Research-based knowledge about social work and sustainability

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This is a pre-publication author manuscript of the final, published article.

**Recommended Citation**

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Guest Editorial

Research-based knowledge about social work and sustainability

Aila-Leena Matthies, Amy Krings, and Ingo Stamm

Complete Citation


The COVID-19 pandemic is yet another crisis for human beings and the environment. It has intensified the sustainability crisis of the world – socially, ecologically and economically – but it has also revealed a deep sense of solidarity within and between countries. The complexity of the global sustainable development issue presents one of the biggest challenges of our time. Therefore, a radically new level of transdisciplinary research on global perspectives and economic sustainability is required to meet the urgent social challenges. This special issue offers a platform for considering what important roles social work research and practice can play in advancing sustainable development. In particular, it highlights the interconnectedness of social work interventions relating to environmental and economic sustainability.

Since the 2012 publication of the first International Journal of Social Welfare special issue (21:4) on social work and environmental issues, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of social work publications related to this area. This significant and growing number of journal articles, along with global-based edited volumes (Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2012; Mason & Rigg, 2019; Matthies & Närhi, 2017; McKinnon & Alston, 2016; Rinkel & Powers, 2019) and monographs (Dominelli, 2012; Erickson, 2018), has strengthened the understanding of why and how social work practice issues are deeply interconnected with environmental challenges, including sustainability. While this growth in publications is promising, several comprehensive literature reviews have provided a more critical and complex picture of the state of social work knowledge and research on environmental issues. In their literature review, Krings, Victor, Mathias, and Perron (2018) found that although the quantity of social work publications on environmental topics has grown in the past 25 years, most of the publications are geographically limited, with the majority examining environmental issues primarily in China, India and the USA. Additionally, the breadth of topics in which social work scholars are engaged is thematically limited, with a little more than a third focusing on practice issues following a natural disaster. This review suggests that social work research must move beyond its now-established calls for social workers to consider the natural and built environment as part of their practice, to examine when and how social workers can promote environmental, economic and human health and well-being. Similarly, Mason, Shires, Arwood, and Borst (2017), who reviewed publications on social work research related to global environmental change, argue that most extant research is about social work’s reactive interventions. They call for more robust and complete evaluations of interventions and their outcomes. Furthermore, Nöjd (2017) explored the practices and features of social work interventions that address environmental issues and sustainable development. She, too, found that the outcomes of social work efforts and the added value of social work involvement are under-researched.
Hence, in this volume, our aim is to update and extend the global-level picture of social work research and knowledge based on the interconnectivity of the environment and sustainability. Our assumption is that social work practitioners and researchers have unique and first-hand access to knowledge about the consequences of unsustainable development. Thus, with this specialised knowledge base, they are also valuable partners in crafting and evaluating interventions that can help communities, organisations and policy makers move towards sustainability at the grassroots level and beyond.

**Content of the special issue**

This special issue offers new insights on social work research and sustainability. It brings different global perspectives together with several contributions that examine collaborative efforts from different regions of the world. The articles cover a wide range of problems and approaches regarding sustainability and the adoption of an ecosocial approach in social work. Most of the articles adopt a community focus rather than an individual perspective in social work, which is vital in efforts to achieve sustainability.

The first two articles are based on research with and on practitioners’ involvement in sustainability efforts. Heather Boetto (Australia), Wendy Bowles (Australia), Kati Närhi (Finland) and Meredith Powers (USA) present the results of a study that used 298 © 2020 Akademikerförbundet SSR (ASSR) and John Wiley & Sons Ltd Int J Soc Welfare 2020: 29: 297–299 Guest Editorial a participatory action research design with social work practitioners. Based on a larger international study, their article focuses on research in the Australia context. The authors used a transformative ecosocial practice model for their collaborative approach. On a positive note, they found that the practitioners in the study incorporated interventions across personal, individual, group and organisational levels of practice. However, the practitioners were also constrained by structural elements at broader levels. The authors conclude that longer-term research that focuses on community- and structural levels of practice is needed.

Another overall positive result regarding practitioners’ attitudes and knowledge about climate change and sustainability is presented by Mary Dallas Allen (USA). She presents the results of a survey study that included 159 social workers from Alaska. The survey asked the social workers about their attitudes, experiences and perception of climate change and its consequences for their clients. Among the main results are that over 75% of the respondents believe that climate change is dangerous for their clients now or will be dangerous in 10 years. Many reported also that effects on infrastructure and on physical and mental health are already clearly visible. In contrast, 10% of the respondents denied that climate change is occurring at all. The author considers it imperative that social workers acquire more and better knowledge about climate change and about ways of discussing and dealing with related issues together with their clients.

The article by Amy Krings (USA) and Tania Schusler (USA) introduces the phenomenon of environmental gentrification, and asks how community groups can reduce contamination and increase access to environmental amenities in ways that do not contribute to – or perhaps even resist – gentrification. Based on a transdisciplinary systematic literature review, their findings reveal that community organisations employ a range of strategies to prevent green gentrification, ranging from individual adaptation to community organising, planning and development. Their contribution introduces five practice principles for social workers to support community initiatives that truly advance sustainable development while challenging environmental injustices caused by environmental gentrification. Notably, when Krings and Schusler searched extant literature on environmental gentrification broadly, they found place-based articles around the world. However, when they focused on local resistance to it, their systemic search only produced place-based articles based in the United States.
In their study, Jennifer Willett (USA), Alonso Tamayo (USA) and Jeffrey Kern (USA) examined the experiences of local residents who are living under conditions of environmental injustices in Nevada, USA. Their findings suggest that to achieve environmental justice over the long term, it is necessary to address both environmental degradation and structural inequality – issues that require a historical and contemporary analysis of interconnected social issues. Their article illuminates the politics of environmental justice organising, shedding light on how institutions such as the federal government, national environmental organisations and the legal system can oppress local communities, but also, at times, act in solidarity. The article concludes with an exploration of new pathways for social workers to support environmental justice organisations, as well as residents impacted by toxic land uses, in ways that not only reduce contamination, but also build power among marginalised groups.

To promote sustainable development of communities, there is an urgent need for economic systems that address social, environmental and economic inequities. Economy has become increasingly an issue of social work practice and research, too, since in many countries social work is expected to play a core role in supporting people and communities to achieve decent livelihood, income and the well-being of people. This task, however, is increasingly challenged in the frame of the profit-oriented mainstream economic models. Several articles contribute with new knowledge about the search within social work for economic alternatives that would also reflect environmental and social sustainability. In the globalised market context of Chinese agriculture and food systems, Hok Bun Ku (Hong Kong) and Karita Kan (Hong Kong) investigated what are the potentials for social work to contribute to sustainable food systems. In their participatory action research study conducted in southwest China, they found that social work can link rural cooperatives with the local food system in the cities, which could result in a win-win situation for farmers and consumers – and for the environment.

Sustainable agriculture is also in the centre of the contribution by Claudia Lintner (Italy) and Susanne Elsen (Italy). They conducted a case study of the Italian agriculture sector, more precisely of social cooperatives as part of a local social and solidarity economy. Using data from five exemplary social cooperatives, the authors asked what are the possible interrelations between social cooperative entrepreneurship, public social work and the socioeconomic integration of refugees/asylum seekers. The article shows the potential of small-step experiences towards attaining sustainable development, as well as how social cooperatives and connected social work practice can support the integration of refugees and asylum seekers, based on self-organisation and cooperation.

Another contribution relating to sustainable food systems is provided by Jennifer F. Jettner and Mary C. Secret (USA). Their article reports on a study on community gardens in food deserts in the southeastern region of the USA. The authors examined the relationship between race and racial diversity on social capital, using regression models. They focused on the aspects of one’s ‘sense of community’ and the ‘number of resources’ as part of social capital. The results show, among other things, that community gardens can foster relationships across race, but may have limited ability to increase access to resources.

In the concluding article, Aila-Leena Matthies (Finland), Jef Peeters (Belgium), Tuuli Hirvilammi (Finland) and Ingo Stamm (Finland) discuss, theoretically and empirically, what kinds of economic models could help social work to promote economic sustainability, especially regarding the needs of people outside the conventional labour market. Based on data from five European countries, new economic models have emerged in which 50 ecossocial innovations have been introduced as alternative forms of social work. The researchers find these new economic models to be highly applicable because of their non-profit-oriented economic purpose,
their value as economic drivers outside of monetary systems, and their striving toward the
democratisation of the economy. Scaled up to the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, it can be concluded that, in local community approaches, social work can contribute more or less directly to a transformative change of the mainstream economy in order to promote a transition towards ecologically and socially sustainable humanity.

As we reflect on the state of research on social work and the environment, including how much it has grown since the IJSW 2012 special issue, it is encouraging to note the wide breadth of topics that social work researchers have begun to explore and the issues in which social work practitioners have begun to intervene. However, despite this growth, social work research must keep pace with the growing need for transdisciplinary, internationally informed knowledge that enforces a transition to a more sustainable development. We are convinced that in such a broader context of debates and practice networks, social work research can have a much greater transformative impact.

References


