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Chapter 20

The Contribution of Social Work and Social Policy in Ecosocial Transition of Society

Kati Närhi & Aila-Leena Matthies

Tim O’Riordian (2014) notes that transitions to sustainability are difficult to conceptualize, problematic to research and are potentially biased by informal and formal power relations. He argues that:

...efforts to transform societies into sustainability require a degree of ambivalence, depend upon fresh approaches to action-based research, focus on people and their empathies and aspirations, and probe the ways in which governing institutions can be adjusted toward greater support and flexibility. Most important will be the shifts in conception of institutional blockages and innovative transformations which are as yet limited in both the theoretical and applied research literature. (O’Riordian 2014: 505)

He finds solutions for starting the transitions from three ‘antidotes’ or dimensions: a new type of sustainability science, a new way of understanding wellbeing as a basis for redefining sustainability and a new perspective to social innovations (ibid.).

The aim of this final chapter is to gather together the results and reflections in answering the core question of this book: what is, or what can be, the contribution of social work and social policy to the ecosocial transition of societies? The authors of the various chapters of this book have presented both theoretical and empirical research on various areas of social work and social policy where ecosocial transition has almost or indeed is already taking its first steps.

As Aila-Leena Matthies reminded us in Chapter 2, the contribution of social work and social policy is not limited to the conventional ‘social issues’ but rather to the

interlinkages between the environment, the economic and the social. In fact, one may argue that there are no 'social issues' independent of ecological and economic issues. Therefore, the increasing environmental, economic and social crises are unable to be solved separately or left outside of social welfare agencies, expertise and professionals (see also O'Riordan 2014).

In Chapter 2, Matthies suggests two options for how social work research and also the professional practice could take the first steps towards ecosocial transition:

- They need to start by looking at how ecological disasters have already caused social problems and threatened the social wellbeing of people and their communities.
- They need to explore what kind of social work and social policy are directly connected to reductions in the use of biophysical natural resources.

Regarding this agenda, it is more than necessary to face the question of what kind of conclusions, crystallizing the new perspectives and steps of ecosocial transition, can be drawn from the chapters presented in this book. What are the insights and results that enable social work as a science, profession and movement to take its place in promoting a transition of societies towards more sustainable development?

The relational conceptualization of wellbeing as defined by Helne and Hirvilammi in Chapter 3 provides new perspectives and a guide towards ecosocial transition since it focuses on concern for others. When the emphasis is shifted from Having to Being, the role and value of Having may decrease in such a way that eases the pressure of Having for social work clients and may also show us the sustainable practices they might already be engaged in. Therefore, Helne and Hirvilammi call for a proactive stance of social welfare professionals to stretch their understanding of their roles. Indeed, social work professionals could understand themselves as transformative professionals by applying the new deeper and enlarged understanding of wellbeing in

relation to nature, the economy and humans. With this kind of new understanding of wellbeing and the role of social work, a significant change could be made. In addition, it might engage professionals in a process of social learning and bring together different transformative social movements like transition towns, urban activism or rural community development to reach political ends. As such, in regard to the concept of wellbeing introduced by Helne and Hirvilammi in this book the following can be concluded: *The new theoretical understanding of wellbeing enables social welfare professionals to extend their role in working with people and in understanding the extended relationship between humans and nature.*

In Chapter 4 Susanne Elsen argues that the capacity and capability to produce knowledge in transformative processes and in particular conditions are vital: 'Knowledge is to be produced in processes of cooperative learning with the methodology of participatory community based action research'. She claims that the methodology of participatory community-based action research is the most important instrument for community development, and it is the best approach to generate community economy which is regarded as a core element in ecosocial transition. Co-creation of knowledge in community based 'future laboratories' with social work service users who have experiences of how to cope with material deficits would be an important input on the shared visions of an ecosocial future. (See Elsen in Chapter 4 in this book.) It can be concluded that: *Co-operational knowledge production creates a community economy, which is essential in promoting ecosocial transition.*

In Chapter 5, Jef Peteers advises social work to look for a basis in forms of civil economy and to create new forms of civil-public co-operation in search of ecosocial transition. According to Peteers, this implies co-operation and sharing as an alternative

to the culture of consumerism and as a key to a new form of social security: 'Local social production and exchange can be part of a growing counter-economy and in a transitional phase can partly meet social needs and focuses on importance of bridging social capital for ecosocial practice'. Peeters argues that from the perspective of citizenship a commons-based transition means reclaiming not only the economy but also the public and the state. Working for the common good creates a basis for a new design of the public sphere, which can be understood as an important place for a society's social reproduction and which will develop the steps for ecosocial transition. Peeters's chapter allows us to conclude that *new forms of civil-public co-operation create small steps for ecosocial transition.*

In Chapter 6, Margaret Alston claims that climate-induced disasters create a critical need for new understandings of people and their environments, and that social workers are indeed able to create new knowledge of people and place based on their work with citizens. Alston, based on her studies in the Global South, shows that social workers already work across disciplinary boundaries in teams engaged in landscape and community rehabilitation. Furthermore, they have the capacity to influence socially just reconstruction efforts. It is this knowledge that social work as a discipline must bring to global forums and decision-making bodies. Therefore, the following can be concluded: *There is already research-based evidence available that social workers have a particular understanding of the critical link between people and place.*

Satu Ranta-Tyrkkö and Bipin Jojo have studied the challenges of Adivasi centred and ecosocially oriented social work in an Indian mining region. In Chapter 7 they use the conceptualization of tribal social work which is based on an aboriginal (social work) framework. It focuses on working *through* people, rather than working

among, with or for the people. An engagement through people means a 'style that is personal, flexible, responsive, and context specific on egalitarian terms, encapsulating all within an ecologically embedded worldview'. Such practice includes research and policy engagement and means collective action for change. Above all, it means a participatory community based process in which a worker has to win the trust of the local communities based on their needs. Consequently, the following conclusion can be made: Social work based on working through people increases the understanding of the relationship between people and their local environment.

In Chapter 8, Komalsingh Rambaree's case study from Mauritius shows that environmental justice is a vital instrument for social work intervention. As in the case of the People's Cooperative Renewable Energy (PCRE), social workers are often required to adopt a radical approach through activism against oppressive practices in conditions and contexts that demand environmental justice. The study confirms that environmental justice is also a political agenda within the ecosocial transition movement and practices. In this sense, 'social workers are required to act as political actors with a political agenda by engaging themselves and the marginalized communities politically in order to ensure that all people have the same access to resources, equality of opportunity and informed/meaningful participation towards ecosocial transition'. He calls for an active role to be taken towards ecosocial transition in the mission of social work for enhancing the wellbeing of all. As such the following conclusion can be made: *The active and political role of social workers is one element of ensuring environmental justice.*

In their chapter, Helena Belchior Rocha and Jorge Ferreira introduce an integrative ecosocial model for the sustainability of vulnerable communities. This

model is relevant for auditing and for developing neighbourhoods, but it also can lead to the empowerment of residents. Further, this kind of multifocal model offers alternative ways for practitioners to approach and address complex social problems and ‘develop effective interventions to deal with individual pain by taking social forces into account’. It can be concluded that: *The ecosocial model systematizes the knowledge of the sustainability of vulnerable communities which gives the tools for a practitioner to work towards ecosocial transition.*

Ben Shepard claims in Chapter 10 that when we lose a green space we lose our sense of community and self, and therefore the instability in the relationship between people and their place increases. He argues that urban gardening is a form of resistance culture, as well as a model of social action, connected to an expanding sustainable urban ecology. Sheppard understands that ‘a collective struggle for an ecosocial transition involves moving away from the human domination of nature, consumerism and individualism towards ecosocial sustainability’. What we need is forms of activism which have an impact on our everyday life, as Sheppard underlines that we can basically all join in with the movement and activism ourselves in our own environment. The argumentation of his narrative research can be concluded as following: *The steps of ecosocial transition need collective struggles and forms of activism, which calls for political and community level action in social work practice.*

In Chapter 11, Mari Kattilakoski and Niina Rantamäki introduce the Local Welfare System perspective that offers an alternative way to approach the welfare of people in their comprehensive local environment. They see the LWS perspective as a kind of research-oriented view on the ‘social diagnosis of communities’ that combines the welfare needs and causes in parallel with the existing welfare resources. The

perspective concretizes the core principle of the person in environment framework; that is, it highlights the importance of a direct physical, social and cultural contextualization of people's situation. The two Finnish rural cases of LWS represented in the chapter show very concretely that the closer welfare policies are developed to their place-based specific context, the more likely they will meet the actual needs of people, realise the particular resources of the comprehensive local environment and facilitate the participation of the citizens in a society both at the level of welfare provision and decision-making. This allows the following conclusion to be made: *The conceptualization of Local Welfare Systems enables the recognition of the needs, resources and solutions in relation to the uniqueness of a place and local community, which provides better tools for creating sustainable welfare provision.*

In Chapter 12, Heather Boetto and Wendy Bowles interviewed older people in Australia and the results showed their coherent action towards ecosocially sustainable transformation in their lives. The picture that emerged was that elders actively supported the commons and civil society, embodied the principles of relational wellbeing and adopted many of the aspects of post-growth societies. In addition, 'the participants were taking matters into their own hands to create sustainable communities and lifestyles, and influence that involved action at the individual, group and community/society levels'. Boetto and Bowles suggest that social workers should use their opportunity to seek out and collaborate in partnership with older people, among others, to implement their tried and tested strategies for ecosocial transformation in wider society. This is one way to increase the knowledge from the relationship between people and their environment. The research shows that: *The elders can provide*

comprehensive and valuable lessons for the ecosocial transition of communities also in the practice of social work.

In Jennifer Boddy and Sylvia Ramsay's chapter on permaculturalists the emphasis in the interviews was placed on the social benefits of involvement in permaculture and the importance of community and local change. Based on their research, they argued that both permaculturalists and social workers act by their respective codes of ethics and are focused on building community and promoting social inclusion. 'Permaculture is a type of community development practice that would sit well with social work practitioners interested in the natural environment, because it is not only an ecologically constructive way of growing things but a way of developing people's self-confidence, their relationships and the community'. By learning more from permaculturalists, social workers could understand more about ecosocial transition and sustainability. Moreover, it can be concluded that: *Learning from permaculturalists enables social work to understand the aspects of the wellbeing of individuals and community from a deepened perspective of nature-human relationship.*

Chapters 12, 15 and 16 critically raise the issue of food in social work and as a part of ecosocial transition in societies. Tiina Silvasti and Teea Kortetmäki conclude that waste-based charitable food aid promotes both social and environmental injustice and therefore cannot play any part in poverty relief under an ecosocial Nordic welfare regime. A broad theory of social justice views charitable food aid as problematic especially in terms of misrecognition and representation: It may stigmatize, treat clients as passive receivers and label them 'second class citizens' as charitable food aid is not a socially acceptable way to acquire food. 'All of these can be considered as cases of misrecognition or a lack of opportunity to participate'.

In Chapter 15, Vesna Leskošek and Romana Zidar continue the critical argumentation of food policy by claiming that although all gardening projects are green and environmentally conscious, not all of them empower collective efforts and struggles for social justice. Gardening can also be seen as a tool of neoliberal governmentality and biopolitics. 'Where this is the case, food self-sustainability becomes a tool for self-governing and food choice becomes a moral question standardized by the privileged'. Therefore, community gardening should be seen as a tool of social work practice because gardening has to do with sharing knowledge, exchanging seeds and looking after one another. In addition, raising social capital is an important part of ecosocial work.

In Chapter 16, Dorothy N. Gamble confirms the importance of community skills in working with people who struggle with food acquisition. In her study, also effective collaboration skills were seen as being important to anyone concerned about nutritious, affordable, locally grown, environmentally restorative and culturally significant food. Gamble claims that social work has the knowledge and skills to engage in ecosocial transitions, but the knowledge should be shifted into the curriculum of mainstream social work teaching. Examples of moving traditional social work towards more ecosocial teaching and practice also identify collaboration across disciplines as the way forwards. The following synthesis can be concluded from the three food-related research contributions: *Food comprises a prominent issue of contemporary social work and social policy, which need to build a critical distance away from charitable food aid and individualized gardening and should rather focus on community practice skills and environmental justice to contribute to the ecosocial transitions of communities.*

Finally, chapters 17, 18 and 19 concentrate on the challenges and possible changes of professional social work in order to start taking ecosocial steps forwards. Subhangi Herath takes a look at the bigger picture of the culture in Sri Lanka in which the disaster related vulnerabilities like landslides happen. The disasters are not only products of natural hazards, but they also need to be located within the context of related social, cultural, economic, political, institutional as well as physical and environmental factors. The mutual interdependence of social policies and policies for economic development has been ignored, which has risked both economic and social development of the communities. In her study, disaster management and social care exist as two isolated entities both at the policy level and in practice. Therefore, she calls for rigorous and integrated environmental activism towards sustainable social and environmental development in which social work could play a key role in maintaining the necessary balance between the ecosocial systems. She claims that ‘social work should have the knowledge and skills to make the necessary community interventions in order to mediate between the bureaucratic and community needs and resources by making development based on ecosocial sustainability as the main priority of the community’.

Meredith Powers’s study on professional socialization tells us that the participants in the study were not only shaped by the profession but they also shaped the profession as they influenced others to accept a broader professional identity. They also found creative ways to situate themselves in such roles, either by integrating environmental issues into their current roles, seeking roles beyond traditional social work settings or establishing their own organizations. ‘While these social workers are continuing to be shaped by the profession, at the same time, through their expanding

response to the environmental crisis, these social workers are also step by step transforming the profession’.

Kati Närhi confirms Powers’s view of the need for a broader professional identity and claims in her chapter that the broader the understanding the social worker has of the ‘person in environment’, the more clearly she or he is able to see the connections between the environment and human wellbeing. In order to be able to understand the grounds of the ecocritical perspective in one’s practice, one should be able to see beyond the relationship between humans and environments into the close relationship between culture and nature. Further, she argues that using complexity theory, for instance, might provide us with new insights into the relationship between people and environments. From these three chapters the following summary can be made: The challenges of social work professionals are connected to the basic understanding of the society and culture we are living in. By critically understanding and challenging the close relationship between humans and nature, social work can develop a theoretical thinking on the relationship between people and place and therefore act as an important mediator between different views.

When reflecting on the contribution of social work and social policy in ecosocial transition based on the chapters of this book, one realizes that it is not about producing research-based knowledge in a separate area of one discipline or about using traditional professional expertise in practice. Rather, it means that social work and social policy should learn from other disciplines, research areas and practical actors and also should share, collaborate and create new knowledge with them. Social work and social policy have started to learn and create new knowledge together in collaboration with local actors like elders, permaculturalists, rural and urban community activists,

residents and service users – and especially with other sciences. These co-creative perspectives demonstrate essential possibilities to learn more about the close relationship between humans in the environment in order to be able to understand the bigger picture of the basis of our culture. Based on the researches presented in this book, it can be concluded that social work and social policy have started to find and define their new ecosocial agency in the form of transformative research and ecosocial work, which connect back to the realities of places and the people themselves in their own environments. However, this process of contributing to the interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral ecosocial transition is indeed only in its infancy and needs to be developed further. This may be an existential challenge for social work and social policy regarding the rather unsustainable mainstream development of social, economic and ecological global perspectives.

The point is not only about understanding the potential positive contribution and role of social work and social policy in ecosocial transition, but it is also necessary to analyse critically the self-understanding of a social welfare profession. The politicization of nature (for example Haila 2003) can be understood in the sense that also social work as an institution is part of the cultural construction processes which promote either human survival or exploitation. 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 sustainable future perspectives.

Compared with O’Riordan’s (2014) understanding about the needed and already growing antidotes against the unsustainable mainstream development of our era, surprisingly the social work and social policy research presented in this book

matches with them. The book demonstrates for its part, that social work and social policy research are already present in the interdisciplinary transformative research that is contributing to the knowledge base of sustainability transition. Secondly, O’Riordan raised the need for new concepts of wellbeing to be practiced – as explicitly established by Helne and Hirvilammi in Chapter 3. However, also many other chapters reflect upon the new understanding of wellbeing, which is an existential concept in social policy and social work. Finally, several chapters introduce research on promising examples of social investments, such as the commons and social economy, new approaches in food policies, sustainable individual and community based lifestyles as well as developing social work interventions in order to take account of the direct human-nature relationship. However, positively stating the presence of social work and social policy in the comprehensive debate on sustainability does not allow for an uncritical self-satisfaction but instead encourages us to go further in this direction – since there are no other ways left if social work is to be committed to a better wellbeing for humans and the earth, as social work should be.

It seems obvious that social work and social policy are needed in the ecosocial transition and even more so in a larger spectrum of activities: environmental issues and conflicts, human rights, food policy, agriculture and gardening, urban planning and rural development, growing cooperation with civil society, citizens’ movements, the media and interdisciplinary settings (Dominelli 2012, Närhi and Matthies 2016). When for instance landslides, renewable energy, food policies, housing, mobility, health, and climate change are becoming a part of social work and social policy agencies, they may also get rediscovered as new types of research, professions and movements.

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