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Come integrare la sostenibilità in sistemi e servizi di welfare locali? Esperienze, prospettive e analisi critiche di assistenti sociali e operatori in organizzazioni pubbliche e del terzo settore

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability, and how it may be embedded in welfare systems and services, is a much-debated topic in social work studies, with implications for the role that social workers and other care professionals play in this process. Analysing a local welfare system, this paper investigates professionals' experiences of the organisational dimension of social services, and potential factors supporting a service redesign informed to sustainability. Professionals' perspectives on sustainability, and their views on structural factors, barriers and methodological tools influencing the establishment of sustainable service networks, are explored. Data is drawn from a study exploring views on sustainability in care professionals in Italy (Veneto region). Eight focus groups, involving $n = 26$ social workers and $n = 12$ care professionals in Public and Third Sector Organisations were conducted using a photo-elicitation technique. Interviews were thematically analysed and interpreted through Boetto's 'transformative eco-social model' (2017). Results describe the structuring of the eco-social intervention network and the (un)sustainable system aspects. Participants highlighted the benefits of participatory planning approaches, community work, new economic models, and organisational cultures fostering meaningful work. We conclude that social care professionals have a key role in catalysing grassroots change, and local services are privileged settings for building a sustainable, generative welfare.

ABSTRACT

Il tema della sostenibilità, e della sua inclusione in sistemi e servizi di welfare, è molto dibattuto nel Servizio Sociale, con implicazioni per il ruolo che assistenti e operatori sociali possono avere nel processo. Analizzando un sistema di welfare locale, questo articolo indaga le esperienze dei professionisti della dimensione organizzativa dei servizi,

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e i fattori che potrebbero contribuire a una loro riconfigurazione informata alla sostenibilità. Verranno esplorate le prospettive dei partecipanti su fattori strutturali, barriere e strumenti metodologici che influenzano lo sviluppo di una rete di servizi sostenibile. Otto focus group, formati da n.26 assistenti sociali e n.12 operatori sociali operanti in organizzazioni del pubblico e terzo settore in Veneto (Italia) sono stati condotti usando una tecnica di foto-elicitazione. Le interviste sono state analizzate tematicamente e interpretate attraverso l'approccio 'trasformativo eco-sociale' di Boetto (2017). I risultati descrivono la strutturazione della rete degli interventi eco-sociali e aspetti di (in)sostenibilità del sistema. I partecipanti hanno sottolineato i benefici di programmazione partecipata, lavoro di comunità, nuovi modelli economici, e culture organizzative promuoventi un 'lavoro significativo'. I professionisti nel sociale, concludiamo, hanno un ruolo chiave nel catalizzare cambiamenti 'dal basso', e i servizi locali appaiono un ambito privilegiato per costruire un welfare sostenibile e generativo.

Background

Sustainability, and how it may be embedded in welfare systems, is a topic of much debate in social work studies, with implications for the role that social workers and other social care professionals may play in this process (Hirvilammi et al., 2023; Matthies et al., 2020). Analysing the case of an Italian local welfare system, this paper focuses on professionals' experiences of the organisational dimension of social services, and the factors supporting a service redesign informed by sustainability. In doing this, professionals' perceptions of sustainability, and their views on structural elements, barriers and strategies influencing the establishment of a sustainable service network, will be explored.

Sustainability has been defined as the capacity to maintain and renew the resources within the normal balance of lifecycles, to meet the needs of present and future generations (Rinkel & Powers, 2017). In social work and policies, sustainability has been discussed primarily in financial, fiscal and demographic terms (Schoyen et al., 2022). However, international literature has highlighted that it should be more broadly conceptualised, in light of pressing environmental issues. Here, the environmental dimension is located within the 'three pillar' model of sustainability, where economic, social and environmental components are distinct but interrelated spheres (Rinkel & Powers, 2017; Schoyen et al., 2022). The notion of an 'eco-social-growth trilemma' captures the complex interplay between the three sustainability components, which cannot be treated separately as they are often connected with divergent goals (Schoyen et al., 2022).

Sustainability is connected to social work practices which challenge the conventional focus on the socio-cultural environment, to emphasise the key role of the natural environment. Several scholars have highlighted the nuances among these practices, designating them with different terms, including 'green', 'environmental' or 'eco' social work (Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2012; Peeters, 2012), used in this paper. The notion of eco-social work refers to professional models conceiving the natural environment not as an addition to the current practices, but as an element entailing a worldview shift (Boetto, 2017; Gray et al., 2012). Eco-social work pays attention to cultural diversity, interconnections among all the life forms, ecological values related to sustainability and de-growth, and comprehensive views of wellbeing. This widens social workers' remits because environmentally related work expands from the micro- and meso-, to the macro-level (personal, community, organisational and political dimensions; Boetto, 2017).

Despite the richness in theoretical contributions, the implementation of sustainability in the day-to-day professional contexts appears challenging. Numerous conceptual frameworks have explained the gap between environmental knowledge and awareness and pro-environmental behaviour, associated with sustainable working practices. However, no definitive explanation has been found. Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) have described the most influential and used frameworks, including early US

linear progression models; altruism, empathy and prosocial behaviour models; and sociological, economic and social marketing models. Kollmuss and Agyeman observed that, even if they all have some validity, none can comprehensively explain what hinders or encourages pro-environmental behaviours as these are positively or negatively influenced by a range of individual and external factors. For instance, gender and education are influential, with women and higher educated people more likely to enact pro-environmental behaviours. Adopting sustainable practices is also shaped by motivation, awareness, values, attitudes, emotions, locus of control, priorities and responsibilities. These are intertwined with structural factors, such as institutional, economic, social and cultural circumstances (Khan et al., 2018; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Naylor & Appleby, 2013).

Study context

The debates on how to increase service system sustainability are ongoing in Italy, whose welfare state has been described as corporatist-conservative as benefits are primarily based on the individual labour market position (Pavolini et al., 2015). As in other Mediterranean countries, public sector services are relatively underdeveloped, due to the traditional reliance on domestic informal care. In 2000, a long-lasting financial crisis has led to a retrenchment of welfare provisions, resulting in a system recalibration, privatisation and regionalisation (Pavolini et al., 2015). Despite the growing residuality and regional gaps, the Veneto services network performs relatively well. Social workers traditionally operate in Public Sector Organisations (PSOs; e.g. Councils and Health Authorities), implementing local social policies. However, due to the differentiation of welfare providers, social work has spread also in Third Sector Organisations (TSOs; e.g. not-for-profit enterprises, charities), in Veneto particularly developed.

In the 2021 Eco-Innovation Index,[1] Italy was ranked 10th, within the EU 27 countries, above countries such as Luxemburg, Finland and Austria (Fondazione Symbola, 2022). Major investments in the green economy will be financed through the Next Generation EU programme, allocating to Italy 191.5 billion Euro by 2026, including 59.3 for the ecological transition (PNRR, 2021). Between 2010 and 2020, awareness of challenges beyond economic factors grew in political parties, trade unions and business organisations, whose programmes considered sustainability more comprehensively (Natili et al. in Schoyen et al., 2022). However, institutional and political obstacles have hampered strong actions towards the introduction of sustainable welfare provisions.

Research has also documented limits to the diffusion of wenjing zhang work. Matutini et al. (2023) suggest that this may be due to the limited space that it has on policy agenda, the inability to cognitively reframe existing activities as eco-social work practices, and the competition of no-profit organisations for scarce public funding, at the expenses of long-term changes. Despite these issues, there is much discussion on how to embed sustainability in social services, and implement professional actions combining social and environmental justice.

This paper contributes to these debates addressing the following questions:

- How do social workers and other social care professionals perceive sustainability in their lived work experience and organisational settings?
- What are their perspectives on structural factors and barriers influencing the establishment of sustainable practices in local welfare systems? What practices, methodological tools and organisational choices could make it more sustainable?

A 'Transformative Eco-Social Model' in social work

This paper draws data from a broader study exploring views on sustainability in social workers and other social care professionals. The research was informed by Boetto's 'transformative eco-social model' (2017). The model may be located within post-humanist philosophical perspectives (Braidotti, 2013), as it addresses the reliance of the profession in positivist and modernist assumptions based on

anthropocentric stances and binary oppositions (e.g. nature/culture, mind/body). Boetto (2017) argues that, by adopting such world views, social work has inadvertently contributed to the nature misuse. She proposes, instead, a paradigm emphasising holism and interdependence, supporting a 'transformative change' in professional practice. Such change endorses a notion of well-being inclusive of spiritual and social dimensions, based on harmonic relations with all living organisms.

Boetto's paradigm articulates social work in three dimensions: ontological, epistemological and methodological. The ontological dimension regards the relationship between individual identity and the environment, including the natural world and living beings. According to Boetto, if 'our sense of belonging or identity [is] interconnected with the natural world, [it] will be evident in practice' (2017, p. 52). The ontological dimension comprises aspects related to the self, including world-views, beliefs, moral stances, and professionals' approach to practice.

The epistemological sphere involves social work values and principles, and 'the "thinking" dimension of practice' (p. 54). It encompasses professional knowledge relating to ecology and de-growth, indigenous perspectives (interpretable, in the Italian social work context, as the promotion of minorities and local communities' views), and the critical analysis of power dimensions. The epistemological sphere includes notions allowing social workers to maintain a global view on the phenomena and the focus on social justice, citizen's rights, and the interconnection between Global South and North.

The methodological dimension includes actions, interventions and strategies employed by social workers in their daily practice. These elements of 'doing' include the individual and 'group, community and political dimensions of practice' (p. 52). Hence, the model allows for representing activities shared by groups of professionals, who recognise themselves as part of communities of practices (Wenger, 1999). These are culturally sensitive to the specificity of local communities, and may promote transformative processes through interventions embedding political stances. Boetto observes that the activist and political dimensions of practice may have profound implications in mitigating effects of the climate crisis disproportionately affecting disadvantaged population groups. Finally, the methodological dimension encompasses activities at the organisational level, because social work primarily operates in an institutional context. As we will show, organisational characteristics have a prominent role in implementing sustainable practices.

Methodology and methods

This study employed a qualitative methodology. Recruitment and data collection were conducted between May and June 2022, after approval from the University of Trieste Research Ethics Committee (Ref. n.122/23.05.2022). Participants were recruited through a purposive sampling strategy in the Veneto region, to obtain a homogeneous sample in terms of legislative, cultural and organisational background.

Recruitment strategies included direct contact with potential participants, emailing, 'snowballing' and chain information dissemination. The final sample was composed of $n = 38$ participants, including $n = 26$ social workers primarily operating in PSOs ($n = 23/25$), and $n = 12$ social care professionals affiliated to TSOs. The sample was composed of $n = 23$ frontline staff and $n = 15$ managers, of which $n = 3$ policy makers. Stratifying the sample based on work setting allowed for accessing a range of professional and organisational experiences, and to understand how 'sustainability' translates in different contexts of interventions. We also recruited a family caregiver, considered 'expert by experience' and, thus, partner in the co-production of social interventions (Yedidia & Tiedemann, 2008). Before the data collection, participants received an informative e-mail about the study, and could express their interest in a meeting to triangulate and discuss the findings.

After receiving the informed consents, data were collected using online focus groups (Clark et al., 2021), allowing us to reach geographically distant participants. This technique supports interactivity to explore the concept of sustainability in professionals with potentially different sensibilities towards the topic. Data were collected during eight focus groups, conducted through an online

video conferencing platform, each including from 3 to 8 participants. When possible, participants were grouped based on area of interest or organisational affiliation. Discussion moderation entailed considerations comparable to those of face-to-face data collection (e.g. in terms of researchers' involvement and meeting structure and development).

During the focus groups researchers employed a photo elicitation technique. This is based 'on the … idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview' (Harper, 2002, p. 13), to generate insights, associations and deepen the discussion topic. The use of photos and images may support the explanation of concepts methodologically and practically not consolidated such as those related to the significance of sustainability, and to 'break participants' meaning frame' (p. 13), encouraging them to interpret in a new way daily experiences that were taken for granted. Photos were selected to avoid response bias. These provided visual stimuli to elicit metaphors and reflections on sustainability, and to recall associated aspects found in literature (e.g. environment, ecology, holistic approach, generativity, human rights: Boetto, 2017; Dominelli, 2012; Peeters, 2012). During the initial sessions, the portfolio of images was refined, to include approximately 15 photos. These portrayed, for example, group or individual sport activities, rock balancing compositions, bridges located in different contexts, urban or natural environments.

Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes. At the beginning of each session the research was introduced and consent to video-recording obtained. Participants were invited to discuss personal and professional meanings attributed to sustainability, values and methods associated with sustainable working practices, characteristics of interventions they considered sustainable, and how economic, environmental and social sustainability could be translated into projects and planning practices.

The focus groups interviews were transcribed and anonymised. A thematic content analysis was conducted using NVivo 13. Researchers identified categories concerning the transformative eco-social model, applying a prevalently inductive approach. The analysis identified accounts referred to the personal and professional dimension of sustainability (ontological dimension), applied principles and knowledge (epistemological dimension) and organisational, planning and political aspects connected with resource maintenance and regeneration (methodological dimension). Categories were validated through discussion meetings between the researchers, to achieve consensus on the topics identified and to test the intersubjectivity of meanings.

At the end of the research, the reliability of the findings was assessed through a discussion with a subgroup of participants (Table 1).

Findings

Results refer to Boetto's methodological sphere, which could not be entirely disentangled from ontological and epistemological aspects. We will report on the progressive structuring of the local network of eco-social interventions; political and organisational barriers hampering its implementation; and the practices which, in participants' perspectives, could promote sustainability in social services and policies.

1. The local system of eco-social interventions: structuring and public-private cooperation

In the focus groups, the 'doing' elements of the transformative approach were associated with activities promoting environmental sustainability, mostly reported by professionals working in TSOs. The overall picture was indicative of a thickly distributed interventions' network, scarcely institutionalised, stemming from environmental sensitivities which had been present for a long time in the communities. Some TSOs were operating since the 1980s and had a marked local presence. Participants reported activities in agricultural cooperatives, social farms, food shops, and interventions of urban regeneration. For example, an association manager (P4-FG1), described a programme to renovate urban spaces for community use, which had 'requalified … an abandoned supermarket', and was realised by 'a neighbourhood committee … an association of biological

Table 1. Research participants.

	ID	Age Range*		Occupational profile	Affiliation	Province
FG1 – Social care professionals in eco-social projects	P1	35–44	M	Social care professional, service manager	TSO	PD
	P2	45–54	M	Social care professional, service manager	TSO	PD
	P3	35–44	F	Social care professional, service manager	TSO	PD
	P4	55–65	M	Social care professional, service manager	TSO	VR
FG2 – Social workers in Health Authorities	P1	45–54	F	Social worker	PSO	PD
	P2	35–44	F	Social worker	PSO	PD
	P3	25–34	F	Social worker	PSO	PD
	P4	25–34	F	Social worker	PSO	PD
FG3 – Social workers & care professionals in care services & eco-social projects	P1	25–35	F	Social care professional	TSO	VR
	P2	45–54	M	Social care professional	TSO	VR
	P3	45–54	F	Social worker	PSO	PD
	P4	45–54	F	Social worker	PSO	PD
	P5	> 65	M	Social care professional service manager	TSO	PD
	P6	35–44	F	Social worker	PSO	PD
	P7	45–54	F	Social worker	PSO	PD
	P8	35–44	M	Social care professional	TSO	VR
FG4 – Social workers in Local Councils, Health Authorities and no-profit organisations	P1	45–54	F	Social worker	PSO	PD
	P2	35–44	F	Social worker	PSO	PD
	P3	45–54	F	Social work manager	PSO	VR
	P4	> 65	F	Social work manager	TSO	PD
FG5 – Social workers in Local Councils and Health Authorities	P1	35–44	F	Social worker	PSO	VI
	P2	35–44	F	Social worker	PSO	VR
	P3	45–54	F	Social worker	PSO	PD
	P4	55–64	F	Social worker	PSO	PD
	P5	55–64	F	Social worker	PSO	PD
FG6 – Social care professionals in no-profit organisations	P1	> 65	M	Social care professional, service manager	TSO	PD
	P2	> 65	M	Social care professional, service manager, family carer	TSO	VI
	P3	45–54	M	Social care professional, service manager	TSO	VI
	P4	55–64	F	Social worker	TSO	VE
	P5	< 65	F	Social work manager, policy maker	TSO	VE
	P6	45–54	M	Social care professional, service manager	TSO	PD
FG7 – Social workers in Health Authorities	P1	35–44	F	Social worker	PSO	VE
	P2	35–44	F	Social worker	PSO	VE
	P3	55–64	F	Social worker	PSO	VE
	P4	35–44	F	Social worker	PSO	VE
FG8 – Social work managers	P1	55–64	F	Social work manager, policy maker	PSO	RO
	P2	55–64	F	Social work manager, policy maker	PSO	PD
	P3	55–64	F	Social work manager	PSO	VI

farmers, a tech company and a group of urbanists'. The care of collective environments was central also in a well-established project of active citizenship created by a social cooperative, characterised by an intergenerational approach. The project, adopted by numerous councils, involved young people aged 14–20 years, who during the summer conducted small maintenance works supervised by 'other young people aged from 20 to 30 years, and … a handyman, namely an older craftsman, who teaches them how to take care of the common goods' (P2-FG3). Finally, one participant (P2-FG6) described an association promoting the right to health, where a dental clinic was 'set up with … refurbished materials and equipment', in line with the environmental sensitivity of the organisation.

The TSOs managed many of the eco-social interventions outsourced by local councils and health authorities, Due to the weak political governance (cf. Section 2), those initiatives followed a bottom-up (rather than top-down) model. They included laboratories of creative recycling, food manufacturing using biological ingredients, initiatives to improve waste differentiation amongst domiciliary care beneficiaries, and nature-based therapeutic activities.

Many social workers in the PSOs collaborated with TSOs in those projects, without directly promoting activities focused on environmental sustainability. Their accounts foregrounded, instead, social sustainability, built through interventions mobilising people's relational resources. From a methodological perspective, sustainability took the form of a generative relationship with care beneficiaries. As observed, this entailed 'trying to make people blossoming, so that they can give something to their community' (P2-FG4). Participants also observed that sustainability consists in a responsible and strategic use of the available resources, crucial in an eco-social work perspective. A social worker, commenting on a picture representing a collection for a food bank, noted that the waste of collective resources results in material and social pollution:

> We need to know the resources in our territories and … the responsibility of using them in a perspective of non-waste, of non … 'pollution' … . In addition, we need to know how to use them … in relation to future needs … a use of material resources, as well as of the resources … which we find in associations, communities, groups (P5-FG3)

Social workers in PSOs struggled to include the environmental dimension in their daily practice because the services system was unanimously considered 'unsustainable'.

2. Barriers to local welfare system sustainability

All participants observed substantial gaps in national and local social policies, and expressed disappointment for the perceived disinvestment. In relation to TSOs, several managers represented the need of requalifying the care system. Shifting attention from environmental to social sustainability, a participant observed that longstanding austerity policies were jeopardising the transmission of symbolic and epistemological capitals supporting the resilience of non-profit enterprises and services. Others suggested that prevention and evaluation should have a central role in the creation of environmental, social and economic sustainable programmes. However, they noted that investments in these activities were residual. Several participants called for political strategies and legislative tools to improve coordination and integration between different governance levels. In relation to this, a social farm manager highlighted how some choices, such as setting up a regional standard menu for school canteens, were not informed by a rationale of sustainability, with paradoxical consequences:

> On the paper things are there, but we don't make them work … For example: if at the regional level people who write the menus put the courgettes from November to March-April in the schools which we supply, it means that there isn't at all an upstream reasoning on sustainability, because the courgettes from November to April needs to be imported from Sicily, Spain or Morocco (P1-FG3)

Importantly, whilst discussing system limitations, some TSOs' representatives considered that competition between non-profit organisations and their inability to conduct effective lobbying activity at the political level contributed to resource waste.

Social workers in PSOs reported numerous constraints to the implementation of eco-social interventions, including organisational deficiencies, bureaucratic burdens, and the growing difficulty in creating welcoming community contexts. The interviews showed that the retrenchment of public expenditure had led to distortions in the welfare system, depriving it of generative capacity. For example, one participant noted that disinvestment had led to 'economising also in relation to … the thinking aspects', with the unexpected effect of sometimes choosing 'the simplest intervention, typically the residential one … which is the most expensive' (P5-FG2). Her account shed light on political choices that had progressively deprived the services of 'know-how'.

Finally, participants appeared highly aware that sustainability was associated with service users' well being and service usability. One social worker reported that deficiencies in the urban

infrastructure plan generated negative environmental consequences, and significantly affected the autonomy of vulnerable or disabled people, who often lacked adequate transport to reach the city hospital from their rural localities. Another participant focused on the contradictions of some public interventions, observing that often 'council houses assigned to people in greater need [had] old boilers, fixtures and plumbing', which represented a 'further burden on those who cannot afford the repair cost' (P4, FG6). Despite the reported limitations, participants also made several considerations to support the development of eco-sustainable social policies and interventions.

3. Promoting a sustainable local welfare: strategies, methodological tools, and organisational choices

The analysis highlighted participants' skills in analysing the care system. To promote a change in the local services, they foregrounded the methodological importance of factors including strategic and integrated planning, community engagement, and economic models combining human and environmental well-being.

a) Co-planning and co-programming between PSOs and TSOs

The importance of strategic planning was primarily emphasised by participants in managerial and political roles, who considered institutional support for eco-sustainable initiatives essential. In their perspective, social policies had a leading role in developing resource networks, raising organisations' profiles, and demonstrating the value of environmental care in social inclusion initiatives. The need for effective planning practices was represented by the repeated choice of a picture representing an orchestra. This was associated with creative and coordinated work, allowing avoiding resource waste, and welfare provisions gaps or overlapping.

Several participants indicated a specific competence of social workers employed both in TSOs and PSOs the promotion of relations between sector stakeholders. Co-planning and co-programming processes (2017, 'Third Sector Code') were considered potentially useful legal instruments to promote the grassroots inter-institutional collaborations, necessary to realise sustainable interventions and enhance the services network in the post-pandemic period. Many participants observed that the COVID-19 pandemic had deeply affected services and communities. In this context, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR, 2021) provided an opportunity for co-planning and co-programming welfare interventions. Interviewees generally valued these approaches as long as their application was accompanied by adequate training. A social work manager observed that co-planning represented a 'big opportunity' and a 'tool [to] make a new planning effort' (P2-FG8). Together with the unprecedented fund availability and professional expertise of PSOs and TSOs, the creation of strategic partnerships could help overcome the offer segmentation, and align the local social policies with the current good practices.

However, others considered the challenges involved in co-planning and programming, because the tight schedule to present the PNRR projects did not allow for developing forms of collaborative governance, and mitigate existing deficiencies in planning activities.

> Co-programming … is really a way to strengthen community resources, reasoning together, see the opportunities, increase the collective capacities, and thus the NRRP gives us some chances (P1-FG8)

> I hoped that with the NRRP it could be possible applying co-planning and co-programming [approaches], or to test it, rather that applying it … but … there was no time (P3-FG8)

Despite the challenges, co-planning and co-programming approaches were already employed in the development of programmes to address homelessness, which suggested their usefulness with eco-social interventions. In discussing the post-pandemic period, many referred to community work, and to how this should be characterised.

b) Community work

Many participants considered local communities as fundamental for services sustainability, despite the erosion brought about by individualisation processes. Participants affiliated to TSOs promoting eco-social interventions observed that local communities were the primary beneficiaries of their activities, and supported the principle of combining local action and global thinking. TSOs were deeply connected with the local collective dimension, allowing them to intercept (unmet)needs, mobilise community skills, and manage material resources. Professionals in PSOs expressed the need for 'getting out from the offices' (P3-FG5) and to commit themselves to the creation of community work initiatives, co-produced with relevant stakeholders. Participants described projects with schools, families and voluntary sector organisations, building solidarity between individuals, groups and generations. They emphasised the importance of intergenerational perspectives in developing sustainable working practices (P1-FG2; P4-FG5; P2-FG1). In their opinion, a forward-looking approach fostered collaboration between different groups by enhancing individual competencies, dialogue and negotiation processes (P3-FG1; P2-FG2; P7-FG3; P1-FG6). This perspective on social workers' intervention linked the micro- and meso-dimensions of sustainability (person-centred case work with networking and community care).

In participants' opinion, these professional actions would have benefited from greater strategic thinking and financial investment, enabling them to dedicate more time to these activities. Whilst community work requires thinking spaces and long-term perspectives, social workers operating in PSOs often describe daily routines characterised by pressing demands and high workloads. These conditions interfered with Boetto's epistemological and methodological spheres (i.e. the 'thinking' and 'doing' spheres of professional practice)

> In some services it's like working at the border, in a A&E … it's hard for an individual finding a 'thinking space' … . In terms of community work and policies, what could be done? My first answer would be … to try to take care of the treasures which are already there … . Sometimes this doesn't get done enough (P3-FG8)

> Investing in community policies means … investing important economic resources. It doesn't mean realising events, but stimulating … good connections between what already exists in the territory … and having the ability to track down submerged issues and needs. I think (that) … after this pandemic there is a theme of loneliness, isolations, compromised relationships which isn't immediately visible. (P2-FG8)

Community work was not presented as a 'quick fix' to complex issues, and participants highlighted the need to be connected with local leaders and relationships, and integrate community interventions with other local policies. Therefore, in the participants' opinions, a 'fast welfare' model was unsustainable.

c) Cultural orientations, new economic models, and organisational cultures

Values and principles were considered central in the creation of sustainable policies and interventions. Participants highlighted the importance of promoting self-determination, participation, and social justice (SW Code of Ethics, 2019). Some projects showed that these could be combined with productive benefits and that economic models, integrating human and environmental well-being, are already in place in Veneto. For example, a TSO professional explained how the inclusion of people with mental health issues on his farm resulted in positive outcomes for the environment, the care beneficiaries, and the social fabric:

> [in relation to social sustainability] psychiatric services tell us that therapy need and hospital admissions for people included in our projects decrease … . This is associated with economic sustainability, because one day in a hospital costs hundreds of Euros per day, whereas we do not cost anything for the community … . However, we have benefits in our productive process, which … improves environmental sustainability … But there is social sustainability also … when the project intersects with community life [because] the work for producing healthy goods produces something good for the community (P1-FG3)

All the participants agreed upon the need for a forward-looking evaluation of interventions' sustainability. However, a systematic assessment of project outcomes was rarely conducted, even though this was considered important 'for all the services we access in our daily life' (P2-FG3).

Another topic with prominent methodological and epistemological implications regarded the work within bureaucratic organisations, a key element for the development of sustainable interventions and policies. The focus groups captured ongoing changes in organisational cultures, particularly in PSOs. Some participants reported the desire for working contexts allowing for consolidating creative practices, characterised by greater attention to the relationship with nature. Some of those already in place included interviews in public and private gardens (P3-FG7), or activities of 'education on beauty' (P2, P5-FG6).

However, many social workers reported that the development of these experiences was influenced by time availability and organisational pressures. One observed that 'a social worker overwhelmed by the workload is hardly able to be generative … and become an agent of change … from the point of view of environmental sustainability' (P2-FG5). Others noticed how the lack of time affected the perception of a meaningful connection with their work, thus suggesting that sharing time (among organisations and professionals, with the community, etc.) is strategic for sustainable welfare.

> Sustainability can be seen as … something that needs to be cultivated … created over time … instead, at the personal level, there is often this feeling of choking, of having no time. And so, you tell yourself: 'but can my work be sustainable for long for with these rhythms?' (P2-FG4)

The identification of ways of working respectful of workers' and service users' rhythms appeared important in the aftermath of the pandemic. Discussing work-life balance, a social work manager observed that some practical actions (such as assigning workplaces close to where people live) may be useful in producing environmental and social benefits. Simultaneously, she suggested that this entails a commitment towards organisational well-being, felt as a value to promote.

> I try to assign … the working place the closest as possible to where people live … it seems to me that [this translates] in environmental and social sustainability, because … it favours personal end family times … and thus I always have in mind an effort in relation to that (P3-FG8)

Some participants highlighted the importance of building an organisational culture able to take care of environments and carefully use material resources. In their accounts, the material representing the potential for increasing the system efficacy was paper, which, despite increasing digitalisation, remained prominent within the administrative apparatus.

Finally, amongst organisational dimensions supporting environmental sustainability, several participants included the use of technologies, highlighting ambivalent aspects. Video calling, consolidated during the pandemic, allowed reducing movements between services and thus, time and environmental pollution. However, technologies showed limitations, including the flattening of relational aspects (P4-FG7) and a marked impact on cognitive labour and workplace communication.

Discussion

Analysing the case of an Italian local welfare system, this paper aimed to explore how social workers and other care professionals perceive sustainability in their lived work experience; their views on structural factors and barriers influencing the adoption of sustainable practices; and on strategies, methodological tools and organisational choices improving sustainability in the service network. In doing this, we applied Boetto's transformative eco-social work model (2017) and focused on its methodological dimension, associated with the 'doing' elements of professional practice.

Our findings indicate that all the participants were highly aware of the crucial role sustainability played in the continuity of social interventions. Interviews highlighted professionals' capacity to critically analyse the service system, including its organisational and power dynamics, and showed the interplay between Boetto's methodological and epistemological dimensions.

As in other European countries, the network of eco-social interventions has been structured from participatory processes involving statutory and non-statutory agencies (Matthies et al., 2020a). However, this expansion has occurred spontaneously and messily, rather than driven by clear choices, thus shedding light on the importance of a strategic system of governance. Accounts show that TSOs played a key role in setting up the initial local network of eco-social interventions. Due to their place-based articulation and organisational flexibility, from the 1980s they have taken action to create economically, socially and environmentally sustainable interventions.

In line with international evidence, our results confirm that TSOs may capture elements of social change and promote innovations in a more timely and effective manner compared to PSOs (Hossain, 2018; Rees & Mullins, 2016). Thanks to daily interaction with communities and their needs, TSOs may mitigate some limits of the ecological movements. As some argue, these struggle to involve the general population because environmental issues appear disconnected from key concerns related to care work recognition, insecurity and inequality (Dominelli, 2012; Fraser, 2021). However, the impact of TSOs was limited by their reduced dimensions, representing a potential barrier to their investment capacity. Moreover, competition dynamics characterising a quasi-market of services affected the influence of the organisations at the political level, thus preventing the development of projects with greater environmental impact (Matutini et al., 2023; Rees & Mullins, 2016).

The perceived barriers to sustainable practices were prominent subject in participants' accounts, showing that many pro-environmental, sustainability-oriented behaviours may be experienced only if adequate organisational infrastructures, policies and incentives are in place (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Participants from all sectors observed that decision-making processes were often guided by a philosophy of resource rationalisation, characterising the neo-managerialist approach in services governance (Lorenz, 2006).

Our findings highlight the vital role that enabling working settings have in incentivising pro-environmental practices, as they can produce long-term effects compatible with sustainability perspectives (*vs*. the short-termism characterising the contemporary financing cycles, Khan et al., 2018; Naylor & Appleby, 2013).

Organisational constraints were perceived as factors hampering sustainability primarily by social workers in PSOs. Despite the perceived limitations, they still appeared as agents of change as in their daily work they avoided resource waste by making accurate use of financial resources, mobilising relational networks and promoting 'frugal' innovations aimed at sustainability. Our findings align with Nandan et al. (2015, p. 40), observing that 'Innovation in the social sphere means accomplishing more with less, working together, leveraging resources, sharing data, and creating models for change that are sustainable'.

Such a generative welfare perspective, encouraging resource preservation and reproduction, appeared beneficial at the systemic and individual levels (Gui & Vecchiato, 2022). These everyday innovations mobilised professional competencies and appeared an expression of personal and social resilience. In a service network described as 'unsustainable', the lack of a generative approach seemed to fuel moral distress, namely a situation of impaired well-being due to the inability to implement actions perceived as ethically appropriate, because of insufficient means (cf. P2-FG4; Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2016).

Finally, our findings suggest that the local welfare systems may have several transformative factors, potentially useful for implementing existing practices. Firstly, the shared epistemological dimension amongst social care professionals. The group interactions showed that participants in PSOs and TSOs had similar backgrounds, close working relationships, and recognised the specificity of their practices. This indicates the existence of communities of practices already promoting sustainability in local welfare, in Italy as in other European countries, and the need to shift the disciplinary focus from a call for action to an examination of existing practices (Matthies et al., 2020a). Even if a transition towards an eco-social welfare system appeared distant (Schoyen et al., 2022), many professionals were already legitimising new ways of working.

A second transformative factor is the availability of normative tools to set up co-planning and co-programming processes between statutory and non-statutory services. These could benefit from the 'know-how' built in previous experiences (Cf. P1-FG3), suggesting that a resolution of the eco-social growth trilemma through new economic paradigms is possible. However, managing complexity requires observing phenomena holistically and investing in quantitative and qualitative intervention evaluations, currently not systematically conducted.

Thirdly, community engagement is necessary to promote sustainable changes in the welfare systems (Schmitz et al., 2012). Quoted by all participants, community engagement was associated with ethical and political stances characterising social work (e.g. anti-oppression, anti-discrimination and advocacy practices, Dominelli, 2012). The local dimension also appeared as the privileged setting to build micro-communities characterised by relationships of solidarity between individuals, groups and generations. In the past few decades, local communities have created a range of initiatives aimed towards sustainability, including energetic communities, co-housing projects and support networks (Hossain, 2018; Matthies et al., 2020). However, participants also warned against a 'romantic view' of communities, whose increasing cultural and socio-economic diversity requires tailored integration work (Rinkel & Powers, 2017).

Finally, a transformative factor for sustainable policies and practices is the work within organisations. Organisational practices represented a barrier to the development of sustainable interventions, primarily due to time rationalisation and pressures within bureaucratic institutions (Fazzi, 2012). In social workers in PSOs, the tension stemming from time management seemed to erode the ontological dimension of social work, regarding the connection between the professional self and the natural environment. However, organisational cultures entailed promising elements of improvement, including the possibility of improving workers' well-being and spreading a culture of caring for common goods and environments. The focus groups mirrored wider organisational changes impacting social work practice (e.g. digital acceleration) and highlighted participants' request to engage in fulfilling and meaningful work (Chalofsky, 2003; Nordesjö et al., 2022). Participants' accounts may be located within the revitalised debates on retention of care professionals as this enhances per se services' economic and social balance (Brown et al., 2019). Thus, PSOs, daily inhabited by professionals and citizens, are vital in developing sustainability in the local welfare.

Conclusions

By applying Boetto's transformative eco-social model, this paper analysed how social workers and care professionals in a local welfare system perceive sustainability in their lived work experience, and their views on hampering or facilitating factors. The focus groups captured participants' widespread sensitivities towards sustainability. Their position allowed them to provide an informed, critical analysis of the system, and catalyse bottom-up change of the services. Accounts shed light on the key role that collaboration between TSOs and PSOs had in locally promoting new economic and welfare models. Managerialism of services and lack of system governance were identified as the main barriers to sustainability. Participatory planning approaches, community work, and new economic models and organisational cultures were indicated as potential factors for system change. This study involved a wide range of organisations and professionals, but the recruitment did not achieve the desired sample stratification by age. Younger participants could have added different perspectives. Further research could focus on how personal beliefs and worldviews (ontological dimension) may promote sustainability, and on the micro-practices to preserve resources in the services.

Note

1. The European Commission's Index measures national performances in innovation that 'reduces impacts on the environment, increases resilience to environmental pressures or uses natural resources more efficiently'. The Index is a key tool to achieve the European Green Deal objective of transitioning to carbon-neutral economy. https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/indicators/eco-innovation-index-8th-eap

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Disclosure statement

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