

transformative  
social innovation  
theory

# Transformative Social Innovation Narrative of Tamera Ecovillage

**A Summary. 31.03.15**

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 613169

## About TRANSIT:

TRANSIT is an international research project that aims to develop a theory of Transformative Social Innovation that is useful to both research and practice. It is co-funded by the European Commission and runs for four years, from 2014 until 2017. The TRANSIT consortium consists of 12 partners across Europe and Latin America. For more information, please visit our website: <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/>.

## About this Document/ Disclaimer:

This report provides a very short summary of a full case report that includes in-depth case-studies of the Tamera Ecovillage. Both, the full case reports and this summary, were guided by four empirical research questions based upon a preliminary conceptual framework of the TRANSIT-project. The four questions concern:

1. the overall development of the local cases and the transnational network(ing);
2. how they relate to different types of change and innovation (incl. social innovation, system innovation, game- changers, narratives of change and societal transformation);
3. how actors are empowered and/or disempowered in and by the local cases and the transnational network(ing), including topics such as governance, learning, resourcing and monitoring;
4. what are other relevant emergent issues with regard to understanding the dynamics of transformative social innovation.

This summary document focuses on the first three questions. It presents – in a highly reduced and generalised format – the interpretations of the researchers, and does not necessarily reflect the views and nuances of the initiatives and respondents themselves. For a full account of each transnational network and local case, including interview quotes and expressed nuances by respondents, we refer to the full case report, which is available via the contact person indicated below or via [avelino@drift.eur.nl](mailto:avelino@drift.eur.nl). Both the full case report, as well as this summary document, are the basis for future research activities and publications.

## Suggested citation:

Avelino, F. (2015) *Transformative Social Innovation Narrative of Tamera Ecovillage. A Summary*. TRANSIT: EU SSH.2013.3.2-1 Grant agreement no: 613169 | 31st of March 2015

**Date:** 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2015

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# 1 (Development of) Tamera

Tamera is an intentional community consisting of 170 people, who live and work on site (German majority combined with dozens of people from across the world). The site covers 330 acres/ 134 hectares and is located 20kms off the west coast in the Alentejo region in southern Portugal. In addition to the permanent community, there are hundreds of guests who temporarily live and work in Tamera. Tamera describes itself as a 'healing biotope' a peace research centre 'for a future without war'. A central feature that distinguishes Tamera from other ecovillages and communities, is its focus on social issues regarding community, love, sexuality and partnership. The belief is that all/most societal challenges in contemporary society (war, violence, ecological destruction, inequality, etc.) originate in difficulties within human relations, and that it is necessary to deal with these human relations first, in order to solve these societal challenges.

Tamera is a member of the *Global Ecovillage Network* and has a strong ecological profile, mostly known for its Water Retention Landscape (naturally man-built lakes following permaculture principles) and for its Solar Village experiments with low-tech innovation in energy. Further, Tamera is bursting with many other international networking and outreach efforts, driven by exceptionally high levels of political activism and idealism. People from Tamera have founded various international network organisations and run numerous educational and activist programmes. The majority of these efforts have a thematic focus on peace work and/or love and sexuality. Examples are the *Institute for Global Peace Work* (IGP), the *Terra Nova School*, and the *Global Campus*, including peace projects in Portugal, Latin America and Palestine.

In addition to the focus on human relations and political work, there is also strong attention for spirituality. Both the political and spiritual identities of Tamera are strongly connected to the views of its founders: Dieter Duhm, Sabine Lichtenfels and Charly Reiner Ehrenpreis. The first two founders have written dozens of book on politics, psycho-analysis and spirituality, which are quoted in signs and in leaflets, all available and visible in the guesthouse, the visitor's book shop and in the large variety of offices. Even though the strong imprint of the founders is evident and widely recognised, Tamera's identity and structure have developed beyond its founders in several ways, and conscious efforts were made to encourage that.

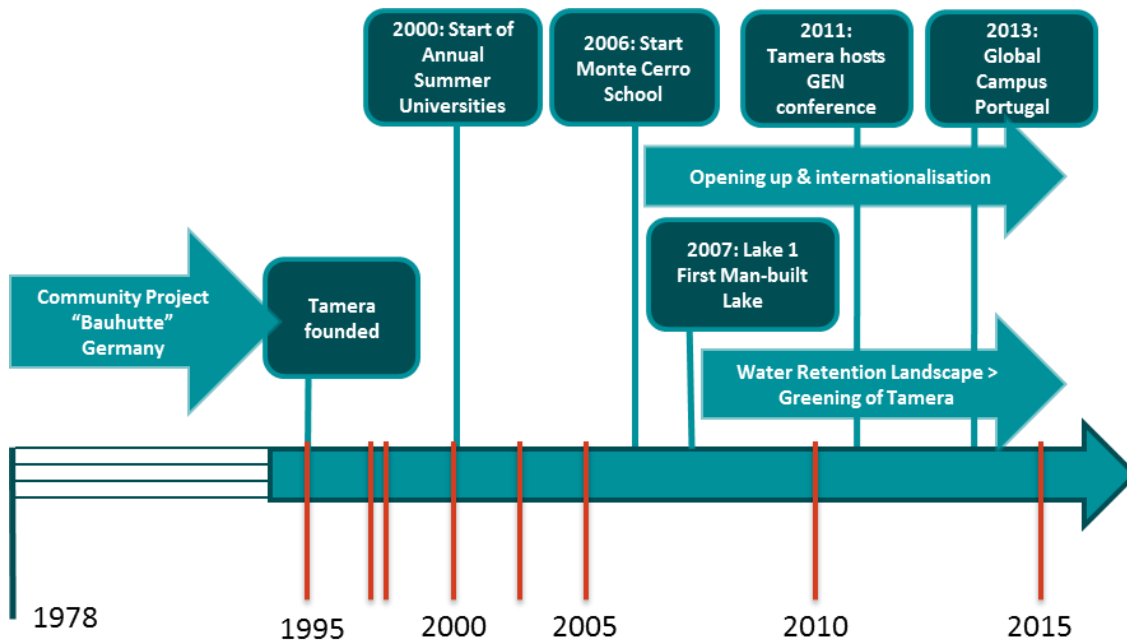
The background of Tamera originates in community project called 'Bauhutte' which was founded in Germany in 1978. After the Bauhutte seed had been planted, it resulted in different follow-up projects that went separate ways but are still connected. One of them was the MEIGA network (German acronym for "Model for an International Non-violent Alternative"), which resulted in Tamera. Another follow-up concerns the intentional community ZEGG (German acronym for "Center for Experimental Societal Design"), founded in 1991 and located in Eastern Germany (1 hour from Berlin). Until today, Tamera and ZEGG are considered 'sister community projects'.

Since Tamera was founded in 1995 in the South of Portugal, there have been many changes and developments, most notably the following:

- (1) the creation of natural lakes and subsequent 'greening' of Tamera;
- (2) a leadership 'shift' to the younger generations;
- (3) the internationalisation and 'opening up' to outsiders through various programmes;
- (4) the loosening up of (informal) rules and norms;
- (5) the increasing attention for ecological issues and life-styles;
- (6) strengthening relations and integration with the Portuguese, regional context.

The most drastic and visible change mentioned concerns the creation of the natural lakes over the years, starting in 2007, which turned Tamera from a desert-like are into a green oasis. Both the shift of leadership to the younger generations, as well as the process of internationalisation, overlapped with (and possibly caused) a process of 'loosening up' rules and norms.

Figure 1: Development Milestones of Tamera through Time



## 2 Change & Innovation by/at Tamera

Tamera has an overt aspiration to contribute to change and innovation. Its *Global Campus* network activities across the world are described as “pioneer and model projects for the transition to a new human culture across various regions” and the *Terra Nova School* is described as “a worldwide learning platform intended to become a catalyst for global system-change” (Tamera website). All shades of change and innovation, including the several notions we use for it within the TRANSIT research project, seem to appear in Tamera discourse, in one way or the other. Tamera and its underlying philosophies demonstrate an explicit ‘theory of change’. This theory of change can be characterised as consisting of five main elements, in which social change is seen as coming forth from:

- (1) Personal transformation and ‘inner work’;
- (2) Re-creating trust within social and intimate relations;
- (3) Living the change by example and through experimentation;
- (4) Holism: political, socio-economic and ecological change are inextricably intertwined;
- (5) Creation of ‘healing biotopes’ and ‘morphogenetic fields’ to foster a ‘new culture’.

In all communications about Tamera, it is strongly emphasised that Tamera wants to create new social systems, or in fact, a new world, a ‘Realistic Utopia’ (Tamera website). They clearly want to do more than creating a pleasant, green living environment for themselves, they really want to ‘change the world’. The *Tamera Manifesto for a New Generation on Planet Earth* (Dieter Duhm) argues that “the world is in transition towards a new way to live on Earth”, that “we are experiencing the collapse of the mega-systems”, and that “the new planetary community is making a fundamental system-change from the matrix of fear to the matrix of trust”.

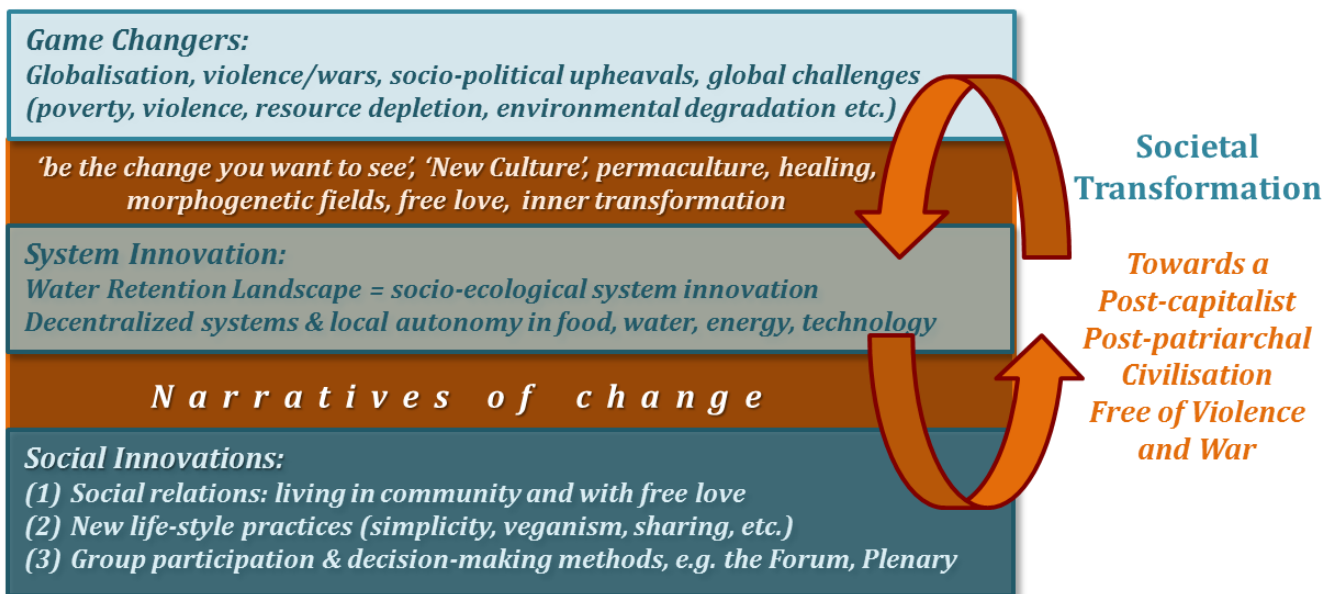
There is an authentic belief that there is a relation between ‘free love’ and profound societal transformation. Here it is important to note that the concept of ‘free love’ in the context of Tamera refers to love that is *free of* fear and dishonesty. In Tamera, the concept of ‘free love’ is explicitly

and recurrently emphasised to be something different from random promiscuity or indifference. The belief in 'love that is free' seems to rest on four principle ideas and hypotheses:

- (1) There is an abundance of resources (incl. love), but we have been socially conditioned to think in terms of scarcity;
- (2) Scarcity is fostered by separation, dishonesty and distrust between people (which in turn leads to greed, jealousy, frustration, fear etc.), which together form the source of all human and ecological suffering;
- (3) If we learn to think and relate to other living creatures on the basis of connectedness, trust, and abundance, this will dissolve the sources of human and ecological suffering;
- (4) For people to relearn connectedness, trust and abundance, they need to (re)learn to live in community and with free, honest love.

Tamera has synergies with various narratives of change and is connected to several social movements, including not only the global ecovillage movement, but also peace activism, permaculture, gift economy, transition towns, and relocalisation movements more generally. Besides its connection to various narratives and movements, Tamera also has an overt aspiration to create a "New Culture" and a "New Image". The notion of "Terra Nova" (Portuguese for 'New World') is described as "the vision of a new Earth. It contains the image of a post-patriarchal civilization free of violence and war" (Tamera website).

Figure 2: Five Shades of Change and Innovation by/at Tamera



### 3 (Dis)Empowerment by/at Tamera

The main way in which people feel **empowered** in/by Tamera, is the exceptionally high level of idealism and activism that is present all around. There is a particularly strong physical manifestation of idealistic philosophies at Tamera, in the permaculture gardens, the man-made lakes, the organic buildings, and the numerous signs stating bits and pieces of Tamera's ideals. Whether or not one like what one sees, walking around in Tamera, feels like walking around in a living proof that 'another reality is possible'. Another obvious source of power in Tamera, is the strong sense of community. People feel supported and cared for, they can recover and 'be themselves', and then feel recharged and empowered to 'go into the world' to do their political

and activist work. Moreover, the focus on inner work and social relations, as the source of social change, also has an inherent empowering element to it, in the sense that it makes social change something that can be worked on at the lowest possible scale (i.e. in one's relation or even at home, alone). Overcoming a negative emotion (e.g. jealousy) is not only a personal victory and pleasant feeling, it also seems to function as a confirmation of one's activist work in and around Tamera (which is focused on 'liberating' people). The concept of 'liberation' and 'freedom' recurs as a theme that people feel empowered by.

While the focus on inner work and social relations is often considered empowering, it also seems to be one of the main sources of challenges and power struggles. It was quite striking to notice that in Tamera, when asked explicitly about **main power struggles or issues of disempowerment**, the thing that was mentioned first and foremost concerned 'inner, personal power struggles'. This is not necessarily because people in Tamera have more personal and inner power struggles than others, but more because they are particularly aware and attentive to such struggles, partly inspired by psycho-analytical writings (such as those by founder and visionary Dieter Duhm) and/or spiritual practices. It was often emphasised that working on such personal struggles, social relations and overcoming issues of jealousy can be extremely confronting and difficult and that this can be disheartening. It was also mentioned that at such disheartened moments, the support of the community really helps to overcome (inter-)personal struggles.

**Internal governance:** Tamera has its own "Government", which consists of three members supported by a 'core-group' of 15 members who coordinate the numerous organisations, projects, programmes and working groups running in Tamera. Final decisions are confirmed in the weekly 'Plenary' meetings, in which all full community members participate. Membership at Tamera has several stages: (1) guest/volunteer, (2) 'student', (3) 'joiner' ('Einsteiger' in German), (4) 'co-worker in training', and (5) 'co-workers'. There is also a separate status of 'specialists', some of which are hired to advise Tamera on specific topics, and unlike all others, receive salary. Every year, more than a thousand people visit Tamera as guests: a substantive part of Tamera's organisation revolves around the management of programmes and accommodation for visitors, guests and volunteers. Both in the government and in the core group, there has been an explicit shift of power to younger generations (aged 18-35). Some claim that 'too much' responsibilities was given to the younger generations, and that these young leaders are too little receptive to learn from the experience of the older generations. Important elements of decision-making, conflict resolution and community-building, are 'the Forum' and 'The Plenary'. Especially the Forum as a facilitated group process was mentioned as a method to deal with processes of disempowerment and power struggles.

Besides formal governance structures, there are many informal norms and rules. Examples include punctuality at meetings (inspired by the predominant German cultural background), veganism in common kitchens, the use of organic cosmetics and respecting different cultures and ages (e.g. not swimming naked and being prudent in front of children, teenagers and guests). Another important example of an informal norm that characterises Tamera, is the honest and direct communication on issues of love and attraction between consenting adults, for instance being able to respectfully express interest in someone, but equally, being able to respectfully say not thank you, and believing that it is possible to do both without hurting or being hurt.

**External governance:** Already in Tamera's background history, there had been quite some conflicts with governments, both in Germany and in Portugal. Currently, there are two main issues regarding the relation with local government. The first concerns the issue of not being allowed to build anymore due to the spatial planning regulations. Tamera is currently working with the Municipality of Odemira and has applied for an official altering of the land use classifications. The second concerns the issue of children schooling; Tamera has created its own certified school (combining elements from Montessori and Waldorf), but was still legally obliged to send their children to the official local school. Recently, this has changed: while Tamera is still waiting to

officially found an international school that aims to provide for children beyond Tamera (called 'Escola da Esperança' – 'School of Hope'), all children from within in Tamera are now allowed to get home-schooling and/or internet schooling, in cooperation with local school who provide formal examination.

**Social learning** is one of the main aims and methods that Tamera focuses on. The learning discourse is omnipresent; Tamera presents itself as a 'research centre' and is filled with 'schools' and 'campuses' of all sorts. There is a strong culture of apprenticeships, where people are stimulated to do new things and take on new responsibilities, with the help of more experienced tutors. This resonates with the recurring idea of 'handing over responsibilities to the younger generations'. Such education of younger generations is not only a means to internally sustain Tamera, but also an end that Tamera aims for: to educate younger generations to go in to the world and do meaningful work.

**Resourcing:** The main revenues of income for Tamera comprise (1) accommodation/ sustenance contributions by all who are not full co-workers, (2) books and other products from Tamera (e.g. herbs, jewellery or other crafts), (3) events, trainings, seminars etc., (4) donations and fundraising, and (5) co-workers going abroad to earn money for a while with their profession (e.g. energy advice or writing). Full co-workers earn money for Tamera by their work at Tamera or outside of it, and receive daily sustenance and pocket money. All others pay for their presence in Tamera. At Tamera, it is often stressed that different 'social relations' based on 'trust' also lead to different interactions about money. The 'Gift Economy' is often mentioned as a foundation.

**Monitoring:** The Forum and the Plenary can be seen as a method for participatory group evaluation, in which community members continuously evaluate and monitor what they feel, what can be improved, etc. Then there is the omnipresent idea of 'research', both formal and informal; there is an explicit culture of 'doing research' and 'being a student'. The winter months (November – March) are described as 'time for reflection, contemplation and study' and a phase of 'planning and restructuring'.

**Figure 3. Impression of Landscape Transformation at Tamera: 2007 – 2011 – 2014**

Source: Tamera website (left) + own pictures (right)

