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Towards the resilience of communities

Ecosocial social work as a producer of nature-based solutions

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James Obeng, Shailendra Rai, Mattia Mansueto and Anne Tolvanen**

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1. Ecosocial challenges

“On average, every fifth European lives at risk of social exclusion.”

- Eurostat 2023

The state of the living environment is rapidly deteriorating because natural resource consumption exceeds ecosystems’ capacity to regenerate resources, provide services, and absorb carbon dioxide emissions from human activities (Figure 1).

Overconsumption has led to significant changes in the natural environment. This affects human well-being worldwide. Climate change and deforestation increase the risk of natural disasters and biodiversity loss, while urbanization reduces citizens’ opportunities to enjoy the well-being benefits provided by nature.

Natural disasters push people into poverty and increase social exclusion. Prior to Covid-19 pandemic, 91 million people in the EU were at risk of social exclusion (Figure 2) and three in every thousand were homeless.

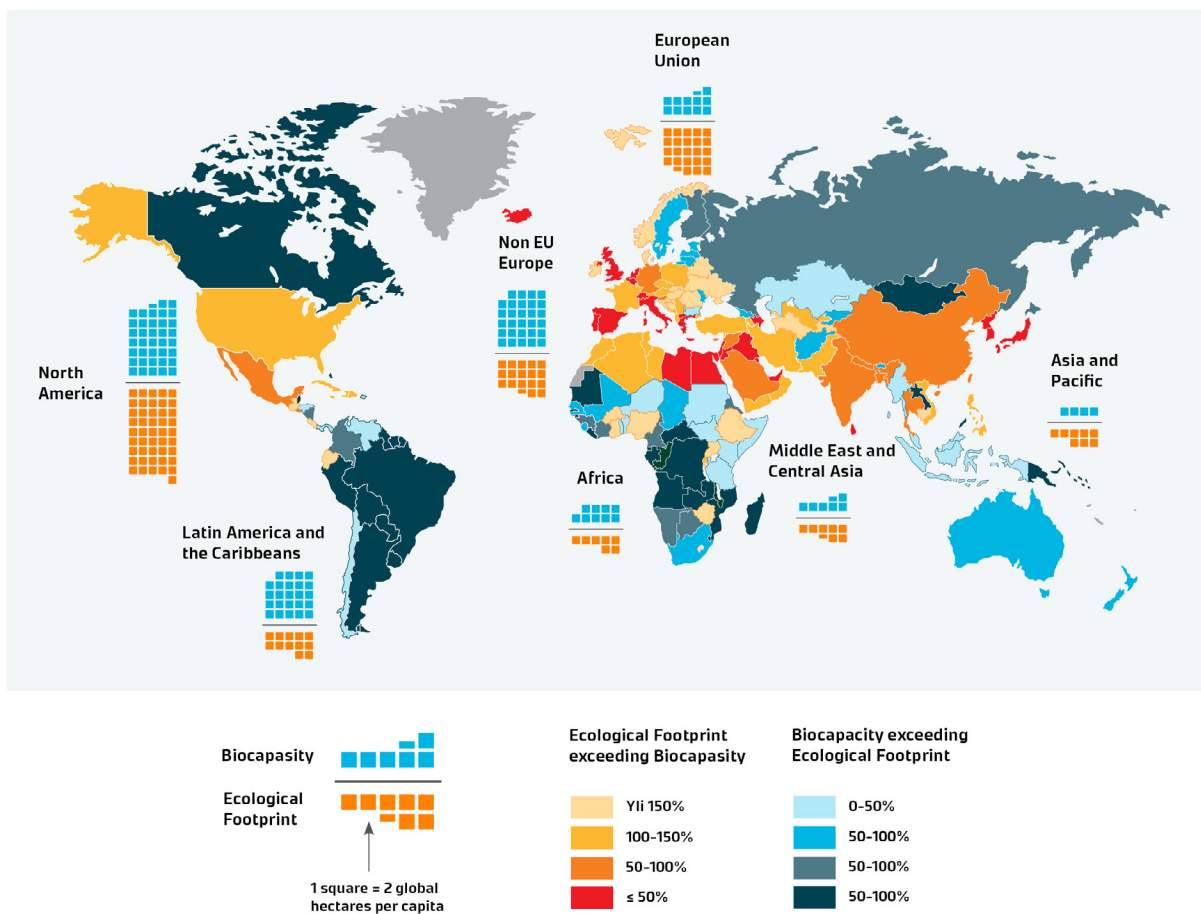


Figure 1. A planet in ecological debt. Humanity’s footprint exceeded global biocapacity for the first time in the early 1970s. The overshoot has led to a massive ecological debt, to which the US and Europe have particularly contributed. The figure is from 2009. (Source: <https://www.grida.no/resources/8174>).

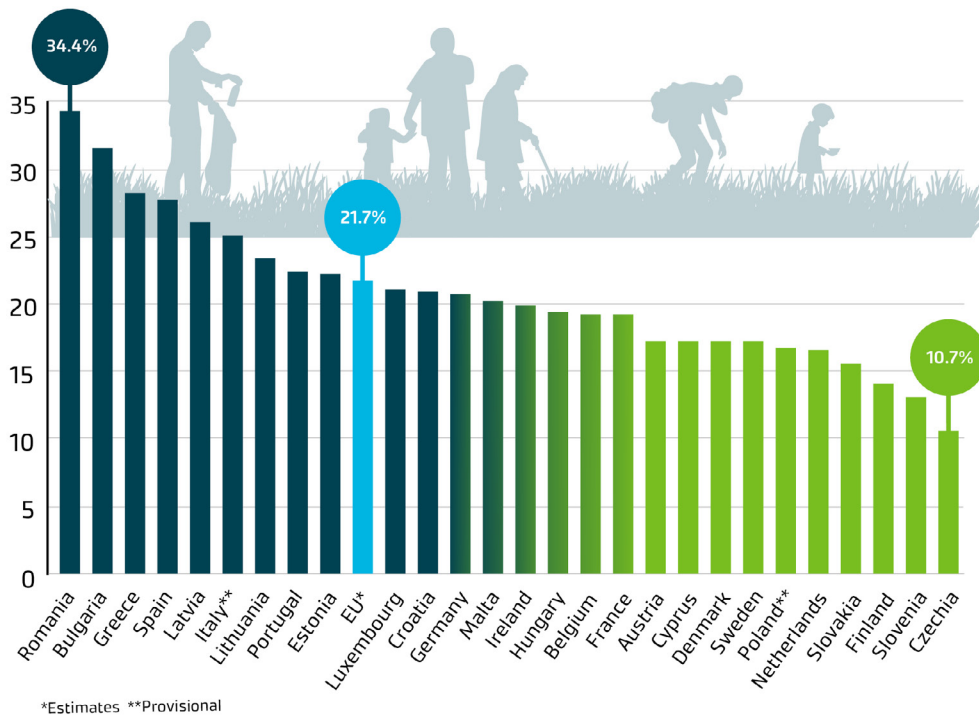


Figure 2. People at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU, % of total population in 2021. (Source: ec.europa.eu/eurostat).

Ecosocial challenges arise when environmental degradation and unequal distribution of resources reinforce each other. An example of the interconnectedness of ecological and social challenges is the dependence of marginalized communities on fossil fuels, which accelerates climate change and causes extreme weather events. These communities lack the resources to implement effective climate actions, such as access to renewable energy sources. They also suffer the most from the impacts of climate change.

Nature-based solutions offer a way to address ecosocial challenges. They can help mitigate the consequences of overexploitation of natural resources and unequal resource distribution, as well as tackle social issues such as homelessness, food poverty, and social exclusion.

Social work and sustainability transition

The role of social work is to support individuals in adapting to changes in their environment. Its primary focus is on those who are most vulnerable in society, particularly those who are most affected by the depletion of natural resources, urbanization, environmental pollution, and climate change. As such, social work must develop an understanding of how societal changes and the actions of the profession can contribute to supporting sustainable development.

Social work should not merely focus on helping individuals adapt to change, but actively work to promote the sustainability transition. While social work is traditionally seen as addressing local community well-being, it also plays a crucial role in shaping global solutions and decisions.

Ecosocial social work advocates for a fundamental shift in perspective, moving away from an anthropocentric approach toward a more integrated, systems-based view. This approach helps to understand how the relationship between humans and nature supports human growth and well-being. Ecosocial social work emphasizes the need to adopt nature-based, nature-preserving, and socially equitable practices.

The sustainability transition requires changes in many areas of life (UN 2024), which can be promoted through social work. These changes include, for example:

- Access to clean energy for all
- Sustainable food systems and healthy eating habits
- A sustainable and just economy
- Sustainable cities and communities
- Safeguarding global natural systems
- Citizen well-being and empowerment.

The EU aims to lead in developing solutions that support sustainable development and strengthen resilience to crises. To tackle ecosocial challenges, the EU's biodiversity strategy and the European Green Deal aim to achieve the widespread implementation of nature-based solutions by 2030.

Nature-based solutions have not yet reached their full potential. Many of them focus on serving the needs of only a limited group of stakeholders, rather than promoting broader societal goals. Decision-makers should recognize the critical role of social work in the search for sustainable and just nature-based solutions. It goes beyond merely minimizing harm. Also the siloing of knowledge limits social professionals' ability to move beyond their specific areas of expertise and adopt a more integrated approach. Therefore, a reform of social work is necessary.

Social work can contribute to the sustainability transition, but this requires:

- Considering nature as the foundation for designing and implementing social work interventions
- Disseminating knowledge about ecosocial work to influence social policies
- Promoting changes that enhance the resilience of social networks and physical infrastructure, both at local and larger scales
- Encouraging citizens' informal participation and engagement in the transition.

2. Recommendations for social work

“Humanity needs to think beyond its immediate self-interests and consider the planet’s long-term health and stability.”

- James Lovelock

Ecological ethics

Integrate nature as the foundation for designing and implementing social work interventions. Nature offers a neutral and therapeutic environment that can help alleviate anxiety among vulnerable groups relying on social services, particularly young people and migrants. These groups face heightened risks of poverty and social exclusion, exacerbated by the effects of unsustainable development that causes natural disasters. Within these groups characterized by diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, relationships with nature, and senses of belonging, connections to nature can vary greatly.

Avoid personal bias: Do not assume that social work clients share the same relationship with nature as you do. Remain open to the possibility of negative experiences with nature. Such openness fosters the development of environmental identity and strengthens a sense of inclusion and belonging in both society and nature.

Increase nature-based interventions: Provide nature-based interventions to enhance vulnerable groups’ engagement with nature, offering health and well-being benefits.

Promote sustainable practices: Leverage nature-based interventions to guide clients toward adapting sustainable lifestyles and career paths.

Collaborate: Build partnerships with organizations with expertise in nature-based methods. These collaborations enhance the effectiveness of interventions.



Advocacy

Raise awareness of the ecosocial approach to amplify the impact of social work. Getting organized is a way to gain power and attention for ecosocial approach. Ecosocial social workers are still on the margins, as professional social work associations continue to prioritize conventional practices and research agendas, often overlooking the critical importance of planetary health (Figure 3).

Get organized: Leverage social networks to identify and implement effective strategies for influencing national, EU, and global policies. This will elevate the role of social work as a key contributor to sustainable development.

Reflect: Initiate and engage in dialogue on the ecosocial approach as a means of addressing environmental challenges. Collaborate with other professions to foster innovative solutions and use these dialogues as a platform to reform the social work profession.

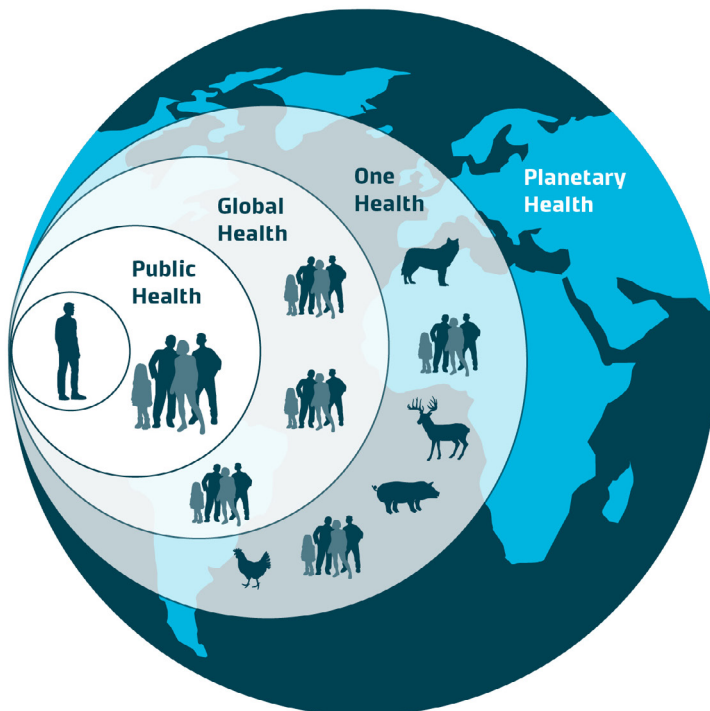


Figure 3. Planetary health and well-being recognize that the health and well-being of humans and the rest of nature are interdependent. The planet's health is understood as an interconnected system. (Source: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johndrake/2021/04/22/what-is-planetary-health/>).

3. Recommendations for social policy

“Innovation is not just about new technology, faster apps, and instant delivery of goods and services. It’s about the people in the system truly thriving.”

- Daniel Rose

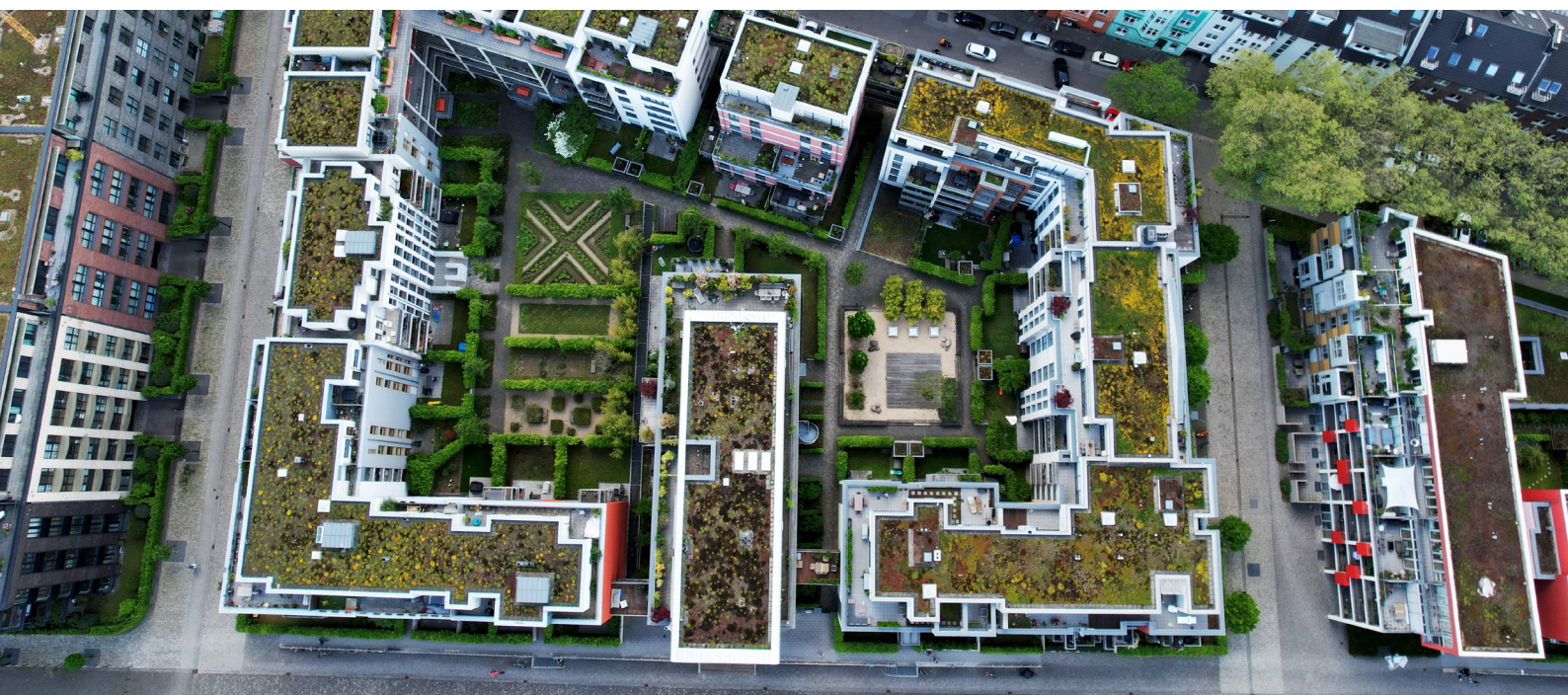
Hybrid designs

Promote changes that enhance the resilience of social networks and physical infrastructure, considering both local needs and scalability. Resilient cities rely on an integrated network of green and environmentally sustainable grey infrastructure, empowering communities to withstand extreme events. Through comprehensive, integrative, and forward-looking approaches, society’s core institutions, alongside human-designed systems for energy and food production, transportation, and trade, can become more sustainable and long-lasting. These efforts align with the UN’s Agenda 2030 goals, aiming to eradicate extreme poverty in all its forms by 2030 while promoting planetary health and well-being.

Adopt a new mindset: Shift from traditional charity-based social work to the ecosocial work paradigm, fostering collective action on a larger scale to promote sustainability and planetary health.

Encourage holistic approaches: Drive transformation by integrating life-cycle thinking, environmental justice, and human rights. This approach can lead to just and sustainable solutions to the climate crisis.

Ensure accessibility: Enact policies that guarantee that essential services—such as affordable housing, healthcare, education, childcare, social welfare, transportation, recreation, and healthy food—are both environmentally friendly and accessible to all.



Social acceptance

Promote citizens' informal participation and active engagement in creating local and scalable solutions. Society should promote active, inclusive, transparent, and innovative participation that prioritizes individuals' autonomy and agency, utilizing social work as a key instrument to achieve social acceptance. This must be done regardless of people's gender, age, social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Often, participation fails due to rigid organizational structures, restrictive funding requirements, and power dynamics within organizations, which marginalize the voices of both social workers and local communities.

Leverage local knowledge: Involve people who have been affected by the climate crisis as expert contributors to multidisciplinary teams. Their lived experiences and cultural knowledge are invaluable for developing nature-based solutions that strengthen community resilience and integrate local practices.

Favor flexible organizational structures: Foster networks of relationships and strategies against oppression supporting community-driven efforts and grassroots initiatives on nature-based solutions.

Adopt new tools: Use interdisciplinary tools, such as participatory GIS methods (Public Participation Geographic Information Systems, PPGIS), to ensure that vulnerable groups can participate in land use and environmental decision-making processes, empowering communities to shape sustainable futures.



4. Research needs

Human Rights: How have governments begun to implement the social and economic human rights they have ratified, particularly in alignment with Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (the right to an adequate standard of living and livelihood in conditions beyond the individual's control)? How does ecosocial social work relate to this?

Effectiveness: How effective are nature-based interventions in fostering social inclusion and strengthening community bonds?

Roles: What is the role of social work and social workers within multidisciplinary teams implementing nature-based interventions?

Funding: How can nature-based interventions be effectively integrated into state-funded social work programs and practices?

Organization: What organizational models and structures best support the promotion of nature-based solutions and ecosocial social work? How should organizations adapt or evolve?

Policy: What are some practical examples of ecosocial social work organizations whose efforts have successfully influenced regional or national policy changes?

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