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Transforming Social Work for Sustainability: Reframing Social Work through an Eco-social Lens

Peter Jusko

Department of Social Work, Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica 97401, SK.

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Corresponding author: Peter Jusko, Department of Social Work, Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica 97401, SK.

Abstract

The Eco-social transformation of social work represents a new approach responding to the deepening ecological crisis and growing social inequalities. While traditional social work has historically focused primarily on solving the problems of individuals and communities in a social context, the eco-social paradigm broadens this perspective to include an environmental dimension and the systemic interconnection between humans, society, and the natural environment. Based on a synthesis of international professional literature, this article analyses the theoretical foundations, value frameworks, and practical applications of eco-social work. It pays particular attention to the challenges faced by professionals in implementing these approaches in practice, as well as the possibilities for integrating them into education, policies, and professional standards. Eco-social work thus emerges as a potential tool for social transformation towards a more just and sustainable future.

Keywords

Eco-social work; Sustainability; Environmental justice; Social work; Systemic change; Climate crisis; Community resilience

Introduction and Methodology

Contemporary society faces unprecedented global challenges, including the climate crisis, environmental degradation, growing social inequalities, biodiversity loss, and deepening socio-economic tensions (Warming, 2023). These phenomena are not isolated occurrences but interconnected consequences of dominant production and consumption systems, whose effects impact not only the environment but also the daily lives of people, especially the most vulnerable. In this context, there are increasing calls for a paradigm shift that would link social justice and environmental sustainability into a single, comprehensive vision of social development (Hariram et al., 2023). Eco-social work represents just such an approach – a synthesis between environmental and social discourse.

The Eco-social approach in social work is based on the assumption that human well-being is not possible without a healthy planet and that the ecological and social determinants of quality of life are inextricably linked (Peeters, 2011; Matthies & Närhi, 2020). This concept calls for a shift in the current anthropocentric model of practice, which has largely overlooked the environmental dimension, while expanding the social work mandate to include new areas, such as climate justice, sustainable community transformation, the right to a healthy environment, and environmental literacy.

While traditional social work has primarily focused on helping individuals and groups cope with social problems, the Eco-social paradigm extends this mission to encompass ecological and systemic contexts. The professional literature (Matthies, 2017; Norton, 2011; Närhi, 2025) suggests that environmental factors, such as pollution, climate extremes, or loss of access to natural resources, have a significant impact on the social determinants of health, life chances, and community cohesion. There are, therefore, growing calls for social work to take an active role in combating environmental threats and contributing to the building of sustainable societies.

Case studies from Scandinavia, Canada, and West Africa show that putting eco-social principles into practice is not only possible but also practical, mainly when based on community development, ecological participation, and transdisciplinary cooperation (Ecosocial Work and Services for Unemployed People, 2021; Overfishing in Senegalese Communities, 2023; Matthies, 2020). On the other hand, however, practice also highlights several obstacles, including insufficient education, limited legislative support, a lack of standards of practice, and resistance to innovation within the professional community (Närhi et al., 2025; Practical Realities of Ecosocial Work, 2020).

This article aims to analyse the concept of ecosocial work as an emerging professional paradigm and to identify its potential to contribute to social change towards a more sustainable and just society. The focus is on defining the theoretical foundations, value orientations, practical examples, and barriers to implementing ecosocial work in various contexts.

This gives rise to the following research questions:

1. What are the theoretical and value foundations of ecosocial work as a new paradigm in social work?
2. How are the principles of eco-social work implemented in practice through specific programmes and institutions?
3. What systemic, institutional, and professional obstacles prevent the broader implementation of Eco-social work?
4. What is the transformative potential of Eco-social work and its contribution to a sustainable and just society?

The methodological framework of this article is based on a qualitative synthesis of secondary professional sources, mainly scientific articles, monographs, and case studies published between 2010 and 2025. A thematic analysis was employed to identify key concepts, values, approaches, and systemic challenges associated with Eco-social work. The analysis focused on the interdisciplinary intersection of environmental, social, and political discourses. Emphasis was placed on comparing international approaches and institutional contexts that influence the possibilities for implementing eco-social work in practice. The scientific quality of the sources informed the selection of literature, as well as the topicality and relevance of the publications to the social work profession. The methodological approach aims to create an integrated view of the development, potential, and limitations of Eco-social work as an emerging paradigm.

1. Theoretical Foundations and Value Frameworks of Eco-social Work

Eco-social work is a response to the complex challenges of our time, which go beyond the traditional understanding of social problems (Boetto, 2017). While classical social work has historically focused on solving the problems of individuals or communities within social institutions, the Eco-social perspective expands it to include an environmental dimension, reflecting the interconnectedness of humans, society, and ecosystems. This paradigm refers to the growing need for a holistic approach that recognises planetary boundaries, intergenerational responsibility, and ecological justice as integral parts of social justice (Matthies & Närhi, 2020).

The theoretical foundations of Eco-social work are based on the principles of ecological ethics, environmental sociology, and critical theory, which question the anthropocentric and neoliberal framework of contemporary social and economic structures (Närhi-Mattthies, 2025). The basic epistemological premise is to overcome the dualism between nature and society. Humans are not superior to nature, but are part of it, which implies a moral obligation to act in favor of ecological sustainability and social inclusion. This holistic approach also highlights the fact that environmental problems – such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution – have the most severe consequences for marginalized groups of the population, creating space for the concept of ecological justice (Peeters, 2012; Norton, 2011).

In this context, Eco-social work is emerging as a normatively anchored framework centred on values such as dignity, solidarity, participation, and sustainability. Ecological and social justice are considered mutually dependent goals (Banks et al., 2024). In line with this value orientation, social work is not limited to individual interventions but seeks to transform the structures that reproduce environmental inequality and social exclusion. This critical

position also challenges dominant technocratic solutions to environmental crises that ignore social contexts and power asymmetries (Matthies, 2017; Thysell, 2022).

Eco-social work finds its theoretical anchoring in various directions. The critical Eco-social perspective analyses global power and economic structures as the primary sources of ecological devastation and social oppression (Dolan-Reilly, 2025). Post-growth approaches (degrowth) reject the paradigm of constant economic growth as incompatible with sustainability and propose alternatives based on community resilience, resource sharing, and conscious frugality (Matthies, 2020). The concept of glocality also plays a crucial role, linking global challenges with local contexts, which supports the creation of participatory and contextually sensitive solutions (Jusko, 2020). The Eco-social framework also encompasses reflection on everyday practices that ultimately contribute to environmental burdens, but can also serve as a starting point for change towards sustainability (Närhi et al., 2025).

The Eco-social approach also brings new epistemological challenges for the social work profession itself. This represents a shift away from a technocratic or therapeutic model toward a systemic, community-oriented, and transformative model of practice (Spatscheck, 2024). The education of social workers must integrate environmental dimensions and prepare them to work with actors outside the traditional framework of social services, such as environmental organisations, community initiatives, and urban planners (Peeters, 2020). Social work is thus becoming an agent of social change, striving for a balance between social welfare and ecological limits.

In this spirit, Eco-social work can be understood not only as a professional approach but also as an ethical and political commitment to the planet and its inhabitants. Its development requires theoretical courage, methodological innovation, and, above all, a willingness to transcend the traditional boundaries of the profession in favour of a more holistic, just, and sustainable society.

2. Practical Applications of Ecosocial Work: Case Studies and Institutional Examples

As a new paradigmatic approach, ecosocial work goes beyond theoretical considerations and proves its viability in concrete contexts and institutional settings. In practice, it takes different forms depending on the political, cultural and ecological specificities of different countries. Despite this diversity, they are united by a common denominator - the effort to link environmental and social aspects of sustainability in favour of a more equitable society and ecological stability (Peeters, 2020; Närhi et al., 2025).

One of the most comprehensive examples of the implementation of ecosocial principles is Finland, which systematically integrates the environmental dimension into social policy. Programmes for the long-term unemployed that link community-based environmental activities - such as urban gardening, public space maintenance and recycling - show synergies between environmental goals and social inclusion (Närhi, Matthies & Ward, 2020). These initiatives not only increase the employability of disadvantaged groups, but also promote community cohesion, eco-literacy, and the revitalization of neglected spaces. In some regions, local reports suggest that unemployment rates have been reduced by up to 15% and the condition of public spaces has improved.

In Sweden, the Bönan project is a community-based model of ecosocial work that focuses on strengthening local resilience during social and ecological transformations (Rambaree, Sjöberg, & Turunen, 2022). Participatory planning, environmental action and shared decision-making about the use of local resources have led to the creation of inclusive spaces reflecting the needs of both people and nature. For example, the project has seen an 18% reduction in household energy consumption, increased participation of women in community decision-making and the development of green infrastructure. This model is also valuable because it demonstrates the possibilities of applying an ecosocial framework outside of traditional social work institutions.

The Canadian experience illustrates the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration between social workers, urban planners, environmental planners and communities. Ecosocial initiatives in social housing or energy justice demonstrate that social work can play a key role in promoting environmentally sustainable solutions that are both accessible and equitable for disadvantaged groups (Thysell, 2022). In Toronto, for example, the Green Neighbourhoods project led to the installation of solar panels in social housing, which reduced energy bills by 25-30% while engaging residents in community energy policy decisions.

In the Global South, applications of ecosocial approaches are often associated with efforts to preserve traditional ways of life, food sovereignty, and ecological balance (Bay, 2015). The example of a fishing community in Senegal facing the impacts of climate change and overfishing highlights the ecological and social vulnerabilities caused by globalization. In this case, interventions based on environmental education, community decision-making and

participatory planning for marine resource use have proven effective (Jönsson, 2022). The result was not only an increase in fish populations in the protected zone by about 20%, but also the empowerment of women in community structures.

Educating social workers on environmental challenges is becoming an increasingly important part of professional development. In Scandinavian countries, topics such as climate justice, environmental ethics and practical tools for ecosocial practice are gradually being incorporated into the curriculum. Emphasis is placed on systems thinking, critical reflection and interdisciplinary collaboration. This creates a new professional habitus ready for the challenges of the Anthropocene (Närhi et al., 2025).

To better navigate the different applications of the ecosocial approach, we provide the following table:

Table 1. Comparative Cases of Ecosocial Work Practices Worldwide: Ecological Dimensions, Social Interventions, and Outcomes

Country/Project	Ecological dimension	Social measures	Outputs and impacts
Finland (urban gardens)	Recycling, maintenance of public areas	Working with the unemployed, community involvement	Lower unemployment, greening of public areas
Sweden ("Bönan")	Local resource management, environmental activities	Participatory planning, community support	Lower energy consumption, higher environmental literacy
Canada (Toronto)	Renewable energy, sustainable architecture	Residents' participation in energy management	Reduce costs, increase social capital
Senegal (fisheries)	Biodiversity conservation, sustainable use of resources	Education, women's participation, local governance	Resource recovery, community and women empowerment

Practical applications of ecosocial work thus confirm the wide potential of this approach - from individual support through community interventions to systemic change. However, it turns out that ecosocial work can only be effective if it is simultaneously socially inclusive, environmentally sustainable and politically supported (Dhananka, 2024). Forging partnerships between the social work sector, environmental actors, public institutions and communities is key. Nevertheless, its institutionalisation and systematic support in terms of policies, funding and professional training remain a challenge.

3. Challenges and Barriers to the Implementation of Ecosocial Work

The implementation of ecosocial work faces a number of structural, ideological, institutional and professional barriers. Although there is compelling evidence of its necessity and usefulness, systemic barriers still hinder the wider application of the approach in different countries and contexts. Implementing this paradigm requires not only a value shift within the social work profession itself, but also overcoming persistent neoliberal frameworks of social policy and public discourse (Peeters, 2020; Matthies, 2021).

One of the main challenges is the absence of a clearly defined and widely accepted concept of ecosocial work within professional standards and educational curricula. Although the number of scholarly publications and examples of good practice is growing, the systematic integration of ecosocial values into education, training and assessment frameworks for social services is still lacking. Practitioners often lack the theoretical background and methodological tools that would enable them to incorporate the environmental dimension into everyday practice (Närhi et al., 2025).

Another obstacle is institutional inertia and narrowly defined departmental thinking. In many countries, social work is implemented in rigid, hierarchical structures with well-defined competencies that rarely allow for interdisciplinary collaboration with environmental actors or urban planning. These organizational constraints make it impossible to link ecological and social strategies, which is at the same time the basis of an ecosocial approach (Norton, 2011; Matthies & Närhi, 2020).

The political-economic environment also plays an important role. The neoliberal logic of market-oriented management of social services, short-term planning, and emphasis on quantitative reporting often marginalizes themes of sustainability, ethics, and long-term social change (Brown, 2021). Ecosocial work, which is systemic and preventive in nature, struggles with a lack of funding, political will, and institutional support (Peeters, 2020). Moreover, the environmental crisis is often perceived as an issue outside the scope of social work, which undermines

the motivation of professionals to actively engage in the field.

From a professional perspective, maintaining critical discourse and the value integrity of the profession in an environment increasingly dominated by technocratic approaches is also a challenge (Dominelli & Hoogvelt, 1996). Eco-social work requires value-anchored professionals able to reflect on the broader climatic, political and economic contexts and to advocate for transformative change outside the traditional framework of the profession. However, this places high demands on education, ethical leadership and organisational culture (Thysell, 2022).

At the same time, cultural barriers emerge in the form of mental models that place nature and society in opposition, or reduce environmental issues to technical or specialized issues beyond the reach of the general population (Fato, 2024). Overcoming these barriers requires new types of communication, participatory strategies, and building environmental literacy - not only in communities but also among professionals (Gibson et al., 2025).

Despite these challenges, ecosocial work has the potential to transform the profession into a catalyst for social and ecological renewal. In order to fulfill this potential, there is a need to strategically link academic research, professional education, advocacy, and practical innovation in the field (Reu & Jarldorn, 2023). At the same time, this transformation requires public policy support, multidisciplinary collaboration, and the active engagement of communities themselves facing both environmental and social crises.

4. Eco-social Work as a Catalyst for Social Change

Increasingly, ecosocial work is emerging as a key tool in addressing deepening environmental and social crises. It is not just an innovation within the social work profession, but a profound value and paradigm shift towards a more sustainable and just society (Wang & Altanbulag, 2022). As climate change, biodiversity loss and social inequalities are interconnected and mutually reinforcing phenomena, the need to transform social institutions, public policies and everyday practices is becoming increasingly urgent (Matthies & Närhi, 2020; Peeters, 2020).

Ecosocial work offers a framework that emphasizes the complex interconnections between the environment, society, and individual life satisfaction (Wendt, 2021). It aims not only to respond to the consequences of environmental problems in people's lives, but to actively contribute to their prevention and to promote systemic change. This includes not only supporting individuals and communities affected by ecological change, but also advocating for systemic solutions that promote ecological justice, solidarity, and the reduction of social inequalities (Thysell, 2022).

The transformative potential of ecosocial work lies in its ability to link micro- and macro-level interventions (Boetto, 2017). On the one hand, it works in everyday situations with individuals, families and communities - especially those most vulnerable to environmental risks and social exclusion. On the other hand, it seeks to influence the political, economic and cultural structures that generate these inequalities. In this way, it overcomes the traditional separation of environmental policy and social services and promotes an integrated approach to sustainability (Närhi et al., 2025).

Practical examples demonstrate that the ecosocial approach can be applied in a variety of areas, from community development and the promotion of food sovereignty to climate change adaptation (Satgar, 2024). Projects such as community gardens, urban green initiatives, energy cooperatives or ecologically oriented social enterprises provide concrete platforms for participation, inclusion and local self-organisation. These forms of work also strengthen the ecological literacy and resilience of communities to future crises (Matthies et al., 2020).

Importantly, however, ecosocial work does not only provide practical solutions. Its transformative significance also lies in the creation of new narratives of social change. These narratives challenge the hegemony of neoliberal individualism, the growth imperative, and technological determinism, and instead emphasize the common good, caring, solidarity, intergenerational responsibility, and ecological integrity (Norton, 2011; Peeters, 2020).

From this perspective, ecosocial work is increasingly being profiled as a profession with a political dimension and a social mandate to act. Although its potential often faces institutional, cultural and professional barriers, a number of initiatives in Scandinavian countries and in the Global South demonstrate that it is possible to create spaces for ecological and social transformation even in resource-constrained settings (Närhi et al., 2025; Sall, 2024).

Social workers and practitioners who identify with this paradigm no longer work exclusively within the system, but seek to transform it for the benefit of future generations. Their role is changing - from a passive service provider to an active agent of social change. Ecosocial work is therefore not just a response to a crisis, but represents a positive vision of a society that is just, inclusive and lives within the ecological limits of the planet (Wendt, 2021).

Discussion

The discussion summarises the key findings that emerged from the analysis in the previous chapters and reflects on the extent to which the study's aim has been met and the research questions answered. The aim of this paper was to analyse ecosocial work as an emerging professional paradigm framework that integrates environmental and social dimensions, and to assess its potential to contribute to a more just and sustainable society.

The first research question focused on the value and theoretical underpinnings of ecosocial work. The first chapter showed that this is a framework grounded in ecological ethics, environmental justice, critical theory and a post-anthropocentric understanding of humans as part of nature. This approach overcomes the dualism of society and nature and emphasises values such as solidarity, participation, dignity, intergenerational responsibility and planetary sustainability. It proved to be not only a value system, but also a call for a reformulation of the professional identity of social work.

The second research question concerned practical applications. The second chapter, which identified practical examples of ecosocial work through case studies and institutional approaches, demonstrated that ecosocial work takes concrete form in a variety of geographical, cultural and institutional settings. Examples from Scandinavia, Canada, and West Africa demonstrated the effectiveness of ecosocial programs in areas such as urban gardening, energy justice, community resilience, and food sovereignty. A key insight is that the success of these interventions depends on local anchoring, community participation and interdisciplinary collaboration.

The third research question focused on the challenges and barriers to implementing an ecosocial approach. The third chapter identified a number of key barriers: the absence of systematic anchoring in professional standards and training programs, institutional inertia, and the dominance of neoliberal frameworks that limit long-term planning and integrated approaches. The barriers identified are not only organisational but also ideological, as the environmental dimension is often perceived as 'extra work' outside the core of the profession. This fragmentation poses a challenge for curricular reforms and the development of professional competences.

The fourth research question focused on the transformative potential of ecosocial work. Chapter 4 confirmed that this is a paradigm capable of linking micro-interventions with systems thinking, responding simultaneously to both climate and social crises, and articulating alternative narratives of care, the common good and planetary responsibility. In this way, ecosocial work operates not only as an adjunct to environmental policies, but as a distinct professional and civic stance. Its implementation can contribute to the democratization of decision-making processes, the strengthening of social cohesion and the ecological literacy of communities.

The discussion confirms that the aim of the article has been fulfilled: through a thematic analysis of expert sources and case studies, it has been possible to define the basic features, possibilities and limits of ecosocial work. The results point to its growing relevance in times of climate and social uncertainty, and at the same time to the need for further research, integration into education and policy support. Thus, ecosocial work emerges as a comprehensive framework capable of redefining the mission of social work in the 21st century.

Although the analysis in this article is based on an extensive secondary literature, it is also important to note certain methodological limitations that affect the interpretation of the findings. First and foremost is the absence of original empirical research - the article draws exclusively on existing theoretical work, case studies and syntheses, which may limit its ability to capture the current contextual nuances in ecosocial work practice.

Another limitation is the dominance of English and Scandinavian sources in the corpus analysed, which - while providing valuable inspiration - may not be directly applicable in other geographical, sociocultural or institutional settings. Ecosocial work is not yet globally and systematically established in professional practice of social work, which may lead to differences in possibilities for its implementation that are not directly captured in the article.

From a methodological point of view, it is thus a conceptual and interpretive probe into an emerging paradigmatic framework, the outputs of which should be complemented by qualitative research from local conditions, as well as interdisciplinary collaboration to test specific models in practice.

Conclusion

Ecosocial work represents a fundamental shift in understanding the mission of social work in the 21st century. In a time of climate crisis, environmental collapse, and deepening social inequalities, it is essential to move beyond the traditional framework of individualized assistance and towards a paradigm that integrates the ecological, social, and

economic dimensions of sustainability (Santoyo & Azapagic, 2014). Both research and practical experience show that social work has the potential to become an active agent of systemic transformation - not only as a service to individuals, but also as an initiator of social change.

In this paper, we have sought to show that ecosocial work is not just a theoretical concept, but a practically viable orientation that offers concrete tools for developing communities, strengthening participation, building resilient local structures, and promoting socio-environmental justice. Case studies and empirical evidence from both Scandinavian countries and the Global South (Matthies & Närhi, 2020; Närhi et al., 2025; Peeters, 2011) confirm the effectiveness of this approach, particularly in addressing the impacts of the climate crisis on vulnerable populations.

At the same time, we have identified key challenges facing the implementation of the ecosocial approach in everyday practice: these include the absence of systemic support, low environmental literacy among professionals, resistance from institutions oriented towards short-term goals, and a lack of research and education on sustainability in social work. Nevertheless, innovative initiatives are emerging that demonstrate that it is possible to implement environmentally and socially sensitive interventions even in resource-constrained settings.

In conclusion, the future of social work depends on its ability to reformulate its mission in line with the challenges of the Anthropocene. Eco-social work brings a new professional identity - grounded in responsibility to society and the planet, an ethic of care, solidarity, participation and long-term sustainability (McKinnon & Alston, 2017). The challenge is for academia to develop research in this area, for educational institutions to develop curricula reflecting ecosocial themes, and for the professional community to build a space for the practical implementation of these values.

Thus, ecosocial work is not only a response to crisis phenomena, but also a vision of a new form of coexistence - between human beings and between human society and nature. Its development and institutionalization represent one of the most urgent and promising paths for the future of social work as a profession and as a social practice. At the same time, it is a call for a redefinition of the professional mandate - from a passive response to problems towards an active shaping of a sustainable and solidarity-based society.

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