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Towards a responsible communication strategy in the eco-social transition sector: an epistemological approach

Abstract

The current transitions towards fair and sustainable models of social and economic relations represents a vital process for the maintenance of the ecosystems and the ways of inhabiting them. This paper is an empirical and epistemological study whose aim is to consider how to develop a responsible communication strategy with the eco-transitions sector. We take a specific region of Spain, Castilla-La Mancha, as a field of experimentation and case study. The analysis is based on a sample of 55 active eco-transition projects, out of a total census of 156. Our position assumes that communication strategy goes through several phases. Firstly, access to empirical and census-based knowledge of this sector; secondly, establishing a type of indicator that can measure the functioning and internal dynamics of these entities in terms of eco-transition; and thirdly, the expansion of responsible, realistic and proactive media coverage, which can encourage messages that contribute to an ever-increasing number of people moving towards eco-social issues. In order to measure the “internal health” of these entities, including the “communication environment,” we have elaborated and implemented the Eco-Transition Indicator (ETI), a measurement tool that allows us to place a project or initiative within a frame leading towards fair and sustainable models of social and economic relations. While the sector shows good “health” in some aspects, the results point very clearly to the need to strengthen the communicative strategy of the eco-transition initiatives and projects.

Keywords

Indicators, eco-social transitions, media, Eco-Social Transition Indicator (ETI), Castilla-La Mancha.

1. Background

On 14 November 2019, the Spanish and European press gave media coverage to the results of the 2019 report of The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: *Ensuring that the health of a child born today is not defined by a changing climate*, published by the journal *Review*. The study, carried out by the international and multidisciplinary research team Lancet Countdown, which monitors the effects of climate change on health, warned that a child born today will live in a world which is four degrees warmer if the Paris agreement on climate

change is not complied with. The research team foresees a world that is considerably less hospitable and healthy than that of the previous generations. Such a world is characterized by loss of crop productivity due to drought, abundance of floods and the disappearance of pollinators, poor air quality, the spread of infectious and diarrhoeal diseases, respiratory and cardiovascular problems, as well as famine that will exacerbate poverty and result in conflict, causing mental health disorders.

This dystopian outlook, increasingly covered in the media, points to a multiple, systemic, global and civilizational crisis that not only jeopardizes all ecosystems, but profoundly questions the model built by development theories too. These theories tend to express economic growth as a permanent and infinite need, without considering the finiteness of resources and the need to redistribute the wealth already produced. As Azkarraga, Sloan, Belloy and Loyola (2012) point out, “A gap has emerged between the ability of humans to transform the world and their ability to control the effects of that transformation.” It should be remembered that this world does not belong to us exclusively if we observe the balance fractal that determines the eco-dependence between species, and between these and the resources that support the populace.

In the light of the ecosystem crisis and its most visible indicators, there are many voices and academicians from a wide range of disciplines and theoretical frameworks, who highlight the urgent need for us to move towards more eco-social, fair, equitable and feminist models of society (Mies & Shiva, 1998; Lietaer, 2005; Mignolo, 2010; Paus, 2013; Castoriadis, 2013). This necessary transition in the change of model is defined as eco-transition. According to Azkarraga *et al.* (2012), there would be two types of eco-social transitions: the disordered and the ordered. Disordered transitions could be seen as a process which includes disorder and conflicts on all imaginable scales, due to the struggle for increasingly scarce resources. Ordered transitions on the other hand, would allow us to embark on a voluntary path of self-restraint, sufficiency and internalization of limits. There are many inspiring theoretical frameworks in this endeavor. A decolonial perspective advocates what Escobar calls an “An-Other-Paradigm.” This is another way of thinking, the very possibility of talking about “worlds and knowledges otherwise” (2010). Several social and redistributive proposals, such as La Vía Campesina, which works to defend food sovereignty by using resources respectfully, promotes the feminization of life, and defends the story of indigenous peoples and the respectful use of nature, fit into this new framework of universal rights, as represented by the Rights of Mother Earth approved in 2010 at the World People’s Conference on Climate Change (Chaparro, 2016). Similarly, from the epistemologies of the South, for Boaventura de Sousa and Paula Meneses (2010), the modern, Western-centric, cultural and epistemological paradigm that has been imposed globally, presents a drastically reduced version and, therefore, an impoverishment of the great diversity of cultures and epistemologies. Eco-feminism has also firmly aligned itself with the set of theories that highlight the lack of solidarity represented by an economic model oblivious to the limits of eco-systems and to the variety and variability of social structures. For Alicia Puleo, a pioneer in promoting eco-feminism in Spain, the patriarchal construction of subjectivities conditions the ability to feel empathy and respect towards the natural world (2011). Therefore, decoloniality in cultures affected by Western cultural impositions is not as difficult as in those demanding disinvestment in supremacist knowledge integrated in the educational, social learning and cultural imprint of so-called Western societies.

Of particular interest in the search for transdisciplinary connections, is the work of Serge Latouche, who has taken a post-development and degrowth approach. He sees development as an imposed and exclusive model where we once again come up against the obstacles already mentioned regarding the finiteness of the planet and the need to redistribute wealth. According to this author, we must question the notions of growth, poverty and basic needs, and we should deconstruct our economic imagination, which affects Westernization and

globalization (2004). We should not overlook the views of those such as Cubillo Guevara and Hidalgo Capitan (2015), who prefer to talk about trans-development instead of post-development, to express the need to improve and define a new stage, a synthesis between subsistence, development and post-development.

This line of theoretical thought that informs this article is complemented by the idea that society needs to respond “transformationally,” as suggested by authors such as Johan Schot and Edward Steinmueller. These authors express the importance of fitting phenomena related to the persistent problems of economic crises and rising inequality to a transformative change framing: “This framing involves a questioning of how to use science and technology policy for meeting social needs and addresses the issues of sustainable and inclusive societies at a more fundamental level than previous framings or their associated ideologies and practices” (2018). Framings are thus important because they compete with one another for the imagination of policymakers and, ultimately, citizens. Indeed, some of them also have pervasive impacts on practice.

2. Communicating Eco-Transitions

Within the previous background, it is worth reflecting on what role media has assumed and what the new communication strategies they have to face are. Media are important public arena (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988) where different images and definitions –‘sponsored’ by different agents, groups and interested parties– compete and grapple with one another. According to Hanse (2011, p. 9) communication is central to how we happen to know, and what we know about the environment and the environmental issues. With all kind of eco-social transitions in mind, major media communication is a central public arena through which we become aware of environmental issues and the way in which they are addressed, contested and resolved. From a communication perspective, the fact that we live “in collapse” despite the hyperabundance of information (Urbano, 2010; Franco & Gêrtrudix, 2015) has already been widely discussed. Hence, the risk no longer lies in the access to sources, but in the increasing difficulty we face in being informed and in avoiding being misinformed; in understanding how to whittle down useful sources from those that are unsubstantial, tainted or fake. In the era of post-truth and infoxication, high doses of media inoculations have become a crucial necessity.

Cases such as the DANA natural disaster that occurred in Spain in September 2019, the Fridays for future school strikes, or the UN climate change summits have received media coverage characterised by sensationalism, notoriety, alarmism, and even a certain personification that tends to blame nature for disasters. They do not clearly explain the true causes: “Rains, snowfalls, winds, floods, fires that kill, failing to mention that behind them, in some way, is the speculative and consumerist economic model imposed on the planet. Most news items do not address the causes, rather they attribute these to a coincidence of causation” (Chaparro, Gabilondo & Espinar, 2019). Dystopian journalism, which increases uncertainties in the face of predicted disasters, is more likely to create an impact, unlike placing value on collective and discreet efforts, which in our opinion must constitute an agenda for the media to modify their information strategy. If we should look at the coincidence of an event, we also need to look at causality.

Among the eco-transition topics, climate change dominates most of the publications (Shäfer, 2015). In this sense, it is worth noting that counter-narratives offered by well-financed lobbying organizations and multinational corporations still clutter the discussion and confuse the public. Hanse (2011) has surveyed environmental communication research of the past four decades. In his study, he quoted authors such as Sharon Beder (2002) who hammers on the increasing use of ‘front’ groups, seemingly independent and impartial groups, set up by business or industry to promote its interests in the public sphere while appearing to merely be representing the ‘public interest.’ Beder takes the example of the

Global Climate Coalition, “a coalition of fifty US trade associations and private companies representing oil, gas, coal, automobile and chemical interests” (Beder, 2002, p. 29), whose main objective was to cast doubt on the evidence for global warming/climate change and to fight scientific, political and legislative initiatives to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

The psychological and the cultural reasons that result in public denial of the badly damaged condition of our world should also be underlined. In this sense, Kari Marie Norgard has been concerned with the problem of how and why people who purport to be concerned about climate change manage to ignore it. As she underlines,

Both unique and universal mechanisms of denial from interpretative narratives to cultural practices surely exist, especially in wealthy nations around the world. Indeed, the phenomenon of denial, our collective resistance to disturbing information, poses a new challenge for our modern society that is increasingly relevant in our globalized information age, even beyond the issue of climate change (2011, p. 413).

Public distance, lack of knowledge and weak support for ecological transition initiatives are not only the result of saturated, sensationalistic media, but of direct disinformation campaigns as well. They are also the public’s adherence to what Brand and Wissen have described from the decolonial perspective as the Imperial way of living, which implies not only that people’s everyday practices rely heavily on the unlimited appropriation of resources but also on asymmetrical social relations along class, gender and race categories. In other words, the imperialist world order is normalized through the mode of production and living (2017).

The prevalence of climate change among media coverage has not prevented an increasing interest in studies concerning eco-social transitions. While some focus on local and neighbourhood aspects (López, Matarán & De Manuel, 2014), others focus on social interventions (Alberich, 2008), among others. The Transdisciplinary Research Group on Transitions and Collapses¹, one of the most active research groups in Spain in which experts such as Jorge Riechman and Yayo Herrero contribute, has launched an interesting line of publications and critical analysis that focus on five thematic areas. These include democracy and power, ecology and economy, inequality and injustice, socio-ecological alternatives and ethical-political tools, and perspectives of collapse. At the same time, related doctoral theses are being submitted on these issues. As an example, “Social innovation for energy transition: characterizing transformative practices by citizens for a new energy model” (Pellicer, 2018).

A long way to be paved is still ahead, though. As shown in the *Guía de transición ecosocial y principios éticos para nuestros medios* [Ecosocial transition guide and ethical principles for our media] (Chaparro, Espinar, El Mohammadiane & Peralta, 2020), the hegemonic media do talk very little about how our wrong practices have negative consequences for the ecosystems, for health and for the way we relate to each other. Among them, the low-cost fashion industry, the use of pesticides, herbicides, chemical fertilizers, seeds and genetically modified crops, harmful monocultures such as sugar cane or even avocado, the problems of non-native fish consumption or the speculation of bottled water, to name but a few. A myriad of myths and erroneous and speculative information has been generated with regards to those topics, making it difficult to understand how our bad habits do have a scope of repercussions. However, even more important, lack of acute information prevents citizens from finding quality references to derive inspiration. Even basic aspects such as the relationship between media and change for democracy is unclear in the academic literature, most notably due to the absence of a theory of mass media and democratization, according to the Reuters Institute for Study in Journalism (2013). Indeed, numerous authors lament the amount of misinformation and hasty reporting of phenomena related to eco-social transitions (McBean & Hengeveld, 2000; McKeown & Hopkins, 2013; Mosser & Dilling 2011; Niesbet, 2009). Thus,

¹ <https://transecos.wordpress.com/materiales/>.

the ideas and practices we need to promote and deepen so that a transition towards more reasonable, more ecologically and socially viable economy can work. Likewise, the study of the connections between economy, ecology and social relations is awaiting the reinstatement of public decision-making power (Arnsperger, 2012).

3. Applied research

In terms of applied research, the *Guía para el Mapeo y Relevamiento de la Economía Popular solidaria en Latinoamérica y Caribe* [Guide for the Mapping and Survey of the Popular Solidarity Economy in Latin America and the Caribbean] (The Solidarity Economy Network Group of Peru, GRESP) published in 2010, contains earlier experiences and a questionnaire designed to identify the nature of the initiatives. In Santa Fe (Argentina), a recent mapping of the social and solidarity economy (Cardozo *et al.*, 2017) has also been carried out in response to the surge in municipal activities. In Spain, of particular note are the initiatives of Som Energía², PamaPam³, or REAS (Red de Redes de Economía Alternativa y Solidaria [Network of Alternative and Solidarity Economy Networks]), groups which aim to create responsible consumption and solidarity economy links⁴. The latter generated a “map of solutions”⁵ of social and solidarity economy on an international scale, published on the website *socioeco.org*. The idea of unifying initiatives into a large, categorized world map underlies some of these projects. In order to make these alternatives flourish, alternatives that are more widespread than visible, the multiplication of points and nodes from the local and regional levels will play a key role.

In Spain, since the Ministry for Ecological Transition (MITECO)⁶ was founded in 2018, there has been an increasing number of media outlets specialized in eco-transitions, or general media outlets that include a specialized section, reflecting the new social demands. Included among these are *eldiario.es*, *Infolibre*, *El Público*, *El Salto*, the feminist magazine *La Poderío*, the website *Soberanía Alimentaria*, *EMA-RTV*, and the blog *El caballo de Nietzsche*, on the *eldiario.es* website. Despite this upward trend, we also approach with caution and concern the debate on eco-social transitions and its treatment by the media. Another cause for caution and concern is the conflicting information found in the same publication, indicating that the trend is not part of the DNA of the medium nor does it conform to a certain publishing style.

In addition, there are numerous studies on indicators of ecological, cultural, economic and environmental “sustainability” found in many journals in the environmental sciences or ecology fields, such as *Ambio: A Journal of the Human Environment*, *Environment and Behaviour*, *Ecology and Society* or *International Journal of Human Ecology*. The Centro de Documentación del Agua y Medio Ambiente [Water and Environment Documentation Centre] in Zaragoza, has published a list of more than 120 national and international journals related to fields such as organic farming, water, resources, energy, climatology, environmental education, and the natural and social environment, among others⁷. Numerous studies show that the focus has especially been on climate change and on energy transition, with a recurrent connection to the use of visibility maps, when the work done involves the use of indicators (Axelsson *et al.*, 2013). The same applies to the field of communication and information.

² <https://www.economiasolidaria.org/union-renovables>.

³ <https://pamapam.org/ca/>.

⁴ <https://www.economiasolidaria.org/map>.

⁵ http://www.socioeco.org/solutions_es.html.

⁶ This Ministry was created with the aim of developing government policies in the areas of the environment, energy, mining, “sustainable” development, protection of natural heritage, biodiversity and the sea, water, the fight against climate change and the management of a more ecological productive and social model. The sustainability criterion adopted by many institutions and public bodies is controversial because the growth of the economy cannot be sustainable over a long period of time. From our perspective, alternative proposals should seek models of transition and change, and, in this sense, it seems more appropriate to speak of eco-transition or eco-responsible initiatives.

⁷ <https://www.zaragoza.es/contenidos/medioambiente/cda/lrevistas12.pdf>.

4. Justifying the proactive stance of this study

Many authors have already been engaged in a proactive, dialogic and purposeful research line, dedicated more to reinforce the dynamics for change and to the “intelligent environmental action” than to perpetuate the study of risk communication. Some authors have highlighted the need to find a way out to integrate climate change and media studies into transdisciplinary research frameworks (Smith & Lindenfeld, 2014) or to integrate theory and practice in energy transition communication (Cozen *et al.*, 2017), with a predominance of case studies of good practice and future projections. Fernández and Águila have focused on how to achieve a journalism in transition regarding climate change that, without forfeiting rigor and objectivity, places sustainability as the axis of reference, promoting a necessary cultural change, which, in turn, requires a media change (2017).

According to Hanen (2011, p.7), there is a need for media and communications research on environmental issues/controversy to reconnect with the traditional sociological concerns about power and inequality in the public sphere, particularly in terms of showing how economic, political and cultural powers significantly affect the ability to participate in and influence the nature of public ‘mediated’ communication about the environment. The social contexts in which users engage with climate-related media content, their motivations, and gratifications as well as their interpretations of the content, have not yet been taken up properly. Motivational theories like uses and gratifications and theories of interpersonal communication and information diffusion could be useful to shed light on these facets (Shäfer, 2015, p. 858). Maibach *et al.* (2010), for example, have begun to show how the reframing of climate change communications as a health issue has empirically demonstrable implications for public perceptions, attitudes and potential behaviour on climate change mitigation. *The monograph Creating a Climate for Change: Communicating Climate Change and Facilitating Social Change*, edited by Moser and Delling (2007) offers well-founded practical suggestions on how to communicate climate change and how to approach related social change more effectively, considering among other issues, how to make a difference using media messages (Dunwoody, 2007), listening to the audiences (Pratt & Rabkin, 2007) or the consumption behavior and narratives about good life (Michaelis, 2007).

All these approaches can help to overcome socio-psychological denial mechanisms such as the costs of shifting away from comfortable lifestyles, set blame on the inaction of others, including governments, and emphasized doubts regarding the immediacy of personal action when the effects of climate change seemed uncertain and far away, as Stoll-Kleemann, O’riordan and Jaeger have evidenced from Swiss focus groups (2001). On the other hand, previous studies, such as the one by Simone Strambach and Gesa Pflitsch, have shown how regional institutional settings significantly influence the pace and scope of sustainability transitions and allow the establishment of a link between short-term gradual changes on the micro-level and long-term transformative change on the system level (2020).

Our study is conceived in line with this way of thinking, as we can see the need to bridge the gap between the media and the eco-social transitions, creating a more holistic perspective which is able to integrate the different casuistries and epistemologies. While recognizing that the previous approaches have provided tremendously productive and rich frameworks and inspiration, our main contention remains that there exist three different worlds which rarely come together. The local eco-transition initiatives carried out by the citizens, which in our opinion are playing a leading role, though with little recognition so far, in pursuit of macro decisions and supra-governmental structures. On the other hand, the scientific world, which, as we have seen, has focused much more on one aspect of the eco-social transitions: climate change. Finally, the last chain link visible in the media, which might find constraints and obstacles to inspire and speed up eco-social transitions as far as their role as mediators is concerned.

5. Hypotheses, aims, research questions and method

Considering the previous assumptions, this work is based on the following hypothesis:

- H1. The eco-transitions sector in Castilla-La Mancha, the region under study, lacks a strong commitment to communication between the media and the entities themselves.
- H2. Measuring the achievements of the local eco-social transition initiatives could contribute to bridge the gap between entities, academia and media by adding value to the daily collective efforts that seek to achieve a fairer, more diverse, environmentally friendly and depatriarchalized organization of life.

Based on these two hypotheses, our main objective is to consider how to empirically and epistemologically develop a responsible communication strategy with the eco-transitions sector, which can contribute to improve the visibility of these initiatives. As specific objectives, we will measure strong and weak aspects in the internal functioning of the associations in the sample. In order to achieve this last aim, the Eco-Transition Indicator (ETI) was elaborated and implemented as a tool to measure the performance quality of the local eco-transition initiatives in terms of internal democracy, gender perspective, economic model, consumption model, commitment to the environment and communicative environment. We will finally try to find connections among the objectives.

This study therefore undertakes a propositional framing with the following research questions: what can be done so that the media can deliver more and better reports about the eco-transitions? How to contribute to the development of a responsible communication strategy with the eco-transitions sector? What should be the starting point? Why is it important to expand the knowledge about local eco-transitions initiatives? How can the implementation of an indicator contribute to downsize the gap between the local eco-social transition and the media? What specific role does the communication environment play in the set of variables studied?

The research takes a specific region of Spain, the province of Castilla-La Mancha, as a field of experimentation and as a case study. This area is rich in natural resources, but it is part of what has been called “empty Spain” due to lack of opportunities and to pitfalls in the local management of the territory.

In order to build a census of initiatives in the region, we first consulted an official document that contains all the registered associations in the province since 1990 (Official Public Registry in Castilla-La Mancha, available at the open data portal)⁸. It is an extensive document which yielded a total of 292,233 associations, most of which were discarded for not being endowed with eco-transition attributes. A huge amount of them also turned out to be obsolete or inactive. We first applied a filter in order to limit the sample to what we identified as “good practice initiatives,” defined as those with a social impact on eco-social transitions.

To guarantee the validity of these initiatives, the fieldwork was complemented by documentary tracking through the associations’ websites, the media, and individual interviews. The sample gathered a total of 156 initiatives from sectors as diverse as eco-transition economy and employment; energy, resources, and mobility; environment and waste; food, health, welfare and quality of life; education and training; political activism and participation for social transformation; leisure and culture, and gender transitions.

Basic information was also gathered from each initiative, such as contact details, websites, activities and locations, among others, which was included in an interactive map, and which has been added to the one already produced in Andalusia⁹ by EMA-RTV in collaboration with COMandalucía.

⁸ <https://datosabiertos.castillalamancha.es/dataset/registro-de-asociaciones-de-castilla-la-mancha>.

⁹ Available at <https://com-andalucia.org/>.

Each of these entities was sent a questionnaire with 58 questions that included both contact and socio-geographic data as well as other internal data, aimed at measuring the eco-social health of this sector, which promotes alternatives to the system for a more equitable, fair and sustainable world. Of the 156 registered initiatives, we received responses from 56 entities, that is, 35.8% of the total. Since the total sample represents a small case study, something that we consider a limitation in this paper, as it does not allow to make inferences about the population, it should be considered as a basic laboratory for experimentation for further inquiries and sample extensions.

The questionnaire was tailored according to the Ecosocial Transition Indicator (ETI), a measurement tool allowing us to place a project or initiative within a frame leading towards fairer and more sustainable models of social and economic relations. The ETI allows the establishment of rankings through validated weights in the answers. It considers six key aspects: internal democracy, the gender perspective, the economic and management model, the consumption model, the commitment to the environment and the communication environment. The latter is central in our study as it measures the “health condition” of the communication environments of these initiatives; that is, to see to what extent there are communication bridges between the entities and the media, and to what extent these are professionalized, accessible and visible. We will show that the application of the ETI is a useful tool to make visible the need to improve and achieve greater access by the media to the proactive and constructivist reality of eco-transition initiatives in Spain and by extension, elsewhere.

Table 1 shows the study variables and weighting system of the ETI. Of the total of 18 points that can be added to the 18 variables, a maximum of one point is given for each of them (three in each of the six areas).

Table 1: Study variables and weighting system of the ETI.

AREAS	Nº	SUB-INDICATORS	SCORE	WEIGHTING
Internal Democracy	1	Non-hierarchical, horizontal, transparent and democratic structure	1	0 = 0p 1-2 = 0.25p 3 = 0.5p 4 = 0.75p 5 = 1p
	2	Internal communication plan/tools available	1	
	3	Accessible published information	1	
Gender Perspective	4	It allows for easy work-family balance	1	
	5	Presence of diverse genders in areas of power	1	
	6	Equitable distribution of tasks by gender	1	
Economic and Management Model	7	Life is at the centre of its activity	1	
	8	Its activity fulfils needs, not unnecessary or superfluous requests	1	
	9	Surpluses are returned to the project or society.	1	
Consumption Model	10	It works with local and nearby suppliers	1	
	11	It works with entities of social and solidarity economy	1	
	12	It works the alternative economy: currencies, barter, self-financing, etc.	1	
Commitment to the environment	13	It cooperates and participates in networks with similar entities	1	
	14	Proactive attitude towards the environment (specific actions)	1	
	15	It organises eco-social awareness campaigns/workshops	1	
Communicative environment	16	It has at least one person specialized in communication	1	
	17	It has a strategic communication plan	1	
	18	It has its own media/channel, as well as website/network	1	
TOTAL			18	

Source: Own elaboration.

Once the responses were gathered, the evaluation ranges were applied according to the following criteria: optimum situation: 12–18p (the optimum for each field would be at 2p: 2 to 3p); acceptable situation: 6–11p (the acceptable for each field would be at 1p: 1 to 1.9p); negative situation: 0–5p (from 0.9 and below per field, the result is negative: 0 to 0.9p).

In this way, each initiative was subjected to the working scheme in table 2, which can be seen in individualized graphics, as shown in Figure 1. Table 2 and Figure 1 show the case of Cooperativa Ambientea as an example, which received a score of 12.75 points out of 18, and is therefore in an optimal position within the 55 entities, with some areas for improvement.

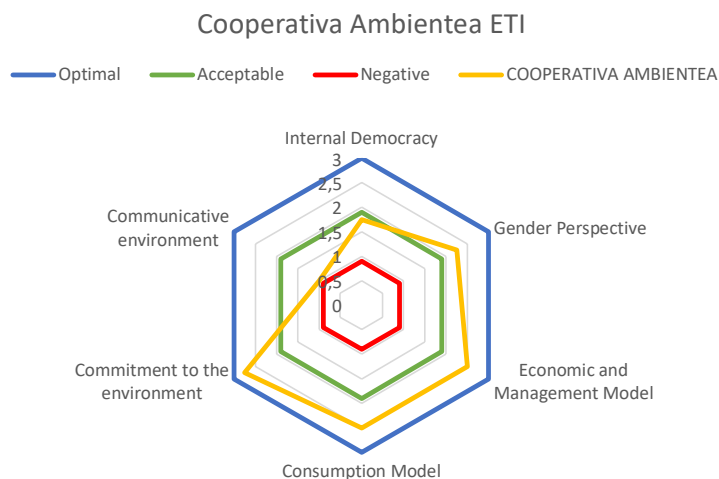
Table 2: Individual Scores.

Initiative: Cooperativa Ambientea	
Internal democracy	1.75
Gender perspective	2.25
Economic model	2.5
Consumption model	2.5
Commitment to the environment	2.75
Communicative environment	1
TOTAL	12.75

Source: Own elaboration.

In this case, Cooperativa Ambientea adds 1.75 points out of the maximum of 3 in matters of internal democracy; 2.25 in the gender perspective; 2.5 in the economic and management model; 2.5 in the consumption model; 2.75 in commitment to the environment and 1 in the communicative environment. We also show the case study in the following figure.

Figure 1: Score. Cooperativa Ambientea.



Source: Own elaboration.

In the interpretation of the figure, the blue line (the external line) is considered the optimal situation that initiatives can reach in relation to the score obtained by the internal functioning in the dynamics of eco-social transition (from 2 to 3 points). The green line represents the range of what is acceptable (from 1 to 1.9) and the red line represents a negative situation (from 0 to 0.9, the internal smallest line). The closer the variants are to this blue line, the closer they are to the optimal situation. In the case of Cooperativa Ambientea, the variable of commitment to the environment (orange line) reaches almost the maximum score (2.75 out of 3 points). It also reaches values that place it in the almost optimal range in terms of models of

consumption, economy and management. The consideration of gender issues within the entity is closer to the line of what is acceptable. Finally, while acceptable, it shows a lower value in matters of decision-making and internal democracy. In communicative environment, the score borders on the red line, which denotes the range of negative scores.

6. Overall results

In the category of internal democracy, we have measured whether these entities are governed by non-hierarchical structures, i.e., that they are horizontal, transparent, and democratic. Moreover, this variable would measure whether an internal communication plan or tool is available and whether the “public” information of that entity is disclosed in an accessible way.

The table shows that in this category there were 24 results (42%) having an optimal result, 28 with an acceptable result (50%) and four results with a “negative” result (7.1%). Gender perspective seeks to obtain information on whether the entities provide work-family balance, whether there is a presence of different genders in spheres of power, and whether there is an equitable distribution of tasks within it. These results show that there are 44 initiatives (78.5%) that reach optimal values, 11 with an acceptable result (19.6%) and only one entity (1.7%) that does not comply with this gender dimension in the internal dynamics. The economic and management model obtains 48 entities that reach the maximum score (85.7%), eight of them with acceptable values (14.2%) and there are none with negative results, which means that the real needs, and not the superfluous ones, of people are being considered, in addition to reverting the benefits to society. In the “consumption model” category, it was measured whether the entities work preferably with local and nearby suppliers, whether they practice the social and solidarity economy, and whether they make use of the so-called “alternative economy,” which involves the implementation of social currencies, barter or self-financing, among other aspects. In this regard, the values show that 34 entities (60.7%) highly respect these variables, 19 of them (33.9%) show acceptable values, that is to say, that there are areas for improvement, and only three do not have this variable among their priorities (5.3%).

Table 3 shows the overall results of the 56 initiatives tested.

Table 3: Overall Results.

	Internal democracy	Gender perspective	Economic and management model	Consumption model	Commitment to the environment	Communicative environment	General
No of results with optimal	24	44	48	34	46	10	26
No of results with acceptable	28	11	8	19	10	18	29
No of results with negative	4	1	0	3	0	28	1
Minimum score	0	0.25	1	0.25	1	0	5.25
Maximum score	3	3	3	3	3	3	17
Average score	1.76	2.34	2.48	2.02	2.39	1.1	12.12

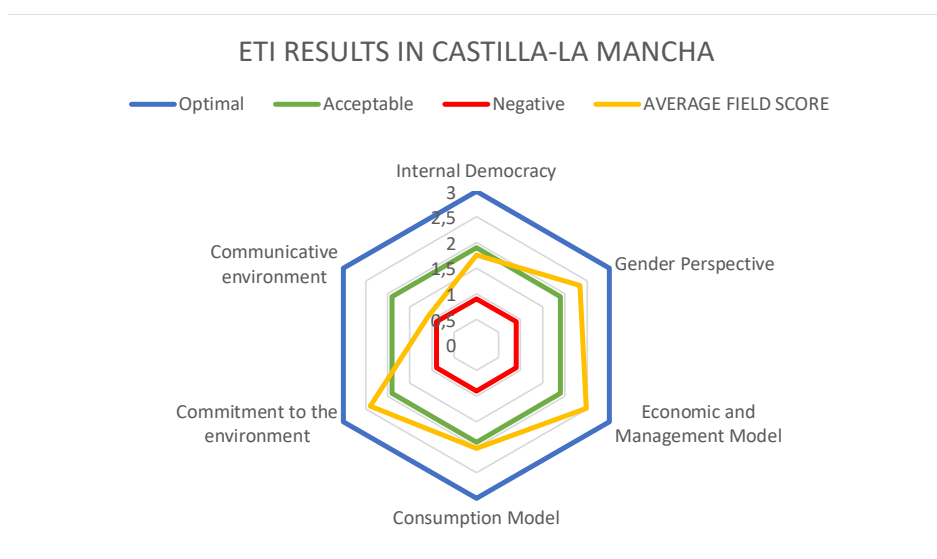
Source: Own elaboration.

Commitment to the environment has been measured through cooperation and participation in networks with similar entities, a proactive attitude towards the environment with the implementation of specific measures such as the use of reusable materials, the non-use of plastic or the consumption of energy from renewable sources, among others, and the investment of human and economic resources in the implementation of eco-social awareness campaigns or workshops resulting from its specific activity. The values also show positive

results, since 82.14% of the entities (n=46) do take care of an optimal functioning of the variables at stake, while 10 show acceptable values (17.8%). There is no company, association or entity in the sample that is not committed to the environment. Regarding the internal communication strategies, we have measured whether the entity has at least one person specialized in this work, whether it has a strategic communication plan and whether it has generated its own means to advertise its activity, in addition to the website or network promotion.

We have called this “the communicative environment.” In the sample, 10 entities have undertaken initiatives in some of the variables, achieving an optimal result overall (17.8%); 18 of them (32.1%) show acceptable values and 28 (50%) do not consider specific measures for a healthy communicative environment. Figure 2 shows graphically the set of results of the 55 participating entities in the six areas evaluated.

Figure 2: Chart with the overall results in relation to the maximum score obtained.



Source: Own elaboration.

7. Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we have theoretically tried to argue several key ideas. On the one hand, the fact that the planet has reached a worrying level in its ecosystem crisis. On the other, the fact that a growing network of local degrowth initiatives is taking place at a global scale; as a trend of economic, political, and social thought, informed by the idea about the controlled and progressive reduction of the excess of production and consumption, mainly in obese societies, with the aim of balancing the relationship between human beings and nature (Latouche, 2004). In addition, we have tried to give evidence that these types of initiatives have little visibility in hegemonic media. We have also highlighted the need to find ways that help build constructive dialogue between the entities, the Academia and the media. Moreover, we have speculated with the idea that measuring the internal dynamics of eco-transition projects can be very useful when it comes to highlighting these initiatives, something that might increase their possibilities to receive media coverage.

We therefore believe that the implementation of the ETI should complement any process that proposes a quality communication project because, on the one hand, it could give visibility to the initiatives, generating network and synergies between the associative structures and other entities, universities, and the information and communication media. On the other hand, it could benefit the entities themselves, which are made visible and at the

same time “evaluated,” by the capacity of the indicator to point out those aspects of their functioning that can be improved, which can allow them to adopt measures for better social performance. Furthermore, public institutions, in their roles as regulators and custodians of public spaces, can also take corrective measures based on the results derived from the implementation of the indicators. Among the public, critical awareness is increased and can thus better guide the choice of consumption and eco-social transition practices. Finally, the media can find channels for the incorporation of new “stories” to their informative agendas, detecting deficiencies in media coverage and “other possible ways” of communicating realities. Thus, an initiative that reaches high levels in each of the variables can serve as an example of good practice, and can be taken by a reference, both by citizens and by the media. Otherwise, the indicator can point to improvement paths.

Results have shown that the eco-transitions sector in the Spanish region of Castilla-La Mancha is generally in good health in relation to the internal functioning of entities that promote initiatives or projects aimed at achieving a more eco-social, equitable, diverse, and feminist environment. We have measured this health based on six major variables: internal democracy, the gender perspective, the economic and management model, the consumption model, commitment to the environment and the communication environment. Commitment to the environment, the economic and management model and the gender perspective are all somewhere between acceptable and optimal. This means that we are dealing with a sector that respects the centrality of life in all its activities, which responds to the real needs of citizens, and is without unnecessary or superfluous consumption. Thus, 85.7% of the total 56 entities tested respect this value above the other variables studied. The eco-transitions sector in Castilla-La Mancha also shows proactive attitudes in favour of environmental conservation. These are entities where in addition, and perhaps because they are mainly owned and managed by women, the gender perspective is considered through specific measures for work-family balance and representation. However, in each of these three areas there is still room for improvement.

With somewhat lower results, the consumption model and internal democracy are placed on the limit between an acceptable situation and the beginning of the optimization process. These results suggest the need to strengthen the networks and actions that connect citizens with the social and solidarity economy, with the networks of local and nearby suppliers and with the non-monetary systems of relating to and exchanging products and services. Regarding internal democracy, although in many cases we speak of the associative sector (but not exclusively) where the meetings are of an assembly nature and each member's vote counts, there are entities that continue to maintain a hierarchical structure. They are also poor in internal communication systems and external communication of their public documents in the interest of transparency in management communication.

As our work is mainly focused on the communicative perspective, we will proceed to isolate the “communicative environment,” one of the variables measured by the indicator. In fact, the “communicative environment” constitutes the weakest aspect in the set of the sampled initiatives, since it is placed on the border between a negative and an acceptable situation. 50% of the entities tested (n=28) offer negative results in the communicative field. This is due to the fact that most of them do not have at least one person specialized in communication, do not have a strategic communication plan, or they do not even have a website or networks, and even less the possibility to have their own media or channel. With the lack of a solid basis, as the results show, it seems coherent to think that these initiatives have little chances to make themselves visible within the media ecosystem.

There are some examples in Castilla-La Mancha of proximity communication initiatives that try to approach users according to local needs, away from commercial parameters and with a critical approach to reality. Among them is the free community and independent radio station *Onda Polígono*, which was created by a neighbourhood association with the aim of

breaking with the “single way of thinking” offered by most media, with associationism, self-management and solidarity as fundamental principles, along with participation. Other cases are the local newspaper *El Foro de Campo de Criptana*, launched by the associative network of the region, and the community website of the Polígono de Toledo neighbourhood, which is a central axis of visibility of the neighbourhood’s challenges and the development of community responses. The magazine *Mujer Rural*, for the promotion of actions, proposals, and complaints of the Asociación de Mujeres y Familias de Ámbito Rural [Association of Women and Families in the Rural Area] (AMFAR) of Ciudad Real, is another example. However, these examples are minoritarian and our first conclusion therefore indicates the need to reinforce internal mechanisms, through people with a specialized profile, to streamline the communication dynamics of associations which are active in the sector of eco-social transitions.

Considering this fact, our position assumes that a responsible communication strategy with the eco-transition sector necessarily goes through several phases: firstly, access to empirical and census-based knowledge of this sector (in other words, before tackling new communication strategies, it is necessary to have in-depth knowledge of the territory and the type of initiatives it promotes, both in quantity and quality); secondly, the establishment of an indicator that can measure the functioning and internal dynamics of these entities in terms of eco-transition, such as the Eco-Social Transition Indicator, and thirdly, the expansion of responsible, realistic and proactive media coverage, which can encourage messages that contribute to an ever-increasing number of people moving towards eco-social issues and which can also be reflected in indicators of quality. The first two steps assist the third by providing reliable sources.

Regarding this third point, as Casadevante suggests, “Facing the ecosocial crisis will require that we become better storytellers. We need images of the future capable of seducing and moving” (2020). Although there are good practices such as those mentioned previously, more effort is needed to implement what Azkarraga (2012) defined as ordered transitions, which we should also bring to the communication sector. We believe that these measures should promote a “communicative transition,” from the current “fire extinguishing” model to a model of “communicative calm” that would give visibility to, empower and inspire citizens to adopt personal eco-transition measures. There is little use for media which limit their information activity to the discourse of the obvious, of the visible, of what is imposed on us. The social turmoil and emergency measures that often accompany news of natural disasters only cover an alarming and, in many cases, paralyzing view of the reality.

In the light of the results, our main hypothesis can be confirmed, as it has been shown that the eco-transitions sector in Castilla-La Mancha, the region under study, lacks a strong commitment to communication between the media and the entities themselves.

We are encouraged to think that if a “real bridge” were to be provided between the eco-social transition sector and the media, new communication strategies would arise more in compliance with the current needs of the planet and society. Our second hypothesis was more related to the consequences of this reality, pointing out that without access to the sources because of ignorance, without valuing the bottom-up movements regarding eco-transitions, without a good knowledge of the dynamics of functioning and the philosophies of life that support the entities and initiatives of eco-transition, it will be difficult to draw up a map of co-responsible media moving towards a change in the information paradigm. We suggest future research to study in greater depth the specific links between this lack of communication strategy and the immobilizing/catastrophizing trend of mainstream media. It is coherent to think that it would be essential to have an alternative, transversal, informative approach, which can provide visibility to the multiple responses with which organized society responds to the passivity of the system, and at the same time forces the design of public policies.

In conclusion, the move towards eco-transitions issues requires not only physical and mental processes, but also a transformation in the media ecosystem, wherein a greater knowledge by media practitioners about local realities could act as a key factor to increase visibility. It would be advisable to redouble efforts to provide media hygiene and health coverage of the eco-transition processes currently in progress. It is necessary to request a much greater effort from these associations, entities and companies that are launching initiatives of eco-social transitions in society in order to professionalize their communication strategy, with people trained and prepared for this, capable of implementing communication plans that reinvest in making their initiatives visible in the media. In many cases, these steps are also associated with proper management and updating of websites and other channels such as virtual social networks. As a further step, it would be advisable for communities to promote their own community-based, collaborative, local media outlets which meet the communication needs of the community, and with the capacity for dissemination and replication.

The eco-transitions sector has a wide range of aspects rich in possibilities of action that must be incorporated into the news making of information agendas. In this task, the media have a great responsibility, but it is not the only one. Transition concerns everyone, both men and women. To achieve this transition, both in social life and in the media, we propose Latouche's formula, decreasing the unnecessary and reinforcing the centrality of life from an eco-social perspective.

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