

# INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES IN ROMANIA. STORY OF THEIR BEGINNINGS

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***Abstract:** Intentional communities have been present throughout the world, for many years. In Romania, such communities have emerged for only a few years and nowadays they are in the forming stage. I studied five such intentional communities, by means of a qualitative research, with a view to identifying the story of each of them.*

***Key words:** community, intentional community.*

## 1. Introduction

“Of late years, in the Romanian space, several initiatives to form intentional communities have come into being. Although, in Romania, these initiatives are relatively recent, and in small numbers, elsewhere in the world, such community initiatives are very old (decades), and very numerous. In this regard, only the website “Fellowship for Intentional Community” ([www.ic.org](http://www.ic.org)) recorded so far 2455 communities, either newly emerging, or already constituted, all over the world. Out of them, 1676 communities are in the United States of America, the rest being distributed across other 73 countries” (Mardache, 2015, p. 15).

Leafe Christian (2003) considers that the emergence of such communities is an extensive cultural phenomenon, in which large groups of people come to feel that they live in a society increasingly fragmented, superficial, expensive and dangerous, as well as that they long for a warmer, healthier, better lifestyle, also a more accessible, cooperative one, in which people should feel much more connected to each other.

I was interested in researching these community projects, as I dare say they will escalate, in Romania, in the coming years, as it has already been happening, for many years, in other countries, too. Furthermore, “this social phenomenon is closely connected to the current problems facing mankind: economic, social, environmental problems, and so forth, offering the alternative of a lifestyle that might mitigate, in the short run, and perhaps even solve, in the long run, a part of these problems facing people everywhere” (Mardache, 2015, p. 17).

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## 2. Definitions of the community – intentional community

*Enciclopedia Dezvoltării Sociale [Encyclopedia of Social Development]* (2007) defines community as “a long-lasting social formation, bringing together a relatively low number of individuals, with a similar cultural background and social status, who live on a less extensive surface and among whom there are well established and persistent cooperation relations, managing thereby to exercise an efficient social-control at a group level”.

*International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1972) defines community as follows: “a population living within a city’s legally established boundaries”. It is specified below that the term is very rarely used to describe a regular metropolitan area, a commercial area, or an entity defined by other than political functions. The issue of establishing a community’s borders is unresolved, as it is well known that decisions taken on the outside can have a significant impact upon the allocation of values, and upon the important private or public decisions within the community.

Precupeţu (2006, p.73) quotes Frazer, who defines community starting from the etymology of the term:

“Etymologically, community can come from “*Communitas*”, which means a symbolic universe of the soul; and, for many authors, the community is the place where the communion with the other people’s souls is achieved. Another etymologic root seems to be “*comunitas*”, in the sense of a group of people who operate by its members’ consensus, this connotation being opposed to the one of “*societas*”, which means association, and to the one of “*civitas*” (city). Communes were territorial associations, sometimes on the grounds of function, such as, for instance, the religious ones”.

For Nisbet, quoted by Bădescu (2005, p.41), “community refers to those «social bonds characterized by emotional connection, depth, continuity, plenitude»”, and “society, as an opposed and complementary notion to the one of «community», designates impersonal, non-emotional relations, namely wholly «reflected», contractual, etc.”

Bauman and May (2008, p.65) propose a large, extensive definition for community: “a collection of people, who are not clearly defined or circumscribed, yet who agree with something rejected by others, and who confer authority upon these beliefs, can be called a community”. The authors specify however that there can be no community apart from a spiritual unity, “the assent, or at least the availability and potential to agree” being crucial.

According to Sandu (2005, p.30), the community “designates a human grouping or gathering, characterized by an increased probability of its members’ value unit” and has at least one of the following three attributes: “its members’ cultural similarity; intense interaction between the group members; status similarity between the group members (occupation, education, age, location, etc.)”.

Longres (1995, p.71) considers that “a community is a type of social system which is distinguished by the personal or affective nature of the relations/bonds keeping its members together. It is a group of people who share a common-identity feeling, who are connected to each other, and become attached to each other by constant interactions”.

Leafé Christian (2003, xvi) defines residential *intentional community* as “a group of people who chose to live together or side by side, in order to have a shared lifestyle or a common purpose”. The author regards as important their co-habitation, and especially the existence of a common purpose, their joint effort and work, in order to have a lifestyle reflecting the same values. Likewise, the author notices that such communities are characterized by idealism, the individuals building a vision of a better life, starting from a

lack or a weakness of the majority culture.

The website “Fellowship for Intentional Community” ([www.ic.org](http://www.ic.org)) enumerates several types of intentional communities: “ecovillage” (ecologic villages based on ecology and sustainability), “co-housing communities” (individual houses in a group ownership), “communes” (organized according to the principle of sharing), “co-ops” or “shared houses” (several individuals who share a living space), spiritual or religious communities.

Making a brief typology of the communities, Pitulac (2009, p.101-104) distinguishes between anarchist communities and intentional communities, specifying: “Here, the term anarchy does not necessarily mean the opposite of the State, but emphasizes the independence from it, on relevant coordinates”. Intentional communities are located in societies organized as a State, and, “either following a decision, or out of need, some of them almost suffice to themselves, in economic terms, being also quasi-anarchist” (for instance: Fourier-type communities, Israeli kibbutz, and so on). Likewise, “intentional communities usually attempt to build in full an alternative lifestyle, relative to that of the society they partially retreat from”.

### **3. The story of the beginnings for the intentional communities in Romania**

Mardache and Atudorei (2013, p. 170) enumerate a few emerging intentional communities in Romania: Armonia Brassovia, Braşov County, Valea Curcubeului [Rainbow Dell], Hunedoara County, Apusenii Verzi [Green Apuseni Mountains], Alba County, Kogaion [Kogaion Community], Buzau County.

The study objectives included the identification of the way in which these intentional communities came into being in Romania. So as to achieve this objective, I conducted a qualitative research, using two research methods: observation (field-, open, uncontrolled, unstructured, participative, intensive), and interview (unstructured, narrative, of thematic storytelling nature). I took 30 depth-, unstructured interviews, ranging between 30 minutes and 2 hours; and for the data analysis, I resorted to NVIVO 10 software.

In this research, I analyzed five such intentional communities: Armonia Brassovia community (Braşov county), Aurora community (Hunedoara county), Valea Curcubeului community (Hunedoara county), SatCitAnanda community (Geoagiu Băi, in Hunedoara county) and Stanciova community (Timiş county). Except for SatCitAnanda community, the other four researched ones are also present in the online environment: Armonia Brassovia community with the website <http://armoniabrassovia.ro/>, Aurora community with the website <http://www.aurora-circle.org/>, Valea Curcubeului community with the website <http://www.valeacurcubeului.org/> and <http://valeacurcubeului.com/> and Stanciova community with the website <http://stanciova.wordpress.com/>.

#### **► Armonia Brassovia Community**

The initiator of *Armonia Brassovia* community is F.D., originating in Braşov. In December 2012, F.D. was involved in organizing at Braşov the “Festival of Self-sustainable Communities in Romania”, where he presented the project of a community he wanted to establish in an area of Braşov county. At the end of the festival, he opened a list with the people present thereat, interested in being part of such a community. Starting with January 2013, F.D. organized monthly meetings with the people interested in the community project (including the remote-participation possibility to these meetings, via Skype).

How did the founder of this community come to want its establishment?

In the interview, F.D. mentioned that, some 5 years ago, he began to nurture a series of preoccupations which brought him to the point of wanting to establish such a community: preoccupations for the production of alternative electricity sources (when he also created a blog), concerns for the depletion of oil, pursuits of a healthy nutrition and natural treatments. Likewise, before starting the community project, F.D. attempted a return to nature, yet by then at a family, not community level: *“I inaugurated a house, so to speak, last summer, and then I bonded with nature, with what means to sit outdoors, in the open, to sleep... It is well for the children, too; they run over there, it is true elation. However, I realized it was not all well; and so came last autumn’s festival. With the festival, the community act was ... enacted.”* (F.D.)

As a source of inspiration for the community, F.D. mentions the series “*Ringling Cedars of Russia*”, written by Vladimir Megre.

► *Aurora Community*

C.D. initiated Aurora-community project, in Hunedoara county; he declared that everything started from a wish forged with his wife. But, before the wish took shape, C.D. mentioned to have gone through a series of changes, mostly of a spiritual nature:

*“... By the age of 18 years old, I experienced a kick of the spiritual kind, I decided that yes, I myself wanted peace, the world was not ok; and my mind would not come to terms with going to college, obtaining a degree diploma and afterwards working for money... So I decided that no, as far as I was concerned, I wanted to dedicate myself to the service for the world, I wanted to do something else; and I actually enrolled in a religious catholic institution, of missionaries, of missionary priests.”* (C.D.)

And the changes of a spiritual nature have continued after he met his wife, too:

*„...And so we started a process... in fact, to ask ourselves where we were, how we lived, why we lived like that; the important part being how sustainable was everything we did, the way in which we fed ourselves, in which we dressed ourselves, in which we did everything (...) it was an inner discontent with what one lives here and now...”* (C.D.)

In this context, they attended some meditation courses and the wish to relocate in the countryside gradually emerged:

*„...we came to a point, after all this part with the meditations and yoga, and with giving up meat; and, what ever, in which we raised the issue of the lifestyle in the city, and we actually wanted to do a downshifting and a slowing of life; so, we decided that «well, it would be interesting to move in the countryside».”* (C.D.)

As he did not succeed in purchasing a terrain in Portugal, so as to move in the countryside, and had to return to Romania, after 13 years of living in Portugal, in order to renew his passport, C.D. has the feeling that his place is in Romania. He collaborated with a Portuguese company for a project developed in Romania, company which subsequently opened a branch in Romania, and began to come in our country ever more often. In parallel, he came into contact with permaculture, the transition culture, transition town, he participated in a conference organized by Global Ecovillage Network in Portugal where he discovered that, in fact, a community was what he had been always searching for:

*“I attended thereto and I realized that what I had been searching all the while was a context in which people live, in fact, much more, much more connected to each other; and here comes the very clear desire of a community, as what we want, this is what I want.”*

► *Valea Curcubeului Community*

For M.C., the initiator of the community project in Valea Curcubeului, the desire to live

in a community intertwines with a very strong desire to live in nature and to depend less on earning one's living in the city:

*„Well, I started -er.. from a desire to live closer to nature, yet not on myself ...but to be together with others who want the same thing – who really want to make this step, of leaving the city and this whole dependence on the system, as well as of becoming as sustainable as possible and, at the same time, of becoming more aware of our powers and what we are as human beings ...”.*

For M.C., in his turn, Anastasia's books (the series “*Ringed Cedars of Russia*”, written by Vladimir Megre) were a source of inspiration as regards the formation of a community:

*“...from Anastasia's books, I had the impulse to establish practically and according to a vision... And there I saw a quite practical model, I felt it to be functional and genuinely for the future, to be fulfilling almost all or ideally almost all aspects of a community...”*

Starting from Anastasia's model of a community, M.C. believes the following to be its prerequisites: each family should own at least one hectare of land, should come and live in contact with nature, should become aware of “where everything comes from and which are in fact the sources of life” and should observe a spiritual practice, so that their spiritual-awakening process might spark and then continue.

#### ► *SatCitAnanda Community*

The project of this community was initiated by a group of five people who met at a campfire in Apusenii Verzi community, Alba county, where they had come in order to attend a spiritual-themed conference. The conference had as its honorary guest Sal Rachele, an author of spiritual-themed books. All five declared to have spiritual preoccupations, and to have felt their meeting around the fire as a magic moment, when an interconnection – a bond formed in their souls:

*“...and it was only us who remained, the others withdrew; we were left by ourselves; and it was a moment, I cannot precisely define when it sparked, but it was so much as a magical moment.”* (M.A.)

*“And there somehow the idea dawned upon us that, ok, we wanted to spend a longer time together, and we wanted to live together, and to jointly achieve things, as we found ourselves comfortable in each other's presence; it is out of this soul link, this bond, that our project, so to call it, came into being ...”* (M.A.)

One of these five persons, A.I. had returned for three years in Romania, after a 12-year period spent in France:

*“... Life in France had lost any significance, no matter how well we were and things went for ourselves; it had no longer any meaning... because everyone around, all people were in their own movie: home, work, credits, children. And there I stood, watched them, and said to myself: Oh, God...which is the point in all these, as they had no meaning, I could find no significance in them.”*

A.I. searched for “*a sense of joy, simply, that's all., The joy of being with the others, somehow a joy, I cannot call it now as I was thinking back then; a joy, simply, of being with the others and of living in an environment ... of enjoying life, probably.*”

As regards the name of the community, “*SatCitAnanda*”, they chose it after many months when they attempted several times to settle upon a name. Eventually, they decided to choose a book which to open at random, and what they would read therein to be their inspiration:

*“And it was clear that, it sounded very clear, SatCitAnanda, because it is pure existence, pure conscience or awareness, pure beatitude; hence, it actually encompasses everything ... Therefore we call our community SatCitAnanda.”*

► *Stanciova Community*

Established in early 2000s, Stanciova community is the longest-lived of all the others. Likewise, out of the five analyzed communities, it is the only one established within the borders of an actual village, namely Stanciova village, in Timiș county; most community members opting for the purchase of an older house in the village and wanting to be in close cohabitation relations with the villagers. All the other communities are at a greater or smaller distance from the residents of the neighbouring villages.

The community project was achieved by a student group of Timișoara, concerned for the environment and involved in various environment-protection projects. They became aware that the most attractive path forward, after their graduation, was the constitution of a community in which to live. Other options, unattractive for them, were the return to their parents, their leaving abroad, or their employment in a multinational company *“where to work to exhaustion and perhaps, only perhaps, manage to earn enough so as to be eligible for a bank credit and afterwards pay installments, for 20 years, for an apartment.”* (T.B.)

The youth group contacted Global Ecovillage Network Association, asking for their help with a view to establishing an ecological village (ecovillage). Following their application, they received two interrail tickets, the opportunity to visit the network members, as well as an invitation to their annual meeting, which was held in Spain. This opportunity helped them collect information about other similar communities worldwide and forge and materialize a vision of their own community for the future.

Likewise, the youth organized, in 1999, an environmental-themed international camp, which gathered approximately 500 people, and where they launched the new community. Following this camp, the youth group received a donation in money, with which they purchased the very first house of their association, in Stanciova village.

► *Legal establishment of the community*

Out of the five communities, only Armonia Brassovia community was legally constituted as an association at the data-collection time (March-August 2014). In Stanciova community, there is Ecotopia Association, established before the start of the community project, but the new members do not affiliate to this former community (*“... The fact is that we use the Association as a legal instrument ... yet it is not something that defines Stanciova community.”* (I.T.)

The other three communities are to acquire, in time, their legal personality.

*“... We want to develop ourselves as an organization, to make an NGO, an association, so that we might attract development funds, too.”* (M.B., SatCitAnanda)

For M.C. in Valea Curcubeului community, the legal constitution of the community bears, in its turn, a spiritual component:

*“... given that when several come together, there is also a greater power, not only in legal terms, but because several people wanting the same thing put their (our) thought, the power of thought together, which becomes greater than the sum of the parts.”*

#### 4. Data Analysis

With a view to analysing qualitative data, I resorted to the software NVIVO 10,

achieving thereby the open coding, axial coding and selective coding. In order to achieve open coding, I used the paragraph-by-paragraph coding technique, I built in-vivo codes, based on which I built categories and subcategories, such as: “types of previous changes”, “socio-professional, familial context”, “transformation stages”, “types of motives for establishing the community”, “characteristics of the founding group”, and so forth. In order to achieve axial coding, I interconnected the categories and subcategories, and I discovered the main axial categories for the research objectives, on temporal sequences, and by localization. In order to achieve selective coding, I identified the nucleus, core category: “motive for establishing the community”.

## 5. Conclusions

In general, the motivation animating the initiators of the analyzed intentional communities to constitute these communities, overlaps with the community members’ motivation to live in such a community: the wish to live closer to nature, in harmony with nature, the wish to attain food and energy self-sufficiency, to live among people with the same ideals, pursuits, to conduct meaningful activities, to enjoy quietness, serenity, harmony, to conduct spiritual activities, and so forth. Likewise, I have noticed that the initiators of such communities are also motivated by the desire to be of help, to make a change, to do something for the people (although this aspect can be found to various extents and in various forms in most community members). This is because the community members believe their living in the community can provide an alternative lifestyle, which could be a model, an example to be followed by ever more people in the future (in this regard, some of the members dare say there is no viable future outside the communities).

In this context, F.D., the initiator of Armonia Brassovia community, wanted to establish the community, with a view to helping other people. SatCitAnanda-community members believe they can help people by the spiritual activities they conduct. Stanciova- and Valea Curcubeului-community members consider to be of help by providing a harmonious lifestyle, and so forth. In addition to these motivations, C.D., the initiator of Aurora community, wants to support the development of the other communities.

Likewise, for Armonia Brassovia and Valea Curcubeului communities, Anastasia’s books were a source of inspiration for the community project.

If the motivations are quite similar, the ways of starting the community projects differ:

- in the case of Armonia Brassovia community, F.D. was involved in organizing the “Festival of Self-Sustainable Communities in Romania”, in December 2012, at Braşov, where he presented the project of the community he wanted to establish in an area of Braşov county. At the end of the festival, he opened a list with the persons present thereat, who were interested in being part of such a community. Starting with January 2013, F.D. organized monthly meetings with the people interested in the community project, where debates took place and group decisions were made, in terms of community location, land purchase, community design, and so forth.

- Aurora community was established by a family who purchased a household in a village of Hunedoara county, where they organized various activities and the community promotion has been and is still achieved both in the online environment, and by the conducted activities.

- Valea Curcubeului community was created by a youth group who had a meeting in Bucureşti, where they discussed the community project. Searching for the land, finding and purchasing it, as well as cultivating it, were the next steps.

- SatCitAnanda community was initiated by a group of five people who met at a campfire in Apusenii Verzi community, Alba county, where they had come to participate in a spiritual-themed conference. All five declared to have very intense spiritual pursuits, and to have felt their meeting round the fire as a magical moment, when a bond – an interconnection formed between their souls, and they wanted to establish a community attracting people with similar pursuits.

- Stanciova community was constituted in the early 2000s, within the borders of Stanciova village, in Timiş county, by a student group of Timişoara, concerned for the environment and involved in various environment-protection projects. They became aware that the most attractive path forwards, after the completion of their studies, was the establishment of a community in which to live. Likewise, they were supported in the start of their community project, by Global Ecovillage Network Association, whose help they asked, with a view to establishing an ecological village (ecovillage).

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