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Perspectives, methodologies, and institutional arrangements for ecosocial transformation in social work

1. Introduction

Social work is "a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people" (IASSW & ISFW, 2014). Thus, transformative change is part of social work's mission. In practice however, it has largely ignored this. Heather Boetto points out the challenging paradox of social work, i.e., social work's inherent modernist roots that contradict its philosophical base of practice. An ecosocial approach is aware of the fact, that social work was conceptualized in an industrialist, individualist, and capitalist context, contributing to adopting people to capitalist society. A shift to ecosocial work, Boetto asserts, must conceptualize congruent approaches across the ontological, epistemological, and methodological dimensions of social work (Boetto, 2017).

Social work in thinking and practice is still led by worldviews, which guided capitalist development within the last 150 years. The most problematic misconception is the ignorance of the differences between economic growth and societal development (Daly, 1997) and between growth and prosperity (Jackson, 2017). This is particularly problematic when ecological imperatives are requiring the recognition of limits to growth (Meadows et al. 1972, 2004).

The paradox, described by Boetto is a strong barrier against a philosophical understanding and practice of social work as a promoter of ecosocial change if we understand change not only in thinking but in relationships that transform institutions and power balances. Environmental problems are symptoms of more significant underlying problems. The Australian expert for community work Jim Ife mentions: "They are the consequence of a social, economic, and political order which is blatantly unsustainable, and thus it is the social, economic and political order that needs to be changed" (Ife, 1996, 25).

This contribution will focus on transformative concepts, strategies and methods which are coherent with the above-mentioned aspirations. It will introduce diverse worldviews, which are relevant for ecosocial transformation but until now rarely found their way into social work. As one example of mostly hidden alternative practices, we will present the solidarity-based economies of people of African descent in Europe.

2. Ecosocial transformation of social work

We cannot resort to a comprehensive theory of social transformation which, following Eric Olin Wright's must involve four interlinked components: "a theory of social reproduction, a theory of the gaps and contradictions of reproduction, a theory of trajectories of unintended social change and a theory of transformative strategies" (Wright 2010, 273). We will focus on the fourth component which attempts to the question of *what can be done*. Wright distinguishes three forms of transformative strategies, ruptural, interstitial, and symbiotic. We refer to the concepts of interstitial and symbiotic strategies while ruptural strategies mean a

“sharp break within existing institutions and social structures”, a direct confrontation (Wright 2010, 303). Interstitial approaches on the contrary, “seek to build new forms of social empowerment in the niches and margins of the capitalist society often where they do not seem to pose any immediate threat to dominant classes and elites. It is the strategy of building institutions of social empowerment, (…) which often falls below the radar screen of radical critics of capitalism” (Wright 2010, 305). Rooted in social movements it can play a central role, often local and small. Cumulatively however, it can cause a metamorphosis in a social system. This metamorphic logic might even be recognized as one base of degrowth.

Symbiotic transformations involve strategies, extending civil empowerment, also helping to solve problems faced by dominant actors. “Forms of social empowerment likely to be much more durable and to become more deeply institutionalized, thus harder to reverse, when in one way or another, they also serve some important interests of dominant groups.” (Wright 2010, 337). One example is the class compromise in labor market.

Social work as an actor of an intentional ecosocial shift needs to disentangle from the worldview of its modernist beginnings in thinking and acting and incorporate ecological considerations beyond “human-centered perceptions of the world towards views, that reflect a holistic and interdependent view of humans as part of the natural world” (Boetto 2017, 49). As one of the fundaments for such a paradigm shift, social work should take note of the variety of “alternative discourses which support a new way of thinking (…) and facilitate social system’s mutually interdependent relationship with the natural environment and the resultant linkage of social justice with environmental justice" (Pulla & Pathare 2018, 119).

Regarding research and practice, which are coherent with such a holistic understanding, social work can revert to well-established as well as new community-based practices and institutional arrangements that are able to facilitate eco-social transformation (Ife 2012; Elsen 2019; Elsen 2023). Social work has a strong tradition and recent developments coherent with the ideas as a promoter of social change and empowerment. There are diverse professional networks, research projects, and academic discourses related to ecosocial work. The history of social work and the struggle for social rights is pillared by the ideas of emancipation, social change, and development. Social work in this political struggle is one of the actors together with others. The connection between social movements and social work has a long and ongoing history in the dynamics of societal conflict, change, and evolution (Addams 1910; Wagner 2009). We refer to the fact, that socio-political dynamics, social innovation, and the assertion of emancipative social work were always the results of social movements, which tried to accomplish social change from below (Ife 1995). Thus, the shift to ecosocial transformation in social work depends on a direct relation to vital ecosocial movements, which predominantly emerge outside of the discipline and profession of social work.

We will discuss a selection of sustainability concepts partly introduced already some decades ago and recent discourses beyond anthropocentrism, economic growth, consumerism, and systematic individualism and connect them with the intention to form ecosocial thinking, practice, and research in social work. For this purpose, we will choose the concept of conviviality (Illich 1975), the alternative movements of pluriversalism (Kothari et al. 2019), and the conception of diverse economies (Gibson-Graham 2013). They have in common the conviction, that there is no alternative to a socio-cultural shift towards conscious de-growth in the global North and the active formation of post-growth strategies that take root in collective, democratic, and redistributive downscaling. De-growth will depend on positive narrations and real utopias of possibilities to live a good life beyond growth. It is imaginable as a “democratic movement of establishing limits within which human well-being and creativity can flourish” (Kallis et al 2015, 4). This presents a chance to replace the primacy of growth with

other values such as meaningful activities, self-efficacy, new social relations, distribution of wealth or access to commons.
Debates around welfare without economic growth are still rare, and many of them only discuss practical approaches to insert green considerations without a radical changed context, and not many contributions related to the recent turn of an era incorporate consequences to welfare and social work even if many of them take a reproductive economy of care as starting point (Biesecker & Kesting 2003). Discourses, movements, and countervailing approaches that consider this assignment imply a critique of commodification and total economization, systematic individualism, utilitarianism, and consumerism and focus on conviviality, voluntary simplicity, cooperation, and new concepts of wellbeing. They integrate the vision of diverse lifestyles, institutional arrangements, common pool resources, and a new organization of labor. Especially, the question of redistribution must be put on the table in this context. The degrowth representatives D'Alisa et.al. (2015, 13) mention, that progressive taxation on high incomes and the definition of a maximum income can be the basis for financing care, education, health, or environmental restoration services.
We will present diverse worldviews for the development of alternative and complementary approaches, generated within the last decades or even recently, relevant for an ecosocial turn in thinking and practice of social work. Some well-established and diverse new community-based approaches will show their potential to contribute to ecosocial transformation.

2.1 Conviviality

The concept of conviviality, first named by Ivan Illich (1973), is a vision of living together in consciousness of ecological and social limits of the globe. It is the imagination of a good life and the relation to nature (Adloff & Leggewie, 2014). In 1973, Illich published *Tools for Conviviality.* His central assumption is the loss of autonomy caused by large, hierarchic organizations, by advancing commodification of goods and professionalized services, which deprive people of their freedom to produce goods, share, exchange or organize outside of market or by expert-driven institutions in education, health, culture, or social work. With "convivial", Illich names a society which entails reasonable limits to the growth of its tools, which include large technics as well as societal institutions. Beyond a certain extent, Illich argues, institutions become a threat to society and people.
Illich's criticism reflects not only the ecological but also the social limits of growth. His vision of a convivial society is that of living simpler, in common, and with less. He votes for an equilibrium, which defends people against the dependencies from market supply and re-opens spaces for self-organization and creativity against economic totalitarianism and paternalism of institutions. As approaches with this objective, he mentions local exchange systems, solidarity economy, or regional currencies. Illich understands this as a kind of decentralization and pluralization of autonomous productivity and sharing as modern subsistence, to safeguard or regain the freedom to use resources primarily to produce use-values. In addition, he points up the significance of an equilibrium of private, common, and public goods and interests and the extension and political protection of the commons.
Illich's book met high resonance internationally and was adapted in France by the philosopher André Gorz (1923 – 2007), in Germany by Erich Fromm (1900 – 1980), and in Italy by the anti-psychiatrist Franco Basaglia (1924 – 1980). Subsequently, Illich's considerations became a strong stimulus for social movements in self-help and self-advocacy, in education, health care, and social work and especially in psychiatry, connected with criticism against disempowerment by paternalistic experts in hierarchic systems. Members of the emerging

self-help movement gained self-esteem as experts of experience and the related professional systems opened their practice for participation, user involvement, and the support of emancipative activities. This is an example for interstitial and symbiotic transformation based on new thinking, effectuating new practices and the cumulation of innovation described by Wright (2010).

Later Illich's thinking became a source of inspiration for post-growth theorists who enhanced the concept. In 2010 a group of scholars and scientists, named *convivialists* connected to adapted the conviviality concept as a minimal consensus for a vision of the world in the 21st century. The group includes a broad political spectrum of alternative economists, post-growth representatives, socialists, leftwing Catholics, and post-structuralists. Beyond a common analysis of the recent global social and ecological threats, they criticize economic, social, political, and cultural aberrations to come to this "minimal doctrine" which, following the group, can be shared globally.

The promotors underline that convivialism is existent in a multitude of social constellations and associative projects worldwide such as in volunteering, third sector, solidarity economy, cooperatives, fair trade and fair consumption, the commons movement, NGOs, and peer-to-peer networks. They assert, that the associative self-organization of people in civil society is crucial for theory and practice of social transformation. As a starting point to move to conviviality, they define the concept of a caring society (Adloff & Leggewie, 2014, 57).

The convivialist manifesto defines moral, political, ecological, and economic principles and recommendations, which are relevant for an ecosocial shift in social work. Following the primary considerations of Illich and of the convivialists, we can deduce referrals for the ecosocial transformation of social work:

- enabling and supporting user involvement, self-advocacy, and supported self-help.
- constructing democratic, decentralized, and cooperative organizational structures embedded in civil society.
- understanding professionals as facilitators of self-organization in social work.
- focusing on community-based collective approaches.
- pluralizing and localizing economic exchange in every-day contexts, fostering diverse economies, defending and extending the commons.

These dimensions are part of community-based social work practice, coherent with ecosocial transformation such as social solidarity economy. They have positive impacts on social relationships, self-efficacy, social learning, and social capital as well as ecological effects such as localization and decarbonization and economic effects like decommodification or the construction of short circuits.

2.2 Pluriversalism

The multiple crisis we are confronting is a crisis of a material and technical civilization, which has lost every sense of priorities (Sarr 2022, 27). The process of ecosocial transformation in general cannot be subsumed in the epistemic frame of modernist western thinking alone, characterized by anthropocentrism, systematic individualism, fixation on private property and economic growth, excluding the connection between human and non-human as part of the whole and same reality. Ecosocial transformation of social work asks for disassociating from this unilateral worldview which led to the cumulative crisis also influencing social work's epistemology and methodology, transferred from the global North to the global South (Boetto, 57). One core deficit of this worldview is the "quantophrenic tilt", the trial, to value complex societal dynamics by quantitative measurement which does not say anything about

the quality of life (Sarr 2022, 18). Thus, also the "reconceptualization of well-being as part of the epistemological base of ecosocial work has implications for the methodological base." (Boetto, 59).

We must learn to think in possibilities, limits, and interconnectivity diverse from the reductionist Western worldview. There is a wealth of alternative cosmovisions and lived political projects in the majority world (Kallis et al. 2015, 5; Peeters 2022) which imply dimensions relevant also for the global North. Other worldviews, knowledge, and skills, particularly those that belong to indigenous people have been marginalized by capitalist development, degrading and relegating them to the realm of myths, legends, and beliefs. These multi-diverse worldviews are composed by different kinds of being, thinking, feeling, concepts of time, understanding of human relations and the relations to the non-human, the vision of the past und the future, the organization of collective living, or the production of goods and services. (Sousa & Rodríguez, 2013).

A growing movement of more than 100 activists, scientists, and scholars, predominantly with origins in the majority world have connected as the so called "*Pluriversalists*" (Kothari et al., 2019). They defend the plurality and diversity of worldviews and knowledge, replacing the dominance of Western ideas, not rejecting them totally but seeing them as one among others (Gudinas 2015). The Pluriversalists are dominated by initiatives of transformation, a pluriverse of economic, socio-political, spiritual, cultural, and ecological concepts, worldviews, and practices from all over the world. They share the idea of alternatives to capitalism and reject "the concept of progress and its derivates (particularly growth) or the idea, that welfare depends only upon material consumption" (Gudynas 2015, 202). A focal point is the criticism of western style development as central organizational principle of social life. In "this way, it is related to two other emerging imaginaries, that of post-capitalism (…) and post- or degrowth (…)." (Escobar 2015, 31). Debates and action affecting this movement include buen vivir and ubuntu as concepts of collective life and wellbeing and the rights of nature.

The pluriverse movement tries to think, conceive and experimentalize a plural, diverse and realizable society in which different principles of constructing realities can coexist. Its position is not to be misunderstood as arbitrary cultural relativism as they have core communalities, such as a diverse concept of human well-being, a prospect of societal flourishing beyond growth, and the socio-cultural embeddedness of economic activities which serve concrete needs.

These perceptions can have implications for the conception of a transformation to ecosocial work. Embracing a pluriversal approach has the objective to push back against inequalities, consumerism, and ecosocial destruction and foster sustainable development (Kothari et al 2019). It defines own trajectories to a good life and alternatives to Western style development concepts. The thinking of a pluriverse implies the existence of many worlds somehow interconnected. The human world is connected to the natural world and the spiritual world. "Taking the pluriverse as an ontological starting point, implies not simply tolerating difference, but understanding that reality is constituted not only by many worlds, but by many kinds of worlds, many ontologies, many ways of being in the world, many ways of knowing reality, and experimenting those many worlds. The discussion then has an ontological fundament with epistemological and methodological consequences" (Querejazu, 2016).

How can these considerations contribute to ecosocial transformation of social work also in the global North? Boetto, in her conception of epistemological elements for ecosocial work lists diverse thinking dimensions of practice under which she assumes indigenous perspectives, eco-feminism, and global perspectives (Boetto 2016, 53). She underlines that the majority world has contributed to social work, amongst others, with new perspectives on micro and

macro practice and the relationship between them. We can learn from “traditional indigenous cultures about living in harmony with the natural world, based on spiritual believes, holism, collectivism and connection with the land” (Boetto 2016, 54).
Furthermore, societies of the global North are becoming more and more pluriverse. Amongst others, migrants and their communities bring in their values, knowledge, and skills and preserve them within their families and communities. Not least as a reaction to rejection, marginalization, and racism in the host countries, they create own self-help systems, which sometimes can be seen as models for innovative ecosocial solutions also for the host countries in the global North (Lintner 2015; Tadesse 2023). They are leftovers of culturally integrated, forms of economic transactions based on mutuality and solidarity, safeguarding the material and non- material livelihood of the migrant communities in the host countries (Sarr 2022). They can also be recognized as socio-economic realities, that organize own and common needs, using or creating opportunities in the niches left over within the capitalist system. They are, as Sarr describes, part of a dual system, which still is coined by the cultural values of societies of descent.
The development of a diverse, embedded, and life-serving economy, is the most important practical implication of ecosocial transformation. A convincing example is community-based Solidarity Economy across People of African Descent (PAD) in Europe, which we will introduce later (Tadesse & Elsen, forthcoming). The worldview of the Pluriversalists includes collective responsibility, sustainability, holisms, and interdependence. Drawing on this philosophical base of practices, which is affected by mentalities and experiences of the majority world, social work can start to “develop practice strategies that address challenges and create opportunities for ecosocial practice” (Boetto, 2017, 64). In relation to this, the following considerations are relevant for the transformation of ecosocial work in thinking and practice:

- deepening the understanding of worldviews and practices of citizens with diverse cultural backgrounds.
- generating sensibility and competences for informal and creative solutions.
- bethinking collective and mutual approaches of Social Work.
- studying diverse understandings of well-being.
- facilitating culturally embedded diverse economies.

2.3 Diverse Economies

Community-based diverse economies are steps on the pathway out of ‘organized irresponsibility’ in capitalist economy and a consequent way to degrowth. Their (re)implementation is one of the most important strategies of ecosocial transformation (Elsen & Wallimann 1998; Elsen, 1998). They aim to re-embed (Polanyi 1944) and reframe economic activities in their sociocultural and natural contexts and make them part of community life. They refer to all practices that allow us to survive and care for each other and the earth. Economy, understood this way, is not separate from ecology, but relates to the management of human and nonhuman ecological relations of sustenance. Seeing it as “day-to-day processes that we all engage in as we go about securing what we need to materially function, it’ s clear that economy is created by the actions we take. People are creating community economies based on ethical decisions to live well with other humans and with the world around them” (Gibson-Graham et. al. 2013, 8). It is the co-creation of diverse ways in which we collectively make our livings, receive our livings from others, and provide for others.

Following this logic, economic activities are predominantly to be considered in their reproductive function for people, nature, and communities. “Reproduction refers to those activities, that reproduce people over time, particularly the caring and nurturing activities performed especially by women, in contrast to activities that produce goods and services” (Wright 2010, 274). We refer to the understanding of provisioning as a life-sustaining approach, which is centred around a comprehensive concept of care, following Peeters in this publication (2024). The concept is based on the understanding of diverse economies, originally discussed by feminist scholars already in the 1970s (Biesecker & Kesting 2003), which include the economy in its plurality and within its diverse contexts, in public, private, common, cooperative, monetary or not for profit environments, connected with the recognition of the plurality of activities like subsistence labour, wage labour, family work, cooperative work, volunteering, care work etc., recognizing the disesteemed plurality of economic activities, especially in the broad field of care, which has been the base of degrading labour division in capitalist societies. Following Peeters, it “is a thinking practice to deconstruct capitalist centered discourses, which focusses on wage labor within capitalist enterprises operating in the market, by making visible actual economic diversity as a starting point for change” (Peeters, 2022, 138). It underpins ontologically the transition to economy as an open space.

Diverse economies strike the dominant economic and political systems. Not only their objectives, but also their functioning and organizational culture is beneficial for ecosocial transformation, and the significance lies not only in their economic potential or their capacity to cope with societal problems, but in their emancipative power related to citizens self-organization, social learning, and social capital. Thus, uncovering, creating, and supporting community-based diverse economies is a core objective of ecosocial social work.

Recently the strong global movement of Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) focusing on just and sustainable transformation of basic needs such as food, housing, and energy but also of culture, education, and social services seems to be the strongest power for a transformative change of social work, significantly broadening also the understanding of “the social” (Utting 2015; Yi et al 2023; Elsen 2019). SSE is a part of diverse economies. It encompasses organizations “that prioritize social and often environmental considerations over private economic interests and profit orientation; involve forms of management or governance which are more horizontal and democratic; and are often linked to forms of collective action and active citizenship” (UNRISD 2016: 17). While actors and organizations of SSE often have a strong local affiliation, they “reflect on the macro-institutional changes such as the privatization of banks and social services, deregulation of markets at the expense of the satisfaction of collective needs, the heralding of elite consumerism as a value system etc.” (Moulaert et al. 2013, 1).

The transformative potential of diverse economies depends on the embeddedness in social, cultural, and political dynamics and the awareness for the interlinked processes of creating and institutionalizing economic alternatives (Laville, 2016, 214). If SSE as part of diverse economies and approach which serves local welfare, common good and eco-social transformation is supposed to step out of its niches, also the dominant economy cannot be discharged from social responsibility. This requires fiscal distribution from capital-steered to life-centered economies (Ulrich 1993).

In the context of social work, SSE can facilitate empowerment and the participation of social service users, opening opportunities for their self-determination and personal prosperity (Elsen 2019, 2023). Acting outside of direct market pressure, SSE can unlock fields that are monetarily little profitable but have a high impact for service users and communities such as urban agriculture. SSE has become an innovative pool for societal experiments with a variety of aims such as poverty reduction, social inclusion, global solidarity, meaningful employment, alternative utilization of green spaces, local production and consumption also effecting carbon reduction. Beyond these concrete experiments, it is an emancipative context of new collective living and working experiences as well as integrative and democratic community development, involving above all, deprived groups. Regarding the diversity and plurality of SSE, different innovative dimensions in relation to welfare production and ecosocial transformation get visible:

- participation, self-government, and self-determination of users versus paternalism.
- a reduction of role-differences and hierarchical positions, flattening vertical structures.
- cooperative knowledge production versus dependencies from experts.

Wright (2010) underlines the potential of SSE as a real utopia and emancipatory alternative to economic capitalism and state-technocratic rationality. It "constitutes an alternative way of directly organizing economic activity that is distinct from capitalist market production, state organized production and household production. Its hallmark is production by collectivities directly to satisfy human needs not subject to the discipline of profit-maximization or state-technocratic rationality" (Wright, 2010, 141).

3. A diverse concept of well-being

The re-conceptualization of the understanding of well-being is essential for eco-social transformation also of social work and it has methodological implications. It is a necessary shift from the orientation on individual material having to vital and responsible being and "recognise ourselves as existing within a holistic world where our well-being is dependent upon the collective well-being of others." (Boetto 2017, 53) Commodification of goods and services, of labor, land and other life-goods and a continuous increase of market dependency of people and communities is a characteristic of capitalist development. One overriding aim and strategy of de-growth for ecosocial transformation is greater autonomy from market supply by self-controlled activities. De-commodification of production, consumption, and knowledge and greater autonomy are common objectives of various ecosocial approaches. The Intention is to decrease the influence of commodities and commercialization and regain material and immaterial resources, knowledge, and skills for a more self-contained life, as Illich proposed in 1973.

We refer to the concept of human scale economies, of the Chilean development economist Manfred Max-Neef (1992). It bases on his theory of human needs and aspirations and represents an alternative idea of well-being, connected with autonomous doing, common experiences and self-efficacy. The analysis integrates being, having, doing, and interacting as basic needs. Max-Neef's classification demonstrates the interconnection between these dimensions and those of subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation,

creation, leisure, identity, and freedom as satisfiers, which relate to forms of organization, values, rules, and social practices. (1992, 199). Following this concept, it makes a fundamental difference *how* needs are satisfied.

Buying vegetables as commodities or producing and harvesting them collectively have completely different qualities, related to needs-satisfaction and to the possible contribution to individual well-being, social inclusion, and capacity building. Operating in self-contained productive niches, like in urban agriculture, can open endogenous and synergetic satisfiers. In this context, fundamental needs are not only goals, but can become drivers of sustainable development. Synergetic satisfiers are those, which in the way they satisfy a given need, stimulate and contribute to the simultaneous satisfaction of other needs. They can generate concrete material effects, but also knowledge, understanding, social inclusion, freedom from market dependencies and resilient communities, as well as affection and identity (Elsen& Fazzi 2021). Self-organization and collective self-help are also counter-movements against the loss of productive competences in the institutionalized state and consumption society, which deliver ready-made ware and services, restricting their processing (Illich 1973; Paech 2015). Fostering citizens self-organization in the field of urban agriculture, repair-workshops, or food coops can capture a pioneering role in the process of ecosocial transformation and is an acting field of transformative community work.

4. Transformative Community Work

One of the answers to the challenges of transformative ecosocial social work is the recourse to its collective and community-based practices and its core idea of participative human scale development. “Community work is potentially one of the most effective ways to develop a more sustainable society (…). The expertise of community workers, in terms of both knowledge and skills, has much to contribute to the Green movement…” (Ife 1995, 26). Ife conceptualized, besides the social justice perspective, an ecological perspective of community work. He mentions that facing the ecological crises of the world gives “the Green position a sense of both, urgency and inevitability” (Ife 1995, 24). He criticizes single environmental responses such as anti-pollution technologies in which each problem is isolated following the characteristic linear thinking, which has played the dominant role in Western world view. “...[T]hey seek solutions within the existing social, economic and political order.” (Ife 1995, 25). The Green perspective sees environmental problems as social, economic, and political problems, caused by the unsustainability of the kind of society we have developed. This inevitably requires a more holistic perspective and integrative answers.

Community-based social work has a strong capacity for coping with processes of societal transformations with the historical example of the settlement Hull House in Chicago. In the era of radical societal changes connected with the dismissals caused by frenetic capitalism, urbanization, industrialization, and huge migration from Europe to the American continent at the end of the 19th to the first decades of the 20th century, a model of ecosocial Social Work emerged with the community-center Hull House in Chicago (Addams, 1910, Tadesse & Elsen 2023). It confronted the devasting living and working conditions, such as extreme exploitation and poverty, huge health problems, lack of infrastructure, disastrous and crowded housing situations, political corruption, and ecological destruction. The work of Hull House, documented by Jane Addams (1910) shows an understanding of transformative social work which starts with the awareness, that social constellations are changeable and must be

changed if they are devasting. Also, the construction of community-based solidarity economy was part of this comprehensive social work. Even if the horizon of the transformation of this era was different from the ongoing, the cumulation of problems in many societal spheres and the complexity of problematic and interconnected components are similar.

The question is, how to approach such complex problems? The answer of community work is, working on local level, interconnected with other layers, involving population and relevant stakeholders. A local community base enables for experiments in a real-life setting. Community-based social work has developed strategies, methods, and instruments as well as institutional arrangements which are coherent with the emancipative ideas of the profession and the recent needs of ecosocial transformation. It "refers to the actions and practices employed by various parties to improve conditions and build development capacities within communities" (Kunnen et al. 2013, 285). Collective and community-based approaches (Sacchetti et al. 2018; Elsen 2019, 2023) such as progressive community-development and community-organizing (Ife1995) are methodologies, which are embedded in civil society and involve the mobilization and participation of citizens in decision-making processes or even self-organized solutions. They have three general directions: community organizing to mobilize citizens, community economic development to build local economy, and participatory community planning for the transformation of living conditions.

In all three approaches, community work responded to the socio-economic and sociocultural crises since the end of the 1970s in two different ways: The first concerns strategies to revitalize disadvantaged communities to satisfy needs and solve problems of the population, starting with the analysis of deficits and following conventional indicators of development and life-quality as a kind of catching-up-development. The second is about a more experimental, and alternative approach, based on a vision of ecosocial development and a sustainable society, fostering diverse and alternative possibilities (Rubin & Rubin 1986; Kretzmann & McKnight 1993; Ife 1995). The detection of deficits as a starting point highlights the lack and failures of concerned people and their circumstances against a background of conventional socio-cultural and socio-economic conceptions. "This orientation then constructs people as incompetent, unable, unknowing and incapable rather than having the skills, knowledge and attributes to contribute to improve their own and others' circumstances." (Kunnen, et al. 2013, 287).

Community work must start from the inside of a community, and it must base upon analyzing and understanding of assets, capabilities, and capacities of a community and its population (Kretzmann& MCKnight 1993). It underlines potential strengths and options, and starts by fostering and creating relationships among residents, local associations, and institutions. This approach can open the perspective to opportunities without denying social problems but recognizing them as a reason to develop alternatives. Especially, for people living under distress, and this is the context of social work, forward looking strategies on the base of a common future-vision and the valorization of productive competences of people are highly important to set free positive energies.

Talking about community-development today must have a focus on ecosocial conceptions of society. Disadvantaged communities and marginalized people, which are the dominant acting fields, can offer a fruitful ground for alternative socio-economic conceptions, given that there is unlocked material and immaterial potential such as workforce, competences, and time-capacities of people but also the lack of alternatives. Community-work in such a context is an empowering process, which "enables people to change self-blame into social indignation." (Rubin & Rubin 2007, 146). Marginalized people in such a collective context realize the social construction of their life situation and gain the power to act.

Here, we are talking about territorial communities or neighborhoods, which are not given *per se* as communities in the sense of awareness for common interests. Communities often must be created first by mobilizing strategies of research and development (Kirby et al. 2010) to raise awareness, identify assets and common purposes and involve the population. In the context of community development, we can look back to the long tradition of community-based action research (CBAR) (Bradbury 2015) as a strategy of participatory planned change. The strategies, methods, and instruments of transdisciplinary research (Broersma, 2014) were developed and practiced in community-based settings. They start with complex real-life problems involving non-academic actors such as stakeholders and concerned people into processes of research and planned change (Elsen 2019, 69).
Starting points for transformative community development can relate to all components of communities; to natural resources such as soil, water, and energy; to human and social capital like skills, abilities, cohesion etc.; and to human made capital like infrastructure, information, and equipment. These are "the raw materials from which we create the social and economic aspects of community" (Gamble & Weil 2009, 7). In socio-economic necessitous communities however, the personal, material, and institutional preconditions for social innovation and creative solutions lack. Professional approaches in disadvantaged communities with marginalized people and generally under conditions of a lack of material and often immaterial resources are highly challenging for professionals and should not be underestimated. Fostering sustainable solutions under such conditions is part of community work in the context of proactive social policy and at the same time environmental policy (Wallimann, 2013).

Coming to a viable base for eco-social development, requires linking local bottom-up initiatives with institutions on a higher level (Wright 2010; Moulaert 2010) as well as with associations and movements following similar intentions, for example, in SSE to build networks for ecosocial transformation, or with institutions and actors in academic research. Acting in this way is a general strategy of progressive community development against ecosocial devastation. One successful approach to initiate transformative community-development is innovative community planning by participatory budgeting following the model of Porto Alegre, which opens doors to larger scale participation and community empowerment. More than 250 municipalities in Latin America, Europe, or China practice this as facilitating context for ecosocial transformation of a community (Gamble & Weil 2009 286).

4.1 New ecosocial community approaches and their impact

For ecosocial transformation of social work, we can turn to central aspects of community life, relevant and feasible for sustainable transformation especially those related to collective learning, cooperative production, provisioning, and infrastructure. Community work can contribute to ecosocial transformation with participative projects and diverse economies which can affect dematerialization such as common use, sharing or repairing, decommodification or decarbonization. Collective housing structures are convenient as development contexts for mutual care, repairing, or gardening. Connecting housing with local energy supply, shared mobility models, community gardens and workshops can tie social and ecological objectives. Repair initiatives, food-coops, community gardens, mutual care approaches or common use contribute to decommodification and decarbonization by local cooperation and most of all foster a spirit of community, break with systematic individualism and the fixation on private property (Gerber & Gerber 2016). This, however, asks for pro-active policy, a cooperative infrastructure such as repair shops or green spaces, and a new ecosocial

understanding of community work which enables and supports integrative approaches for social innovation (Moulaert 2013; Elsen, 2019).

We are talking about small local activities in social work context "which often fall(s) below the radar screen of radical critics of capitalism" (Wright 2010, 305). Tim Jackson, the post-growth economist, values these small socially productive approaches as "Cinderella" economy: Maybe the "seeds for (such) a transformation already exists often in local, community-based initiatives or social enterprises: community energy projects, local farmers' markets, slow food cooperatives, (…) local repair and maintenance services, craft workshops, (…) gardening, the restoration of parks and open spaces. In formal terms, many of these activities tend not to feature too highly on the conventional radar. They represent a kind of "Cinderella economy" sitting neglected on the margins of consumer society" (Jackson 2017, 142).

It Is the assignment of community work to seed and cultivate such kinds of transformative activities, to enable, initiate and attend settings in which ecosocial transformation gets possible. Professional approaches in disadvantaged communities with marginalized people and generally under conditions of a lack of material and often immaterial resources are highly challenging for professionals and should not be underestimated. The process of ecosocial change asks for positive experiences and narrations that show possibilities beyond loss, disclaim and reduction only, but bring benefits and enjoyment. In many European cities, urban subsistence activities or integrative rural approaches of multi-active people (Elsen & Uleri, 2023) are flourishing. Community work can either tie with these already existing movements or initiate them cooperatively with citizens, schools, associations, and other actors in- and outside of the local community. The following approaches are embedded in every-day life contexts and can be integrated in social work in different fields such as in the housing area, in schools, youth work or elderly care:

- Approaches, aiming to local food sovereignty, alternative food supply and food sharing, against food waste and the dependency from agro-industrial food and big distributers, are emerging in many welfare states, in which up to a third of food ends up in waste. These initiatives have a strong social and ecological impact, tying social and ecological motivations, community-based agriculture, bio-farmers, and movements against the global agriculture industry.
- Urban agriculture is a global movement. Citizens produce agricultural products in their neighborhood, regaining and sharing competences, utilizing green spaces productively and contributing to sustainable urban development (Sauer et al 2016). Small plots of land, walls and rooftops are used productively by community members. This has also a climate effect and gives citizens the opportunity to learn about horticulture and create intergenerational networks.
- The repair-movement is part of circular economy approaches. Reducing, reusing, upcycling and recycling are ways to sustain resources. The movement is highly creative, producing original, often artistic artifacts. Repair-cafés emerged in many cities as an intergenerational learning context for decommodification and control over technical goods rather than being controlled by them. The self-concept is that of "repairing the world" in a new and common post-capitalist do-it-yourself-practice (Baier et al., 2016).
- Green care integrates biological farming with social, educational, healthcare or therapeutic objectives. The role of this approach for maintaining and improving health

and wellbeing of vulnerable people, has gained high attention. It uses material and immaterial agricultural potential to deliver protected employment or other services for the benefit of users and the local community, fostering social integration, education for sustainable development, leisure activities and contributing to landscape ecology, preservation of biodiversity and rural development. These approaches also have an ecological impact (Elsen et al., 2020).

4.2 New institutional arrangements for ecosocial transformation

Regarding ecosocial transformation, institutional arrangements must be conductive for these open processes. They must be integrative, breaking with functional splitting of spheres and sectors, anchored in real life contexts and organized in cooperative and democratic organizations which allow for social experiments. We alluded to the convivialists, who in the 1970s worked for democratization, decentralization and user involvement of institutions and the participation of civil society. Community economies are predominantly arranged in voluntary associations, citizen initiatives, self-help-groups, and social cooperatives, based on democratic governance and (supported) self-organization (Elsen & Walk 2016; Elsen 2019). They are pathways to social empowerment by which civil society actors directly organize various activities, rather than simply shape the deployment of economic power (Wright 2010, 140).
Cooperatives are the historical alternatives to capitalist economy, and they have been as well emergency solutions as diverse economic cultures. They are both, economic and social institutions. The common interests of members, not capital accumulation, is the objective. Common use of resources and inclusive ownership avoid speculation, foster collectivity, and give access to goods and services for community members. The potential of cooperatives stems from the opportunities to combine resources, disconnect from market pressure and compensate monetary capital by social capital (Elsen 2019).

Italy has developed a strong cooperative sector, following societal needs, creating adequate institutional arrangements, facilitating legal frames and own supporting systems. The social function of cooperatives is anchored in article 45 of the Italian constitution of 1947. Fostered by regional and national consortia and a mutual fund as own financial structure, cooperatives have emerged as synergetic solutions for diverse societal problems. With the societal changes at the end of the 1970s, collective solutions for social needs such as elderly- and child-care, care for handicapped people, labor integration of disadvantaged people, or for new social needs gained topicality. Citizens along with their relatives and volunteers, built local cooperatives to advance specific social services. Two decades later, a legal frame for cooperatives with social objectives was legislated in 1991. Italian social cooperatives are SSE enterprises conducting educational, healthcare, and social services as well as socio-economic employment in many productive fields, acting in markets, following democratic, integrative, and participative rules, based on the mandate of social inclusion of marginalized groups (Elsen 2019).

The understanding of the social assignment, within the last years amplified from the focus on the needs of members or disadvantaged people, to the needs of communities. These third-

generation cooperatives are based on multi-stakeholder-structures focusing on the preservation and development of social cohesion, ecological balance, employment, infrastructure, or sustainable development. They act in all fields relevant to countermand negative dynamics of communities in decline, such as disaffection, unemployment, obsolescence of population, lack of infrastructure, loss of facilities etc. unlocking collectively development options (Kieswetter, 2018). Also, in the eastern part of Germany, within the last 20 years, this model was implemented for the benefit of local communities (BMWI, 2021). These new institutional arrangements act in various fields of common infrastructure such as energy, housing, education, mobility, water-supply, culture, and care, generating effects for the common good. They are models of a new subsidiarity, based on a diverse balance between state, market, and civil society, convenient for ecosocial transformation. As practice shows, they depend on facilitating conditions, especially the active support of public administration (BMWI 2021; Kiesswetter 2023).

4.3 The example of the Solidarity Economy of People of African Descent

To provide examples of SSE derived from the majority world, we draw on our ongoing research that explores SSE of People of African Descent (PAD) in Europe (Tadesse & Elsen, forthcoming). Our study reveals that the practices and entities associated with the SSE of PAD originate from a different ontology or worldview, distinct from the modernist perspective. They are based on collectivist, cooperative, and relational African philosophies such as Ubuntu, which is best summarized by the maxim “I am because we are.” Ubuntu underscores the importance of relationality and caring about the wellbeing of others at individual, family, community, societal, environmental, and spiritual levels (Mayaka & Truell 2021). Such culture affects perception, attitudes, investments or savings, and individual and collective decisions as core determinant of economic acting (Sarr 66).

We have identified diverse types of economic organizations of PAD built on philosophical foundations such as Ubuntu. These organizations include, among others, Hometown Associations (HTAs); burial societies; urban community gardens (commons); various types of financial institutions like Rotating Savings and credit Associations (ROSCAs), Accumulating Savings and Credit Associations (ASCAs); different types of cooperatives like worker cooperatives and housing cooperatives; religious-oriented associations like Mahiber and Dahira; and associations and organizations specializing in different fields including health, education, housing, development, welfare, culture, etc. (Tadesse & Elsen, forthcoming).

These SSE organizations of PAD can be mutual or public benefit organizations. Mutual benefit organizations (e.g., ROSCAs) primarily aim to meet the needs of their members while public benefit organizations (e.g., humanitarian associations) aim to address public interest (i.e., the welfare/wellbeing of the public). The SSE organizations of PAD engage in a multitude of activities in all sectors of the economy producing goods, services, and knowledge. Their activities include, social and cultural activities; welfare and social support services; education, training, and knowledge production; physical and psychological health services; housing services; development projects; financial services such as savings, credit, and insurance; agricultural activities; social business activities; activism, advocacy, lobbying; and consultative

and networking activities. By engaging in these services and activities, SSE organizations of PAD meet the needs of their members, communities, and societies; empower PAD at individual, group, and community levels; and facilitate social development (including social inclusion) at their host and origin countries (Tadesse & Elsen, 2023).

To provide specific examples, we briefly describe three types of SSE organizations of PAD, i.e., HTAs, ROSCAs, and burial societies.

HTAs are transnational associations of immigrants, bringing together individuals from the same village, town, ethnic group, state, or country. Their primary objectives include supporting their places of origin, maintaining connections with local communities, and fostering a sense of community as they adapt to life in their new home countries. These multifunctional associations operate both here (in the host countries) and there (in the origin countries). They offer mutual assistance to their members, families, and communities in host countries while simultaneously engaging in development initiatives within their countries of origin (Beloe-Nyamusa 2020; Mercer & Page 2010; Orozco & Garcia-Zanello 2009; Tadesse & Elsen forthcoming).

ROSCAs are "association[s] formed upon a core of participants who agree to make regular contributions to a fund which is given, in whole or in part, to each contributor in rotation" (Ardener, 1964, 201). ROSCAs rely on two fundamental principles, rotation and regularity. These principles serve as the foundation for their primary functions, which involve providing savings and credit services to their members. Furthermore, ROSCAs possess a dimension beyond finance, a social dimension, related to the solidarity of kin-group, neighborhood, or friendship. ROSCAs, as enduring informal financial institutions, play a vital role in offering alternative financing options to excluded groups like PAD and women. They also impart valuable lessons regarding ethical finance (Ardener, 1964; Tadesse & Elsen, forthcoming; Tadesse & Erdem, 2023).

Burial societies primarily function as a social insurance. They operate by sharing risks and expenses related to death, illness, and accidents. Members, along with their families, make regular financial and other types of (e.g., labor, food) contributions. These societies offer several welfare and social benefits, including the organization of the burial ceremony, financial compensation for grieving families, psychosocial support during bereavement, assistance to orphans and elderly, aid for sick and disabled, and support for poor and unemployed. Burial societies also engage in community development by mobilizing their members for various community initiatives such as sanitation campaigns, environmental work, crime prevention, and campaigns against HIV/AIDS (Aredo, 2010; Pankhurst, 2008; Pankhurst & Mariam, 2000; Tadesse & Elsen, 2023; Tadesse & Elsen, forthcoming).

Many SSE organizations of PAD are multifunctional, addressing social, economic, and, in some cases, environmental aspects. In relation to this, we also observed that the services provided have, in most cases, a tendency to be, what Max-Neef (1992) called "synergetic satisfiers" of fundamental human needs, which can satisfy multiple needs at the same time.

5. Conclusion

Ecosocial transformation is a challenging objective which concerns all societal levels, sectors, and actors. The layer which enables integrative and synergetic approaches is the local level because it allows for new institutional arrangements and the involvement of stakeholders and citizens. One of the answers to the challenges is the recourse to collective and community-based practices of social work. Many practices, philosophies and institutional arrangements of community based social work are congruent with what Boetto (2017) requires across ontology, epistemology and methodology for ecosocial social work. Community work underpinned with diverse economies can generate transformative processes in cumulative metamorphosis. It is, what Wright calls interstitial strategies to build new forms of social empowerment in the niches of capitalist society (Wright 2010, 305). As we demonstrated, also symbiotic strategies of transformation (Wright, 210, 337), extending civil empowerment, helping to solve problems faced by dominant actors, can cause metamorphic changes.

Not least, social work must adopt its worldviews to the recent shift of the era. We discussed a selection of concepts partly introduced already some decades ago and recent discourses beyond anthropocentrism, economic growth, consumerism, and systematic individualism and connected them with ecosocial thinking, practice, and research in social work. This requires, as Illich claimed already 50 years ago, a new equilibrium, which defends people against the total dependencies from market and re-opens spaces for self-organization against economic totalitarianism and paternalism of institutions. Community work can contribute actively to ecosocial transformation by fostering participation and diverse economies which can affect dematerialization, decommodification and decarbonization and especially new social relations.

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