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# New Communities are not built by themselves - New Master's Degree Starting in Autumn 2022 Creates New Practices for Community Work

**Merja Sinkkonen, Inka Matilainen, Minna Niemi and Päivi Heimonen**

Ensuring the earth's ecological carrying capacity and human wellbeing calls for a communal, societal, and global concern for sustainable development. Professionals have a key role in ensuring that even the most disadvantaged people can participate. Eco-social work requires new communal values and skills, as well as a holistic systemic understanding of individuals' needs and services. TAMK's new international degree programme offers the opportunity to deepen this competence.

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## Introduction

Influencing human rights and living conditions, assessing justice and reducing poverty have been global goals of social work throughout history. The same phenomena have also been recognized as core themes of sustainable development, to which a new type of relationship is sought through various strategies, agreements and actions.

The key question is how to redefine human rights in such a way that acting on the basis of the rights guarantees wellbeing of future generations. Ecological justice means fair distribution of natural resources and living standards, as well as proportion of lifestyles to the sustainability of the planet.

During the 21st century, international social work has paid increasing attention to sustainable development, ecosociality and ecological social work. The roots of eco-social social work began to integrate in the 2010s. The root system evolved from different definitions based on which the phenomenon had been described and studied in different countries and language regions. (Matthies & Närhi 2014.)

In this article, we clarify the possibilities of eco-social thinking and community work in promotion of wellbeing. In addition, we describe working life representatives' needs for and use of eco-social skills in future working life, especially in social work.

## Basis for eco-social work

Eco-social work can be described with the HDLB model (having, doing, loving, being) based on theories by Erik Allardt (1976). To put it in a nutshell, having means living standard, doing responsible activities, loving interactions and being presence. People are active promoters of their wellbeing. Improving the economic situation and the possibility to increase

consumption are not enough to improve wellbeing. The social sector can be seen as a promoter of sustainable wellbeing, which means that persons' relationships with their environment and other people are also taken into account in organizing services. (Matilainen 2021.)

In eco-social work, attention is paid to living conditions, equality, justice and survival of the most vulnerable. The eco-social framework is structured in social work as an umbrella concept, under which interaction between the environment and people on the one hand and ecological and social sustainability issues on the other are examined. The two main theoretical orientations of the eco-social framework are the systems theory and the ecocritical trend. (Matthies & Närhi 2014; Närhi 2015.)

The systems theory perspective emphasizes the importance of the social environment and interaction for human wellbeing and examines the relationship between clients' or residents' living environment and wellbeing, related problems and resources available. The aim is to adapt to the prevailing conditions or change behaviour and/or conditions. (Matthies & Närhi 2014; Närhi 2015.)

The ecocritical perspective questions the meaning of profit. Profit-seeking may lead to exploitation of nature and environmental problems, which also increase social problems. The ecocritical perspective includes the systematization view, but also seeks practices which are natural and conserve nature. The ecocritical perspective seeks structural change. (Matthies & Närhi 2014; Närhi 2015) In practical work, this is reflected, among other things, by an increase in animal-assisted methods and utilization of nature in customer work. An example of this is Green Care Finland's (2021) diverse development work in Finland.

Ecosocial work strives for environmental justice, which means fair distribution of environmental benefits and harms between different people and residential areas. Even the poor are expected to be able to make ecologically sustainable choices. Ecological sustainability is built not only on strategic decisions and plans but also on small everyday deeds, such as sorting garbage. (Matilainen 2021.)

Social services professionals are seen as significant influencers at both local and global level. Holistic consideration of persons in their living environment is essential. Community work identifies and creates opportunities for participation and influence. People are encouraged to influence environmental issues in their environment in such a way that fair opportunities and conditions can be secured for as many people as possible. In addition, people are instructed to take into account how vulnerable the environment is. When the environment deteriorates, it creates problems that make everyday life more difficult. During advocacy work, residents/clients create and maintain important social relationships. Instead of looking at individual problems, the focus is on promoting and sharing good in the community. (Payne 2020, 213–221; Matilainen 2021.)

## **Community work as enabler of eco-social work**

Individual thinking has been commonplace in the 21st century Finland, but there are signs that communities are becoming more valued in our society (Haili 2017). Ecosocial work is also based on community values and community work, the core of which continues to recall the early stages of social work described by Jane Addams (1910) in her book on Chicago settlement work. In addition to social work in offices, there is still an obvious need for communal social work that is a part of people's everyday lives (see, for example, Leppänen et al. 2021; Laitinen 2019).

In this article, we define community work as the process of assisting people to improve their communities by undertaking autonomous collective action. (Twelvetrees 2008). People involved in community work have a common interest whose development they are committed to and due to which they meet. They are often in a same type of life situation and/or share common core values. (Payne 2020.)

Involving everyone, including those in a difficult life situation and those with social problems, is essential in community work.

There are differences in community work practices between countries, but they have community/residential development efforts and measures to reduce poverty, discrimination and injustice in common. Involving everyone, including those in a difficult life situation and those with social problems, is essential in community work. Success is experienced when community members commit to addressing common concerns and key issues, use their know-how and capital and work in a goal- and solution-oriented manner. (Popple 2015.)

## **Skills needs in working life – what does the eco-social approach mean in practice?**

In March 2021, Inka Matilainen (2021) interviewed five social and health care experts / supervisors on needs for sustainable development and eco-social thinking skills in working life. According to the interviewees, future working life requires a new type of thinking.

Based on the interviews, those who have completed a master's degree in social services are expected to have eco-social work values and skills. The perspective emphasized was understanding of the service system and individuals' needs. In understanding the whole, a variety of cause-and-effect relationships were raised. In design and implementation of services, the aim was to bring out a comprehensive and long-term understanding of effects.

Systemic thinking requires future employees to have a new type of thinking and the ability to see cause-and-effect relationships more broadly than in their work. When the goals and development needs of work are seen broadly and the network of available services is seen as a whole instead of the closest work community, for example, family counselling can see an increase in student welfare resources as a resource for "us". Both student welfare and family counselling support the wellbeing of residents in the same municipality and an increase in school resources may at best reduce the need for family counselling. From the point of view of municipal resource planning, it is worth increasing resources in services where they increase the wellbeing of families the most and reduce the need for expensive services.

Networking requires building and maintaining trust. Finding enough trust and understanding quickly helps networking and cooperation, which benefit all parties.

Despite the fact that the social sector is seen as an important factor in increasing justice, eco-social work remains a foreign term in everyday life, even at the local level. At the moment, increase in the systemic approach to individual and family work is seen as a development need, but at the same time it would be important to take forward the perspective of systemic management and the ability to see eco-social work goals as a broader, even global issue.

## **A new master's degree for future skills needs**

In the autumn 2022, a new Master's Degree Programme in Community Work and Multicultural Development will be launched at Tampere University of Applied Sciences. The application period starts on 8 December 2021 and ends on 19 January 2022. The degree includes six advanced courses in eco-social work and community work:

1) Theoretical Framework and Application Possibilities of Eco-Social Work, 2) Finnish Health and Social Service System and Community Work and Their Development, 3) Global Challenges and Wellbeing, 4) Community Based and Participatory Development, 5) Management of Customer Relationships and Projects and 6) Innovation and Interaction in Multi-Professional Communities.

There is need for knowledge of eco-social and community work now and in the future. As Besthorn (2014) argues: the possibilities of eco-social work are just beginning to be understood. It can be stated that currently more and more Finns seem to be considering and making eco-social openings themselves. The work is not done alone, nor on the basis of one discipline. There is need for bold visions and research, as well as joint deeds utilizing social resources. Higher education institutions should also be active in them (also Luca Sugawara & Opačić 2021).

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## Authors

### **Merja Sinkkonen**

Doctor of Social Sciences, Master of Administrative Sciences, Principal Lecturer  
School of Social Services and Health Care  
TAMK

[merja.sinkkonen@tuni.fi](mailto:merja.sinkkonen@tuni.fi)

ORCID: 0000-0002-7514-4901

Fields of expertise: management of social services, ethical leadership, coaching leadership, self-direction, changing working life, social capital

### **Inka Matilainen**

Master of Social Sciences, Bachelor of Education  
[inkasuvi.matilainen@gmail.com](mailto:inkasuvi.matilainen@gmail.com)

**Minna Niemi**

Doctor of Social Sciences, Principal Lecturer, Social Worker  
School of Social Services and Health Care

TAMK

minna.niemi@tuni.fi

Fields of expertise: development of social services, social services and health care reform, social services system, social services for children, community work, social policy

**Päivi Heimonen**

Doctor of Social Sciences, Master of Education, Bachelor of Social Services, Principal Lecturer

School of Social Services and Health Care

TAMK

paivi.heimonen@tuni.fi

Fields of expertise: management and development of social services and social services and health care organisations, third sector, social services operating environment and changes, community work, service design

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**More information**

New Master's Degree Programme in Community Work and Multicultural Development, Tampere University of Applied Sciences. Application period on 8 December – 19 January 2022

Community Work and Multicultural Development | Tampere Universities (tuni.fi)