

Keywords: Environmental justice; ecological social work; social farming; ecological participation

Introduction

In the 1970s, concepts such as environmental and ecological justice emerged. Alongside social justice as an ideal state in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protections, opportunities, responsibilities and social benefits (Barker, 2003), environmental justice has its relevance to human dignity and well-being. Poor communities have been found to be most unequally affected by environmental damage, to suffer most from pollution problems or environmental risks, and poverty is inextricably linked to malnutrition. Poverty, various forms of deprivation and poor living conditions are associated with lower chances of future success. At the heart of the idea of environmental justice is the minimisation of environmental damage and the equitable distribution of environmental benefits, such as the protection of clean water, the preservation of species integrity, climate stability and so on, in a way that provides the best for the greatest number of people. "Environmental justice's first task is to preserve the integrity of the natural environment and its resource potential for the benefit of human welfare" (Besthorn, 2013, p. 35).

The concept of environmental justice recognises the strong connection, mutual respect and interdependence between humans and nature. At the heart of this idea is the notion that all human and non-human species have a just and equal claim to an existence that ensures their well-being. In this paper, the concept of ecological justice is embodied in social farming, which declares the natural relationship between social work and nature (outdoor and extra-urban spaces). Social farms are places or projects that offer a variety of activities in a farm environment for people who have different life challenges due to their mental and physical health problems or difficult social backgrounds. They aim to improve the quality of life of the people referred to in this paper as 'participants'. Depending on the participants, social farms offer paid employment, vocational rehabilitation, useful daily activities in non-formal places and a green environment. Social farms operate as unique institutions established in the countryside for the benefit of the public, complementing the range of social and healthcare instruments outside the cities (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009).

This article presents the theory of environmental justice and environmental/green/ecological social work, discusses these concepts through the lens of social farms, and explains how social farm participants contribute to ecological social work. In addition to presenting and discussing the theories, mixed research methods such as focus groups, in-depth interviews and questionnaires are used to analyse the perspective of understanding the concept of ecological social work on social farms. It seems that the important and often mentioned perspective of the social farm workers is that the participants with difficult living conditions are enabled to feel that the importance of keeping the environment healthy is the core value of human existence and that by working on a social farm they fully participate in these safeguarding actions. They become neighbourhoods and communities responsible for nature and future generations.

Theoretical background

The entrance to this theoretical passage begins with an eco-social worldview that strengthens relationships with people and places and elevates the knowledge commons. It also begins with a resignation to the anthropocentric perspective, which allows one to see the benefits of all human activities for one's own purposes and promotes economic growth. At some point, it coincides with a degrowth perspective on our work, where "we can then slow down to enjoy the relationships with others in our lives, invest in the connections to place, and take advantage of the opportunities to grow our own garden, hang our clothes to dry, or walk/bike, rather than always being in a hurry", as Meredith and Powers (2019, p. 27) explain in their article. It also closely addresses the issue of sustainability as the ability of the ecosystem to be maintained and renewed within the normal balance of life cycles of essential elements of culture, society and nature

(idem, p. 28). It pushes us towards sustainability and environmental thinking in social work, ecological justice and social farming.

Together with environmental justice, which aims to minimise environmental damage and ensure that the benefits of the environment are shared equally, such as protecting clean water, maintaining the integrity of species and ensuring climate stability in a way that provides the greatest good for the greatest number of people, social workers can engage in practices that protect the environment through the creation and maintenance of green spaces. Through community gardening, citizens connect with community-supported agriculture and nutrition programmes and participate in the process of community regeneration by planting, weeding and harvesting in space (Shepard, 2013, p. 121).

Community gardening is a well-established concept and practice, often located in low-income, high-density neighbourhoods. This paper discusses social farming as an intimate engagement between the environment, social justice, community and green space. Social farming is broadly defined as "the use of commercial farms and agricultural landscapes as a base for promoting mental and physical health through normal farming activities. Specifically, the provision of a structured, supervised programme of health, vocational, social and/or farm-related activities for vulnerable people" (Murray et al., 2019, p. 14). The opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Social Farming (2012) captures the main characteristics, stating that social farming is a "set of activities using agricultural resources, both plant and animal, to create an appropriate environment for people with different disabilities or socially disadvantaged people and the general public, to provide them with employment opportunities and to support their integration into society" (NAT/539-EESC-2012-1236, p. 4).¹ It is an "innovative, inclusive, participatory and generative model of agricultural practices that provides recreational, educational and support services. It aims at the social and labour integration of disadvantaged people who, through social farming practices, are able to contribute to food and agricultural production". (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009, p. 11). Social farms are then settings or projects that offer a variety of activities in a farm environment for people who have experienced various life challenges due to their mental health problems or difficult social backgrounds. Depending on the participants, social farms offer paid employment, vocational rehabilitation, useful daily activities in non-formal settings and a green environment.

Methodology

In this paper, we identify the environmental social work narratives in social farming to answer how these innovative actions cover environmental issues in social work practice. It also demonstrates that vulnerable people can participate in ecological sustainability, obtain healthier food and regain environmental justice.

It uses mixed methods research. It comes mainly from the meetings held during the Eco-Social Farming project.² In the first phase, the project partners conducted several focus groups in which they tried to identify as many very specific elements as possible that take place on social farms that are related to ecology and minimise negative impacts on the environment. These results were then discussed with social farmers in the Czech Republic (Svobodný statek na soutoku) and Germany (Die Fleckenbühler), who were critical of the results. In the last round, an online questionnaire survey was carried out, the results of which can be

¹ Available from [EESC Opinion: Social farming | European Economic and Social Committee \(europa.eu\)](#) [2023-01-16].

² The small cooperation project funded by the Erasmus+ programme, no. 2022-1-CZ01-KA210-ADU-000083310, lasting from 11/2022-11/2024. The Erasmus+ funded small collaborative project, No. 2022-1-CZ01-KA210-ADU-000083310, running from 11/2022 to 10/2024. It aims to explore elements of environmental sustainability in social work research on social farms.

presented for the Czech Republic. Between 15.11.2023 and 30.11.2023, 70 contact persons from the field of social farming (farmers, social workers, scientists) received the questionnaire; the basic question was which elements of social farms promote a sustainable and quality environment. The return rate of the questionnaire was 17, i.e. just under 24%.

Tentative results: How social farming fosters environmental justice and how social farms contribute to ecological social work in rural areas

Preliminary results: Several levels of social work and ecological approaches can be identified on social farms. Social farmers are generally aware of the urgent need to protect nature. There are several general ideas behind the management of social farms, such as the attitude of caring for nature, organic farming, holistic thinking of man in the environment, and the attitude of partnership in caring for the landscape. Then there are general attitudes to social support and welfare aspects, such as an open-door system - acceptance of human diversity, multi-sectoral cooperation at local and regional levels, valuing diversity and individualised care. In both approaches, it is possible to identify a list of very concrete activities that support the background ideas.

Concerning ecosystem theories in social work, the environment in social farming is not a static place ready for human action where people decide what to do. The position of man is not anthropocentric but a partner. There is a basic human need for nature, so it must be protected. What is interesting from this point of view is that people who participate in social farming are generally not used to caring for things. In health and social services, they are often the ones being cared for. They become active agents in social farming, transforming, improving, nurturing, weeding, watering, and making the place aesthetic and the community sustainable. This aspect taps into the profound mission of social work. It empowers the participants. They become participants in the environmental justice that depends on them.

Conclusion

Social farming as a concept and practice is still only marginally mentioned in relation to social work. Although it is clear from the literature and research that agriculture as a whole has a significant impact on climate change, soil nutrients, toxic substances, water status, erosion and food security, which in turn has consequences for deforestation, pollution, environmental refugees, etc., social farming offers a positive mirror to this picture. Apart from the economic impact of the social farm on the interconnectedness of local ties and needs, which multiplies the locally generated profit, this research shows, above all, positive environmental and social impacts at several levels, both at the general level of the underlying assumptions and at the level of the social farm participants themselves. It reverses their role concerning society, in which they become active agents of sustainable ecological change that positively impacts local communities and regions.

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