

Social work and ecological problems, new or renewed competences

Hilde Maelstaf
Artesis-Plantijn

A conference on social work, challenging boundaries and promoting sustainable future should give the scene to the discussion on ecology and social work or the role of green or eco-social work and the competences necessary to execute those tasks. The ecological crisis in general and more specific the climate change cannot be minimized. Many professions and citizens are active in the ecological movement on different levels: political, scientific as well as education and development of practice models. Research showed that many social workers are involved in ecological activism or climate change work, but most of the time out of the scope of their professional practice (Tischler, 2011). Climate change has become one of the most important challenges facing contemporary societies. Climate change and the global warming will have a direct or indirect influence on human activity and the quality of life. One should expect that social work as a profession and the importance of the 'person in environment' perspective or model should be more involved in the ecological environmental discussion, but this is seldom present in mainstream social work practice (Domineli, 2012). Environment is a broad term and social work until now concentrates on the social and the economic environment. Slowly things seem to change and although social work is not engaging on an overall level; good practices exist of practitioners who are able to combine ecological activism with social work practice (Tischler, 2011; Sugirtha & Little Flower, 2015). They work with communities, are involved in education, campaigns and policy change and support concrete actions as making cities green and more walkable, organizing organic community gardening. Domineli (2012) argues that the social work profession has an important task in the field of making people understand the importance of ecological problems and climate change, helping people and communities to find solutions for greenhouse gas emissions, promoting sustainable consumption and energy production and energy efficiency. The question is whether social workers have the competences to develop an ecological-social work approach.

Based on the following case the role, the competences and the needs of social workers will be explained. The case focusses on housing, community and neighborhood development and energy and is situated in a small part of the city of Ghent (Belgium). It is considered as a disadvantaged community and the housing stock is in need of renovation. Various stakeholders were brought together to look for affordable and sustainable solutions. Humidity, energy or fuel poverty are common problems in the houses. Together with the (financial) support of the city of Ghent (Social Department) a pilot project was set up: the direct aim is the renovation of 10 houses, privately owned by poor people living from benefits or low paid work. The indirect aim is the reduction of greenhouse gas emission by improving insulation, sustainable energy and energy efficiency. To reduce the costs a system of collective renovation, exchange of experiences between the owners was set up. Social workers, architects and engineers worked as a team and both the technical and social support were indispensable for the work with disadvantaged and poor people. A lot of attention was given to the involvement of the residents, their personal control over the housing improvement as a challenge to improve empowerment. Recommendations based on the project include the awareness of the importance of interprofessional collaboration competences and the combination of technical and social skills. Social workers emphasize also the importance of a better understanding of environmental impacts on vulnerable populations and the relation between energy, sustainable energy and health. After the pilot phase, about 100 houses (poor owners) will be renovated.

During the conference the results of this type of project, the future activities and the role of social work and the necessary competences will be explained.

References

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