



Building an alternative world

A study about the internal processes and external dynamics shaping rural intentional communities

Lena Beucker & Olivia Hallberg

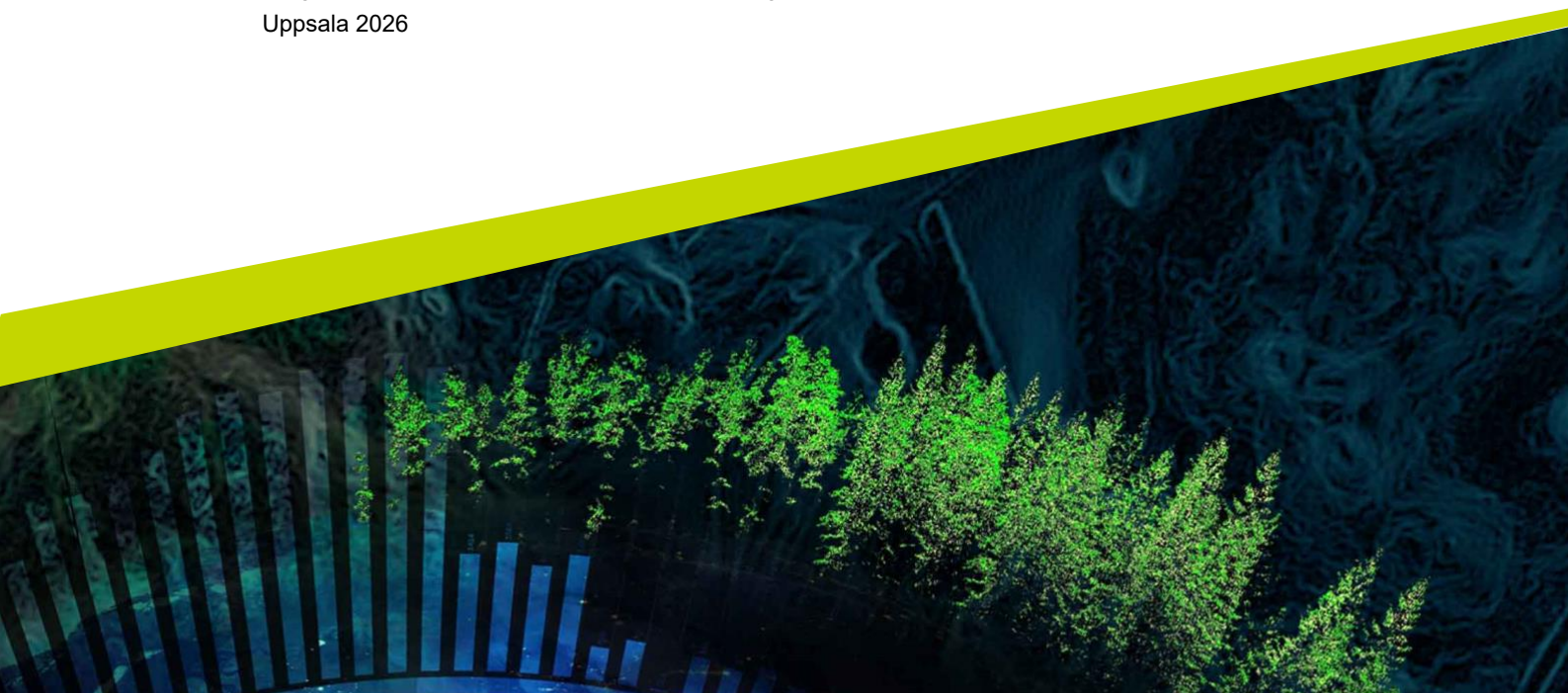
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Abstract

This thesis explores the internal dynamics in intentional rural communities in relation to broader society's value systems. In rural communities, people create lifestyles and value systems that are different from the mainstream, neoliberal and individualistic ones. Through interviews with members of four different communities, we collected data on the values, motivations, and worldviews within the communities. The data was analysed using the conceptual framework "the circle of commoning" developed by Arbell (2023). The framework understands commons as social processes rather than fixed resources and places an emphasis on the interplay between internal and external dynamics forming the communities, where a circular internal process is in constant negotiation with external influences. Subjectivities, visions, and social practices are the three components making up the internal circular process, with each of them producing and reproducing the next.

In the analysis, we identify three central themes driving this process: a) Sense of belonging, b) equality and inclusion, and c) rurality and nature. For each theme, we carve out the interplay of subjectivities, visions, and social practices. The themes mirror central worldviews in the communities and therefore the motivation of individuals to join and uphold them. Two central worldviews we establish are (1) the criticism of mainstream society's ways of life, and (2) that humans and nature are deeply interconnected. In these worldviews there is a negotiation between the communities and broader society: the communities are shaped by society's value systems in that they are actively trying to undergo them.

Keywords: commons, commoning, intentional communities, rural communities, commoning, social systems, social organisation, neoliberalism

Table of contents

List of tables	6
List of figures	7
Abbreviations	8
1. Introduction	9
1.1 Research problem	9
1.2 Background: brief history of the commons	11
2. Theoretical framework	13
2.1 Understanding the commons and commoning	13
2.1.1 The relationship between commons and intentional communities	13
2.2 The circle of commoning as a conceptual framework	14
2.2.1 Understanding the three elements: Subjectivities, Visions & Practices.....	15
3. Research design	17
3.1 Collection of data	17
3.1.1 Framing of data and sampling.....	17
3.1.2 Interviews	19
3.2 Analytical strategy.....	20
3.3 Ethical considerations and positionality statement.....	20
3.4 Limitations.....	21
4. Analysis	22
4.1 Sense of belonging	22
4.1.1 Subjectivities: finding alternatives and companionship.....	22
4.1.2 Visions: the ways of being together	23
4.1.3 Social Practices: sense of belonging in material and social means	25
4.2 Equality and inclusion	26
4.2.1 Subjectivities: individuals as a part of larger units	26
4.2.2 Visions: equality within the community.....	27
4.2.3 Social Practices: decision-making structures.....	28
4.3 Rurality and nature	29
4.3.1 Subjectivities: unity of humans and nature	29
4.3.2 Visions: live in harmony with nature.....	30
4.3.3 Social Practices: caring for the land.....	31
5. Discussion.....	33
6. Conclusion	35
Author contributions	36
Acknowledgements	37

References	38
Appendix 1: Interview Participants	40
Appendix 2: Information to participants and asking for consent.....	41

List of tables

Table 1. Description of communities.....	18
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List of figures

Figure 1. The circle of commoning. Source: Authors' own figure, based on Arbell (2023).	
.....	16

Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Description
C1	Community 1
C2	Community 2
C3	Community 3
C4	Community 4

1. Introduction

When we get off the bus, a warm April sun shines on the yellow farmhouse that is visible between the trees from a long distance. We follow a narrow gravel road away from the main road, between apple trees that have not yet started to bloom, and up a slope towards the farm. We pass a chicken shed and a greenhouse before arriving at the heart of the farm: a collection of buildings, slightly elevated on the hill to present a view of the vegetable garden, greenhouses, and apple orchard. There is an old barn turned café, with a bar and an outside sitting area filled with tables and armchairs that seem to be randomly assembled. Everything feels handmade, nothing fits together quite well; plenty of hand-painted signs point out the dishwashing area or bar. Scattered books, games, painted signs, and even the big treehouse built in the rising of the trees behind the farm tell the stories of many people having worked and lived here. The greenhouses and garden are still just empty soil when we visit, but there are a few hundred tomato plants waiting inside to be put into the earth. The farm itself is also still quite empty; but soon, it will be filled once again with people working and living together, bringing this community to life. It is communities like these that this thesis focuses on.

1.1 Research problem

Our research for this thesis has taken us to multiple rural communities like the one described above; communities where people live and work together in a rural setting, sharing responsibilities for daily tasks as well as management of the community's resources. These types of communities are not very common today, because modern market systems push for profitable businesses and privatization, disadvantaging systems of common ownership and management (Hansen 2016). Still, rural intentional communities exist: In an act that deviates from mainstream modern lifestyles, people come together to share their lives and the access to, use of and responsibility for resources. These social systems can be referred to as "commons" (Hansen 2016).

As Arbell (2023) argues, this is often an act of resistance against current market and political systems. This resistance can symbolize the terrain where the value systems of capital and commons collide. The logic of capital entails accumulation of capital and growth, while the logic of commons entails social justice and autonomy over resources for social reproduction such as food, housing and social relations (De Angelis & Harvie 2013; Caffentzis & Federici 2014). Current ecological, economic and social crises seem unbreachable, and privatization through liberal market systems or state regulation has not managed to solve these issues (Fournier 2013). Collective organisation in communities

creates a space of autonomy, resisting enclosure and creating a space where the members' livelihoods are not necessarily depending on the market and the state (Caffentzis & Federici 2014). Further Arbell (2023) argues that community becomes a strategy to finding solutions to the insecurities these crises bring with them, such as isolation, economic instability and food insecurity (Arbell 2023). People who actively seek out community look for safety and a more fulfilling lifestyle than the one mainstream society provides (Nightingale 2019; Arbell 2023) forming "intentional communities" that see their purpose in living and doing together.

These communities do not exist in a vacuum but are in constant negotiation with the surrounding world. In the framework "the circle of commoning", Arbell (2023) develops an understanding of commons that is based on the interplay between internal and external dynamics. The author identifies three key elements of commoning: subjectivities, visions, and social practices. These three elements are interconnected with each other and with external factors, and through their interrelations, these factors shape "the nature of the commons" (Arbell 2023). The framework will be explored in more detail in part 2.2 of this thesis.

Extensive research has already been conducted in the field of commons and commoning, with Ostrom's "Governing the commons: the Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action" being one of the first works to start the discussions around commons as social systems (Ostrom 1990 see Acheson 2011). However, research of commons influenced by Ostrom's framework often focuses on formal rules and measurable variables and overlooks the everyday processes that constitute the processes of collective use (Fournier 2013; Arbell 2023). In this thesis, commons are studied as more than a social system of governing resource pools and rather as a social system of dynamic and complex social relations. This shift highlights commons as a process, and a space where producers reclaim the means to produce for themselves, deviating the capitalist logic of separation (Fournier 2013; Caffentzis & Federici 2014). We aim to bring into focus the everyday processes taking place in the communities by illustrating the practices of four communities in rural Sweden. By examining the internal and external dynamics shaping these communities, we explore how rural intentional communities through their everyday practices navigate and negotiate their own existence and autonomy. We aim to create a deeper understanding for what dynamics constitute spaces reclaiming control over resources essential for their own social reproduction and survival.

Using the "circle of commoning" (Arbell 2023) as a framework, we analyse how subjectivities, visions and practices together create the communities in

relation to each other and to various external factors. This allows us to understand the details of the inner workings of the communities while not losing sight of the broader perspective of societal and political dynamics (Arbell 2023).

The following overarching research question will guide our analysis:

- Which internal processes and external dynamics shape intentional rural communities?

Furthermore, we use the three following sub-questions to structure our analysis:

- What are the individual motivations for living in intentional rural communities?
- How do visions drive the rural intentional communities?
- Which social practices are derived from these motivations and visions?

1.2 Background: brief history of the commons

There are many kinds of commons: from the more traditional commons that consist of natural resources like land or water bodies, over cultural commons like languages and traditions, to entirely new and sometimes global commons like the internet (Hansen 2016; Sievers-Glotzbach et. al. 2020).

Some commons exist independently from human influence (e.g. water bodies and air), while others are produced and reproduced by us (e.g. culture, knowledge) (Hansen 2016). Commoning practices also vary widely: they can be very intentional, carried out by a tight group following their own guidelines, and they can be looser, involving large numbers of people and not strictly following a set of guidelines. What characterizes all of them as commons is that people share access and responsibility for something, be it a resource, knowledge, traditions or the internet (Hansen 2016).

The origin of commons lies in rural, agricultural landscapes, where farmers cooperated around the use of the local natural resources to ensure that everyone could live off the land without it having negative consequences for others (Hansen 2016). It was people cooperating to manage the land they lived on and lived off. Only with the beginning of industrialization did these commons begin to be enclosed by both state and market actors through privatization and increased regulations. (Fournier 2014; Hansen 2016). Enclosure in this context means the process of legally and physically denying a community access to a resource they were accessing before (Hansen 2016).

Today, the number of commons has decreased significantly. Most land resources are now privatized and managed with the purpose of creating financial profits. This is in accordance with neoliberal ideals that push for privatization and

market liberalization, which have taken a hegemonic position in today's societies, as Hansen (2016) points out. Neoliberalism has not only led to a decline in commons, but there are also strong indications that it is closely interconnected with ecological, economic and social crises we face today (Hansen 2016). Climate change, rising inequality and inflation are only some of the symptoms of these crises, and market and state actors are yet to present viable solutions to them (Fournier 2014). In search of alternatives and wanting to find solutions themselves, there are movements of community-led resource management and collective organization of use in response to these crises (Fournier 2014; Nightingale 2019). This observation is the starting point for our research.

We will now dive into our understanding of the commons and the theoretical framework we use to analyze processes in the communities. Thereafter will follow a discussion of the methods we used during our research, before we turn to our empirical material in the analysis. The findings from our analysis will be reflected upon in a concluding discussion.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Understanding the commons and commoning

This study is informed by the understanding of commons as social systems. The conceptualization of commons as social systems was a groundbreaking step within the commons scholarship presented by Elinor Ostrom (De Angelis & Harvie 2013). Ostrom's studies of commons have focused on the inner institutional framework between users of common pool resources, where the study of commons has been primarily focused on fixed resources (e.g lakes or forests) and the design principles of sustainable management of the commons (De Angelis & Harvie 2013). This study explores commons beyond common pool resources and institutional design principles, instead defining them as social systems with a horizontal and democratic way of managing resources (De Angelis & Harvie, 2013)

Understanding commons as social systems entails that they are constituted by two main components (Barbagallo et al. 2019): (1) sharing of material and immaterial resources and (2) the social relationships within the commoning community. These social relationships produce and reproduce the norms and rules which guide the actions and relations within the common. These two components make up the process of doing in common, in what Peter Linebaugh has conceptualized as commoning (Linebaugh 2008 see De Angelis & Harvie 2013). Linebaugh argues that central to the understanding of commons is this process, rather than the resource itself: without the practice of commoning, the commons itself would not exist (De Angelis & Harvie 2013). Commoning thus is a way of both being and performing. Furthermore, Fournier (2014) explains that commoning is a process of managing the concept of 'use', where collective organisation of production and distribution are at the core of commoning.

2.1.1 The relationship between commons and intentional communities

To frame the commons within the context of this thesis, we use the term intentional communities. Intentional communities are defined as groups of people who consciously and purposefully choose to realize a vision or specific goals within a community. The individual's participation is based on the intention to share lifestyle, property, and social relationships aligning with those visions and intentions within the community (Meijering et al. 2007; Shenker 2011).

The concept of intentional communities is intertwined with the understanding of commons as social systems. A key aspect is the communal organizational

structure, built on collective strategies for managing immaterial and material resources in both commons and intentional communities (De Angelis & Harvie 2014; Fournier 2014). Community is a necessity for a common to become, and processes of commoning are often found within intentional communities, such as managing and sharing resources to various extents (Meijering et al. 2007; Fournier 2013; De Angelis & Harvie 2013). Another connection between commons and intentional communities is their ways of managing tension between their own value system and neoliberal value systems. Both face constant negotiation as they attempt to uphold their own value systems while making use of established institutional structures. So instead of growth and accumulation of capital which are intrinsic to the logic of capital, commons and intentional communities can create and operate through alternative value-systems (De Angelis & Harvie 2013; Pitzer et al. 2014).

2.2 The circle of commoning as a conceptual framework

The circle of commoning framework (Arbell 2023) functions as a lens for understanding commons and commoning and is the central theoretical approach in this thesis. The purpose of the framework is to understand and explain the practices of commoning, as well as how commons emerge. It employs an understanding of commons as social systems that are highly contextual and situated in both its members and surroundings and thus always are unique. Commoning is understood as “processes of managing and reproducing the commons” (Arbell 2023). With the framework’s help, we want to understand external dynamics and internal processes affecting the commoning process.

With the definition and understanding of commons as social systems, a fundamental aspect of the circle of commoning framework is the interplay between internal and external context. The internal context consists of the subjectivities of commoners, the visions of the community as goals, aims and values and the social practices being carried out, translating both subjectivities and visions into practice. The external context is constituted by the cultural, political, social, environmental and economic structures in which the community is embedded. Arbell (2023) presents commoning as a dynamic process that evolves in constant negotiation between the internal and external factors. Through positioning commoning as the core aspect of the framework, Arbell (2023) highlights how both internal and external dynamics impact commoners practice, the process of commoning and therefore the existence and characteristics of the commons itself.

2.2.1 Understanding the three elements: Subjectivities, Visions & Practices

There are three key elements making up the dynamic process of commoning: subjectivities, visions, and social practices.

Subjectivities are defined as the individual process of becoming in the interaction between contexts, relationships, and practices (Arbell 2023). It represents partly the epistemological position of understanding the subject as something constructed, partly the position through which the individual makes sense of the world. Coming into being is a process of practices carried out over time, forever changing in relation to the context in which the subject is situated. In the framework, the concept of subjectivities serves to understand two dynamics: Firstly, the process of and motivations behind becoming a commoner and how these affect visions and practices of the community; Secondly, how individuals are subjected to and affected by both the internal value-system of the community and the external value-system of the society (Arbell 2023). Hence, an individual who is a member of a community does not exist outside of societal structures but rather is embedded and situated. This generates internalized value-systems affecting the members navigation of values, expressing of visions and participation in practices within the common, as explained by Arbell:

[...] commons are not separate from other systems and that commoners are also neoliberal subjects, who bring the changing contexts of society into their commoning practices (Arbell, 2023, p. 233)

The space for understanding subjectivities within the framework allows understanding both the subject formation created by external societal structure the individual is embedded within and the internal processes within the community in which the subject formation is being produced and reproduced. To make the term applicable to our empirical findings, we have chosen to primarily focus on motivations of individuals to partake in rural intentional communities: it was not always possible to distinguish values of individuals and communities, whereas individual motivations are clearly recognizable.

Visions are the “collective goals, aims and ideals” of a community (Arbell 2023). They are expressions of members’ subjectivities and the available ways of putting them into practice. Visions function as a compass for the community, navigating between the internal dynamic of the members and external mechanisms which determine the identification of “possible solutions, obtainable resources and the strategies acceptable” (Arbell 2023) for translating vision into

practice. Arbell (2023) highlights that a plurality of visions within a community can exist, making it a terrain for tension which can generate both conflicts and change. Further, the author explains that with the community's embeddedness in general society, change in external factors will always impact the visions of the community.

Through the social practices, visions are translated into reality and subjectivities produced and reproduced. In other words, social practices are the result of visions and they affect subjectivities. Practices are understood as coming into existence through social, cultural and material means. They entail both formal structures, as decision-making processes and the legal suit of the community, and informal arrangements like meals and the daily life shared by members. It is through practices that the commons, commoning and commoners become into being.

The three elements reproduce the commoning process in a cyclical process, with subjectivities shaping visions, visions shaping social practices, and social practices shaping subjectivities. This internal process is always affected by external dynamics as shown in figure 1. The commons evolve and persist through this continuous process, which we showcase through the example of four communities in this thesis. Before we turn to the analysis of this process, we will present our research methods and practical approaches.

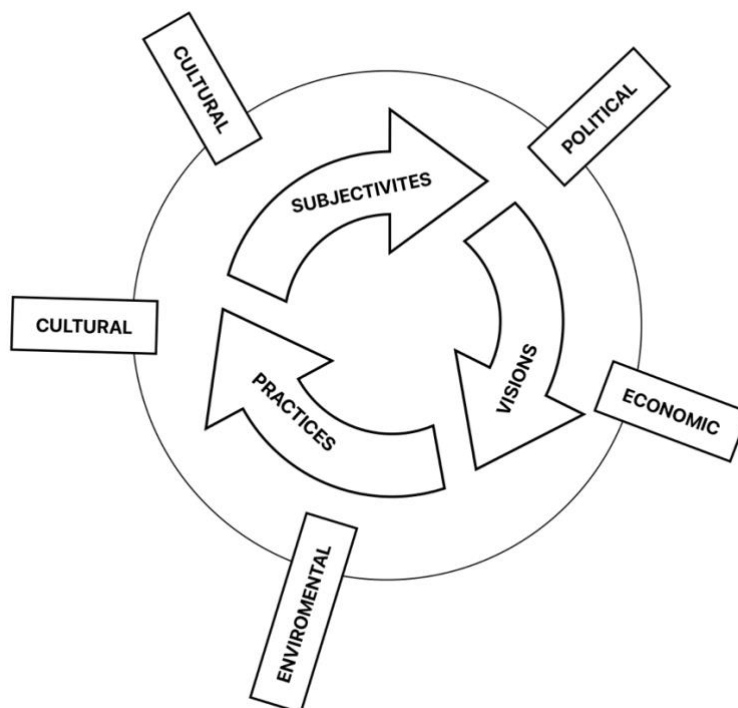


Figure 1. The circle of commoning. Source: Authors' own figure, based on Arbell (2023).

3. Research design

In this study, we use a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of intentional rural communities. Qualitative methods offer an effective way of navigating exploratory matters, as is intrinsic to the research question and purpose of this study (Robson & McCartan 2016).

Throughout this process we have used an inductive approach and flexible design allowing us to interact with theory and empirical findings simultaneously during the research process with the purpose of finding patterns between the empirical setting and the framework “circle of commoning”.

We will now describe our collection of data and associated methods, analytical strategy, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study.

3.1 Collection of data

3.1.1 Framing of data and sampling

In our study, we focused on communities that meet the following four criteria: (1) they are located in rural areas, (2) they have an active farming practice, (3) they have aspects of co-living, and (4) they are “intentional communities”, meaning that members actively seek out the community (Meijering et al. 2007; Shenker 2011). We chose these criteria to frame our field of study and pin down the specific type of community we are interested in.

The communities were selected through a non-probability and strategic sampling (Alvehus et. al. 2025). We did not randomly select communities to interview but directly contacted several communities that we partly had private contacts to and partly found via internet searches. We chose this method of sampling for two main reasons: Firstly, carrying out a probability sampling was impossible as there is no complete register over the type of community we studied. Secondly, since our aim is to create a deeper understanding of processes in and around these communities, a strategic sampling of specific communities allowed us to choose communities intentionally that satisfy the criteria of our research question (Alvehus et. al. 2025). As it is not the aim of this thesis to present statistically representative results, probability sampling was not a viable option.

We studied four different communities in total, which will be referred to as community 1, 2, 3, and 4 throughout the thesis. They were located in East central, South and West of Sweden. While they shared the criteria mentioned above, they differed greatly in other aspects, such as structures around finance and decision-making, size and number of members (see table 1). The selection of informants

for the study was based on voluntary participation after the communities were selected, with the informants' experience of living in intentional communities ranging from six months to thirty years. The age amongst our informants was between mid-twenties to eighty years old and their nationalities varied, with half from Scandinavia and half from other European countries.

Table 1. Geographic location and socio-economic description of communities

	Community 1	Community 2	Community 3	Community 4
Location	Close to a metropolitan area	Close to a town with a population of 25,000	Close to a town with a population of 3000	In proximity to a town with a population 2000
Years active	35	20	<2	35
Individual/collective ownership	Individual	Collective	Collective	Individual
Members/Inhabitants/ Volunteers¹	Seasonal community; 10-20 volunteers in high season	25 members with 10 yearly volunteers	6 members, 10 inhabitants	40 members, 9 year-round inhabitants
Decision-making structure	Owner as final decision-maker; smaller decisions allocated according to skill	Sociocracy (consent-based decision making)	Sociocracy (consent-based decision making)	Civil association (Swedish förening): majority decisions
Income	Selling of produce and hosting events, renting out restaurant space, café	EU volunteer funds, hosting events, members' contributions, work in municipality	Members' contributions, renting out rooms, investors	Members' contributions
Activities	Small-scale market produce, café and restaurant, events	Semi self-sufficient farming, hosting events,	Community building, semi self-sufficient farming, hosting events	Administrative work for the property, community work

¹ Members defined as people who are long-term and all year around participants of the community. Inhabitants defined as participants who are seasonally or short-term part of the community. Volunteers defined as participants who are 4 weeks to 6 months part of the community, often through external organizations.

		community building		days, providing ateliers
Informants	Oskar - Owner	Amanda and Alex – Garden coordinators	Lucie and Hanna – Garden coordinators Stephanie and Lukas – Founding members	Martin – Chair of the board

3.1.2 Interviews

Our data was collected through interviews with nine informants from four different communities. We visited communities 1 and 3 to conduct interviews in person. The interviews with communities 2 and 4 were held online, as a visit was not possible due to long distances and time restraints.

All the interviews were documented through recording and notetaking, to then be transcribed manually. As some of the interviews were held in Swedish, the quotes we use have been translated for this thesis by the authors (see appendix 1 for a detailed table of the interviews).

The interviews were conducted through a semi-structured approach. We chose this approach because of its features of combining flexibility and structure, as it gave us the possibility to spontaneously explore interesting themes in interviews while remaining aligned with the research aim of the study (Robson & McCartan 2016). With our interest in experienced beliefs, perceptions, and practices within the community amongst our informants, the adaptability of the approach allowed us to explore this. The interviews began with a structured sequence, with the purpose of obtaining biographical data about the informant and the collective, followed by a more flexible structure of three general themes and key questions for each theme. The themes *subjectivities*, *visions*, and *social practices* were drawn directly from the “circle of commoning” framework (Arbell 2023) and are the same as used in the analysis. To gather our empirical data, we found that using the themes of the framework would reflect both the internal and external dynamics of the collectives and how informants navigate these dynamics. Through the semi-structured approach and the themes adopted we create a terrain for in-depth understanding of the subjectivities, visions and practices of members in these four communities.

3.2 Analytical strategy

We used both a thematical and theory-informed analytical approach for this thesis (Alvehus et. al. 2025). After collecting empirical data in interviews, we transcribed them manually, dividing the work equally between the two authors, which may have led to differences in interpretation.

We then coded the material using Arbell's "the circle of commoning" (2023) as a framework, marking parts concerning "subjectivities", "visions" and "practices" in different colours. We colour-coded the material and identified three themes that all communities had in common: sense of belonging, equality and inclusion, and rurality and nature. Within the themes, we identified the circle of subjectivities, visions, and practices that influence each other and are reproduced in the communities, and how external aspects influence the themes.

In the processing of written text, we have used grammar program through Microsoft words to identify and correct grammatical errors. This has been adjusted manually to avoid any contextual unfit grammatical corrections.

3.3 Ethical considerations and positionality statement

This study followed a set of basic ethical guidelines, as all scientific work should. Since our study was based on interviews, it was especially important that we comply with standards around data protection, confidentiality and voluntary participation (Alvehus et. al. 2025).

The topic we discussed is not in itself highly sensitive or controversial; however, in discussing visions and values, we touched upon political subjects and political opinions of our informants. This demanded extra care in anonymising the material we collected to make sure that opinions cannot be connected to individuals. Our informants are held anonymous and given pseudonyms in this text, and we do not disclose which communities we visited.

As we conducted a qualitative study based in the hermeneutic tradition of social sciences, it is important to discuss our own positionality. Positionality describes the researchers' own world view and position in relation to their research (Holmes 2020). Each person's experiences and background influence their interpretation of the world, and researchers are no exception from this (England 1994, Haraway 1988). Our research is therefore always influenced by our positionality (Goundar 2025, Holmes 2020).

Both authors have a previous interest in rural communities due to visits in community projects (one of which is an informant for this thesis) and education

on the topic. The concept seemed very interesting and promising to us on an academic as well as personal level; One of the authors planned to visit one of the communities as a volunteer for some time. This implies that there may have been overlapping worldviews between the authors and the participants of the study. This can have led to a positive bias in the results; it can also have created a deeper understanding between informants and researchers and therefore led to unique insights. We aimed to be as critical of our own positionality as possible. Still, a certain bias cannot be discounted (Goundar 2020). Any choices we made in material and citations used or left out in the thesis do not necessarily reflect the participants prioritizations (England 1994).

Given the timely restrictions of a bachelor's thesis, we cannot go more in depth with our positionality statement, and it is therefore incomplete (Holmes 2020).

3.4 Limitations

Due to practical aspects of our research in the communities, there are some limitations to the results of this study. One such limitation is the difference in depth of research between communities: since we visited community 3 for two days, we were able to hold more interviews and get a more in-depth picture of the life in the community. For example, by participating in meals and work in the community, we could collect information that exceeds our interview questions and thus get a more nuanced understanding of the communities' subjectivities, visions, and practices. This creates an imbalance in data since our data on community 3 is more nuanced and broader than on the other communities.

Some interviews were held online and some in person, which has a similar effect: online interviews limit the research in that they don't allow for small observations of the environment, and it is harder to read mimics or tone of voice. Some interviews were held in pairs which can also change data since informants might adapt their statements to what they believe is appropriate in relation to the other person. It can however also add depth since informants are able to inspire each other more than the researcher could.

4. Analysis

In this part we carry out our analysis of the empirical findings through the circle of commoning framework. The analysis is structured by themes wherein subjectivities, visions and social practices are discussed.

4.1 Sense of belonging

Commoning is fundamentally a way of social organisation of collective use (Eizenberg 2012; Fournier 2013; García-López et al. 2021) and the social ties within the community are a prerequisite for communication and cooperation between members (García-López et al. 2021). To understand the social cohesion of the communities and how it is a part of the internal structure we have identified sense of belonging as a theme for this part of the analysis.

4.1.1 Subjectivities: finding alternatives and companionship

Finding companionship and solutions through community was a main motivation for being a part of the community for informants across all communities. For Oskar, the concept of being together was of great personal meaning. It partly represents his ideological stance of seeing individualism and the concept of the “core family” as too vulnerable, and partly represents his emotional stance and perspective of the meaning of life.

Well, what makes life meaningful? I think it is about giving and taking from each other, that you enjoy being together and try to make it as good as possible for each other and for yourself. (Oskar, C1)

Both Lukas and Stephanie expressed how they perceive community as a way of responding to worldly challenges as environmental crises and socioeconomic inequality. They expressed how they can build a way of life aligning with their visions through community:

For me, the most valuable thing is living with other people. I feel sharing life and co-creating together. Like the amount of the things you can move both practically and socially is huge and the impact is huge. (Lukas, C3)

I would like [Community 3] to reflect an alternative to what's out there and responding to what is alive and staying current that way. (Lukas, C3)

Aligning with Lukas, Stephanie from the same community expressed how she perceived community as a solution and strategy for approaching wider political and social problems:

[...] I really believe that the solution to a lot of problems we face today is community. And then I decided to focus my next years of life on really finding out what it means to create a community, what it means to be in community, what it means to strengthen community. (Stephanie, C3)

Another motivation found is the notion of companionship between the community and the individual. It is not only the organisational aspect around material means as farming or infrastructure but also an emotional process of bonding and care. As Amanda expressed:

I feel the best part of living a community is this communal feeling of that we can care for each other and love and respect and that is the foundation of everything, and I feel like you can go to whomever you want to ask for advice or a hug. You can feel lonely also because sometimes you can feel loneliness in a big group, which is a challenge for me sometimes, but it is also just feeling like a big family, and you have a belonging here. I would say it is being a part of a 'normal' family or relationship. (Amanda, C2)

David from community 4 explained the community created an opportunity to have a space for their profession and lowering living costs through the sharing of resources, mainly housing and land. He expressed both the social value of sharing his profession and field while being able to incorporate more personal values into the daily life, as for example striving for self-sufficiency.

Within all the communities we found the sense of belonging being expressed in different ways, such as responding to external circumstances, building a shared space or choosing collectivism over individualism. As Arbell (2023) explains subjectivities within the community builds up the shared visions of the community, below we will see how these subjectivities are being expressed as visions.

4.1.2 Visions: the ways of being together

A main vision within community 1 was to create a space that shows how communal life can exist and what being a part of an intentional community can entail. This has evolved organically over time and has become an important vision.

Everyone is welcome as long as we have space and maybe we perceive it a bit as that our main purpose is to show a way of how to live together. It may be our main task, in addition to surviving economically ourselves. A sort of school really. (Oskar, C1)

For community 4, where the income and financial structures are mainly individual, David expressed the importance of taking care of the community together for its members to feel ownership and participation. At the beginning,

shared self-sufficiency farming was a vision, as a way of lowering living costs within the community. Now, the primary vision was to create a generational shift where the values of community and sharing of resources as infrastructure stays alive in the future.

We realize that we must work together to feel responsible for the community, and we must work together to continue to know each other. (Martin, C4)

For community 3, who were in the beginning of their project, the visions are many and varied. We found expression of internal visions for the group and external visions for the groups position in larger society. For the internal vision one main aspect was creating a space of care and commitment. Stephanie, one of the core members, compared the membership process to being involved in a relationship. The values of commitment and group compatibility is a high priority.

[...] it's our life here that we're creating, and we're putting a lot of energy and effort into it, and it's a life-long process so it's also a very serious decision. (Stephanie, C3)

Regarding the vision of the groups' position in society, Lukas said, "If the system is too rigid it gives all the more reason to try to change it". He explained that in order to build persistence and recognition for alternative ways of managing resources through common ownership, the structure needs to carry legitimacy in the surrounding society. This includes legal legitimacy and social legitimacy through building relationships with the surrounding localities. He said, "We are creating a project bigger than us" and points out the vision of being able to persist over time without being dissembled through privatization coming from inside or outside of the community. Further he explained how they aimed for strengthening and inspiring other intentional communities through legal and financial advice.

Community 2 defined themselves as a learning centre with focus on small-scale regenerative agriculture and permaculture farming practices. This was a general focus in the community, and the purpose was to organize this through co-living with shared meals and housing. The main goal was to have a fruitful learning experience, where the community and its members reciprocally can provide knowledge to each other. This was carried out through an interchanging process between the coordinators and the participants. In Alex' statement "the idea is that the knowledge gets spread when they go back", we see an important vision informing the idea of community 2 as a learning centre and their potential of creating impact outside the community through their participants.

4.1.3 Social Practices: sense of belonging in material and social means

We will now explore how the different practices taking place in the communities create a sense of belonging for the communities' members. It is these practices that strengthen the ties within the community and build the sense of belonging that is expressed in the quotes above.

Community 2 and 3 had sharing circles where members can share anything on their mind, which was a way of connecting and creating understanding between each other. Both communities had routines in place for addressing any conflicts or tensions in the group, an important aspect of co-living which informants from both communities highlighted. The emotional work taking place is important for the communities to build a space of care and to make the communal life work for all its members. Community 1, 2 and 3 also share a large portion of their daily life as meals and other social activities.

For practices being carried out with a certain purpose, community 3 used the term 'collective action' which can entail for example clearing out stones from the recently ploughed garden bed in the community. It was a voluntary practice carried out together as a community that will benefit the whole community long term. Community 4 had a similar practice called "dugnadsdag" which translates to a day of doing together for the best of the community. This involved meeting once a month over coffee, collaborating over today's tasks, for example painting one of the ateliers or helping with renovations of the ateliers.

Within community 2 the gardening practices were continuous and a central aspect for the community to function. The knowledge informing these practices was partly the experiences from its members, and partly a garden book entailing descriptions of how gardening has been carried out, stretching 18 years back. Amanda and Alex highlighted how community 2 operates through 18 years of accumulated knowledge tied into the place.

Similar to community 2, community 1 shared the gardening practice amongst its members as it is important for the community's survival and purpose. Even though both communities were reliant on their gardening and farming practices the main value of it is that it is something to do and come together about.

If you are going to work together, I have a hard time imagining something better than to work with the soil, to sit in the garden, pull weeds and talk with each other while doing so. (Oskar, C1)

4.2 Equality and inclusion

A central part of the communities we studied is the work that is done together. Community members engaged in diverse processes of decision-making, both on a larger and more long-term scale as well as in small, everyday decisions. There were different systems for decision-making in the communities, from completely flat and decentralized structures to more centralized and hierarchical ones. We will now look at the decision-making processes and power structures in the communities.

4.2.1 Subjectivities: individuals as a part of larger units

The work processes were mostly described as being reciprocal, as teamwork where everyone contributed equally. There were coordinator roles in all the communities, but it became clear that people in these roles did not see themselves as more knowledgeable than others and appreciate input and inspiration.

There was also a great appreciation for different skillsets and personalities. Our informants saw them as necessary and valuable for the communities, without valuing specific skills higher than others:

For example, I want to eat my own vegetables, but I don't have the time or passion to grow vegetables. But I can build a house and still eat good food and support the garden where it needs support. I think that's how we should live. (Lukas, C3)

One of the core motivations for Lukas and other informants to live in community was thus the opportunity to share work and benefit from each other's skills. The idea was that everyone benefits if people feel fulfilled and do what they do best. This entailed that everyone's opinions and needs should be respected equally, as was implemented for example through co-ownership models:

I think that the fundamental thing is that it always comes down to co-ownership. That is the foundation for any functioning group of people being together. People can feel ownership and feeling like oh I'm not just doing it for someone else. (Lukas, C3)

Lukas believed that people need to feel like they are doing something in their own interest to feel motivation and responsibility. Hence, everyone should have equal access to and power over the work and/or resources: if there are only a few people who decide, the others will feel powerless and unmotivated.

The above shows that there are subjectivities in the communities that perceive every person as unique and valuable and place high value on equality and inclusion. The people we interviewed all seemed to see themselves as a part of a larger unit, a bigger whole that works together in intertwined and reciprocal

processes and relations. There was also an understanding of people as emotional beings with differing needs that need caring. These perceptions of oneself and others motivate our informants to live in community. The visions derived from these subjectivities will be explored in the next part.

4.2.2 Visions: equality within the community

In accordance with these subjectivities, there were visions about equality and inclusion in all four communities. Communities 2 and 3 had strong visions of being equal in power and having completely flat hierarchies and decision-making structures: they wanted everyone to be able to influence decisions equally. There was also the vision of dividing tasks according to skills, and that everyone can do what suits them best. Lukas described his vision as follows:

The ideal scenario is that everyone does what they feel passionate about and love and feel resourced through and getting energy through that. (Lukas, C3)

Here, a vision about self-realization becomes apparent: everyone should be able to follow their passions in the community and feel supported in doing so.

Communities 1 and 4 employed different systems. These communities have become disillusioned after big visions did not work out, or they adapted to more hierarchical structures for practical reasons. In community 1, the aim was for everyone to be able to “make their voice heard”, while also maintaining an authority over decisions. Community 4 has gone through a sobering process of privatization due to legal difficulties with co-ownership:

Now we have privatized the land and go into an age-old process of privatization. And then you have sovereignty over your land and that collides with the community. (Martin, C4)

The visions about tight-knit community and reciprocal cooperation have here had to make way for a more individualist mindset. The community employed a democratic decision-making structure, which also follows the concept of everyone making their voice heard.

Something all communities had in common was the vision of being welcoming and including. Most of the communities aimed to make themselves more accessible by removing financial barriers. The original vision of community 4 was to enable a “cheap and good life” for artists, and community 3 wanted to adapt their structure to different financial situations:

One of these things we can offer is that instead of people paying a square meter price for renting something, they pay a percentage on their income to allow all kinds of artists being able to be here without having a high rent for example. (Lukas, C3)

The communities thus aimed to be inclusive and adapt concepts of equality, while also juggling the reality of decision-making processes and external, legal limitations. We will now look at how these visions are translated into practices.

4.2.3 Social Practices: decision-making structures

The communities had different ways of implementing inclusion and equality. Community 2 and 3 used the concept of sociocracy in their decision-making processes, which Alex described as follows:

It's consent-based governing. So basically, unless it's a unanimous yes, we don't take a decision. So, we try to have no hierarchies. Of course, there's different levels of experience and expertise, that's why you're (Amanda) the coordinator, for example. (Alex, C2)

Through working groups with different responsibilities, general meetings for taking larger decisions, and trial periods for decisions, consent-based governing ensures structures that are both effective and completely flat in hierarchy (Owen & Buck 2020). Equality and inclusion are here secured on a structural level: they are pinned down in the formal processes of the communities' day-to-day functioning.

Community 1 and 4 used other models for decision-making: community 4 had the form of a civil association (Swedish "förening"), with a board that gets re-elected every other year. Community 1 did not have a formal system for joint decision-making, but informal meetings every morning to divide tasks and in the group. Previously, there were weekly meetings between a core group that made the decisions. All four communities had regular gatherings with all their inhabitants, either in shorter meetings, longer meetings for decision-making, or joint working sessions, like here in community 4:

The first Saturday every month, we come together at ten o'clock and drink coffee at someone's house. And then we chat a bit, and then we talk about what we need to do, and then we go out and do it. (Martin, C4)

These were more informal gatherings without a formal decision-making process; still, they encouraged participation and equal contributions to the community.

4.3 Rurality and nature

All four communities were located in rural areas: they were not immediately surrounded by a lot of infrastructure, like industrial buildings or housing, but by what is perceived as natural landscapes (Woods 2011): meadows, fields, lakes, and forests. We will now examine what role nature and rurality play in reproducing the community.

4.3.1 Subjectivities: unity of humans and nature

Many of our informants did not grow up in rural areas but have a background in the city. For some, it was a long-time dream that came true by moving into the countryside: they described a longing for being closer to nature, and a wish to be more connected to their immediate surroundings. Other informants have “ended up” in rural areas and choose to stay because of the positive experience of being close to nature.

All informants expressed a deep appreciation for nature, be it plants, animals, or landscapes. Martin described the valley his community is located in as follows:

It is a wonderful piece of nature; it is silent and clean. The wind is blowing and there is no factory in the area, it is mostly farmers and they are organic farmers (...), so there are a lot of insects and songbirds. (...) It's wonderful to come here. (Martin, C4)

Martin and other informants experienced a profound joy simply by being close to nature, in a space that is silent and clean and peaceful, which are attributes often associated with rural areas and nature (Woods 2011). This stands in stark contrast to urban lifestyles, which our informants described as meaningless, stressful, and unhealthy than a rural life. Several informants told us that they worked office-jobs before and felt relieved at having left that behind. A rural life offered them a feeling of connectedness to their surroundings and to nature that they did not have before.

Informants from all communities embodied a view of human-nature relationships that Helfrid (2007) calls “the shared body” (own translation from Swedish). Its core belief is that humans are not separate from nature but are a part of an eternal cycle where nature and humans influence each other in a constant flow of back and forth. It is believed that the distance between humans and nature has become too great, and that only a closing of this gap can help us overcome current sustainability crises (Helfrid 2007). This is reflected for example in the wish to follow the rhythms of the seasons that was expressed by several informants, or when Amanda reflected that:

(...) we always keep in mind to be as kind as we possibly can to our surroundings, to nature, we try to always learn more how we can do things more sustainably. (Amanda, C2)

Nature is here regarded as an equal, as something that we should respect and can learn from, and as something that we as humans have become too distant towards. A motivation for our informants to live in rural communities is thus their perception of themselves as a part of nature and the wish to deepen or rebuild this connection.

4.3.2 Visions: live in harmony with nature

All our informant communities had a farming practice, and all of them named self-sufficiency as one of their visions. Growing food in a way that doesn't exploit the land was seen as a way of deepening the connection between the land and the people:

What I like here (is that) you're with the plant from the first seed to the harvest to you eat it, so it is way more connected to the process of life and nature. (Alex, C2)

Circularity of nutrients was also an important point; Amanda told us that they try to "close the loop" in the garden, or as Lucie put it:

(...) it comes down to finding ways to reuse the materials you're producing and bringing them back down to soil. (Lucie, C3)

The visions of both circularity and self-sufficiency derive from the view of oneself as a part of nature: There is a strong wish to live in harmony with nature, to live with its rhythms and be a part of the (eco-)system. Stephanie described one of the initial visions of the community as "living together on the land, with the land, and creating the life accordingly to the rhythms of the place".

Several informants also made a connection between their own actions and bigger ecological crises. Hanna for example saw the farming in the community as part of a larger movement, and growing food in the community as a way of contributing to a change in modern systems anchored in the local:

What we do here is also kind of connected to the world we want to build (...). [That's] what I want my own farming practice to be. Like a part of a wider, systemic, societal change. (...) For others it's maybe just a project for self-sufficiency and wanting to have a good life in the forest. But it could also be creating alternatives on a wider societal scale. (Hanna, C3)

Many informants showed this awareness of the multiple crises the world faces and their own role in them, and they hoped to contribute to making a difference in

fighting them, even if it is a small one. However, not all communities wished to connect their activities to political movements: for example, community 4 wanted to avoid being “dogmatic” when it comes to ecological values and guidelines, instead giving its members more personal freedom.

The above shows us that informants have a wish to live in harmony with nature, to be a part of natural cycles, and to not have a negative impact on nature. This is manifested in different visions, such as being self-sufficient on food, having a closed cycle in the garden, or living in tune with nature’s rhythms. An overarching vision is also to contribute to fighting global climate- and ecological crises on a local level and make an impact in the world through that.

4.3.3 Social Practices: caring for the land

The vision of living in harmony with nature was translated into practice partly through locating the community in rural areas, simply by being physically close to what is perceived as nature (Woods 2011).

Self-sufficiency and circularity were realized through farming practices: All communities used organic methods, and some described their methods as permacultural or agroecological approaches, which are more holistic and include specific techniques and goals. Examples of methods our informants described are no-dig methods, crop rotations, companion planting, and refraining from using chemical pesticides and fertilizers. By for example making their own fertilizer and compost from manure or compost toilets, the communities tried to have a closed cycle of resources and organic matter within the community and ensure the local ecosystems wellbeing:

Even if it is in a small way we are trying to give back to the soil and make sure the life there isn’t disturbed and all the creatures have things to eat. It is good for us but also giving back to the planet in a small way. (Amanda, C2)

Using organic methods seemed like an obvious choice for our informants: for them, it was an integral part of wanting to live with and show respect to nature, and a way for the members of the communities to feel more connected to the land they live on by consuming its products, while at the same time letting the communities take care of the land in the way they think is right.

In most communities, the farming practice was a central part of the community’s activities. However, there were external and internal factors influencing and sometimes limiting the practices: in community 4, communal food production was abandoned, and instead it was singular members who privately grew food on the community’s land. According to Martin, this was due

to a lack of motivation from members, as they were primarily artists and not farmers.

The practices of food production with organic methods shape the members' subjectivities: being close to nature and deepening a perceived connection through growing environmentally friendly will strengthen the feeling of the members that they are a part of nature (Arbell 2023).

5. Discussion

In our analysis, we identified three different themes that we found in all communities. However, these themes are not separate but closely connected by underlying values and worldviews that together shape the communities' internal processes and are strongly influenced by society at large. The themes can also be understood as terrains of negotiation between the logic of capital and the logic of commons.

We identified two core worldviews that shape the communities: firstly, a fundamental criticism of modern lifestyles, in which our informants criticize for example individualism, conventional agriculture, and urban lifestyles. In the communities, they wanted to create an alternative to these aspects of modern society by deepening connections between people and between people and nature. The second core worldview is that humans and nature are seen as deeply connected. Defined by Nightingale (2019b), this approach is called "socio-natures". The term describes an ontological conceptualization of nature and societies as one entity instead of separate ones, as is common (Nightingale 2019b). Human societies and nature are therein seen as influencing the world and each other in an intertwined process, constantly evolving together. It is also argued that any attempt to solve current sustainability crises should be based on such an understanding (Nightingale 2019b). Our informant communities are doing exactly this: they are attempting to find solutions to issues they perceive through engaging with nature and the resources they have access to in a curious and respectful way, thus deepening this connection.

The internal worldviews are clearly connected to external, cultural, and political contexts. The persistence of the communities is in many ways a response to modern societies' values and lifestyles, as it presents alternative ways of living. Both the individual members and the communities are shaped by for example neoliberal market ideals, public discourses around sustainable development and urbanization. Arbell (2023) argues that the communities and their members see these phenomena as issues, and due to their subjectivities (such as worldviews about community and human-nature relations), they search for solutions differing from mainstream ones. The circle of commoning framework highlights how members of a community and the community as a whole are in a constant process of framing of problems and identifying possible solutions which affect the visions as values and aims within the community (García-López et al. 2021). We argue that these internal processes generate the notion of making an impact through the pure existence of the communities as they are reclaiming means of their own production in relation to food and housing. The notion of making an impact and

generating change becomes embodied for the members through the communities, generating visions and practices. By generating alternatives such as collectivism over individualism, horizontal decision-making over vertical and low scale organic farming practices over consuming industrial agricultural products, the communities put their values and visions into practices. As aligning with the framework, this affects members' subjectivities in a way we can understand as co-becoming. Co-becoming highlights the process of becoming a part of the common (García-López et al. 2021), in other words the logic of the common becomes the primary navigational system for the communities and its members.

The notion of making an impact and the logic of the commons as a primary value-system are internal processes we have identified within the communities. As Arbell (2023) explains, commoning is always affected by the interchanging dynamic between the internal and external dynamics. The external dynamics can be understood through how the commons are situated in general society. All informant communities find ways of working with the systems they criticize, for example through using formal structures of civil or economic associations. These arrangements can be beneficial for the communities, but they can also hinder their visions, as we see for example in community 4, where a privatized structure was adapted due to lack of realistic alternatives. Eizenberg (2012) argues that 'actually existing commons' will always exist in a contesting relationship with enclosures, as inbound in the logic of capital, challenging the core of production and social reproduction. This is an external dynamic that always affects the persistence of commons simultaneously expressing their potential of providing alternatives of societal change (Eizenberg 2012; Fournier 2013; García-López et al. 2021).

Our findings show the complex dynamics that constitute rural intentional communities as spaces of alternative organization. These communities are in constant negotiation with the logic of capital, which they in various ways try to deviate from but cannot cut themselves off from completely. The three themes identified show how the daily life of the communities is a terrain for making an impact through claiming autonomy and reclaiming control over social reproduction, such as food and housing. This is not only a necessity for the survival of the community but also becomes an act of resistance towards enclosures and neoliberal governance. The members' and communities' motivations, visions and practices constitute two worldviews that highlight the collision between the value-system of commons and capital. By trying to create a reality aligning with the logic of commons, they are actually existing alternatives, showing a possible future built on companionship, solidarity and sustainability.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis, we have examined commoning processes within intentional rural communities. For our analysis, we employed Arbell's (2023) conceptual framework "the circle of commoning", which understands commons as social systems and builds on two central dynamics: internal and external ones.

The communities are shaped by subjectivities, visions, and social practices that reproduce each other in a circular process. We have identified central external and internal dynamics in the communities we studied, as well as subjectivities, visions, and social practices divided into three themes.

A central external dynamic lies in the wish of members to create a lifestyle different from what modern society offers. All communities criticize aspects of modern society (such as individualism, conventional agriculture, or urban lifestyles). This external influence is thus the reason the communities exist, as they present an alternative for their members. Internally, a central dynamic lies in the worldviews that exist and are reproduced in the communities. A central worldview across all communities is the belief that humans and other living beings are part of one large unit, which creates the vision of living in harmony with each other and with nature. This worldview is in constant negotiation with the external world and is shaped and reproduced by external and internal processes equally. To frame and understand the communities' external and internal dynamics, we can apply the terms "intentional communities" and "actually existing commons". They describe how the communities want to establish their own way of life outside of mainstream society while not being able to part from it entirely, having to constantly negotiate their value systems. The three themes we identify in our analysis are the central aspects in which life in the communities differs from mainstream society, and thus the central motivations for members to join the community and the central visions of what they want to achieve within the community.

We have studied commoning within the intentional communities and explored the circle of how subjectivities shape visions and visions shape practices. The study gives an important insight into how organization of collective use can be carried out and how the logic of commons is being expressed in different communities. An important finding is the process of co-creation and co-becoming for defining common visions and feeling ownership and responsibility over shared resources.

We encourage further research on commons as social systems and commoning to create a deeper understanding of how these practices can impact and inspire governance on a societal scale.

Author contributions

This thesis and the research behind it are the work of two authors, which we want to acknowledge here. We have worked closely together throughout the project and see both our contributions as equally important.

All interviews were conducted by both authors, with Olivia taking responsibility for notetaking. We divided the transcribing and coding between us evenly, and each of us coded the interviews that the other one had transcribed. We chose this method to make sure that we both engaged with all the material deeply and actively. To make sure that we have a common understanding of the theoretical concepts and terms we use, we identified these in close conversations and reviewed and discussed them continuously. Still, as we are different people with different backgrounds, we interpret our material differently at times, which we believe to be a benefit to this thesis. The analysis was also carried out in close conversation, and in our discussions, we identified three themes. The primary text production was then divided between us, with all written text being discussed and revised together.

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Appendix 1: Interview Participants

Informants and Community (pseudonyms)	Number of interviews	In person/digital	Individual/Pair interview	Language
Oskar C1	1	In person	Individual	Swedish
Amanda C2	1	Digital	Pair	English
Alex C2	1	Digital	Pair	English
Lucie C3	1	In person	Pair	English
Hanna C3	1	In person	Pair	English
Stephanie C3	1	In person	Individual	English
Lukas C3	1	In person	Individual	English
Martin C4	1	Digital	Individual	Swedish

All interviews were documented through recording and handwritten notes and transcribed manually.

Appendix 2: Information to participants and asking for consent

About the research

The study is conducted within the frame of a bachelor's thesis on undergraduate level in the program *Societal change - rural development* at SLU (Swedish University of agricultural sciences). The purpose of the study is to explore how collective agriculture works in practice by studying the dynamics between visions, everyday practices, and relations to society at large. Our aim is to extend the knowledge about how collective solutions can contribute to meeting the challenges and ecological crises we are facing.

What does the participation entail?

You have been asked to participate in this study because of your experience with collective agriculture and your ability to give insights into this topic. The interview is going to be about your personal experiences and perceptions about participation in collective agriculture, and all answers are therefore valuable for us.

The participation in this study entails that you take part in an interview, where you will tell us about your experiences. We would also like to get a more practical idea of the organization, for example by following daily work and activities and taking a look at farming practices. The interview material is going to be documented through notetaking and recordings. Any physical observations would be documented through notetaking and photographs. **Any documentation will only happen with your, the participants, permission.**

Voluntary participation

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and will happen on your terms. You may withdraw your participation at any time. If we have already collected data from you, this data will then be deleted and not used in any part of the study.

Data handling and confidentiality

All material we collect during our research is confidential and will only be used to meet the study's purpose. This means that the material will be made anonymous, so that information about your personality and the organization remains hidden to protect the participant's integrity. The study's results will be presented in the form of a bachelor's thesis for students, the examiner and supervisor, and you as a participant have the right to receive the results as well. Any citations from interviews will be used to highlight the study's analysis and results but will not be tied to your identity or organization. Any data we collect that contains personal

information and identification will be handled according to data protections laws and deleted after the thesis has been graded.

Thank you for your time and participation in this study. Please don't hesitate to reach out to us if you have any questions about the study or your participation!

Warm regards,
Olivia & Lena

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- <https://libanswers.slu.se/en/faq/228318>

☒ YES, I, Lena Beucker, have read and agree to the agreement for publication and the personal data processing that takes place in connection with this

☒ YES, I, Olivia Hallberg, have read and agree to the agreement for publication and the personal data processing that takes place in connection with this.

☐ NO, we do not give our permission to publish the full text of this work.

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