SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY IN SOCIAL WORK TRAINING

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Abstract

Social ecology appears as overcoming the functional inconsistencies of the current development model, introducing a new perspective of eco-systemic balance among species and between humans and nature, as well as society systems. This is a theme directly related to Social Work that seeks to ensure social well-being, intervening in multiple dimensions of human, social and sustainable development. This presentation aims to analyse the perception of social work master students about social ecology and the importance of social and ecological sustainability on social work training.

We followed a collaborative learning methodology with a group of Erasmus Social Work master's students from various Universities (Portugal, Finland, Slovakia, Spain and Lithuania). Based on a questionnaire given to each student before the group discussion, we assessed the participants' knowledge on this topic. From here we proceeded to a debate activity that allowed systematizing contributions to Social Work, as well as discussing the importance of promoting more sustainable societies and practices.

The results showed that many students had limited knowledge about ecological and social sustainability, recognizing that this was a relevant topic for Social Work training. Among the aspects that the group highlighted as essential in the training were: the importance of promoting a more inclusive planet, combating social inequalities and to ensure environment as fundamental right; and the importance of promoting sustainable actions that preserve the environment and respond to climate changes.

Additionally, the participants considered that social and ecological sustainability should be part of the Social Work training programme, considering present and future social intervention.

Keywords: Social and Ecological Sustainability, Social Work training, Social intervention.

1 INTRODUCTION

Social and ecological issues are interconnected and cannot be dissociated if we want to approach them from the perspective of preventing the future and, at the same time, solving the problems of the present. The social effects of the ecological crisis are perceived across the board, are part of contemporary questioning and, as such, it is relevant to take into account that ecology should not be reduced to just a concept in the theoretical discourse, but can foster social transformation practices that reinforce the goals set by the United Nations in the 2030 Agenda (Sustainable Development Goals 2030 – SDG2030) for an effective environmental sustainability, along with the principles and values defended by Social Work from the perspective of the well-being and human dignity.

The ecological perspective, also known as the social ecological model, uses concepts from biology and the physical sciences to describe the reciprocity between individuals and their environments and how the mutual exchange of person and place affects their livelihood and is a methodological model used in the social sciences to observe and understand the dynamics of relationships between individuals, including multiple levels of perspective of the social environment [1]. Provides a "holistic" look at phenomena that occur at various levels of society and within different systems and considers the influence of environmental factors at different levels (family, school, community, nation....) that shape individual behavior. The key concept is interconnectedness, i.e. each system works interconnected with the functions of another system, as such, the impact and consequences of each action must be considered [1, 2].

By the fact of not being an exclusive subject of one area of knowledge, it cannot be understood in its complexity without the participation and integration of the various fields of knowledge. Therefore, integrating it in the scope of professions that are closer to individuals and that works to overcome the aggravation of social inequalities and on the responses of social issues, is important in order to join the socio-environmental area, in an interdisciplinary perspective, which is why the social worker's performance has the challenge of include in the daily practice the apprehension of the social dimensions of the environment.

> Social work prepares its professionals with rigorous field experience, and a holistic curriculum, which includes theories and frameworks that question and challenge complex social systems. First year students have a basic conceptual understanding of feedback loops, nonlinear trajectories, and exposure to systems thinking. This foundation is useful for their subsequent coursework, which can take them in a variety of directions across micro to macro practice: political advocacy, behavioral economics, clinical and therapy modalities, social enterprise, just to name a few [3].

The two greatest potentials of this perspective lie in that it provides a better understanding of research by investigating the problem with multiple perspectives and allows researchers and practitioners to look at various levels of the individual (micro - biological, relationship and cultural levels), within social organizations and larger structural influences (meso, macro and exogenous) [2, 3].

> In education and in practice, social workers are trained to see the invisible social forces that inform behavior and social organization. In this way, a person's motivations can be as important as their actions. Trained to perceive the gestalt, they build their work sensibly and dynamically in response. Practitioners bring the unseen layers of influence into the light and challenge the forces in the system not viable for the whole. They evaluate entropy in the system by identifying and deconstructing the factors that do not promote growth: intergenerational poverty, historical oppression, systemic and institutionalized racism [3].

Previous models presented a reduced view of reciprocity [4] therefore, the importance of this perspective is highlighted because, being transversal to several fields, in the cause-effect understanding; it provides elements about why individuals do or do not take certain attitudes in society and information for decision making at various levels (e.g. policies that intend to change a social problem, such as domestic violence, poverty or environmental degradation) [2]. The consequences of ecological crises and shortage of natural resources have strongest impact on the most vulnerable people (space, food, energy, health, recreation) [2].

> In this sense, the modes of intervention should not be understood only in the technical–operative instrumental dimension, but also in a theoretical–scientific reference in the apprehension of everyday facts, phenomena, processes and practices. This knowledge is necessary and pertinent since the profession originates from the needs and possibilities offered by the unequal development of society. Dealing with social–ecological issues requires practitioners to change their traditional approach in a way that social work can contribute to sustainable development [2].

This is justified to reinforce the understanding that the social and the environmental components cannot be separated from this discussion, and that Social Work has broadened its field of action, renewed its theoretical, methodological, and political interpretation, and sought to establish a critical look at reality in conjunction with other professional areas in order to offer answers to the worsening of this problem. However, if, on the one hand, the several refractions of the ecological (socio-environmental) issue have been a challenge to Social Workers, on the other hand, even with some advances in the last decade, this theme is still an incipient space of debate and intervention in the scope of Social Work.

Based on the literature review and despite the increase of scientific production on this subject, several authors [2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11] mention that there is a scarce inclusion - if not at all - of this theme in the training process, and this issue is reflected in the theoretical accumulation, as well as in the professional practice of Social Workers, normally, it is not present as mandatory in the syllabus of Social Work courses, however, it is noticed that in some educational institutions it appears as an optional curricular unit. But, beyond the existence or not of curricular units, it is affirmed the importance of this professional category seeking more and more qualification and knowledge, to be able to act in a qualified way, and the University has a fundamental role in this process, both in what concerns the training and in the possibility of elaborating extension projects. Social workers are being called to play an increasing role on SDG 2030 and it is exactly this notion of belonging, of integration and interdependence of everything with everyone, of this complex web that rules life, that we must transmit to students.

> "For long, the teaching and learning of environmental concerns has been neglected in social work curricula. Social work as one of the vital agents of social change in society and needs environmental education to prepare practitioners for working on all the three main dimensions of SD, i.e. social, economic and environmental. The current state of the environment is a major global cause of concern and worry for all. For decades, several political leaders and professionals (such as social workers) have failed to consider societal transformation towards SD in a comprehensive and more holistic manner with a high degree of seriousness" [11].

Social workers are being called upon to play an increasing role in developing sustainable environmental practices [12,13]. Currently, however, dominant social work practice models do not address issues of environmental sustainability. Nonetheless, social workers have the core skills necessary for environmental practice as they excel in networking, linking and engaging multiple sectors of marginalized communities, all of which are important to sustainable development.

Therefore, the profession is ideally situated to further environmental justice and promote sustainable development, which is a complex undertaking given the social structures that separate people from the physical environment [2,14]. Disconnected from the environment, social workers can't create conditions and undermine their ability to meet the collective needs for water, food, health, safety and security

Those on the margins of society are little able to advance environmental justice as long as it is separated from the responses to the structural issues (e.g. War, violence and poverty). Environmental degradation, poverty and war are inextricably linked, and the human and social dimensions of this crisis is tied to issues of human rights and social justice [14, 15].

The interconnection between poverty, food insecurity, inequality, environmental degradation, sustainability and development are well established since 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987). The United Nations recognizes the link between environmental concerns, social stability and peace and security, the signs are clear and we are already behind.

2 METHODOLOGY

The study presented in this paper aims to understand how the intervention of social work can promote the ecological sustainability and the main objective was to analyze the perception of social work master students about social ecology and the importance of social and ecological sustainability on social work training. The study occurred during one week in our university with an international group of students inserted in a Short blended intensive programme (BIP) about sustainability, that includes some sessions, collaborative workshops and study visits to services and programmes in this field.

During these BIP, the group of students undertake 6 days physical mobility at our university combined with a compulsory virtual component that will count towards the overall learning outcomes, 6 ECTS with 50 hours of studying in total.

We followed a collaborative learning methodology with a group of Erasmus Social Work master's students from various Universities (Portugal, Finland, Slovakia, Spain and Lithuania). This option can take on multiple characterizations, and there may be different dynamics and learning outcomes for each specific context. In this methodological process we observe a set of phases, planning, action, observation, reflection, evaluation and future reformulation [16], that develop continuously making possible the beginning of new cycles that trigger the development of new learning processes.

Based on a questionnaire given to each student before the group discussion, we assessed the participants' knowledge on this topic. From here we proceeded to a debate activity that allowed systematizing contributions to Social Work, as well as discussing the importance of promoting more sustainable societies and practices. At the end of the week we made an evaluation assessment to the BIP.

3 RESULTS

In the questionnaire applied, debate activity and final assessment all participants freely and voluntarily gave their consent for the resulting data to be used for academic and research purposes, ensuring confidentiality.

3.1 Participants Knowledge

The results showed that many students had limited knowledge about ecological and social sustainability, recognizing that this was a relevant topic for Social Work training. It can be seen below in Table 1. Participants Knowledge, the questions made with a multiple choice of 4 answers each. The one in italic in the right answer and the third column is the % of right anwers.

Table 1. Participants Knowledge

Questions	***Answers Choice***	***% right answers***
What best defines sustainability?	*Meeting the needs of the present without depleting resources for the future* A term that refers exclusively to environmental preservation Investing in the development of products with raw materials from the forest Did not contribute to pollution	89%
What does the term greenwashing mean?	Organizations that operate in the green product segment *Brands that create a false appearance of sustainability* Companies that specialize in recycling Care with the environment	89%
Which one of the options below is not a renewable energy?	Hydropower Solar *Natural Gas* Wind	61%
What are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?	17 goals proposed by WWF to be achieved by 2030 that involve several dimensions of sustainable development 25 goals proposed by the UN to be achieved by 2030 that involve various dimensions of sustainable development *17 goals proposed by the UN to be achieved by 2030 that involve several dimensions of sustainable development* Millennium Development Goals	50%
When was the Paris Agreement, a global treaty to reduce global warming signed?	*In December 2015, during the COP 21* In January 2020, during the World Economic Forum In December 2009, during the COP 15 On World Environment Day	67%
Today, which country is the largest emitter of carbon dioxide (CO2), the main gas responsible for the greenhouse effect?	USA Brazil *China* India	89%
What are biodegradable products?	Readily decomposable products composed of synthetic material *Products that break down easily, composed of organic elements* Products produced through an environmentally friendly artisan process Products that degrade easily	78%
What best defines the concept of upcycling?	*Using creativity to give a new purpose to a material that would otherwise be discarded* Using a product beyond its useful life Equipment, furniture, or clothing passed from generation to generation in a family A product that can be used several times, without the need for chemical interventions	72%
Which country is the largest emitter of CO2 in the world?	Russia *China* USA India	39%
What was the hottest year ever?	2019 2011 *2016* 2007	43%
How many people die each year from diseases of environmental origin?	1.6 million 2.5 million 5.3 million *12,6 million*	33%
During the 15 days of confinement in China how did the emissions of pollutant gases evolve?	Less 12% less *Less 25%* More 2% Stayed the same	33%

When does Portugal have to achieve carbon neutrality?	2100 2070 *2050* 2025	50%
What percentage of the planet's water is drinkable?	17% *3%* 9% 25%	78%
With the melting ice, how much do sea levels rise per year? With the melting ice, how much do sea levels rise per year?	*3,3 cm* 82 cm 1 m 66 cm	17%
If this rate of destruction continues, when will the rainforests disappear?	*2100* 2500 2350 3000	
How many rainforest-dwelling species go extinct each day, on average?	22 *137* 50 100	44%
How many litter plastic bottles does it take to make one polar fleece sweater?	180 *25* 3 60	17%
How many kg of waste paper does it take to make 1kg of recycled paper?	3kg 500 grams *1.1 kg* 900kg	22%
If the temperature on the planet rose by 3.7°C, how much would be the losses caused by equivalent climate change:	900 billion dollars 551 billion dollars *Twice as much wealth as there is in the world today* 20 trillion dollars	17%
Since the advent of agriculture about 12,000 years ago, humans have destroyed what percentage of wild mammals?	10% 27% 44% *83%*	
How many mass extinctions have there been on the planet throughout its history?	4 *5* 10 15	33%
What is Social Sustainability?	*Yield boosting with a reduction in value for money, reduction of social differences and increase of quality of life* Maintenance of the planet Earth environment Ser of actions that a organization leads, aiming environment respect Set of actions that are beneficial to society	67%

What is the difference between sustainability and sustainable development?	Sustainability means a search for balance between a better life quality and the environmental limit of the planet and Sustainable Development It is linked to the speeches of various sectors of environmental companies Sustainability is linked to the speeches of various sectors of society and Sustainable Development means an action in which it will maintain a society in evolution *Sustainability means a search for balance between a better life quality and the environmental limit of the planet and Sustainable Development It is linked to the speeches of various sectors of society such as educational, political, health, etc* None of the alternatives above presents the differences between Sustainability and Sustainable Development	44%
Which of the alternatives below is an example of Social Sustainability?	Reforesting: areas that have suffered the removal of vegetation can be reforested for preserving the environment Disposal of electronic devices, batteries and accumulators at appropriate locations so that specialised companies can dispose of them correctly Proper treatment and all pollutants generated in the production products and services *Guidance to young people through efficient education programmes*	50%
According to Sustainability what are de 3 R's	Readjust recycle remake *Reduce, re-use and recycle* Repair, recycle and re-use Re-think, remake and realize	61%
What is the role of recycling?	*It is the process of reusing waste, giving rise to a new product or raw material* It is the process of reusing recyclable materials, making the product reusable It is the process of recycling waste, giving rise to a new product or raw material It is the process of reusing recyclable materials, making them non-reusable	28%
In home environment, one aspect of great importance for the environmental sustainability is:	*Waste recycling* Reuse of phosphorus Metal recycling Wood recycling	78%
Which of the alternatives below is an example of recycling?	Raw material accumulation *Selective waste collection* Plastic bottles reuse Incineration	33%
What is to be a sustainable person?	*Taking advantage of what the world offers us without compromising future generations* Not taking advantage of what the world offers us and compromising future generations Exercise every day before living home Do not harm your environment by keeping your things organized and visualising a good future for yourself	56%

Source: Own elaboration

3.2 Group Activities

During the BIP the group had several activities (classes, laboratory, workshops, fieldwork/visits and autonomous work. The themes of the workshops were "The eco-social dimension in territorialised intervention", "Expanding Eco-Social Approaches", "How can we adapt eco-social principles to build power within ourselves and communities?", "Where is Social Work in Ecological Sustainability?" "Healthy neighbourhoods: prospects and challenges", "Transition to a circular and carbon neutral society: context and practical local intervention".

Among the aspects that the group highlighted as essential in the training were: the importance of promoting a more inclusive planet, combating social inequalities and to ensure environment as fundamental right; and the importance of promoting sustainable actions that preserve the environment and respond to climate changes.

Additionally, the participants considered that social and ecological sustainability should be part of the Social Work training programme, considering present and future social intervention.

3.3 Final Assessment

In the final assessment was asked participants to ask some questions and was used a Likert scale with five (5) points (1-Very Low, 2 – Low, 3 – Moderate, 4 – High, 5 – Very High.

For the category “knowledge acquired” in the subcategory “Level of skills or knowledge at the beginning of the program 50% said it was low and 25% consider moderate and high, respectively. In the Level of skills or knowledge required to complete the program, 10% find it moderate and 90% high. Concerning the Level of skills or knowledge at the end of the programme, 5% said it was low, 35% moderate, 45% High and 15% Very High.

About the “Skills and dedication of the speakers” the scale points were 1-Strongly Disagree, 2- Disagree, 3 – Undecided, 4 – Agree and 5 - Strongly Agree. For the sub-category the speakers were an effective trainer, 80% Agree and 20% Strongly Agree, when asked if speakers stimulated students interest 85% Agree and 15% Strongly Agree. In the last item, if the speakers were attentive and willing to answer questions, 95% of participants Agree and 5% Strongly Agree.

In the category “Field Visits” the first sub-category was if the visits contributed to learning, 10% were Undecided, 40% Agree and 50% Strongly Agree, the next sub-category was if the visits were useful to Illustrate the contents of the program, 35% Agree and 65% Strongly Agree, for the sub-category, if the visits complemented the information worked in the classroom, 5% Disagree, 5% were Undecided, 35% Agree and 55% Strongly Agree.

About the “Programme Content”, 50% Agree that the Programme objectives were clear, 30% Strongly Agree, 15% were Undecided and 5% Disagree. If the Programme content was well organized and planned, 10% Disagree, 10% were Undecided, 55% Agree and 25% Strongly Agree.

The assessment had also open questions, the first was – What aspects of this programme did you find most useful? The majority of the participants mentioned that the lectures about the Eco social approach and the connection between social work topics like environment will be included in their work. They also refer to the practical examples of how to implement sustainability with Social Work, considered the topics very well chosen and that it was great to have a diversity of speakers.

In the question “How would you improve this programme it was unanimous that at least 2 weeks was the right time, in order to do more visits and have more debates, more interactivity between the students, nevertheless they like the whole programme.

Them you ask them to write a phrase or 3 word about the BIP, the word that were more used were: Interesting, important, eye opening, amazing, excellent, enriching, different, informative, intensive and important. The phrases reflected that participants rely considered this theme important for Social Work “Really interesting topics, looking forward to learn more about these”, “Great example of a good international practice”, “Few lecturers were really inspiring”, Excellent information”, “Really good”, “Inspiring! Thank you so much for this experience”.

Additionally, the participants considered that social and ecological sustainability should be part of the Social Work training programme, regarding present and future social intervention and all of them considered that this kind of programme should continue to be offered to students.

4 CONCLUSIONS

We believe that after completing the BIP students will be able to: Promote social inclusion in the context of social sustainability, expand Eco-Social approaches, develop critical thinking towards healthy neighborhoods and social work in ecological sustainability, contribute to the transition of a circular and carbon neutral society; Develop critical thinking and the digitalization of the processes of smart city concepts. The challenge lies in social workers developing or adapting new theories related to this field and, above all, elaborating properly grounded practices to improve their capabilities, ensuring their insertion, both theoretical and practical, in the professional training curriculum. Learning for sustainable development then becomes an instrument for the promotion of social justice and human dignity.

The environmental crisis has very relevant impacts on social service practice. The deterioration of livelihoods directly affects the health and well-being of populations. These first steps allow students to have coherence between thinking, speaking, feeling, and doing. Also, promote processes focused on humanistic values, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies that contribute to citizen participation in the construction of sustainable societies.

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