

Poverty in Eco-social Work: A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

This paper critically examines how eco-social work conceptualises and addresses poverty, emphasising the interconnections between economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Despite global commitments to eradicate poverty, recent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated poverty rates and inequalities worldwide, notably within the European Union (EU), highlighting significant limitations within traditional welfare state frameworks. As eco-social work is rapidly evolving as a response to climate crises causing ecological degradation and increasing poverty, it is important to know how poverty is understood in eco-social work and what solutions it offers. Through a comprehensive conceptual analysis of selected contributions, this article explores multidimensional factors of poverty within the eco-social paradigm, revealing notable gaps in poverty measurement, particularly concerning environmental impacts. Findings suggest that effective poverty alleviation strategies must extend beyond conventional economic growth models to integrate ecological economics, social solidarity practices, and community-driven initiatives. Eco-social work emerges as a crucial framework, advocating for inclusive, a holistic approaches that balance human wellbeing with environmental sustainability. This integrative approach proves essential for social work practice, emphasising the importance of building resilient, empowered communities capable of simultaneously addressing poverty and environmental challenges. Thus, eco-social work significantly contributes to sustainable development and social justice within the EU context.

Keywords

Ecological economics, Community resilience, Social solidarity, Multidimensional measurement, Sustainable development.

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Introduction

Poverty is a complex social phenomenon as the discourse on poverty intersects different development agendas, priorities, causes and responsibilities. Despite a strong consensus on the unacceptability of poverty in the modern world and the commitment of all major international and transnational organisations to eradicate it such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2008), International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Ames et al., 2001), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023) and European Commission (EC, 2021), the extent of poverty is stagnating and, in some countries, even increasing. World Bank data show that, after years of slow decline, poverty has started to rise again following the global economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. More than half of the extreme poor live in Sub-Saharan Africa, in military conflict environments and in rural areas of the world. Twice as many children as adults live in poverty (World Bank, 2023). On a global scale poverty is often expressed in terms of absolute rather than relative poverty. For example, around 1.5 billion people live on less than 1.25 dollars a day and another billion on less than 2.50 dollars a day (Khavul & Bruton, 2013). According to UNDP (2023), 165 million people from low- and lower-middle-income economies have slipped into poverty since 2020. Global poverty has risen sharply from 8.3% in 2019 to 9.2% in 2020 (UNstat, 2023). Similar to poverty, global inequality also increased after 2020. During the pandemic, the poor lost twice as much income as the rich, their health deteriorated, and they lost access to education (World Bank, 2023). The latest Oxfam report (2024) reveals that the wealth of the five richest people in the world has doubled since 2020. Over the same period, nearly five billion people around the world have become poorer.

There are no objections to the fact that extreme poverty exists in developing countries as it is visible at first glance, but many are more cautious, even sceptical, about highlighting poverty in the developed countries. Especially when it comes to the situation in the European Union, where the welfare state is still seen as providing a decent level of wellbeing and its safety nets can absorb most people who cannot provide for themselves and their families from employment, even though statistics on in-work poverty show that paid employment does not prevent all employed people from poverty. In 2023 the EU27 in-work at-risk-of-poverty rate was 8.3%. The highest was in Romania (15%), followed by Luxemburg (14.8%) and the lowest in Finland (2.8%), followed by Czechia (3.1%) (Eurostat, 2024). However, long-term data shows that poverty is an important issue in most EU Member States.

Poverty has long been a central concern of social work practice and research. In addition to the traditional challenges associated with economic deprivation and social exclusion, social workers are increasingly confronted with the consequences of environmental crises. In Europe, these include the impacts of climate change such as more frequent storms, desertification (European Court of Auditors, 2018), floods, and landslides.

These developments intensify existing social vulnerabilities and increase the demand for social support services. In response, a growing body of scholarship has developed the concept of eco-social work, grounded in the recognition that social problems cannot be addressed without considering the ecological conditions that shape human wellbeing. Eco-social work therefore seeks to integrate environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainable development within social work theory and practice (McKinnon, 2008; Coates & Gray, 2012; Crawford et al., 2015; Närhi & Matthies, 2017; Elsen, 2019; Powers, 2019; Rambaree et al., 2019; Matthies et al., 2020; Matutini, 2020; Peeters, 2022).

In this article, eco-social work is understood as a perspective within social work that integrates concerns for social justice with ecological sustainability. It emphasises the interdependence between human wellbeing, social institutions, and ecological systems, arguing that social problems cannot be addressed in isolation from environmental conditions and planetary limits (Dominelli, 2012; Närhi & Matthies, 2017; Rambaree et al., 2019). From this perspective, poverty is interpreted not only as economic deprivation but as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by social exclusion, environmental inequalities, and structural constraints affecting access to resources and opportunities. Eco-social work therefore provides a conceptual lens for analysing poverty through the interaction between social, economic, and ecological processes.

The main research question here is how eco-social work addresses the problem of poverty, how it is understood in eco-social work and what solutions it offers. This article examines selected contributions in the field of eco-social work, sustainability and poverty that address the problem of poverty. The following section begins by outlining the nature and measurement of poverty in the EU in order to give an idea of the scale of the problem in developed world. This is followed by a review of the literature on the major conceptual shifts in the understanding of poverty within eco-social work and sustainable transition.

From a social work perspective, examining poverty through an eco-social lens is particularly relevant because it expands the profession's traditional focus on social inequality to include ecological conditions that shape human wellbeing. This perspective highlights the role of social workers not only in supporting individuals and families experiencing poverty, but also in promoting community resilience, advocating for environmentally just policies, and contributing to sustainable development processes. In this way, eco-social work connects social work practice at micro, meso, and macro levels with broader socio-ecological transformations.

Poverty in the EU

In 2016, the European Union committed to pursue ambitious targets on the Sustainable Development Goals (hereafter SDGs) (EC, 2016), set up by the United Nations in 2015. SDG 1 seeks to eradicate extreme poverty and reduce those in poverty and social

exclusion by 15 million by 2030 (European Commission, 2021). Despite the ambitious target there has been a very modest progress over the last fifteen years (see Table 1). The EU measures relative poverty using the at-risk-of-poverty rate, which refers to the share of people with net disposable income below the poverty threshold. It is calculated as 60% of the national mean equivalised disposable income (Eurostat, 2023a). Data on absolute poverty, which is measured with reference to the cost of a basket of minimum basic goods and services, are not collected on the EU level.

Eurostat data show that at EU27 level, poverty in the last 15 years fell by only 0.1 percentage point (2.4 per cent).

TABLE 1
At-risk-of-poverty rate in the EU 27, in years 2007, 2011, 2017 and 2022 in %

	2007*	2011	2017	2022	Difference 2007-2022
EU27	16.6	16.9	16.9	16.5	-0.1
Belgium	15.2	15.3	15.9	13.2	-2.0
Bulgaria	22.0	22.2	23.4	22.9	+0.9
Czechia	9.6	9.8	9.1	10.2	+0.6
Denmark	11.7	12.1	12.4	12.4	+0.7
Germany	15.2	15.8	16.1	14.7	-0.5
Estonia	19.4	17.5	21.0	22.8	+3.4
Ireland	17.2	15.2	15.6	14.0	-3.2
Greece	20.3	21.4	20.2	18.8	-1.5
Spain	19.7	20.6	21.6	20.4	+0.7
France	13.1	14.0	13.2	15.6	+2.5
Croatia	**	20.9	20.0	18.0	-2.9
Italy	19.5	19.8	20.3	20.1	+0.6
Cyprus	15.5	14.8	15.7	13.9	-1.6
Latvia	21.2	19.0	22.1	22.5	+1.2
Lithuania	19.1	19.2	22.9	20.9	+1.8
Luxemburg	13.5	13.6	16.4	17.3	+3.8
Hungary	12.3	14.1	13.4	12.1	-0.2

	2007*	2011	2017	2022	Difference 2007-2022
Malta	15.1	15.6	16.7	16.7	+1.6
Netherlands	10.2	11.0	13.2	14.5	+4.3
Austria	12.0	14.5	14.4	14.8	+2.8
Poland	17.3	17.7	15.0	13.7	-6.0
Portugal	18.1	18.0	18.3	16.4	-1.7
Romania	24.6	22.3	23.6	21.2	-3.4
Slovenia	11.5	13.6	13.3	12.1	+0.6
Slovakia	10.6	13.0	12.4	13.7	+3.1
Finland	13.0	13.7	11.5	12.7	-0.3
Sweden	10.5	15.4	15.8	16.0	+5.5

Source: Eurostat, 2023, At-risk-of-poverty rate, EU27

* Due to comparability of the data, the year 2007 is chosen as the first year of observation because data are available for most member states and it was a year before the economic crisis in Europe (2009-2014) with still high percentage of employment and GDP growth. In 2011 most of the member states experienced effects of the economic crisis what impacted the poverty rate. Year 2017 was in the post-crisis economic recovery and 2022 is the post-pandemic time.

** No data for Croatia, difference is calculated by 2011 and 2022.

Longer-term data show annual upward or downward fluctuations in individual countries, which can be up to approx. 1 percentage point or more, but in some countries the difference is much bigger. Poland, Ireland, Croatia and Belgium have managed to reduce poverty the most, even up to 6 percentage points. Sweden is the record holder in terms of poverty increase (5.5 percentage points), followed by the Netherlands, Estonia, Luxembourg and Slovakia. Since 2007, poverty has increased in 16 countries and decreased in 11 countries.

According to these data, the presence of poverty in the European Union is unequivocal. If we were to look at specific populations such as the older people, people with mental health problems, the homeless, migrants and ethnic groups, we would most likely find large differences in poverty within countries, not just between countries. The same applies also to the effects of poverty on education, health, accessibility of services and other areas of life. Effects of poverty are complex and the same applies to its origins, therefore it needs to be understood as multidimensional concept. Sen (1981) argues that a simple poverty headcount is insufficient as it overlooks income distribution among the poor and between poor and rich. These caveats are extremely important for understanding poverty,

as they shift the focus toward understanding the conceptual framework on which the quantified measures are based. In theory and research there is a broad consensus about the multidimensional nature of poverty and that the unidimensional focus on income is not enough to make policy decisions toward the eradication of poverty. However, collecting relevant data remains a challenge for designing and measuring policy impact. So there is a need to translate multidimensional experience of poverty of people into meaningful and measurable analytical tools. The more elements of multidimensionality there are, the more difficult they are to measure (Thorbecke, 2007). The EU lacks data on climate change's impact upon poverty, which is monitored through the concept of At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion (AROPE) and data is collected by the Survey on Income and Living Conditions – EU-SILC, with the aim of having comparable data across Member States (Eurostat, 2014). The comprehensiveness and limitations of these measures have been discussed in recent statistical reviews (Eurostat, 2021; Eurostat, 2023; Eurostat, 2024; UNstat, 2023), highlighting the absence of environmental dimensions in poverty measurement. AROPE corresponds to the sum of persons who are either at risk of poverty, or severely materially and socially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. The indicator distinguishes between individuals who cannot afford a certain good, service, or social activities. It is defined as the proportion of the population experiencing an enforced lack of at least 7 out of 13 deprivation items (6 related to the individual and 7 related to the household) (see the list of indicators at Eurostat, 2021). According to Eurostat data, some 94.9 million people, equalling 21.4% of the EU population, were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2024a).

In the EU, there is no data on the effects of climate change on poverty or social exclusion. AROPE indicators do not include environmental living conditions. However, the impact of crises on poverty is already fairly well known. The World Bank reports an increase in poverty due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is mostly due to health and economic causes, the latter being highlighted by the rise in food prices (Jafino et al., 2020). The war in Ukraine has led to an extremely high increase in infrastructure costs (electricity, gas, heating), affecting both households and the economy (European Investment Bank, 2022). In fact, the European Union has experienced constant crises over the last fifteen years. Crises often increase poverty risk, as many countries respond with austerity, reducing public and social welfare spending. A large part of the reason for poverty is therefore environmental, which is not part of the monitoring of poverty data.

Methodology

This article adopts an exploratory review approach to analyse selected contributions in the field of eco-social work in order to examine how poverty is understood and addressed within this emerging framework. Given the evolving and interdisciplinary

nature of eco-social work scholarship, an exploratory review is particularly suitable for identifying and synthesising conceptual contributions across connected fields (Grant & Booth, 2009).

This article offers a conceptual analysis of selected contributions in the field of eco-social work in order to explore how poverty is understood and addressed within this emerging framework. Given the evolving and interdisciplinary nature of eco-social work, the search strategy was employed with careful methodological consideration.

Search Strategy

The primary search was conducted using Google Scholar (Advanced Search), selected for its comprehensive and interdisciplinary coverage, which includes peer-reviewed journals, books, and grey literature relevant to both social work and environmental studies. While Google Scholar has limitations compared to discipline-specific databases, it provides a valuable tool for identifying cross-sectoral scholarship — particularly important for an emerging field such as eco-social work.

In the course of the study, searches were guided by a set of keyword combinations designed to capture the multifaceted relationship between eco-social work and poverty. These included terms such as «eco-social work», «green social work», and «environmental social work» combined with «poverty», as well as phrases connecting poverty to the economic, social, and environmental pillars of sustainability. Articles were selected if they had been published in English between 2000 and 2024, and if they engaged explicitly with poverty in the context of eco-social work or sustainability themes. The search deliberately excluded articles that did not directly address poverty or were non-academic commentaries, ensuring that the synthesis remained grounded in scholarly discourse.

TABLE 2
Summary of Reviewed Articles and Relevant Themes

Author(s)	Title	Publication Type / Source	Methodology	Pillar	Relevance to Eco-social Poverty Analysis
Peeters (2022)	Sustainability and New Economic Approaches	Working paper – SPSW Working Paper Series	Conceptual analysis	Economic	Explores alternative economic models and their implications for sustainable and equitable development

Author(s)	Title	Publication Type / Source	Methodology	Pillar	Relevance to Eco-social Poverty Analysis
Närhi & Matthies (2017)	The Contribution of Social Work and Social Policy in Eco-social Transition of Society	Book chapter – <i>The Eco-social Transition of Societies: The Contribution of Social Work and Social Policy</i> . Routledge	Conceptual framework	Social	Discusses the role of social work and social policy in supporting eco-social transitions
Halpern-Meekin (2019)	<i>Social Poverty: Low-Income Parents and the Struggle for Family and Community Ties</i>	Book – NYU Press	Qualitative study	Social	Explores relational and social dimensions of poverty and the role of social networks
Whelan (2022)	From Dissent to Authoritarianism: What Role for Social Work in Confronting the Climate Crisis?	Journal article – <i>Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work</i>	Conceptual analysis	Social	Examines the role of social work in addressing climate crisis and social justice
Whelan (2024)	Teaching for Eco-social Work: What Can Eco-social Policy Offer?	Book chapter – <i>Teaching and Learning in Eco-social Work: Concepts, Methods and Practice</i> . Springer Nature	Pedagogical analysis	Social	Discusses eco-social education and implications for social work practice
Matutini (2020)	Environmental Social Work and Poverty	Journal article – <i>Journal of Social Work</i>	Conceptual review	Environmental	Connects environmental social work with poverty reduction and ecological justice
Elwood et al. (2017)	Geographical Relational Poverty Studies	Journal article – <i>Progress in Human Geography</i>	Theoretical review	Social	Introduces relational approaches to understanding poverty
Jehan & Umana (2003)	The Environment-Poverty Nexus	Journal article – <i>UNDP Development Policy Journal</i>	Policy analysis	Environmental	Explores reciprocal relationships between environmental degradation and poverty

Author(s)	Title	Publication Type / Source	Methodology	Pillar	Relevance to Eco-social Poverty Analysis
Mensah (2019)	Sustainable Development: Meaning, History, Principles, Pillars and Implications for Human Action	Journal article – <i>Cogent Social Sciences</i>	Literature review	Environmental	Provides theoretical grounding for the three pillars of sustainability
Murphy (2022)	The Relationship Between Poverty and Prosperity: A Feminist Relational Account	Journal article – <i>Journal of Global Ethics</i>	Conceptual analysis	Social	Analyses poverty through relational and ethical perspectives
Xu et al. (2022)	Formation of Relational Poverty Governance and its Impacts	Journal article – <i>Journal of Chinese Political Science</i>	Policy analysis	Social	Examines governance approaches to relational poverty
Fitzpatrick (2014)	<i>Climate Change and Poverty: A New Agenda for Developed Nations</i>	Book – Policy Press	Policy analysis	Environmental	Investigates links between climate change impacts and socio-economic vulnerability
Liu (2012)	Environmental Poverty, a Decomposed Environmental Kuznets Curve, and Alternatives	Journal article – <i>Ecological Economics</i>	Empirical analysis	Environmental	Analyses environmental degradation as a driver of poverty
Rees (2002)	Eco-Economics and Poverty	Journal article – <i>Ecological Economics</i>	Conceptual analysis	Economic	Critiques growth-based economic systems and ecological limits
Riches & Silvasti (2014)	<i>First World Hunger Revisited: Food Charity or the Right to Food?</i>	Edited book – Palgrave Macmillan	Edited volume	Social	Examines food insecurity and structural poverty in high-income societies

Author(s)	Title	Publication Type / Source	Methodology	Pillar	Relevance to Eco-social Poverty Analysis
Riches (2018)	<i>Food Bank Nations: Poverty, Corporate Charity and the Right to Food</i>	Book – Routledge	Monograph	Social	Analyses food banks as responses to structural poverty
McKinnon (2008)	Exploring the Nexus Between Social Work and the Environment	Journal article – <i>Australian Social Work</i>	Conceptual review	Environmental	Explores connections between environmental issues and social work practice
Dominelli (2012)	Green Social Work: From Environmental Crises to Environmental Justice	Book – Polity Press	Conceptual framework	Environmental	Foundational text linking environmental justice and social work practice
Coates & Gray (2012)	The Environment and Social Work: An Overview and Introduction	Journal article – <i>International Journal of Social Welfare</i>	Conceptual overview	Environmental	Introduces environmental perspectives within social work theory
Crawford et al. (2015)	Environmental Sustainability and Social Work	Journal article – <i>Social Work Education</i>	Evaluation study	Environmental	Evaluates eco-social approaches in social work education
Glasmeier & Farrigan (2003)	Poverty, Sustainability, and the Culture of Despair	Journal article – <i>Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science</i>	Conceptual critique	Social	Discusses structural causes of persistent poverty
Saraceno (2020)	<i>Quando avere un lavoro non basta a proteggere dalla povertà</i>	Book – Firenze University Press	Policy analysis	Economic	Examines in-work poverty and labour market inequalities
Stamm (2023)	Eco-social Work and Services for Unemployed People	Journal article – <i>Nordic Social Work Research</i>	Case study	Social	Explores eco-social interventions in employment services

Author(s)	Title	Publication Type / Source	Methodology	Pillar	Relevance to Eco-social Poverty Analysis
Leonardi (2023)	La giusta transizione tra questione sociale e questione ambientale	Journal article – <i>Giornale di diritto del lavoro e di relazioni industriali</i>	Conceptual analysis	Social	Discusses the concept of a «just transition» linking social and environmental justice
LaRocque (2023)	Co-envisioning the Social-Ecological Transition Through Youth Eco-Activists' Narratives	Journal article – <i>Journal of Community Practice</i>	Qualitative study	Social	Analyses youth perspectives on ecological transition and social justice
Shackelford et al. (2024)	Abolitionism and Eco-social Work: Towards Equity, Liberation and Environmental Justice	Journal article – <i>British Journal of Social Work</i>	Conceptual analysis	Social	Links eco-social work with environmental justice and structural inequality
Tassan (2021)	Antropologia e giustizia ambientale	Journal article – <i>Anthropology</i>	Conceptual analysis	Environmental	Discusses environmental justice within anthropological frameworks
De Simone (2020)	Le piccole scuole promotrici di democrazia, equità e giustizia sociale	Journal article – <i>Formazione & Insegnamento</i>	Conceptual analysis	Social	Examines education and social justice within community contexts

Note: Several publications engage with more than one sustainability dimension; however, each source is categorised according to its primary analytical focus.

Supplementary Search Techniques

To address potential limitations of relying solely on Google Scholar, a snowballing technique was also employed. Reference lists of key publications identified through the initial search were examined in order to locate additional relevant literature. This helped ensure that both foundational and more recent contributions were included, even if they were not captured in the initial search results.

Selection and Documentation

A total of 28 publications were included in the analysis, comprising 13 identified through keyword searches and 15 through snowballing techniques. Selection was based on relevance to the research question and to at least one of the three dimensions structuring the analysis: economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

A summary table documents these publications, indicating their thematic focus, year of publication, and methodological orientation where applicable.

Analytical Approach

The selected literature was analysed using thematic analysis, following the qualitative analytical framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The analysis identified key conceptual and practical themes in how poverty is understood and addressed within eco-social work scholarship. While the analysis remained open to emergent themes, the reviewed literature frequently engaged with the economic, social, and environmental dimensions associated with sustainability debates. These dimensions therefore provided an analytical structure for organising the findings and facilitating an integrated discussion of poverty through an eco-social lens.

Limitations

The use of Google Scholar as the primary search engine, while justified by its breadth and interdisciplinary scope, may have resulted in some omissions due to its less systematic indexing compared with discipline-specific databases such as Scopus or Web of Science. For this reason, the study is not intended as an exhaustive systematic review but rather as an exploratory synthesis highlighting key themes and gaps in existing scholarship.

Future research could expand this initial work by employing systematic review protocols and searching additional databases to capture a wider range of relevant studies.

Findings

The Interconnectedness of Economic, Social and Environmental Sustainability for Poverty Eradication

This section introduces the key thematic findings from the study. The analysis of the selected literature highlights three interrelated dimensions — economic, social, and envi-

ronmental —that structure the discussion that follows and provide a coherent framework for understanding how eco-social work engages with poverty. The literature considered spans contributions from both Global North and Global South contexts. While many eco-social work discussions originate in European, North American, and Australasian scholarship, several contributions also examine poverty — environment dynamics in developing regions. Across these contexts, the literature highlights both shared challenges — such as ecological degradation and social inequality — and context-specific manifestations of poverty shaped by different socio-economic and environmental conditions.

These dimensions refer to the different but interconnected domains through which poverty is experienced and reproduced within socio-ecological systems.

In reviewing the selected literature, a recurring theme emerges: the relationship between and sustainability is most coherently understood when considered across these three interconnected dimensions. Rather than arising purely inductively, this conceptual framing draws on the well-established sustainability perspective that distinguishes economic, social, and environmental pillars (WCED, 1987; Jeronen, 2023). These dimensions therefore serve as an analytical lens through which the reviewed contributions were examined. The thematic analysis confirms that many contributions addressing poverty within eco-social work implicitly or explicitly engage with the intersection of these domains, underscoring the multidimensional nature of deprivation and the need for integrated responses.

The importance of integrating these dimensions has roots in the global discourse on sustainable development. In 1983, the United Nations General Assembly established the World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, which culminated in the landmark 1987 report, *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987). Although the report did not explicitly define the interconnectedness of economic, social, and environmental sustainability, it recognised each pillar as an essential component of sustainable development. The report's legacy underscores that economic sustainability is about preserving natural, social, and human capital while meeting current consumption needs without compromising the future. It advocates for equitable access to basic social services and productive resources, reinforcing that development must serve society as a whole.

Social sustainability, in this context, centres on promoting human rights, equality, empowerment, participation, cultural identity, and institutional stability, ensuring that the benefits of development are shared inclusively. Environmental sustainability emphasises maintaining ecological integrity and the carrying capacity of the planet so that future generations inherit a resilient natural environment (Jehan & Umana, 2003; Mensah, 2019; Jeronen, 2023).

These foundational principles continue to shape contemporary eco-social work thinking. The key issues remain: what constitutes wellbeing, prosperity, and progress in light of planetary biophysical limits, and how can a socially just and sustainable way of living be achieved? Scholars such as Matthies et al. (2020) stress that significant challenges

persist in integrating the complex interdependencies of ecological, economic, and social processes. Peeters (2022) adds that climate change and environmental degradation affect even the developed world, generating issues such as air pollution, loss of green spaces, and related health impacts, all of which disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.

Across the reviewed literature, a consistent message emerges: poverty alleviation efforts that narrowly target material deprivation are insufficient because they overlook the wider ecological and social conditions that sustain disadvantage. Many authors therefore emphasise that meaningful and lasting poverty reduction requires greater integration between the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development, supported by coherent policy responses at both global and local levels.

Eco-social work, as an emerging framework, embraces this complexity and positions itself as uniquely equipped to address poverty holistically. Its orientation resonates with global calls for a 'just transition' that ensures environmental action advances rather than undermines social justice. For social workers, this integrated perspective provides a theoretical and practical roadmap: to design interventions that address not only immediate client needs but also the structural and environmental factors perpetuating inequality.

In summary, this section establishes a robust conceptual anchor, demonstrating why poverty must be examined through the interconnected lenses of economic, social, and environmental sustainability. It reinforces the relevance of eco-social work as a discipline committed to advancing human dignity and social justice in an era of ecological crisis. In the subsections that follow, each pillar is introduced with a rationale and synthesis of key insights from the literature, illustrating how these dimensions intersect and inform eco-social work practice and scholarship.

Taken together, the reviewed literature does not treat the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability as independent domains. Rather, many authors emphasise their mutual interdependence and the ways in which imbalances in one dimension can reinforce vulnerabilities in the others. Economic inequalities, for instance, often shape exposure to environmental risks and influence access to social resources and networks. Similarly, social exclusion can limit communities' capacity to respond collectively to ecological pressures, while environmental degradation can undermine both livelihoods and social cohesion. The literature therefore suggests that eco-social work must address poverty through integrated approaches that recognise these interactions rather than treating economic, social, and environmental challenges as separate policy fields.

Section: Economic Pillar

The economic pillar of sustainability is frequently foregrounded in both international policy and academic discourse, yet its relationship to poverty within eco-social work requires careful, critical examination. The reviewed literature reveals that economic sus-

tainability, in its broadest sense, involves more than simply ensuring growth and wealth accumulation; it is fundamentally about safeguarding the natural, social, and human capital essential for present and future livelihoods. The Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) underscored this by linking economic activity to responsible stewardship of resources and equitable human development.

Traditional development paradigms, however, have tended to prioritise economic growth as the primary route to poverty reduction, reflecting a logic that remains pervasive in policy circles. Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (Ames et al., 2001) and OECD (2008) have long promoted growth-oriented strategies, though even these organisations acknowledge that growth alone is insufficient unless accompanied by progressive redistribution. This view recognises that economic inequality can undermine efforts to reduce poverty even in times of overall prosperity.

From an eco-social work perspective, the critique of growth-centred approaches is particularly salient. Scholars such as Rees (2002) and Peeters (2022) challenge the assumption that unlimited economic expansion can coexist with ecological integrity, pointing instead to the finite biophysical limits of the planet. Glasmeier and Farrigan (2003) argue that poverty is often entrenched in a ‘culture of despair’ shaped by structural economic exclusion, reinforcing the need for eco-social work to address poverty’s cultural as well as material dimensions. The literature examined in this review converges around the need for alternative economic models that embed equity and sustainability at their core, such as ecological economics, degrowth, doughnut economics, and the wellbeing economy. These paradigms offer more than abstract alternatives; they provide tangible frameworks for social workers seeking to address poverty without contributing to environmental degradation.

Moreover, economic sustainability is not just a macroeconomic concern — it has direct implications for social work practice at the community level. Poverty constrains opportunities, increases vulnerability, and reduces resilience, particularly in communities already facing environmental risks. Eco-social work advocates for economic strategies that promote access to resources, strengthen social protection systems, and enable participation in decision-making processes. This approach requires practitioners to move beyond addressing individual need toward challenging the systemic economic inequalities that sustain poverty.

In this way, eco-social work contributes to a critical rethinking of prosperity and development: away from an uncritical embrace of GDP growth, toward models that foreground human dignity, social justice, and ecological sustainability. The economic pillar, therefore, is not merely an abstract category; it is a dynamic field where eco-social work theory and practice intersect with the lived realities of poverty and environmental precarity. This intersectional perspective informs a more holistic, just, and sustainable response to poverty — a theme that runs through the remaining discussions on the social and environmental pillars.

Section: Social Pillar

This subsection synthesises the thematic findings relating to social sustainability and its connection to poverty in eco-social work.

The social pillar of sustainability is fundamental to understanding poverty within an eco-social work framework, as it foregrounds issues of inclusion, participation, equality, and social cohesion. Whereas economic sustainability interrogates the distribution of material resources, social sustainability focuses upon the quality of human relationships and the structures that enable people to live dignified, fulfilling lives within resilient communities.

The reviewed literature highlights that poverty is not solely a matter of financial deprivation but also encompasses dimensions of social exclusion and relational disconnection. This perspective also resonates with the capability approach developed by Sen (1981), which conceptualises poverty not merely as a lack of income but as a deprivation of capabilities — the substantive freedoms individuals have to lead lives they value. From this viewpoint, social participation, access to supportive networks, and the ability to exercise agency become central elements for understanding poverty and wellbeing. Incorporating a capability perspective reinforces the argument that social sustainability depends not only on the distribution of resources but also on individuals' opportunities to participate fully in social life. Concepts such as social poverty and relational poverty offer important lenses through which to understand this complexity. Social poverty refers to inadequate or absent networks of social support, encompassing community ties, friendships, and institutional engagement (Elwood et al., 2017). Relational poverty, more narrowly defined, pertains to the quality and depth of intimate relationships — connections essential for emotional wellbeing, security, and belonging (Halpern-Meekin, 2019). These dimensions of poverty often intersect with material deprivation, exacerbating individuals' vulnerability and undermining their capacity to cope with adversity.

From an eco-social perspective, social sustainability requires fostering conditions where all individuals can participate meaningfully in society, exercise their rights, and cultivate supportive relationships. The Brundtland Report's vision of sustainable development implicitly acknowledged this need, even if its primary emphasis was on economic and environmental concerns. Social sustainability in this context includes promoting empowerment, cultural identity, accessibility, and participation — values that resonate deeply with the ethical foundations of social work (Jehan & Umana, 2003).

The literature consistently demonstrates that social exclusion is both a cause and consequence of poverty. Marginalised populations, including older people, migrants, racialised communities, and those experiencing homelessness, frequently suffer from diminished social networks and reduced opportunities for civic engagement. As Peeters (2022) and Närhi and Matthies (2017) emphasise, addressing poverty thus requires not only economic measures but also interventions that build community capacity, enhance social capital, and ensure that all members of society have a voice in decisions affecting their lives.

In this regard, eco-social work offers a distinctive contribution. It positions the wellbeing of individuals as inseparable from the health of the communities and environments they inhabit. Social workers, through their practice, are uniquely placed to identify and mitigate the social dimensions of poverty — whether through facilitating community development initiatives, supporting peer networks, or advocating for policies that reduce isolation and discrimination. This work takes on additional urgency in the context of the ecological crisis, as climate change disproportionately affects those already marginalised, eroding community ties and threatening social cohesion.

Moreover, the literature reviewed underscores the long-standing tradition within social work of recognising the importance of social networks, ecosystems thinking, and relational wellbeing. By integrating these traditions into a broader sustainability agenda, eco-social work expands the scope of poverty alleviation beyond immediate material assistance to include the promotion of social connectedness, equity, and collective resilience.

In sum, the social pillar highlights that poverty cannot be understood — or addressed — purely in economic terms. Social work's long-standing commitment to human rights, participation, and social justice provides a critical foundation for tackling the social dimensions of poverty in a way that is both holistic and attuned to contemporary challenges. This perspective enriches eco-social work's capacity to respond to poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon, situating individual hardship within broader structures of inequality, exclusion, and environmental vulnerability. These concerns also inform the subsequent discussion of the environmental pillar, which brings ecological considerations directly into the analysis of poverty and social wellbeing.

These insights resonate with Närhi and Matthies's (2017) argument that social work and social policy are pivotal in facilitating an eco-social transition toward a more sustainable and equitable society capable of adequately responding to poverty. This perspective underscores the importance of addressing both social and relational poverty by advocating for policies and practices that target not only economic and social disparities but also environmental degradation as a core element of social justice. The eco-social framework affirms that the wellbeing of individuals and communities is inseparable from the health of their surrounding environments (Rambaree et al., 2019; Powers, 2019).

Recent scholarship also emphasises relational poverty as a distinct but interconnected dimension of social deprivation. It draws attention to the importance of intimate bonds for emotional support, social inclusion, and personal fulfilment. Deficiencies in close, supportive, and reciprocal relationships can exacerbate feelings of exclusion, loneliness, and emotional distress (Murphy, 2022). Human social systems are complex and dynamic networks of relationships and institutions embedded within broader socio-ecological contexts (Dominelli, 2012). As Xu et al. (2022) note, understanding poverty-generating processes at macro, meso, and micro levels is essential for effective interventions.

Addressing social poverty involves expanding opportunities for meaningful community participation, while tackling relational poverty requires interventions aimed

at enhancing the quality and depth of personal relationships — such as counselling, relational education, and community-building initiatives that foster trust and inclusion. These expanded understandings strengthen eco-social work's capacity to support holistic wellbeing and promote social integration.

Section: Environmental Pillar

This subsection draws together the thematic findings concerning environmental sustainability and its relationship to poverty, as reflected in the reviewed literature.

The environmental pillar of sustainability completes the integrated framework through which eco-social work engages with poverty, situating ecological integrity as both a determinant of human wellbeing and a site of social injustice. The literature reviewed consistently reveals that environmental degradation is neither incidental nor external to poverty; rather, it is intimately bound up with the lived experiences of marginalised communities who are disproportionately exposed to environmental harms and least equipped to mitigate their effects.

At the heart of this nexus lies what Jehan and Umana (2003) describe as a bidirectional relationship: poverty contributes to environmental degradation, while environmental decline exacerbates poverty by undermining health, livelihoods, and community resilience. For instance, the degradation of natural resources can erode the subsistence economies of rural populations, while urban environmental hazards disproportionately impact low-income neighbourhoods, reducing quality of life and amplifying social inequities.

Eco-social work, with its commitment to social justice and sustainability, recognises that poverty must be understood in relation to environmental conditions. As Peeters (2022) and Fitzpatrick (2014) argue, the consequences of climate change — including extreme weather events, pollution, and resource scarcity — pose acute challenges for disadvantaged populations in both the Global South and affluent societies. These challenges compound existing social vulnerabilities, highlighting the necessity of an approach that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries.

Emerging concepts such as environmental poverty, ecological poverty, and climate poverty help capture these complexities. Liu (2012) differentiates environmental poverty as the deprivation of a healthy environment necessary for human flourishing, ecological poverty as a lack of access to ecosystems that support livelihoods, and climate poverty as vulnerability arising from climate change impacts such as droughts and floods. These interrelated dimensions illuminate the ways in which environmental injustices are deeply entwined with social and economic marginalisation.

For eco-social work, the environmental pillar entails not merely acknowledging these realities but actively intervening to promote ecological justice as an integral component of poverty alleviation. This orientation expands the remit of social work practice, calling

on practitioners to advocate for cleaner, safer environments, equitable access to natural resources, and policies that protect the most vulnerable from environmental harms. Moreover, it positions social workers as key actors in fostering community resilience in the face of environmental crises — through initiatives that support local sustainability, promote environmental education, and empower communities to participate in environmental governance.

The literature underscores that environmental sustainability cannot be pursued in isolation from social and economic justice. The failure to integrate these dimensions risks reproducing the very inequalities eco-social work seeks to redress. Therefore, addressing poverty through an eco-social lens requires recognising that environmental degradation is not an abstract ecological concern but a material condition that shapes, and is shaped by, the everyday lives of those experiencing poverty.

Altogether, this exploration of the environmental pillar enriches the eco-social framework by showing how poverty is intimately connected to people's immediate environments — their homes, neighbourhoods, and the natural resources they rely upon. Rather than treating environmental issues as distant or technical concerns, eco-social work approaches them as lived realities that shape, and are shaped by, the day-to-day experiences of those facing disadvantage. This perspective highlights the unique position of social workers to help nurture communities that are healthier, safer, and more equitable — places where everyone has the opportunity to live well in balance with their environment. In doing so, eco-social work contributes meaningfully to understanding and addressing poverty amid today's intertwined social and ecological challenges.

Discussion

The preceding analysis has explored how poverty, within an eco-social framework, is not simply an economic issue but a multidimensional phenomenon embedded in intersecting economic, social, and environmental processes. By examining these three pillars, the review has shown that poverty alleviation cannot be achieved without addressing structural inequalities, relational disconnection, and ecological degradation in an integrated manner.

This multidimensional view aligns with recent scholarship that critiques the limitations of growth-driven paradigms and calls for a fundamental rethinking of prosperity, wellbeing, and social justice. Whelan's contributions (2022, 2024), which bridge eco-social work and eco-social policy, are particularly salient here. Whelan argues that social work must confront the realities of ecological crisis not merely through individual support but by challenging the political economy structures that sustain inequality and ecological harm. His call for an eco-social pedagogy and practice that recognises the limits to growth resonates strongly with the findings of this review, reinforcing the view that

transformative approaches are needed if social work is to remain relevant in an era of escalating climate crisis.

Moreover, Whelan's work highlights the dangers of authoritarian responses to ecological crisis and the need for social work to stand as a voice for democratic participation and social solidarity. This insight underscores the importance of viewing poverty as deeply political: a reflection of policy choices and systemic structures that privilege short-term growth and elite interests over equity and sustainability.

By situating eco-social work within this broader critique of the political economy, the review contributes to an emerging dialogue that sees poverty alleviation not just as a matter of redistribution but as requiring systemic transformation. This places social work central to efforts to forge sustainable, just communities capable of withstanding and responding to ecological disruption.

In light of these insights, it becomes clear that eco-social work must move beyond siloed interventions and adopt an explicitly interdisciplinary and transformative agenda. This involves integrating ecological consciousness into all aspects of practice, policy engagement, and education — ensuring that social workers are equipped not only to support individuals and communities but also to advocate for the structural changes necessary for a sustainable and just future.

Conclusion

The literature review has shown that the consideration of environmental factors broadens the understanding of poverty as a social phenomenon. The financial causes of poverty are important. The lack of money to ensure a decent life is a major cause of poverty because money enables people to buy what they need and what suits their cultural habits and beliefs. Food is a good example, as this is where the non-profit industry of redistributing surplus food (essentially food waste), an important link in the circular economy of food chains, is developing most rapidly. Instead of ending up in landfill, it is being distributed to the poor. Riches (2018) argues that this is a violation of the human right to food, as the poor are not able to choose their own food according to their preferences, tastes and cultural practices. The case is a good example of how not all solutions that appear to be environmentally friendly are also just (Riches & Silvasti, 2014). Money is so important because it gives people autonomy and independence from charity.

However, fighting poverty requires an understanding of the structural causes of poverty, which shifts the responsibility for poverty reduction from individuals to states. Environmental factors are becoming important drivers of poverty, as the effects of climate change are also clearly noticeable worldwide and are set to intensify. Summarising the results of the literature review, we would like to highlight the most important aspects of the interplay between the environmental, social and economic pillars of sustainability.

The economic pillar focuses upon the link between economic development and human life within the concept of ecological economics, which emphasises qualitative rather than quantitative development. It is about limiting economic growth on the one hand and limiting consumption on the other. It is an economy based on the knowledge of social inequalities. This is important for social work because it encourages the development of programmes and services that are not based on the market logic of consumption, but on the development of community potential and a different type of economy, which Elsen (2019) calls the social or solidarity economy. These are forms of activity that respect both human rights and the environment, but are not geared toward profit at any price. The integration of social work in the development of the activity is based on social innovation and community-oriented work, which is an important change in today's world. Peeters (2022) states that these programmes should be bottom-up and promote a participatory way of working.

Within the social pillar, the focus is on social and relational poverty as well as social networks and community engagement. Both Elwood et al. (2017) and Halpern-Meekin (2019) emphasise that these relationships must be based on trust and respect as well as acceptance of people's diversity and their uniqueness. For people living in poverty, social ties are only beneficial if they are accepted as equals and empowered to participate and act. Poverty is often the result of marginalisation and exclusion from the community. People living in poverty are not accepted because they are labelled as 'different' and degraded. This is a very important message for social workers. From an eco-social work perspective, their role is to support the building of open and inclusive communities. They need to be aware of people who are outsiders, who do not belong to the majority, and help find ways to integrate them. The goal is to create collectives that care about each other and about shared interests and needs. Närhi and Matthies (2018) note that this is not an alternative to the welfare state, but rather another model of it, as it emphasises local welfare services based on the actual needs and capacities of communities.

In the environmental pillar poverty is also understood as relational, this time with the environment. Poverty is not only caused by economic or social circumstances but is also exacerbated (or diminished) by the natural environment — the more degraded it is, the more destructive the effects. The environment-poverty nexus is therefore much more important and at the same time overlooked in both poverty measurement and poverty reduction policies. In the present time, this nexus is becoming more transparent because of the effects of global warming. For social work, this area is of great importance. In recent years, many articles have focused on the role of social work in disasters and crises. However, eco-social work deals with environmental outcomes all the time and develops social innovations that ensure people's sustainable wellbeing without harming the environment (Stamm, 2023).

Within this framework, eco-social work emerges as a pivotal intervention, tackling poverty through a holistic approach that considers the interconnection between

environmental, social, and economic factors (Saraceno, 2020). Contextualizing poverty is crucial for developing targeted and sustainable interventions. Eco-social workers, operating within this framework, are adept at identifying and leveraging local resources, thus fostering initiatives that specifically address the needs of the communities involved (Khavul & Bruton, 2013). Through a holistic action, eco-social work aims not only to mitigate the immediate effects of poverty but also to lay a solid foundation for a sustainable future where economic, social, and environmental needs are equally balanced (Minsky et al., 2014). To translate these actions into tangible impacts on poverty reduction and sustainability promotion, community involvement and the creation of supportive policies are essential. Public engagement becomes crucial in defining the relationship between responsibility and prospective health technologies, where community participation in directing and shaping innovation is fundamental (Lehoux et al, 2018).

Eco-social work, in the current context, is central to a critical reflection on the need for a transition toward sustainable development models. This transition extends beyond the mere adoption of ecologically responsible practices, requiring a profound reconfiguration of societal values and priorities. In this perspective, eco-social work becomes a catalyst for promoting a lifestyle that values sustainability, conservation of natural resources, and respect for all forms of life (Tassan, 2021; Leonardi, 2023; Maturo, 2012). Such a transition involves the creation of policies and practices aimed at promoting social equity, environmental justice, and sustainable development (Crawford et al, 2015; Shackelford et al, 2023; LaRocque, 2023). Addressing the root causes of poverty requires a concerted action that integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions, leveraging a collective commitment to sustainability (De Simone, 2020).

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