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## Chapter 2

### The Conceptualisation of Ecosocial Transition

*Aila-Leena Matthies*

The concept of ecosocial transition refers to the efforts of policy makers, activists and researchers towards creating sustainable changes both practically and conceptually (Elsen 2011, Soots and Gismondi 2008, Fischer-Kowalski 2012). Referring to sustainability, the concept of ecosocial transition combines ecological, economic and social dimensions of development and is interested in the interlinkage between social and ecological sustainability. An increasing number of practical areas of action are addressed by the search for models of ecosocial transition, like cultural life, food production and delivery, local governance, transport and housing. This first chapter aims to clarify conceptual issues related to ecosocial transition. It will provide a view of how ecosocial transition is promoted and manifested for instance as scientific debate, policy making and networks of actions groups and movements. These are discussed from the perspective of social work and social policy, although their role in ecosocial transition is not yet very visible. Finally, the chapter will critically analyse how social dimensions are understood in the transition movement and sustainability paradigm. The question of how social work and social policy are essentially related to the core topics of ecosocial transition will be looked at in this chapter.

#### **Concepts in the Ecosocial Discourse**

*Transition and Transformation*

Different conceptual understandings of transitions and transformation exist that refer to the programmatic debates that aim at promoting urgently needed major changes in current societies in order to sustain the planet as a value per se with an inherent worth and as a place for future human generations to live. Referring to this change both as a process and result, the words *transition* and *transformation* towards sustainability can be found in the literature in different languages. The word transformation is used especially in the German literature (Elsen 2011) when tracking back along the discussion paths of the paradigmatic ecosocial change. On the other hand, while following the global discussion for instance about *transition towns, communities*, (Hopkins 2011) and the *transition movement* (Hopkins 2008) also the decision to speak about ecosocial transition is legitimated. According to the Cambridge Dictionaries Online (2015) transition means ‘a change from one form or type to another, or the process by which this happens’. In the same source, transformation means ‘a complete change in the appearance or character of something or someone, especially so that that thing or person is improved’ (ibid.). There seem to be nuanced differences between transition and transformation in the aspect of their radicalism and whether the emphasis is more on the process or its outcome. However, both words are used in the broader scientific debate also outside of social work while discussing the same concern: shifting the current destructive development of comprehensive areas of society towards a more sustainable direction (Fischer-Kowalski et al. 2012, Bay 2013, Löwy 2014, Berger et al. 2014). However, it needs to be made clear that besides this explicitly normative and action-oriented understanding of transition and transformation, like in the context of this book, there is a much longer tradition of scientific studies of historical transition processes. In the latter cases transition is rather a neutral concept and more a synonym

for change or development which takes place and is just observed and studied without any intentions to influence it. Anyway, by analogy with Karl Polanyi's study *The Great Transformation* (1944) about the transition from a feudal to a capitalist economy, a growing global network of scholars and civil society activists are speaking of a "Great Transition" to a future of equity, solidarity and ecological sustainability. Among these are the New Economics Foundation (Spratt et al. 2009) and especially the discussion network The Great Transition Initiative (2015). Hence, we are in good company even if we decide to use the word transition in our book as a pragmatic solution to having one concept throughout the book. But this background also suggests that this is not an exclusive way of nominating the needed change. Keeping in mind the value of various cultures of languages and scientific debates, we regard that the ongoing ecosocial crisis does not allow scientists to get 'lost in conceptual transition debates' or in the diversity of languages.

Both transition and transformation embed in this meaning a strong normative and programmatic character of argumentation, which addresses political processes from the local to global level, as well as practical models of changing different areas of human life. Ecosocial transitions and transformations are indeed mainly presented as political and practical programmes to follow in order to improve the perspectives of the earth. Therefore, it is important to underline that the aim of this book is not first and foremost to present a practical programme but instead is to present theoretical and empirical research on various areas where (the normative) ecosocial transition is already taking steps.

*Transformative Sciences and Transformative Research*

Transformative research (TR) figures out the frame of reference that contextualizes the research on the contributions of social work and social policy to ecosocial transition also in this book. The definition of Transformative Research seems to be biased and has changed during the last 10 years. At the level of the higher policies of science, it has been used to describe any new paradigm, discovery or innovative research that promises better competition and new fields of markets from the perspective of neoliberal economic interests especially in the context of the US National Science Foundation (NSF 2007: 1–2). In the similar context of European programmes for research funding (European Commission 2015, ERC 2015), words like ‘through breaking’ or ‘frontier research’ are used.

However, nowadays transformative research can also be understood to more exclusively describe the growing interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary community of researchers around the globe that provide knowledge and seek solutions for the urgent future challenges of humanity (Trevors et al. 2012, University of Bolzano 2015, ISSC 2015). Trevors et al. (2012: 121) even argue that one cannot claim to be doing transformative research if one is not aiming to alleviate the tremendous personal, social, environmental and economic problems that currently face humans.

Interdisciplinary research on transition towards sustainability has a number of conceptual differences. Depending on the background of the authors and their prioritized area of changes also the concepts of socio-technical and social-ecological transition are used (Smith and Stirling 2010). The natural sciences mainly speak about *ecological* transition and largely still focus on biophysical dimensions giving only little attention to social dimensions. Ecosocial transition is mainly used in social sciences and aims at integrating ecological and social dimensions. *Socio-ecological transition* is

also used in order to cover the biophysical and social changes, however this concept mainly refers to macro-level systemic processes (Rotmans and Fischer-Kowalski 2009, Fischer-Kowalski 2012). Further, sustainability transition or social-ecological transition are also used broadly in the scientific literature (for example STRN 2015). Social-ecological transition already implies that on Earth there are no pure ecological or social systems that are not influenced by the others.

In criticizing sustainability research for being limited mainly to the natural sciences, one has to keep in mind that also the social sciences have been mainly focusing on the social aspects of sustainability (for example Magee, Scerry and James 2012). Therefore, serious research efforts to combine the social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainability are needed.

#### *Categories of Ecosocial Transition*

While speaking about ecosocial (or socio-ecological) transition, two of its phases are often differentiated in the respective literature (for example NEF 2015a, Fisher-Kowalski et al. 2012). The '*historical*' transition (comp. by Polany 1944 'Great Transformation'), has taken – or is still taking – place away from the agrarian regime, which was based upon solar energy and land-use towards the industrial regime, which is based upon fossil fuels and a wide variety of conversion technologies. Although this first transition is regarded as history in Western industrial societies, it actually describes the present development in many developing countries.

The *new transition* moves away from fossil fuels towards solar and other low carbon energy sources due to the limitations of fossil fuels. This is the phase that may be actively accelerated to avoid catastrophic climate change. This transition is either

practiced or becomes part of the political agenda mainly in Western countries (for example the National Council for Ecological Transition of France 2015, Brown et al. 2015).

Also frequently referred to in the debate on ecosocial transition are the different scenarios concerning the rate of how radical the changes ought to be in applying the aims of sustainability in the practice of policies. In Table 1 three different perspectives are identified by combining the scenario analyses of the cross-European research project by Fischer-Kowalski et al. (2014) and those of Rob Hopkins (2008), who is one of the founders of the transition movement:

**Table 2.1 Scenarios of Ecosocial Transition** (according to Hopkins 2008, Fischer-Kowalski et al. 2012)

	<b>No Policy Change</b>	<b>Conventional Environmentalism</b>	<b>The Transition Approach</b>
<i>Aims</i>	Defending status quo	'Greener' growth by market instruments	Smart, lean and fair holistic societal change in economic de-growth
<i>Means and Tools</i>	Business as usual	Emission trading, lobbying, ICT, recycling	Eco-tax reform from labour to resources, up-cycling
	Current level of consumption and production defended	Investments in green production, green consumer choice and price policy	Less resource use by changed policies of food, work, mobility, housing, welfare etc.
<i>Norms</i>	Partial application of existing sustainability policies	Correct price seeking, carbon foot print	Global justice, holistic wellbeing, resilience indicators
<i>Actions</i>	No effective control measurements	Individual choice	Collective, community-based participation, 'global' actions
<i>Unattended</i>	Global megatrends, preparing changes	Rebound effects, global distribution	Preconditions of transition



The three scenarios in Table 2.1 clearly differentiate the current streams of understanding and practicing sustainability policies. It also highlights the necessity of political decisions taking into account the linkages between the environmental, economic and social challenges of societies. First, although many people would like to see that politicians and other responsible decision-makers would keep the current status of development and harmony in prospering societies, and especially maintain the achieved privileges and level of consumption, it is clear that ecological limits may prohibit this. Secondly, it is vital to acknowledge the difference between ‘green-washing’ – type of reforms that maintain the status quo with slightly ecological consumption and the radical changes promoted by the ecosocial transition approach. Don Clifton (2010) compares the reformistic and transformative approaches in their capacity to achieve sustainability and states that the transformative one is seemingly more the way towards socio-ecological resilience.

Especially when regarding the scenarios from the point of view of social work and social policy, it becomes clear that as part of contemporary society these institutions are also standing at the crossroads between exactly the same scenarios. It sounds no more sustainable to continue mainstream social work and social policy, with the current managerialistic and individualistic orientation, without considering their social, ecological and economic consequences. Some superficial forms of ‘conventional environmentalism’, such as adding ecological consumerism or participatory experiments in social services, are not helpful enough to contribute to ecosocial transition. The radical transition approach indicates rather the deep interdependence between the exploitation of nature and increasing social injustice. It also seeks to practice new types of alternative social work and social policy; ones which do not

demand economic growth as their financial guarantee but some other comprehensive understanding of wellbeing and justice.

## **The Manifestations of Ecosocial Transition**

### *Manifestation in Sciences*

The considerations of Bruno Latour (2005) on the domain of ‘the science of the social’ underline that ‘the social’ is not just something that can be attributed to other domains such as technology, economy or environment as if these exist outside of society; they all are acting in, shaped by and influencing society. And the way in which they interact in society belong to the focus area of the social sciences, too. So far, the contribution of social sciences to the ecosocial transition of societies cannot be limited to only some additional social dimensions. The International Social Science Council (ISSC 2015) is pushing the importance of social sciences in the research of global challenges for a number of reasons. In the ISSC report *Transformative Cornerstones of Social Science Research for Global Change*, Heide Hackmann and Asunción Lera St. Clair (2012) argue that the definitions of research priorities and concrete agendas are already political decision processes where societies, including various stakeholders, have to be involved. The research priorities cannot be isolated to the challenge of one discipline only, but instead they are shared challenges to which the solutions demand joint efforts from both natural and social scientists as well as the human, medical and engineering sciences (Hackmann and St.Clare 2012: 15). They invite social scientists to research what the processes of change are in particular places where social and environmental problems converge. Further, social scientists can provide knowledge about what changes at the individual, organizational, cultural and systemic levels are

needed for sustainability and how these future challenges can be anticipated in socially acceptable and adequately ways. The authors nominate the following ‘transformative cornerstones of social sciences’ that is the knowledge of social sciences which needs to be integrated into research on global changes:

- Historical and contextual complexities of the phenomenon / challenge / crisis
- Consequences
- Conditions and visions for change
- Interpretation and subjective sense making
- Responsibilities
- Governance and decision making.

The main point concerning the role of social sciences in ecosocial transition is that environmental issues and the challenge of sustainability are basically contextualized and determined both politically and societally. Hence, they cannot be insulated to one field of science. The above mentioned dimensions of knowledge concerning current and future challenges at both the local and global level can be communicated by social sciences at an interdisciplinary round table. They are actually relevant research topics of ecosocial transition from the stand point of social work, too. When considering the intersection of social and ecological problems, social work as a discipline and profession is involved in the contextualization of the problems, the prevention of any consequences due to the problems and the individual and community-based interpretation of the problems as well as the taking responsibility for the practical solutions to them. Social work also increasingly intervenes in the governance and decision making processes of ecosocial challenges especially by providing knowledge from the grass roots level of the problems (Matthies and Närhi

2016). One can even apply the above mentioned cornerstones as an analytical frame for questions with regard to any social and ecological problem that is to be researched and intervened by social work, such as those discussed in this book.

The transformative research discussed above is the best example of the manifestation of ecosocial transition in different scientific efforts. (STRN 2015) Practically all disciplines and areas of research have started to develop their own research reflecting the demands of knowledge related to transition towards sustainability. But it is especially the interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approach that seems best to promote a scientific pro-active response to the global megatrends threatening the wellbeing of humans and the flora and fauna. Studying only one scientific area is no long prioritized, but each discipline still needs to identify its own potential to contribute to the sustainability of the Earth. This is what we aim to do with this book in the case of social work and social policy.

Another significant characterization of ecosocial research is its international and even global approach: one of the core scientific arguments of sustainability moves the attention to the interconnection between local processes and global impacts, be it climate change, the mining industry, food production, environmental disasters or the forced migration of people. The scientific research, however, is not only focusing on the global interconnection of the environmental, economic and social crises but also on their global and local solutions. Scientific experts provide scenarios and expectant knowledge concerning the short and long-term future that are dependent on the decisions and actions taken today. Therefore, scientific research and debate produces knowledge that is the main tool used in the two further forms of transition, the transition policies and the citizens' movements towards more sustainable solutions.

Consequently, questions about global social impacts may also be appropriate for social work research and practice.

Although the topical areas of environmental or green social work (Dominelli 2012, Gray et al. 2012, MacKinnon and Alston 2016) and the ecosocial approach in social work and social policy (Matthies and Närhi 2016, Peeters 2012a) are broad, the potential research-based contributions of social work and social policy for the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ecosocial transition has not been systematized, especially in regard to its global networking. However, instruments like the *Social Impact Assessment* (Närhi 2004) that is based on social work research or the theory development of sustainable wellbeing and welfare (Hirvilammi 2015, Fitzpatrick and Caldwell 2001) are highly relevant examples of social work and social policy research that provide a holistic and cross-disciplinary understanding of ecosocial transition. Also, scientific approaches applying methods of action research and social learning are crucial as they directly bridge between practice development and research (for example Wals 2007, Peeters 2012b, Matthies, Järvelä and Ward 2000, Matthies, Kattilakoski and Rantamäki 2011).

### *Manifestations in Policy Making*

Different manifested forms of ecosocial transitions can be identified as part of *policy making processes* in a multi-level setting. As outlined by Hopkins (2008: 75) there is a certain division of tasks between global, national and local level of policy-making in promoting ecosocial transition towards sustainability. Each of the level has indeed significant instruments to link this process, such as:

- global summits, agreements, emission quotas and global watch

- national legislation, taxation strategies and action plans
- local community programmes, infrastructure initiatives, Fair Trade municipalities and agendas (ibid.)

However, as Hopkins (Hopkins 2008) states, transition initiatives mostly function best if a combination of top-down and bottom-up responses appear. The global and international level of political potential for ecosocial transition is embedded in the capacity to establish overall binding standards and programmes from the highest level of the mutual commitment of collaborative societies. Examples of these are the very first *United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development* (UN 1987), better known as the Brundtland Commission, and the subsequent international agreements and communications that address protection of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development. Later, these have been followed by the world climate summits and climate change protocols. Also the European level of political activities towards sustainability incorporate significant potentials: the European Union as well as the European Council provide various intensive instruments to reinforce ecosocial transition in the member states, although the main agenda of the EU is rather to promote economic growth and trade, which is a contradiction from the point of view of sustainability. The European Union has an even stronger position and more rigorous legal instruments to underpin the protection of the climate, water, forests and socio-cultural environment among their member states than any global organization. However, the central remaining question is whether all these political agendas and commitments are meant to be taken seriously as their impact on positive ecological changes have been very weak.

The *Global Agenda of Social Work and Social Development* (IFSW, IASSW and ICSW 2012) may be regarded as evidence of global policy making towards ecosocial transition as well. The international organizations of schools social work (IASSW), social workers (IFSW) and social welfare organizations (ICSW) state how the current development has unequal consequences for global, national and local communities and negative impacts on people. The organizations especially recognize that 'people's health and wellbeing suffer as a result of inequalities and unsustainable environments related to climate change, pollutants, war, natural disasters and violence to which there are inadequate international responses' (ibid.:1).

International efforts to carry out the ecosocial transition of societies have evidently rather a top-down character, and their resolutions are thought to be followed by the national level of actors, who are also requested to report back to the EU and global organizations about their progress in regard to the issues under concern. Similarly, the national level of agencies can have a strong top-down impact on promoting ecosocial transition through legislation and financial programmes to influence local level governance. National policy-making, besides international agencies, also plays a central role in regulating the market actors and consumption, the use of natural resources and the production of food. And so far national policies are in a strong position to outline ecosocial transition – or its absence. The political activities and macro-level efforts may sound huge, but they mainly remain in the category of conventional environmentalism (Table 2.1). The contradictions between economic and environmental interest demark the conflict lines in political decision making, but the awareness about the social consequences and impacts of the policies are often completely missing. The question remains as to when the social consequences will be

recognized to be strong enough to enforce more radical changes, which would then be a bottom-up transition.

The local level of policy making and acting and the local communities are the main platform for realizing the practical steps of ecosocial transition towards sustainability. According to Hopkins (2008), the local level of policies not only applies to national decisions and regulations but at best also acts from the bottom-up and influences the larger dimensions of society. Most of the transition initiatives indeed emerge as local actions and not as macro-level political programmes. In this regard, Hopkins (*ibid.*: 75–76) mentions locally and regionally owned energy plants and agriculture companies, community economy and climate-friendly local communities.

The *Agenda 21- programme* (UNCED 1992) which started as a consequence of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 has been a core document and frame of reference for efforts of sustainable social work and social policy at a local level. It was perhaps the first time at this kind of prominent forum that dimensions of social welfare were combined on the same agenda with the environmental and economic challenges of the earth. Agenda 21 emphasized the local level of action towards sustainability while addressing poverty, consumption patterns and the sustainability of human settlements in combination with the management of natural resources as well as the issue of democracy and equality from the perspective of the most disadvantaged groups. The process of Local Agenda 21 mobilized numerous projects with the shared goal to bring together the main social actors for joint cooperative efforts on vital issues of environment and development. This has been both a top-down and bottom-up process across the globe. In a research project that followed up the Agenda 21 process in Europe (Lafferty and Eckerberg 1998), the authors state that although the research



addressed the national configurations of an international policy implication, numerous unique local cases of peoples' actions for sustainability also emerged. Local NGOs and also municipal authorities, service providers and institutions were mostly the core participants carrying the responsibility for sustainable local living conditions.

In order not to contrast the local and global levels unnecessary, it is important to keep in mind the numerous international social and economic movements that are bridging local and global efforts, also in social work and social policy. Further, there are several European initiatives, such as the Covenant of Mayors that focuses on the climate efforts of cities, that bridge the local and the European level. Finally, also the regional level of policies is significant.

#### *Manifestations in Practical Movements*

Ecosocial transition manifests itself, however, mainly through the hands of various *social movements* – actually there are joint efforts of numerous movements of ecosocial transition that also feed the policy actions with initiatives and critical partnership in many countries. These movements apply the slogan 'Act locally, think globally' since these actions mainly take place in local contexts, but the awareness of the global dimensions of the issue as well as global networking are often self-evident. Since the first ecological crisis in the early 1970s various local and even global social movements have emerged that promote in one way or another a change in society or in its direct environment towards sustainability. There are also numerous forms of networking, groups and activities focused on conversation that are based on ecosocial transition. For example, the New Economics Foundation (NEF 2015b and c) in London – that also includes scientific activism – claims to be 'promoting innovative solutions

that challenge the mainstream thinking on environmental, economic and social issues' (also Resilience Alliance, Great Transition Initiative, 'PP Foundation, Commons Transition and several national level think tanks). There exists also an on-line based forum called Global Alliance for a Deep-Ecological Social Work, established by Fred Besthorn (2015), that directly addresses the ecosocial approach in social work. It aims to bring together social workers caring for the environment. There is a huge diversity of issue-based movements and action groups that address some very practical dimensions such as protecting the natural environment, strengthening the social environment or practicing new models of a sustainable lifestyle.

One of the most visible and systematically organized movements is the Transition movement (Hopkins 2008), which is connected with Transitions Towns and Transition Network. UK-based Rob Hopkins (2008), who is the founder of the Transition movement (Heinberg 2008), connects the core of transition to the issue of energy and the transit from peak oil to renewable and local systems of energy. But also several other issues are addressed, in particular permaculture and self-sufficient livelihood as especially food production in a sustainable way in local communities is significant for transition.

*The Transition Handbook* (Hopkins 2008) includes a rich collection of cases for local initiatives of transition, and the national level is made responsible for transition through legislative and political means. Further, international agencies are expected to maintain strong international climate change protocols and a moratorium on biodiesel production as a consequence of rethinking economic growth and biodiversity protection. (ibid.: 75).

Hence, on the one side, the Transition Movement using this name has been emerging mainly in the English speaking Western countries and is now spreading across the European continent by often growing from the roots of previous environmental and green movements. Transition towns and network can be followed up and joined especially by social media on the internet (although use of social media in movements has also been criticized for leading to inaction). On the other side, social movements that have been developing transformative ecosocial alternatives, even if not calling themselves transition movements, can be especially found among indigenous communities in Latin America, Asia and Africa. As Michael Löwy (2014: 14) argues, this is not only because local and national environmental struggles between petroleum and mining multinationals and actions defending rivers and forests are taking place in the living areas of indigenous people. But indigenous communities are also those who propose realistic alternatives and more sustainable ways of life when compared to those of neoliberal globalized capitalism. For instance, the ‘Buen vivir’ social philosophy is not only inspiring movements in South America, but even to the Ecuadorian constitution, which refers to it as following: ‘We ... hereby decide to build a new form of public coexistence, in diversity and in harmony with nature, to achieve the good way of living.’ (The Guardian 2013) In particular, Eduardo Gudynas from Uruguay, a leading scholar on buen vivir, criticizes the Western concept of wellbeing due to only referring to individuals and neglecting the social context of their community in a unique environmental situation. (Gudynas 2011; also Chapter 3).

### **The Social in the Ecosocial Transition**

Since the aim of our book is to identify what is and could be the contribution of social work and social policy, it is vital also to investigate how ‘the social’ is

understood in the transition debate, as well as in the entirety of sustainability research. Conventionally, social dimensions are indeed mentioned as the third core area of development that needs to be promoted in balance with the economic and ecological dimension (Peeters 2012a). In order to be sustainable it is not enough to reduce the exploitation of the natural resources of the earth in the economy and to take better care of the biophysical environment; it also demands a significant change in various dimensions of society. Although the three-fold concept of sustainability has existed already for decades, the special expertise and content of social sustainability has essentially not been deepened, but seems mostly to appear as an addition to the economy and the environment. Especially in systems theoretical frameworks of research on sustainability, 'the social component' focuses on public perception, stakeholder participation and their influence on decision-making and serves in facilitating the acceptance of science and technology. (for example Hopkins et al. 2012)

Usually macro-level socio-economic quantitative aspects such as economic equality, health, fighting poverty and women's access to income, as well as education and further service availability are regarded as vital social factors of transition towards sustainability (Dillard et al. 2009, Borström 2012). Also the involvement of local communities, democratization and care for the most vulnerable groups are revealed (Magee et al. 2012). These are indeed elementary subjects to be addressed; however, these typical criteria for social sustainability are actually just characteristics of a fictive good society. Certain questions, such as who is capable of fulfilling these criteria in society and how they should be achieved have not been topical. Further, the interlinkages between the aspects of social sustainability and environmental issues have not been deeply analysed. In a similar manner, Lena Soots and Michel Gosmondi

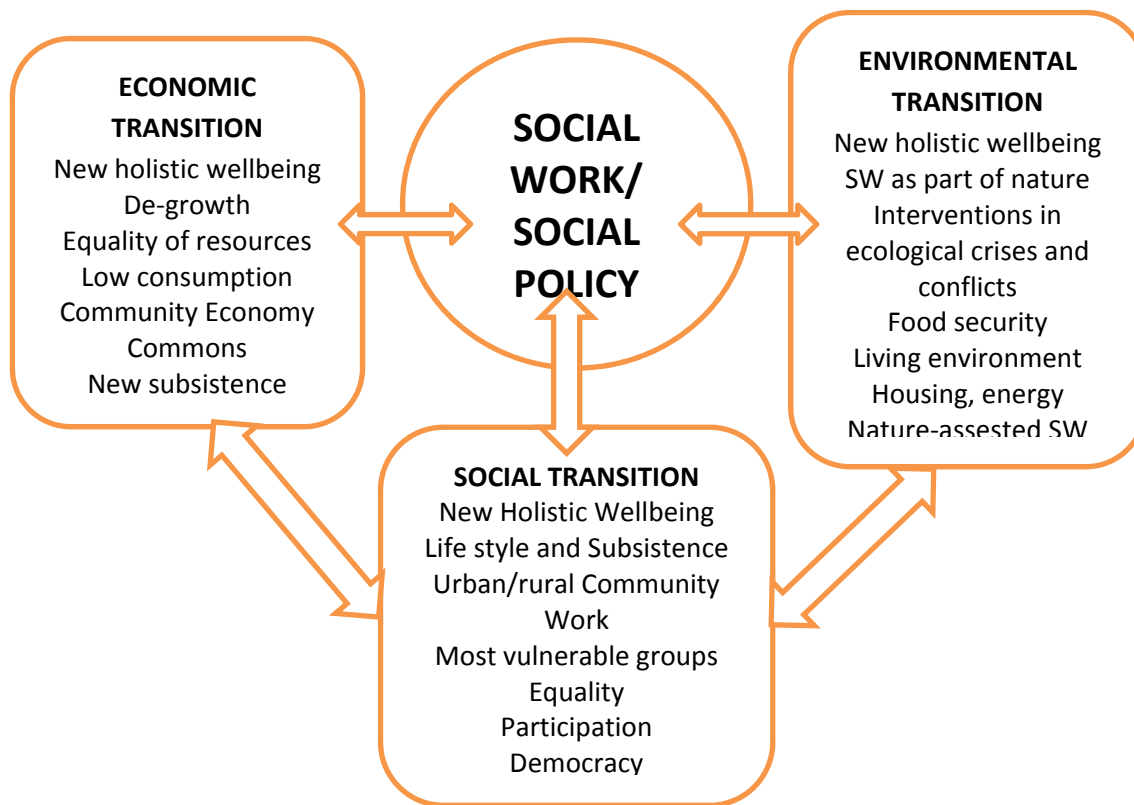
(2008) criticize that the question of sustainability 'has attracted much meta-level analysis that offers little analysis of the transition to sustainability question or, when it does, moves quickly to global change or local action' (ibid.). The authors rather wish to respond to the need for middle level analysis of organizations and argue that the social economy type of organizations are better operationalized towards regulating ecological resources, reinstating democracy and reclaiming sustainable futures.

So far the transformative contribution of social work and social policy towards a socially *and* ecologically and economically sustainable society as well as to resilient communities has not yet been discovered at large. Basically, it can be seen that both policy makers and civil society are those who are legitimated to strengthen social sustainability. But such scientifically and practically established professional instances like social work and social policy should also be involved and take a stronger role in ecosocial transition. The issues of social sustainability undeniably belong to social political tasks and those of social work, like fighting poverty, enabling equality and democratic participation and caring for vulnerable people as well.

However, what is significant and what we would like to discuss with this book is that their contribution is not limited to the conventional 'social issues' only but specifically to the interlinkages between the environment and the social as well as the economic and the social. If ecosocial transition is wanted in the society, the core point is to identify the deep social nature and impact of any environmental and economic project or crisis. None of the economic trans-actions, environmental interventions, industrial and agricultural investments or land use programmes take place in a societal vacuum. And none of them are without strong social consequences, which have to be anticipated, reduced and solved among the people facing the consequences and having

their own role as stakeholders. Therefore, the absence of social policy and social work, as research, professional practice and activism, in the debate on sustainability is simply unacceptable and unjustified. With all of their experience in regard to the suffering and wellbeing of people, knowledge about social security and social cohesion, capacities in community building and the mobilization of social capital as well as the risks of social conflicts and marginalization, social policy and social work should themselves take self-confidently and responsibly their roles on the forefront of ecosocial transition together with other agencies. It is true that mainstream social policy and social work would like to focus on their conventional and institutionally limited repertoire of tasks. But in reality the increasing environmental, economic and social crises are unable to be solved separately or left outside the doors of welfare agencies.

The point is not only about understanding the potential positive contribution and role of social work in ecosocial transition, but it is also necessary to overcome the uncritical self-understanding as a helping profession. Due to this self-image, social work and social policy have for long enough neglected the fact that they too are also part of the ecosocial problem of the globe, especially while being dependent on and committed to constant economic growth. Therefore, the concept of ecosocial transition implicates that also ‘the social’, that is the society, including its institutions of social work and social policy need a deep transformative process to enable a sustainable future perspective. They also need further involvement of those actors with a social work and social policy background, together with civil society and policy makers. In Figure 2.1, the different links are illustrated of social work and social policy to the three dimensions of ecosocial transition that are discussed in this book.



**Figure 2.1 Contribution of Social Work and Social Policy to Ecosocial Transition**

In this book, as also shown in Figure 2. 1, we therefore aim to deepen not only the social aspects of sustainability but to focus on the question of what kind of social work and social policy is best to replace the current model, which causes economic and ecological catastrophes, in order to support a more hopeful, yet more complicated, future.

One option to conceptualize ecologically sustainable social work is to start by looking at how ecological disasters have already caused social problems and threatened the social wellbeing of people and their communities. These can lead to the development of reactive and corrective social interventions. This includes also direct

interventions of social work and social policy in environmentally caused crises (food, housing, protection of the most vulnerable people; Peeters 2012a, Dominelli 2012).

The second option is to explore which types of social work and social policy are directly connected to reductions in the use of biophysical natural resources and withdraw from the conventional model of economic growth. For instance, the protection of nature and the reduction of climate change can go hand in hand with the protection of local services and a holistic understanding about the significance of the environment for welfare. These range from social political reforms of income and understanding the security of subsistence and livelihood to employment and community, recycling- and upcycling- based new employment and community work protecting nature in the living environment. Finally, there have already emerged ecosocial contributions by interventions that directly demonstrate the value of nature as such, and that connect human wellbeing back with nature; for instance in projects involving nature- and animal-assisted social work.

For social work the consequent community-orientation, the comprehensive understanding of well-being and the direct connections of it to livelihood are relevant, and at the same time challenge a paradigmatic change. On the other hand, one cannot avoid the impression of a certain romanticizing of original poor communities and the middle-class based development of the Transition Movement. Also the identified reality of superdiversity of societies (Vandenabeele, Van Poeck and Peeters 2016) enforce the change of the traditional understanding of communities. Social aspects of community have been overlooked as have social policy and social services. Ecosocial transition can also mean a change in the understanding of professions and institutions. Transition Towns are developing especially the economic structures, the mobility and



the built environment towards resilience, but there is no reason not to also re-think social services and social security. However, the comprehensive infrastructure of wellbeing could not be included in the areas targeted by transition. For social work also the way in which the processes of transition are expected to run is central: will they be bottom-up, inclusive, participatory and cross-generationally and respect social diversity. These belong also to the normative and ethical codes of social work, too.

### **Conclusions: Towards New Understanding of Social Work as Ecosocial Work**

As analysed by Tuuli Hirvilammi and Tuula Helne (2014), in the sustainability debate there is a common line of argumentation: the essential demand of a paradigm shift that is even comparable with scientific revolutions. Tony Fitzpatrick and Caron Caldwell (2001) speak about a new radical theory of ecosocial welfare. Jef Peeters (2012a: 290), while defining the new paradigm that is embedded in the ecosocial transition, considers the following conditions essential for sustainability: the reduction of the input and throughput of natural resources, the fair redistribution of wealth and energy as well as a new vision for the wellbeing of humans and the planet. Thus the needed transition is not just one of better care for the biophysical environment but for the quality of society, too.

In order to conclude this conceptual debate, it is significant to reflect upon whether ecosocial transition opens a new perspective for social work and social policy as an alternative to the dominant and destructive social and ecological development of societies. We are currently witnessing the long and slow death of the current welfare state, its social services and the systems of social security, which are withering away due to decades of unavoidable mainstream development, even in the Nordic countries.

In the meantime neoliberalism is still alive although nobody calls himself a protagonist of it. (Crouch 2011). Analogically to the categorization of the two phases of ecological transition, the first historical transition in the development of the welfare state and its institutions can be seen in the reformistic birth of social policy, social security and the social professions. They have been helpful for configuring the brutality of industrial society and the market economy into a socially acceptable and civilized modus. The price paid has been that both social work and social policy have been established in a deep interdependence with industrial capitalism, too.

The second transition, the new ecosocial transition of social policy and social work as agencies of the welfare state, should then surely mean something else than just a neoliberal fading of any sociopolitical infrastructure. Seeking the new paradigmatic change of social work and social policy in the sense of ecosocial transition means that also a radically new understanding about these institutions is necessary. Therefore, the conventional concepts of social work as a profession as well as the areas of social policy are already challenged in the discussion and in this book. Now they are requested to take distance from the models of economic growth that are causing natural disasters. It may mean that the institutions and professional standards of social work as well as its scientific research and training need to be transformed, and that social work has to seek new allies and a new basis for working. In many developing countries we can already identify another type of understanding of social work; one that is more political and more directly active in environmental issues.

Although numerous frustrated social workers are claiming that the current managerially controlled and individualized-processed routines in their jobs do not allow for the maintaining of 'real social work', at the same time these structures still

offer a certain security and escapism. As such, another future is still very open.

However, it seems obvious that social work and social policy are needed in the ecosocial transition, too, and more so in a large spectrum of activities: those connected to environmental issues and conflicts, human rights, food policy, urban planning and rural development, growing cooperation with civil society, citizens movements, media and interdisciplinary settings (Dominelli 2012, Närhi and Matthies 2016).

Consequently, social work has its burden and chance to find and define its new ecosocial agency – as ecosocial work. ‘Real social work’ as ecosocial work takes place with the people themselves in their own environment, including all the issues concerned with material and cultural wellbeing. In the case that food security, housing, mobility, health, climate change and subsistence are becoming part of social work agency and research, the profession and the movement, then real social work may be rediscovered. With this book we would like to invite readers to become part of the ecosocial transition by starting to reflect upon the following questions:

- What are the mechanisms of current welfare policies and their economic basis that cause exploitation of nature and what kind of alternative economic models for social wellbeing are possible?
- What are the causalities between social crises and environmental crises, and what kind of release and support can social work provide?
- How can social work and social policy overcome their dependence on growth and their agenda committed to labour-focused life, consumeristic models of services and individualized material indicators or wellbeing?
- How can social work interventions shift from technological-medical-managerial approaches towards more ‘natural’ and holistic forms of (self)help, empowerment, resource-orientation and prevention?

- What are the practical dimensions of the living environment that are essential for holistic wellbeing and daily coping especially in regard to vulnerable groups (traffic, housing, recreation)?
- What kind of sustainable models of mobility, settlements and food production can be supported by social work and welfare policies?
- How can social services be organized in rural and urban contexts so that they can directly contribute to protecting and valuing nature?
- How can nature be part of social work interventions by using the deep healing effects of nature?

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