

Sustainability in everyday Social Work practice: From ecological awareness to operational change

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Abstract

The ecological crisis challenges social work not only to address environmental issues through specialised projects, but to reconsider how everyday professional practices are organised, sustained and legitimised within welfare services. While eco-social work has increasingly highlighted the interdependence between social and environmental justice, sustainability is still often treated as an additional thematic area rather than as a guiding principle for ordinary practice. This article proposes a theoretical-methodological reflection on sustainability in everyday social work practice, understood as an operational competence that shapes daily decision-making, professional relationships and organisational processes. From an eco-social and relational perspective, sustainability is reframed as the capacity to hold together care, limits and responsibility over time, avoiding both the moralisation of individual workers and the delegation of ecological concerns to specialised interventions. The paper identifies key dimensions through which sustainability takes shape in daily practice: the use of sustainability as a decision-making lens, the revaluation of margins and «waste» as generative resources and the diffusion of practices through relational processes rather than formal replication. It argues that working sustainably is not primarily a technical issue, but an ethical and political orientation that affects how social workers inhabit complexity, manage scarcity and preserve the quality of professional and community ecosystems.

Keywords

Sustainability, Social work practice, Everyday decision-making, Organisational change, Professional wellbeing.

Introduction

The ecological crisis is increasingly recognised as one of the most significant challenges shaping contemporary societies, not only because of its environmental conse-

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quences, but also due to its profound social, economic and relational impacts. These dynamics increasingly appear in ordinary casework and service design through housing insecurity, energy poverty, climate-related displacement, disruptions of local economies and the cumulative effects of environmental stress on mental health and community cohesion. Climate change, environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources intersect with existing social inequalities, amplifying vulnerability and placing additional pressure on welfare systems and social services. In this context, social work is increasingly called upon to rethink its role, responsibilities and practices in light of ecological imperatives (Dominelli, 2012; Matthies & Närhi, 2017).

In recent years, the development of eco-social work has contributed to highlighting the interdependence between social justice and environmental justice, challenging traditional divisions between social and environmental policy fields. From this perspective, human well-being cannot be separated from the health of social and natural ecosystems and social work is invited to engage with ecological issues as an integral part of its mandate (Rambaree et al., 2022).

However, despite this growing theoretical awareness, sustainability often remains framed as a specialised area of intervention or as an additional set of projects, rather than as a guiding principle for everyday professional practice within ordinary social work services. Several scholars have documented this tendency: eco-social innovations have often developed as distinct programmes or time-limited projects, highly dependent on specific funding streams and the motivation of individual practitioners, rather than reshaping the core routines and organisational logics of mainstream services (Boetto, 2017; Matthies & Närhi, 2017; McKinnon, 2008; Rambaree et al., 2022). Put differently, eco-social work is often approached as a topic to be added to practice, rather than as a lens capable of reorienting how practice is organised, prioritised and sustained (Besthorn, 2012; Boetto, 2017).

This gap becomes particularly evident in daily work contexts characterised by scarcity of resources, organisational constraints and increasing demands for efficiency. Social workers frequently operate in conditions of chronic pressure, where the focus on immediate outcomes and emergency responses risks overshadowing questions of long-term sustainability, professional well-being and relational quality. In such settings, sustainability may inadvertently turn into a moralised expectation placed on individual workers, rather than a shared organisational and professional responsibility (Healy, 2022). When this happens, sustainability risks becoming another layer of responsibility placed on already overburdened professionals, reproducing the very extractive dynamics it aims to counter.

From a relational perspective, this represents a critical issue. Relational social work emphasises that practice is always situated within networks of interdependence involving people, organisations, communities and institutional arrangements (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012; Folgheraiter, 2004). Sustainability, therefore, cannot be reduced to environmental sensitivity or to technical adjustments, but concerns the capacity of social work to maintain, over time, the quality of relationships, the balance of resources and the coher-

ence between values and practices. In this view, sustainability concerns the care of the possibility of practice itself: the organisational and relational conditions that allow social work to remain feasible, ethical and generative over time (Gray et al., 2012; Ward, 2001).

This focus is particularly relevant for practitioners, supervisors, coordinators and service managers who are asked to «do more with less» while preserving relational quality and professional integrity. The argument developed in this paper proceeds in two connected steps: it first draws on eco-social theory to identify a structural gap in how sustainability is currently integrated into professional practice; it then proposes that closing this gap requires attention to the organisational and relational micro-processes through which everyday social work is enacted. The ecological imperative, in other words, can only become a genuine reorienting principle if it is grounded in the ordinary conditions of professional life — the decision-making routines, relational dynamics and organisational arrangements that structure daily work.

This article advances a theoretical-conceptual argument: it argues that sustainability should be understood as an operational competence embedded in everyday social work practice. This is not a paper reporting original empirical research; rather, it draws on existing theoretical and empirical literature to develop a conceptual framework with normative implications for how sustainability is understood, taught and organised in social work services. Rather than proposing new models or specialised eco-social interventions, it focuses on how sustainability can orient routine decision-making, organisational processes and professional relationships within ordinary services. The contribution of the article lies in (i) defining sustainability as a practical orientation shaping daily work under conditions of complexity and scarcity, (ii) identifying key dimensions through which sustainability becomes observable in everyday practice and (iii) outlining organisational implications for embedding sustainability as a shared professional responsibility. By reframing sustainability as an ethical and political dimension of ordinary practice, the article aims to offer a perspective grounded in relational thinking and attentive to the concrete conditions of fieldwork.

Eco-Social Work beyond environmental projects

The development of eco-social work has played a crucial role in expanding social work's engagement with environmental issues, challenging the traditional separation between social policy and environmental policy (Gray et al., 2012). Foundational contributions have highlighted how ecological degradation, climate change and resource depletion intersect with social inequalities, disproportionately affecting marginalised groups and communities (Dominelli, 2012; Matthies & Närhi, 2017). From this perspective, eco-social work has contributed to reframing environmental concerns as matters of social justice and human rights, rather than as external or secondary issues traditionally delegated to other policy domains (Dominelli, 2018).

This body of work has been particularly important in questioning anthropocentric and sectorial approaches to welfare, emphasising instead the interconnectedness of social, economic and environmental systems. As several authors have argued, eco-social work invites a rethinking of social work's mandate in terms of interdependence, collective responsibility and ecological limits, moving beyond linear notions of need, intervention and outcome (Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2013).

Within this broad field, sustainability has been a central — though contested — concept. In its most widely used formulation, sustainability refers to the capacity to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own (WCED, 1987), encompassing ecological, social and economic dimensions that are understood as interdependent. Eco-social work has engaged with this multi-dimensional conception, emphasising that social work's mandate necessarily involves attention to ecological limits, intergenerational responsibility and the distributional consequences of resource use (Peeters, 2012; Boetto, 2017).

At the same time, the concept has attracted significant critique within the field itself: its association with technocratic and managerial discourses, its compatibility with growth-oriented economic models and its tendency to produce abstract commitments without operational traction have led several scholars to question whether sustainability, as conventionally framed, can serve as a useful guide for professional practice (Baines, 2011; Besthorn, 2012; Gray et al., 2013). These critiques are not peripheral: they point to a genuine tension between the transformative aspirations of eco-social work and the normative ambiguity of a concept that has been appropriated across very different political and institutional agendas. This paper engages with these critiques directly, not by abandoning the concept of sustainability but by proposing a more operationally grounded understanding of it — one that is explicitly anchored in the conditions of everyday professional practice rather than in abstract normative commitments.

At the same time, much of the existing debate and practice has focused on the development of specific eco-social projects: initiatives related to environmental education, sustainable community development, green jobs or nature-based interventions. While these experiences are undoubtedly valuable and often innovative, there is a risk that sustainability becomes confined to a specialised domain, delegated to particular programmes, professionals or funding streams. In this configuration, ecological concerns may remain peripheral to the everyday functioning of social work services, rather than reshaping their core practices, decision-making processes and organisational logics.

This tendency reflects a broader dynamic within welfare systems, where complex social challenges are frequently addressed through project-based responses rather than through structural and organisational change. Several authors have warned against this form of «projectisation» of sustainability. Matthies and Närhi (2017) note that without a deeper transformation of welfare systems and professional cultures, eco-social innovations risk remaining isolated experiments, highly dependent on

short-term funding and vulnerable to organisational constraints. Similarly, Rambaree et al. (2022) emphasise that ecosocial approaches require a shift in worldviews and professional orientations, not merely the addition of environmentally themed activities to existing service models.

The limits of a project-centred approach become particularly visible in ordinary social work settings, where professionals operate under conditions of scarcity, bureaucratic regulation and increasing accountability pressures. In such contexts, sustainability is often interpreted primarily in environmental or economic terms, while its implications for professional relationships, decision-making processes and organisational sustainability remain under-theorised. As a result, ecological responsibility may be implicitly transferred to individual workers' personal sensitivity or motivation, rather than being addressed as a collective and structural issue embedded in organisational arrangements and policy choices (Healy, 2022).

From a relational perspective, this represents a critical gap, as it overlooks how ecological responsibility risks being relegated to individual workers' personal sensitivity rather than collective organisational arrangements (Healy, 2022). Relational social work conceptualises practice as inherently embedded within networks of interdependence — involving service users, professionals, organisations, communities and institutional arrangements (Folgheraiter, 2004) — where actions are co-produced through shared relational processes (Folgheraiter, 2024; Gray et al., 2012). Within this framework, sustainability cannot be reduced to the environmental impact of specific interventions, but concerns the capacity of these relational networks to endure, adapt and remain generative over time, holding together care, responsibility and limits amid complexity and scarcity (Matthies & Närhi, 2017; Ward, 2001). This includes attention not only to outcomes for service users, but also to the sustainability of professional roles, emotional labour, organisational cultures and everyday decision-making routines (Borrell et al., 2010; Schmitz et al., 2011).

Moving beyond environmental projects, eco-social work can therefore be understood as a reorientation of everyday practice rather than as a specialised field of intervention. Sustainability becomes a lens through which social workers interpret situations, allocate resources, negotiate limits and assume responsibility within complex systems. Rather than asking how to «add» ecological concerns to social work, this perspective invites reflection on how ordinary practices either consume or regenerate social, relational and organisational resources. The following sections develop this argument by proposing an operational understanding of sustainability — one that is grounded in the relational and organisational fabric of everyday practice and that treats the micro-processes of professional life as the primary site through which eco-social reorientation can take place. In this sense, eco-social work points towards a transformation that is less about introducing new activities and more about reshaping how social work is practised, governed and sustained on a daily basis.

Sustainability as an operational concept in Social Work

In this contribution, *operational sustainability* refers to a practice competence that shapes routine professional decisions about priorities, boundaries, time and relational investments, with explicit attention to their cumulative effects on professional, organisational and community ecosystems. Defining sustainability in operational terms means shifting the focus from abstract commitments or specialised interventions to the everyday choices through which social work is enacted and sustained over time (Borrell et al., 2010; L. Schmitz et al., 2011).

The concept of sustainability as developed in eco-social work literature carries significant theoretical weight, but also acknowledged limitations as an operational guide for practice. In its foundational formulations, sustainability encompasses three interdependent dimensions (ecological, social and economic) understood as requiring simultaneous and integrated attention (Peeters, 2012; Dominelli, 2012). Within eco-social work, this tripartite conception has been used to challenge reductive understandings of welfare that address social needs in isolation from their ecological conditions, arguing for a systemic and long-term perspective on human well-being (Matthies & Närhi, 2017; Boetto, 2017).

However, as Baines (2011) and others have noted, the concept also carries risks: its breadth and normative ambiguity make it susceptible to co-optation by managerialist discourses, while its association with aspirational commitments can render it ineffective as a guide for concrete professional decisions. These limitations do not invalidate the concept, but they do suggest that for sustainability to function as a genuine reorienting principle in everyday social work practice, it needs to be translated into operational terms — that is, into a set of practical orientations and dispositions that are observable in the micro-routines of professional life, rather than confined to the macro-level of policy or programme design.

In social work literature, sustainability is often addressed in broad normative terms, associated with long-term outcomes, environmental responsibility or the durability of social policies (Matthies & Närhi, 2017; Peeters, 2012; Ward, 2001). While these perspectives are important, they tend to leave underexplored how sustainability operates within the micro-level routines of professional practice. As a result, sustainability risks remaining an aspirational principle or an ethical ideal, rather than a concrete competence guiding how social workers allocate attention, negotiate limits and distribute responsibility in daily work contexts (Bowles et al., 2016).

The operational reframing proposed here is therefore not a departure from eco-social theory but a specification of it. By asking what sustainability looks like when it is enacted in a team meeting, in a caseload prioritisation decision or in a supervision session, this paper attempts to bridge the gap between the normative ambitions of eco-social work and the practical conditions under which most social workers operate. In doing so, it draws on two additional theoretical resources — relational social work and organisational theory — not as replacements for eco-social thinking, but as complementary frameworks

that illuminate how sustainability can be embedded in the relational and structural fabric of everyday services.

From an eco-social perspective, sustainability can be understood as the capacity to hold together care, responsibility and limits over time (Elo et al., 2023; Närhi & Matthies, 2016). This implies moving beyond a logic centred on immediate problem-solving or short-term effectiveness, towards an orientation attentive to the cumulative consequences of professional decisions on people, relationships, organisations and communities (Care et al., 2021). Sustainability, in this sense, is not primarily about doing more or expanding professional commitment, but about doing differently: redistributing attention, energy and responsibility in ways that do not exhaust the social and relational ecosystems in which social work operates.

Relational theory offers a crucial lens for conceptualising sustainability as an operational dimension of practice. Social work action is always embedded in networks of interdependence — involving service users, professionals, organisations, communities and institutional arrangements — where outcomes are co-produced through shared relational processes and responsibility is negotiated rather than individually carried (Folgheraiter, 2004; Gray et al., 2012). Within these networks, sustainability concerns the durability and quality of relational processes: how limits are recognised and legitimised, how responsibilities are shared among actors and how professional roles are positioned in relation to service users, organisations and institutional mandates (Folgheraiter, 2024; Ward, 2001). From this perspective, sustainability is inseparable from the capacity to maintain relational integrity under conditions of complexity and constraint, holding together care, responsibility and limits amid scarcity over time (Borrell et al., 2010; Elo et al., 2023; Schmitz et al., 2011; Matthies & Närhi, 2017; Närhi & Matthies, 2016).

Understanding sustainability as an operational concept also requires a critical distinction from dominant narratives of individual resilience or personal adaptability. In contexts of structural scarcity, prevalent appeals to flexibility, coping strategies, and personal endurance risk displacing organisational and systemic responsibility onto practitioners, framing sustainability as an individual moral task rather than a collective condition (Baines, 2011; Healy, 2022). This individualisation not only moralises professional effort but also undermines relational social work principles, which emphasise that responsibility is co-produced through interdependent networks involving service users, professionals, organisations, and institutions (Folgheraiter, 2004; Gray et al., 2012). An operational approach to sustainability explicitly resists this moralisation. Instead, it foregrounds shared responsibility for shaping the conditions under which social work is practised, including organisational arrangements, decision-making processes and the equitable distribution of emotional and relational labour (Borrell et al., 2010; Ward, 2001).

Framing sustainability as a practice competence also has methodological implications for how social work is analysed and evaluated (Bowles et al., 2016). It shifts attention from isolated interventions to patterns of practice, from individual performance to relational

dynamics (Folgheraiter, 2004; Gray et al., 2012) and from predefined outcomes to processes unfolding over time. Sustainability becomes visible not in exceptional projects or innovative programmes, but in the ordinary ways social workers inhabit complexity, negotiate limits and care for the possibility of continuing to work well (Borrell et al., 2010; L. Schmitz et al., 2011). In this sense, operational sustainability can be understood as a form of situated practical wisdom (Fook & Gardner, 2007), developed through reflexive engagement with everyday work rather than through the application of standardised tools or prescriptive models.

Everyday practices: where sustainability takes shape

If sustainability is understood as an operational competence rather than as a thematic specialisation, its effects become visible primarily in everyday practice (Borrell et al., 2010; Schmitz et al., 2011). It is within ordinary professional routines—rather than in exceptional projects—that social work either reproduces extractive logics or develops more regenerative ways of working (Bowles et al., 2016). Team meetings, case discussions, organisational negotiations and informal interactions with service users represent key sites where sustainability is enacted, negotiated or undermined (Folgheraiter, 2004; Gray et al., 2012). These settings constitute what might be defined as the «micro-infrastructures» of practice, where abstract principles are translated into concrete orientations and where cumulative effects take shape over time (Elo et al., 2023; Närhi & Matthies, 2016). Three interconnected dimensions can be identified through which sustainability takes shape in these everyday contexts.

The first dimension concerns sustainability as a decision-making orientation under conditions of uncertainty and scarcity (Gray et al., 2012). Decision-making in social work is rarely neutral or purely technical; it involves continuous evaluations of priorities, responsibilities and limits within constrained organisational environments (Banks, 2012; Hasenfeld, 2010). A sustainability-oriented approach invites professionals to consider not only the immediate effectiveness of an action, but also its cumulative impact on relational dynamics (Folgheraiter, 2004; Gray et al., 2012), professional well-being and organisational balance (Närhi & Matthies, 2016; Ward, 2001). Asking whether a choice is sustainable over time means reflecting on how it affects the distribution of emotional labour (Borrell et al., 2010), the manageability of workloads and the quality of professional relationships (Elo et al., 2023), rather than focusing exclusively on short-term outcomes or procedural compliance.

A sustainability-oriented approach invites social workers and teams to introduce reflective questions into ordinary decision-making processes: What will this decision cost relationally over time? Which resources are being depleted and which can be regenerated? Are we responding to urgency, or reproducing a cycle of permanent emergency? Is responsibility being shared, negotiated or implicitly individualised? Could this way of working be sustained without relying on overextension or moral over-commitment?

These questions do not function as evaluation tools, but as practical devices to support reflexive, relationally grounded and sustainable practice within everyday work contexts.

A second dimension concerns the revaluation of margins and «waste» within everyday practice. Contemporary welfare systems tend to privilege efficiency, standardisation and measurable outputs, often rendering invisible those aspects of practice that do not easily fit performance indicators: informal interactions, relational work, pauses, errors and ambivalences. Yet, several scholars have highlighted how learning, change and professional judgement in social work often emerge precisely from these marginal spaces (Ferguson, 2018; Fook & Gardner, 2007). For instance, an informal chat during a coffee break with a service user might uncover unspoken family dynamics that inform long-term support planning, fostering trust and preventing future crises — yet such moments are rarely logged or valued in caseload metrics. Similarly, deliberate pauses for reflection after a tense team meeting allow practitioners to process emotional labour, recalibrate priorities and avoid reactive decisions that deplete relational resources over time (Borrell et al., 2010). Errors, like misjudging a client's readiness for independence, provide critical learning opportunities when debriefed collectively, enhancing team wisdom without punitive blame (Gray et al., 2012).

Reframing sustainability involves recognising these elements not as inefficiencies to be eliminated, but as generative resources that sustain reflective practice, ethical deliberation and professional growth, thereby countering extractive logics and supporting regenerative relational networks (Folgheraiter, 2004; Ward, 2001). From a sustainability perspective, these margins are not peripheral but structurally pivotal—the vital spaces where practitioners test boundaries, negotiate meaning, and creatively adapt to complex realities. Dismissing them as disposable or non-productive fuels an extractive drain on your professional resources and relational reserves; embracing them as legitimate practice ignites regeneration, bolstering competence, wisdom, and long-term resilience in everyday work (Ferguson, 2018; Fook & Gardner, 2007).

A third dimension concerns how sustainable practices circulate within and across teams. Sustainable practices are rarely—if ever—successfully transferred through top-down implementation of standardised models, protocols or training programmes, which often falter in the face of contextual complexities and professional resistance. Instead, they propagate laterally and resiliently through everyday mechanisms of observation, shared reflection and relational proximity, embedding themselves deeply within professional cultures (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Practice wisdom circulates fluidly within teams and across organisations precisely when professionals witness resonant actions in their peers — moments of recognition that spark adaptation to local contexts rather than rote imitation. This relational diffusion thrives on foundational conditions: profound interpersonal trust, mutual recognition of shared challenges, and protected spaces for dialogue, such as team huddles or post-case debriefs. Without these, sustainable orientations risk remaining isolated experiments; with them, they become woven into the fabric of col-

lective practice, fostering regenerative change that endures beyond individual tenure (Borrell et al., 2010; Folgheraiter, 2004).

Practical examples abound in social work's micro-infrastructures. Consider a child protection team where one social worker, during a routine case discussion, models sustainable decision-making by posing reflexive questions — «What relational costs might this urgency-driven intervention incur over time?» — to redistribute emotional labour and avert collective depletion (Gray et al., 2012). Colleagues observing this do not merely note it; they internalise, adapt and replicate it in subsequent meetings, gradually shifting the team's default from reactive individualism to shared, balanced responsibility. Similarly, in community mental health services, an informal corridor conversation about negotiating boundaries with a demanding service user—framed not as refusal but as a sustainable limit to preserve long-term relational integrity—spreads through relational networks (Närhi & Matthies, 2016). One worker's story of communicating workload realities to a client, met with eventual understanding, inspires others to experiment during home visits, normalising such practices and reducing moral over-commitment across the team.

Even in high-pressure organisational negotiations, diffusion operates potently: a practitioner who visibly advocates for pausing a meeting to process ambiguity (revaluing those generative «margins» of practice (Ferguson, 2018; Fook & Gardner, 2007)) demonstrates its value in real-time. Peers, seeing the subsequent clarity and reduced error rates, incorporate similar pauses into their routines, creating pockets of regenerative rhythm amid scarcity. These instances illustrate how sustainability diffuses not as imposed doctrine, but as lived, adaptable wisdom—strengthening professional resilience, relational networks and service continuity without demanding new resources (Ward, 2001).

Importantly, these everyday practices do not require additional resources or specialised competencies (Ward, 2001). Rather, they depend on how existing resources — time, attention, relationships and professional discretion — are used and valued within organisational settings (Folgheraiter, 2004). Sustainability thus becomes visible in small but significant choices: how limits are communicated to service users (Närhi & Matthies, 2016), how uncertainty is handled within teams (Borrell et al., 2010) and how responsibility is shared rather than individualised (Gray et al., 2012). In this sense, sustainability is not an extra layer added to practice, but a way of inhabiting professional action that prioritises continuity, balance and relational integrity (Ferguson, 2018).

Organisational implications for Social Work services

Understanding sustainability as an operational competence raises profound questions about organisational responsibility. While sustainability is enacted through practitioners' everyday decisions and relational interactions, it is simultaneously shaped — enabled

or constrained — by the organisational contexts in which social workers operate. Welfare organisations are not passive containers of practice: they configure professional discretion, define operational priorities and allocate scarce resources such as time, supervisory support and emotional labour (Hasenfeld, 2010). These structural arrangements fundamentally condition whether sustainability remains an individual aspiration or becomes a shared professional orientation. From an eco-social perspective, this means recognising social work services as interdependent ecosystems that require active maintenance to avoid depletion and foster regeneration — not only of human and relational resources, but of the broader social and ecological conditions in which services are embedded (Matthies & Närhi, 2017; Närhi & Matthies, 2016). In many contemporary social services, organisational models are increasingly shaped by managerial and performance-oriented logics that emphasise efficiency, accountability and measurable outputs. While these approaches aim to optimise resource use, they often privilege short-term results and procedural compliance, neglecting the relational and processual dimensions of practice that are essential for its sustainability (Clarke et al., 2007). The compression of reflective spaces under efficiency pressures, the prioritisation of urgency over relational continuity and the individualisation of professional responsibility are not incidental features of these systems — they are structural tendencies that systematically work against the conditions identified in the previous section as enabling sustainable practice.

Addressing sustainability at the organisational level therefore requires deliberate attention to a set of decision areas — here conceptualised as organisational levers — through which the conditions of everyday practice are actively shaped. These are not technical fixes or additional programmes; they are points of intervention where values, priorities and responsibilities are negotiated amid resource scarcity and systemic pressure (Hasenfeld, 2010; Lipsky, 2010). Four interconnected levers are identified as particularly significant.

The first lever concerns caseload governance and prioritisation criteria. In many welfare organisations, priorities are defined almost exclusively in terms of urgency, risk management or procedural deadlines, producing a condition of permanent emergency. Drawing on street-level bureaucracy theory, such prioritisation regimes profoundly shape professional discretion and coping strategies (Lipsky, 2010). A sustainability-oriented approach invites organisations to complement urgency-based criteria with attention to cumulative relational impact: identifying which cases require relational continuity rather than speed, recognising instances of professional overexposure and addressing how repeated short-term responses erode relational quality and professional capacity over time (Clarke et al., 2007; Lipsky, 2010). This reframing also carries an ecological dimension: the depletion of professional relational capacity is analogous to the depletion of natural resources — it is gradual, cumulative and difficult to reverse once it reaches a critical threshold (Matthies & Närhi, 2017).

The second lever concerns time allocation and the protection of reflective spaces. Time is one of the most scarce and contested resources in social work organisations, and

reflective activities — supervision, team debriefs, peer discussions, ethical forums — are typically the first to be reduced under efficiency pressures (Borrell et al., 2010). From a sustainability perspective, these spaces are not optional: they are the infrastructural conditions through which practice wisdom circulates, emotional labour is processed and shared responsibility is cultivated. Protecting them is not a concession to professional comfort but a structural requirement for maintaining the quality and continuity of practice over time. Without such protection, organisations risk entrenching cycles of burnout and moral distress that ultimately undermine the very service objectives they pursue (Baines, 2011; Clarke et al., 2007).

The third lever concerns boundary management. Social workers are routinely required to negotiate limits with service users, collaborating institutions and policy frameworks, often under conditions of chronic scarcity that make comprehensive need fulfilment structurally impossible. When boundary-setting remains the sole responsibility of individual practitioners, it generates moral overload: workers internalise guilt for systemic failures that are not of their making, which erodes professional resilience and perpetuates emotional depletion. Organisationally supported boundary management — through shared guidelines, integration into collective decision-making and explicit legitimisation of unavoidable limits — redistributes ethical responsibility across teams and reframes sustainability as a collective rather than individual concern (Borrell et al., 2010; Folgheraiter, 2004).

The fourth lever concerns collective decision-making processes. When ethically complex decisions are made in isolation — under pressure from policy mandates, resource constraints and immediate risks — sustainability is undermined as individual practitioners bear disproportionate emotional and moral burdens. Organisational arrangements that institutionalise shared deliberation — through regular team-based case discussions, supervision sessions and ethics-oriented forums — enable responsibility to be negotiated across professional networks. This distributes ethical load, strengthens collective professional judgement and interrupts the individualisation of responsibility that characterises extractive organisational cultures (Baines, 2011; Folgheraiter, 2004).

Taken together, these four levers point towards an understanding of social work organisations as ecosystems in the eco-social sense: systems whose long-term viability depends on the balance between what they extract from and what they return to their members and communities (Nearhi & Matthies, 2016; Rambaree et al., 2022). Activating these levers does not require additional programmes or significant new resources. It requires a reorientation of organisational attention — from short-term outputs to the enduring conditions of professional practice — and a willingness to treat the sustainability of workers, relationships and institutional cultures as an organisational responsibility rather than an individual one (Lipsky, 2010; Ward, 2001). In this sense, the organisational dimension of sustainability is not separable from its ethical and political dimensions, to which the following section turns.

Ethical and political dimensions of sustainable practice

Reframing sustainability as an operational dimension of everyday social work practice raises ethical and political questions that cannot be reduced to technical or organisational matters (Banks, 2012). Sustainability entails explicit normative choices about values, shared responsibilities and the equitable distribution of scarce resources across interdependent social and organisational systems (Clarke et al., 2007; Dominelli, 2012; Folgheraiter, 2004). Working sustainably requires a deliberate confrontation with the assumptions — often implicit and frequently extractive — that shape professional action, organisational priorities and welfare arrangements (Baines, 2011).

Ethically, sustainability demands a reconsideration of what it means to «do good» under conditions of scarcity, uncertainty and systemic constraint. Conventional social work ethics prioritise beneficence, respect for persons and social justice (Banks, 2012), but these principles are difficult to honour when urgency-driven practice reduces ethical responsibility to task completion and procedural compliance. A sustainability ethic shifts the horizon from short-term effectiveness to the preservation of continuity, balance and long-term relational integrity — attending not only to immediate outcomes for service users but to the conditions that make good practice possible over time.

From a relational perspective, ethical responsibility in sustainable practice is inherently shared and situated rather than individualised. Social work unfolds within networks of interdependence where outcomes are co-produced and responsibilities negotiated among multiple actors (Folgheraiter, 2004). Framing sustainability ethically therefore counters narratives that equate professional commitment with unlimited availability or that locate responsibility exclusively in individual workers. It affirms, instead, that recognising and communicating limits is itself an ethical act — a condition of responsible and sustainable practice rather than a failure of professional dedication.

Sustainability also carries a political dimension that is inseparable from its ethical one. Social work practice is embedded within institutional, economic and policy contexts that shape what forms of practice are feasible and what constraints are structurally imposed (Clarke et al., 2007). Welfare services reflect political choices about funding priorities, regulatory frameworks and organisational models — choices that determine the conditions under which practitioners work and the resources available to service users. When sustainability is understood only at the individual or organisational level, these structural forces remain unexamined. An eco-social approach, by contrast, connects everyday practice to broader debates about social justice, environmental stewardship and equitable resource allocation, making visible the links between micro-level decisions and macro-level power structures (Dominelli, 2012). This framing repositions practitioners not merely as recipients of structural constraints but as actors capable of naming them, challenging them and advocating for change.

At the level of daily practice, the ethical and political dimensions of sustainability are enacted through choices that shape professional cultures and relational climates over time. Communicating limits transparently to service users, navigating uncertainty collectively within teams, distributing responsibilities rather than concentrating them and creating space for ethical deliberation on resource allocation — these are not merely technical decisions. They either entrench existing power dynamics or contribute, incrementally, to transforming them (Folgheraiter, 2004; Clarke et al., 2007; Dominelli, 2012). Sustainability, understood in this sense, is not confined to formal advocacy or policy intervention: it is enacted in the everyday ways social workers position themselves in relation to their roles, their colleagues, their organisations and the people they serve.

Conclusion

This article has argued for understanding sustainability in social work not as a specialised environmental concern but as an operational and relational competence embedded in the fabric of everyday professional practice. Rather than asking how ecological issues can be added to social work, it has asked how sustainability can reorient the ordinary ways in which social work is organised, enacted and sustained over time. This reframing is proposed as a contribution to eco-social work scholarship: one that does not depart from the ecological and normative commitments of the field, but attempts to specify what those commitments require at the level of everyday practice, professional relationships and organisational arrangements.

Three interconnected arguments have been developed. First, sustainability functions as a decision-making orientation that shapes how social workers allocate attention, negotiate limits and distribute responsibility in conditions of scarcity and complexity. This orientation becomes visible not in exceptional programmes but in the micro-processes of professional life — the questions asked in a case discussion, the way a boundary is communicated, the space made for collective reflection after a difficult situation. Second, everyday sustainability is relationally produced: it circulates through observation, shared reflection and relational proximity rather than through formal training or top-down implementation. The conditions that enable this circulation — trust, mutual recognition, protected spaces for dialogue — are themselves organisational responsibilities. Third, sustainability cannot be embedded in everyday practice without deliberate organisational support. The four levers identified — caseload governance, protection of reflective spaces, boundary management and collective decision-making — are not additional programmes but reorientations of existing organisational arrangements towards the long-term conditions of viable practice.

A relational perspective is central to this argument. By conceptualising practice as embedded within networks of interdependence, relational social work resists the individu-

alisation of sustainability and the moralisation of professional effort that characterises extractive organisational cultures (Folgheraiter, 2004). Sustainability, from this perspective, is a collective and organisational condition — one that requires shared accountability for the quality of professional relationships, the equitable distribution of emotional labour and the honest acknowledgement of structural limits.

The contribution of this paper lies in bridging two levels of analysis that are often treated separately in eco-social work literature: the normative and ecological ambitions of the field on the one hand, and the micro-processes of professional practice on the other. By grounding the argument in the operational conditions of everyday social work, it aims to make the eco-social reorientation of practice less abstract and more actionable — not by providing prescriptive tools, but by identifying the relational and organisational dimensions through which sustainability can become a lived professional orientation rather than an aspirational principle.

Ultimately, sustainable social work practice requires more than efficiency adjustments or additional competencies. It calls for a reorientation that privileges long-term continuity over immediate output, shared responsibility over individual endurance and relational integrity over procedural compliance. In the face of intensifying ecological and social pressures, this reorientation is not peripheral to social work's mandate — it is a condition of its continued capacity to pursue social justice and support collective well-being.

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