



SHARED MEALS

EXAMPLE OF PRACTICE LAYER - SOCIAL DIMENSION

A common feature in many groups (e.g. the ecovillage and cohousing movement, community gardens, transition groups) is the practice of dining together. This ranges from sharing every meal to having shared dinners occasionally, usually on a weekly or monthly basis. Systems of shared dining are often subject to experiments and changes as the ultimate form that meets the needs of different individuals is generally hard to reach. Therefore the practice of shared meals offers an excellent co-creation process to find a solution that group members can all consent to. Furthermore, it is a field of mutual exploration between different projects. We mostly refer to groups that live closely together, but we acknowledge that many groups organize shared meals on meetings or special occasions, so many of these concepts and dynamics also apply.

IMPACT ON THE INDIVIDUAL LAYER



Eating together traditionally takes place in the daily routine of a family. In an ecovillage, for example, all the people from the community are included and become part of the intimate space, which was formerly reserved for the family. For individuals who previously had no family for daily dining, shared meals can meet the longing for community and are one of the main reasons why they decide to join.

Families cherish shared meals in the community as they enrich relationships for both adults and children. On the other hand, it is necessary to preserve the intimacy of families and similar small groups when the community takes over spaces that were previously meant for private time. With respect for individuals' and families' need of their own space the opposite might be needed in some communities: days with no shared meals. This can manifest in providing the opportunity to bring food prepared for a shared meal back home, or through other ways that allow individual needs and wishes to be mindfully incorporated into the shared community practice. This also takes into account allergies and personal preferences – eating in silence, blessing the meal, favoring raw food, fitting meat into a sustainable lifestyle, avoiding gluten or sugar, etc. Eating culture requires individual balancing and compromising with the group.



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IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY LAYER

The need for food is universal. Eating together is inherently community building because it includes everybody. Common meals are a space of informal dialogue whereby even those group members who ordinarily don't communicate get to meet and speak. In this way, common meals build and maintain relations. Forming a community of practice in preparing and serving food for each other is of high value as these practical tasks foster avenues of cooperation and dialogue. Shared meals are an excellent entry point for newcomers, guests, and volunteers to a community, where new contacts and plans are made. These ways of developing community cohesiveness are often found in such daily practices, and the act of eating together is essential.



INTENTIONS THAT INFLUENCE PRACTICE

The decision to have shared meals comes from the combined intentions for both community-building and wishing to meet practical/ ecological parameters. Sharing food preparation is a community-building practice and an opportunity for members to grow together.

The ecological benefits of not having kitchens running in every household around mealtime and reducing food waste can be part of the intention for setting up a shared meal system. There may also be a wish to create free time for people by sharing work tasks rather than spending time on the individual tasks of shopping, cooking, and cleaning in every household.

A moment of gratitude shared before eating is a way of valuing the systems that produced the food, as well as valuing the privilege of having the food and sharing it with the group. It is also an expression of the wish for creating a new relationship with people and the planet.

All this is quite common in eco-communities. However, some people feel uncomfortable about mixing common meals with what they perceive as a spiritual practice (blessing the food). To avoid this some groups express gratitude in a more relaxed and non-ceremonial way.



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THE IMPORTANCE OF STRUCTURE

Shared food systems often attract well-organized people to design structures that underlie this practice. This is particularly common in ecovillages. Almost all ecovillages have an established structure for shared meals. The structure deals with organizing kitchen teams, managing financial aspects with regard to reimbursement for expenses and payments, the way how people subscribe and unsubscribe for meals if they pay monthly or separately for each meal. It deals with the issue of fairness, such as excusing sick or elderly people from participating in practical tasks. The structure tends to change over time depending on the ever-changing needs of the group. The number of days in the month when people share meals can vary depending on the season; meals can be available only for fixed groups or also for visitors, etc.

In summary, the practice of shared dining includes all of the GAIA dimensions of sustainability, contributing to community glue (social), decreasing food waste and promoting shared resource utilization (ecological), showing intentions (culture/world view), and finally saving time and money (economic).

TWO PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

A shared meal model suits most cohousing-projects.

They meet every Friday, and 3 other adults are responsible for preparing the meals, including organizing the food. This task rotates so that everyone who participates has their turn. It's up to the people cooking if they use expensive or cheap food if they go food saving for it or buy the ingredients in the organic food store.

Sieben Linden shared meal model (simplified).

The whole community shares the basic food-supplies and pays a monthly fee for the background work and a daily fee for the days that they actually consume the food.

The shared food-supply is 100% organic. There are several private kitchens and there is a community kitchen, so people are free to choose where they consume the food.

Every member of the community has the obligation to work 1-4 hours a week for the shared household, depending on the number of meals they take in the community-kitchen. People who love to cook take the role of the responsible cook, others support with preparing the food or with kitchen and dining room cleaning afterward.

There are plans where people sign up according to their availability. If the plan doesn't fill up, there is no shared meal. Every month the balance sheet of the community hours is published