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Social Sustainable Development and Social Work

Our planet creaks under the stress of a global ecological crisis, together with the financial and economical crisis. The biggest victims are those who have the least responsibility: the poor. Hence, the relationship between the ecological crisis and the globally growing social gap is an important challenge for social work. From the social perspective sustainable development is in the first place not about the material implications of the ecological crisis, but it questions the fundamentals of the society. Social work has to explore the social dimension of sustainable development and enter it in the public debate. Surely social work has to hold on to principles of social justice, and the strengthening of efforts for a more equal society is a basic condition for a process of sustainable development. But there is more. The current social-ecological crisis needs a transition into a sustainable society, and that is a different society. It involves a change of society’s fundamental principles or a ‘paradigm shift’. The awareness of ecological limits shows that the redistribution of wealth is a more radical task than thought before. Moreover, it asks for rethinking our ideas of well-being and of emancipation. Now they are connected too much with the possibility to participate in ever-growing material prosperity. We suggest that for a new idea we have to look after the quality of our relations on all levels, beyond the satisfaction of basic needs. So, sustainability is about the quality of our society.

Our exposition of the relation between social work and sustainable development departs from the conviction that the transition into a sustainable society is only possible on the basis of new forms of active citizenship and communal well-being. For that we can make use of important elements from the tradition of social work and of ecological systems thinking. We build particularly on the European project ‘The eco-social approach in social work’ for a more general framework for social work and sustainable development. Central concepts are empowerment, social capital and resilience. Resilience, the ability of (social-ecological) systems to absorb disturbance, is not only important for an appropriate reaction to the problems of the social-ecological crisis. We will present it as a capacity for social change, for a sustainability transition. Resilience is based on a diversity of subsystems, processes and appropriate connections between them. So social capital is an important condition for resilience, which itself is a condition for empowerment, both as a process and as a result of actual social change. To underscore the possibilities of the empowerment approach for social change, it is also important to emphasize its political character.

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