

OPINION

Climate action needs more than policy: The moral and spiritual foundations of sustainable change

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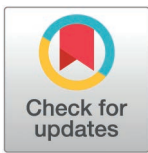
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1. The policy gap in climate action

Global climate governance has, over the past three decades, produced an impressive architecture of commitments: international accords, national emissions targets, carbon markets, green subsidies, and public information campaigns. The underlying assumption across most of these instruments is broadly rationalist, that individuals and organisations will act sustainably when given appropriate incentives, information, and regulation. And yet the evidence is unambiguous: environmental awareness has never been higher, while aggregate emissions trajectories have consistently fallen short of what is required [1].

This is the value-action gap, the divergence between environmental values and behaviour [2,3]. Its persistence is not primarily a failure of communication or incentive design. Rather, it reflects a deeper theoretical blind spot in the dominant policy paradigm: the systematic neglect of the subjective and axiological dimensions that structure both individual and collective behaviour. Climate action has been limited precisely by its failure to engage the moral and existential frameworks through which people inhabit the world.

Technocratic approaches to sustainability treat values as fixed input parameters to be leveraged rather than transformed. Market-based instruments assume preference stability; nudge-based policies assume bounded rationality. Neither framework engages seriously with the possibility that the crisis of sustainability is, in significant part, a crisis of meaning, a consequence of long-standing cosmological assumptions about nature [4,5]. Religions have been called upon to respond to these crises, yet proposed solutions continue to sideline the spiritual dimension as drivers of ethical and ontological transformation. Without understanding how these subjective dimensions shape identities, models of ecological transition remain unable to generate lasting behavioural change.



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2. Ecovillages as social laboratories

Ecovillages offer a distinctive analytical advantage for precisely examining this question. Defined by the Global Ecovillage Network as intentional communities combining ecological, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of sustainability, ecovillages have emerged globally since the 1990s as spaces in which alternative relations with the natural world are not merely theorised but institutionalised in daily practice [6]. In Portugal, a country with a notable concentration of such communities, our empirical research provides material for examining how values are translated into action.

The findings are instructive. When residents were asked about the factors driving their decision to join an ecovillage, the dominant motivations were ecological and ethical, namely the concern for the natural world, a desire for coherence between values and lifestyle, and a search for community, rather than economic or pragmatic. Crucially, the sustainability practices observed were not experienced as sacrifices or constraints, but as expressions of identity and moral commitment. This finding dialogues with Ergas's [7] analysis of ecovillages as spaces where collective identity itself becomes organised around sustainability, transforming ecological practice into a shared moral framework. Between permaculture systems and ancestral knowledge, these communities implement practices such as bioconstruction, organic farming, circular-economy models, forest management, and the pursuit of energy, water, and food self-sufficiency. These practices materialise new spiritual grammars and ecocentric ontologies, in which the Earth is understood as a relational entity endowed with agency.

This distinction matters enormously for policy (Table 1). Residents did not describe themselves as 'adopting sustainable behaviours'; they described themselves as living in accordance with who they are and what they believe. Ecovillages are, in this sense, social laboratories: spaces in which an alternative relationship with the natural world is prefigured and tested, generating evidence about what conditions enable genuinely transformative action [8,9].

3. Ecospirituality as moral mobilisation

The concept of moral mobilisation, understood here as the process through which deeply held values are translated into sustained collective action, helps interpret ecovillage dynamics [10]. The analysis, based on our research, reveals three interconnected mechanisms through which ecospiritual frameworks perform this mobilising function.

The first is relational ontology. Spirituality within these communities rejects institutionally dominant religious traditions, instead favouring eclectic engagements with holistic practices and beliefs associated with what sociology has termed New Age culture, something that Pinto's [11] identified in his review, where spirituality emerges less as institutional religion and more as an embodied and relational worldview connecting ecological practice, self-transformation, and communal belonging. This spirituality tends to be understood as a process of self-knowledge and inner transformation, as a universal connection and dissolution of the ego, and as an ethical-practical commitment that is naturalised in daily life. Its sociological function is to

Table 1. Contrasting logics of climate action.

Dimension	Conventional Policy Approach	Ecovillage Model
Driver of change	External incentives (regulations, subsidies, taxes)	Internal moral and spiritual commitment
Mechanism	Behaviour modification through price signals and information	Value alignment through relational ontology and collective practice
Social cohesion	Minimal; assumes atomised individuals	Central; spirituality mediates conflict and sustains collective norms
Resilience	Dependent on institutional continuity	Embedded in community bonds and self-sufficiency practices
Political role	Top-down; state and market actors as primary agents	Prefigurative; grassroots enactment of alternative futures

Source: Authors, based on empirical research with Portuguese ecovillages (2020–2025).

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guide action and sustain ecological commitments. The belief in the interdependence of all living beings orients daily choices about food, water, energy, construction materials, and land use. This sensibility extends even to interspecies relations: veganism, or the ritualised and conscious consumption of animal life, comes to be experienced within a resacralised environmental morality in which gratitude and ecological awareness directly guide both physical and metaphysical practice.

The second mechanism is normative cohesion. Research into spiritual practice within ecovillages shows that it plays a significant role in mediating internal conflict, a finding of considerable practical importance given the well-documented tendency of intentional communities to fragment under the pressure of collective decision-making. Shared ritual practice, the invocation of common values, and the maintenance of a shared moral vocabulary provide the social infrastructure that enables communities to sustain collective projects over time. This normative function is not peripheral, it is constitutive of the community's capacity for collective action. Far from being confined to an individualistic or escapist plane, this holistic spirituality performs vital functions of cohesion, social regulation, and mediation of interactions.

The third mechanism is prefigurative politics. Ecovillages act as concrete demonstrations that a different relationship between human society and the natural world is not merely desirable but liveable. This prefigurative function, the enactment, in the present, of the future one seeks to bring about has been recognised as a distinctive form of political action [8]. It is particularly salient in the context of climate change, where the dominant imaginaries of the future oscillate between catastrophism and technological optimism, leaving little conceptual space for communities already living differently. The relevance of this prefigurative dimension became especially evident in the wildfires that have repeatedly affected central Portugal, where ecovillage communities, characterised by strong social bonds, partial self-sufficiency, and a practical relationship with the local landscape, demonstrated forms of resilience — mutual aid, rapid collective response, ecological knowledge — that market-based and state-led climate adaptation strategies struggle to generate [12].

4. Implications for climate governance

The argument advanced in this article does not imply that moral and spiritual transformation can substitute for regulatory frameworks or green investment. The climate crisis still requires policy, institutional, and technological action. The claim is more specific: that the current architecture of climate governance systematically neglects a dimension of the problem that is not peripheral but central. As Hitzhusen and Tucker [13] argue, religious and spiritual worldviews possess significant but underutilised potential for fostering forms of Earth stewardship capable of motivating long-term ecological responsibility.

A significant political and regulatory ambivalence runs through the situation of communities such as these. On the one hand, ecovillages prefigure the future at the margins of the state, and their networks have acquired consultative value in

the design of global guidelines for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). On the other, they face systematic legal constraints. These everyday frictions expose the limits to the scalability of community-based solutions within rigid legal frameworks, becoming especially evident in the implementation of off-grid systems or alternative education models that clash with prevailing regulatory regimes. Beyond legal barriers, the everyday life of these communities is characterised by intrinsic instability: high resident turnover, economic constraints, and, frequently, power and gender asymmetries that challenge the egalitarian ideals upon which they are founded.

What would it mean to take moral infrastructure seriously as a component of climate strategy? It would mean, first, that communities capable of sustained ecological commitment. It would mean supporting the conditions under which such communities can proliferate and diversify. It would mean developing a climate science that is genuinely multidisciplinary — one in which the sociology of religion and environment, moral philosophy, and cultural theory are in dialogue with climate modelling and policy analysis. And it would mean attending to the question of meaning: what stories, values, and ontological frameworks can motivate the scale of transformation that is required. These are not soft questions, they are the hardest questions in the entire climate problem, and the ones that contemporary governance is least equipped to address.

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