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Ecosocial work and services for unemployed people: the challenge to integrate environmental and social sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability in the context of labour market and unemployment policies is usually understood as mere cost-efficiency. The environmental and social dimensions of sustainability are missing. This article discusses the meaning of sustainability in this field of policy and practice in a medium-size city in Finland. It focuses on services for unemployed people and the role of social work. The paper aims to contribute to the knowledge base on sustainable welfare in a Nordic context and on ecosocial work in Finland. It is structured by two main questions. 1) How is 'sustainability' perceived and interpreted in the context of services for unemployed people? 2) What potential for eco-social policies can be identified in the field? The data was collected through expert interviews with various actors in the field. The data analysis followed the constructivist grounded theory approach, as well as sequential analysis according to objective hermeneutics. The results reveal a number of valuable ideas and concepts for future eco-social policies. However, an integrated eco-social approach was largely missing from the field. The analysis further reveals a fragmented picture of numerous meanings, interpretations, and concepts of sustainability. This leads to the conclusion that social work needs to clarify its own role regarding sustainability, drawing on the concept of its third mandate. This will enable social workers to become sustainability experts at the local level – for and with their clients.

KEYWORDS

Sustainability; eco-social policies; ecosocial work; labour market and unemployment policies and services; expert interviews

Introduction

Services for unemployed people are an important pillar of any local social service infrastructure. They provide people with financial benefits, information, and guidance; through diverse programmes and support systems, they also provide knowledge and personal development. Social workers, administrators, and other professionals work for and with unemployed people. In addition to the practical goal of employability, in order for the unemployed to (re-)enter the labour market, the overall principles of autonomy, inclusion, participation, and sustainability are central (Hänninen, Lehtelä, and Saikkonen 2019; Tarkiainen 2020). Whereas the link to work and unemployment is clear for the first three principles, sustainability seems to be less clearly connected. Does it simply refer to the long-lasting positive effect of services, in other words to a narrow view of sustainability in its social dimension? What role does the environmental dimension play? Despite the increasing relevance of the concept of sustainability, including for social policy and social work, its meaning is still rarely discussed. Sustainability in the context of public welfare is usually understood in a broad sense simply as financial

sustainability (Stamm et al. 2020). That means that economic sustainability dominates in this context, overlapping with the overall principle of cost-efficiency in public services. The intertwined social and environmental dimensions of sustainability are neglected.

This paper aims to examine the meaning of sustainability in the field of services for unemployed people. It argues that concrete, integrated social and environmental sustainability goals are missing from services for unemployed people. The paper is structured by two main questions. 1) How is 'sustainability' perceived and interpreted in the context of services for unemployed people on the local level? Here, the role of the social work profession and social workers' actions is the central focus. 2) What potential for eco-social policies can be identified in the field? The term 'eco-social policies' refers to a concept developed by Ian Gough, who defines them 'as policies that simultaneously and explicitly pursue both equity/justice and sustainability/sufficiency goals' (Gough 2017, 161). For my study, I narrow the meaning of eco-social policies down to programmes and measures in the field of services for unemployment people.

The paper builds on two somewhat marginal research fields. The first is research on sustainable welfare and conceptions of eco-social policies, which tries to link social and environmental policies to the question of sustainable well-being (e.g. Fitzpatrick 2011; Koch and Mont 2016; Gough 2017). It primarily asks how we can maintain a high standard of social welfare and at the same not overshoot the planetary boundaries. The second is rooted in the 'ecosocial' paradigm in social work. In contrast to the concept in social policy, 'ecosocial' is usually written here without a hyphen. This paradigm emphasizes the connection between social and environmental problems, which affects marginalized groups the most. On that basis it identifies an adjusted role for social work in the quest for sustainability, not only striving for social sustainability goals but also following an integrated approach that includes the environmental dimension (e.g. Peeters 2012; McKinnon and Alston 2016; Rambaree, Powers, and Smith 2019). Ecosocial work has a relatively long tradition in theory and research in Finland (e.g. Matthies, Närhi, and Ward 2001; Närhi 2004). However, social work research on the specific field of services for the unemployed is rare (Matthies et al. 2019; Stamm et al. 2020). In summary, this paper aims to contribute to the knowledge base on sustainable welfare (in a Nordic context), and on ecosocial work in Finland.

My empirical research was conducted in the medium-size city of Kokkola, Central Ostrobothnia, Western Finland. It consisted of expert interviews with professionals from various local and regional actors. The majority of the interview partners had a social work background. The analysis was guided by a constructivist grounded theory approach combined with an in-depth textual analysis according to objective hermeneutics (OH). The results of the small-scale case study at first confirmed a lack of integrated environmental and social sustainability goals in services for unemployed people. However, a great variety of perceptions and interpretations among the interview partners became visible, as well as a number of concepts and programmes which could become or inform eco-social policies in the future. Although not directly generalizable, the results can serve as a starting point for a better understanding of the meaning and implications of sustainability in the context of labour market and unemployment policies.

Sustainability, sustainable welfare, and ecosocial work

The principle of sustainability or sustainable development has been high on the agenda for many decades. The Brundtland report (WCED 1987) is commonly seen as a starting point for defining and understanding sustainability. This visionary document puts the needs of human beings, today and in the future, at the centre. Its openness can be seen as a strength when it comes to different interests and actors. For some scholars, a clear definition of sustainability is not realistic; it is only in public discourses, specific to time and place, that the concrete implications of sustainable development can be discovered (Grunwald 2016). Critical commentators, on the other hand, consider sustainability an 'exhausted paradigm' (Blühdorn 2016, 259) which has merely led to a 'politics of unsustainability', despite the public commitment to the overall principle.

According to early conceptions, sustainability or sustainable development consisted of three pillars or realms: environmental, social, and economic. There were central controversies about the respective importance of each pillar. Critics saw the notion of equality between the three pillars of sustainability as mistaken: while the economic dimension might have dominated political discussions, the ecological dimension should have been the priority all along. This view led to a one-pillar model (Littig and Griefßler 2005, 66). In either case, the social dimension of sustainability was mostly neglected, despite the fact that needs satisfaction and poverty eradication had been at the centre of concepts of sustainability from very beginning (see WCED (World Commission on Environment and Development) 1987). Social sustainability may have been neglected due to its complexity. The difficult question here is how to attain social justice and equality while protecting the physical environment at the same time. In more up-to-date concepts of sustainability, the social dimension is literally (back) at the centre. Kate Raworth's (2017) doughnut model, for example, takes the widely accepted concept of planetary boundaries as the main frame (or ring), and places social standards and values at the centre. This social foundation encompasses dimensions such as food, health, gender equality, and peace and justice, among others (Raworth 2017, 296). A regenerative and distributive economy is here considered 'only' as a means, that is, as serving society. As Berg and Saikkonen (2019, 166) state, in Nordic countries the social foundation is quite strong, but ecological boundaries are crossed in various areas.

Another dimension of Raworth's social foundation is income and work. As Littig and Griefßler (2005, 71) argue, 'work – in the broadest sense (paid and unpaid labour, care work) – plays a central role for sustainability, since the satisfaction of needs – and thus the exchange between society and nature – involves mainly some sort of work'. When the focus is on employment, environmental sustainability is generally discussed either as a threat – i.e. jobs are lost (for example, in the mining or forestry industries) – or as an opportunity, i.e. new green jobs might emerge (for example, in the green energy sector). However, the other side of the coin, unemployment and related policies, usually plays no role in these discussions (cf. Stamm et al. 2020).

This gap is slowly being filled by relatively new social policy research on sustainable welfare (see Gough 2017; Hirvilammi and Koch 2020). Sustainable welfare is generally defined as a system that would satisfy human needs within planetary boundaries. In other words, the 'internal logic' of the welfare state would be readjusted to (social) sustainability (Opielka 2017). One realm in this context comprises 'eco-social policies', a term and concept coined mainly by Gough (2017). He argues that eco-social policies 'combine sustainable livelihoods with human wellbeing' (Gough 2017, 2). In his study, examples range from population policies to working-time reduction schemes. Recent research on sustainable welfare has further focused on the integration of ecological sustainability and social welfare. Khan, Hildingsson, and Garting (2020), for example, conducted research in Sweden's three largest cities: Stockholm, Göteborg, and Malmö. Drawing on policy documents and interviews with city officials, the authors concluded that 'ecological and social concerns in urban governance are treated as separated topics' (Khan, Hildingsson, and Garting 2020, 1). Eco-social policy integration thus still only happens to a very limited degree. Even though these authors did not focus on unemployment, their main results might also indicate a gap between social services and environmental policies. Other research on sustainable welfare focuses on the expenditure side of the welfare state – that is, on various benefits – and its implications for the environment (Bohnenberger 2020). These research endeavours can all be considered pioneering. They try to concretize what integrated eco-social policies might look like.

Since there is no (social) policy without practice, we also have to pay attention to social work in the field of unemployment services. The ecosocial paradigm in social work has gained increasing importance during the last 20 years. Sustainability can be considered a leading principle of social work, together with human rights and social justice (e.g. Pillai and Gupta 2015; Ife 2018). It can be seen as a central part of ecosocial work. However, it is only rudimentarily incorporated into national ethical guidelines (Bowles et al. 2018; Stamm 2018), and the practical implications of sustainability as a guiding principle are still underdeveloped. Despite its increasing consideration on an

international level, there is still no clear and consensual definition of ecosocial work (cf. Rambaree, Powers, and Smith 2019). However, three central elements of ecosocial work can be named. 1) Ecosocial work identifies a strong link between social and environmental problems. Therefore, marginalized groups are often affected by both problem areas. They might suffer from both environmental and social injustice. 2) In regard to solutions, the social and environmental dimensions need to be brought together as well. Social work can play an important role in this realm. This also means that nature can be seen as a resource to be (re)discovered by social workers. 3) Social workers together with their clients can also contribute to more sustainable societies. This may be one important aspect of services for unemployed people. In practice, all three of these dimensions of ecosocial work might coincide.

Research from the early 2000s in Finland demonstrated that social workers at least had potential as experts on environmental and social sustainability at the local level (Närhi 2004). One of the main questions was what an eco-socially sustainable and inclusive living environment might look like from a social work perspective. Not surprisingly, the list was diverse: social and ecological diversity in the environment, coping in everyday life, access to activities, and the quality and state of the environment in a broad sense (Närhi 2004, 41). The natural environment was discussed, but it played a somewhat marginal role. It was difficult for social workers to give a definition of sustainability, either from a professional perspective or in relation to Finnish communities. However, as Närhi (2004, 77) concluded, social workers ‘have a unique knowledge base to do that, i.e. multiple ways of knowing in and from practice, as well as a firm foundation through their action as mediators in local contexts’. Another Finnish research project focused on rural areas, citizen participation, and community orientation (Matthies, Kattilakoski, and Rantamäki 2011). The findings were based on data gathered at open community meetings, which included the voices of social workers and other officials as well as citizens. Again, a diversity of issues related to sustainability came to light, but no direct ‘conscious theoretical thinking or political strategies of sustainability’. Among the most important results was that community orientation in general was regarded as sustainable. This included participation and co-production as guiding principles. The natural environment was not at the centre of discussions, but rather a more ‘holistic, cross-sector view on the living environment’ (Matthies, Kattilakoski, and Rantamäki 2011, 132). The field of unemployment or related services was not the main focus of these research projects.

To conclude, discussions of sustainability or sustainable development are still marginal or only just beginning in this field. This applies to the welfare state as a whole, as well as to unemployment policies and related services in particular, despite the fact that work is central to any comprehensive understanding of sustainability. This paper will examine some of these interlinkages, focusing on policy from a practice perspective on the local level.

Methods: expert interviews, constructivist grounded theory, and objective hermeneutics

Expert interviews as a data collection method

My methods of data collection and analysis are rooted in three qualitative research approaches: expert interviews were used for the data collection; constructivist grounded theory and OH were applied for the data analysis.

Expert interviews can provide various forms of knowledge (cf. Meuser and Nagel 2005). Apart from technical and process-related knowledge, interpretative-evaluative knowledge, which is often hidden and can be seen as implicit knowledge about social patterns of interpretation, is an important outcome (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2009; Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2014). There are explorative, systematizing, and theory-generating expert interviews. The third form was the most important for this study. It aims at latent meanings, patterns of interpretation, and subjective views.

The experts interviewed for this study were considered experts for several reasons: they all had important responsibilities; the majority were actually the heads of their respective organizations or departments; they had privileged access to knowledge about clients and their situations, as well as about labour market and unemployment programmes and measures in Kokkola.

For this study I conducted seven expert interviews, two of which were group interviews (11 interviewees in total). The interview partners came from the local branch of the nationally organized employment offices, the municipality, the local social work and public health organization, and third-sector organizations working with unemployed people in Kokkola. The city of Kokkola was chosen due to its size and on the basis of my previous research. The presumption was that in a medium-size city different actors would be more closely connected than in a big city, and access to the whole field would be easier. The general structure of services for unemployed people in Finland can be described as a multi-actor approach. The city of Kokkola, the employment office, and the local branch of KELA (the Social Insurance Institution of Finland) oversee the distribution of services and financial benefits. Services are provided by the city and the employment office to a smaller extent; the larger part is provided by third-sector organizations, as well as public institutions such as the local social work and public health organization. Social work is involved in all public institutions and third-sector organizations. However, other professions also organize or coordinate some of the programmes and measures, as my selection of interview partners demonstrates.

The majority of the interview partners (seven) had a professional background in social work. The others had backgrounds in administration, economics, and education; they were chosen for the study because their institution or position entailed close collaboration with social workers or services for unemployed people. I gained access to the field through the long-standing cooperation between some of the organizations involved in the study and the university unit in Kokkola (part of the University of Jyväskylä). I found further interviewees by using the snowball method. Participants were not selected on an individual basis: as long as potential interview partners came from a relevant organization in Kokkola and had a certain role, they were considered relevant experts for the study. Group interviews were chosen due to requests from some of the organizations. They followed the same semi-structured format as the individual interviews. They were not conducted with a focus group approach. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour. All interviews were conducted in English and transcribed verbatim using the qualitative data analysis and research software ATLAS.ti.

Constructivist grounded theory

For the data analysis I followed a constructivist grounded theory approach. The grounded theory method (GTM) is a systematic, inductive, and comparative approach with the goal of generating a theory that is closely linked to the collected data (Bryant and Charmaz 2007, introduction). The constructivist approach to the GTM emphasizes the importance of the researcher's role and perspective, and invites researchers to reflect on these during the research process. Furthermore, it focuses on language and the co-construction of data. Within this logic, it also acknowledges the researcher's prior knowledge (Charmaz 2014).

My study cannot be fully considered a grounded theory study, since the data-gathering, data analysis, and theory construction could not proceed concurrently. Due to a lack of time and resources, and partly also to the restrictions at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible for me to return to the field after transcribing and analysing the first interviews. However, the coding and analysis process resulted in the construction of 158 codes. Thirty-five codes became part of a narrower coding family more closely related to the issues of sustainability and eco-social policies. These codes served as the basis for building the core categories.

The use of the constructivist GTM, with its reflective approach and focus on the data, supported me to identify and correct several preconceptions and false assumptions from my planning process.

Objective hermeneutics

In order to better understand the meaning of sustainability in my field of study, I further decided to conduct a sequential analysis according to OH. In general, OH follows the logic of reconstruction and opposes classificatory approaches that aim for simple subsumption (cf. Oevermann et al. 1979; Wernet 2009, 2013). According to OH, the world is meaning-structured and constituted through language and texts. Access to the meaningful structure of the world can therefore only be gained through protocols (texts) of the *Lebenswelt* (life world). Every analysis within OH aims to reveal the latent meaning structure or case structure. The method of interpretation is an in-depth, line-by-line analysis based on the principles of extensity and sequentiality. Every textual interpretation unit leads to a hypothesis about the case structure (Wernet 2009, 80). My sequential analysis resulted in 41 pages of textual interpretation and a set of four final case structure hypotheses. These formed the case structure, which I linked to the core categories.

The results of my study proved the feasibility and usefulness of combining the GTM with OH. However, several differences remain, especially regarding the constructivist GTM. For OH, the question ‘what is the case?’ stands at the beginning of the sequential text analysis; in the GTM, the question ‘what is this data a study of?’ is a permanent one that follows the researcher throughout the process. For my study, the pragmatic combination of both approaches served its purpose: to better understand the experts’ perceptions and interpretations of sustainability and its meaning for the field of services for unemployed people.

Results: core categories and case structure

The preliminary result of the first interviews was the impression that the term and concept ‘sustainability’ were still very hard for interview participants to grasp. They clearly struggled with the question about sustainability and what it might mean in the context of their work, both for them as professionals and for their clients. My preconceptions had been more optimistic about this. With climate change and its consequences becoming increasingly visible even in the Nordic context, and in light of the intensified political and social work discourse and (new) global forms of protest against the political and economic status quo, I had expected the topic to be more present at the local level. However, sustainability was eventually discussed in all the interviews, with emphasis and as a highly contested concept. The core categories I found all describe processes; this is closely linked to the constructivist GTM. My core categories are as follows: viewing sustainability as the ‘true nature’ of social work; seeing sustainability from clients’ perspectives; linking sustainability to institutions and measures. The latter category incorporates insights and ideas regarding eco-social policies, either as already existing or as potential concepts for the future.

Viewing sustainability as the ‘true nature’ of social work

Before the interview participants shared their thoughts about what sustainability meant or could mean in the context of their work, they tried to give a definition or grasp the idea of sustainability in their own words. This in itself led to a number of very interesting statements. One social worker replied: ‘that we can do our work in such a way that [...] we have enough time and possibilities to concentrate on the customer’s situation and try to find solutions that are durable’ (I2¹). A colleague at the same interview responded that to her it simply meant that they would do their work.

Another stream of definitions and interpretations of ‘sustainable’ presented it as synonymous with ‘long-term’ or ‘durable’. A number of interview participants expressed their hope that their work would be sustainable in the sense that their influence would be long-term and their solutions durable, so that they could support clients to break the cycle (of social problems) (I1, I3). One interviewee saw sustainable social work as more effective in the longer term – for example, when social workers support younger unemployed persons, who might in turn become better and more supportive future parents (I3). This view clearly indicates an understanding of intergenerational justice.

As will be shown in the next core category, interview participants also defined sustainability concretely in terms of having enough time to work and find solutions *with* clients (I4). For example, interviewees took the view that a long-term unemployed person could not be ‘brought’ back into work within six months. Such a person would usually need a lot of support and preparation to find a longer-lasting place in society (I2, I4). According to one interviewee, this would perhaps not be understood by other actors in the field of employment services (I4).

Overall, many interviewees talked about how important it was to really see the situation clients were in, and they emphasized the time factor and how a slower and sometimes more patient pace of work could lead to better (more sustainable) solutions. In summary, these views claimed that sustainability could mean returning to the ‘true nature’ of social work. This appeared in most of the interviews. I will elaborate further on the metaphor of ‘true nature’ in the discussion section.

Seeing sustainability from clients’ perspectives

When interview participants reflected on sustainability and their work, the perspectives of unemployed people – that is, their clients – were at the centre of the discussion. One interviewee explicitly stated that better knowledge of the environment was needed: ‘I think when you understand that more you can help more’ (I2). Although the natural environment was not directly discussed, it could be implied. A number of other interview participants mentioned how important it was to see their clients’ (whole) situation(s), beyond the mere social problem of unemployment (I2, I4, I5). This meant not just following a plan and using standard strategies, but taking more time, having more discussions with the clients, and trying to better understand their living situations. One interviewee also presented her personal thoughts about the small carbon footprints of most unemployed people. With a low income, buying luxury products, travelling abroad, or owning a car was usually impossible. Although this might be involuntary, it led to a much more sustainable lifestyle than that of social workers in service organizations, for example. This might be considered a strength of unemployed people, and even a contribution to the public good, which was usually overlooked (I3). Following this line of thought, services for unemployed people could actually contribute to more unsustainable lifestyles. This complex discussion was not taken further by the interview partner and was not directly connected to her professional role.

In general, the knowledge, attitudes, and motivations of unemployed people were frequently discussed during the interviews and were connected to sustainability. Sustainability was seen here in very diverse ways. For example, it was stated that many young unemployed people nowadays knew about the importance of the environment, and would think about the environment if they entered work or education. That was why new environmental businesses in Kokkola – such as the local branch of the Finnish Red Cross, which ran a big second-hand shop in the city and also offered work placements – were important employers (I3).

Other interview partners again saw sustainability more as a long-term, effective strategy. One stated that without motivation there could be no sustainable support. Income support and housing were important but would not solve the problem of unemployment in the long run (I1). Other interviewees described their experience with (younger) clients who criticized the work-and-spend cycle of life. These clients preferred a slow and less stressful way of living for which no high income was needed (I2). Although this attitude was controversial in the group interviews, some social

workers expressed their understanding of these choices and doubted that any form of coercion would constitute meaningful help for these unemployed clients (I2, I3). Other interview partners identified a tension between the (public) goal of employability and the ‘frugal’ attitude of some young unemployed people. Some of these clients might base this attitude on environmental reasons. However, the interview partners who raised this point did not specify any concrete arguments by clients against entering the work-and-spend cycle. One interviewee considered sustainability from the perspective of clients – here, young people in general – as a way of preventing problems. Despite our knowledge of the origins of many problems at early ages, in nursery or primary school, many young people still end up needing support. Therefore, ‘sustainability would be to try to prevent problems as much as possible’, according to this interviewee (I6).

Linking sustainability to institutions and measures

As with the connection between sustainability and clients, the link to institutions and measures also encompasses a large number of different views, approaches, ideas, and concepts. This category mostly provides answers to the second question about eco-social policies. This is partly connected to the location of the study. The city of Kokkola is mostly surrounded by rural areas dominated by agriculture. Therefore, nature-based activities or programmes might be more common than in bigger cities.

Several interviews mentioned recycling as one activity in Kokkola in which unemployed people were involved. A number of associations and foundations that work with second-hand or recycled materials offer work placements, which are partly subsidized by either the municipality or KELA. This is a privilege granted only to non-profit organizations, but companies can receive similar support from the employment office. These wage subsidies can be for part-time or full-time jobs. Some organizations also have the means to offer non-subsidized employment contracts after the wage subsidy phase has ended. Furthermore, in many cases they offer training workshops for unemployed people, run second-hand shops, and provide counselling and support for certain groups. Often these services are commissioned by the municipality or KELA and provided by third-sector organizations.

At the time of the interviews, one foundation was planning to collect and forward second-hand materials to companies. A cooperation with Ekorosk, a local waste management company, was part of the plan. An interviewee explained: ‘rubbish isn’t rubbish as long as it can be used, it’s someone else’s raw material, and we could be there, and perhaps this could be the social labour market where people come in and dismantle a leather sofa, for example’ (I4). However, these plans had not yet been realized.

In one interview, the organizations in question were described as ‘environmental businesses’, even though they were non-profit organizations (I3). In organizations’ self-descriptions, the environmental aspect of their work is often not highlighted. Nevertheless, there were already good examples of how to successfully combine support for unemployed people with environmentally friendly activities. One interviewee stated that more cooperation was needed between associations that conducted recycling activities.

Before unemployed people enter work rehabilitation measures or other forms of training or education, they are often offered social rehabilitation measures. For example, local social and health organizations offer group support programmes. Interviewees from one organization emphasized that some of these programmes combined social goals with nature-based activities. This could include going to the forest, picking berries, and building a fire, but also longer-term projects such as building a garden and growing vegetables (I2). Another form of nature-based rehabilitation is green care. Green Care Finland ry is a Finland-wide association that coordinates, develops, and promotes nature- and animal-assisted methods. Green care is commonly offered to marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities, and it focuses on well-being and health services. Several interviewees suggested that green care could be extended to other groups as well (I2, I3). Unemployed people are

usually not the main focus group. However, in the Kokkola region unemployed people can get green care work placements for social rehabilitation, although these placements are scarce and transport to the countryside is often unavailable.

Another issue discussed several times was the ‘fourth sector’. This comprises activities organized by engaged citizens without institutional backgrounds (15, 17). One example in Finland is *Siivouspäivä* (‘cleaning day’), partly supported by a third-sector organization in Kokkola that participated in my study. The fourth sector can be connected to new forms of work, volunteering, and an informal, social, and solidarity economy. Kokkola has also had a time bank project. The basic idea is that you offer your time and skills and get something in return. The model has been successfully implemented in several cities and regions. In Finland, however, according to one interviewee, the project had to be stopped due to tax issues. If somebody were to offer their professional skills, this could not be done free of charge and without paying taxes. Therefore, the project and the cooperation with the third-sector organization had ended.

Finally, one interviewee brought up the idea of a team for environmental sustainability (16). This might be coordinated by the municipality. As formulated in the interview, it might be useful for youth services, ‘so that it will be easier to inspire and motivate’ young people to engage in environmental activities; if linked to social services, it might also promote an integrated approach to eco-social policies in Kokkola.

Objective hermeneutics analysis: case structure on sustainability

The following results are based on the second, complementary part of my analysis. They mainly respond to the first research question. The focus here was on the meanings of sustainability to be found in the data. Accordingly, my line-by-line OH analysis only included interview passages that directly outlined the issue of sustainability in the context of labour market and unemployment policies and services for unemployed people. My OH analysis aimed to reveal the latent meaning structure, or simply a case structure (based on case structure hypotheses), rather than core categories as with the GTM. Therefore, the presentation of these results refers not to interviewees directly, but to the case structure and implied latent meanings. A ‘case’ can be one interview or the study as a whole.

The interviewees took very different approaches and various perspectives, and the overlaps between the interviews were only visible in the nuances. At first glance, this was in line with the findings of my first round of analysis. One way to interpret sustainability in the context of unemployment is to mainly see the economic side. This first perspective can be summarized as the economic and public spending perspective. The revealed case structure shows that in one interview, the relationship between the labour market and social benefits was considered to be the essential question. The interviewee asked rhetorically whether it would always be a good choice to take a job, and came to the conclusion that it was often the better choice to continue on benefits. To take a job might be a disadvantage. According to the case structure analysis, this was considered to be unsustainable in the context of the interview. Private jobs and the spending of public money should be in a different configuration in order to be sustainable. This argumentation also became visible in another interview. Here too the interviewees emphasized the economic side of sustainability in the context of services for unemployed people. It was companies that provided jobs, and therefore the focus should be on them. Support for unemployed people was important, but companies might also need support. This would eventually turn out to be more sustainable. The public or non-profit sector should find solutions only for people who could not meet the high demands of working full-time in a company. The sustainability impact of the jobs themselves, whether private or (semi-)public, was not discussed in these interviews. In only one interview were ‘green jobs’ mentioned as a side note. Within the logic of these interview case structures, creating jobs meant promoting sustainability.

Table 1. It is: Research methods and main results.

Methods		Results
Data collection	Expert interviews <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 5 individual and 2 group interviews• 11 interviewees in total• 7 experts with a social work background	
Data analysis	Constructivist grounded theory	Three core categories were established: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Viewing sustainability as the ‘true nature’ of social work• Seeing sustainability from clients’ perspectives• Linking sustainability to institutions and measures
Data analysis	Objective hermeneutics	Sequential analysis discovered a variety of meanings of sustainability in the case structure: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• an economic and public spending perspective• a social work ethics view• a moral behaviour perspective

In other interviews, the case structure revealed a view that was less focused on jobs or the economic side and more on the social work services side. What would it mean to have sustainability in services for unemployed persons? Several interview partners emphasized the process rather than the possible outcomes. Sustainability rested not on the question of whether the person found gainful employment, but on how the service and service relationship were conducted. The logic of the case structure could be formulated in terms of sustainability as part of ethics. Hence, it was one of the main principles or even the essence of social work-related services. This perspective can be named social work ethics view. Even though the interview partners described it as not actually in place, they had ideas about what would be needed to establish it. Time played an important role: more time for the support measures, meaning more time for the professionals and more time for the clients.

Finally, in one interview the revealed case structure included several aspects. The issue of time was mentioned, but first the interviewee reflected on sustainability and unemployed people from a moral perspective. I call this perspective the moral behaviour perspective. The background was the above-mentioned fact that unemployed people generally use fewer resources. If one were to follow this logic, the most sustainable approach would be not to support clients to find gainful employment, since this would almost automatically mean a bigger carbon footprint. The analysis revealed another aspect. Supporting clients meant supporting them to become independent in the future, which might potentially also benefit their future children. Sustainable services were services that made themselves redundant. Spending resources (money) now to support unemployed people would mean that fewer resources would be needed in the future. Supporting potential parents now would serve the needs of their future children.

To sum up, if one considers this whole study or Kokkola as the case, a consistent case structure cannot be found. This is not surprising in light of the openness of the concept of sustainability. It is also in line with the results of the first stage of the analysis. The task for the following discussion is to make links between the results of both parts of the analysis and existing theoretical concepts in social policy and social work. [Table 1](#) summarizes my methodological approach in brief, and lists the main results.

Discussion

In this paper, I have focused on two central questions. 1) How is ‘sustainability’ perceived and interpreted in the context of services for unemployed people on the local level? Here, the role of the social work profession and social workers’ actions is the central focus. 2) What potential for eco-social policies can be identified in the field? For the second question, I examined existing ways of

integrating environmental and social sustainability goals in the field. The first part of the analysis, based on the constructivist GTM, led to three core categories: viewing sustainability as the ‘true nature’ of social work; seeing sustainability from clients’ perspectives; linking sustainability to institutions and measures. The second part of the analysis, which followed the principles of OH, discovered a variety of meanings and interpretations of sustainability in the case structure. These ranged from an economic and public spending perspective to a social work ethics view and a moral behaviour perspective.

The overall results, informed by the core categories and the revealed case structure, lead to a grounded theory that consists of three elements. If one asks with the GTM ‘what is the story of the data?’ (Glaser in Charmaz 2014, chapter 4), the tentative answer might be that it is a fragmented story. Hence, the first element is that there are many different meanings of sustainability. Sustainability must be seen as a multifaceted process and outcome on many levels. The picture at the local level is blurry, and there is a lack of clear definitions, targets, and practices. Direct theoretical or conceptual knowledge about sustainability is largely missing. This is in line with the findings of Matthies, Kattilakoski, and Rantamäki (2011) action research in several Finnish municipalities. However, the openness of the principle of sustainability can also be seen as a strength, leaving space for implementation adapted to context, place, and time.

One way to structure the ‘fragmented story’ is to focus on different perspectives. This is the second element of the proposed theory. The results of the case structure analysis were useful for understanding these different positions more precisely. Sustainability based on the interview material can be seen 1) from the perspective of social workers and other professionals, 2) from the clients’ perspectives, and 3) from the perspective of the state or public institutions. These perspectives coincide with the concept of a third mandate of social work developed by Silvia Staub-Bernasconi (2007, 2016). Based on the commonly known double mandate of social work – between help (clients) and control (state) – Staub-Bernasconi developed the idea of a third mandate for the organized profession itself: ‘the third mandate legitimizes relative professional autonomy, i.e. to make judgements about scientifically based interventions as well as ethical judgements in relation to its professional ethical code. Although this can be accompanied with many tensions, the skilful dealing with these three mandates is part of the competence of any profession’ (Staub-Bernasconi 2016, 44). Ethical decisions are based on the main principles of social work: human rights and social justice. As many scholars have shown, sustainability and collective responsibility for the natural environment need to be integrated into the ethical basis of social work (e.g. Ife 2018). They would thus become part of the third mandate. Further, the metaphor of the ‘true nature’ of social work, used in the first core category, additionally hints at important theoretical traditions in social work regarding the environment. Although the physical environment was not directly invoked during the early stages of the profession, one could argue that concepts such as urban ecology (Jane Addams) and the person-in-environment approach (Mary Richmond’s ‘person in a situation’) (Matthies, Närhi, and Ward 2001; Harrikari and Rauhala 2019) have already led in the direction of ecosocial work. On many occasions, interview partners mentioned clients’ environment, situation, and needs. All of this might influence professional goals based on an (environmentally informed) third mandate.

The third and final element of my grounded theory suggests that eco-social policies that would lead to new services can only be developed and implemented if we identify these different perspectives and values regarding sustainability. Social workers and other professionals, clients, and public and private actors often mean different things when they talk about sustainability, and therefore have different goals. This needs to be reflected if labour market and employment policies and related services are to be redirected towards sustainable welfare.

Regarding the findings and answers to the second question, I found no programmes or measures that are based on eco-social policies. This is not very surprising, since previous research in Finland and other European countries has come to the same conclusion (Stamm et al. 2020). Current labour market and unemployment policies still lack any clear links to environmental policies; no policy

integrating social and ecological goals exists in Finland. However, my data reveals some valuable approaches, ideas, and concepts. Social rehabilitation measures, for example, might come close to a new, small-scale eco-social policy if the environmental aspect were highlighted. Furthermore, the interview material emphasized the importance of recycling, reuse, and waste management. Other studies have presented examples of this in diverse European countries as well (e.g. Stamm et al. 2017; Matthies et al. 2020). In Kokkola, a number of third-sector organizations are active in this field. Their activities include workshops on revamping furniture, repairing old household machines, and designing new products, in which unemployed people receive training. The fourth sector, with its innovative and community-based ideas and events, has tremendous potential to inform future eco-social policies, as do other alternative economy models. Social work organizations could support these activities and introduce groups such as unemployed people to them (see also Matthies et al. 2020). In general terms, they could connect more strongly to new social movements. All these activities in the third and fourth sectors are often summarized as the social and solidarity economy, or more recently as a circular economy at the local level. The high potential for ecosocial work approaches is clearly visible (cf. Stamm et al. 2017). Finally, the idea of a ‘big team for environmental sustainability’ is valuable. This could be translated into a coordinating office that helps to integrate local eco-social policies. As recent research in Sweden by Khan, Hildingsson, and Garting (2020) has shown, eco-social integration in cities is just beginning.

Conclusion

Based on the proposed theory with its three elements, one can argue for a new, active role for social work and the social work profession: an expert role regarding sustainable development, and an eco-social transformation at the local level in the field of unemployment. As Närhi (2004, 77) states, social workers have a duty to take a seat at the ‘round table negotiations of sustainability’, where many different actors and views come together. Sustainability is a question of social norms and values. In the case of social work, it is also a question of professional ethics. Linked to a long theoretical tradition, social work could implement sustainability as part of the third mandate and act upon it at the community level. A seat at the table of experts can only meaningfully be taken if the profession itself – social workers in the field – has wider knowledge and a clear understanding of the implications of (sustainable) social work. This could help to move from a blurry picture to a clear vision, and social workers would be enabled to stimulate an urgently needed discussion.

Bottom-up ideas, concepts, or solutions, partly discovered and presented here, are valuable and important. Yet they might not be enough. Despite the fact that ecosocial work has been discussed in Finland for at least 20 years, even the concept of sustainability is still hard to grasp for many practitioners. It seems that further changes and developments within the profession – in practice and teaching – are needed. Individual social workers or organizations at the local level cannot turn towards sustainability on their own. How we think about work in the future, and how we treat the problem of unemployment, is decisive for sustainable development. This also means that other public and private economic actors have to be involved. Only if resources and competencies are connected, and if different actors at the local level follow the same long-term goals, can a path towards sustainability be taken. The results of this study have shown that valuable ideas and successful local models for ecosocial work in services for unemployed people already exist. It would benefit clients and the natural environment to follow up on these. This study has concentrated on a medium-size city in Finland. It would be worthwhile to extend the research to the whole of Finland, and to other European countries.

Note

1. Interview references are indicated with a capital I followed by a number from one to seven (in chronological order of interview).

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