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Ecosocial innovations enabling social work to promote new forms of sustainable economy

Matthies A., Peeters J., Hirvilammi T., Stamm I. Ecosocial innovations enabling social work to promote new forms of sustainable economy

Social work research and practice that address environmental sustainability have already become prominent. However, a change in unsustainable economic structures is also urgently needed. This study explored emerging opportunities in theory and practice for a sustainable economy that are relevant to the aims of social work. As practical examples, our study concerns ‘ecosocial innovations’, i.e., social innovations that combine ecological and social goals. We analysed how these grassroots innovations in the field of social work reflect crucial shared conceptions of alternative economies. The qualitative data set comprised of 50 ecosocial innovations and six case studies in five European countries. The findings show a rich diversity of ecosocial innovations and describe how they reframe economic purposes, value economic diversity and democratise the economy. We suggest that social work might consider these practices as opportunities for collaboration, especially regarding work with people on the margins of the labour market.

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Introduction

Social work in Western countries has been tightly bound to the welfare capitalism that had developed thanks to strong economic growth during the 30 years after World War II when social programmes were more widely considered to make positive contributions to economic prosperity (Midgley, 2014), and a growing market economy was seen as a necessary precondition for jobs and incomes (Kamali & Jönsson, 2018). Since the neoliberal turn in most welfare states, the link between economic growth and social outcomes has been under pressure. Cuts in public expenditure have led to increased inequality and poverty, which are seen as individual and self-inflicted problems (Diop-Christensen, 2018). In many developing countries, social protection programmes have been retrenched and governments have focused on increasing economic growth rather than on meeting social needs (Midgley, 2014).

Furthermore, the destructive environmental effects of the growth economy are increasing. The earth's resources are overexploited and the consequences of climate change ignored, regardless of the potential of future generations for a decent life. Social inequality is being deepened globally by the environmental effects of a one-sided interest in profit-making that results in countries with higher economic growth consuming more resources. For instance, the countries with the lowest economic growth suffer the most from the

consequences of global warming, despite not having caused it (Diffenbaugh & Burke, 2019).

The Global Agenda for social work and social development (International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Federation of Social Workers & International Council of Social Welfare, 2012, p. 1) recognises ‘unjust and poorly regulated economic systems, driven by unaccountable market forces’, and aims to promote the goals of social and economic equality and environmental sustainability. The concept of sustainability, which is understood as the final goal of sustainable development (United Nations, 2015), has been criticised for being an empty, fuzzy term or for including everything as diverse dimensions are addressed in varying contexts (Vogt & Weber, 2019). In the context of social work, sustainability recognises the impact of unjust ecological, social and economic dimensions and promotes the goals of a just and prosperous social life for all, one that can be sustained because environmental boundaries are respected (Bowles, Boetto, Jones, & McKinnon, 2018; Peeters, 2012). Social work is thus committed to support economic approaches that do not harm the earth but instead enable new sources of income and livelihood for people in marginalised situations. In this global context, we apply a broad understanding of social work that not only refers to a practical profession that includes community work, but also takes the form of a

discipline and research area, a societal institution and an actor in social movements (Berzin, 2012; Dominelli & Hackett, 2011; International Federation of Social Workers, 2014; Sommerfeld, 2014). However, since practice cannot work if the theories are wrong (Dash, 2014), we recognise an urgent need for new economic concepts in social work. The mainstream economic narrative considers ecology and society to be external to the market (Raworth, 2017). Measures taken for their benefit represent costs to economic profit, leading to competing policy choices – mostly giving priority to shareholders' profits that are guaranteed by economic growth (Piketty, 2014). Hence, a profit-oriented economy is basically extractive – it extracts value from nature and society to the benefit of the few. In contrast, a sustainable economy is generative – it adds value to the common world (Bauwens, Kostakis, & Pazaitis, 2019; Kelly, 2012), and requires an orientation towards ecological and social goals. However, embedding these goals in a growth strategy, as in proposals for 'green growth', will not work, because there is no empirical basis for doing so (Hickel & Kallis, 2019).

In this article, we discuss selected theoretical conceptions of alternative economies that are emerging for a sustainable economy and are relevant to social work. In particular, we consider what the shared core themes are in these alternative economic and conceptual approaches. We explore how these core themes appear in practice in ecosocial innovations. We introduced the concept *ecosocial innovations* in connection with a four-year research project we conducted in five European countries (Matthies, Stamm, Hirvilammi, & Närhi, 2019; Stamm, Hirvilammi, Matthies, & Närhi, 2017; Stamm, Matthies, Hirvilammi, & Närhi, 2020). Ecosocial innovations are social innovations that combine ecological and social goals. They emerge in practical projects, networks and local organisations, and include, for instance, recycling and upcycling, community gardening and social restaurants, and spaces for creative community action. Our research has found that ecosocial innovations often operate in the target field of social work, they may involve social worker and/or they may collaborate with social work institutions, as they often offer alternative forms of work and participation for people at the margins of the mainstream labour market. In this article, we explore how these ecosocial innovations reflect the shared themes that are suggested in alternative conceptions of the economy. Last, we discuss the options they offer for social work to promote a more sustainable economy.

Context: Social work research on an environmentally sustainable economy

Social work research that includes environmental sustainability has already claimed a remarkable space as

an emerging area in the discipline, as seen in literature reviews (Krings, Bryan, Victor, Mathias, & Perron, 2018; Nöjd, 2017; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Several authors have even begun to use the concept of *ecosocial work* to describe this area (Bailey, Hendrick, & Palmer, 2018; Boetto, 2017; Crews & Besthorn, 2016). However, so far little research has been done on how social work relates to the economic dimension of sustainability. In a research review on social work in which environmental issues and sustainability are considered, Nöjd (2017, p. 46) found only seven articles that address this topic. These articles focus on the grassroots economy and employment, including environmental sustainability.

Nonetheless, the strong interlinkage between the market economy and environmental degradation was already identified in early writings on the environment and social work (Coates, 2003; Dominelli, 2012; Närhi & Matthies, 2001, 2016). Certainly, the cooperative economic structures for housing, food provision and sanitation developed by Jane Addams and her colleagues at Hull House more than 100 years ago (Addams, 1910/2004; Närhi & Matthies, 2016; Staub-Bernasconi, 1989) provide evidence of a social work orientation towards alternative and community-based economic thinking and practice. As Boetto (2017) explained, the ecosocial discussion is about not only adding the natural environment to existing social work approaches, but also challenging the whole industrial capitalist modernity. She stated that sustainability and degrowth are epistemological elements of ecosocial work. This includes conceptualising environmental justice from the economic point of view and recognising the effects of overconsumption and overproduction (Boetto, 2017).

The few social work publications on economic sustainability and alternative conceptions of the economy can be divided into theoretical-conceptual developments and empirical case studies. Elsen (2017, 2019). Also Elsen and Wallimann (2012) included economic transformation as an inevitable element of sustainability in her research on community-based and social economies. Peeters (2012, 2017a,b) argued that there is a need for an ecological economy and discussed the concept of *commons* – i.e., resources that are available for everyone to use, which implies community-held notions of what is just and acceptable behaviour in the local economy (Case, 2016; Nagenda & Ostrom, 2012) – as useful in social work. Empirical research has been conducted in the context of local communities where social work is engaged in developing new economic practices for human well-being and environmental sustainability (Gamble & Hoff, 2005). For example, Case (2016) analysed environmental conflict and water activism in Canada as an example of commons in the local

economy, where ecosocial work concretely includes environmental justice. Similarly, Weber (2012) studied a case where social work was involved in developing an energy alliance as a form of green economy in the USA. Ku and Dominelli (2018) reported on a transdisciplinary action research project that included local social workers in a Chinese post-disaster area, which developed cooperative and social economy practices for a community kitchen and community reconstruction. However, despite growing research on social work and sustainability, there is a gap in theoretical and empirical knowledge about new economic perspectives and their relevance and application to social work.

Alternative economic concepts

Alternative economic concepts emphasise the social and ecological connectedness of economic practices and systems, and recognise the complementarity of various economic forms (Peeters, 2017a). For our theoretical discussion, we have selected the alternative economic concepts that we regard as most relevant for demonstrating economic sustainability in the context of social work. As shown in Table 1, we have selected the following conceptual approaches: *doughnut economy* (Raworth, 2017), *degrowth* (e.g., D'Alisa, Demaria, & Kallis, 2015), *diverse economy* (e.g., Gibson-Graham, Cameron, & Healy, 2013), *solidarity economy* (e.g., Utting, 2015), *community economy* and *commons* (e.g., Bauwens et al., 2019) (see descriptions in Table 1). Based on the paradigmatic and programmatic characteristics of the different approaches, we have opted for

a thematic discussion of three interrelated themes that are shared by all the approaches: economic purpose, economic diversity, economic democratisation.

Economic purpose

Since we have selected them for their transformative orientation, all of these alternative economic concepts prioritise goals other than economic growth. This implies a reversal of the current economy's for-profit logic towards an economy driven by social-ecological purposes, reaffirming the economy as life-sustaining through the creation of sustainable livelihoods. This entails a switch from the search for *private profit* towards an orientation to the *common benefit*, with a major impact on institutional forms. For example, dividends are restricted by regulations in cooperatives, exchanges are not monetised in commons and complementary currencies separate exchange from the capitalist market.

An iconic way to present economic purpose is Kate Raworth's (2017) doughnut economy. Respect for planetary boundaries is combined with a social boundary that defines the minimal level that must be achieved to ensure a dignified life for all people. The current mainstream economy causes transgressions of both boundaries. The objective is to move *within* the boundaries, which requires an economy that is both regenerative and distributive by design (Raworth, 2017). This implies a reduced throughput of materials and energy, and the development of an integral circular economy, shortening economic cycles to more regional and local production. Circularity means closing both the agricultural nutrients cycle and the materials cycle as much as possible. The

Table 1. Alternative economic concepts.

Economic concept	Short description	Relevant literature
Doughnut economy	Economic theory developed to ensure that all people have access to the resources to meet their needs while collectively living within the planet's ecological boundaries	Raworth (2017)
Degrowth or post-growth	Economic approaches that want to abandon gross domestic product growth as an economic goal	D'Alisa et al. (2015), Jackson (2017), Kallis (2018), Raworth (2017)
Diverse economy	Thinking practice to deconstruct capitalism-centred discourse – which focuses on wage labour within capitalist enterprises operating in the market – by making economic diversity visible as a starting point for change	Gibson-Graham (2006), Gibson-Graham et al. (2013)
(Social and) solidarity economy	International network and movement of a wide range of organisations and enterprises that prioritise social and environmental objectives, use more democratic forms of governance, and push for systemic transformation (e.g., social enterprises, fair trade, cooperatives, commons, complementary currencies, etc.)	Elsen (2019), Lewis and Conaty (2012), Miller (2010, 2013), Utting (2015)
Community(-based) economy	General term for all community-based economic initiatives; for Gibson-Graham, <i>community economy</i> means democratic co-creation of various ways to make a living, receive and provide for others	Elsen (2017, 2019) Gibson-Graham (2006), Gibson-Graham et al. (2013), Miller (2013)
Commons & commoning	Socio-economic structures outside the market for the collective management and use of shared resources by communities that democratically determine their own rules – a practice called 'commoning'	Bauwens et al. (2019), Bollier (2014), De Angelis (2017), Peeters (2017a, 2017b)

avoidance of unnecessary consumption is followed by maintenance and repair, reuse and redistribution, refurbishing/remanufacturing, and recycling as the last step (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). A distributive economy goes beyond the redistribution of income, towards the distribution of assets and thus of economic power (Raworth, 2017). Cooperatives try to realise this through members' shareholding, and commons by sharing resources.

Economic diversity

Recognising complexity entails valuing the diversity of social relationships and connected economic forms. This implies a break with the state/market binary and an emphasis on the importance of value creation by civil society institutions, although this is indicated by various terms with shifting meanings. For instance, the *third sector* traditionally refers to social enterprises (Lewis & Conaty, 2012), but with the rise of somewhat autonomous economic initiatives within civil society, this is now often named *commons* (Bauwens et al., 2019; Bollier, 2014; Raworth, 2017). If we regard economics as 'all of the diverse ways that human communities meet their needs and create livelihoods together' (Miller, 2010, p. 28), then the fields of the household and informal care become central.

Historical and anthropological studies define four theoretical forms of value production and exchange, each following different logics: communal sharing, reciprocity, redistribution and price (Bauwens et al., 2019; Fiske, 1992; Peeters, 2017a; Polanyi, 1944/2001). In reality, economies are complex mixtures of these, as is visible in today's 'new' hybrid economic forms. The solidarity economy, for instance, emphasises the multiplicity of alternative economic practices across different economic sectors, spread over all spheres of economic life (Miller, 2010). The *diverse economy* approach has been systematically developed by Gibson-Graham as a way to expand the economic vocabulary without predefined criteria (in contrast to the *solidarity economy*, cf. Miller, 2013).

Economic democratisation

In existing forms of the community economy, connections between people are made in such a way that social power can be translated into economic power. Thus, the commons appear to be a paradigmatic social structure and practice that can offer the clearest alternative to the dominance of the market (Bollier, 2014; Peeters, 2017a). Consequently, commons are part of the degrowth discourse (D'Alisa et al., 2015; Kallis, 2018) and are seen as a basis for socio-economic transition (Bauwens et al., 2019).

This focus on commons also creates new hybrid economic institutions, for example in innovative cooperative forms, such as cooperative platforms (Scholz,

2016) and open cooperatives (Bauwens et al., 2019). Although cooperatives operate in the market, which makes them resemble companies, they can organise themselves internally as commons through *commoning* (De Angelis, 2017; see Table 1). Alternatively, cooperatives can offer an interesting legal form for organising commons in the dominant market environment (Peeters, 2018). In this way, commons and cooperatives can also form collaborative networks (Bauwens et al., 2019).

Gibson-Graham et al.'s (2013) concept of community economy (Table 1), which builds on the diverse economy, can be seen as a space of commoning: 'a space of decision making where we recognise and negotiate our interdependence with other humans, other species and our environment. In the process of recognising and negotiating, we become a community' (p. xix). The community economy can be given shape in any place where people meet to engage in ethical discussions about how to work and live together, and in the struggle for spaces where interdependence is visible and collectively negotiated.

Thus, community-based solutions are often referred to in the literature on social work and the environmentally sustainable economy discussed above. In the empirical part of our research, we analysed in more detail the extent to which ecosocial innovations reflect these key issues of alternative economies – purpose, diversity and democratisation – and might, therefore, be relevant to social work's search for a transition to a sustainable economy.

Methods and data

In research on potential and existing pathways towards sustainability, there is a strong belief in the transformative role of grassroots initiatives (Geels, 2011; Loorbach, Frantzeskaki, & Avelino, 2017; Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012). For the purpose of analysing practices of the sustainable economy in this article, we use qualitative data from a four-year research project that addressed practical grassroots models of transition towards sustainability. To collect these grassroots examples, we created the concept of *ecosocial innovations* and defined four criteria to identify them, based on a comprehensive literature review of sustainability transitions (see Matthies et al., 2019; Stamm et al., 2017, 2020). Each example of the ecosocial innovation had to be innovative in character, while contributing in some way to the sustainability transition (Loorbach et al., 2017; Wolfram, 2018). It had to be categorised in the field of the local third sector (Salomon & Sokolowski, 2016), even if it also collaborated with the state and market sectors. It had to enable participation and the realisation of new ideas among people in marginalised positions, especially regarding the labour market

(Matthies & Uggehoej, 2014). Lastly, it had to have concrete ecological content and contribute to environmental sustainability (Fang, Heijungs, & De Snoo, 2015). The analysis of the practical appearance of economic sustainability themes in this article is based on our broader data set, which includes basic information about a total of 50 examples of ecosocial innovations mapped out in five European countries: Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy and the UK (Matthies et al., 2019; Stamm et al., 2017). It is obvious that similar grassroots innovations (Loorbach et al., 2017) can be found in any European region. However, we focused on countries where we had gained prior knowledge of such innovations through contacts with local researchers who could also help us to access the field. The data aimed to give a general picture of the various types of projects, initiatives and activities that could be regarded as ecosocial innovations (listed in Appendix 1). Furthermore, in the article we also refer to data from six case studies that were selected from the 50 examples.

Six ecosocial innovations (one Belgian, one German, one Italian and three Finnish examples) were selected for intensive case study as country-based examples and to demonstrate the diversity of activities among such initiatives (Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012). The central part of the case study data consisted of 28 semi-structured individual interviews with founders, coordinators and participants, as well as two group interviews in each case. In this article, these data are used to investigate how the three shared themes of alternative economics – purpose, diversity and democratisation – are present in the activities of the six cases. For analysing the data, we use theory-driven thematic analysis in the sense that we classify the data according to these three predefined theoretical themes (Bazeley, 2013; Kuckartz, 2013). Further, to sketch the context, we highlight the connection to social work in each case. The six cases are:

- Hirvitalo (Centre of Contemporary Art Pispala, Tampere, Finland) is a non-profit open cultural space founded in 2006 by young local artists. Nowadays, it is a registered association supported by the city of Tampere. Its aim is to stimulate local activities and enrich artistic and cultural life in the community. It offers a range of activities, from an open café and social kitchen to art exhibitions and gardening projects. All projects are based on voluntary work by students, artists or unemployed people. Hirvitalo has no direct connection to social work. However, when its participants need individual benefits from the public income security system, they mostly stay in contact with social work institutions.
- Oma Maa (Helsinki area, Finland) is an organic food cooperative founded in 2010. It is inspired by the concept of community-supported agriculture. The food is grown in the fields of an old farm outside Helsinki. Most of the work in Oma Maa is done voluntarily by members; during summer months only, the cooperative provides gainful employment for some farmers. Oma Maa's connection to social work is similar to Hirvitalo's.
- Lapinlahden Lähde (Helsinki, Finland) was initiated in 2013 and is located in a former hospital in Helsinki. Now the building offers space for sustainable well-being and cultural events. The activities range from a vegetarian lunch café and art galleries to an old sauna and a small upcycling and second-hand shop. It also hosts seminars and workshops. The association has four full-time employees and a number of trainees and volunteers. It collaborates with social work when providing rehabilitation programmes for marginalised people.
- Kunst-Stoffe (Berlin, Germany) is a registered association that works in the fields of waste prevention and reduction combined with arts and education. The main activity is to receive, organise and store waste and second-hand material, and to pass them on to individuals or groups for further use for artistic purposes. It also offers repair cafés and a cycle and woodworking workshop. Approximately 15 people actively run the organisation – unemployed people, volunteers, self-employed people and one part-time employee. Social work institutions are not directly involved in the activities of Kunst-Stoffe. However, one of the coordinators has a social work degree.
- VELO (Leuven, Belgium) has been established for more than 20 years as a social enterprise promoting cycle mobility combined with reuse and recycling ideas. Bicycle hire and repair is connected to mobile repair shops and other cycling projects. It also offers professional training for marginalised people. VELO has around 100 employees and workers, including volunteers and trainees. Social workers are an important part of the staff and play a decisive role in supporting the trainees in social and family matters as well as with their employment situation.
- Vinterra (Mals, Italy) is a social cooperative founded in 2014. Its main goal is to combine organic vegetable farming with a social work format. In addition to farming, Vinterra also runs a street kitchen and produces desserts. It provides around 12 persons with gainful employment, supported by a group of volunteers. Social workers were part of the founding team and still play an important role in the board of the cooperative as well as in the daily work of Vinterra. The main coordinator has certification as a farmer and as a social worker.

Ecosocial innovations practising alternative economic concepts

Reframing economic purpose

Ecosocial innovations' notions of economic purpose are related to their organisational structures and their legal forms as non-profit or not-only-for-profit, which varies in different cases. VELO and Lapinlahden Lähde are social enterprises that clearly define themselves as local social economy actors. They, therefore, follow the logic of enterprises, more so than our other case studies. Besides monetary profit, they emphasise their other missions, such as providing work for people in need of rehabilitation and promoting cycling culture. Thus, they can be seen as not-only-for-profit enterprises:

The goal of the company is [...] not to share profits with owners – or we do not make any profits yet – but the purpose is not to share profits at all, but all will be used to reach our goals. (Lapinlahden Lähde interviewee)

Vinterra and Oma Maa are cooperatives. In Italy, this organisational form is supported by tax subsidies from national and regional governments, enabling social cooperatives to offer work to underprivileged persons. Vinterra and Oma Maa aim to make a profit, but only for their financial consolidation, to employ workers or raise salaries.

Kunst-Stoffe and Hirvitalo are registered associations and do not strongly consider themselves to be economic actors. Nevertheless, Kunst-Stoffe does obtain an income by selling low-price waste materials to individuals and public institutions, such as schools or kindergartens. They also offer workshops, for example for students, for which they charge small participation fees. Any profit is directly reinvested in their activities. Hirvitalo has deliberately refrained from commercial activities and wants to keep all its activities free of charge. More than in other cases, the interviewees in Hirvitalo want to stay outside the monetary economy, which is considered unequal, and to invent a do-it-yourself culture that is not dependent on monetary flow.

In all of these ecosocial innovations, the reframing of economic purpose is clearly connected to environmental sustainability. All the cases emphasise a shift from the unsustainable overconsumption of natural resources and the fossil-based production system to forms of production that reduce the environmental impact. In practice, this is seen in their efforts to, for example, recycle material or support a vegetarian or vegan diet. The dominant goals also include promoting cycling culture and infrastructure, spreading knowledge about waste avoidance, promoting alternative consumption patterns and food systems and enabling do-it-yourself strategies to grow.

The economic benefits to which these ecosocial innovations aspire are connected to equal employment and participation opportunities:

What makes us special is that we also try to reuse people, people who society thinks we cannot do anything with them. We try to reintegrate them, to reuse them, in a good way of course, give them a new place, a new status, a new identity, a better identity so that they can participate again. (VELO interviewee)

One motivation behind the activities is the notion that the current market-based employment system does not provide decent jobs for all vulnerable groups, nor sufficient incomes for artists or other precarious workers. Therefore, the ecosocial innovations aim to develop diverse production and work practices that provide meaningful activities, regardless of participants' employability or the organisation's ability to pay high salaries. Participation opportunities are highly valued and clearly related to the organisation's mission:

We have this kind of mission, that we build a centre for mental well-being, where we maximise social participation in a sustainable way. This is really the core thing here. And we intentionally use the concept of maximising, because this maximising of profits is used a lot in economic language, and of course we do understand the economic realities, and they have to be considered here. But the economy is a means to attain these, and where we want to focus is really on the increase in social participation, so that different people will find places for themselves and can become part of this society. (Lapinlahden Lähde interviewee)

Similarly to VELO, in Vinterra and Lapinlahden Lähde the goal of providing rehabilitation and employment opportunities is intentional and institutionally organised. The same is visible in all the other cases as well. For example, one interviewee in Oma Maa explained that they have many volunteers who have had problems with drug use but are now active and have something meaningful to do. Hirvitalo and Kunst-Stoffe also provide a community for people who are outside the labour market and work-related social occasions.

Valuing economic diversity

It is worth highlighting that in many ways the ecosocial innovations are acting on the borderline between the capitalist market economy and what might be called the solidarity or community economy. They follow market logics in some transactions and provide wage labour,

but on other occasions they are dependent on unpaid labour and non-market transactions. In this way, they are ‘navigating the diverse economy’ (Houtbeckers, 2018, p. 271). Each case has different positions regarding the framing of the diverse economy. VELO, Vinterra and Lapinlahden Lähde are closer to the economic spectrum that contains wage labour, capitalist enterprises, market transactions, private property and mainstream market finances. Oma Maa, Kunst-Stoffe and Hirvitalo are run more on the basis of alternative and unpaid labour, as well as non-market transactions and finances. However, the more market-based ecosocial innovations are also much more dependent on economic diversity than are private for-profit companies. This is seen, for example, in their broad notion of economic purpose, and also in their efforts to gain public funding or grants, and in their reliance on state-subsidised workplaces. Often the organisations’ active members and workers can get by only thanks to public support, for example via project funding, subsidised work or unemployment allowance received while volunteering.

In all cases, the diverse forms of value creation become most visible when we look at the diverse work practices (see also, Stamm et al., 2020). All cases include wage labour, alternative paid labour and unpaid labour, and all incorporate specific settings for various forms of employment, workfare or volunteering. Surprisingly, many interviewees state that it does not matter if the work is contractual or voluntary, as long as they receive some social benefit to make their living. For example, one Vinterra worker stated in the interview that the salary is important, but even more important is the different nature of the organisation and working atmosphere, which contrasts starkly with for-profit companies. The coordinating farmer and the workers basically receive the same salary. In that sense, the ecosocial innovations also bring together people with different economic, educational and ethnic backgrounds. This becomes clear in Kunst-Stoffe, where interviewees emphasised that despite their different backgrounds, the most important thing is that everybody can contribute to the association’s activities according to her or his needs and abilities.

Cultural diversity and biodiversity are also valued. Many interviewees mentioned how the ecosocial innovations are working against the monoculture of society in general, or the monoculture of farming in particular. One participant in Hirvitalo, for example, explained the art centre’s whole purpose from this perspective:

I see that the ultimate value of this organisation is now that it opposes monoculture. We do as diverse art work as possible and create a platform for people who want to do it. So that amid this everyday life they have a space to do that, to express themselves

and make art, which is still a very important part of the culture. (Hirvitalo interviewee)

Vinterra and Oma Maa produce several organic products, instead of specialising in one product. The latter is often the case in more mainstream organic farms as it guarantees higher financial gains. Vinterra avoids the harmful use of pesticides and wants to be a successful example to other farmers in the area, who often concentrate on apple monoculture. One interviewee stated clearly that for him the use of pesticides is like only treating the symptoms of mental illness and that monocultures are an ‘unhealthy’ form of economy. More diverse farming is seen as providing a more resilient basis for self-sufficiency and a sustainable food system.

In addition to market transactions, the ecosocial innovations have developed other ways to exchange services and products. Examples include reciprocal work such as the exchange of services with other associations (car use, advertising, co-producing events) and in-kind work where people can eat for free or receive food products when they have done a certain amount of unpaid work. The role of community currencies is also mentioned by some interviewees in Oma Maa who described an experiment where members of the Helsinki time bank bought food bags with a time currency and earned a time currency, while participating in farming.

All the ecosocial innovations rely on principles of collaboration and sharing, for example connecting with nationwide networks of open workshops (Kunst-Stoffe) or community-supported agriculture (Oma Maa). Kunst-Stoffe also offers open workshops on how to set up one’s own cargo bike. Furthermore, one of the workshop coordinators mentioned that all over Germany, workshop activists are sharing open-access bookkeeping programmes to minimise costs, provide mutual support and exchange experiences.

Democratising economies

The ecosocial innovations’ goal of horizontal democracy was mentioned in many interviews, as was the idea that all decisions should be made in open meetings. Hirvitalo, for instance, has a weekly meeting in which everyone can participate and play an equal role. In practice, board members have the last word because they are better aware of budgetary limitations. Board members’ discussions and decisions are also important in the bigger and more established VELO:

It’s what is called a non-profit organisation, and we have a board that is the final responsible meeting, in which those who started up VELO 22 years ago are represented by two people apiece. So two people from the university, two from the city, two from the

students and two from the trade union. They make the decisions. (VELO interviewee)

Commoning requires horizontal, open and constant communication among all members (De Angelis, 2017). This takes time and can cause problems if the structures are not precise, or if people do not have equal access to resources or time for communication. In practice, power could be concentrated in the hands of a few decision-makers if there were a lack of coordination or of platforms for sharing:

We have this horizontal decision-making. No one can rule anybody, so in order to get this working, it of course requires an enormous amount of communication, and the communication has to work. And when people are just people, there are breakdowns and many problems – so it is an ongoing process, it needs to be constantly honed, honed and honed. (Hirvitalo interviewee)

Even though community economy-building in terms of ethical discussions and collective negotiations is not always easy, interviewees recognised the value of community and collective doing. For many, the main value of being active is related to the need to belong to the community. They want to spend time in the common space and to enjoy the openness and free atmosphere, where they are not bound to pure market logics. Active members of Lapinlahden Lähde, Hirvitalo and Kunst-Stoffe have also been prepared to struggle for their organisation's survival when the rental contracts on their spaces were threatened with termination. Common projects where people grew their own food, recycled materials and created cycling services that fulfilled local needs are satisfying, they stated, and it can feel like taking back the economy.

Discussion

From the perspective of social work's search for economic sustainability, it is promising that there exists a rich variety of ecosocial innovations in these five European countries. Obviously, similar collective activities and ideas are practised everywhere that people have a collective need and a chance to develop bottom-up solutions to social, environmental and economic challenges.

Most of these ecosocial innovations are organised as associations, cooperatives or social enterprises; however, in most cases, they mix economic tools from the market, public sector, civil society organisations and informal sector. To our eyes, these hybrid mixtures and collaborations already challenge mainstream understandings that recognise only the market economy and paid labour. Welfare state-based

benefits are part of the economic framework of most ecosocial innovations and can be regarded as meaningful social investments (O'Riordan, 2013; Stamm et al., 2020). Collaboration with labour market agencies enables both public funding for the projects and income benefits for the participants. Therefore, in most cases, this may formally include a strong orientation towards predominant understandings of work and the market economy. However, insights are growing on all sides that meaningful alternatives for work are needed for people for whom labour market entry is challenging. Moreover, the work, services and ideas produced by ecosocial innovations are valuable due to their manifold capacities to combine social, ecological and economic purposes (Matthies et al., 2019), and they cannot be replaced by the market or the state. Thus, ecosocial innovations are already enacting a broader notion of the economy and pointing out the weaknesses in mainstream economics.

This broader notion of economic purpose is more in line with *The Global Agenda for social work and social development* (International Association of Schools of Social Work et al., 2012) than is the narrow focus on monetary profit that dominates neoliberal thinking about welfare states. Therefore, we suggest that ecosocial innovations provide opportunities for social work collaborations with people who are marginalised from the labour market. Although not all ecosocial innovations connect directly with social workers' professional practice, they often involve users of welfare services and recipients of public benefits. Many social service initiatives already provide valuable examples of how to use natural resources in a sustainable way and promote new forms of sustainable economy. Therefore, it is time for social work to pay them more attention and to broaden social work education in light of ecological challenges.

Our findings also strengthen the results of previous studies on social work and the sustainable economy (Nöjd, 2017). However, alternative forms of economy do not just provide a platform for social work practices; social work competences may also be needed to strengthen them in many ways. Social work can support community-building in community economies, or offer mediation in their internal and external negotiations. Further, governing the commons democratically and resolving potential collective and personal crises may need social work's expertise on social relationships and dialogue.

Conclusions

Quoting Neera M. Singh (2019, p. 141), we '(...) want to emphasise that the critical challenge for us at this current conjuncture of social and ecological crisis is to imagine other ways of being and

transformative change to our economic life'. Social work is also missing a convincing economic perspective beyond the profit-oriented capitalism that predominates. Social work cannot contribute very much to social justice and environmental sustainability without a transformation of the economy. Especially in European welfare states, we are often told that constant economic growth is needed to finance both the welfare state and social work. For sure, the alternative economies discussed in this article as theoretical concepts and ecosocial innovations cannot replace the social security provided by the traditional welfare state. However, we consider that ecosocial innovations and similar movements make it possible for social work to imagine such alternative sustainable economies in practice. Historical transitions show the necessity of developing concrete social-economic practices that embody a new logic, as a prefiguration of broader institutional changes (Bauwens et al., 2019). Ecosocial innovations have an effect by offering alternative perspectives and pointing out the shortcomings of the prevailing economy. This is already becoming visible in the mixed forms of funding and collaboration across different economic sectors (Miller, 2010), which entail mutual learning and rethinking.

Interestingly, when working with people who face unemployment, social work is often situated at exactly the interconnecting point between public, market, non-profit and informal sectors of diverse economies. At this concrete level, social work can indicate new directions and professional practices, instead of serving the neoliberal management and governance of poverty and unemployment (Kamali & Jönsson, 2018). Ecosocial innovations demonstrate that there are meaningful activities for people outside the labour market and that diverse work may be more sustainable than extractive labour in the growth economy (see Hirvilammi & Joutsenvirta, 2020). It is increasingly proposed that all people should spend less time in paid work and have the chance to participate in other forms of life and other economies, which would also have significant positive impacts on health, the environment and social inequality (Stirling & Arnold, 2019). Social work can transition from therapy to engagement, from employees to community members and can make the community a more central focus. Nor should we forget the important role of social work in seeking ways to make the instruments of public welfare and labour market policies supportive of people in transformative innovations. This is also transforming traditional systems of the welfare state from the 'inside'. We suggest that through ecosocial innovations, social work – in particular ecosocial work – can contribute more or less directly to transforming the mainstream economy.

Data Availability Statement

Regarding the data availability, we state that the 50 examples of the ecosocial innovations are listed in the Appendix, including the addresses of their webpages. The six case study objects are included in the list. However, the detailed case study data has unfortunately not been made accessible since permission had not been requested from the informants.

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Appendix 1 Ecosocial innovations included in mapped data, by country

Finland

1. Valtaajat-projekti, Tatsi ry, squatters, Helsinki, <http://valtaajat.fi/>
2. Oma Maa, organic food cooperative, Helsinki region, <https://www.omamaa.fi/in-english/>
3. Oma Pelto, urban farm food cooperative, Helsinki, <https://www.omapelto.fi/english>
4. Lapinlahden Lähde, cultural centre, Helsinki, <http://lapinlahdenlahde.fi/fi/main-page-3-2/>
5. Kokkotyösaatiö, foundation for work rehabilitation, Kokkola region, <https://www.kokkotyo.fi/>
6. Jyväskylän Uusiotuote, recycling workshop, Jyväskylä, <http://www.uusiotuote.fi/>
7. Lentoon, training and employment programme, multiple sites (webpage no longer available).
8. Töitä nuorille -kampanja, jobs for youngsters campaign, Helsinki, https://www.kierratyskeskus.fi/tietoa_meista/toihin_kierratyskeskukseen/toita_nuorille_kampanja
9. Kestävän kehityksen keskus, centre for sustainable development (rehabilitation centre), Oulu, <http://kesta.vankehityksenkeskus.net/jarjestot>
10. Kulttuuripaja Elvis, cultural rehabilitation workshop, Helsinki, <https://niemikoti.fi/yksikko/kulttuuripaja-elvis/>
11. Mun Juttu -hanke, youth participation project, Lahti, <http://www.lahdenyliopistokampus.fi/?s=Mun+juttu>
12. VAMOS, youth project, multiple sites (eight cities), <https://www.hdl.fi/en/>
13. Valoa elämään -hanke, work training project, multiple sites (six cities), <http://www.valo-valmennus.fi>
14. Kotkan pyöräpaja, bicycle workshop, Kotka, <https://facebook.com/kotkanpyorapaja>
15. Luontopolkua eteenpäin -työpaja, nature path workshop, Tampere, <https://trey.org/luontopolku/>
16. Porin luontopaja, nature workshop, Pori, <https://www.facebook.com/PorinLuontopaja/>
17. Luontoa elämään -Kemijärven osahanke, nature-based well-being project, Kemijärvi, <https://www.lapin.amk.fi/fi/Yrityksille-ja-yhteisoille/Tutkimus-ja-kehitys/Hyvintointipalveluiden-osaamisala/Luontoa-elamaan#>
18. Turun kirjakahvila, literature café, Turku, <http://www.kirjakahvila.org/>
19. Kulttuurikahvila Laituri, cultural café, Joensuu, <https://www.facebook.com/laiturijoensuu/>
20. Jupiter-säätiö, foundation for training and employment, Vaasa (webpage no longer available).
21. After Eight Pietarsaari, music and youth employment café, Pietarsaari, <http://aftereight.fi/ae/>
22. Hirvitalo, art and urban gardening, Tampere, <http://www.hirvikatu10.net/wordpress.1/>

Germany

23. KlimaWerkstatt Spandau, climate workshop, Berlin, <http://www.klimawerkstatt-spandau.de/index.php>
24. Kunst-Stoffe e.V., upcycling of materials for arts, Berlin, <https://www.kunst-stoffe-berlin.de/>
25. Life e.V., ecological training, Berlin, <http://www.life-online.de/>
26. Foodsharing e.V., Germany, <https://foodsharing.de/>
27. Real Junk Food Project, Berlin, <https://realjunkfoodberlin.wordpress.com/>
28. Haus der Eigenarbeit (HEi), do-it-yourself house, München, <http://www.hei-muenchen.de/>
29. Transition Berlin and Brandenburg, <https://transitionberlinbrandenburg.wordpress.com/>
30. Die Wille e.V., work inclusion project, Berlin, <http://www.evangelisches-johannesstift.de/die-wille>
31. Projekthaus Potsdam, house of projects, Potsdam, <http://www.projekthaus-potsdam.de/index.php>

UK

32. Local Projects Ideashive, ideas for change, Durham (webpage no longer available).
33. Abundant Earth, food cooperative, Durham, <http://www.abundantearth.coop/>
34. Empty Shop, cultural community meeting point, <https://www.facebook.com/emptyshopHQ/>
35. Re-f-Use, social café and enterprise against food waste, Durham, <https://refusedurham.org.uk/>
36. Incredible Edible, permacultural gardening, Durham, <https://www.incredibleedible.org.uk/find-a-group/durham-city/>

37. Recyke Y’Bike, sharing economy with bicycles, <http://recyke-y-bike.org/>
38. Transition Durham, <https://transitiondurham.org.uk/>

Belgium

39. De Winning, employment and agricultural project, multiple sites, Flanders, <http://dewinning.be/>
40. VELO, employment, recycling and mobility, Leuven, http://www.kuleuven.be/velo_eng/
41. Arbeidscentrum De Wroeter, employment and agriculture, Flanders, <http://www.arbeidscentrum-dewroeter.be/>
42. De RuimteVaart, social restaurant, Leuven, <http://www.deruimtevaart.be/>
43. Food surplus entrepreneur network, Brussels, <http://fsenetwork.org/>

Italy

44. Akrat, upcycling cooperative, Bolzano, <https://akrat.squarespace.com/home/>
45. CLAB, Bolzano, upcycling cooperative and social enterprise, Bolzano, <http://www.clab.bz.it/>
46. Albatros, larger social cooperative, Merano, <http://www.albatros.bz.it/de/index>
47. WiaNui, small upcycling enterprise, Brixen, <http://www.wianui.eu/>
48. Vinterra, organic agriculture and social cooperative, Mals, <http://www.vinterra.it/>
49. Bürgergenossenschaft Obervinschgau, citizens’ cooperative, Mals, <http://www.bgo.bz.it/>
50. Hollawint, organic agriculture and community gardening, Mals, <http://hollawint.com.dedi4234.your-server.de/>