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Title: It is the Time for Social Work and Social Policy Research on the Ecosocial Transition

Year: 2017

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Matthies, A.-L., & Närhi, K. (2017). It is the Time for Social Work and Social Policy Research on the Ecosocial Transition. In A.-L. Matthies, & K. Närhi (Eds.), *The Ecosocial Transition of Societies : The Contribution of Social Work and Social Policy* (pp. 1-13). Routledge. Routledge Advances in Social Work.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Research on the ecosocial transition from the point of view of social work and social policy

Aila-Leena Matthies and Kati Närhi

Context and background of the book

Be it the global climate change or the wars rooted in global oil business, both causing fathomless human suffering and forced migration – the manifold interconnections between environmental crisis, economic cupidity, social catastrophes and cultural losses are becoming increasingly evident for everybody. The economic models aiming at constant economic growth for any prize have already crossed over the ecological limits of the earth, but it is still the economic reasoning that is dominating public attention and political efforts (Crouch 2011). However, instead of deferring to pessimism and cynics, numerous critical scholars, practitioners and movements around the globe and across different sectors are quite advanced in seeking practical models towards more viable and resilient conditions for the current and next generations. These efforts can be gathered together to a comprehensive process of transition of societies towards sustainability. The main areas of the transition address new economic and environmental solutions, especially built on new sources of energy beyond peak oil. What has not yet been focused comprehensively is the social embeddedness of this transition, which matters more than conventional understanding of social sustainability. For the context of this book, where we focus on the perspective of social work and social policy, it is inevitable to consider that the paradigmatic change of a society addressed by the transition has even direct linkage to social work and social policy. Ecosocial transition of societies arises for instance the following questions:

What kind of welfare state, social services and support for the social life of communities are sustainable i.e. possible without the current model of economic growth and environmental hazards?

What kind of understanding of the role of social professions can strengthen an ecosocial transition of society?

Without these practical reflections, the balance between the three dimensions of economy, ecology and social development - well-known as a concept of sustainability - seems to remain only as a theoretical concept.

Over the past few years, the debate on sustainable development, ecosocial, ecological, green or environmental social work have grown into one of the most dynamic global topics of the discipline and profession. They are frequently discussed in various global contexts of social work. However, the discussion about the connection between environmental issues and social work are actually not new but have been around in publications on various continents since the 1980s (Schwendter, 1981; Opielka, 1985; Mühlum, 1986; Blanke & Sachsse, 1987; Matthies, 1987a; Naess, 1989; Närhi & Matthies, 2001). Some authors even discuss the first ecological thoughts of social work pioneers such as Jane Addams from more than 100 years ago (Staub-Bernasconi, 1989; Dominelli 2012; Närhi & Matthies 2016). What is new since a couple of years is the globalization of the ecosocial debate in social work as it previously used to be separated geographically and in terms of language, and due to using diverse concepts as well. We are witnessing now a noticeable movement towards a shared theoretical and operational discussion about ecological or ecosocial approach in social work at the global level of the social work community. The environmental issues have taken a prominent place at several international conferences, which has been followed by new global networking of scholars and practitioners engaged in environmental social work. The same dynamic movement is also visible in a range of publications. Two journals - *Critical Social Work* and the *Journal of International Welfare* - published special issues on environmental social work in 2012. During the same year, Lena Dominelli published a book called "Green Social Work" (2012), which focuses on environmental disaster, pollution and conflicts, along with human rights, poverty and inequality and develops guidelines for social work practitioners to intervene in environmental crises. In the same year also an edited book on "Environmental Social Work" (Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2012) was published, which gathers together

authors from different continents. The book explores the conceptual perspectives on environmental social work and uses case studies to illustrate practices. One of the books based on the conference papers of the international conference of Social Work in Stockholm in 2012 focuses on environmental change and sustainable social development (Hessle, 2014b). We are also aware that a further text book on ecological social work edited by Margaret Alston and Jennifer McKinnon and with international authors will be available in early 2016.

However, what still needs to be strengthened besides the valuable practice oriented and programmatic efforts, is the research of ecosocial transition from the perspective of social work and social policy. In the international conferences of social work in Stockholm 2012 and in Melbourne 2014, online-based networking of those social work scholars and practitioners interested in environmental paradigm in social work were established. Through these networks it was possible for us to identify worldwide colleagues involved in related research and invite twenty of them to the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, to a symposium and workshop to work on the topic and on this volume. We have collected together selected research scholars who are interested in sharing and contributing knowledge about the role of social work and social policy in the ecosocial transition of societies in interdisciplinary collaboration. The circle of authors consists of international authors, with an European focus, who are doing research on this topic. Both of the editors are nationally and internationally involved figures in the ecosocial approach in social work (Närhi & Matthies, 2001; 2015; Matthies et al., 2001; Matthies & Närhi, 2013; Närhi, 2004; Matthies et al., 2011). In the meantime the Academy of Finland decided to fund a four-years research project on "The Contribution of Social Work and Systems of Income Security to the Ecosocial Transformation of Society", which also is essentially based on international collaboration on the topic.

The aim of this book is to carry on the development of the existing debates, and to strengthen the environmental paradigm in social work research. In difference to the previous publications our book emphasizes the research around this paradigm. This may be achieved through further research on theoretical and conceptual clarification as well as distinct reflection on its several practical directions. While

claiming to strengthen a research base of ecosocial transition of social work and social policy, it is not said that this would be beneficial for the academic only. In opposite we regard that especially in such an applied scientific areas as social work and social policy it is the role of research to provide research based knowledge and tools for critical reflection for the practitioners, NGOs, activists and educators as well.

The second special aim of this book is to bring together social work and social policy knowledge regarding the perspective of ecosocial transition of societies. While on the one hand there is a need to develop further social work's own environmental paradigm theoretically and conceptually, as well as its research-based knowledge, it is important to realise how it contributes to the overall joint efforts of various other sciences, agencies and movements that are trying to solve the core future challenges of the earth. On the other side, it is not only social sciences, like social work and social policy which need to be aware about their own role in the interdisciplinary efforts of transition. This volume may for its part also inform other scientific areas, like economics and environmental sciences about the question, why social work and social policy may be relevant for promoting transition towards sustainability.

In addition, the chapters will focus on the research of the solutions of ecological, social or economic challenges of ecosocial transition rather than the analysis the problems. In the context of ecosocial transition the basic assumption is that a change, a transition towards an ecologically and socially balanced society at the global and local level, is indispensable and urgent. The transition debates highlight that the dominance of the current economic system does not only cause environmental damage and the destruction of natural resources but also increases social inequality. The core of the ecosocial transition is based on economic de- and post-growth models of society. These are discussed in several chapters of this book from the perspective of social work and social policy. The global ecocritical discussion of social work argues that the sustainable development of society means, among other things, a substantial reduction in the consumption of natural resources, the equitable distribution of wealth as well as a new vision of humanity and the planet's well-being. This will require ecosocial transition in all areas of societies: in its ecological, technological, economic, social, political as well as structural and institutional dimensions.

Social work and social policy are especially challenged to provide knowledge on how to move towards social sustainability and resilience in the process of ecosocial transition. For instance, issues of food, land ownership and climate change are highly related to social work and social policy, and not only due to poverty and inequality. As discussed in the chapter by Tuula Helne and Tuuli Hirvilammi, the question arises how to establish a new understanding of well-being that is both affordable ecologically and economically, yet still socially just.

Consequently, the debate on ecological social work contests not only the current economic model of developed societies but also reflects critically social work's current institutional and professional models, which are dependent on the problematic economic model of societies. Therefore, the core of the ecosocial transition is based on new economic alternatives of society, including the idea of the commons and community economy, as discussed by Susanne Elsen and Jef Peeters in this book.

One of the central theses in the ecosocial paradigm is that an environmental crisis is a social crisis, as it increases social inequality and causes the highest level of problems for the most vulnerable citizens in societies (Opielka, 1985; Elsen, 2011; Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2012; Närhi & Matthies, 2001; 2014). Although the profession is becoming increasingly aware of ecological issues, there is limited attention given to 'how to' incorporate this awareness into practice (McKinnon, 2008). Several chapters of this book present and analyse such practical developments. On the one hand, ecosocial transition is theoretically rooted in the traditions of critical theory and challenges the belief in technological-economic rationality, which is seen to colonialize the 'natural' resources of the human living world (Lebenswelt by Jürgen Habermas). On the other hand, ecosocial paradigm is linked to systems-theoretical holistic modelling of interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral relationships (Peeters, 2012; Wendt, 2010; Närhi & Matthies, 2001). As Sawyer (2008; 1751) states, the ecosocial criteria of development aim at protecting the discrimination of poor communities in environmental interventions. Crucial to sustainability is the opportunity for the most marginalised people to participate fully in all activities and decision making and to receive the benefits of this participation (also resilience, Walker et al., 2004; Peeters, 2012; Estes, 1993, p. 3). Sustainable growth

is understood as an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, both in the short and long term. The paradigmatic propositions of de-growth are that the currently dominating understanding of economic growth is not sustainable and that human progress without it is possible. (Nussbaum, 2011; Crouch, 2012; Schneider et al., 2010; Jackson, 2009.)

In this book our main objective is to constitute social work and social policy as a part of the more comprehensive and interdisciplinary debate on ecosocial transition of societies towards sustainability by balancing economic and social development with the limited resources of natural environment. The book discusses how social work and social policy contribute to this transition. By focusing on different aspects, all chapters share a clear perspective of social work and social policy and a research-based approach in their analysis and argumentation.

Content of the book

The book consists of seven sections that provide research-based knowledge and regard the contribution of social work and social policy from multiple viewpoints. After the introduction section core concepts of ecosocial transition in the frame of social work and social policy will be discussed. The third section presents examples of empirical studies how environmental challenges are tackled as social work or social political interventions. In the fourth section efforts of ecosocial transition are analysed in urban and rural communities and lifestyles aiming at practical sustainability. The fifth section addresses social political and social work related research on food politics from various perspectives. In the sixth chapter the change of the profession of social work as a reflection on the required paradigmatic shift and ecosocial transition is discussed. Finally there is a concluding section by the editors.

Concepts

The discussion about ecosocial transition and related concepts still have a novelty position in the disciplines of social work and social policy in most countries. Correspondingly, most of the interdisciplinary scholars

involved in research and practice of transition towards sustainability may not have thought about their research topic in relation to the issues relevant in social work and social policy, like poverty or human relationships. Therefore the first section establishes a basic conceptual frame for the entire book with four essential concepts: ecosocial transition, new concept of wellbeing, the commons and the community economy. In doing this the chapters in the section also introduces the debate of de-growth from several points of view of social work and social policy.

Aila-Leena Matthies introduces and defines the concept of ecosocial transition and related concepts as well, in order to map out the interdisciplinary field where social work and social policy may contribute to. She presents its genealogic and scientific background by a comparison of the concepts of the Great Transition of industrial economy (Karl Polanyi) and the current post-growth and post-peak oil transition. The emerging forms how transition appears as scientific efforts and transformative research, as political structures and interventions, but also as increasing actions of social movements and civil society as well, will be explained. The author critically analyses how the social dimensions of the ecosocial transition are understood quite narrowly yet. Continuing the conceptual frame for sustainable social policy and social work, *Tuula Helne* and *Tuuli Hirvilammi* introduce a new concept of relational wellbeing. It is based on the criticism of the fact that the prevailing wellbeing with material wealth has had ecological consequences that threaten human wellbeing and survival. They argue that maintaining the status quo and holding on to the current conception of wellbeing are not an option if sustainability is to be achieved. Instead, a sounder understanding of wellbeing is needed for ecosocial transition. It involves setting limits on wealth and unsustainable consumption and shifts the focus away from mere 'Having' towards placing value on 'Loving', 'Being' and responsible and meaningful 'Doing'. The model is founded on a conception of the human being as being connected to its social and natural environment and is thus a self-evident agent of the 'ecosocial work' that the sustainability transition requires.

Although the theories of ecosocial transition concern global and national development, most of their practical implementations are specifically local. There are already concrete scenarios and practiced models

of ecosocial transition built by local communities, a new type of self-sufficiency and social justice as well as economic and ecological sustainability in urban and rural communities. Projects include, for example, solidarity economy models such as cooperatives, micro-credits and local currency. To analyse these, *Susanne Elsen* introduces the concept of 'community-based economy'. The author analyses the historical development and present examples of community economy, claiming more social justice and responsibility for communities. She concludes that community economy models appear due to a lack of other means of securing one's livelihood, or as an explicit and reflected ecosocial concept to infringements through the globalised market economy. Intensive exploration of cases of community economy will demonstrate the practice of the this concept. *Jef Peeters* concludes the section on concepts with the relatively new economic concept of the commons, which refers to indispensable resources with definable boundaries, and which can be preserved most easily if kept in local community ownership; this can also stabilise the community socially and economically. He contends that this concept is often put forward as the basis for a more inclusive and just society. He investigates the concept of commons in the recent literature and evaluates the strengths and opportunities of it from the perspective of ecosocial transition and social work.

Tackling challenges and complexities

In the second section the impacts of environmental crisis and tackling of them will be analysed systematically from the perspective of what kind of challenge they pose for social work and social policy as well as the solution how they can be faced. This section points out selected kinds of challenges and complexities in the process of ecosocial transition, which are emerging especially outside of the Global North. All the chapters address the issue of local and global power and the advantages and disadvantages in tackling the challenges. Especially, the aim of these researches is to demonstrate how the transition is layered and complex, including the role and scopes of activism. Also social work is discussed here in broader terms, including academic and professional expertise as well as involvement of citizens' movements.

Margaret Alston, by setting the issue of the book more concretely in the global picture in her chapter, opens the perspective of ecosocial transition in the Global South. She draws on social work research undertaken in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region to both discuss the significant social and gendered challenges created by climate changes and to outline a social work response. In the research on the Global South, which is particularly vulnerable to climate changes, the researchers investigated for instance rising food and water insecurity, poverty and dislocation as well as critical gendered impacts. In her chapter, ecosocial transition incorporates attention to environmental, social and gender justice together and critiques neoliberal policy formulations that are exacerbating these demands for justice. *Satu Ranta-Tyrkkö* and *Bibin Jojo*, who are running in an important internationally comparative research, contrasts the Global South and North while investigating what the contribution of social work could be in the natural resource management of the mining industry in India and in Finland. Mining projects are significant examples of the use of natural resources being in contradiction with other uses of the same soil and bringing about disturbance to and displacement of livelihoods and people. The benefits and the risks of mining projects are often unevenly divided: while some benefit, others may be adversely affected. The authors argue that in this context social work can play its part by promoting processes of negotiation, problem solving and more equal distribution of resources. However, the traditions of social work differ a lot between the regions of concern. To give a practical example of how social work can act in environmental conflicts, *Komalsingh Rambaree* analyses a case-study of a people's renewable energy cooperative by describing the environmental activism in Mauritius. The context of the study is the enormous challenge in regard to the demand for energy that is causing a conflict between the interests of a multinational company, which has plans for a coal power investment and the civil society movement, which is suggesting solar-based power plants organised through a cooperative basis. By using this case, the author analyses how political instrumentalism affects ecosocial transition movement and practice, how the strategies used for ecosocial transition develop and the implications for ecosocial practices.

Sustainable Communities and Lifestyles

Although the theories of ecosocial transition concern global and national development, most of their practical implementations are specifically local, and they are addressed by the researches of this section. There are already well-established scenarios and practiced models built on local communities; a new type of self-sufficiency and social justice in urban and rural communities are growing. Aim of section is to contribute to more interdisciplinary research approaches to ecosocial transition. Coherent concepts shared by the chapters refer to community perspective of wellbeing. It includes personal wellbeing and how much it is supported by community, including space for own activism and engagement, as well as sense of belonging and connectedness. Here also classic social scientific terms such as social capital and community find their space. In the same time two partly contrasting theoretical implications related to the need of interdisciplinarity are discussed. The systems theoretical organising of the ecological perspective in micro-, meso-, macro levels on the one hand and the complexity theory applied to understand the intersections of needs and resources in rural provision of subsistence and wellbeing are both involved.

Four chapters present research examples of urban and rural community approaches in settings where ecological, economic and social transition become very concrete. *Helena Belchior Rocha* and *Jorge Ferreira* identify indicators of ecological sustainability in socially vulnerable communities and propose an eco-model for social sustainability. Their case studies address two socio-environmental pilot projects in Portugal and two international eco-neighbourhoods where holistic sustainability has been a core objective of urban community intervention programmes. In their chapter, the contribution of social work in this kind of multidisciplinary effort is highlighted in order to provide research-based knowledge on the interrelationship of different dimensions and professions. While their chapter has a perspective of professional planning and co-creation, the chapter of *Ben Shephard* analyses the ecosocial social activism of social movements and social work close to urban civil society. He focuses on the connection of environmental and social urban activism in New York, where transforming brownfields into community gardens, bike lanes and non-polluting transportation as models of sustainable urbanism are connected to urban climate protection but also to new types of social participation. Through street ethnography and participant observation of social change movements, the chapter explores the interconnections between street activism and social history

and reflects upon what impact can be achieved through the merging of direct action for a more humane model of cities. Balancing these urban views the chapter of *Mari Kattilakoski* and *Niina Rantamäki* analyses two cases of community-based local welfare systems in rural areas of Finland. By the concept of local welfare system (LWS) the authors refer to models that have arisen in rural areas that emphasise local perspective and collaboration across different sectors, in opposite to the main stream of centralisation, specialisation and the marketing of welfare services. The comparative research setting comprises case studies between two regions and applies complexity theories to analyse the development, structure and operation of the LWS. In addition, if the LWS promotes citizens' participation and the bottom-up perspective, the ecological and economic dimensions of ecosocial transition progress and results in shorter circles and better targeting of services, thus increasing resources through co-operation between different actors. Therefore recognition of unique local dimensions of welfare is needed as well as a new wider concept of welfare. The faceted practice-research based picture of sustainable communities and lifestyles is complemented by the chapter of *Heather Boetto* and *Wendy Bowles*, who analyse the wisdom and experiences of older Australians who develop sustainable living practices in later life. In contrast to researches who conceptualise elderly people mainly from a service provider perspective, this research takes a strengths approach to explore the solutions members of the aging population have initiated in order to address environmental decline. Using a phenomenological methodology the research explores the experiences of older rural and regional citizens as they attempt ecosocial transition towards more sustainable lifestyles. The aim is to learn lessons from the wisdom of the elders that social workers and policy makers can apply in wider society. In the chapter of *Jennifer Boddy* and *Sylvia Ramsay* a narrative research approach to permaculture, which is known as a social change movement that promotes local production, importance of community, and fair share instead of individual premises. The narrative study of ten permaculturalists demonstrates this movement emerges as an economic, ecological and social transition of the individuals involved in a local not for profit organisation established by community members and guided by the permaculture ethics. Therefore is it reasonable to identify permaculture and its

ethics as methodic tools of social work in community development but also in ecosocial support of individuals.

Food Politics

A noticeable and practice-based bridge from social work and social policy to economy and ecology is emerging in the extremely topical issue of food, which relates to a broad range of questions in regard to poverty and charity, land ownership and market as well as climate change and other ecological disasters. In their chapter, *Tiina Silvasti* and *Teea Kortetniemi* examine ethical tensions between the ethos of Nordic welfare universalism and charity food delivery in the context of the environmental goal to reduce food waste by delivering surpluses as charity food aid. During the last 20 years in Finland, one of the world's richest countries, charity food aid – based on donated food and delivered by voluntary workers in food banks and on bread lines – has become an established way of fixing the holes in the public social safety net of the most vulnerable people. This examination connects environmental ethics, especially its discussion on environmental and social justice in the context of sustainability. The chapter offers a reasonable and critical evaluation of the place of charity food aid practices in the course of ecosocial transition.

Dorothy N. Gamble continues the debate of food and environment with an analysis of the methods used in a nonprofit project called 'Farm to Table' that promotes food security and agricultural sustainability in a culturally and ecologically sensitive setting. As fragile elements of the biosphere are being destroyed by human pollution, the ability to produce nutritious food in an equitable way is threatened and climate change will reduce the needed moisture in the near future in the area of New Mexico. The programme aims at understanding Native American, Hispanic and Anglo knowledge of food production and consumption and how that knowledge evolves using information relating to soil health, climate change, water conservation, childhood development and health concerns. The use of respectful engagement techniques and the importance of human relationships and environmental concerns become familiar to the community practice of social workers. Also the chapter of *Vesna Leskošek* and *Romana Zidar* focuses on the complex issue of food. In their analysis, they contrast the neoliberal policy that compensates for

poverty through organisations offering charity-based food distribution programmes and models of self-organised food production of initiatives of collectives, cooperatives and social enterprises, which are changing municipality land into gardens for people that are interested in growing their own food. The chapter presents the results of the qualitative study on the emancipatory potentials and social political impact of the models. The charity-based programmes do not aim to eliminate poverty but instead mirror paternalism and citizens' lack of influence even on the content and the quality of their daily food. The more self-initiated and participatory initiatives can create new communities that generate social capital and can even in some forms influence local policies. This Slovenian study provides a clear direction for social work and social policy in regard to how to contribute to ecosocial transition.

Profession in Transition

In the section before the conclusion, the change of the profession and discipline of social work are discussed from the perspective of ecosocial transition. Aim of the section is to point out that as the societal context is changing and making ecosocial transition inevitable, also social work profession should keep pace in order to stay relevant with context changing, and in order to bring about bigger social transition.

Subhangi Herath looks at the role of social workers towards sustainable social development in the very urgent practical context of ecological crisis. Regular landslides in Sri Lanka are posing an ongoing threat to the social and physical existence of people and are exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. The author has conducted a qualitative study in a landslide prone community to identify the socio-economic attributes of landslides and their linkage to existing socio-economic vulnerabilities, association with social development and social policy measures as well as the role of social work. The need for a new holistic approach to social work becomes evident, taking environmental sustainability as its foundation and moving away from the compartmentalised approaches in addressing social issues. Working towards preventing natural disasters and mitigating their impacts are seen as vital requisites. This research suggests social workers in all roles and capacities to take into account the imminent environmental crisis. Although there are not currently numerous social workers involved in environmental tasks, there are interdisciplinary groups addressing the

imminent environmental issues and social work could identify this gap to step in. Thus social work education must cater to this expanded understanding.

Meredith Powers also argues for the increasing embracement of social workers in regard to an expanded professional identity that includes a response to the environmental crisis. Her presents actual research looking at existing social work practitioners and what is their interpretation of the socialization towards environmentally involved social workers. She provides new in-depth knowledge of how these individuals developed social work identities that include a response to the environmental crisis even though the field of social work, as a whole, remains reluctant to respond. A model of reciprocal professional socialisation was developed, which expands understanding of social work identity and the supports needed to infuse environmental concerns and transform the social work profession.

Kati Närhi finally returns to the historically most important principles in social work practice and theory, the constellation of 'the person in environment' (PIE). Her chapter examines how this understanding has changed, since social work practices have been organised differently during the last 20 years in Finland, from being based on the community based generalistic models to being based on specialised and centralised models. This comparative study across time examines the current contexts - meaning the organizing of the practice setting between either community- or casework- oriented - as the 'socializer' (Reinharz, 1993) that shapes the understanding of what social work is for the social workers. She also analyses, how the practice setting and context should be structured to create and encourage a more expanded social work practice that enables more holistic environment in an expanded understanding of PIE. The qualitative content analysis of social workers' group interviews compares three different organisational phases: ecosocial social work practice constructed by community based social workers (1995-2000); the specialised models of social work practice in 2006; and the centralised models of organising social work practice in 2015. The chapter analyses how the organisational setting of social work practice prohibits and advances social workers' input on ecosocial transition of society. In the concluding chapter the editors maintain a meta-analysis of the book content in order to identify a theoretical and

practical model, which together tries to answer the core question set by the objective of this book: what is, or what can be, the contribution of social work and social policy to the ecosocial transition of societies? At this juncture, it is important to point out that we understand social work here not only as the work done by social workers but also as the discipline of social work as well as a societal institution of modern societies.

In the conclusion section the editors will point out the main research-based progress achieved: to reflect both upon the possible clarification of the environmental paradigm of social work as well as how social work and social policy can take responsibility in the efforts of various actors who aim at solving the core future challenges of the earth.

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