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Ready, Steady, Go? Obstacles to the Spread of Eco-Social Work Approaches: An Italian Case Study

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Abstract: While eco-social work as a strategy that combines responses to environmental and social risks is gaining ground in Europe, it has not evenly spread across countries. This paper looks at Italy, a country in which eco-social work has arrived only recently and has found difficulty establishing itself, in order to understand the factors that have hindered and fostered its development. To do so, it explores two cases of eco-social innovation and, using a neo-institutionalist framework, the mechanisms at work in encouraging or impeding the establishment of eco-social work. The research suggests three mutually reinforcing obstacles to the spread of eco-social work in an Italian context: the limited space for eco-social work in the Italian policy agenda; the inability to reframe practices used by existing work integration initiatives; and the reproduction of established relationships between public and non-profit organisations in a competition for scarce resources.

Keywords: eco-social work; environment; social work; neo-institutionalism



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1. The Rise of Eco-Social Work

The environment—here understood as the economic, social and cultural context in which people live—has long been a focus of social work as a discipline and a professional practice [1–7]. Yet, until recently, the links between environmental change, social issues, and interventions have attracted little attention [8–10]. In the framework of a general environmental turn in the analysis of social problems and social policies [11–13], social work has increasingly explored the role of the biophysical environment in contributing to the well-being of individuals and groups. In the past two decades, the environmental and ecological dimensions of social work have also become ever more significant in the international academic and policy debate [9,14–16]. Emerging “eco-social” approaches in social work combine social and ecological perspectives [3,15,17–20] to promote social justice and advocate for human rights through social work interventions in communities [21,22]. Eco-social work is also key to promoting environmental justice and sustainable development [17,19,23,24]. Jane Addams’ theoretical and practical contributions to social work inspired an interest in overcoming its “strangely silent” attitude on the role of nature, the physical environment, and the related “threats to human well-being and continued existence” [10] (p.18). Today, the eco-social work approach includes numerous traditions and empirical studies that combine social and ecological perspectives in different ways. Seminal work by Hoff and McNutt [25], and subsequently by Zapf [10], emphasising the need to overcome an anthropocentric vision of social work, paved the way for approaches that recognise the interdependence between humans and the natural environment. According to Dominelli [19] (p. 6), a new social work paradigm is emerging that is based on a “holistic approach that addresses both personal behaviour and the structural facets of social organisation and marginality to argue for mutuality and solidarity in solving social problems that are rooted in an unequal distribution of Earth’s resources”.

While recent empirical research on eco-social work has focused on the transformative potential of practices combining social, environmental and economic goals, [26,27] there

are—to our knowledge—no studies on the dynamics of the diffusion of the approach, or on the factors facilitating and hindering its systematic adoption. Yet, understanding how and under which conditions eco-social ideas and practices are (not) incorporated in social work is crucial from a scientific and societal perspective.

In recent years, key international social service organisations and networks boosted a debate on the potential role of social work in reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations [25,28–30]. The eco-social perspective, which has gained ground in all continents [15,31–34], is witnessed in Europe through the rise of educational and training programs, even if with a different extent across national cases [35,36]. The eco-social work debate emerged late in Italy and remained relatively marginal. The incorporation of a reference to sustainability and ecology in the 2020 Italy's Social Worker Code of Ethics [37] shows there is now some interest in the issue. Likewise, some universities started including courses on sustainability and ecology in their social work curricula. Yet, academic papers on the topic in Italy are few and far between, and mainly focus on social interventions in the event of natural disasters [38,39]. The scant literature looking at eco-social innovative projects [40], with a focus on sustainable education, food production, and recycling, with the aim of reviving abandoned rural areas [13,37,41–44], suggests that these are fragmented, small-scale, and not incorporated in the public social service system, even if they do relate to social interventions to varying degrees [40,41]. In addition, it is not clear to what extent they can be understood as expressions of eco-social work, nor what kind of relationship they have with social work's academic and professional community.

Against this background, the article focuses on how changes towards eco-social work (do not) happen and asks what the conditions are that allow or hinder the rise, development, and expansion of the new approach. To do so, it analyses two cases of running eco-social innovative projects [40] in a context—the Italian one—featuring a fragmented and underfunded social service system [45–48], and where the rise, circulation, and integration of eco-social work ideas and practices is still limited. This strategy allows an observation, from the perspective of the organisations involved in eco-welfare projects, of the factors that promote and those that hinder the incorporation of new social work ideas and practices in the deployment of the process itself. The analysis, guided by neo-institutionalist insights and recent studies on environmental and social policy change in fragmented welfare states [49–52], sheds light on the relationship between eco-social innovations and the eco-social work perspective, and on how institutional features and the positioning of actors within the field may help to understand the slow and difficult consolidation of eco-social work.

2. Analytical Framework

Within the literature about the diffusion of policy ideas, Jenson's [53] analysis of the rise of the social investment perspective posits that there are three main mechanisms. The first—environmental—mechanism consists of an extension of the political space in which it is possible to discuss alternatives to dominant approaches. In the case of eco-social work, this space has been provided in the encounter between the debate on SDGs [25,28–30] and the increasing quest for innovation [54] in social and environmental policies and interventions. The second—cognitive—mechanism is a change in the perception of problems and relative policies. Redirecting social work towards an ecological perspective means acknowledging that there are problems that cannot be addressed within the existing approaches and that new courses of action are better placed to respond to emerging needs [53,55]. Embracing an eco-social work perspective requires recognising that problems of the natural environment have significant social repercussions [11,12,15] and that environmental distress puts specific pressures on vulnerable individuals, groups and communities [56–58]. Thus, social work is called upon to redirect its interventions so that they also promote environmental justice and sustainable development [17,19–21,23]. The third—relational—mechanism is based on the intersection of expert and policy networks across and within countries. The Joint World Conference on Social Work and Social Development in Stockholm in 2012 and

Melbourne in 2014 held various debates on eco-social work that influenced professional and academic communities in the field of social work at a national level. Many national social work institutions in Europe have taken up the challenge by developing training programmes and degree courses in social work, with a focus on the connection between environmental and social issues [36].

Research on policy transfer has highlighted that, in the process of idea and policy diffusion, relevant actors produce adaptations and modifications of objectives and instruments, therefore fostering deviations from the original policy [59,60]. Possibly, it is on Jenson's [53] second and third mechanisms that these processes rely. While the polysemic nature of policy ideas tends to foster this process, [53] "merchants of meanings" and material and immaterial objects such as documents, books, and speeches, etc., carry and modify ideas and policies [61]. Furthermore, policy ideas and instruments do not reach and spread equally across contexts, and the outcome of this diffusion results from the encounter of the policies with the context [62]. This entails that national and local actors may mediate between the spread of eco-social work ideas and practices diffused at the international or cross-national level, and the actual penetration of eco-social work into national and local contexts.

Actors possessing the ability to disseminate concepts, knowledge, priorities, and strategies [63] within a national and local context do not operate in a vacuum: their action is socially embedded and therefore guided, limited, and conditioned by the institutions—i.e., the "rules of the games" [64]—in which they are immersed. The concept of embeddedness, introduced by Polanyi [65], was taken up by Granovetter [66] to analyse economic action as conditioned by the networks of social relations, and then further developed by neo-institutionalist scholars [67,68]: social action is rooted in institutions along different dimensions. Structural embeddedness refers to the shape and characteristics of the network of relations in which social actors are immersed, and their positioning within it [69]. Cognitive embeddedness involves the symbolic representations and frameworks of meaning that define and make sense of the world of individuals and organisations [67]. The cultural dimension refers to the shared values and norms sustained by an emotional repertoire [70,71]. Political embeddedness indicates how social struggles for power and the distribution of resources shape the strategies and outcomes of organisations, highlighting how organisational opportunities depend on connections to regulatory agencies and political authorities [72]. All of these dimensions are likely to orient individual and organisational activities and processes, including attempts of changing the "rules" [73].

Thus the diffusion of eco-social work ideas and practices, e.g., in Italy, would depend on the degree to which the eco-social approaches are presented, understood, and seen as reasonable and realistic by the relevant actors in the given context, and that eco-social work terminology, with its specific set of tools, is spread across the professional network. Furthermore, the diffusion of such practices is likely to depend on the structural, cognitive, cultural, and political features of the field of social policies and social work, and on the opportunities offered for change.

In Italy, social work is embedded in a context of limited overall resources and fragmentation. Social welfare deals with the organisational and implementation problems caused by underfunding (Pavolini et al., 2021), high levels of regionalisation, fragmentation and a lack of coordination [52,74], and the scarcity of professionals [75]. Social workers traditionally operate in local public authorities, namely municipalities and local health authorities, which are responsible for the implementation of local social policies. Yet, the increasing role played by non-profit [76,77] and commercial [78] organisations as welfare providers accompanies the diffusion of social work also in the private sector. Historically, the Italian third sector evolved in the context of a welfare system with a low level of public planning [79], which provided non-profit organisations with a high degree of autonomy [77]. However, the expansion of welfare state provision in a long-lasting crisis of regional and national finances fostered the development of a provision system (under)funded by the state and delivered by third-sector organisations, encouraged to adapt to the public sector's

demands. While beforehand the public sector directly outsourced social service provision to social enterprises, from the 1990s onwards, it started using market mechanisms geared towards the rationalisation and further containment of public expenditure [80]. Thus, social work is embedded in the relationships between public and non-profit organisations, based on the competition for scarce resources.

In addition, while the sustainability issue has recently entered national and regional policy debates, the degree of its institutionalisation and incorporation in actual policies and public and private strategies is still very limited [81]. Recent research posits that, alongside a diverse interpretation of ecological policy—in a more productivist or social direction—policy makers and socioeconomic stakeholders are confronted with a variety of constraints: political reluctance, a lack of coordination between institutions, a lack of awareness, and reduced resources [82].

Against this background, this research aims at shedding light onto how the institutional and organisational set-up fosters or limits the diffusion of eco-social work as an innovative professional approach and practice. In particular, it wishes to identify the extent to which existing eco-social experiments refer to and represent a development of the eco-social work approach; how they have developed and under the influence of which ideas; which actors and how are promoting the diffusion of eco-social work; and how the actors' institutional embeddedness (from a cognitive, cultural, relational, and political perspective) conditions their strategies and the transmission of change.

3. Research Design, Data and Methods

The research adopted a case study approach, based on the qualitative analysis of two projects that can be considered revelatory [83] as they show how specific sets of practices are established, and how they challenge, resist, and have the potential to become and transmit eco-social work interventions.

The two projects included in the study were selected based on a two-step procedure. First, we mapped out the social work projects in one Italian region where social services are relatively well-developed in comparison to other areas of the country. Therefore, the chosen context can be considered as relatively advanced and potentially productive of relevant initiatives, while sharing the generalised weaknesses of the Italian social intervention system. Thanks to contacts with stakeholders, local and regional policy makers, social workers in coordinating positions, managers of third-sector organisations, the reading of policy documents (e.g., regional funding schemes for innovative social intervention projects), and information collected through a web search, we compiled a list of sixteen active projects fulfilling three criteria: (1) they address employment, poverty, and inequalities; (2) they display sensitivity to environmental issues; and (3) they include the work of social work professionals. We subsequently filtered the projects based on the following further criteria: (4) a sufficiently long history (at least five years), in order to be revelatory of established practices; (5) sufficiently large—in terms of the number of participants, resources, and the articulation—to ensure that their activities could have sufficient scope; and (6) a minimum involvement of both public and private organisations, in order to be able to assess the relationship between the two. Most projects fulfilling the first three criteria were of too small a scale, too “new”, or only involved non-profit organisations, without connections to the social service system, and were therefore excluded. The remaining two projects were included as case studies.

Both cases focus on social vulnerabilities—problems related to income, work, housing, education, social integration, and health—and on the relationship between humans and nature. The first one is a community recycling project, transforming broken objects into something useful through a chain of recovery, repair, transformation, and relocation. The second one is an agricultural project that aims to combine sensitivity to nature, the protection of the living environment, and the creation of employment opportunities for people in disadvantaged socioeconomic situations. They were both initiated by charitable organisa-

tions, which mainly offer emergency assistance (the distribution of food and clothing, etc.) in partnership with public social services.

The cases were studied by combining the analysis of policy and project documents with interviews and focus groups. We retrieved information on the history, mission, objectives, past and prospective activities, and community engagement of the projects from their websites and documents such as annual reports, proceedings of public meetings, press releases, and internal evaluation reports. Furthermore, we interviewed five social workers or project coordinators and five participants for each project. Both groups of interviewees possessed relevant knowledge as they experienced, in different capacities, the project from within and were therefore “competent” subjects [84].

Given the exploratory nature of the research, the interviews were conducted in the form of open conversations. We used semi-structured interviews to ensure that, while touching upon the key aspects of the research, the participants’ voices could be heard, and also so unforeseen topics could emerge. The interviews were articulated into five parts, with some adaptations for the two types of respondents: (1) the interviewee’s profile, (career) history, and reasons for involvement in the project; (2) the interviewee’s perspective on the content of the project, and its deployment and activities; (3) the interviewee’s view on and experience with the project (i.e., its approach, methodology, and perceived strengths and weaknesses); (4) their interactions with other projects, public social services, and other relevant actors; and (5) the perceived importance or impact of the project for the individual, the community and beyond. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min and were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Finally, we organised three focus groups, provided that group interaction is a cognitive resource able to elicit supplementary, complementary, or alternative aspects to those that emerge in interviews, as well as normative views [62]. Each focus group included six participants among social workers, project coordinators, and other professionals, and had the duration of 60 min.

The interviews and meetings took place in person on the premises of the projects, between January and April 2021. All participants—working age (25–64) women and men—explicitly agreed to be included in the research and were guaranteed anonymity.

The data generated have been analysed by searching for the most salient themes [63], thanks to an iterative approach, in which we have gone back and forth from data to theory and vice versa. The three authors discussed the findings until they were able to converge on a common interpretation [64].

4. Findings

We first present the aims, history, and organisation of the projects. Subsequently, we illustrate the main findings, organised around the most important themes that emerged in the interviews and focus groups.

4.1. REUSE and AGRI as Eco-Social Innovations

The first project—from now on: REUSE—is a solidarity-based recycle and reuse centre. Some old industrial sheds have been restored and used to collect and transform objects destined for local landfills. Anyone can donate objects and the restored artefacts are relocated through a solidarity-based market. The project started in 2010 and was developed by social workers active in the charity, alongside professional restorers, architects, and designers. The aim is threefold. First, REUSE wishes to prevent waste and give old objects a new possibility to be used, based on transformations that restore dignity and beauty. Second, REUSE promotes the reintegration of long-term unemployed women and men with young children facing financial difficulties or exposed to complex life trajectories into the labour market, by providing the beneficiaries with a space where they can regain confidence, receive training, acquire skills, and be in gainful employment. Third, it promotes community awareness of social and environmental issues. In the view of the respondents, REUSE overcomes the logic that, people in disadvantaged conditions should

receive used furniture and household items, and posits that anti-poverty interventions are not simply a matter of making commodities affordable, but also of allowing everyone to enjoy well-kept, functional, and renewed living environments. At the time of data collection, REUSE was running two collection and repair centres in the area, as well as a shop, employing 15 lone mothers. The social workers—all five employed by the charity—decided that those living in the area could buy the objects, regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances, in order to create opportunities for encounters between different people, to create the sense of a caring community and to raise awareness on the issues of waste, environmental degradation, and poverty.

The second project is an agricultural project—from now on: AGRI—that produces organic food in deprived areas. In 2009, the local owner of a vineyard who was no longer able to manage it proposed that a local charity take over it and develop a project. Following multiple discussions and experimentations, a cooperative was set up in 2011 to manage the project. People employed by the project were given professional training in sustainable cultivation techniques. The initiative aimed to encourage work inclusion based on the reuse and recovery of local land that risked damaging the surrounding environment. AGRI also provides cheap, fresh, and organic food to the poorest families in the area, employing 20 people in difficult socioeconomic circumstances, with the support of 5 professionals. At the time of data collection, the project had put several hectares of vineyards and over one thousand olive trees that were overrun with brambles back into use, and one hectare of land and more than 60 beehives back into the production of organic vegetables and honey. AGRI's objective is to create a virtuous circle between fighting poverty, promoting sustainability, and reducing environmental degradation.

4.2. *A Different Kind of Social Work*

The participants present both projects in ways that are consistent with the logic of eco-social work, even if the term is never mentioned:

“The earth is a kind of common denominator, reminding us that we are alike, despite having different life experiences [. . .] Contact with the earth, with nature, is a wonderful tool for social work with people, which is still rarely used today.” (Professional educator and social worker, AGRI).

The emphasis on the importance of the Earth as a social as well as a natural resource is one of the distinguishing features of both initiatives, so much so that it starts to be a key aspect in the project's communication with the outside world:

“In my opinion, one of the elements that characterise this approach to social work is the message it transmits to the outside world. The message being sent out is that of waste as a valuable object and the need for the community to become more aware of the issue of environmental sustainability. Through this idea, we also suggest the construction of a different image of the poor, of wasted lives, as Bauman calls them. They can be seen as possessing dignity, deserving of respect and able to offer useful resources to the community (and not just ask for them).” (Social worker, REUSE).

“The projects are designed to support vulnerable people but also to communicate with the community, to make people think, shape and experience urban and rural spaces, create new consumption styles, deconstruct the stigma associated with differences and vulnerability.” (Social worker, AGRI).

Most social workers that were interviewed have long-term experience with anti-poverty interventions within more traditional social work projects, and are involved for the first time in eco-social projects. They tend to underline the exceptionality of the projects they currently work in and their “difference” from other social work interventions, due to the contexts in which they take place, the type of activities proposed, and the structure of the relationships between the professionals, beneficiaries, and volunteers. According to these respondents, due to being hands-on, concrete, open-air, and focused on the environment, the projects foster close and non-hierarchical relationships, creativity, and ultimately better support.

For instance, a social worker from AGRI argues that agricultural tasks taken up together by professionals and beneficiaries produce a sense of closeness that is not typical of standard social work relationships, and facilitate communication, mutual knowledge, and reciprocal understanding, which are, eventually, key to providing professional support:

“We find ourselves working side by side on the land, facing problems related to cultivation and harvest together. This allows us to open up new channels of communication and mutual understanding. The aid relationship is truly experienced with no asymmetries and within a context of professional help. We get to know each other better, at a deeper level, and I, as an operator, was able to discover the potential of the person that I would never otherwise have come to know. Potential that I was able to harness in the professional aid relationship, obtaining great benefits.” (Social worker, AGRI, interview).

Similarly, a social worker from REUSE, by pointing to the importance of the environment as a concrete, factual, and shared focus, and to the parallel between caring for the environment and caring for oneself, also underlines:

“It is a very concrete approach to aid that restores dignity and health to humankind and nature. The earth is a kind of common denominator, reminding us that we are alike, despite having different life experiences. Working outdoors, deforesting, reconditioning, restoring beauty to used objects is a sort of metaphor for what a person does with their life when they start a concrete path of rehabilitation and restoration of their dignity. Contact with the earth, with nature, is a wonderful tool for social work with vulnerable people, which is still barely used today. I myself didn’t know it very well at first.” (Social worker, REUSE, interview).

At the same time, among the beneficiaries, there are long-term social assistance users acquainted with more traditional social work interventions, who compare the studied projects to their previous experiences. In line with the professionals, they underline both the importance of close relationships and of the focus on the environment as a channel to life change. V., a 41-year-old woman with a long history of economic and social vulnerability, talks about the life-changing effect of engaging, committing and being recognised as valuable. Having long-term experience with more traditional social service approaches, she attributes to the specific project in which she is now active the ability to motivate her and make her visible to others.

“The people that have surrounded me over the last few years, [...] have helped me to make a change, first internal then material. Commitment to work, doing something that is admired by other people, being a role model. Perhaps for the first time in my life, I have the desire to stand out and do everything in my power to solve my problems and also those of the community in which I live, which also concern me. This is perhaps even more important than economic aid.” (V., 41, REUSE).

V. attributes this success to the special relationships within the project, built around concrete, practical work.

“People that see me, that are interested in me as a person ... that stimulates my creativity, my desire to do things, that makes me feel useful for others and able to teach things, even to those who are richer than me ... All this made me regain confidence in myself, in my abilities, after many years. [...] A real miracle took place. Through my work in the artisan workshop and the organic garden, I was able to become an example for other people. I was able to go to the centre of the squares to sell my beautiful and elegant products to beautiful and elegant ladies, inviting them to engage in a more responsible and sustainable lifestyle. I achieved all that! I used to live in the shadows, I did not go out on weekends because I did not have the right clothing and the money to buy an ice-cream for my children. Now that’s amazing.” (V., 41, REUSE).

F. contrasts his previous experience as a social assistance beneficiary with his current participation in AGRI. It is worth noting that he associates his diminished feeling of dependency and isolation not to the personal characteristics or goodwill of the social workers, but to the features of the interventions, their organisation, the relationships they produce, and the specific content of the project. In fact, he puts a particular emphasis on

the role played by agricultural work and healthy food production and consumption, as well as on the relationships this type of work allows to build up:

“When you go to collect the food package at a hand-out centre because you have nothing to eat for you and your family you feel *so poor*, even though social workers and volunteers do everything they can not to give you this idea, you feel that way and it’s not nice. [...] Now I eat things produced by me and other people like me. Healthier, more genuine products that are good for my children (beforehand they almost always ate cheap junk food). Working on the land, I met many people in situations similar to my own and we grew in strength together. But I also met people with less difficult backgrounds than mine who helped me get out of isolation.” (F., 39, REUSE).

4.3. *Feeling Good, Changing and Growing*

There is widespread satisfaction among the respondents—both professionals and beneficiaries—about their experience with the project. In particular, social workers and users often refer to their own well-being, and the possibility to grow and develop professionally as a result of their participation. The very specific tasks they perform and the relationships they engage in are often referred to as the key to the benefits they perceive for themselves in the project.

C., a single woman with two children and no job, underlines the importance of having control of the work:

“I like to give new life to used, abandoned, ugly objects. We have done training courses, we have developed skills, we build handcrafted products, including very beautiful ones. We imagine them, we procure the materials and we make them. I put something of myself into every product I make. That’s what makes me feel good. I like to build beauty from waste, just like what happened to me: I felt discarded, a failure and now I am a person who does things, who takes care of raising awareness on the damage of waste and pollution.” (C., REUSE).

On the side of the professionals, there is explicit reference made to the positive impact of working with nature for their satisfaction. Notwithstanding the difficulties and challenges of the job, the activities and the relationships entailed by those activities are deeply meaningful to many respondents, as underlined by this social worker active in AGRI:

“When I get home from work, I’m always pretty happy with what I’ve done. Sometimes you have to deal with fatigue, with failure, with the complexity of needs, etc. But, in the end, the balance is always positive. This project offers something extra. The wellbeing of those I helped and my own have grown together in some ways. When I go into the field, I rediscover the smells, the flavours, the actions that I saw others doing when I was little and that I had forgotten, just as the other people who work in the projects had forgotten, be they users, volunteers, or people of a wide variety of social origins.” (Social worker, REUSE, interview).

The type of satisfaction and well-being coming from working on the project is described as a combination of material and non-material, and physical and psychological. This social worker posits that the positive effects are to be seen in all actors involved in the project:

“I believe that this is a project in which wellbeing is truly created in terms of physical, psychological and material health for everyone: for nature, for vulnerable people, for volunteers or the owners of the lands handed over for use that come to visit us and work with us in the places they had abandoned, for the people who consume what is produced, for the community that takes back green spaces and produces food in an organic way ... and for the social worker! They, like all the others, while helping to create all this, rediscover it, experience it and benefit from it.” (Social worker, REUSE, interview).

The combination and interdependence of social and environmental goals seems to be the key to the high level of satisfaction of the professionals:

“I wish I had done this type of work sooner. The wellbeing that comes from being in contact with nature and respecting it is something I thought I was very familiar with. But

perhaps this was not the case. I realised that I too had lost contact with the environment in which I live. I did not pay attention to many small actions that I carried out almost automatically, but which were not respectful of the environment, like certain consumer habits. Working with discarded items makes you reflect on waste, and on the value of things. It calls you into question as a person and as an operator.” (Project coordinator, AGRI, focus group).

For social workers, the projects do not only provide a sense of satisfaction and well-being, but also an opportunity to grow professionally. The work is depicted as complex and demanding: there is a need to change common social work practices and adapt them to the specificities of the project, which requires personal and professional flexibility. Yet, in spite of the complexities, professionals often refer to the improvement of their skills as an outcome of these challenges, as in the case of this project coordinator:

“In effective social work, there is always a personal and professional growth pathway. In this project, I had to work with a lot with people, institutions, the community, on consumption styles, on the importance of recycling, on the transformation of people’s perception of the fragile, abandoned or discarded (be it a person, abandoned land covered with rubbish, an old piece of furniture) and I also worked on myself. I was already very sensitive to the environmental issue, but through this project I really took it to heart.” (Project coordinator, REUSE, focus group).

Flexibility and creativity, but also teamwork and the development of communication, are often mentioned as important resources, which, in turn, enable social workers to reach higher levels of awareness and professional standards.

“To be a social worker in this context, you need to be flexible and creative. It is necessary to use traditional methods and techniques in a responsive manner, adapting them to the specific context. An important resource to overcome moments of difficulty is group work, discussion and debate on the problems encountered from time to time.” (Social worker, REUSE, focus group).

4.4. The Projects’ Sustainability Challenge

Both cases under study started as small projects, thanks to private non-profit initiatives, and their growth into larger-scale projects required the weaving of a network of financial supporters and operational partners. Not stemming from regular social work, social assistance, or labour market interventions, and rising from small and rather informal groups, the projects clearly need to invest time and efforts in securing the funding and the human resources necessary for their development and survival over time. The sustainability of the projects is a clear issue among the professionals and the coordinators:

“A fundamental challenge for a project like ours is to find ways of lasting over time.” (Project coordinator, REUSE, focus group).

For instance, at the origin of AGRI was a small piece of land lent to a charity, where a couple of volunteers and a few people in need of support who were attending the local support centre started working together. Based on an awareness-raising campaign in the local community, the group progressively obtained uncultivated pieces of land from private citizens to be used for the project. At the same time, the organisation started applying for funding from bank foundations. The resources attracted allowed for the development of the initiative on a larger scale and the involvement of professionals. It is at this point that the project came into contact with social services and started involving people sent by social services as a part of anti-poverty interventions. The project coordinator explains that pursuing the sustainability of the project entails a threefold strategy. The first objective of this strategy is that of building “credible” relationships with social services. The second concern is that of embedding the project in the local community. The third concern is securing funding for the development and survival of the project:

“First, we need to build a credible relationship with social services, to develop true cooperation with them. A simple delegation from them to us is not enough. Second we

need to be strongly connected, rooted in the local community. Third we need to secure funding that allows us adequate investments". (Project coordinator, REUSE, focus group).

In what follows, we discuss how the two projects face these three main challenges to their sustainability.

4.5. The Community

The projects invest many resources in "opening to" the community and in getting local citizens and stakeholders involved. The respondents underline the need to be recognized by local citizens and organisations as part of a way of making the intervention work: without recognition of the work done by the project and by the people involved in it, there is no chance of success. In fact, involving the community is something that worked out well for case study one, where the projects' land owners and customers have become volunteers and started collaborating with the beneficiaries. As a result, the area in which the project insists has become a system of reciprocal relationships and not only a place in which projects can be implemented. The project beneficiaries are given new opportunities to participate in the social life of the local community, and the local community offers up resources and capacities to aid in this social integration. Professionals emphasise the importance of this development:

"One of the most important things [...] is that a dialogue was established with the community. To avoid being closed in ourselves... Showing ourselves to the public, to all citizens, at weekends, with shops and window displays. Poor people who present themselves to the world not only as people who are lacking something. They are presented as people who have suffered wounds, of course, but who have been able to transform these wounds into openings, into a new and better perspective through which to look at the world. They present themselves as people who have something to teach others. In some respects, they set an example worthy of imitation." (Social worker, REUSE, interview).

In addition, the "community" is crucial because it provides resources difficult to summon through other channels: it is through private donations, the involvement of volunteers, and the construction of relationships based on trust with local stakeholders that the projects can expand their scope and gain momentum, in a context of limited resources:

"Our strength has been our ability to get to people, to the community. The bio-agricultural project has become bigger and bigger thanks to land donation and to the involvement of the local citizens." (Project coordinator, REUSE, focus group).

4.6. Funding

Funding, by contrast, remains a key concern. The resources available to the projects mostly come from limited, contingent, temporary, and uncertain funding through successful applications to competitive calls published by bank foundations and other funding institutes. The projects receive no continuous funding from public or private organisations. By contrast, what these initiatives need, in the illustration of the coordinator, is a continuous and reliable flow of resources that enable investment and provide stability to the project.

"Getting hold of capitals that allow us to invest adequate resources for the challenge we are undertaking is an issue. If we do not secure funding in times of reduced production, when the activities slow down, but also when we need to grow, the risk is to stand still and fall. We work outside the market, but also outside the social service logic." (Project coordinator, REUSE, focus group).

In both projects, the acquisition of professional and skilled work, and its integration within the organisation, is very important for the success of the project. Yet, this poses important problems for the project, given their uncertain and non-continuous funding. Persistent fundraising and highly skilled volunteering seem to be the non-optimal solutions in both projects:

"Developing "high-quality" activities is not easy. We need highly qualified personnel, which is not always available at low costs, and we need it not only for one-time tasks,

but for continuous activities. For instance we involved an engineer, two architects, an agronomist.” (Project coordinator, REUSE, focus group).

“In order to work out, our reuse and recycle project must produce beautiful, original elegant objects. To do this we need to work together with designers, architects, artisans ... who have to be paid. [—] to do this we need quite some money: the funds coming from foundations and other organisations are important, even necessary in the first month or years of a project like this, to launch it. But they just stop at a certain point. Then you have to keep looking for other money and that is complicated.” (Social worker, REUSE, focus group).

4.7. Relationships with Social Policies and Interventions

While the projects appear to have developed an intense bond with the local context, also benefiting from mutual exchanges, their relationships with the system of social policies and interventions at large emerges as problematic. The projects appear quite isolated from the external world in different respects.

First, there is no connection with other experiences of eco-social work. The professionals interviewed declare an interest in getting to know similar projects in other contexts. Yet, they put forward the difficulties of investing already scant resources in networking with other eco-social work initiatives:

“Our network with similar projects elsewhere in Italy is very limited. I know they do exist, but we do not manage to get in contact. It would be very stimulating, but we are drowning in our own work. This would be a whole new activity because, at the moment, projects like ours remain at a very local level. Being embedded in a territory is an advantage but also a limitation!” (Social worker, REUSE, interview).

Second, a missing link with local social policies and interventions is also apparent. The only link with social services consists of the fact that, in both cases studies, people with social and economic needs were referred to the project coordinators by local social services or charitable organisations in the area. Besides this referral, our interviews with social workers and beneficiaries reveal that public institutions do not play an active role in these projects. The beneficiaries of the projects receive training, develop skills and competences, and work within the organised activities. According to several professionals and coordinators, these trajectories could and should be integrated into more general active labour market policies and interventions, either through the municipalities or through employment centres. However, this does not happen: cooperation with municipal social services is limited. According to the respondents, social workers in the public sector see them simply as one of many labour inclusion projects run by non-profit organisations where it is possible to send jobless people:

“We have struggled and are still struggling today in our relationship with public and private institutions. Sometimes we speak different languages and start from a somewhat different conception of social work. Many of our projects are valued, also thanks to their results, but it is still difficult to work together to create a common working model.” (Social worker, REUSE, focus group).

Contacts with employment services and potential employers are hardly there, as explained by this social worker active in AGRI:

“We work together with other projects run by X [large charity], for example fair trade, and with the Municipal social services. We try to work with the employment centre but it is not easy...” (Social worker, AGRI, interview).

Professionals and coordinators often refer to a different “logic” of their projects—as opposed to the institutional logic of social services and social policies—as the basis of these difficult relationships:

“One of the most complicated aspects is the mutual understanding with traditional social services, which use a completely different logic compared to ours.” (Social worker, AGRI, interview).

According to the respondents, the presence of different “languages” across organisations—namely municipalities vs. third-sector organisations—also limits the mutual understanding between professional social workers. While social workers should share a common understanding of their mission and a common language, their approach and even their language appears profoundly influenced by the organisations in which they operate and their very different institutionalised rules:

“The world of professional social work is very diverse and internally fragmented. We all do the same job but with very different institutional mandates depending on the organisation for which we work. Belonging to different work environments means using different languages” (Social worker, AGRI, interview).

As explained by a social worker active in AGRI, different systems of meaning apply to different organisational contexts:

“Working on these projects has always been, and still is, a challenge—a great one. At the beginning, especially when I was dealing with colleagues outside our activities, I struggled to explain what we were doing, the meaning and aims of certain initiatives, etc. I believe that this is linked to the experimental nature of the activities and the lack of training of all of us with respect to this type of intervention.” (Social worker, AGRI, interview).

Furthermore, these differences are not without consequences upon the exercise of the professionals’ role:

“Where I work [third sector] there is the possibility to support people with a high degree of physical proximity and to share experiences outside the scope of the institution. This makes it possible to transform the relationship into a more powerful weapon to foster change: I can see limits, problems, difficulties and I can step in and do something more specific; the person I am working with has got the time and more opportunities to understand what I am doing. In more institutionalised social work all this is hardly seen and valued.” (Social worker, REUSE, interview).

The respondents generally describe social workers in public organisations and policy-makers as “closed” to the social work approach used in the projects, while, in their view, public agencies could play a key role in fostering it. These actors would be crucial to recognising the new “eco” approach and intervention design, in funding new eco/social-based policies, diffusing new methods and tools, and recognising and promoting innovative projects. However, as one project coordinator explains, they do not do any of that:

“It would be nice to be able to give this social work approach more breathing space: the community and people in need of support respond well to our initiatives. Developing networks is one of my main activities as a coordinator, but also one of the most difficult. There should be more awareness, commitment and a more open-minded attitude in order to allow different institutions to adopt some elements of eco-social work. I believe that this step is a necessary, though not of course sufficient, condition for laying the foundations of a model of social intervention that is spread throughout the area and inspired by an ecological and sustainable approach to social work. There has been some movement, but there is still a long way to go.” (Project coordinator, AGRI, interview).

5. Discussion

The small-scale projects we analysed combine social and environmental objectives according to the logic of eco-social innovation (Stamm et al., 2020). The professionals and beneficiaries involved show awareness of the distinctiveness of the practices they contribute to, with respect to other forms of social, anti-poverty, and activation interventions. The narratives of social work professionals converge with the ideas and practices at the basis of eco-social work, as defined in the recent literature [19], with a strong community involvement.

Yet, while introducing a new “eco” dimension in their work, social workers and coordinators never name “eco-social work”, nor do they refer to their activities as a specific, new *social work* approach. There is no perception of a space beyond the project itself to develop, compare, discuss, and evaluate professional practices; no identification with a

set of ideas regarding social work practices; and no influence from actors external to the project in conveying, circulating, and sharing these ideas. In other words, *if* environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms [53] supporting the diffusion of eco-social work have been activated in the projects' environment, they remain invisible to them.

Neither project emerged within the social work field as a result of the increasing attention to eco-social work. Instead, both started before the introduction of the (limited) debate on eco-social work in Italy. Yet, they do not appear to have been subsequently influenced by that very debate. The projects are based on the innovative capacity of informal groups within well-established non-profit sector organisations, operating in the social policy field and in combination with the specific resources of the local community. Their consolidation then called for greater social work contributions. Professionals seem to have adapted and re-elaborated on their knowledge and experience, and applied a non-formalised, implicit eco-social work approach by doing so. In this sense, our cases provide examples of eco-social innovations fostering the development of new eco-social work practices outside of the mainstream professional and academic field of social work. While this trajectory may be specific to our cases as a result of the inclusion criteria of this study, it is unlikely to be exceptional in the Italian context, where, from the scant data we have, it seems that the current eco-social innovations are based on similar experiences [42,44,85].

These local developments point to a potential opening to the new wave of eco-social work, as they might provide fertile ground for the development of "new" forms of eco-social work. Through examples, vocabulary, tools, and methods, eco-social initiatives in general and eco-social work in particular could acquire legitimacy and support, and develop further [68,86]. However, in the cases we analysed, this is not happening, as no one has yet assumed the role of "merchant of meanings" [61]. The projects' promoters and the social workers involved have not reshaped and framed their practices as examples of an emerging trend in social work, and have not presented them to the outside world. Moreover, at least from the perspective of the projects' participants, there is no other (political, economic, or social) actor interested in their practices and diffusion. As a result, the projects and the related practices remain isolated and unrecognised. This situation calls into question the different forms of embeddedness in the projects and in their professionals.

As for the professional community, social workers active in the projects underline the distance in vocabulary and practices between their current experience and "regular" social work approaches, but above the organisational boundaries they perceive between social work in the public and in the non-profit sector. This distance, reflecting a weak cognitive and structural embeddedness [87], clearly does not favour the circulation of practices and professional innovations, neither from the projects to the larger social intervention field, nor vice versa.

As for social policies and interventions, a similar isolation can be observed: public authorities do not explicitly and directly support or recognise the projects, nor do the non-profit organisations hosting the projects manage to convey their innovative approach in the direction of other organisations in the field, or towards policy makers. In this respect, the type of political and relational embeddedness [66,68] that characterises the non-profit organisations promoting the projects appears responsible for this isolation. As Stamm and colleagues [40] observed, these initiatives would not exist without public support, even if in our cases the support received by the projects is indirect: the organisations within which the projects are found are linked to and receive funding from public authorities in exchange for service delivery. Third-sector organisations tend to reproduce similar organisational behaviour and conform their "products" to expectations, avoiding the promotion of the "new" types of interventions that they set up by considering them not viable in the field.

6. Conclusions

Given the growing importance of eco-social work across national contexts, this paper aimed at contributing to the understanding of its different capacity to penetrate national and local contexts. Our analysis of two cases of eco-social innovations in Italy—a context

of late and slow absorption of the new social work approach—wished to identify the institutional mechanisms hindering or supporting its spread.

Being based on two cases in one region, the results of the study are by no means generalizable. In addition, the research only considered the perspectives of the actors inside the eco-social projects and their view on their own environment. Despite these limitations, the study does provide insights into some of the mechanisms at work in the diffusion of eco-social work (and beyond), especially those contributing to the growing stream of literature on the limits to the spread of policy ideas and practices in weak welfare states in other policy areas [47,51,52].

The two case studies suggest that eco-social work is practised within these innovative projects, without being seen, understood, and considered as a viable option in mainstream social work. The projects in which they are embedded appear isolated from the wider social policy and intervention field, and our evidence suggests that the cognitive, relational, and political features of their institutional environment obstruct the circulation of ideas and practices both from and towards the projects. Actors potentially in a position to foster change—social workers and their organisations within and outside the project, and policy makers and service providers in the third sectors—do not see the extension of eco-social work as a solution to a problem, and do not possess the space and resources to extend it and to change the environmental constraints.

There seems to be three obstacles to the spread of eco-social work: a political one is the absence of a space for eco-social work, with the policy agenda still not having introduced an “eco” dimension into social work; a cognitive one is represented by the fact that widespread initiatives in the history of the Italian social welfare, such as public works, work integration social enterprises, agricultural social enterprises, and social farms [44], are not seen as linkable to eco-social work in the minds of professionals and policy makers; and a structural one referring to the mutual relationships of public and private organisations supporting the current system of the externalisation of welfare service production. These obstacles tend to reinforce each other: the absence of a political space for eco-social work hinders its diffusion; the presence of well-known and widely established terms such as “work integration” or “social farms”, alongside a structured system of relations between public and non-profit organisations, implies that there is no perceived need for new policy ideas and this, as Jenson [43] noted, inhibits a fundamental mechanism that creates the space for new policy ideas.

These mechanisms make it difficult, in a fragmented policy field and social service system, to promote change, either from *above* or from *below*. This perspective should be of interest for supranational and national policy makers and stakeholders wanting to foster sustainability goals (and beyond). It has been argued, for instance, with reference to social investment, that not all countries are “suited” to specific policy approaches [51] and that the encounter of the policy with the context might produce unwanted results. This study suggests that the problem might be the difficulty, in certain policy contexts, to translate an innovative idea or practise into processes which are consistent with the original idea *and* meaningful for that very context. In other words, it may not be the approach that does not work in the context, but rather the context and the actors within it that do not understand, elaborate, adapt, and implement the approach in order to make it work.

Based on these considerations, this paper paves the way for further and more systematic investigations of a larger and more representative sample of (eco-social) innovations within a given context, and with a broader focus on the positioning and strategies enacted by a larger set of stakeholders, alongside a comparative analysis across institutional contexts.

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