Sustainable Development & Social Work

Lecture, Erasmus-TM
Vilnius, February, 2013

Introduction: questions
- Is Sustainable Development (SD) an issue for Social Work (SW)?
- How connect SD with the mission of SW?
- Which concept of SD is appropriate?
- How conceptualize the relation of a process of SD with SW practice?

Introduction: basic assumption
Appropriate interpretation of SD
- Current analysis of the ecological crisis
- Within mission and tradition of SW

Elaboration: double movement:
- Greening SW
- Strengthening the social dimension of SD

Contents
1. The challenge: social transition
2. What is Sustainable Development?
3. SD & SW: normative questions
4. SW & SD: a general model for practice: social-ecological approach
5. Social-ecological practice

1. The challenge:
from social-ecological crisis
to transition into a different society

A clear point of departure that connects the ecological crisis with social problems:
the ecological footprint

Ecological ‘Overshoot’

LPR-rapport 2010 (WWF): Global ecological footprint in 2007:
50% above the carrying capacity of the earth = 1.5 planet

Who’s footprint is too big?

The actual consumption and production patterns are socially and ecologically not sustainable

Just consumption and production patterns: not necessarily sustainable

Impasse!

Social-ecological crisis: not independent of the social system.

Cf. The “Scylla-Charybdis”-principle:

“As long as the present-day world system is maintained, there is no other possibility than to steer clear of two rocks. The larger the part of the world population that lives in prosperity, the more the ecosystem is in danger; the more the ecosystem is safeguarded, the more it is allied with unlimited misery.”

E. Vermeersch

(De ogen van de panda, Brugge: Marc Van de Wiele, 1988, p. 41)
Impasse!

- The current social system has no way-out!
- Central problem:
  - structural: growth economy (cf. Tim Jackson’s *Prosperity without growth*)
  - related cultural norms and expectations
  - fundamental ways of thinking and of framing problems and answers

= ‘paradigm’ of our society

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‘Grenzen aan de groei’
We kunnen het niet meer ontkennen

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Limits to growth

1972

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The challenge

- Satisfaction of needs and creation of well-being for every world-citizen with maintaining ‘natural capital’.
- That requires:
  - dematerialisation of the economy
  - a just distribution of welfare
  - a new view on well-being (decisive)
- That means:
  transition into a different society

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Sustainable production and consumption:
socially just, ecologically maintainable

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2. Sustainable Development
What is SD?

Departing from the challenge:
► Business as usual is impossible!
► Sustainable Development: a process of social transition that doesn’t leave one domain of society untouched
► So the demand for a SD touches also Social Work (SW)

Transition

► A thoroughgoing process of social change within several generations
► Interaction between ecological, technological, economic, social, institutional and cultural developments.
► A sustainability transition contains a combination of parallel changes in the most important subsystems of society (e.g. energy system, mobility pattern and system, food model, organisation of labour and care, etc.)
► Involvement of many actors on all levels of society

Transition: do it otherwise

Complementary strategies

► Efficiency
  – Higher productivity of resources
  – Closing production cycles
► Redistribution of use of resources
  – Relation with quality of society
  (cf. Wilkinson & Pickett, The Spirit Level)
► Sufficiency
  – Quality instead of quantity
  – Well-being as finality is more than material welfare

SD: Brundtland definition

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts:
  – the concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which priority should be given;
  – and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs.”

[WCED, Our Common Future, 1987: 43]

Sustainable Development

► It concerns the needs of people
► Two dimensions:
  – Space: here and elsewhere
  – Time: now and in the future
► Debate about the meaning of SD
**SD: a political concept**

- SD is a vague concept: reflects the complexity of the issues at stake
- SD as a political concept (cf. justice): different interest-based standpoints make up its content
- Result: many different conceptualisations, contents, definitions, agendas, representations and images ...
  - e.g. 3P: people, planet, prosperity (profit)
  - For SW?
    Which agenda, criteria, process?

**Normative principles of SD**

- meeting of needs
- respect for ecological limits
- common but differentiated responsibilities
- global justice
- intra-generational equity/solidarity
- intergenerational equity/solidarity
- active participation
- gender equality
- respect for diversity

(based on the WCED

**Ecological justice**

- Bringing together respect for ecological limits and demands of justice: equal right of access to ecological resources
- Contraction and convergence
  - dematerialisation of the economy
  - a just distribution of welfare

**Contraction and convergence**

Source: http://www.climatejustice.org.uk


Levels of Trust are Higher in More Equal Rich Countries


CO2 emissions and life expectancy

World average CO2 emissions and life expectancy

Contraction and convergence

After Jones & Jacobs 2006

Social Work

‘The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.’ (IASSW & IFSW, 2001)

Comparison of normative principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sustainable Development</th>
<th>Social Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>meeting of needs</td>
<td>enhance well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>respect for ecological limits</td>
<td>compatible: depends on concept of well-being: still and SD both deal with the problems of our society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>common but differentiated responsibilities</td>
<td>compatible: follows from general principles of fairness and attention for the possibilities and limitations of people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in the first place between nations)</td>
<td>- characterize also empowerment - attention to differences between individuals or groups in society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>global justice</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intra-generational equity/solidarity</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inter-generational equity/solidarity</td>
<td>compatible: depends on concept of responsibility (as differentiated: compatible with empowerment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>active participation</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gender equality and respect for diversity</td>
<td>yes</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Similarities between SW & SD

- Large similarity in the normative principles concerning attention for well-being, justice, human rights, diversity and participation
- Common characteristics:
  - Process-oriented
  - multi-level
  - multi-actor
- EXCEPTION: absence ecological principle

SW & SD: strengthen each other

- Widen contextual view to the biophysical environment: social-ecological approach
  - take into account the notion of biophysical limits
  - meaning of the natural environment for well-being
- Reinforce the social dimension of SD:
  - strengthen the focus on questions of redistribution
  - emancipatory focus
  - bottom-up approach of empowerment and participation
  - promoting social economy
- Help widen the focus of SD on (basic) needs to other aspects of well-being, particularly those referring to new views on a meaningful life.

Theoretical frameworks

Decisive are among others:

- An ecological world view
  - a social-ecological conception of SD & SW
  - new evolutions in ecological systems theory
- New ideas about well-being
- A choice for participatory practice theories
  - empowerment oriented
  - social learning
  - participatory research of eco-social context

Well-being

- Redefining of a ‘good life’
- From individualism to a relational view on human beings: autonomy in connection
- Rethinking of ‘emancipation’
  - relation to work and consumption
  - relation to different forms of participation
- Importance of natural environment
- Narrative structure of meaning of life
  - difference with happiness as ‘feeling good’
  - relation between well-being and citizenship
- Relation to time: “Time is meaning”
  - exchange of consumption for more time

Ecological traditions in social work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Approaches of Social Work</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880-1940</td>
<td>Adams: urban ecology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Richmond: holistic person-in-environment thinking</td>
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<tr>
<td>1950-1960</td>
<td>eco-critical approach</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970-1980</td>
<td>activity approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 - 1990</td>
<td>activity approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990 - 2005</td>
<td>activity approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>since ca. 1995</td>
<td>activity approach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: UK Life Satisfaction and GDP - 1973-2002

4. SOCIAL WORK & SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

a model for practice: social-ecological approach

The current image of SD

Ecology
Economy
Society

The domain of SD
SD as a ‘balance’ of 3 dimensions

Advantages systemic image

► More realistic i.e. more ecological world view
► States the importance of maintaining ‘natural capital’
► Joins the concept of ecological economics
► Joins the contextual view in the tradition of SW:
  “Person-in-Environment means that a new multi-dimensional and holistic way of working can re-build connections between service users, decisions and politics in a given living area.” (Matthies 2001:141)
► Makes clear why ecological questions are also social questions
► The mediating position of the social sphere for social (and political) action

A systemic image

Ecosystem
Society
Economy

Economy in SD

Environment is better protected and improved

Action through collaborative governance, innovation and change

Nigel Roome

Society seeks a more environmentally sustainable and socially cohesive system

Economy contributes through responsible business

Nigel Roome
Society seeks a more environmentally sustainable and socially cohesive system. Social Work contributes through empowerment.

**SW & SD: social-ecological approach**

- **3 connected multilevel concepts**
  - Social capital: basis for resilience
  - Resilience: condition for empowerment
  - Empowerment:  
    - Practice paradigm: process + result
    - Multilevel: individual to political level
  - Connected by positive feedback

**Process of empowerment**

- **Empowerment as actual social change**
  - Resilience
  - Social (cultural) capital
  - Own strengths

**Desirable direction?**

- **Empowerment as actual social change**
  - Resilience
  - Social (cultural) capital
  - Own strengths

**Paradigm SW: empowerment**

Decisive paradigm change in SW practice:

- from a medical/pathological model with emphasis on deficiencies,
- to a positive view on the own capacities of clients and target groups,
- who will be approached as ‘partners’ of social work, as participants in a process of learning, development and social change.

**Empowerment: personal and political**

‘Empowerment suggests both individual determination over one’s own life and democratic participation in the life of one’s community, often through mediating structures such as schools, neighbourhoods, churches, and other voluntary organizations. Empowerment conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights. It is a multilevel construct applicable to individual citizens as well as to organizations and neighbourhoods; it suggests the study of people in context.’

(Rappaport 1987:121).
**Power**

- Difference: strength – power
- Power = relationship between people
  - Negative: domination (power over)
  - Positive: cooperation – partnership (power with)
- Empowerment: a process of positive interaction, in which the 'common' capacity for action increases through recognizing and joining together the particular capacities of individuals or groups.
- In the case of domination:
  Empowerment: a process of building counter-power for social change.

**Building social capital**

- For a fundamental transition a society needs a large amount of resilience:
  - diversity and connectedness (see below)
- Everybody has the right to participate and contribute. That requires solidarity and social inclusion.
- Building social capital is both an objective and a part of a transition into a sustainable society.

**Social capital: a process**

Co-operative and multilevel action:
social capital for social work is
"a process of building trusting relationships, mutual understanding and shared actions that bring together individuals, communities and institutions."
(Loeffler)

**Social capital: multi-level**

-linked (social-ecological) systemic levels: panarchy

**Linked (social-ecological) systemic levels: panarchy**

Walker & Salt 2006:91

**Resilience**

- Resilience: the capacity of a system to positive adaption in risk situations or in great processes of (social-ecological) change.
- We bring together two theoretical lines within one social-ecological approach:
  - resilience as a condition for empowerment
  - resilience as a basic characteristic of sustainable social-ecological systems
Empowerment as core

- **Empowerment** is a more or less developed normative-methodical framework, that enables for SW to connect his work with own specific target groups with a broader process of SD.

- Further elaboration through *The Eco-Social Approach* (research project on social exclusion in European cities):
  - three basic concepts:
    - ‘Eco-social approach’ as a broad contextual view, with more attention for the biophysical environment than usual;
    - In the core: the social action concept of empowerment and citizen-oriented practice;
    - Social impact assessment (SIA) through participative research by social workers makes the connection between.

The eco-social approach

- Eco-social context
- Social learning
- Empowerment
- Participative research (SIA)

SD as a process of social learning

- Ways to unsustainability are mostly well-known as contrasted with ways to SD, which has to be explored.
- Solutions that at first sight look interesting, appear sometimes to be contra-productive or even riskful for people now or in the future.
- Therefore SD presupposes by definition a continuous learning process.
- *Theory and practices of social learning are crucial in view of SW & SD.*
5. SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL PRACTICE

Social-ecological practice for a sustainability transition

1. Mitigating of problems
Preserving and enhancing of well-being:
• environmental pollution and destruction of resources (health, insufficient food and water, poor quality habitat),
• rising prices of food, energy, housing and mobility (hunger, debts, homelessness),
• declining quality or shortages of farmland (migration and refugees)
• ....

2. Preparing for change
Creating situations that both help overcome difficulties and work on the conditions for a sustainable future:
– building social capital and resilience
– engagement in process of social learning
– networks in civil society, a.o. social movements: oriented towards change on macro-level (a.o. important for ecological justice)
– alliances: counter-power

Educational programmes:
– understanding of life situation and relationship to the environment
– development of capabilities and skills: helping people to get better control over their lives: sustainable consumption, energy conservation, healthy cooking of sustainable food, gardening, crafts...
– Create contexts that bring people together
  – building networks, communities, movements
  – making possible structural answers
– Attaching work with individual clients and families to networking and community building
  – e.g. organising educational programmes under the form of group work.

Forms of social economy: sustainable production and services and social objectives go hand in hand
– neighbourhood services, sheltered workshops – for repair and recycling
– community-supported agriculture, community gardens, social eco-farms
– sustainable catering and mobility services.
– Perspective: anchor social enterprises – locally and regionally
  – providing food security and other essential needs

Connection between 2 & 3:
building resilience = part of change
3. Participation in change

- Creative imagining of a future society (Leitbild): guide for actions to be developed
- Experiments based on new principles of social and economic organisation:
  - social economy: further development of principles of corporate social responsibility
  - new cooperative forms of enterprise;
  - complementary currency systems: local communities less dependent of monetary system
- Participation of social work in:
  - projects of public transport
  - urban development and spatial planning
  - review of systems of distribution
  - rethinking organisation and valuation of labour...

Some sources
- Peeters Jef (red.) (2010), Een veerkrachtige samenleving. Sociaal werk en duurzame ontwikkeling, Berchem:EPO.