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# A call for ecosocial work

Local opportunities for promoting youth well-being

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*To my father, Herman (who passed away in 1997),  
and my mother, Sumi*



## Abstract

This thesis explores and analyses how an ecosocial perspective is incorporated into social work practice with youth in Gävle in order to promote their health, well-being, and working-life capacities. It is based on three empirical studies presented across four articles and adopts a qualitative, multi-level research design, drawing on 20 semi-structured interviews with professionals, two focus group discussions with professionals, and two photovoice groups with youth. The findings suggest that ecosocial perspectives are present in local practice, but remain partial, uneven, and often implicit. Environmental issues are addressed mainly through small-scale activities, such as recycling, waste sorting, neighbourhood improvement, and access to safe green spaces, while broader structural and ecological dimensions receive less attention. Youth tend to understand sustainable development in terms of individual environmental behaviour and often experience it as distant from their everyday concerns. Their well-being is shaped more strongly by present relationships, safety, meaningful activities, and future security, with limited attention paid to intergenerational and longer-term perspectives. Professionals also emphasise social sustainability, participation, and community support, but they work within segmented municipal structures, limited ecological mandates, and managerial demands that make holistic practice difficult. The thesis identifies a gap between knowledge and action: socio-ecological connections are recognised in principle, but are not fully integrated into policy, planning, or practice. It concludes that stronger ecosocial work with youth requires clearer policy language, cross-sector collaboration, stronger community work, and more meaningful forms of youth participation. An ecosocial approach can support more preventive, relational, and sustainable social work, but only when social and ecological concerns are addressed together.

**Keywords:** ecosocial work, sustainable development, community work, youth, health and well-being

## Sammanfattning

Denna avhandling undersöker och analyserar hur ett ekosocialt perspektiv integreras i socialt arbete med unga i Gävle, i syfte att främja deras hälsa, välbefinnande och arbetslivsförmågor. Avhandlingen bygger på tre empiriska studier som presenteras i fyra artiklar och har en kvalitativ design på flera nivåer. Det empiriska materialet består av 20 semistrukturerade intervjuer med yrkesverksamma, två fokusgruppsdiskussioner med yrkesverksamma samt två photovoice-grupper med ungdomar. Resultaten visar att ekosociala perspektiv delvis förekommer i den lokala praktiken, men att de fortfarande är fragmentariska och ofta underförstådda. Miljöfrågor hanteras främst genom småskaliga aktiviteter, såsom återvinning, källsortering, förbättring av närmiljöer samt tillgång till trygga gröna områden, medan bredare strukturella och ekologiska dimensioner får mindre uppmärksamhet. Unga tenderar att förstå hållbar utveckling i termer av individuellt miljöbeteende och upplever ofta att frågorna ligger långt från deras vardag. Deras välbefinnande formas i högre grad av nuvarande relationer, trygghet, meningsfulla aktiviteter och framtidssäkerhet, medan intergenerationella och långsiktiga perspektiv ges begränsad uppmärksamhet. Yrkesverksamma betonar också social hållbarhet, delaktighet och stöd i lokalsamhället, men arbetar inom segmenterade kommunala strukturer, med begränsade ekologiska mandat och styrningskrav som försvårar ett helhetsinriktat arbete. Avhandlingen identifierar ett gap mellan kunskap och handling: socioekologiska samband erkänns i princip, men integreras inte fullt ut i policy, planering eller praktik. Den visar att ett starkare ekosocialt arbete med unga kräver tydligare policyspråk, ökad samverkan mellan sektorer, stärkt samhällsarbete och mer meningsfulla former för ungas delaktighet. Ett ekosocialt perspektiv kan bidra till ett mer förebyggande, relationellt och hållbart socialt arbete, men endast om sociala och ekologiska frågor hanteras tillsammans.

**Nyckelord:** ekosocialt arbete, hållbar utveckling, samhällsarbete, ungdomar, hälsa och välbefinnande

## Acknowledgements

My path into social work and ecosocial work was not the result of a planned decision. I began studying social work in Sweden in 2011, after moving there from Indonesia, where I had trained and worked as a teacher. Before that, my understanding of social work had been shaped by community and cultural contexts in which social support was often understood as charity work or ‘good deeds’. Such support was commonly organised through organisations, neighbours, or local groups. It was something people did together and was often connected to religious affiliation, ethnic identity, or a shared sense of local belonging. When I entered the Swedish social work landscape, first through education and later through practice, including municipal social services, I encountered a very different context.

My path into PhD studies was not planned either. After completing my first bachelor’s degree in Indonesia, and later my bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Sweden, I felt that I was done with studying. I had never imagined that I would pursue a PhD, and yet here I am. I am very grateful for the opportunity to continue. These years have meant a great deal to me, and I have grown not only academically but also personally.

There are many people whom I would like to thank for their different forms of support and contribution. First, my supervisors, Komalsingh Rambaree, Stefan Sjöberg, and Päivi Turunen. Thank you for your guidance, for sharing your knowledge with me, and for always having my best interests at heart. I would also like to thank Josefin Westerberg Jacobson, Head of Department, for always checking in on me and for making sure that my roles as a PhD student and adjunct have been as balanced as possible. To Annika Nilsson, thank you for your encouragement and for asking about my project with genuine interest, even after you were no longer Director of Doctoral Studies.

Karin Steive, a colleague turned work wife, who reads random Swedish poems to me and listens to my rants, and who is there regardless of whether it is about work or life. How time flies, and here we are. Amanda Norrgård, a colleague who has become a close friend, with whom I can laugh until my eyes tear, often at the most random things, usually when I need it the most. Tomas Lindmark, a colleague who became a *friendu*, with whom I have shared many lunches, from *krämig* everything to overly salty food. Just imagine how much money we could have saved, and how many cats we could have bought, if we had not eaten out so much. Eller?

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Gävle, 7 April 2026

*Elvi Chang*

## List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers, which are referred to in the text by Roman numerals.

### Paper I

Chang, E., Sjöberg, S., Turunen, P., & Rambaree, K. (2022). Youth empowerment for sustainable development: Exploring ecosocial work discourses. *Sustainability*, 14(3426), 1–27. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3390/su14063426>

### Paper II

Chang, E., Turunen, P., Sjöberg, S., & Rambaree, K. (2025). Youth perspectives on health, well-being, and sustainable development: A photovoice study. *Journal of Social Work*, 25(3), 395–417. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173241312783>

### Paper III

Chang, E., Sjöberg, S., Turunen, P., & Rambaree, K. (2026). A call for ecosocial community work: Challenges and possibilities for ecosocial work in local neighbourhoods in Sweden. *European Journal of Social Work*, 29(2), 438–454. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2025.2510340>

### Paper IV

Chang, E., Rambaree, K., Turunen, P., & Sjöberg, S. (2026). A call for the development of local ecosocial policies for youth in Sweden: Youth perspectives and local practices in sustainable development. *Social Sciences*, 15, 1–29.

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## Author contributions

All authors participated in the design and conceptualisation of the studies.

### **Paper I**

Elvi Chang (EC) collected the data (20 qualitative interviews), transcribed the interviews, and led the analysis using ATLAS.ti (software for qualitative data analysis). EC drafted the manuscript. Komalsingh Rambaree (KR), Päivi Turunen (PT), and Stefan Sjöberg (SS) provided feedback for revisions. All authors read and approved the final version.

### **Paper II**

EC and PT collected the data (two photovoice group discussions), and EC transcribed the material. EC and PT analysed the data, with EC leading the analysis in ATLAS.ti. EC drafted the manuscript, and PT, SS, and KR contributed with feedback for revisions. All authors read and approved the final version.

### **Paper III**

EC and SS collected the data (two focus group discussions), and EC transcribed the material. EC and SS analysed the data, with EC leading the analysis in ATLAS.ti. EC drafted the manuscript, and SS, PT, and KR contributed with feedback for revisions. All authors read and approved the final version.

### **Paper III**

This paper draws on the data from Papers I–III. EC analysed the combined datasets in line with the research aim and questions of Paper IV. EC also led the analysis in ATLAS.ti in consultation with KR, SS, and PT. EC drafted the manuscript, and KR, SS, and PT contributed with feedback for revisions. All authors read and approved the final version.

### **The thesis**

The thesis is my own work. I wrote the entire thesis myself, with some reflections and general feedback from my supervisors. After I submitted the work-in-progress version for the final seminar, my principal supervisor (Komalsingh Rambaree) read the draft once and provided overall comments. I received comments from the opponent during the final seminar. I then revised the manuscript in light of the opponent's comments, which I also discussed with my supervisors. Before submission for the public defence, all supervisors read the final draft once and gave overarching feedback. Responsibility for the analysis, interpretation, writing, and final text remains mine.



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## Declaration on the use of AI tools and professional proofreading

During the process of writing this thesis, I utilised digital and professional support tools in accordance with the principles of good research practice and academic integrity. The purpose of using these supports was to strengthen the text's readability, coherence, and accessibility while maintaining full academic responsibility and intellectual authorship. The University of Gävle provided access to *Mendeley*, *Grammarly*, and *Microsoft Copilot*, and also funded the cost of a professional proofreader.

As someone who learnt English as a fourth language and Swedish as a fifth, these tools became part of my academic process rather than replacements for it. For example, when writing in English and Swedish, I sometimes cannot express myself as well as I do in my mother tongue, leading to awkward formulations and grammatical errors. By using AI tools, I was often able to express these complex reflections more clearly (by explaining what I meant) while preserving my own voice.

*Mendeley* was used to assist me in inputting, formatting, and creating the in-text citations and the reference list. *Grammarly* was employed and set to identify grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, and issues related to the clarity and flow of the text. When needed, it was also used to suggest ways of paraphrasing long or complex sentences. Generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, namely *Microsoft Copilot* and *OpenAI ChatGPT*, were occasionally used to review certain parts of my text. The purpose was to help identify areas for improvement in clarity, coherence, and flow, as well as to refine the organisation and academic tone of the writing (for instance, transitions and sentence precision). All suggestions from these AI tools were carefully reviewed, and I accepted only those that supported the intended purpose of use. I did not use AI to generate original text.

All empirical analyses, theoretical interpretations, and arguments presented in this thesis are entirely my own, based on my readings and analytical work. The AI tools were not involved in analysing the data. After the main writing was completed, I engaged a professional proofreader to further improve the clarity, grammar, and flow of the writing. This service focused solely on linguistic refinement.

I take full responsibility for the final form of this text. In the sections where AI-generated suggestions were adopted, I carefully reviewed them to ensure the final version accurately reflects my reasoning, interpretation, and voice.



# 1. Introduction

Social work is a multidimensional and multifaceted field understood as both a profession and an academic discipline (Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2024). It is also a global field of practice shaped by different historical and cultural conditions in the contexts in which it is practised, while simultaneously being influenced by international perspectives and developments in the field (Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2024a, 2024b). What is understood as social work, how it is practised, who is recognised as a social worker, and what is defined as a social problem, thus vary across different social and cultural contexts. However, across these diverse contexts, social work is broadly concerned with promoting social change, social justice, human rights, and well-being by engaging people and social structures in addressing social challenges in everyday life (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014a). Accordingly, social work practice, including in Sweden, involves working with individuals, families, groups, communities, and broader social and political systems to address social problems such as poverty, marginalisation, and health disparities (K. Healy, 2022; Hesse, 2025; Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2024b; Payne, 2021). Within this broad mandate, the profession has often defined its distinctive role among the helping professions through its focus on the relationship between individuals and their environment, commonly referred to as the ‘person-in-environment’ perspective. This perspective emphasises that people’s lives are shaped by the wider contexts in which they live (Besthorn & Canda, 2002).

Traditionally, this focus has primarily centred on the social dimensions of human life and the social environment, including family relations, employment, social rights, the social implications of the built environment, and overall well-being, while the natural environment and the ecological conditions that shape human existence have received far less attention (Zapf, 2010). A similar orientation can be seen in Swedish social work, which is strongly embedded in the welfare state and practised largely within the public sector. Across Sweden’s 290 municipalities, local authorities have considerable responsibility and authority to organise and provide social services under various pieces of legislation, including the Social Services Act. Within this municipal framework, social work in Sweden has largely focused on the individual and the social environment, with very limited attention to ecological conditions and their relevance to social work (Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; Cuadra, 2015).

The conventional separation between the social and the ecological dimensions in social work can be problematic, as social dimensions and the social environment are closely interconnected with broader environmental perspectives, including the natural conditions and ecological concerns that shape everyday life. This interconnection becomes particularly visible in the

growing concern about the environmental limits within which humanity can safely operate (Rockström et al., 2009, 2024). One way such concerns have been conceptualised is through the planetary boundaries framework, which identifies key Earth system processes that regulate the stability and resilience of the planet (Rockström et al., 2009). The framework defines planetary boundaries as environmental limits and thresholds that mark a safe operating space for humanity (Rockström et al., 2009, 2024; Sakschewski et al., 2025). Among these boundaries, climate change is especially critical because of its central role in maintaining the functioning of the Earth system and the conditions necessary for life and human well-being (Stenzel et al., 2025).

Climate change is understood not only as a biophysical process but also as a social and political issue shaped by different narratives. From the 1970s to the present, the different narratives that have framed climate change influenced how it is defined, interpreted, and governed, thereby shaping political decision-making, international agreements, and wider societal responses rather than merely describing climate events (Laruffa, 2025). Excluding denialist narratives, the focus here is on narratives that treat climate change as an established phenomenon with serious consequences (Ripple et al., 2022). These include, among others, *apocalyptic climate change* (see Foust & O'Shannon Murphy, 2009), *sustainable development* (see Holden et al., 2025; Jordan, 2008), *degrowth* or *post-growth* (see Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Koch, 2022a, 2022b), and *the Anthropocene* (see Fiske, 2022). In recent years, climate change and sustainable development have become central concerns in both research and policy (Iacobuță et al., 2022). Baidya and Saha (2024) report that climate change, sustainability, and sustainable development are among the most frequent keywords in climate-related scholarship and policy discourse. As these narratives increasingly shape political agendas and policy frameworks, they also influence how societal institutions and professional fields interpret and respond to climate-related challenges.

Within this broader context, the implications of climate change have also increasingly become relevant for the field of social work. Climate change affects the well-being of individuals and communities and has increasingly posed challenges for social work practice (Coates & Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2012). Environmental changes, extreme weather events, and ecological degradation can intensify existing social inequalities and vulnerabilities, thereby creating new forms of social risk and insecurity. As a consequence, social work has increasingly been confronted with the task of responding to complex socio-ecological challenges that extend beyond traditional social concerns (Alston et al., 2019; Cuadra & Ouis, 2022; Dominelli, 2024; Peeters, 2012a, 2012b).

Against this background, there is growing international recognition that social work and its practitioners cannot remain detached from natural-environment perspectives, including the consequences of climate change (Besthorn, 2012; Boetto et al., 2020; Coates & Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2011, 2018b; Matthies & Närhi, 2017b; Peeters, 2012b; Revanth et al., 2025). Correspondingly, research in the field has increasingly examined the social

challenges associated with ecological disruption, the interdependence between social and natural environmental processes, and the relationships between humans and their broader environments (Cuadra & Ouis, 2022; Dominelli, 2024; Hetherington & Boddy, 2013; Krings et al., 2020; Matthies et al., 2001; Matthies et al., 2000; Norton, 2012). Within this discussion, scholars have argued that the traditional person-in-environment framework is no longer sufficient unless it explicitly incorporates the natural environment alongside the social and the built environment (see Boetto, 2017; Boetto et al., 2020, 2022; Närhi et al., 2025; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017; Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021; Stamm et al., 2023). This development reflects more than the addition of a natural-environment dimension; rather, it suggests a broader reconfiguration of the profession's conceptual foundations. It requires social work to acknowledge its responsibility to address both ecological and social injustices (Boetto, 2017). At the same time, it challenges the long-standing assumption that social work's mandate lies primarily within the social sphere, since ecological crises increasingly shape the conditions under which social issues emerge.

In response to these developments, the growing recognition of environmental perspectives within social work has contributed to the emergence of concepts such as ecosocial work. The argument behind ecosocial work is that social work must engage with ecological knowledge and perspectives, recognising that social, natural, and built environments, as well as ecological systems, are closely interconnected (Boetto, 2017; Matthies & Närhi, 2017b). Ecosocial work emphasises that human well-being is closely tied to planetary well-being and the sustainability of natural systems (Stamm et al., 2023) while also highlighting the role of social work in supporting the ecosocial transition towards more sustainable societies (Matthies & Närhi, 2017b). Within this orientation, sustainable development becomes an important area of engagement as it provides a framework for linking social justice concerns with ecological sustainability and broader societal transitions (Boetto, 2017; Peeters, 2012b).

To situate this engagement, it is necessary to briefly consider how sustainable development has been conceptualised within international policy frameworks. Sustainable development, as defined in the Brundtland Report, refers to meeting present needs while ensuring that future generations are able to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). Building on this concept, the Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, provide a global framework for implementing sustainable development and monitoring progress through specific goals and targets. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals with their 169 targets are commonly presented as an attempt to balance economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability. This framing suggests that such reconciliation is both desirable and achievable (Laruffa, 2025), although what 'balance' means in practice and whom it is for remains subject to debate.

Some scholars in international social work (see Baikady, 2026; Cordoba & Bando, 2022; Naranjo, 2023; Peeters, 2012b) argue that despite differences in how social work is practised across contexts, the profession's core values

are normatively aligned with sustainable development through common commitments to empowerment, equality, human rights and dignity, participation, resilience, respect for diversity, social justice, and well-being. At the same time, sustainable development raises important theoretical and practical questions for the profession, particularly regarding how social work can engage with the complex relationships between people and their environments. Therefore, social workers need to engage actively with all three pillars of sustainable development: social, economic, and environmental (C. Cox, 2020). Ecosocial work represents one approach through which social work seeks to address these challenges. As a conceptual and practice-oriented perspective, ecosocial work shapes how social workers understand human–environment relations and how these concerns can be translated into micro-, meso-, and macro-level practices as well as education and local policy work that support sustainable transitions (Boetto, 2017).

Within the broader context of ecosocial work and sustainable development, young people (aged 10–24 years) constitute a particularly important group. Young people’s health, identity, and working-life capacities are still developing and are shaped by ongoing social and ecological conditions and changes, which also affect health and well-being across the wider population. This makes working-life capacities a particularly important dimension of youth health and well-being, as they are closely connected to employment and the labour market (Chang, Rambaree, et al., 2026). Since employment is one of the determinants of health (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024) and both paid and unpaid work, such as care work, are important for meeting human needs, working life is closely related to health and well-being (Littig & Grießler, 2005). This is particularly important for young people, whose future opportunities in working life are still taking shape. At the same time, research suggests that climate change poses significant risks to young people’s health and well-being (Proulx et al., 2024). Young people globally also face considerable labour market challenges, such as not being in employment, education, or training (International Labour Organization, 2025). These conditions make youth a particularly important group for social work, especially from an ecosocial perspective, as their present lives and future opportunities are closely linked to how societies respond to sustainability challenges.

The importance of youth is further reinforced by the fact that it is a formative life phase in which health, well-being, identity, and future possibilities are still being shaped. The transition from childhood to adulthood, particularly during adolescence, is characterised by development, change, and challenges in the physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional domains. This influences young people’s health and well-being and may have consequences that persist into adulthood and beyond (Chang et al., 2025; Cheng et al., 2024; Kjellgren et al., 2025). During this period, young people are also expected to become more independent from their parents, renegotiate relationships with peers, and begin to form goals and aspirations in different areas of life, all of which is closely related to health and well-being (Mataloni & Reinprecht, 2024). In this context, sustainable development becomes

particularly relevant as several of the Sustainable Development Goals are directly related to young people's health and well-being, and young people are also regarded as important actors in advancing the goals (United Nations, 2022). However, the WHO (2020) argues that young people still are not collectively and actively involved in efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and to improve both their own and global health.

In this context, it becomes important to consider how social work research and practice engage with young people when it comes to environmental and sustainability issues as well as their health, well-being, and working-life capacities. This is especially important in the Swedish context. Although the international literature, as described above, increasingly recognises the importance of integrating environmental and ecological perspectives into social work and engaging with sustainability issues, these perspectives remain limited in Swedish social work research and practice (Brusman & Turunen, 2018; Cuadra & Eydal, 2018; Cuadra & Ouis, 2020, 2022; K. Rambaree, Sjöberg, et al., 2019). This also applies to social work with young people (see Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; Chang et al., 2025). This limited attention is particularly notable given the central role of social work practice and interventions targeting children and young people in Sweden. Child welfare – which refers to welfare interventions for those under the age of 18 – is one of the core areas of social work across the country's 290 municipalities (Shanks & Lundström, 2023).

## **1.1. Rationale**

The rationale for this thesis draws on the growing recognition that social work cannot be separated from the wider environmental conditions that increasingly shape people's everyday lives. For young people in particular, health, well-being, and future working-life capacities are increasingly connected to these conditions. This thesis is also motivated by the limited attention given to the natural-environment perspective in social work, despite social workers increasingly encountering ecological issues and their socio-economic consequences in everyday practice. Mainstream social work, including in Sweden, remains dominated by casework approaches centred on individuals and families, while community-based approaches and environmental and ecological perspectives remain marginal. Yet, many of today's complex social problems, from youth unemployment and well-being to environmental crises, cannot adequately be addressed through individual, segmented interventions alone. They require collective, community-oriented, and multidisciplinary responses that recognise the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental systems.

### ***The focus on sustainable development and ecosocial work***

Within the global framework of sustainable development, the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental systems is a central principle. These three dimensions of sustainability are interdependent, and progress in one area is limited if the others are neglected. Since the adoption of the United

Nations Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, social work has increasingly been discussed as a field that can contribute to sustainable development. The Sustainable Development Goals resonate with social work's long-standing concern with how social, economic, and institutional conditions shape people's lives and well-being. From this perspective, engaging with sustainable development is not simply an additional area of interest for social work; rather, it raises the need for the profession to address structural inequalities and social injustices alongside ecological limits and questions of ecological justice.

Despite this potential alignment, social work is often positioned as being most closely associated with the social pillar of sustainable development and, to a lesser extent, with the economic pillar (Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; Pavani & Ganugi, 2024). In contrast, the environmental pillar is often described as more difficult to integrate into social work practice and as less familiar to practitioners (Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026). As a result, in efforts to promote human well-being, attention to the well-being of the natural environment is still frequently regarded as the responsibility of other professional fields (Nöjd et al., 2023). However, this division is increasingly difficult to maintain, as ecological conditions that affect planetary well-being also shape the social conditions under which human well-being can be realised. Addressing this tension requires social work to develop a broader understanding of well-being that includes both human and planetary well-being as well as the ecological limits within which societies operate.

In response to this need, ecosocial work has emerged as an approach that frames social work as part of an ecosocial transition towards more sustainable societies (Cuadra, 2024; Matthies & Närhi, 2017a; Närhi & Matthies, 2017). Ecosocial work emphasises that ecological crises, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and other environmental challenges, are closely connected to issues of social justice (Shackelford et al., 2024). These crises tend to affect vulnerable populations first and most severely, thereby intensifying inequalities and injustices that social work already seeks to address. From this perspective, ecosocial work calls for a theoretical and practical shift in the profession – from an anthropocentric focus on individuals within social environments to an ecological understanding of people as part of interdependent social and natural systems. In ecosocial work, sustainability begins with the recognition that human needs must be met within ecological limits and in ways that are fair and responsible to both present and future generations (Cuadra, 2024). Sustainable development therefore becomes a key concern in ecosocial work scholarship (Boetto, 2017). Ecosocial work also connects global challenges, such as achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, with local action, including community resilience and place-based responses to socio-ecological change (Närhi et al., 2025; K. Rambaree, Sjöberg, et al., 2019). In this sense, ecosocial work expands the understanding of welfare and well-being to include the ecological foundations upon which human life and social relations depend.

In this broader ecosocial and sustainable development framework, youth become a particularly crucial focus. They are both central actors in shaping

sustainable futures and disproportionately affected by the social and ecological challenges of our time. Young people face multiple pressures, including precarious work, mental health struggles, and climate anxiety, while also being positioned as bearers of hope and responsibility for realising sustainable development (see Chang et al., 2025). Ecosocial and youth-focused social work scholarship understands environmental degradation and inequalities (especially within communities), and ecological conditions as shaping young people's everyday lives and future prospects, making critical engagement with youth perspectives essential for understanding how sustainable development is experienced and enacted locally (see e.g. Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; Chang et al., 2025; Obeng et al., 2023; Schusler et al., 2019). Bringing together ecosocial work, sustainable development, and youth highlights how ecological, social, and generational justice are interconnected. For social work, this means treating sustainability and planetary well-being not as distant policy goals but as realities that young people experience in everyday life and that influence their well-being in their communities.

### ***The focus on youth and Gävle***

The terms 'youth' and 'young people' are used with some flexibility in this thesis, reflecting both the empirical focus and the broader context. Throughout the thesis, 'youth' refers to those aged 15–19 years, which aligns with the common statistical and policy framings of upper secondary school students in Sweden. Using this narrower definition allows me to study the connections between social work practices, environmental perspectives, and the everyday lives of young people at a crucial transitional stage between compulsory schooling and adulthood. I occasionally use the term 'young people', for example when drawing on policy and organisational texts that use this wording. It is important to recognise that 15–19-year-olds are included in various different categorisations across international organisations, statistical frameworks, and national policies. This demonstrates that the category is socially and politically constructed rather than fixed. The United Nations (2025b) defines *youth* as people aged 15–24, while the World Health Organization (2025) distinguishes between *adolescents* (10–19 years), *youth* (15–24 years), and *young people* (10–24 years). In labour statistics, the International Labour Organization (2024) extends the category to 15–29 years to capture prolonged transitions from school to work. In Europe, young people are often defined as those aged 15–29 (Eurostat, 2025). In the Swedish context, national youth policy covers young people aged 13–25 (MUCF, 2023), while the social services in certain welfare provisions apply the category *unga* (young people) to include those who have turned 18 but not 21 (Sveriges Riksdag, 2025). These variations in definitions also resonate with academic discussions, which stress that youth cannot be reduced to age brackets but is a relational, socially and politically constructed life stage (Smith & Mills, 2019).

In an annual survey conducted in Sweden among young people aged 15–24 ( $n = 17,447$ , see Ungdomsbarometern, 2025), respondents continue to express money-related worries that affect their well-being. The survey shows

that health remains an important concern, though it ranks below goals related to education, income, and security. Compared with previous years, the importance attached to health has slightly declined, and a similar trend is observed for education. At the same time, young people's values appear to be changing. The survey shows that being seen as successful and wealthy has become more important over time, while the share of those who want to be perceived as open or tolerant has declined. The survey also indicates that young people's views on working life are increasingly pragmatic and individualised, with greater interest in entrepreneurship and a stronger focus on earning money. Social and political issues, including domestic and foreign policy and broader societal development, remain important to many young people, but reported interest has decreased over time. The survey suggests that environmental and climate issues show a similar trend: many young people still regard them as important societal concerns, yet fewer link environmental engagement to their personal identity, and only a small minority describe themselves as environmentally friendly. These developments point to a gradual shift away from collective ideals towards more individual aspirations related to security, success, and wealth. This shift may influence how health, well-being, education, and future working-life are understood, particularly as economic concerns and status-oriented goals shape priorities and everyday choices. It may also affect engagement with sustainability, as environmental concern appears less connected to identity and collective responsibility. Sustainable practices may thus need to be experienced as practical, 'affordable', and compatible with young people's life plans.

These patterns in young people's reported priorities and concerns also need to be understood in relation to the policy aims that guide youth-related work in Sweden. The objectives of the National Youth Policy are that all young people aged 13–25 are to have good living conditions, the power to participate in and shape their own lives, and influence over societal developments (MUCF, 2024). The policy addresses aspects such as work, school, health, future dreams, influence, and democracy. The government and parliament set the National Youth Policy in Sweden, and the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (in Swedish: *Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor*, MUCF) is responsible for analysing and following up on young people's living conditions. Although the national policy outlines broad goals, each of Sweden's 290 municipalities is free to develop its own local youth policy. Many municipalities and regions use the 'Local Follow-up of Youth Policy' (in Swedish: *Lokal Uppföljning av Ungdomspolitik*, Lupp) questionnaire, developed by MUCF, which captures information on work, school, health, future plans, and young people's sense of influence and democracy. The Lupp survey is designed to provide municipalities, city districts, and regions with knowledge of young people's situation so that decisions that affect them can be based on an up-to-date understanding of their experiences and opinions. The survey is administered to participants in three different age groups: 13–16 years, 16–19 years, and 19–25 years.

Gävle was among the municipalities that participated in the 2025 Lupp survey, although the results had not yet been released at the time of writing. Data from previous Lupp surveys in Gävle, including all three age groups, reveal a steady decline in young people's interest in social issues: from 49 per cent in 2016 to 44 per cent in 2019, and further down to 37 per cent in 2022 (Gävle Kommun, 2022). Interest in politics followed a similar trajectory, falling from 39 per cent in 2016 to 29 per cent in 2019, before a modest increase to 32 per cent considering politics to be important, in 2022 (Gävle Kommun, 2022). These trends align with the findings of the 2016 government-commissioned democracy inquiry in Sweden, which reported that young people participate less in formal political activities such as voting and party membership than older generations while showing greater engagement in alternative forms of participation, including demonstrations and social movements (SOU, 2016).

Gävle, a municipality in Gävleborg County in east-central Sweden, had a population of 104,108 in 2025, of which 6,197 were aged 15–19 (SCB, 2026). Gävle has experienced unusual environmental events, including a drought in 2018 and extensive flooding in 2021. In 2024, Gävleborg County recorded Sweden's highest youth unemployment rate (ages 18–24) at 13.1 per cent, compared with the national average of 8.2 per cent (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2024). One possible factor behind this difference is education: only 21 per cent of young people aged 16–24 in Gävleborg County had completed at least three years of post-secondary education, compared to 25 per cent nationally (SCB, 2025).

The focus on Gävle in this thesis is grounded in its relevance as a local context where broader national and global sustainability challenges intersect. Gävle is facing pressing social and economic challenges, including high youth unemployment, relatively low levels of post-secondary education, and declining civic engagement, which may reflect both structural inequalities and the local consequences of broader societal transformations. By situating the study in Gävle, this thesis contributes to understanding how an ecosocial perspective is incorporated into local work with young people to promote their health, well-being, and working-life capacities.

In this thesis, working-life capacities refer to the combination of health, skills, motivation, social support, access to supportive environments, and work conditions that influence young people's real opportunities to prepare for, enter, and stay in the workforce. For the youth discussed in this thesis, these capacities are closely linked to education, overall well-being, and the transition from school to employment. It is not only a question of individual resources, such as health or skills, but also of whether institutional, social, and environmental factors offer meaningful pathways into working life (see Tengland, 2011; van der Klink et al., 2016).

### ***The focus on (youth) health, well-being, and health-promoting working life***

The Swedish welfare state, through its policies and institutional arrangements, influences many of the social determinants of health that shape

people's well-being (Burström, 2015). Within this framework, social work plays a central role. Most social work practice in Sweden is located within municipal social services, which implement welfare policies at the local level. In the Scandinavian context, welfare and well-being have often been used interchangeably to describe standards of living and quality of life, through which people can meet material and non-material needs (Allardt, 1975, 1976, 1993). In this thesis, well-being is understood in this sense – as a concept related to need satisfaction and everyday living conditions – while welfare is used more specifically to refer to public provisions and institutional support across central social domains, including health and housing, education and employment, income support, and municipal social services (Vella, 2019). This conceptual distinction is important because it separates well-being as a lived condition and outcome from welfare as a set of collective arrangements that may enable or constrain the fulfilment of needs.

Although well-being is central to the definitions, ethics, and values of social work (IFSW, 2014b), practitioners often find it challenging to translate health-related perspectives into everyday practice (Beddoe & Maidment, 2014). Yet, promoting health and well-being in relation to people's everyday environments is commonly described as a core social work role (Beddoe & Maidment, 2014). This gap between stated commitments and practical application suggests a need to more clearly connect social work's health-promoting role to the wider social and environmental conditions that shape health and well-being. Based on this understanding, social workers are well placed to take a leading role in understanding the relationship between people and the environment through the person-in-environment perspective, as it allows for considerations of the physical environment and nature to be incorporated across all levels of practice (T.V. Shaw, 2011). Nonetheless, debates within the field have paid limited attention to the physical and natural environment and its importance for health, especially when compared with disciplines where these links are more routinely discussed (Heinsch, 2012; Jones, 2013).

Ecosocial work scholarship argues that this relative absence is linked to a long-standing tendency to operationalise 'person-in-environment' primarily as 'person-in-social-environment', which can marginalise the material and ecological conditions that shape health and well-being (see Boetto, 2017; Gray & Coates, 2015; Närhi & Matthies, 2016; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). However, it remains uncertain to what extent social work practice can move towards a wider definition of 'the social' that includes non-human relations and ecological interdependencies rather than treating them as external context in promoting health and well-being (Thysell & Cuadra, 2023). Some studies suggest that even when social workers recognise ecological interdependencies, such issues are not consistently translated into everyday organisational routines and practices, partly due to institutional constraints and the priorities that dominate practice (Boetto et al., 2022; Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; Kaffrell-Lindahl, 2025; Labron & Burke, 2025).

According to the WHO (1946, p. 1), 'health is a complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity',

indicating that well-being is an integral component of health. Determinants of health are the social, economic, environmental, behavioural, psychological, and biological factors that shape health outcomes (Fisher et al., 2022; WHO, 1998, 2024). These determinants include social and structural conditions, such as income, economic stability, education, employment and working conditions, social support, culture, gender, community networks, and neighbourhood safety; the physical environment, including housing conditions, clean air, safe water, and environmental quality; individual behaviours, such as diet, smoking, physical activity, and coping with stress; biological factors, including genetics and family history; and access to health and healthcare services (WHO, 2024; Zaid & Liamputtong, 2025). Collectively, these factors shape people's opportunities to live in health-supporting ways, as individual behaviour is often constrained or enabled by broader social and environmental conditions. For this reason, improving people's health behaviours often requires health promotion (Zaid & Liamputtong, 2025).

Health promotion refers to enabling individuals and communities to gain greater control over the factors that shape their health and to strengthen and improve their health by doing so (WHO, 1998, 2016). It is commonly described as resting on three interrelated elements: good governance for health, which embeds prevention and safety across policy areas; health literacy, which involves supporting people's knowledge, skills, opportunities, and voice; and healthy cities, where municipal leadership integrates prevention into urban planning and primary care so that healthier environments contribute to healthier populations (WHO, 2016).

Based on the above descriptions, health can be understood as physical, mental, and social well-being, while determinants of health refer to the wider social, economic, environmental, behavioural, psychological, and biological conditions that make such well-being possible or difficult to achieve. Health promotion follows from this as it seeks to enable people and communities to gain greater control over these conditions, rather than focusing only on individual lifestyle change. From this perspective, working life becomes a key arena, because many important determinants of health are embedded in employment conditions, work organisation, and the relationship between work and everyday life. A health promotion perspective therefore also requires attention to how working environments are designed, governed, and experienced, and how these conditions interact with people's resources, agency, and opportunities. Health-promoting working life is thus concerned with how working conditions are, and can be, shaped to support health and well-being.

Health-promoting working life refers not only to what happens within what is traditionally considered a workplace; in Sweden, schools are also viewed as workplaces, or work environments, for students (Högskolan i Gävle, 2018). The concept refers to a broad, multidisciplinary field of research and education that links health promotion with ill-health prevention to working life more broadly (Björk & Furåker, 2025; Sandberg, 2019). It examines how physical, mental, and social working conditions, as well as

factors at individual, organisational, and societal levels, shape health and well-being, both within work and through the interaction between working life and life outside work (Björk & Furåker, 2025; Högskolan i Gävle, 2018; Sandberg, 2019; Sandmark, 2023). In this way, health-promoting working life situates work within the broader framework of health determinants and health promotion, showing how employment conditions and the organisation of work both reflect and reproduce wider social and environmental structures. Working life is therefore not an isolated domain but part of a larger socio-ecological context in which health is shaped across multiple levels. This broader understanding makes it necessary to move beyond the workplace as a bounded setting and to consider how social, environmental, and structural conditions interact with working life, shaping people's capacities and well-being over time. This broader understanding of working life and health also raises questions about how well-being is conceptualised and supported through wider welfare arrangements that shape people's opportunities to meet their needs in everyday life.

From this perspective, the relationship between needs, well-being, and working life becomes central. Need satisfaction is rarely possible without some form of labour, whether through paid employment, unpaid work, or care work; and work, in both its paid and unpaid forms, is therefore fundamental for individuals as well as for societies (Littig & Grießler, 2005; Sandmark, 2023). In the Swedish context from which the data were collected, work is commonly understood mainly in terms of paid employment and is closely linked to income, economic security, and labour market participation (Forslund, 2019). This understanding reflects dominant economic structures and growth-oriented perspectives, where employment is closely associated with productivity and economic contribution. For young people, developing working-life capacities is thus closely connected to their future opportunities to enter the labour market and secure work that meets their needs and supports their well-being. Working-life capacities should not be reduced to employability or individual readiness, however. They also depend on social, organisational, and ecological conditions that enable meaningful participation and shape how needs can be met without exceeding ecological limits.

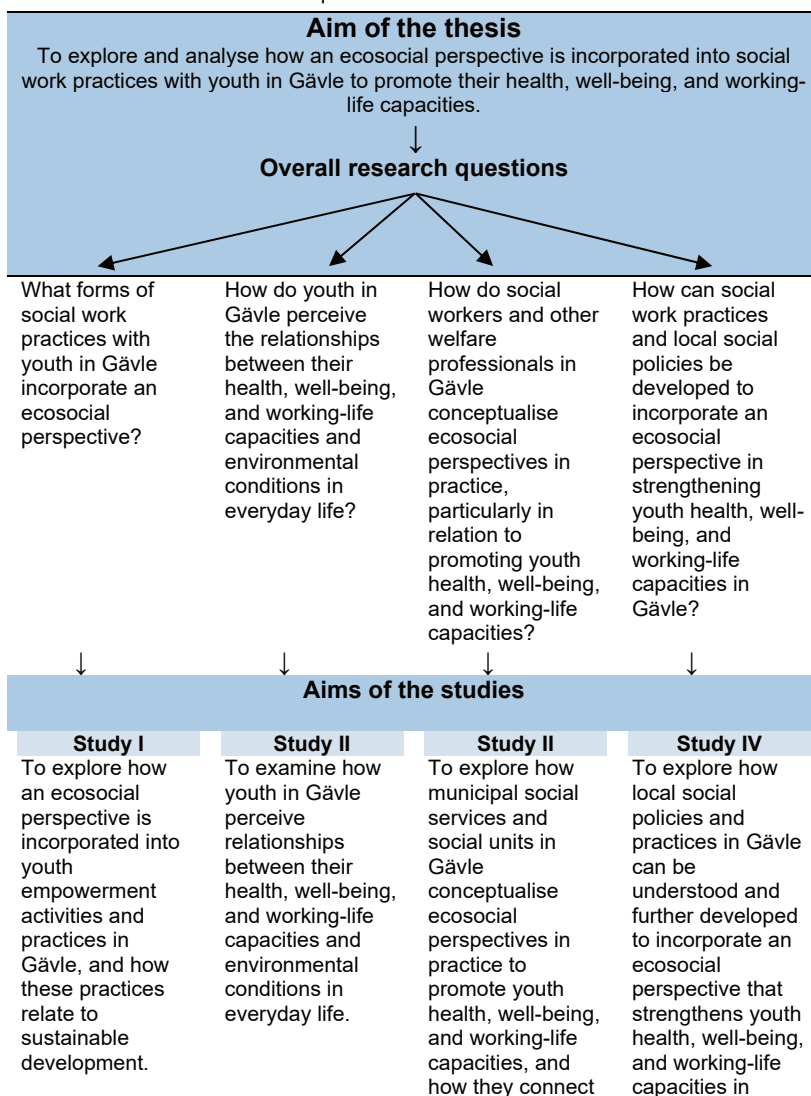
The health-promoting working-life perspective is particularly relevant to this thesis because the concept of working-life capacities, as discussed in the included studies, is closely connected to the broader social and environmental conditions described earlier. The young people in this thesis, aged 15–19 years, are still attending school and are in a period of developing different skills, experiences, and capacities, including future working-life capacities. Schools thus function as workplaces (see Högskolan i Gävle, 2018) where young people learn and develop these capacities in preparation for their future working life.

## **1.2. Research aims and questions**

This doctoral thesis examines how an ecosocial perspective is incorporated into social work with youth aged 15–19 to support health, well-being, and

working-life capacities, and how this relates to sustainable development in Gävle. It is based on four interrelated qualitative studies using three types of empirical material (see Chapter 4). A qualitative design allows deeper exploration of meanings, experiences, and practices, with each method contributing a different type of knowledge (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6). The overall aim is addressed through the research questions that guide the four studies (see Table 1). Each question is mainly addressed through one study; for example, Study I, through its aim and research questions, addresses the thesis's first research question.

Table 1. The research aims and questions of the thesis and its four studies.



this work to sustainable development within local communities.

relation to sustainable development.

The studies' research questions			
Study I	Study II	Study III	Study IV
<p>1. What ecosocial perspectives and practices related to youth empowerment can be identified in Gävle?</p> <p>2. What driving forces and circumstances shape how an ecosocial perspective is incorporated into youth empowerment activities and practices?</p> <p>3. What implications do the findings have for ecosocial work research and practice in youth empowerment related to sustainable development, youth well-being, and working-life capacities?</p>	<p>1. How do youth in Gävle understand environmental conditions related to sustainable development in their everyday lives?</p> <p>2. How do they describe the relationships between these environmental conditions, their health, well-being, and working-life capacities?</p> <p>3. In what ways do they experience empowerment in relation to environmental conditions connected to sustainable development?</p>	<p>1. How do municipal social services and social units conceptualise ecosocial perspectives in their work with youth in Gävle?</p> <p>2. What opportunities and challenges do they experience when incorporating ecosocial perspectives into practice?</p> <p>3. In what ways do they promote youth health, well-being, and working-life capacities through ecosocial practices, and how is this work connected to sustainable development within local communities?</p>	<p>1. How is an ecosocial perspective incorporated into local youth policies and practices in Gävle, and how are these linked to sustainable development?</p> <p>2. How do social workers, other welfare professionals, and youth contribute to the understanding and further development of ecosocial perspectives in local youth policies and practices?</p> <p>3. What challenges and possibilities are identified in integrating an ecosocial perspective into municipal youth policies and practices aimed at strengthening youth health, well-being, and working-life capacities?</p>

## 2. Contextual background

### 2.1. Social work

The answers to the questions of what counts as social work, who is considered a social worker, and what the purposes, methods, and focus areas of social work are, have always reflected the prevailing moral, social, political, and economic order of a given period within a specific context. In this sense, as Payne (2005, p. 14) puts it, ‘the current idea and practice of social work is only of its time, our time’. However, to understand social work as it exists today, it must also be considered in relation to its historical development and the ongoing transformations that shape its future directions. The social work profession is not only a product of its present circumstances but also an outcome of accumulated traditions, institutional frameworks, and theoretical and ideological debates that continue to shape its meanings, boundaries, and practices. At the same time, social work has consistently responded to changing societal conditions by engaging with new problems and developing innovative theories and interventions, such as exploring the role of social work in addressing the relationship between social inequalities, climate, and environmental issues (see L. Healy & Thomas, 2021). In this sense, social work continues to evolve in relation to changing social needs and public concerns. This is particularly important given its institutional role within welfare systems, where social work, municipal social services, and related welfare professions play a central part in supporting individuals, families, and communities. Social services refer to organised private or public efforts (such as municipal social services) that aim to support and improve the well-being of individuals or groups who are disadvantaged, distressed, or otherwise vulnerable (Pinker, 2025). However, particularly in the Swedish context, social work is broader than municipal social services alone. Although municipal social services form a central institutional setting for practice, social work also extends into a wider field of welfare-related activities across society.

In this thesis, the term social work refers mainly to mainstream Western social work, particularly traditions developed within Anglo-American contexts. At times, the term ‘Western social work’ is used here to make this focus explicit. In relation to practice, social work is understood as a wide range of welfare-related activities carried out across different sectors of society. These activities are undertaken by professionals with diverse educational backgrounds and job titles as well as by volunteers in non-profit organisations. They address complex, multifaceted interactions between people and their environments (see Hesse, 2025; Lyons et al., 2012). Within this broad field, the term social worker may refer both to individuals who hold the formal job title of ‘social worker’ and to those working in social

work-related roles under other titles, regardless of whether they hold a social work degree. Alongside social workers, this thesis also refers to welfare professionals in a broader sense. Here, welfare professionals are understood as people working in municipal welfare services, civil society, and non-profit organisations who support young people's well-being and empowerment. Although they work in different sectors and institutional settings, they all contribute to a wider welfare landscape that supports young people's health, well-being, and working-life capacities within the context of sustainable development. Social workers employed within municipal social services are discussed separately to clarify their specific professional role within the welfare system.

### ***A brief historical and global perspective on social work***

The discussion of the development of social work as both a profession and a field of education in this section focuses on the Western tradition, particularly the Anglo-American context. This focus is chosen because the early formation of the profession was most prominent in the United Kingdom and the United States, although similar developments also occurred in other parts of Europe (L. Healy & Thomas, 2021). As social work evolved globally, these developments later expanded beyond Europe and North America (L. Healy, 2008; L. Healy & Thomas, 2021; Payne, 2005). As a result, the Anglo-American tradition has played a central role in shaping the theories, methods, and institutional structures that continue to influence social work education and practice internationally, including in Sweden, where this thesis is situated.

The origins of social work are interpreted in various ways. Some scholars attribute its emergence to the point when the term was first introduced, while others argue that its ideological foundations extend much further back in human history, rooted in an intrinsic human inclination to support and care for others (Hessle, 2025). There is no single, agreed-upon moment that marks the beginning of modern professional social work, although numerous formative developments in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggest that social work emerged as a profession during this period (L. Healy & Thomas, 2021; Meinert et al., 2012). It is generally recognised that historically, professional social work as we know it today developed in Europe and North America during the late nineteenth century, rooted in religious traditions and voluntary efforts to respond to urbanisation and the striking coexistence of poverty alongside an increasingly prosperous economy during the industrial revolution (Henrickson, 2022; Hering & Waaldijk, 2003; Pierson, 2022; Stuart, 2019).

These early initiatives reflected both a moral concern for people experiencing poverty and a growing awareness of the social consequences of industrial capitalism. From these formative beginnings, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States, social work gradually developed into a recognised occupation, gained professional status, and emerged as an educational field in the 1920s and 1930s (L. Healy & Thomas, 2021; Payne, 2024; Stuart, 2019). Consequently, the social work practice and education

shaped by the thinking from these two countries became a significant stream of professional and theoretical influence that was later exported to the rest of the world (Askeland & Payne, 2006) by ‘American and European experts to address the problems of underdevelopment’ (L. Healy & Thomas, 2021, p. 176). This trend was evident in the early and mid-twentieth century with the introduction of professional social work to Asia, Africa, and Latin America (see L. Healy & Thomas, 2021), where colonial governments or missionary organisations in many cases initiated social welfare training as part of ‘modernisation’ efforts. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why most histories of social work’s development have been written by authors from the West and tend to assume an internationalist perspective that centres on Western social work (Payne, 2005). In fact, while the development of social work in the European context has been deeply intertwined with welfare state policies, it has consistently sought to internationalise and universalise its discourses and professional ideals (Lorenz, 2008).

When tracing the development of professional social work, two main historical contexts are often identified. In the United Kingdom, the profession is frequently described as having emerged in the slums of London (Younghusband, 1981) through initiatives such as the Charity Organisation Society, the Toynbee Hall Settlement and the Young Women’s Christian Association (L. Healy & Thomas, 2021). In the United States, the development of social work is commonly associated with Mary Richmond’s work on *Social Diagnosis* and Jane Addams’s settlement work at Hull House (L. E. Cox et al., 2021). The historical narrative of the profession has largely centred on Richmond and Addams, two White women who are widely recognised as early pioneers of social work. It is important to acknowledge that many others contributed to the development of the profession, including Black people, Indigenous people, and people of colour, whose roles have often received less attention in mainstream histories (see Gary & Gary, 1994; Hounmenou et al., 2025; Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2024; Williams & Bernard, 2019). The prominence of Richmond and Addams in social work history reflects their lasting influence on two major traditions within the field. Their work came to represent distinct, yet interconnected, approaches that have shaped the direction of professional practice. Richmond’s contributions laid the foundation for casework, emphasising individual intervention and the person-in-environment perspective. In contrast, Addams’s settlement work established the roots of community-oriented practice, with a focus on collective action and social reform. These orientations – casework and community practice – are often described as two central, and at times competing, perspectives on the purpose of social work (J. B. Thompson et al., 2019).

During the formative period of social work, the question of whether it could be regarded a profession became the subject of increasing debate. The most influential early assessment came from Abraham Flexner, an American educator who in 1915 delivered his well-known lecture ‘Is social work a profession?’ to the National Conference of Charities and Correction. His conclusion was unequivocal: social work was not yet a profession (Flexner,

1915). Flexner viewed the social worker's role as primarily mediating between the client and the agency, rather than exercising an autonomous, specialised body of knowledge. In his view, the methods of social work were not sufficiently systematic or teachable to be classified as professional practice (Daley & Pittman-Munke, 2021).

However, only a few years later, Richmond's publication *Social Diagnosis* (1917) was widely interpreted as a response to Flexner's critique, as it offered social work a communicable set of methods and a scientific framework for practice (L. Healy & Thomas, 2021; Righard & Montesino, 2012). Richmond, who was strongly influenced by medical science, developed a process of 'social diagnosis' as a systematic investigation (Righard & Montesino, 2012). This process started with the collection of social evidence (see Richmond, 1917), continued through the comparison of social, and culminated in a reasoned decision about the diagnosis and appropriate intervention (Righard & Montesino, 2012). This can be seen as the profession's early efforts to establish legitimacy and scientific credibility by adopting systematic and evidence-based approaches centred on understanding and intervening in individuals' lives within their social environments. However, this pursuit of legitimacy also reinforced an individualised orientation, gradually shifting attention away from broader social and structural conditions. This focus on the individual and their social environment continues to shape social work to this day, particularly in Western contexts, despite the growing recognition of the natural environment's importance in social work since the 1970s.

One possible reason this individualised orientation has remained strong is that wider changes in welfare governance and the political economy from the 1970s onwards have influenced and reinforced it. As neoliberalism began to spread globally during the 1970s (Balaji, 2025), many governments increasingly emphasised measurable results, targeted support, and individual responsibility, also in welfare provision. Under these conditions, structural problems can more easily be managed when they are translated into individual cases and interventions that focus on personal change (see Kamali & Jönsson, 2018). This can lead social issues to be understood as individual issues, addressed through medical or therapeutic approaches and discussed in less political terms, thereby reducing attention to structural causes and collective responses (Ferguson, 2017; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2016; Kamali & Jönsson, 2018). This shift towards individualised explanations is also linked to neoliberal ideas about human capital, where social justice more often is understood as improving individuals rather than changing social structures (Wagner & Yee, 2011).

The works of Richmond and Addams also shaped different ways of understanding the environment in social work. Richmond emphasised a holistic view of the individual's social surroundings and life situation, whereas Addams located social work within the broader context of urban life, including both social and physical environments (Matthies & Närhi, 2018). However, within the globally dominant Western tradition of social work, the understanding of the environment gradually narrowed after the Second World

War. It was increasingly limited to social, cultural, economic, and some built dimensions, largely overlooking the natural environment and its significance for human well-being and social life (Gray et al., 2016; Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Molyneux, 2010; Närhi & Matthies, 2016, 2025; Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021; Zapf, 2010). This focus was largely influenced by the therapeutic orientation of the dominant US social work literature and was also one reason for the delayed involvement of social work in the environmental movement (Coates & Gray, 2012). This focus remains visible in the individualised orientation that characterises much of contemporary Western social work (Boetto et al., 2020; Shackelford, 2025).

One of social work's key strengths has been its central aim of promoting and enhancing individual and social well-being, guided by the holistic person-in-environment perspective that situates human experience within its immediate social context (Probst, 2013). The person-in-environment perspective is often regarded as both the foundation and a defining hallmark of social work, setting it apart from other helping professions (Akersson et al., 2017). At the same time, the person-in-environment perspective can be problematic for two reasons: it is so broad that it appears to lack clear boundaries, and many other professions also engage with issues related to the person-in-environment configuration (Meinert et al., 2012). The framework's openness has probably contributed to the profession's ongoing struggle to articulate a unified definition that fully captures its mission, values, knowledge base, and scope of practice. Despite long-standing efforts, social work as a profession has struggled to achieve clarity in defining its identity (K. Hill et al., 2017; Tarshish, 2025). These ongoing discussions reflect not only the profession's complexity but also its adaptive and evolving nature. Areas once considered central to social work may gradually lose relevance, while new fields of concern emerge in response to broader theoretical, social, and political developments that continue to reshape the profession's boundaries and purposes. Despite these shifting boundaries, social work remains grounded in a shared set of values and theoretical perspectives that guide its practice. Social work is committed to promoting positive change at the individual, family, and community levels (IFSW, 2014a; Lyons et al., 2012). These levels are often described as micro, meso, and macro levels of practice, which are carried out through different methods targeting diverse groups and contexts (Mattocks, 2018) (see Table 2).

Although this three-level model is used globally, in practice the balance between these levels tends to differ across world regions and professional traditions. In the Global North, social work often prioritises micro-level practice shaped by individualised ideas of well-being, while in the Global South, it is frequently associated with macro-level approaches informed by cultural values of community cohesion and social harmony (Boetto, 2017). Meanwhile, Hugman (2010) emphasises the interconnections between micro- and macro-level practice traditions developed in the Global South, especially within social development approaches, and challenges the tendency in the Global North to treat micro- and macro-level practice as separate or opposing.

Table 2. Social work methods and levels of practice that correspond with one another.

<b>Social work methods</b> (Payne, 2021)	<b>Levels of practice in social work</b> (Mattocks, 2018)
Casework (work with individuals and families)	Micro level (practice with individuals, families, and small groups)
Groupwork (work with groups)	Meso level (practice with organisations, teams, and groups)
Community work (work with the community, emphasising social change)	Macro level (practice with community organising, policy, and administration)

Definitions of micro-, meso-, and macro-level practice are not fixed. They are fluid and vary across contexts, traditions, and sources within the social work literature (Bronwyn, 2023). While some authors use all three levels, others rely on only micro- and macro-level distinctions or apply different terms to similar forms of practice (L. E. Cox et al., 2016; Netting et al., 2017). Within this broader fluidity, micro-level practice is most commonly understood as work with individuals and often described as direct practice or clinical practice (Austin et al., 2016; Tosone, 2016). It can also include work with dyads or couples, small peer groups, families, and other small-group constellations in which relationships are close and interaction is direct (Bronwyn, 2023).

Meso-level practice is generally associated with group work and may involve both small and large groups. It can also involve developing and implementing plans in community-based settings such as neighbourhoods, schools, and local organisations (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2018; Polites & Mulcahy, 2017). However, the meso category is not used consistently across the literature. Some sources describe meso systems as organisations or communities (L. E. Cox et al., 2016; Netting et al., 2017). Families may also be positioned within meso-level practice when they are conceptualised as small groups rather than as collections of individual relationships (Bronwyn, 2023; L. E. Cox et al., 2016). These differing uses suggest that meso-level practice often functions as a flexible middle space between direct work and broader structural interventions.

Macro-level practice usually refers to work within larger systems and broader arenas, including organisations, communities, and policy processes (Bronwyn, 2023; Matthies, 2022). It frequently overlaps with community work and structural social work but is most often associated with community organisation and social administration (Tice et al., 2020). Some authors describe macro-level practice as community social work practice (Austin et al., 2006; Netting et al., 2021), while others define it as professionally guided interventions designed to bring about change in organisational, community, and practice arenas (Netting et al., 2017). In some accounts, social work with

groups is also defined as macro-level practice (Bronwyn, 2023), further illustrating the lack of consensus about the level where group and community interventions belong. This means that communities and community work appear to have permeable boundaries, so they can be placed within both meso- and macro-level practice. This is also where macro-level practice closely connects with social policy, because the organisational and community arenas in which social workers intervene are shaped by policy decisions and institutional arrangements.

Social work practice is always situated within broader social policy frameworks that shape its possibilities and constraints. Social work services are thus embedded in political and institutional contexts that determine the conditions under which they are carried out – defining priorities, allocating resources, and shaping practice methods. At the same time, social workers are not merely policy implementers; they also act as interpretive and advocacy agents, translating policy into practice while contributing to its critique and reform (see Kindler, 2025). In this sense, professionals such as social workers play a pivotal role in both realising and shaping social policies, working to ensure that they reflect the profession’s enduring commitment to human needs, social justice, and people’s collective well-being within their environments (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2022). Although these principles form the foundation of social work globally, their meanings and applications are shaped by national welfare systems and policy frameworks. The following section situates social work within the Swedish welfare state, highlighting its organisation, scope, and defining characteristics.

### **Social work in the Swedish context**

Social work in Sweden is closely related to the welfare state, and it can be practised at different levels (see Table 3). Historically, however, it has strongly been oriented towards work with individuals and families, with limited emphasis on community-level practice (Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026). Moreover, the social environment has been central in Swedish social work education and practice, and perspectives on the built and natural environments have received far less attention; the significance of the natural environment for human well-being has largely remained peripheral (Cuadra & Eydal, 2018; Kaffrell-Lindahl, 2025; K. Rambaree, 2020).

Social work in Sweden is understood as an organised, interdisciplinary field encompassing a wide range of activities carried out by different professional groups, as well as by volunteers in non-profit organisations, across sectors such as municipal social services, criminal justice, and psychiatry (Hessle, 2025). Within this broad field, municipal social services have a central role. As stated in the Social Services Act (2025:400), *socialtjänsten* (social services) refers to activities carried out under the Social Services Act (*Socialtjänstlagen*), the Act on the Care of Substance Abusers in Certain Cases (*Lag om vård av missbrukare i vissa fall, LVM*), the Act with Special Provisions on the Care of Young People (*Lag med särskilda bestämmelser om vård av unga, LVU*), and the Act on the Placement of Children in Sheltered Accommodation (*Lag om placering av barn i skyddat*

*boende*) (Sveriges Riksdag, 2025). It also includes activities that a municipal social welfare committee (*socialnämnden*) or the National Board of Institutional Care (*Statens Institutionsstyrelse*) are required to undertake under other legislation or government regulations. In this thesis, social services refer to those services provided by the municipalities. In Sweden, these services are known by different names, such as *socialtjänst*, *socialförvaltning*, and *välfärd*, but the term *social services* is used throughout this thesis to refer to these municipal bodies.

Table 3. Social work methods and practice levels in Sweden.

<b>Social work as social change work for welfare (H. Swedner, 1983)</b>	<b>Levels of methods (G. Swedner, 1969; Turunen, 2004)</b>	<b>Social work methods and analysis (Hessle, 2025)</b>
Micro level: Direct work with individuals and families	Casework: Individual and family-oriented social work	The individual and family level
Meso level: Practice is situated within organisations, local communities, and neighbourhoods. This includes community work, organisational development, interprofessional collaboration, and local preventive initiatives	Group work	The group and organisational level
Macro level: Practice concerns structural and societal change. This includes social policy development, welfare reforms, legislation, and broader efforts to address inequality, poverty, and exclusion	Community work	The structural level
Administration		
Research		

**Note:** In both international and Nordic contexts, the first three methods are regarded as the primary modes of social work practice, while administration and research are considered secondary methods (Turunen, 2004). However, Turunen also adds that in social work practice, the five methods have often overlapped, in contrast to the distinctions drawn in the literature.

To understand how municipal social services in Sweden developed, it is important to consider the historical conditions that shaped Swedish welfare and social work. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sweden

was among the poorest countries in Northern Europe, characterised by deep social inequality and widespread social problems including poverty, unemployment, urban migration, alcohol abuse, and emigration (Svärd & Egerö, 2006). These social problems were traditionally managed and addressed by the family, the church, and the local parish – but due to the societal transformations of the nineteenth century, including urbanisation and industrialisation, this arrangement increasingly became inadequate (Björktomta & Arnsvik, 2016). As a result, a new local government system was established in the mid-nineteenth century. Although it was built on the old parish structure, the municipalities were now given specific legal responsibilities for social welfare (Öberg, 1998).

The development of the Swedish welfare state is closely linked to the Social Democratic labour movement and the period of Social Democratic governance during the twentieth century (Korpi, 1978; S. E. Olsson, 1990). After the Second World War, the Social Democrats implemented a series of comprehensive social and economic reforms that played a key role in shaping the modern Swedish welfare state (Burström, 2015; Valocchi, 1992). Following the establishment of its post-war universal welfare system and policies, Sweden came to be widely recognised as one of the most equal societies in the world in terms of income distribution, welfare provision, and general living standards (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Kravchenko & Håkansson, 2024). Through measures such as comprehensive social insurance, universal health care, and heavily subsidised childcare, the country maintained a generous welfare state that assumed primary responsibility for public well-being during the 1960s and 1970s (Herz, 2016). However, since the 1980s, the Swedish welfare system, like those of other Western countries, has been reshaped through neoliberal reforms (Shanks & Lundström, 2023; Skyman et al., 2023; Svallfors & Tyllström, 2019), in line with the rise of neoliberalism in the United States and the United Kingdom. These reforms have transformed welfare governance towards a dominant orientation that celebrates the individual while marginalising societal and collective responsibility (Sewpaul, 2006).

Neoliberalism is often considered to have emerged during the mid-1970s to early 1980s, when many governments responded to stagflation by adopting more market-oriented reforms (Balaji, 2025). It can be understood as a socio-economic ideology grounded in the belief that global market forces should dominate while government intervention and state regulation are kept to a minimum (Kamali & Jönsson, 2018). In Sweden, neoliberal reforms have taken place across nearly all areas of the public sector, including the legal system, central administration, healthcare, and municipal social services (Espvall, 2018). This development is characterised by a gradual shift from a universal and solidaristic model towards one increasingly marked by competition, cost-effectiveness, expanding bureaucracy, managerial control, and growing privatisation (Jönsson, 2019; Skyman et al., 2023; Stenius & Storbjörk, 2023). Government spending has been reduced, welfare services have progressively been privatised, and private-sector management models emphasising cost-effectiveness, competition, and individual choice have

been introduced (Shanks & Lundström, 2023; Skyrman et al., 2023). The practical implementation of neoliberal principles in Swedish social work, particularly in municipal social services, primarily occurred through the introduction of New Public Management and Evidence-Based Practice (Jönsson, 2019). New Public Management is a model of governance that brings ideas and methods from the private sector into public organisations. In social work, this approach has led to a stronger focus on market principles, where decision-making and control move upwards in organisations and are influenced by economic efficiency (Herz & Lalander, 2018). One of the central assumptions of New Public Management is that the public sector is too costly and inefficient, arguing that it could function more effectively if it operated more like a business – applying competition, performance measurement, and management methods (Kamali & Jönsson, 2018; Shanks & Bjerland, 2023; Skyrman et al., 2023; Svallfors & Tyllström, 2019). Evidence-Based Practice has developed in tandem with New Public Management, reflecting a growing tendency to make social work more technical and measurable, valuing ‘evidence’ and quantifiable results as indicators of effectiveness within the neoliberal welfare state (Herz & Lalander, 2018). Consequently, the Swedish welfare state, which has long been portrayed as universal and egalitarian, has increasingly become instrumentalised and marketised (Kravchenko & Håkansson, 2024).

Public welfare institutions, including municipal social services, have increasingly been expected to operate according to market principles guided by the ideals of New Public Management. As a result, municipal social services have moved towards greater specialisation since the 1980s (Bergmark & Lundström, 2007; Perlinski et al., 2012). Social work practices carried out within and by the municipal social services have thus become increasingly instrumentalised, individualised, specialised, and, in many cases, fragmented (Almqvist, 2006; Grell et al., 2017; Gümüşcü et al., 2015; Sernhede, 2018), largely due to political demands for increased efficiency (Blom, 2004). For example, neoliberal reforms have led to the large-scale outsourcing of services, such as residential care and in-home support, to private providers (often for-profit). This means that an increasing share of social work is now conducted outside the public sector, even though municipalities remain formally responsible for ensuring both access and quality (Shanks & Bjerland, 2023). These structural transformations have altered not only how social work is organised but also how social problems are defined and addressed, reshaping social workers’ professional roles and identities (Jönsson, 2019; Tham, 2018).

The pursuit of efficiency, measurability, and accountability, grounded in the ideals of New Public Management, has become a dominant organising principle shaping much of the everyday work within municipal social services. Within this context, managing complexity in social work can be seen as a contradictory process. Organisational systems seek to control and rationalise complexity by disassembling, categorising, and quantifying social issues in line with managerial demands, while the creative and relational dimensions of professional practice, grounded in professional assessment,

empathy, and contextual understanding (see Khoo et al., 2020), cannot be simplified and reduced in this way. These tensions exemplify the paradox of neoliberal governance in social work: while neoliberal governance aims to enhance efficiency and predictability, it simultaneously undermines the professional autonomy and reflexivity needed to engage with the complex and dynamic realities of social life. This mismatch has created dissatisfaction among social workers and contributed to recruitment difficulties, which, in turn, has created business opportunities for private agencies that offer higher salaries and supply social workers to municipalities on temporary contracts (Sallnäs & Wiklund, 2023).

In Sweden, social work occupies a central position in the welfare state. The Swedish welfare state is characterised by tax-funded services organised through a ‘cradle-to-grave’ welfare system that includes, among other things, economic security, childcare, healthcare, and a wide range of municipal social services (Brauer, 2025; Burström, 2015). The welfare state is organised through a multi-level political and administrative structure comprising the state, regions, and municipalities. At the national level, the state oversees agencies such as the Swedish Public Employment Service (*Arbetsförmedlingen*) and the Social Insurance Agency (*Försäkringskassan*). At the regional level, the regions are responsible for, for example, healthcare, public transport, and regional development. At the municipal level, local authorities are responsible for, among other things, primary and secondary schools and various other social services that constitute an important arena for social work practice.

Within this structure, most social workers in Sweden are employed in the public sector, primarily within municipal social services (Shanks & Lundström, 2023; Thorén & Salonen, 2013). Municipal social services serve as a key arena for implementing social policy and realising the objectives of the Swedish welfare state in practice (see Figure 1).

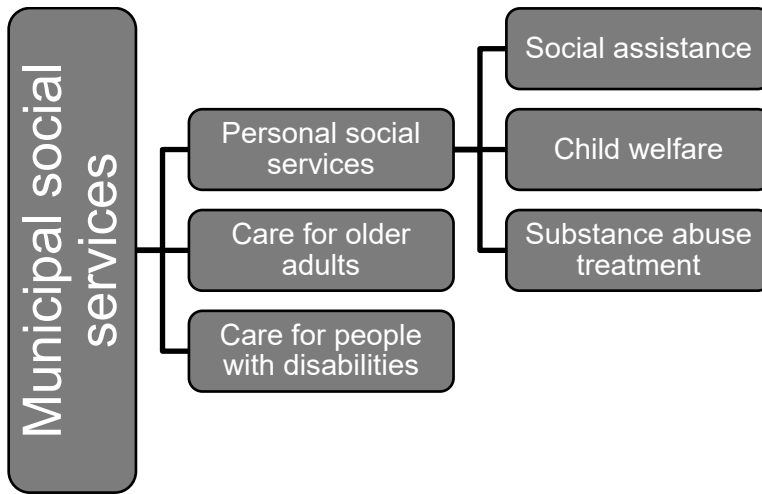


Figure 1. The main domains of work in the social services in Sweden (Khoo et al., 2020; Shanks & Bjerland, 2023).

Although the 290 municipalities in Sweden share this overarching mandate, they possess significant autonomy in how they organise and deliver welfare services (Khoo et al., 2020). This autonomy has resulted in variations in organisational structures and social services across municipalities (Hillörm et al., 2025; Shanks & Bjerland, 2023). These variations reflect not only local adaptations, priorities, and needs, but also local political orientations as well as economic resources and pressures. Despite this autonomy, the core provisions of social services in each municipality (as shown in Figure 1) are regulated by the Social Services Act.

The current Social Services Act, *socialtjänstlag* (2025:400) – hereafter referred to as the Act – entered into force on 1 July 2025, replacing the 2001:453 Act. The 2001:453 Act, which entered into force on 1 January 2002, was primarily based on the 1980:620 Act, which entered into force on 1 January 1982. Through the 1980:620 Act, earlier laws on social care were merged into a single piece of legislation covering the entire social sector, including the Social Assistance Act (1956:2, *lagen om socialhjälp*), the Child Welfare Act (1960:97, *barnvårdslagen*), the Sobriety Care Act (1954:579, *lagen om nykterhetsvård*), and the Childcare Act (1976:381, *lagen om barnomsorg*).

The 2025:400 Act aims to establish a long-term, sustainable, knowledge-based social service system that is more preventive in character, striving to enhance rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for both individuals and social services (Regeringskansliet, 2025). The 2025 Act is largely a linguistic and editorial revision of the 1980/2001 Acts, retaining almost all of their provisions, including those concerning municipal social services' mandate to participate in community planning. However, the current Act also introduces several substantive changes, such as requiring social services to adopt a preventive approach in all areas of their work and obliging them to help

prevent and counteract crime, with responsibility for children and young people in crime prevention efforts (Socialstyrelsen, 2025). This reorientation can create new opportunities for social services to integrate broader environmental perspectives into preventive work with children and young people, emphasising community-based collaboration and the shared responsibility for creating supportive, sustainable, and resilient local environments.

The Act furthermore emphasises the importance of accessibility, planning, quality, and knowledge, while introducing provisions that allow municipal social services to offer support and interventions without an individual needs assessment (Regeringskansliet, 2025; Socialstyrelsen, 2025). *Akademikerförbundet SSR*, Sweden's union and professional association for social workers and other social science professionals, notes that the Act also calls for improved follow-up and evaluation of the interventions provided by the municipal social services (*Akademikerförbundet SSR*, 2025). These expectations are, in principle, positive, as they aim to enhance the quality, transparency, and accountability of municipal social services. Yet, they may also strain already limited municipal resources and professional capacities, especially in smaller municipalities, where social workers often face tensions between administrative obligations and the relational, value-based aspects of their work.

### *The social work profession and practice in Sweden*

The concept *socialt arbete* (social work) was primarily introduced by *Centralförbundet för Socialt Arbete* (the National Association of Social Work), which was established in 1903 on the initiative of two women, Gertrud af Klintberg and Gerda Meyerson (Hessle, 2025; Lindholm, 1993). The association played a crucial role in shaping both the professional and the educational foundations of Swedish social work. Its early training in practical social work, initiated in 1910, laid the groundwork for what would later become formal social work education. This education became institutionalised in 1921, with the establishment of *socialpolitisk och kommunal utbildning och forskning* (social policy and municipal education and research) in Stockholm, coinciding with the achievement of women's suffrage (Cedersund et al., 2021; CSA, 2025; Lindholm, 1993) and marking both an academic and a societal milestone in Sweden's social development. A historical overview of social work education in Sweden can be divided into three phases: 1921–1963, with social work education programmes at social institutes (*socialinstitutens socionomutbildningar*); 1964–1977, with education programmes at schools of social work (*socialhögskolornas socionomutbildningar*); and 1977 to the present, with university-level social work education programmes (*högskolornas socionomutbildningar*) (Regeringen, 2025).

Following the Second World War, the need for professionally educated social workers increased rapidly in Sweden, partly due to rising population mobility within the country and across its borders, driven by economic changes (Öberg, 1998). Consequently, more schools of social work were

established: in Gothenburg in 1944, Lund in 1947, Umeå in 1962, and Östersund and Örebro in 1971 (Soydan, 2001). In their early years, the programmes offered by these schools could be described as general training for local government officials (Öberg, 1998). However, from 1964 onwards, social work education in Sweden underwent substantial reform. The programmes were expanded, and the previously independent training institutions were reorganised into state-run colleges (Bengtsson, 2020; Öberg, 1998). By 1977, these institutions were fully incorporated into the national university system, in which social work was formally established as an independent academic discipline (Righard & Montesino, 2012; Sunesson, 2003). In 1979, Harald Swedner was appointed to the first professorship in the subject, based in Gothenburg (Sunesson, 2003).

Since the 1990s, social work education in Sweden has expanded considerably, with new programmes introduced at several universities and an increasing number of available study places. In 2007, the social work education at the bachelor's level (*socionomutbildningen*) and the social care programme (*sociala omsorgsprogrammet*) were merged. In the same year, the Bachelor of Science in Social Work (*socionomutbildningen/socionomexamen*) was standardised nationwide (Salonen & Panican, 2021). Upon completing their education, degree holders are referred to as *socionom* (*socionomer* in the plural), often translated as '(professional) social worker', in international contexts (see Thorén & Salonen, 2013). However, *socionom* is a title that primarily refers to an educational qualification rather than a specific work qualification or job/professional title (Salonen & Panican, 2021; Svensson, 2025).

The emergence of *socionomutbildningen* and the qualification as *socionom* in Sweden is often described as closely linked to the development of social policy (see Swärd, 2017), with the foundation being laid during the development of the Swedish welfare state between the 1950s and the 1980s, with the expansion of welfare institutions and increased demand for qualified professionals within the public sector (Bengtsson, 2020; Salonen & Panican, 2021). Today, nineteen higher education institutions across the country provide this programme, reflecting both its national importance and the continued demand for qualified professionals within social work. Despite this institutional significance, the title 'social worker' is not legally protected in Sweden, meaning that it is not limited to people with a *socionom* degree. *Socionomer* also do not have exclusive rights to most work tasks commonly associated with social work (Bengtsson, 2020). As a result, municipalities, other welfare institutions, and civil society organisations can employ staff with varied educational backgrounds, such as in psychology, sociology, or education, in roles that are often understood as social work, particularly within welfare services. Against this backdrop, in this thesis, the term social worker refers to study participants who hold a *socionom* degree or other relevant qualifications and are employed within municipal social services under various job titles. This broad use of the term is necessary because *socionom* roles are organised and labelled in many ways across welfare settings.

The professional roles and job titles for *socionomer* appear to encompass a broad, diverse field, making it difficult to define them precisely (see Svensson, 2025). Nevertheless, *socialsekreterare* (social worker within the municipal social services) and *kurator* (counsellor) have long been the most prominent job titles among *socionomer* (Bengtsson, 2020). Within the Swedish municipal social services, staff hold various job titles, with *socialsekreterare* being the most common. These professionals typically hold roles that involve exercising public authority. Most *socialsekreterare* hold a *socionom* degree, although some may come from other higher education backgrounds. The title *socialsekreterare* does not necessarily specify the types of cases managed or the methods employed. Instead, it signifies that they belong to the core staff of municipal social services (Svensson, 2025).

In Sweden, social welfare has long been regarded as a public responsibility, primarily vested in the municipalities through their social services. The municipalities have the primary responsibility for organising and providing social welfare services and are therefore the principal employers of social workers (Jönsson, 2019; Perlinski et al., 2012; Shanks & Lundström, 2023). Even though social work practices in Sweden are largely carried out through the provision of social welfare services by professional social workers and other professionals within the municipal social services, it is important to note that social work practices are not limited to *socionomer* but also undertaken by professionals from other disciplines as well as by volunteers and non-profit organisations outside the public sector (see Herz, 2016). The boundaries of social work are often shifting and difficult to define, be it through one's employment, the tasks performed, or the educational qualifications required (see Svensson, 2025). This fluidity makes it difficult to determine exactly who belongs to the professional group of social workers, what roles they occupy, and what expertise they are expected to possess.

#### *Nature, identity, and environmental awareness in Sweden*

Sweden is a relatively wealthy country and has often been described as largely 'spared' from large-scale environmental disasters, as such disasters have historically been uncommon (Cuadra, 2015). People in Sweden are also often described as having a close relationship with nature, and one important expression of this relationship is *allemansrätten*. The literal meaning of *allemansrätten* is 'every person's right'. The term itself was likely established in the mid-twentieth century (Warell et al., 2026) and refers to the principle that grants the public the right to move freely in nature and to enjoy it responsibly, provided that others are not disturbed and nature is not damaged (Naturvårdsverket, 2025). It is commonly understood as a long-standing tradition carried across generations and closely connected to how many people in Sweden understand themselves and their relationship with nature (Beery, 2011). Over time, *allemansrätten* has also become an important national symbol (Warell et al., 2026), shaping ideas of 'Swedishness' and supporting a particular cultural and patriotic view of nature (Beery, 2013). This close link between nature and identity is also

reflected in Swedish environmental discourse more broadly. Environmental issues have often been closely connected to Swedish national identity (Cuadra & Ouis, 2020), and ‘eco-friendliness’ has been described as closely tied to Swedishness (Bradley, 2009).

Environmental awareness has developed over a long period in Sweden and can be traced through a series of early institutional, political, and societal initiatives. One of the earliest milestones occurred in 1909, when Sweden became the first country in Europe to establish national parks (Sveriges Nationalparker, 2022). Around the same time, the Swedish Nature Conservation Association (*Naturskyddsföreningen*) was formed, and the first nature conservation law was adopted, marking an early formal commitment to nature protection (Naturskyddsföreningen, 2026). During the mid-1960s, environmental concerns were still not widely recognised as a global crisis by many scientists and politicians. However, in 1967, a group of Swedish scientists publicly warned about emerging environmental threats (Heidenblad, 2021a). This was articulated through Hans Palmstierna’s *Plundring, svält, förgiftning* [Plundering, famine, poisoning] and Karl-Erik Fichtelius’ *Människans villkor: En bok av vetenskapsmän för politiker* [The predicament of man: A book by scientists for politicians], both of which addressed the consequences of environmental degradation and human activity (Heidenblad, 2021b). In the same year, the Swedish government established the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (*Naturvårdsverket*) and a National Licensing Board for Environmental Protection (*Koncessionsnämnden för miljöskydd*), and Sweden became the first country in the world to adopt an Environmental Protection Act (Lönnroth, 2010; UN Environment Programme, 2022). These developments signalled a shift towards stronger state involvement in environmental governance.

Sweden’s national engagement with environmental issues also extended to the international arena. Building on earlier scientific and political debates, Sweden proposed a major global environmental conference, which resulted in the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972 (Heidenblad, 2021b). The outcomes of this conference later informed the work of the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, whose report *Our Common Future*, commonly known as the Brundtland Report, was published in 1987 and played a central role in shaping the concept of sustainable development (Du Pisani, 2006). Alongside these policy and institutional developments, environmental awareness was also expressed through social and cultural movements. In 1971, the concept of *Gröna vågen*, or the Green Wave, emerged in Sweden (Heidenblad, 2021a, 2021b). This movement involved young people, often with young children, moving from urban areas to rural settings closer to nature, such as small farms. *Gröna vågen* symbolised a critique of modern ways of living and emphasised self-sufficiency, small-scale food production, and everyday life closer to nature (Nationalencyklopedin, 2026b).

In the following decade, environmental thinking increasingly became embedded in local governance. The concept of an eco-municipality (*ekokommun*) was first introduced in the Nordic countries in 1980 through

the Finnish municipality of Suomussalmi, and three years later, in 1983, it was introduced in Sweden in the municipality of Övertorneå (Nationalencyklopedin, 2026a). The eco-municipality concept was based on the idea that local environmental quality, local economic and business structures, and local ways of living should form the foundation for municipal development strategies. The work initiated in Övertorneå later inspired other Swedish municipalities, leading to the formation of the National Association of Swedish Eco-Municipalities (*Sveriges Ekokommuner*), which is described as the world's oldest municipal network for sustainable development (Sveriges Ekokommuner, n.d.).

## **2.2. Sustainable development and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**

Development as a concept has been understood and interpreted in different ways, and it has been shaped by a wide range of scholarly perspectives. In the 1950s and 1960s, development was largely understood as economic growth, defined as the use of economic and technical measures to mobilise resources to improve people's quality of life (Rabie, 2016). After the Second World War, international development agencies created interventions intended to guide 'developing countries' along a European path to development through capitalism (Willis, 2011).

In contemporary contexts, development is often discussed in relation to *sustainable development*, reflecting a shift away from the sole focus on economic growth towards improving and sustaining healthy economic, ecological, and social systems that support human development. Sustainable development has become a widely used concept in development discourse, interpreted in different ways and adopted as a dominant paradigm across international aid, policy planning, academic work, development, and environmental activism (Jacob, 2025; Mensah, 2019). The Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, offers what is likely the most frequently cited definition of sustainable development, describing it as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987, p. 41). It is important to remember that by 1987, neoliberalism was already gaining influence (see section 2.1 in this thesis); it is therefore not surprising that the dominant understanding of development at the time was framed within a neoliberal and capitalist logic in which economic growth was treated as the primary source of progress and hope (Powers, Rambaree, et al., 2019). This orientation is reflected in the triple bottom line '*profit, people, and planet*', which suggests that sustainable development aims to balance economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Later attempts to replace the term 'profit' with 'prosperity' were never widely adopted (Peeters, 2012b).

The historical development of 'sustainable development', following Shi et al. (2019), can be divided into three periods: *the embryonic period* (before 1972), *the moulding period* (1972–1987), and *the developing period* (after 1987). The shift from the embryonic to the moulding period is closely

connected to the rise of modern environmental awareness and international environmental governance around the late 1960s and early 1970s. In April 1970, the first Earth Day took place in the United States, mobilising millions of participants. It became a significant turning point in the development of the environmental movement both nationally and internationally (Dietz, 2020). The event was influenced by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which drew widespread attention to ecological degradation (Earth Day, n.d.). During the same period, in 1968, the *Club of Rome* was founded to examine long-term global challenges, particularly the risks to social and ecological stability posed by rapid industrialisation, environmental decline, and population growth (The Club of Rome, 2025). In 1970, it initiated its first major project, 'The Project on the Predicament of Mankind', which examined the interactions between population growth, resource consumption, pollution, and industrial production and their impact on planetary systems (A. Smith & Ely, 2025). The results were published in 1972 as *The Limits to Growth*. Around the same time, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm (in 1972), which helped shift the idea of development from focusing on economic growth alone to economic growth with minimal environmental harm (Mensah, 2019; Shi et al., 2019). The Stockholm Conference in 1972, together with the *Our Common Future* report in 1987, marked the moulding period of sustainable development (Shi et al., 2019).

During the *developing period*, several important milestones can be identified, including the Rio Conference in 1992, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000, and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals introduced in 2015 (Shi et al., 2019). In contemporary contexts, the Sustainable Development Goals are often used interchangeably with the concept of sustainable development. However, sustainable development is a broad and overarching concept, whereas the Sustainable Development Goals constitute a specific, time-limited framework designed to translate this concept into concrete goals and to monitor progress towards their achievement. The Sustainable Development Goals comprise 17 goals and 169 targets and can be understood as 'a global agreement and reference point that enhances debate over sustainability in research, policy, and practice' (Eisenmenger et al., 2020, p. 1102), with an intended completion date of 2030. This framework also lends itself to a systems-thinking approach (see Androff & Damanik, 2024), which is known in social work through systems theory and ecological perspectives that emphasise relationships, interdependence, and the multi-level conditions that shape people's lives. In this sense, the Sustainable Development Goals can be linked to systems thinking, where each goal can serve as a starting point for broader change by addressing interconnected conditions that shape oppression, inequality, and discrimination (Androff & Damanik, 2024).

Earlier studies suggest that among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, goal 3 (good health and well-being) is one of the most extensively examined goals and often a particularly prominent focus in the academic literature on the Sustainable Development Goals (Meschede, 2020; Sorooshian, 2024;

Yeh et al., 2019, 2022). This strong focus can be explained by the central role of health and well-being in sustainable development, as health and well-being are widely regarded as fundamental to advancing the economic, social, and environmental pillars of sustainable development (P. S. Hill et al., 2014). In this sense, good health and well-being can be conceptualised both as a necessary condition and as an outcome for successful sustainable development processes (Menne et al., 2020).

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals have an implementation period from 2016 to 2030 to achieve their goals and targets. However, despite some progress, the overall pace of change remains too slow to meet the commitments set for 2030 (Moyer & Hedden, 2020; United Nations, 2025a). Experts have already begun discussing and debating possible directions for a post-2030 agenda. Drawing on what has been learned from implementing both the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals – including areas of progress as well as persistent gaps – a post-2030 agenda could be designed in ways that are more targeted, workable, and effective than these previous frameworks (Cernev & Fenner, 2024).

### ***Sustainable development, the Sustainable Development Goals, and (eco)social work: Global initiatives in local context***

Despite growing efforts in research and policy to address sustainability, human impact on non-human nature continues to intensify the current socio-ecological crisis (Artmann, 2023). A socio-ecological crisis is a situation in which social and ecological problems are deeply interconnected and reinforce one another, affecting both human well-being and ecosystems simultaneously (Ainia et al., 2024; see also Artmann, 2023; Aschero et al., 2026; Petrova, 2024). This understanding is relevant for social work because the profession is concerned with well-being in context and with the environments that shape everyday life. However, although social work is a context-based profession, it has primarily focused on the social environment and how it enables people to live well. As a result, ecological concerns are often not treated as a core part of the profession (Peeters, 2012b), even though the consequences of ecological problems have long challenged social work's efforts to promote human well-being.

The current socio-ecological crisis indicates that the global social system is under significant pressure, affecting many areas of life and the wider ecosystem. Socio-ecological crises require approaches that address social and ecological dimensions together and treat them as interrelated. Sustainable development, particularly through the Sustainable Development Goals, is commonly presented as an integrative response to these interrelated pressures. Social work has increasingly engaged with sustainable development and with the relationship between social and non-social environments. This engagement is present in key documentary statements that function as collective professional and political texts, including *Social Work and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals* (IFSW, 2020b), *The Role of Social Workers in Advancing a New Eco-Social World*

(IFSW, 2022b), *2020 to 2030 Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development* (IFSW, 2020a), and *The People's Global Summit Co-Building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind* (EcoSocialWorld, 2022), which produced *The People's Charter for an Eco-Social World* (IFSW, 2022a) (see Ioakimidis & Maglajlic, 2022; Rice et al., 2022).

These texts not only signal growing policy attention; they also point to how the relationship between social work and (social) sustainability can be understood as both practical and normative. Normatively, social work values align with the ethical foundations of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals through their commitment to human rights, well-being, social justice, participation, and equality (Cordoba & Bando, 2022; Naranjo, 2023). The Sustainable Development Goals can, ideally, reframe social work practices by linking the fulfilment of human needs to ecological conditions and environmental limits (see Koch & Mont, 2016, on sustainable welfare). While this reframing can support more integrated approaches to human well-being, it may also generate tensions in practice and policy. It may raise questions about how social work responds when urgent social needs are met through actions that may harm the environment, or when environmental policies, even when justified through sustainability goals, are implemented in ways that reproduce or intensify social inequalities.

Social sustainability is conceptually broad and multidimensional, encompassing inclusion, equity, participation, and community cohesion, and it is therefore difficult to quantify and measure (Pavani & Ganugi, 2024; Stamm, 2021). It remains the dimension most directly associated with social work, not least because social workers often situate their professional contribution within this domain (see Boetto et al., 2022; Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; Närhi & Matthies, 2016; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). This reflects the profession's long-standing orientation towards social issues and the social environment. However, if social work is to accommodate a broader environmental perspective and ecological concerns, it arguably requires further theoretical frameworks to encompass these aspects (Peeters, 2012b). In Europe, one influential example is the *ecosocial work* conceptualisation associated with Aila-Leena Matthies and Kati Närhi (see Matthies, 1987; Närhi, 2004; Närhi & Matthies, 2001), in which social work is re-envisioned in response to the current ecological crisis (Peeters, 2012b). The definition of sustainable development presented in *Our Common Future* has also influenced how Matthies and Närhi have developed and conceptualised *ecosocial work* (see Närhi, 2004; Närhi & Matthies, 2016).

Social work is anchored in shared global professional principles (see IFSW, 2014a), yet its concrete meaning is produced in national and local settings shaped by how the welfare state is organised, how societal challenges are defined, and by local resource conditions. This gap (and the relation) between global principles and local practice can be read through the notion of *glocal social work*, which treats global challenges as locally mediated and advocates for context-sensitive responses while remaining oriented to wider structural concerns (Nothdurfter & Pedroni, 2025). *Glocal social work* thus recognises the complex links between global and local phenomena and

advocates for context-sensitive responses, thinking globally and acting locally (Harrikari & Rauhala, 2019; Nothdurfter & Pedroni, 2025). This dynamic can be illustrated by the relationship between the Sustainable Development Goals and (eco)social work. While the Sustainable Development Goals set common global directions, they are interpreted, negotiated, and put into practice within national contexts, particularly at the municipal and local levels (Breuer et al., 2023) where social workers engage with the everyday impacts of social and ecological change. In this context, a glocal perspective is useful for understanding how ecosocial commitments can be enacted within specific welfare systems and municipalities without treating sustainability and global challenges as a generic agenda detached from local constraints and possibilities. It also highlights the need for local action models that strengthen community resilience and support an ecosocial transition towards sustainable development (Närhi, 2025; Närhi & Matthies, 2016). This can be understood as *ecosocial glocalisation* (see Närhi et al., 2025): while it is essential to identify and address local challenges, situating ecosocial practice within a global context remains necessary because responding to global challenges locally depends on international collaboration (Närhi et al., 2025; Nöjd et al., 2025).

### **2.3. Ecosocial perspectives in social work**

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2025b), ‘environment’ refers to both the physical surroundings in which life takes place and the wider social, political, and cultural conditions that shape behaviour and attitudes. In this thesis, the environmental perspective encompasses the social, built, and natural environments, along with their interconnections and combined influence on health, well-being, and working-life capacities.

To clarify the concept, this thesis distinguishes between three closely related environments. The *social* environment refers to the cultural and societal contexts of everyday life, including relationships, networks, institutions, and shared meanings that shape social interaction (Høyer-Kruse et al., 2024). The *built* environment refers to human-made settings, such as housing, schools, workplaces, transport systems, and public spaces. The *natural* environment refers to the physical world, including living elements such as plants, animals, and microorganisms, and non-living elements such as air, water, soil, climate, and landforms.

While these three describe different forms of environment, ecology concerns the relationships and interdependencies between organisms and their surroundings (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025a). In this thesis, taking an ecological perspective means understanding human life as embedded in interconnected systems, including relationships with the natural environment and with the social, cultural, and built contexts that shape these relationships. Building on this, the thesis uses an ecosocial perspective to connect social and ecological perspectives by attending to social conditions, environmental conditions, and ecological interdependence. This perspective is also relevant historically, as growing public awareness of environmental issues and

ecological crises in the 1960s and 1970s (Dominelli, 2024) was reflected in both social work (Matthies et al., 2000; Närhi, 2025) and community work (Lienard, 2022; Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021; Turunen, 2004). In both fields, the ecosocial perspective contributed to broader discussions of the links between social problems, environmental conditions, and human well-being. This is further discussed below.

### ***Early ecological roots in social work***

Across much of its history, social work has centred on human experiences of suffering, striving, and injustice, strongly emphasising its human-social character (Mathias et al., 2023; Payne, 2024; Zapf, 2010). In doing so, the profession has an anthropocentric orientation, tending to assume that social problems largely are products of human relationships (see Payne, 2024). This anthropocentric orientation has contributed to a tendency to pay limited attention to the natural environment and the ecological contexts that condition social relations (see Bexell et al., 2019; Krings et al., 2020; Molyneux, 2010). This narrow focus has shaped social work's theoretical foundations and practical approaches, often limiting its capacity to recognise the interdependence between human well-being and the wider ecological systems that sustain it. Consequently, social work practice has historically prioritised casework with individuals and families, focusing on the social environment while marginalising community-based approaches and overlooking the significance of the natural environment in shaping human life and welfare (Zapf, 2010).

However, community-based approaches and broader environmental perspectives have long been present in social work, even if they have not always held institutional or professional dominance (Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; Cuadra & Ouis, 2020; Närhi & Matthies, 2016). In this sense, ecological thinking is a recurring, though uneven, element of social work, rather than a recent or entirely new perspective. It has been present across the profession's history and has influenced both theory and practice, although its influence has varied over time (McKinnon & Alston, 2016). Ecological roots in social work can be traced back to its inception as a profession, through the work of Mary Richmond and Jane Addams in the United States (Närhi & Matthies, 2016; Stamm, 2021). The discussion of ecological roots in social work here focuses primarily on an Anglo-American perspective since these women's work is closely linked to social work's development as a profession, strongly influencing how social work has been conceptualised internationally. Mary Richmond, often regarded as one of the pioneers of the modern social work profession, discussed the person-in-environment perspective in her book *Social Diagnosis*. She highlighted the interdependence between people and their environment through the systematic collection of detailed data regarding an individual's surroundings: 'What is his physical environment? What is his mental and spiritual environment?' (Richmond, 1917, p. 35). The person-in-environment perspective remains one of the cornerstones of social work (Närhi & Matthies, 2016), although social work scholars themselves argue that it is

mainly applied to intrapersonal and social relations, with too little attention to policy practice and to the built, physical, and natural environments (see Närhi, 2025). In her later book *What Is Social Case Work?* Richmond (1922) further discussed the person-in-environment perspective through the casework method, which remains central to social work practice, particularly in Western contexts. Richmond described casework as follows: ‘Social casework consists of those processes which develop personality through adjustments consciously effected, individual by individual, between men and their social environment’ (1922, pp. 98–99). Richmond recognised that a person’s ability to function socially is deeply influenced by their surrounding environment (Pardeck, 1988).

However, Richmond largely confined the term ‘environment’ to the social environment, where social networks, interactions, and relationships between humans occurred (Närhi & Matthies, 2016; Peeters, 2012b; Zapf, 2010). At the same time, although ‘environment’ was framed as the social environment, Richmond’s reasoning built upon the premise that the basis of ‘environment’ lies in the physical surroundings and living conditions that shape people’s lives, such as housing, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and sanitation (Richmond, 1917, 1922). She acknowledged that the physical environment was relevant to social work practice (Richmond, 1922) – but she understood its significance primarily in social terms, implying that it became part of the social environment because it involved social elements and affected human relationships (McKinnon, 2012; Zapf, 2010). This conceptualisation has had a lasting influence, as Richmond’s work has contributed to the understanding of the environment in social work as primarily social, a view that continues to date.

Jane Addams, another early pioneer of the social work profession, also emphasised the importance of the environment in shaping human well-being (Närhi & Matthies, 2001, 2016). She adopted a broad understanding of the environment, often described as the urban environment or urban ecology, which focused on the interconnected social, physical, and built conditions of everyday life in cities (see Matthies et al., 2001; Närhi & Matthies, 2016; Stamm, 2021; Stamm et al., 2023). She also recognised the value of the natural environment, particularly in industrial urban settings, and argued for reducing pollution and expanding public green spaces so that workers and their families could find relief from harsh working and living conditions (Mathias et al., 2023; Matthies & Närhi, 2018; McKinnon, 2012; Närhi & Matthies, 2001, 2016). Addams’s work suggests that attention to the physical and natural environment has been part of social work since its early development. Through her settlement movement work, such as in *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (1895) and *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910), Addams consistently linked poverty to environmental conditions such as overcrowding, poor sanitation, unsafe housing, and limited access to clean water and green spaces, and she actively advocated for environmental improvements as a way to protect public health and well-being (Addams, 1910; Addams & Residents of Hull-House, 1895; Hutchison, 2019).

The works of Mary Richmond and Jane Addams reflect two diverging yet foundational traditions in the early development of social work: the *diagnostic* and the *reformist* (Hounmenou et al., 2025; Lundblad, 1995; Mahowald, 1997; Righard & Montesino, 2012). Richmond sought to professionalise social work through systematic casework and aimed to strengthen the field's legitimacy through method and objectivity. Addams, by contrast, advanced a broader reformist vision grounded in community engagement and social change. Through her settlement work at Hull House in Chicago, Addams approached the social and industrial problems of modern urban life as collective social and political issues (Addams, 1910), emphasising participation, democracy, and community building (J. B. Thompson et al., 2019).

### ***The re-engagement and development of ecological approaches in social work***

In this section, the discussion of the re-engagement with and development of ecological approaches in social work focuses mainly on Anglo-American and Finnish contexts, since it is particularly in these settings that key strands of ecosocial thinking have been re-developed and brought into more mainstream social work. In the European context, 'ecosocial' as a concept can already be found in German and Finnish social work literature from the 1980s and 1990s (Matthies et al., 2001). Ecosocial work spread from Germany to Finland in the late 1980s through the work of Aila-Leena Matthies (Peeters, 2012b). This development became visible through concrete field projects and later through a European project involving Jyväskylä in Finland, Magdeburg in Germany, and Leicester in the United Kingdom, focusing on social exclusion and sustainable living environments (see Matthies et al., 2000; Matthies et al., 2001; Närhi, 2004; Turunen et al., 2001). In other words, ecosocial work developed alongside a growing awareness that social problems are closely connected to environmental conditions and risks.

One of the main challenges threatening both human and planetary boundaries and well-being today is climate change. It refers to shifts and alterations in global temperatures and weather patterns. Although climatic changes can occur naturally due to factors such as variations in solar activity or major volcanic eruptions, the observed warming since the late nineteenth century has been driven primarily by human activities, with the contribution of natural processes being very small in comparison (The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 1992, 2022). These activities are particularly associated with the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas. This process releases greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide, which trap heat in the Earth's atmosphere and contribute to global warming (EPA, 2025). The relationship between atmospheric gases and rising temperatures was first identified by Eunice Foote in 1856, followed by John Tyndall in 1859 (Dominelli, 2024) and Svante Arrhenius of Sweden in 1896 (Stockholm University, n.d.). Foote's pioneering contribution was overlooked because she was a woman working in a male-dominated scientific community, while Tyndall received formal recognition for the discovery, and

Arrhenius was later awarded a Nobel Prize for his related work (Dominelli, 2024).

Although the climate impact of burning fossil fuels was identified in the late nineteenth century, it was not until the 1960s that the general public became aware of the dangers human activities pose to the environment (Dominelli, 2024). This growing awareness was mainly influenced by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which revealed how everyday human activities, including the use of common household products and pesticides, released toxic chemical residues into water and soil, harming the natural environment and ultimately threatening human health and well-being (Coates & Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2018a, 2024; Mathias et al., 2023; McKinnon, 2012; Närhi, 2004). During the same period, similar discussions that reflected ecological consciousness began to (re-)emerge in social work, for example through one significant contribution addressing the environment and environmental change, 'The concept of the social environment in social work practice' by Herman Stein, which was first published in 1960 and later reprinted in 1963 (Grinnell, 1973). Stein challenged earlier views in the social sciences that regarded the environment as external and static, influencing individuals from the outside; instead, he proposed that it be understood as dynamic, relational, and interactive, where individuals and their surroundings continuously influence one another (Stein, 1963).

During the 1970s, social work theorists began to draw on concepts from ecology to refine the idea of the person-in-environment relationship, making it more precise and theoretically grounded (Besthorn, 2015; Besthorn & McMillen, 2002). As these ideas developed, the 1970s and 1980s also witnessed a growing awareness of ecological crises and the rise of environmental movements in Western countries, also in the field of social work itself (Närhi, 2025). The environmental movement has not only exposed how human actions and exploitation drive environmental change and structural inequality (Gray & Coates, 2015); it has also advanced alternative values (such as conservation, degrowth, diversity, sustainability, and restoration) that envision a thriving planet with flourishing inhabitants, offering social work a framework for equality and inclusion to guide transformative education and practice (Coates, 2005; Dominelli, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2015).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, social work increasingly acknowledged the importance of the natural and physical environment. This shift was influenced by environmental justice movements and growing concerns about pollution, waste, and unsustainable practices that produced social and ecological inequalities (Gray et al., 2013b; McKinnon & Bay, 2013). Social work scholars argued that the profession should respond to escalating ecological crises by drawing on its concepts, values, and responsibilities (Besthorn, 2002; Dominelli, 2012; Jones, 2010; Miller & Hayward, 2014). This growing recognition was also driven by increasing awareness of human-caused environmental disasters, such as 'Cancer Alley' in the United States during the 1980s and the Bhopal tragedy in India in 1984 (Alston et al., 2019). Since the 1980s, and more noticeably in the early 2000s, some social work

scholars have explicitly included the natural environment in their discussions of social work (see Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Närhi & Matthies, 2001, 2016). They argue that environmental harm caused by human activity often intensifies social problems, as the consequences ultimately impact human well-being (Besthorn, 2003; Besthorn & Canda, 2002). These scholars also raise concerns about an economic system that relies on unlimited growth and about its impact on the relationship between people and their environments (Alston et al., 2019).

According to Coates and Gray (2012), the first comprehensive examination of environmental issues within social work, and one that remains highly relevant today, is the edited volume by Hoff and McNutt from 1994 titled *The Global Environmental Crisis: Implications for Social Welfare and Social Work*. Hoff and McNutt (1994) argue that human well-being and the health of the environment are closely interconnected and mutually reinforcing (Närhi & Matthies, 2001). However, there have been ecological perspectives in social work since the 1970s (Alston et al., 2019; Närhi & Matthies, 2001; Pardeck, 1988). Besthorn and McMillen (2002) summarise the ecological perspectives in social work during the late twentieth century (1970 to 2000) as the goodness-of-fit model (e.g. Bartlett, 1970), the systems perspective (e.g. Hartman, 1970), the situational approach (e.g. Siporin, 1972), the systems/ecosystems approach (e.g. Meyer, 1970), ecological/life models (e.g. Germain, 1973; Gitterman & Germain, 1976), the structural approach (e.g. Middleman & Wood, 1974), and empowerment/social justice-oriented models (e.g. Lee, 1994).

In this thesis, I follow the categorisation proposed by Närhi and Matthies (2001), who describe the ecological perspectives in social work that have developed since the 1970s as *the systems theoretical approach* (also referred to as systems theoretical thinking or the systems theoretical perspective) and *the eco-critical perspective* (also referred to as the eco-critical approach). This categorisation continues to be used in current ecological social work literature (see Närhi, 2025; Närhi & Matthies, 2016, 2025). The systems theoretical approach highlights the significance of the social environment and a holistic understanding of human life, while the eco-critical perspective, influenced by ecological movements, questions the structures and operations of modern industrial society, viewing them as both socially and ecologically unsustainable (Närhi, 2004, 2025; Närhi & Matthies, 2001, 2025). The systems theoretical approach and the eco-critical perspective can also be understood as two distinct strands of thought that represent a more environmentally aware social work, as described by Gray and Coates (2015). The systems theoretical approach treats 'ecology' and 'the environment' as an extension of the traditional socio-cultural view of the environment in social work, and the eco-critical perspective moves beyond this to seek a deeper, transformative approach to ecological change (Boetto et al., 2020).

### *The systems theoretical approach*

As social work only to a limited extent has engaged with environmental issues, professionals and scholars interested in this area have relied on

insights from other disciplines, resulting in an interdisciplinary development of developing knowledge and understanding (Coates & Gray, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2015; Schmitz et al., 2012). This interdisciplinary engagement also reflects a broader recognition that environmental issues are interconnected with the socio-economic history of humanity and that they therefore must be understood in relation to one another (see McNeill, 2000). Interdisciplinary collaboration in both research and practice is also necessary to advance the transition towards sustainability (Matthies & Närhi, 2017b).

During the 1970s, social work and the social sciences distanced themselves from viewing the social environment in biophysical terms, thereby distinguishing their field from other disciplines (Närhi, 2025; Närhi & Matthies, 2016; Payne, 2021). The systems theoretical approach is rooted in the biologist von Bertalanffy's *General Systems Theory* (published in 1968), which argues that different systems cannot be understood in isolation (Norton, 2012). Building on this foundation, Bronfenbrenner developed the ecological systems theory of child development (published in 1979; see Ungar, 2002), emphasising the interrelationship between humans and their environment through interconnected systems that both influence and are influenced by one another, a framework that also has informed theory building in social work (Närhi, 2025). For example, Bronfenbrenner's use of ecological concepts such as microsystems, mesosystems, and macrosystems remains relevant for understanding social work practice today (Probst, 2013).

The systems theoretical approach views the social environment as essential for human growth and well-being, emphasising the relationship between the individual and their environments (Närhi, 2025; Närhi & Matthies, 2001, 2025). Within this perspective, social work focuses on understanding the interactions between individuals and their environments, where individuals are part of a holistic system that includes micro-, meso-, and macrosystems (Närhi & Matthies, 2025). Ecology is in this approach interpreted through the concept of human ecology, which draws analogies between social and biological systems, serving as a metaphor for understanding these interconnections (Närhi & Matthies, 2001). However, the systems theoretical approach often neglects the broader living environment and the role of nature, narrowing its focus to supporting individuals in adapting to their existing circumstances (Närhi & Matthies, 2001). Nature receives little attention in these early perspectives, reflecting the separation between humans and nature, where nature is viewed as passive, external, or primarily a resource for human use, even if its importance is not entirely dismissed (Besthorn, 2012; Besthorn & McMillen, 2002; Coates & Gray, 2012; Gray et al., 2012; Gray & Coates, 2012; Molyneux, 2010; Zapf, 2010). The primary concern of the systems theoretical approach is to describe how systems function, rather than engaging with political questions such as responsibility, power, or justice (Närhi & Matthies, 2018). Consequently, structural and environmental injustices, and the actors who produce or are affected by them, tend to fall outside the scope of analysis.

Examples of works within the systems theoretical approach (as outlined in Matthies & Närhi, 2018; Närhi, 2025; Närhi & Matthies, 2001, 2016, 2025)

include the work of Pincus and Minahan (1973), Goldstein (1973), Siporin (1975, 1980), Germain and Gitterman (1980), Wendt (1982, 1990), Germain (1991), and Meyer (1983, 1995). Most of these contributions were developed within an Anglo-American context, while Wendt's work is situated in Germany. The work of Germain from 1973, 'An ecological perspective in casework practice', is often described as the first formal application of ecological concepts in social work (Rotabi, 2007). She introduced the ecosystem concept as a framework for social casework and, in doing so, extended the person-in-environment perspective to include the influence of biophysical and social conditions on human development (Besthorn, 2015; Rotabi, 2007). Germain later developed these ideas further, and her collaboration with Gitterman in *The Life Model of Social Work Practice* (Germain & Gitterman, 1980) is regarded as one of the key formulations of ecological systems theory in social work (Payne, 2021).

### *The eco-critical perspective*

Industrial modernisation and the growth of modern society changed both the environment and broader ecological conditions, creating new and often severe ecological problems. As these effects increasingly became visible, particularly through pollution, resource depletion, and environmental degradation, public concern grew. The growing awareness of ecological crises and the rise of ecological movements in Western countries during the 1970s and 1980s also influenced social work and other social sciences, where ecological critiques of modern industrial society and modernism more broadly began to take shape (Närhi, 2025; Närhi & Matthies, 2001; Peeters, 2012a). In the European context, social workers initiated practical alternative projects and developed various forms of 'green practice' during this period (Matthies & Närhi, 2017a; also see Schwendter, 1981), exploring approaches that linked social work with ecological principles and environmentally oriented ways of working. The ecological crises of modern society and the global environmental movements that gained momentum during this period also informed the conceptualisation of the eco-critical perspective in social work, which theorises the relationship between humans and nature (Närhi, 2025; see Närhi & Matthies, 2001; Payne, 2021).

The eco-critical perspective includes the work of Schwendter (1981), Opielka (1985), Beck (1986), Blanke and Sachsse (1987), Opielka and Ostner (1987), Soine (1987), Puch (1988), Berger and Kelly (1993), Hoff and Polack (1993), and Hoff and McNutt (1994). These contributions primarily emerged from Anglo-American and German contexts. However, during the same period, discussions on ecological social work also developed in Finland, as exemplified by the work of Matthies (1987) and Närhi (1995). The subsequent development of the eco-critical perspective was further shaped by environmental sociology and by the concept of sustainable development articulated in *Our Common Future* (1987) by the World Commission on Environment and Development (see Närhi, 2004; Närhi & Matthies, 2016).

Within the eco-critical perspective, the environment is understood as encompassing nature itself alongside cultural, social, and well-being

dimensions, while ecology is linked to normative and political demands where ecological concerns carry moral and political obligations, closely associated with sustainability and social justice movements (Närhi & Matthies, 2001). This framing makes ecological concerns part of the political debate and collective decision-making, and it links ecological awareness to the central ecosocial question of how societies can organise themselves sustainably (Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Närhi & Matthies, 2001; Opielka, 1985). In this process, social issues are reframed as ecosocial issues (Matthies, 1987; Närhi & Matthies, 2025; Opielka, 1985). This reframing reflects the eco-critical critique of modernity and industrialisation, challenging the Western model and lifestyle grounded in continuous economic growth and reliant on the exploitation of both natural and human resources for financial gain (Närhi, 2025). In doing so, it highlights the interdependence between human well-being and the natural environment's condition (Närhi & Matthies, 2016). Together, these arguments illustrate the inherently interdisciplinary nature of the eco-critical perspective (see Gray & Coates, 2015; Schmitz et al., 2012), as they draw together insights from social work, environmental sciences, sociology, and political ecology to clarify these interconnections.

Building on this interdisciplinary foundation, the integration of ecological and social concerns within a shared analytical framework raises questions about which forms of social work practice may be regarded as sustainable (Matthies & Närhi, 2017a; Närhi, 2004; Nöjd et al., 2025). These questions must and should be understood in relation to the broader institutional context in which social work operates. Social work practices are embedded within welfare systems, closely intertwined with social policies that establish the conditions under which practice is enabled or constrained (Chang, Rambaree, et al., 2026). From an eco-critical perspective, this positioning provides social workers with the scope to not only operate within these structures but also question existing policies and institutional arrangements rather than merely adapting to them (Närhi, 2004). This orientation becomes clearer when placed in a historical comparison: when examining how Mary Richmond and Jane Addams conceptualised and applied the environment in social work, the eco-critical perspective corresponds more closely with the theoretical and political orientation found in Addams's work (Dominelli, 2012; Kennedy, 2018; Närhi & Matthies, 2025).

### *Eco-critical perspectives from the 2000s to date*

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, interest in theories and discussions exploring the relationship between social and environmental dimensions in social work has increased, particularly within the context of the eco-critical perspective (Närhi, 2025; Närhi & Matthies, 2016). Social work scholars worldwide (in both the Global North and the Global South) have sought to articulate the connections between people and their environments in various ways (see examples in Alston, 2017; Boetto et al., 2020; Gray, 2025; Peeters, 2012b), including within the framework of sustainable development. The various discussions and theories situated

within the eco-critical perspective during this period comprise a broad set of approaches (see Table 4).

Table 4. Eco-critical perspectives in social work from the 2000s to date.

Perspectives	Examples
Ecosocial approach in social work	(Närhi & Matthies, 2001, 2018; Norton, 2012; Peeters, 2012b)
Ecofeminism	(Besthorn & McMillen, 2002)
Deep-ecological and eco-spiritual social work	(Besthorn, 2003, 2012; Coates et al., 2006; Gray & Coates, 2013; Zapf, 2005)
Eco-social/Ecosocial work	(Alston, 2017; Bell et al., 2019; Boetto et al., 2018, 2020, 2022; Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; Crews & Besthorn, 2016; Forbes & Smith, 2023; Forde et al., 2024; Hermans et al., 2025; Hetherington & Boddy, 2013; Kaffrell-Lindahl, 2025; Kang et al., 2019; Lysack, 2012; Matthies, 2017; Matthies & Närhi, 2017b; Molyneux, 2010; Närhi, 2025; Närhi et al., 2025; Närhi & Matthies, 2017, 2025; Nöjd et al., 2024; Peeters, 2012b; Powers, K. Rambaree, et al., 2019; Powers et al., 2021; B. Rambaree, 2020; K. Rambaree, Sjöberg, et al., 2019; K. Rambaree et al., 2023; Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021; Shackelford et al., 2024; Shackelford, 2025; Stamm, 2021; Stamm et al., 2023; P. Wang & Altanbulag, 2022)
Environmental social work	(Alston, 2013; Coates & Gray, 2012; Gray et al., 2013a, 2013b; Gray & Coates, 2012; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017)
Green social work	(Dominelli, 2012; Dominelli et al., 2018)
Social-ecological social work	(Peeters, 2012a)
Sustainable social work	(K. Rambaree, 2013)
Ecological social work	(McKinnon & Alston, 2016)
The transformative ecosocial model	(Boetto, 2017; Boetto et al., 2020)
Postanthropocentric social work	(Bozalek & Pease, 2021)

These eco-critical perspectives form a wide framework that positions nature as interconnected with human life and as an essential component of environmental understanding within social work. Although each perspective highlights different areas, they also converge around several shared elements while maintaining notable points of divergence (see Table 5).

Table 5. Comparison of various eco-critical perspectives in social work from the 2000s to date, adapted from Närhi and Matthies (2016, pp. 13–14) and Boetto (2017, p. 50).

Approach	Main focus	Shared elements
Ecosocial approach in social work/ecosocial work	Umbrella concept examining the interconnection between human well-being and the natural environment, within the context of sustainable development	Seeing people and the natural world as interconnected, drawing on holistic and relational understandings from Indigenous perspectives and eco-critical traditions
Deep-ecological social work	Places strong emphasis on environmental justice; critiques human-centred worldviews; views humans as part of a larger ecological whole	Encouraging global awareness and responsibility in social work, while valuing cultural diversity and knowledge from the Global South and linking this to action at the local community level
Eco-spiritual social work	Highlights humans as part of nature; draws on spiritual and Indigenous ways of knowing; emphasises meaning, connection, and relationality	Bringing ecological values into social work, grounded in sustainability, degrowth, and the need for new paradigms that respond to ecological limits
Green social work	Focuses on safeguarding both people and the environment; emphasises prevention, preparedness, and support during environmental crises	Widening the scope of practice to include environmental and political action at personal, collective, community, and societal levels, recognising social workers as political actors
Environmental social work	Highlights the impact of the environment on people's well-being, often grounded in critical and anti-oppressive traditions	Supporting culturally rooted approaches that integrate land, identity, and spirituality into practice
Societal ecological social work	Combines systems thinking with ecosocial concepts, emphasising empowerment, social capital, and community resilience	Rethinking well-being in environmental, relational, and holistic terms
Ecofeminism	Challenges the dualistic separation between humans and the natural environment, promoting an understanding of the self as embedded within the natural world	Challenging mainstream social work and promoting transformative rather than adaptive responses

## 2.4. Community work

The umbrella concept of community work includes a range of practices such as community development, community organisation, community intervention, community planning, social and area development, social

mobilisation and collective action, and neighbourhood renewal (Clarke, 2000; Popple, 2015; Sudmann & Breivik, 2018; Turunen, 2004, 2024). Across these approaches, the shared aim is to promote good living conditions and strengthen participation, solidarity, and empowerment in local contexts (Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; Sjöberg & Turunen, 2022; Turunen, 2004). Community work can focus on geographically defined neighbourhoods as well as on communities of interest formed around shared identities, concerns, or experiences (Sjöberg & Turunen, 2022). In this thesis, I use the term community work to refer to collaborative efforts that promote community development and well-being through the involvement of different actors across sectors, including non-profit organisations, the private sector, and public welfare with professionals such as social workers (Dominelli, 2018a; Grandier et al., 2022; K. Healy, 2022; Kravchenko & Håkansson, 2024; Payne, 2021).

In many parts of the world, especially in the Global South, traditions of collective responsibility and social solidarity have long shaped how care and support are organised. Long before social work became a recognised profession and institution, many societies had developed ways of providing care, sharing responsibility, and supporting collective well-being through religious, moral, and communal traditions, and many of these practices continue to this day (see examples in Chabad, 2025; Daffu-O'Reilly et al., 2024; Mugumbate et al., 2024; Mulumba & Carvalho, 2024; Wutich et al., 2017). It is important to recognise that building on these longer histories, community-based work has developed through different historical pathways across the world, often shaped by power relations. In many contexts, it has emerged through grassroots organising in response to, for example, colonialism, unequal development, and persistent social and economic injustice (see e.g. Hollinsworth, 1996; Niigaaniin et al., 2023; Purvis et al., 2025). Across many Global South contexts, community development was often shaped by colonial administrative agendas and promoted by colonial administrations to manage social change and maintain order rather than to support self-determination (Hollinsworth, 1996; Maggetti, 2025; Smyth, 2004). In many Global North contexts, including Sweden, community work within social work became increasingly professionalised and institutionalised in the post-war period, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s (Gray & Webb, 2013; Turunen, 2004).

These varied trajectories help explain why community work has taken different forms and has been practised across a range of professional fields, including social work. For this reason, community work cannot be understood as exclusive to social work (Payne, 2021). Community work within social work can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, during the profession's formative period. Two prominent examples are Toynbee Hall in England and Hull House in the United States. As community centres within the settlement movement, both played an important role in shaping early social work. Through their settlement activities and active engagement with local communities, they connected direct social support with wider efforts to influence social policy and pursue social change and reform

(Turunen, 2004). Community work has long been recognised as one of the core methods in social work practice, alongside casework and group work (Payne, 2021; Turunen, 2004). One influential conceptualisation of community work is Jack Rothman's typology of community practice. In 1968, Rothman identified three main approaches: locality development, social planning, and social action (Rothman, 2001). He later reframed these approaches as community capacity development, planning and policy practice, and social advocacy, and further elaborated the typology in 2007 by outlining possible combinations (Rothman, 2007).

Despite this recognition, Western social work practice and education have historically mainly been organised around casework and work with individuals and families. This professional orientation has likely shaped what becomes institutionally visible and legitimate, including the extent to which community-based approaches are sustained within mainstream practice (Zapf, 2010). As a result, the dominance of micro-level work has often meant that community work receives less systematic attention, even though many social problems are produced and experienced beyond the level of individual cases (Sjöberg & Turunen, 2022; Stamm et al., 2023).

When casework is the primary professional reference point, community work tends to be less visible. This may partly explain why its development, particularly in Europe, is often described as cyclical. Community work is commonly portrayed as reaching a peak during the 1960s and 1970s, when broader environmental perspectives received renewed attention and were actively discussed within community work debates (Lienard, 2022; Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021; Turunen, 2004). This momentum was followed by a decline during the 1980s and 1990s (Turunen, 2004, 2009). From the 2010s onwards, however, community work has re-emerged as an area of interest, also in Nordic welfare contexts (Karagkounis, 2021; Sjöberg & Turunen, 2022; Sudmann & Breivik, 2018). In many settings, this renewed focus has been linked to municipal initiatives to improve living conditions in marginalised neighbourhoods (Hutchinson, 2009; Lienard, 2022; Turunen, 2004).

### **Community work in Sweden**

In Sweden, early community-oriented initiatives emerged around the turn of the twentieth century. The first Nordic settlements, known in Sweden as *hemgårdar*, were established in 1912 through Birkagården in Stockholm and Kristeligt Studenter-Settlement in Copenhagen (Roivainen, 2002). As the first settlement house in Sweden, Birkagården was inspired by the English settlement movement, especially Toynbee Hall in London (Qyarsell, 2026). The establishment of Birkagården was closely associated with *Centralförbundet för Socialt Arbete* (the National Association of Social Work) (Lindholm, 1993; Turunen, 2004). In later social work debates in Sweden, community-oriented initiatives such as community work became commonly associated with the term *samhällsarbete* and gained visibility during the 1960s and 1970s. *Samhällsarbete* was introduced as the so-called

third method of social work and became part of broader social reforms and local welfare development (Turunen, 2004).

Harald Swedner, the first professor of social work in Sweden, showed a sustained commitment to *samhällsarbete* (community work) and a broader ecological understanding of welfare in both his writings and empirical engagements (Turunen, 2004). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he led some of the earliest ‘pioneer projects’ of Swedish community work in Malmö, including the Östergård/Österhus project (initiated in 1969) and the Kroksbäck project (Sunesson, 2003; Turunen, 2004). These initiatives were carried out in the working-class areas of Östergård and Kroksbäck with the aim of improving residents’ living conditions. They were explicitly field-based and action-oriented, addressing welfare challenges at the neighbourhood level, such as through housing renewal, local participation, and social rehabilitation (Linder, 2026). The two projects are often described as being among the first urban-sociological studies within Swedish social work to use fieldwork and action research as central methods, linking research, practice, and social reform (Turunen, 2004). This orientation is articulated more explicitly in Swedner’s later work *Human Welfare and Action Research in Urban Settings: Essays on the Implementation of Social Change* (1982), where he frames social work as a form of social change work situated in urban environments. He argues that social problems cannot be understood only at the level of individuals and families but must also be analysed in relation to housing structures, urban planning, organisational arrangements, and patterns of social inequality. Although he did not use contemporary environmental terminology, his continuing attention to urban settings and the built environment as well as to how social structures shape everyday life can be read as an ecological perspective.

Building on these earlier developments, the 1970s also saw this orientation more clearly connected to a broader environmental perspective, framed in terms of the living environment and good living conditions. These questions were discussed in relation to social policy, community work, and urban planning within Swedish social work (Turunen, 2004, 2020). In practice, this broader environmental perspective was often embedded in municipal projects focused on neighbourhood renewal, housing, and civic engagement. Social workers were directly involved in local planning processes and worked closely to people’s everyday lives, particularly in suburban areas, with the aim of improving living environments (Sundh & Turunen, 1992). Social work in this context was not limited to individual casework but became part of broader welfare and planning processes.

Against this historical and institutional background, there was also a need to conceptualise and systematise these practices. As community-oriented and planning-related interventions became more visible within Swedish and Nordic social work, conceptual frameworks were developed to describe and analyse them. Building on Rothman’s earlier typology, Sjöberg and Turunen (2018, 2022) proposed a three-approach model that has been influential in these contexts: local development, social planning, and social mobilisation. Although their model does not include the cross-combinations found in

Rothman's later revisions, they argue that the approaches often are blended in practice, even if one tends to guide the work more than the others.

Collectively, these historical experiences and subsequent conceptual developments illustrate how Swedish social work, at least during certain periods, has integrated structural, community, and environmental dimensions into its understanding of welfare and social change. This conceptualisation also aligns with how community work typically has been practised in Sweden, namely focusing mainly on strengthening the well-being of local communities and supporting good living conditions, including the physical environment (Turunen, 2004, 2020). Since Sweden does not have a distinct profession of community workers, community work is typically carried out by social workers together with other municipal staff, civil society organisations, volunteer groups, and local communities, often with the aim of preventing and addressing social problems and supporting local development (see Grander et al., 2022). At the same time, reduced public sector resources and limited professional interest have contributed to weak funding for community work, increasing dependence on voluntary organisations (Sjöberg et al., 2018).

Under these practical and institutional conditions, one example of community work in Sweden is Stadsdelslyftet Andersberg (the Andersberg neighbourhood uplift) in Gävle, where social workers collaborate with other municipal and local actors (Gävle Kommun, 2026). The project is organised through the Stadsdelslyftet Andersberg project group. In addition to the project leaders from the municipal administrative unit for social sustainability (*Enheten för social hållbarhet*), the group brings together representatives from the municipality's sector for the living environment, urban development, and public spaces (*Livsmiljö*); the municipal education sector responsible for schools and educational services (*Utbildning Gävle*); the municipal department for governance and support (*Styrning och Stöd*); and the municipal department responsible for social services and welfare provision (*Välfärd Gävle*). It also includes representatives from the municipal companies *Gavlefastigheter AB* (the municipality's property company responsible for public buildings) and *Gavlegårdarna AB* (the municipal housing company). Representatives of the project group have emphasised that collaboration across municipal sectors has been a central part of the project's strategy (Sjöberg et al., 2025).

The community work in Stadsdelslyftet Andersberg includes ecosocial elements linked to social planning processes and local development (Sjöberg & Turunen, 2018, 2022). In the project, urban planning in Andersberg is approached through what can be understood as an ecosocial lens, including the development of green spaces intended to serve both environmental and social purposes. These spaces are intended to serve as everyday meeting places where inhabitants can gather, interact, and spend time together (Sjöberg et al., 2025). *Stadsdelsnätverket* (a neighbourhood network that includes local civil society organisations) has played an important role in this work by mobilising residents and putting forward proposals for local development, including initiatives to improve the outdoor environment.

### ***Community work and (eco)social work***

As noted earlier, in the 1960s the public became more aware of the dangers human activities posed to the environment (Dominelli, 2024). The 1970s and 1980s then saw growing awareness of ecological crises and the rise of environmental movements in Western countries, including in social work itself (Matthies et al., 2000; Närhi, 2025). This growing interest later led to approaches such as ecosocial work (Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026). Increased awareness of environmental issues also emerged in European community work in the 1960s and 1970s, where practitioners and scholars argued for a more structural and expansive environmental understanding of social problems and for efforts to support and promote good living conditions (Brusman & Turunen, 2018; Lienard, 2022; Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021; Turunen, 2004). Since the late 1970s, community work has responded to socio-economic and socio-cultural crises by using various approaches to revitalise disadvantaged communities and promote an ecosocial perspective and sustainability in meeting needs (Elsen et al., 2025). In the Nordic context, Finland offers a useful example: community work developed there in the 1970s and later, in the 1990s, provided the basis for ecosocial work as described by Aila-Leena Matthies (Roivainen, 2004). This can be seen as a confluence of, and an intersection between, ecosocial work and community work.

Social work is often described as a human-centred profession and discipline, but, through its person-in-environment perspective, it can also encompass broader environmental concerns. Ecosocial work offers one way of doing this. It does not move away from human needs but rather places human well-being within social and ecological contexts, reconciling anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric ethics (see Sterba, 2022; Thysell & Cuadra, 2023). In this way, ecosocial work connects social work's concern for care and justice to the idea that social relations and environmental conditions are interdependent. This ethical and conceptual repositioning also has practical implications for how sustainability is addressed in ecosocial work. Ecosocial work supports sustainability by integrating social, ecological, cultural, and economic dimensions to strengthen collective well-being across age groups (Närhi & Matthies, 2018). It makes the natural environment more visible in social work practice and policy, rather than treating environmental concerns as secondary (Vicario et al., 2025).

Seen from this perspective, social work practices that value collectivism, such as community work, are important for developing ecosocial work practices, because collectivism focuses on working together to promote the overall well-being of communities (Boetto, 2017; Närhi & Matthies, 2018). This collectivist orientation within community work also builds on core principles of social justice and environmental justice (Ife, 2016). Ife argues that work for sustainability has little meaning in contexts marked by oppression and injustice, just as efforts towards social and economic justice are weakened in an unsustainable world that threatens human survival. In this sense, with its collectivist values that stress collaboration and shared

responsibility, community work becomes central to the development of ecosocial work. At the same time, the ecosocial approach helps practitioners understand that community work and structural social work are not separate from casework and individual concerns but closely connected through a broad interpretation of the person-in-environment perspective (Dominelli, 2012; Matthies, 2022). The ecosocial perspective re-establishes links between individuals, groups, and communities and their biophysical and built environments, pointing to the need for group and community work as well as structural and macro-level strategies (Matthies, 2022; K. Rambaree et al., 2023). In this way, ecosocial work can strengthen community-based social work by bringing a clearer environmental perspective into everyday practice while also revitalising community work through stronger connections between social and environmental concerns (Boetto, 2017; Stamm et al., 2023). Moreover, the ecosocial perspective supports cross-sectoral and transformative collaboration within structural social work and reinforces its central role in promoting social justice, including environmental justice (Närhi & Matthies, 2018).

These conceptual claims are also reflected in the empirical and practice-oriented literature, where ecosocial work often is described as more effective at meso and macro levels because connections between social and environmental issues are more visible and can be addressed through collective and structural responses (see Peeters, 2012b; Stamm et al., 2023). At the meso level, ecosocial work may take the form of community-based work, and it is often positioned as especially viable at the community level because communities include wider ecosystems and non-human beings as part of everyday life (Stamm et al., 2023). At the macro level, ecosocial work can be seen in interventions that address global environmental issues through community mobilisation and policy-oriented work (Mason et al., 2017). These advocacy-oriented efforts are often presented as particularly important for promoting sustainability in society (Lysack, 2012). At the same time, this emphasis on meso- and macro-level effectiveness should not be read as marginalising individual-level practice. Individual-level practice remains important for broader social issues and change; an ecosocial approach in casework involves a holistic and participatory analysis of a person's life circumstances that links individual experiences to broader structural conditions (Matthies, 2025).

However, the 'fit' between ecosocial work and broader levels of practice is not straightforward, since bringing them together reflects – and requires changes in – the ethical, organisational, and political conditions that shape professional action. In practice, such work is often mediated by organisational mandates, managerial priorities, and professional jurisdictions, which may limit the extent to which ecosocial commitments can be operationalised. Empirical work suggests that social workers recognise the need for ethical change in how relationships between humans and non-humans are understood, while they also report that institutional and organisational conditions constrain implementation (Aschero et al., 2026; Närhi et al., 2025). Against this background of recognised need but limited

room for action, a study by Aschero et al. (2026) indicates that even though social workers recognise the urgency of expanding ethical frameworks to include more-than-human perspectives, such expansion is often seen as more feasible when introduced gradually through interdisciplinary training and policy adaptation rather than through rapid transformation. From this perspective, interdisciplinary collaboration becomes not only a practice strategy but also a research orientation because the knowledge needed to support a transition towards sustainability is produced across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries (Matthies & Närhi, 2017a; Närhi & Matthies, 2017).

These findings highlight the importance of the organisational and professional context in which ecosocial work is carried out. When social work is primarily understood as bureaucratic, administrative casework, often limited to office-based settings, the space for ecosocial practice is narrowed (Närhi et al., 2025; Närhi & Matthies, 2018). Community-level work, by contrast, offers a wider and more flexible setting for ecosocial approaches, as it more naturally connects social, economic, and environmental conditions (Peeters, 2012b), representing a more holistic person-in-environment perspective. For this reason, community work has been identified as a key arena for ecosocial practice, particularly at the meso level of communities, organisations, and local networks, where professionals can work together to influence both social and environmental well-being (Matthies & Närhi, 2017a; Stamm, 2021; Stamm et al., 2023). In this sense, community work can reconnect social work with its collective roots and provide a foundation for developing ecosocial approaches within welfare systems. At the same time, there is still limited empirical knowledge about how ecosocial perspectives are translated into everyday social work practice, especially within community settings (Boetto et al., 2020; Park, 2025), where young people are part of these local communities.

In an international study, Matthies et al. (2019) identify 50 examples of ecosocial community-based initiatives across Finland, Germany, Belgium, Italy, and the United Kingdom. In Sweden, similar community-based approaches informed by an ecosocial perspective have been identified in 28 ecosocial interventions in Malmö. These interventions are led by for-profit and non-profit organisations, as well as by social entrepreneurs, and involve professionals working to address residents' social and environmental needs (Tsunoda & Cuadra, 2022). While the interventions themselves do not include social workers or other municipal professionals, interviews were conducted with staff from various departments within the City of Malmö during the mapping process. The purpose of these interviews was to examine the project's relevance to the city's urban development agenda and to gain a clearer understanding of the municipality's ongoing efforts to address ecological and social challenges (Tsunoda & Cuadra, 2022). Another example is provided by Cuadra et al. (2025) who examine four cases of ecosocial innovation, also in Malmö, which generate benefits for both the environment and the community and involve collaboration among various professionals, including municipal social services.

Taken together, these examples point to a wider opportunity for social work, particularly for municipal social services in Sweden. Municipal social services have a mandate under the Social Services Act to participate in community planning. This mandate was already included in the 1980/2001 Social Services Acts and has been further strengthened in the current Act (2025:400) (Cuadra, 2024). Within this framework, municipal social services can engage in community planning through community work. However, although community work has the potential to strengthen ecosocial perspectives in Sweden, it remains underused (Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; Cuadra, 2024).

### **3. Theoretical and conceptual framework**

In this thesis, the theoretical and conceptual framework is used to interpret and link the findings across the four studies, rather than to re-analyse the empirical material. Since the empirical analyses are reported in the individual articles, the framework is used here to synthesise results in relation to the thesis's aim and key concepts in ecosocial work, youth well-being and health, working-life capacities, and sustainable development.

#### **3.1. Ecosocial work**

The historical background of the ecosocial perspective (presented in section 2.3) matters analytically because it suggests that contemporary ecosocial and environmental approaches, such as ecosocial work, are not 'new' innovations but re-articulations of attention and concerns that have been present, though unevenly recognised, in social work over time. Although dominant models of practice in contemporary social work still do not fully engage with issues of environmental sustainability (Mason et al., 2017; Zapf, 2010), the profession has increasingly acknowledged the significance of the built and natural environments (Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2013a; Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Krings et al., 2020; McKinnon, 2008), the interdependence of human and planetary well-being, and the relevance of sustainability and sustainable practices (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017; Stamm et al., 2023). Despite this increased interest in environmental social work, it remains a marginal and peripheral aspect within the profession (Bexell et al., 2019; Coates & Gray, 2012; McKinnon, 2008).

Since the early 2000s, conceptual discussions of the natural environment in social work have expanded, including the development of ecosocial work, and the number of theoretical publications has grown (Besthorn, 2012; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Ecosocial work involves applying an ecosocial perspective in social work by integrating the natural environment into theory and practice. This emphasis is significant because the natural environment has long been marginal in social work, where attention has primarily centred on social, economic, and, to some extent, built environments (Gray et al., 2013b; Gray & Coates, 2013, 2015; Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Molyneux, 2010; Närhi & Matthies, 2016, 2025; Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021; Zapf, 2010). It broadens social work's person-in-environment lens beyond the social environment to include both natural and built environments, and it brings environmental crises into the scope of practice (Mathias et al., 2023; Stamm et al., 2023; Teixeira & Krings, 2015). However, it is essential to recognise that 'ecosocial' is not limited to ecological and social concerns; it encompasses social, environmental, and economic sustainability. This is

because the economy is not separate from society but forms part of social relations.

While theoretical discussions of ecosocial work have increased, practice-focused ecosocial work has developed more slowly and gained more attention mainly from the 2010s onwards (Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021), though it remains limited (Bexell et al., 2019; Boetto et al., 2022; Molyneux, 2010; Nöjd et al., 2024). Ecosocial work can be practised at micro, meso, and macro levels (see Table 6), encompassing the personal, individual, group, community, and political dimensions of practice (Boetto, 2016, 2017; K. Rambaree, Powers, et al., 2019). The personal dimension refers to practitioners' personal morals, beliefs, and attitudes, which influence their behaviour and approach to their professional practice (Boetto, 2017).

In this thesis, the term *ecosocial work* is used as an umbrella concept that emphasises the connection between humans and nature, the relationship between social and ecological sustainability, and the coexistence of social and natural environments, while also drawing attention to the link between social and ecological justice and bringing the biophysical environment into the field of social work. Although definitions, domains, and boundaries are contested, and distinctions between ecosocial, environmental, and green social work remain both blurred (Krings et al., 2020) and intertwined (see Table 5), I focus here on what ecosocial work *is*, rather than defining it by what it *is not*.

Table 6. Levels of ecosocial work practice, based on Boetto (2016).

Level	Example of practice process	Example or application in practice
Micro	Engagement	Uses nature in direct contact with clients, such as indoor plants in the meeting room or outdoor conversations.
Micro	Assessment	Assesses the natural environment in the client's daily context, including access to and the quality of local green spaces.
Micro	Intervention	Includes nature-based activities in practice, such as animal-assisted therapy or mindful walking.
Micro	Evaluation	Examines whether the natural environment has reduced problems or improved client well-being.
Meso	Group work	Integrates the natural environment into group interventions for people with shared concerns.

Meso	Mutual support and advocacy	Develops self-help and advocacy groups for people facing similar environmental disadvantages.
Meso	Policy context	Refers to legislation and organisational policies that support sustainability.
Macro	Community environment	Considers community access to natural spaces, such as playgrounds and community gardens.
Macro	Environmental conditions	Examines whether environmental problems exist in the community.
Macro	Advocacy	Advocates for disadvantaged groups affected by environmental issues at local, regional, and national levels.

As shown in Table 6, ecosocial work may appear to overlap with conventional social work because it often draws on familiar practice forms, such as person-in-environment assessment, support, engagement, and community work. However, ecosocial practices also include efforts to mitigate the negative effects of environmental and socio-economic changes that have already occurred, such as pollution, resource depletion, rising living costs, food and energy insecurity, inadequate housing, and declining access to land and livelihoods (Coates, 2003; Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Matthies et al., 2001). Addressing these impacts, including threats to health, well-being, and basic living conditions, aligns closely with established social work concerns and is an important part of ecosocial practice (Peeters, 2012b). Additionally, ecosocial work differs from conventional social work in its underlying assumptions and organising rationale. Rather than treating the natural environment mainly as a background resource that supports human well-being, ecosocial work challenges the human–nature divide and understands human societies and ecological systems as interdependent (Boetto, 2017; Gray & Coates, 2012; Kang et al., 2025). This shift has implications for how problems are defined and how interventions are designed. While mitigating existing harms is necessary, ecosocial work also emphasises change-oriented interventions that prepare people for ongoing transformations and actively contribute to social and ecological change (see Gamble & Hoff, 2013). In practice, short-term mitigation and longer-term change-oriented strategies often occur simultaneously and across levels, making it important to consciously link these dimensions.

Through this reframing, ecosocial work moves from a predominantly anthropocentric, case-based orientation towards a people-in-ecosystems perspective where environmental conditions, ecological health and their relationship to social life are treated as central determinants of well-being and as legitimate targets of intervention. This broadens what counts as intervention and outcome, allowing assessment and evaluation to include environmental and infrastructural factors such as access to green and blue

spaces, energy burden, safe mobility, and local ecosocial policies alongside more conventional social indicators. Attention to local community knowledge and local ecological knowledge becomes part of the practice logic, supporting interventions that reflect lived environmental realities. In this way, ecosocial work retains social work's relational and ethical foundations while revising priorities and criteria for action so that social equity and ecological sustainability are addressed together rather than treated as competing goals across micro, meso, and macro levels.

The starting point in ecosocial work is that sustainability involves recognising ecological limits while meeting human needs in ways that are just and responsible towards both present and future generations (Cuadra, 2024). From this perspective, ecosocial work aims to advance socio-ecological justice, sustainability, and sustainable practices in meeting needs (Närhi & Matthies, 2018; Stamm et al., 2023). It is based on the view that well-being is ecologically embedded, meaning that human lives are closely linked to built and natural environments and to other living beings (Boetto et al., 2022). From this perspective, ecosocial work expands the person-in-environment approach and moves social work beyond an anthropocentric focus that centres mainly on human needs and wants. Rather, it adopts a more ecocentric view in which humans are part of wider ecosystems (Boetto, 2017; Boetto et al., 2020, 2022; Stamm et al., 2023). Building on this shift, ecosocial work emphasises the interdependence of humans and nature. It highlights the interconnectedness of human and planetary well-being, connects social and ecological sustainability, and recognises the co-existence of social and natural environments (Boetto, 2017; Boetto et al., 2018; Stamm et al., 2023). This shifts the profession towards an interdependent, holistic, and sustainable outlook. In challenging dominant paradigms in social work, ecosocial work also shares similarities with critical, structural, radical, feminist, and Indigenous approaches. These perspectives share a broad understanding of people in relation to their environments and power dynamics (Coates & Gray, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2012; Närhi & Matthies, 2016; Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021).

This shift also raises ethical questions about how humans relate to the more-than-human world, and what kinds of responsibilities follow from recognising ecological interdependence. Here, the idea of intrinsic value becomes useful. As Sterba (2022, p. 191) writes, 'To recognise something as having intrinsic value does not preclude destroying it to preserve other things that also have intrinsic value when there is a good reason to do so'. Recognising that non-human nature has intrinsic value does not mean that it can never be harmed. Rather, it means that harm requires justification, and that decisions should consider competing goods within an interconnected system. In practice, there may be situations in which harming one entity is ethically defensible to preserve other beings or ecological relations that also have intrinsic value, provided there is a good reason and careful attention to consequences. In this sense, moving from an anthropocentric to an ecosocial perspective does not mean abandoning human needs. It means placing human

needs within a wider ethical and ecological field where human flourishing is pursued alongside responsibility towards the more-than-human world.

These ethical commitments also shape how ecosocial work understands its professional role. In shifting the profession's paradigm, ecosocial work seeks to clarify social work's role in facilitating a transition towards a more sustainable world (Boetto, 2017; Coates & Gray, 2012; Matthies, Krings, et al., 2020; Närhi & Matthies, 2016). This shift not only expands social work's systems perspective to include the three pillars of sustainability but also encompasses ecological, economic, environmental, and social justice concerns, positioning ecosocial work as an innovative, transdisciplinary, and present- and future-oriented approach to practice and knowledge production (see Närhi & Matthies, 2025; Nöjd et al., 2023; Shackelford, 2025). Within this framework, ecosocial work also incorporates an intergenerational perspective (Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021), as achieving sustainable societies concerns both present and future generations, necessitating intergenerational and intertemporal responsibility and solidarity (see Stamm, 2023). By incorporating an intergenerational perspective, ecosocial work further frames sustainability as a question of responsibility and solidarity across time, since the consequences of current social and ecological arrangements fall unevenly on present and future generations (Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021; Stamm et al., 2023).

### **3.2. The transformative ecosocial model**

As the social work profession developed across Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it adopted many of the values associated with modernist thought, including individualism, rationalism, positivism, industrial capitalism, and anthropocentrism (K. Bell, 2012; Boetto, 2017, 2019; Howe, 1994; Hugman, 2010; Närhi & Matthies, 2001; Webb, 2007). These ideas later became embedded in mainstream social work practice and continue to shape it to this day (Boetto, 2019). These perspectives shaped the philosophical foundations of social work: modernist assumptions influenced how knowledge and reality were understood within the profession; positivism emphasised objectivity and scientific methods and promoted the view that reality can be observed and measured independently of the observer (Boetto, 2019). Within this worldview, the natural environment is understood as an objective reality that exists independently of humans and is available for use in the service of human progress, needs, and interests (Coates, 2005).

Contemporary social work largely continues to rely on paradigms grounded in modernist and positivist ontology, contributing to, amongst other things, the prominence of biomedical approaches (K. Bell, 2012), psychotherapy-based models of intervention (Specht & Courtney, 1994), and forms of managerialism within social work organisations (Tadesse & Elsen, 2025). These roots are also reflected in the profession's core concepts, such as human rights, social justice, and human well-being, which are often framed in anthropocentric terms that prioritise human interests over those of non-human life. Although these principles have supported important

achievements, including empowerment and the expansion of rights, they are grounded in a human-centred ontology (Boetto, 2019).

Against this background, the mutually dependent relationship between social work, the welfare state, and industrial capitalism can be read as not only an external structural constraint but also an internal contradiction within the profession's philosophical foundations (Boetto, 2019; Tadesse & Elsen, 2023, 2025). When social work is positioned within capitalist welfare governance, it may reproduce individualising and technocratic assumptions in its everyday knowledge practices, even when its stated commitments are oriented towards anti-oppressive and critical work (Besthorn, 2002; Boetto, 2019; Coates, 2003). This is important because in the social, economic, and ecological crises intensified by industrial capitalism, these assumptions shape which problems are recognised, how responsibility is allocated, and which forms of intervention appear legitimate, with the most severe effects often experienced by disadvantaged individuals, groups, and communities (Alston, 2013; McKinnon & Alston, 2016). From this perspective, the institutional critique also points towards an epistemic critique: the question of whether the profession's ways of knowing and acting are aligned with its values and analyses of structural oppression (see K. Bell, 2012; Boetto, 2017).

This concern is taken up directly in K. Bell's analysis (2012), which specifies how such misalignment can be located within the profession's own conceptual architecture. She identifies a mismatch between the profession's ontological foundations and its epistemological commitments, particularly its anti-oppressive and critical orientations. Boetto (2017, 2019) describes this mismatch as a central contradiction in social work's philosophical base. The contradiction becomes apparent, for example, when social work promotes anti-oppressive values yet continues to treat individuals as separate and self-contained rather than as relational beings embedded in social and ecological contexts. In such cases, structural oppression may be recognised in theory while everyday practice mainly remains focused on individual assessment and intervention. K. Bell (2012) therefore calls for a post-conventional shift in which social work knowledge is understood as relational, holistic, and grounded in lived experience and collaboration. In this way, the proposed shift is not limited to how social work understands relationships among people but extends to how the profession conceptualises human life as embedded within ecological systems. This may create a link to debates on sustainability and the environmental turn in social work (see Peeters, 2012b).

In this respect, the incongruity between social work's modernist roots and recent efforts to promote environmental sustainability, for example through ecosocial work, creates a significant dilemma (Boetto, 2017, 2019). This is because ecosocial work emphasises holism, interdependence, and the inseparability of humans and the natural world (Boetto, 2016, 2017, 2019; Närhi & Matthies, 2016, 2025). However, if the profession continues to operate from assumptions that separate humans from nature and prioritise economic growth, it will struggle to respond coherently to ecological crises. Building on this critique, Boetto (2017) argues that greater coherence requires an ecologically centred reorientation. This involves moving from an

anthropocentric worldview to one that recognises interdependence and ecological limits (see Gray & Coates, 2015). However, such a shift cannot be reduced to new methods or added content. It requires transformation at the level of the profession's philosophical base and attention to the wider social and political systems that shape practice (Boetto, 2024) as well as those that create disadvantage and unequal power relationships (Närhi & Matthies, 2018).

To articulate this transformation, Boetto (2017) proposes the *transformative ecosocial model*, structured around three interconnected dimensions: *ontology* (being), *epistemology* (thinking), and *methodology* (doing). The model challenges the assumption that humans are autonomous and separate from nature, presenting identity as relational and ecologically embedded (Boetto, 2017). On this basis, environmental exploitation and social injustice are understood as interconnected and rooted in hierarchical and oppressive structures. This ontological shift encourages critical reflection on personal values and positionality and how they shape social workers' professional behaviour (Boetto, 2017, 2024). In this model, *ontology* forms the foundation and concerns the practitioner's way of being, including worldview, positionality, beliefs, attitudes, and lived experience. In this sense, the ontological dimension relates closely to the concept of the 'self' in practice and to how social workers understand their own location within social and ecological systems (Boetto, 2017, 2024).

*Epistemology*, which Boetto (2017) refers to as *thinking*, builds on this ontological base and concerns how professional knowledge, values, and ethics are understood and applied within an ecosocial practice approach. In this sense, epistemology also concerns *knowing* 'how to practice'. *Epistemology* involves applying social, cultural, and ecological knowledge, alongside professional ethics, to understand complex, interconnected social and environmental issues and to inform the development of ecosocial work interventions (Boetto, 2017, 2019). Boetto (2017) includes ecological justice, ecological literacy, Indigenous perspectives, ecofeminism, sustainability, degrowth, and global citizenship within this dimension. Justice is extended beyond a human-centred framework to acknowledge ecological interdependence and the intrinsic value of all living beings. The model questions dominant Western and positivist knowledge traditions and calls for decolonisation, including the recognition of Indigenous and Global South perspectives. It also challenges assumptions of continuous economic expansion by framing well-being as relational and environmentally situated, rather than defined mainly by individual economic success (Boetto, 2017). When well-being is understood in this way, it becomes part of the epistemological foundation of ecosocial work, with methodological consequences. How well-being is defined influences what is seen as relevant knowledge, what is measured, and how social work practice is organised (Boetto, 2017). Related arguments can be found in other social work and well-being literature. Within social work, promoting health and well-being in people's everyday environments is often presented as a key focus (Beddoe & Maidment, 2014; Crisp & Beddoe, 2013). Well-being is deeply embedded in

social work at both global and local policy levels (Gamble, 2012) and is also reflected in, for example, the global definition of social work adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014a), which links well-being to social development, social cohesion, human rights, and collective responsibility. In this sense, well-being is not only an individual outcome but a relational and structural concern. In this regard, there is a need for a model to improve well-being that encompasses not only economic but also environmental, social, and political dimensions (Gamble, 2012). This broader framing challenges narrow interpretations that equate well-being primarily with wealth or material growth. Growth-centred understandings of welfare are further questioned by Hirvilammi and Helne (2014), who point to the tension between economic expansion and ecological sustainability (Boetto, 2017). These contributions support the argument that ecosocial work requires a broader and more ecologically grounded understanding of well-being. Such a shift is needed not only in theory but also in method and in practice.

*Methodology* concerns the practical dimension of doing and is expected to align with ontological and epistemological commitments. It refers to the actions, interventions, and activities undertaken in ecosocial work practice, including efforts to support sustainable development (Boetto, 2017, 2024). Boetto (2017) outlines five interconnected levels within this methodological dimension to guide interventions, reflecting the multidimensional character of ecological and social problems: the *personal* level (self), the *individual* level, the *collective* level, the *community* level, and the *structural* level. Practice may therefore include individual support, community development, disaster response, collective mobilisation, and structural advocacy. Political engagement is central in methodology, as policy and structural change may shape both the environmental crisis and its unequal impacts. At the same time, Boetto (2017) notes that the methodological dimension remains underdeveloped in the literature, suggesting a need for further elaboration and a clearer articulation of practice strategies.

In other words, the *transformative ecosocial model* calls for a paradigmatic shift in social work. Rather than adding environmental concerns to existing frameworks, it seeks to redefine the profession's philosophical base through greater consistency across *being*, *thinking/knowing*, and *doing* (Boetto, 2017). However, questions of feasibility remain. In many Western contexts, social work is practised within organisations shaped by neoliberal governance and managerialism (K. Healy, 2022), and practitioners depend on human service organisations for employment, resources, and access to service users (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2022, 2025; Kindler, 2025). These structural conditions may constrain transformative, politically engaged ecosocial practice, as shown in several studies (see Boetto, 2024; Boetto et al., 2020, 2022; Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; McKinnon, 2013; Nöjd et al., 2024, 2025; Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021). The model can therefore be understood both as a normative vision for change and as a critical framework for examining tensions within contemporary social work.

### 3.3. The Having–Doing–Loving–Being model of relational well-being

In the ecosocial work literature, relational well-being – alongside decolonising practice and grassroots work – is often described as a central feature that distinguishes ecosocial work from conventional social work (K. Bell, 2019; Boetto, 2019; K. Rambaree, Powers, et al., 2019; Shackelford, 2025). The concept of relational well-being reshapes how well-being is understood by emphasising connection, reciprocity, and responsibility (Hirvilammi, 2015; Norton, 2012). It also stresses that social and ecological relationships must be sustained over time and that human well-being depends on ecosystem resources and services, while human actions affect those same systems (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015, 2019). Within the ecosocial work literature, whether it is implicitly implied or conceptualised as, for example, relational, collective, or sustainable well-being (Shackelford, 2025), the shared underlying idea behind relational well-being is that well-being is not only about individual conditions or access to material resources but also about the quality and sustainability of the relationships that make life possible.

The Having, Loving, and Being model of relational well-being was first developed by the Finnish sociologist Erik Allardt in his comparative Scandinavian welfare study (Allardt, 1975, 1976). Allardt was among the early scholars who argued that social science research needed to be reoriented because human activities were already having significant effects on the living environment and the Earth system, with consequences for human life (see Allardt, 1993; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015, 2019; Hirvilammi & Helne, 2014). He called for a broader understanding of welfare that includes environmental concerns, and his work was among the first welfare studies to consider environmental factors and related human needs when assessing a society's level of welfare (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019). In this way, a relational understanding of well-being was already present in his theory, since well-being was not separated from social and environmental conditions.

Allardt's model is a needs-based approach in which well-being is understood through three categories of needs: having, loving, and being (Allardt, 1975, 1976, 1993). *Having* refers to needs met through material and impersonal resources; *loving* refers to needs related to love, companionship, and solidarity; and *being* refers to needs connected to self-actualisation and the opposite of alienation (Allardt, 1976, 1993; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019). He described these as central conditions of human development and existence. Although Allardt briefly mentioned *doing*, such as leisure activities, as part of *being* (Allardt, 1993), he did not develop it as a separate dimension. Building on Allardt's work, Helne and Hirvilammi (Helne, 2021; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015, 2017, 2019; Hirvilammi & Helne, 2014) further developed the model into the Having–Doing–Loving–Being model of relational well-being. They argue that *doing* should be recognised as a distinct dimension because human activities have major social and ecological consequences. At the same time, they place all four dimensions on an explicit ecological foundation. In their interpretation, well-being is not only socially

relational but also ecologically embedded (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019). Human well-being is understood as nested within planetary ecosystems and dependent on ecological resources and services (Helne, 2021; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2017, 2019).

Within the Having–Doing–Loving–Being model, *having* refers to the satisfaction of needs through material resources provided by ecosystems (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2017, 2019). Drawing on Fromm’s (1976) distinction, Helne and Hirvilammi differentiate between *existential* and *excessive* having (Helne, 2021). *Existential* having concerns the material conditions necessary for survival and subsistence, such as clean water and fresh air (see Boetto, 2017), whereas *excessive* having refers to accumulation beyond need. In the context of sustainability and degrowth, the emphasis is on securing a decent and fair standard of living while recognising ecological limits (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019; Hirvilammi & Helne, 2014). The model therefore distinguishes needs from unlimited wants and questions the assumption that well-being depends on continuous economic growth (see Gough, 2017).

*Doing* refers to human activity and agency. Because human actions shape both social and ecological systems, *doing* becomes central in discussions of sustainable well-being (Hirvilammi & Helne, 2014). *Doing* should also involve ethically sustainable and responsible activities, including meaningful employment, leisure activities, and education (Boetto, 2017), and responsibility towards other beings and future generations (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2017, 2019). This is important because it positions human agency as both a source of well-being and a source of impact. *Doing* can be experienced as pleasurable, but it can also be meaningful. In this way, responsible forms of *doing* are understood as supporting personal meaning while also contributing to broader ecosocial transformation (Helne, 2021; Holden et al., 2018). Agency is therefore seen as a key resource for change.

*Loving* refers to caring and compassionate relationships. In the Having–Doing–Loving–Being model, *loving* includes not only relationships between humans but also connections with non-human animals and nature (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019). Additionally, since well-being is ecologically embedded, relationships with the natural world are considered essential rather than secondary (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2017, 2019; Hirvilammi & Helne, 2014). *Loving* extends across time and space, including concern for past and future generations and care for places ranging from one’s local environment to the planet as a whole (Helne, 2021). This broader understanding of care challenges the narrow image of the self-interested individual and emphasises interdependence, interconnection, and interrelation.

*Being* refers to physical, mental, and spiritual existence, and to what may be described as being fully human (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2017). It includes health, presence, self-actualisation, a meaningful life, personal growth, and a sense of wholeness and interconnectedness (Helne, 2021; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019). In contrast to *having*, which depends on finite material resources, *being* develops through practice and inner growth (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019). It also includes harmony with nature and a deeper sense of connection with the world (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015).

These emphases on meaning, growth, and self-realisation help explain why the Having–Doing–Loving–Being model is often described as eudaemonic in its understanding of well-being (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2017, 2019). A eudaemonic understanding of well-being distances itself from radical hedonism, where well-being is equated with maximum pleasure and the satisfaction of any desire (Fromm, 1976). Drawing on Aristotelian thought, eudaemonic approaches define well-being as living and acting well and being true to one’s deeper self (Helne, 2021; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019). This orientation involves flourishing, realising one’s potential, and achieving personal growth while also moving beyond a narrow focus on the isolated self to recognise one’s connection with others and the wider world (Fromm, 1976; Helne, 2021; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019). At the same time, the distinction between hedonic and eudaemonic approaches may be less rigid than often assumed (Helne, 2021). Reaching a level of well-being that is both adequate and adaptive requires elements of both hedonia and eudaemonia (Huta & Ryan, 2010), as pleasure need not be materialistic or harmful (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019). Critiques of hedonism mainly address radical forms of hedonia that ignore ethical and ecological consequences (White, 2016). Soper (2006) introduces the idea of alternative hedonism, in which material consumption is reduced while experiential and relational pleasures are strengthened, for example through health, free time, and social connection. From this perspective, enjoyment and sustainability do not exclude each other. Accordingly, the Having–Doing–Loving–Being model remains primarily eudaemonic while also allowing for sustainable forms of pleasure that contribute to meaningful and ecologically responsible lives (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019). This can be seen as *hedonic eudaemonia*, in which a flourishing life need not reject pleasure, and pleasurable experiences do not automatically undermine a meaningful or sustainable life (Helne, 2021). From this standpoint, *hedonic eudaemonia* takes a synthetic view of well-being, holding that it can include both feeling good and living well. In sustainability debates, there is a common assumption that pleasure is primarily associated with overconsumption, luxury, or environmentally and socially harmful lifestyles. Instead, *hedonic eudaemonia* suggests that enjoyment and sustainability are not necessarily opposites.

While the four need dimensions are analytically distinguishable, they are conceptualised as relationally constituted, so changes in one dimension shape, and are shaped by, the others (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2017, 2019). This relational view aligns with needs theories that treat needs as non-substitutable, where needs cannot substitute for one another (see Gough, 2017). Consequently, well-being cannot be secured through strong performance in a single domain, because no one, including *having*, can validly operate as a proxy for the rest (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019; Max-Neef et al., 1991). Well-being therefore appears as a multidimensional and relational whole rather than as success in only one area (see Hirvilammi & Helne, 2014). If well-being emerges through interaction between dimensions, policy approaches that prioritise a single domain are unlikely to generate broader improvements on their own. This has clear implications for policy

design: supporting well-being means aiming for balance across the four need dimensions through differentiated measures, while also recognising that interventions in one area can strengthen, weaken, or reshape possibilities in the others. For example, some policies may focus on reducing overconsumption while still securing a decent level of having (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2019), while others may aim to increase awareness of ecological limits in the pursuit of well-being and to strengthen need satisfaction in the dimensions of doing, loving, and being (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015).

Helne and Hirvilammi (2019) also argue that policies focused on improving well-being can gain stronger legitimacy and wider support for degrowth-oriented and sustainability-related changes. The Having–Doing–Loving–Being framework supports this approach by placing well-being directly within sustainability discussions. It also presents socio-ecological change not mainly as sacrifice, restrictions, or prohibitions but as reshaping the conditions for living well within ecological limits (Hirvilammi & Helne, 2014). It argues that the pursuit of well-being should be decoupled from economic growth and reconnected with ecological limits and social justice (Helne, 2021; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2017, 2019). This argument also sets a standard for what sustainability ‘should’ mean – that well-being and human need satisfaction are sustainable only when they are pursued through a balanced and responsible human–nature relationship (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015) and in ways that meet present needs without eroding the conditions through which future generations can meet their own (Gough, 2017). At the same time, ‘balance’ is not neutral, as decisions about acceptable balance and the priority of needs are shaped by power relations, resource constraints, and institutional mandates, and may produce trade-offs across dimensions even in policies designed to support well-being.

### **3.4. Psychological empowerment**

Empowerment has a central role in health promotion (Wallerstein, 1993), and it is also widely recognised as a core concept in social work. This is reflected in the global definition of social work, which states that empowerment is a central value (IFSW, 2014a). However, empowerment is also a contested concept. It is used in various ways across disciplines and contexts, and professionals may attach varied meanings to it. As a result, it can lose clarity and become an all-purpose term for ideas related to strengthening people and giving them power and control (Noordink et al., 2021).

Rappaport (1984) broadly defined empowerment as the process of gaining control over one’s life. In social work, Adams (2008) describes empowerment as the ability of individuals, groups, and communities to control their circumstances, exercise power, and achieve their goals, thereby improving their quality of life individually and collectively. These definitions suggest that empowerment concerns both agency and context and includes individual as well as collective dimensions. Empowerment can be understood as both a process and an outcome (Zimmerman, 1995, 2000). As a process, it refers to the ways in which people, organisations, and communities become

empowered, while as an outcome, it refers to the results that follow from these processes (Zimmerman, 1995). This makes empowerment dynamic and ongoing. Zimmerman (2000) distinguishes between psychological, organisational, and community empowerment, and Turunen (2020) similarly differentiates between individual, group, and community levels. At the individual level, the focus is on capacity building, self-efficacy, and personal agency; at the group level, attention is given to strengthening collective capacities; and at the community level, empowerment relates to structures, resources, and mobilisation (Sjöberg et al., 2015). Chang et al. (2022) also describe empowerment as occurring at both individual and collective levels, including psychological, social, economic, and political forms. These frameworks are useful because they show that empowerment can be analysed across interconnected levels, where shifts at one level may be shaped by processes occurring at others. For example, individual empowerment is rarely purely personal, as it is produced and constrained by relationships, collective conditions, and broader structural arrangements.

This multi-level framing aligns with conceptualisations of empowerment as an active social process that develops in relation to others and varies across environments and among the people involved (Cavaliere & Neves Almeida, 2020). It is therefore difficult to separate the individual from the broader community, or the personal from the environmental. From this perspective, empowerment does not take place in isolation. Environmental and relational conditions, including interpersonal connections and power relations, play a significant role in empowerment processes (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Doneys et al., 2020; Mafle Ferreira Duarte et al., 2021; Naezer et al., 2017). In this sense, empowerment is best understood as situated within wider social contexts rather than as an individual attribute. It occurs within broader social and environmental conditions shaped by everyday practices, relationships, and institutional structures. These conditions and structures can either enable or constrain empowerment. At the same time, despite increasing interest in empowerment across policy and practice, research that explicitly examines how environmental and relational factors enhance or restrict empowerment is still limited (Berñe et al., 2023).

These broader conceptualisations of empowerment provide an important foundation for understanding youth empowerment. As empowerment is embedded in social and institutional contexts, it cannot be assumed to operate in the same way across different contexts or age groups (see Zimmerman, 2000). Young people generally occupy positions with less formal authority in schools, families, and communities. For this reason, youth empowerment is often conceptualised differently than the process that adults experience, namely as a form of empowerment shaped by young people's specific social position, their developmental stage, and their more limited access to structural power compared with adults (Peterson et al., 2011). From this perspective, youth empowerment is closely connected to how young people act within institutions and social settings where adults usually have formal authority. Youth empowerment frameworks thus often include

developmental, relational, and structural aspects that are given less attention in adult empowerment approaches (Berñe et al., 2023).

This orientation implies that relationships between young people and adults are not peripheral to empowerment but central to the process. Adults' role is crucial in shaping whether young people's participation is meaningful or merely symbolic. Adults may either reinforce existing hierarchies or contribute to more equitable forms of participation. In practice, supporting youth empowerment involves creating safe and credible spaces for young people's voices, listening seriously to their perspectives, sharing decision-making power, and providing guidance and resources without assuming control (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014; Salusky et al., 2014). Within youth empowerment research, a key component is socio-political control, which refers to young people's belief in their capacity to influence social and political environments, exercise leadership, and participate in decisions that affect their lives (Peterson et al., 2011). This focus illustrates how youth empowerment extends beyond individual self-confidence to include engagement with broader social and political structures. From this perspective, it is important to ask whether, and under what conditions, young people can translate this perceived influence into action within the limits and opportunities of their social contexts. In this sense, empowerment requires not only that young people develop capacities but also that they can implement and exercise them in real situations (Berñe et al., 2023; Soler-Masó et al., 2025; Úcar Martínez et al., 2017). Thus, youth empowerment supports young people in developing the skills needed to analyse their circumstances and to take action to improve their health (Chrifou et al., 2024). These concerns are also reflected in policy ambitions, where empowerment is framed as something that should be supported through concrete opportunities for participation and connection. For example, the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 positions youth empowerment as a central priority and structures its framework around the principles 'engage, connect, empower' (Soler-Masó et al., 2025). These discussions can be situated within Zimmerman's (1995, 2000) theory of psychological empowerment, which has widely been used to inform research and practical interventions with both youth and adults across different fields and areas of practice (Peterson et al., 2011). At the same time, the strong influence of this framework has shaped the field's direction, as most academic research on empowerment has focused mainly on psychological empowerment (Berñe et al., 2023; Soler-Masó et al., 2025) whereas organisational and community empowerment have received comparatively less attention (Röger-Offergeld et al., 2023).

Zimmerman's psychological empowerment theory explains how empowerment develops and is expressed at the individual level. Yet it recognises that individual empowerment is shaped by socio-political control and broader contextual conditions, including ecological and cultural influences (Chang et al., 2025). Psychological empowerment involves beliefs about one's competence, efforts to exert control, and an understanding of the socio-political environment (Peterson et al., 2011; Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). There are three interrelated components of

psychological empowerment: *intrapersonal*, *interactional*, and *behavioural* (Zimmerman, 1995, 2000). These three components of psychological empowerment together describe an empowered person as someone who believes that they can influence a particular context (the intrapersonal component), understands how the system in that context operates (the interactional component), and takes action to exercise influence within it (the behavioural component) (Zimmerman, 1995).

The *intrapersonal* component concerns how individuals perceive themselves and the extent to which they believe they can influence their life situation and socio-political environment (Chang et al., 2025). It includes positive variables such as perceived control, self-efficacy, competence, mastery, and motivation to influence one's own life (Peterson et al., 2011; Zimmerman, 1995). Perceived control refers to the belief that one can exert influence in different areas, such as family, work, or socio-political contexts (Zimmerman, 1995). These beliefs are central because they provide the motivation and initiative to work towards desired goals; without a sense of capability, individuals are less likely to act or to learn what is required (Zimmerman, 1995, 2000). In contrast, when individuals experience social isolation, powerlessness, normlessness, or helplessness, psychological empowerment tends to be lower (Rappaport, 1984; Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

The *interactional* component refers to how individuals understand their community and socio-political environment, including their awareness of possible courses of action, emphasising not only their belief in influence but also their knowledge of how a context functions and which strategies are realistic within it (Zimmerman, 1990, 1995). A central concept is critical awareness, defined as the ability to analyse one's social and political situation. This involves recognising who holds power, what resources those in power control, how they are connected to the issue at hand, and what shapes their decision-making; when to engage in or avoid conflict; and how to identify and mobilise the resources needed to pursue desired goals (Zimmerman, 2000). Related to this is one's understanding of causal agents, meaning the capacity to identify who or what influences outcomes in a specific setting, such as decision-makers, organisational structures, material conditions, or public events, and the factors that shape their actions (Röger-Offergeld et al., 2023; Zimmerman, 1995). The interactional component also includes the development of skills such as decision-making, problem-solving, and leadership, which can be acquired in participatory contexts and applied across different areas of life (Zimmerman, 1990, 1995). In this way, knowledge, practical skills, and the ability to mobilise resources create a link between perceived control and concrete action, connecting intrapersonal beliefs with behavioural participation.

The *behavioural* component refers to the concrete actions individuals take to influence their lives and the socio-political environment (Zimmerman, 1995, 2000). While the intrapersonal component concerns beliefs about control and the interactional component concerns understanding of context, the behavioural component focuses on participation and direct involvement.

It includes engagement in collective action, participation in voluntary or mutual help organisations, and individual efforts to influence social or political conditions (Zimmerman, 2000). This component can take different forms depending on the setting. For example, young people may participate in a sports team, contribute to a student newspaper, or join a school association (Zimmerman, 1995). In this way, empowerment is expressed through active engagement in everyday contexts. The behavioural component can also include coping behaviours, such as managing stress and adapting to change, that help individuals maintain a sense of control under challenging circumstances (Zimmerman, 1990, 1995, 2000). Importantly, the specific action matters less than the effort to exert control and participate, often with others (Zimmerman, 2000). However, visible participation does not automatically mean that a person has strong critical awareness or a strong sense of control. The components of psychological empowerment are not hierarchically ordered and do not necessarily develop in sequence (Zimmerman, 1995, 2000). A person may take part in collective activities without strong critical awareness, or understand power structures but choose not to act (Zimmerman, 1995). Empowerment thus involves different combinations of perceived control, contextual understanding, and behavioural involvement, rather than a fixed progression across components.

### **3.5. Summary of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks**

*Ecosocial work* provides the overarching perspective and frames social work with youth as shaped by interconnected social, environmental, and structural conditions (see Närhi & Matthies, 2016, 2018). Within this perspective, Boetto's *transformative ecosocial model* (see Boetto, 2017, 2019) guides the analysis of how an ecosocial orientation is incorporated in municipal youth work in Gävle. The model focuses on the relationship between practitioners' assumptions about people and the world (being), the knowledge and values that guide their reasoning (thinking/knowing), and the practices they enact (doing). It also makes it possible to locate youth work across levels of intervention, from individual and group work to organisational, community, and political action, and to identify tensions between ecosocial ambitions and institutional conditions.

Helne's and Hirvilammi's *Having–Doing–Loving–Being model* is used to clarify what is meant by youth well-being and to examine how well-being is shaped by social and ecological contexts (Helne, 2021; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2017, 2019). It supports analyses of which dimensions of well-being are promoted or neglected in practice: material conditions and opportunities (having), participation and everyday activity (doing), relationships and belonging (loving), and identity, meaning, and recognition (being). The model also helps relate well-being to ecological limits and to questions of sustainable development.

Zimmerman's theory of *psychological empowerment* is used to interpret findings on participation and power in youth-focused social work (see

Zimmerman, 1990, 1995, 2000). Empowerment is often described as a central aim in social work, yet it is frequently approached from a predominantly anthropocentric perspective (Chang et al., 2022; Norton, 2012). In ecosocial work, empowerment is also connected to collective participation, advocacy, and community development, where individual capacities are understood in relation to wider processes of social change (Chang et al., 2025; Närhi, 2025; Närhi & Matthies, 2018; Peeters, 2012b; Schusler et al., 2019). In this thesis, empowerment is understood as situated in social and ecological conditions. It includes *intrapersonal*, *interactional*, and *behavioural* dimensions, but it also depends on access to resources, recognition and belonging in relationships, opportunities for meaningful participation, and sustainable environments.

Together, these perspectives support analysis of: (i) how ecosocial commitments are articulated and enacted in youth work in Gävle, (ii) which forms of well-being are enabled through practice, and (iii) how working-life capacities and empowerment are supported through individual, social, and environmental conditions that shape young people's lives.

## 4. Methodology

My doctoral project comprises four studies (see Table 7). Study I traces how ecosocial orientations emerge in everyday empowerment work; Study II centres on young people's narratives of health, well-being, and working-life capacities; Study III investigates how municipal organisations seek to promote these outcomes while negotiating sustainability obligations; and Study IV draws on the datasets examining how local strategies may be interpreted and further developed.

This project employs a qualitative approach across all four studies, which may be perceived as a weakness. However, a qualitative research design is appropriate when the aim is to understand people's experiences, perspectives, and the meanings they attach to them, meanings that are later interpreted by researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hammarberg et al., 2016; I. Shaw & Holland, 2014). For this reason, a qualitative approach was employed across all studies, as their primary aims were to explore and understand the meanings, perceptions, and practices related to the research objectives from participants' perspectives. Data were collected using methods suited to capturing these complex understandings, such as interviews, photovoice, and focus groups. These methods are especially effective for exploring beliefs, attitudes, and norms within a specific context (see Krueger & Casey, 2015; Patton, 2015; Rubin & Babbie, 2017; Tracy, 2025; C. C. Wang, 2006).

Across the studies, thematic analysis was the primary approach to data analysis. In Study I, the analysis was inspired by thematic network analysis (K. Rambaree, 2018; K. Rambaree & Faxelid, 2013), whereas in Studies II–IV it was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2021b) approach. Qualitative research includes many different analytic traditions, but many of them share an interest in identifying patterns of meaning in data. Thematic Analysis makes this focus explicit. It is sometimes presented as a single standard method, but it is better understood as a group of related approaches that share common features while differing in their assumptions and analytic steps (Braun & Clarke, 2020, 2021b). I chose Thematic Analysis because it centres participants' experiences and how they make sense of their lives, and because it provides a flexible way of identifying, examining, and interpreting patterns within and across datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020). This flexibility also means that it can be used across different epistemological positions, theoretical perspectives, and data-generation methods in the studies (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Table 7. Overview of the four studies.

<b>Study</b>	<b>Data collection</b>	<b>Method of data analysis</b>	<b>Theoretical and conceptual framework for interpreting the data</b>
<b>Study I</b>  Twenty professionals who worked with youth in different settings.	Twenty semi-structured interviews (30–60 minutes each), conducted in 2019	Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, combined with Abductive Thematic Network Analysis (K. Rambaree, 2018; K. Rambaree & Fixelid, 2013), was carried out using ATLAS.ti (program for assisting with qualitative data analysis)	Empowerment  Ecosocial work  Foucauldian discourse, power, and knowledge
<b>Study II</b>  Eleven youth aged 15–19	Two photovoice group discussions (70 and 80 minutes), along with two interviews with three participants from Group 1, conducted in 2023	An inductive thematic analysis, inspired by Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (2019,2021b) was carried out using ATLAS.ti	Having–Doing–Loving–Being model of relational well-being  Psychological empowerment
<b>Study III</b>  Ten staff members from municipal social services and other municipal social units	Two focus group discussions (75 and 90 minutes) were conducted in 2023	An abductive approach was combined with thematic analysis, inspired by Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis (2021b), and carried out using ATLAS.ti	Ecosocial work  Community work
<b>Study IV</b>  This study uses data collected in Studies I, II, and III. These data were re-analysed based on the research aim and questions of Study IV		An abductive thematic analysis (J. Thompson, 2022a, 2022b) was carried out using ATLAS.ti	Theory of human need  Having–Doing–Loving–Being model of relational well-being

In Thematic Analysis, analysis develops through codes and themes. A code is a short analytic label applied to a part of the data to capture one clear idea or observation (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Coding helps organise the material and supports the early development of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b). A theme is different from a code. It is an analytic result that the

researcher creates through and beyond the coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020, 2021b). A theme represents a shared pattern of meaning across the dataset, organised around a central concept. Themes are therefore interpretive accounts, not topics that simply exist in the data. They can bring together material that seems different at first and include several dimensions. For this reason, interview guide headings or broad topics are not themes in themselves, because themes explain patterned meaning rather than only summarising what was discussed (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021b, 2022).

In developing codes and themes across all studies, I listened to the recordings, read the transcripts, and conducted open inductive coding to identify initial meanings. I coded both semantic meanings, which are explicit and directly stated, and latent meanings, which are implicit and underlying. The initial codes were flexible and non-mutually exclusive, and they were developed both within (Studies I, II, III) and across datasets (Study IV). Codes that showed shared patterns of meaning were then grouped into preliminary themes. These themes were reviewed in relation to coherence, understood as recurring and patterned meanings within and across the datasets, as well as in relation to their distinctiveness from one another. When necessary, themes were merged, refined, or divided. The process was interpretive and reflexive, recognising that analysis is shaped by the researcher's theoretical positioning and prior understandings (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

The data analysis process was also interpretive and reflexive. In ATLAS.ti, I wrote reflexive memos to record reflections, thoughts, and comments while working with the literature, the interview transcripts, participants' photographs, and parts of the audio recordings. I then compared emerging patterns with relevant theories to identify the most suitable explanations in relation to each study's aim.

#### **4.1. Study I**

Study I explores how an ecosocial perspective is incorporated into youth empowerment activities and practices in Gävle, and how these practices relate to sustainable development

##### ***Sample and recruitment***

Purposive sampling (see Clark et al., 2021) was used to recruit participants (see Table 8) who could contribute relevant and varied perspectives on the study's aim. Participants worked in organisations based in Gävle, including municipal social services, other municipal units, and civil society organisations. These organisations were engaged in youth-related work connected to sustainable development, including activities linked to the Sustainable Development Goals. The sampling strategy also included the private sector; one private organisation agreed to participate but withdrew before data collection began. The main eligibility criteria were that participants' professional roles involved working with young people aged 15

years and older in Gävle, and included responsibilities related to sustainability and/or social issues.

Table 8. Participants in Study I, adapted from Chang et al. (2022, p. 8).

<b>Participants (age, gender, work description)</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
<b>#1</b> (40–50, F, unit manager working with social sustainability) <b>#2</b> (30–40, M, social sustainability)	A: municipal public sector
<b>#3</b> (40–50, F, developing environmental strategies with schools) <b>#4</b> (40–50, F, project leader for education for sustainable development) <b>#5</b> (60–70, F, manager within education and school systems)	B: municipal public sector
<b>#6</b> (20–30, F, coordinator for 'social well-being' towards tenants)	C: public sector, municipally owned company
<b>#7</b> (60–70, M, youth centre manager) <b>#8</b> (30–40, M, youth centre leader) <b>#9</b> (40–50, F, youth centre leader)	D: non-profit association/civil society
<b>#10</b> (40–50, M, deputy manager for field social workers) <b>#11</b> (30–40, F, field social worker)	E: municipal public sector
<b>#12</b> (40–50, F, unit manager at support and prevention unit) <b>#13</b> (30–40, F, family therapist) <b>#14</b> (60–70, F, family therapist)	F: municipal public sector
<b>#15</b> (40–50, F, social sustainability) <b>#16</b> (50–60, F, project leader for environmental work)	G: municipal public sector, municipal association/local authorities
<b>#17</b> (30–40, M, youth centre manager) <b>#18</b> (30–40, M, deputy manager at youth centre)	H: non-profit association/civil society
<b>#19</b> (30–40, M, working with prevention programmes and education)	I: municipal public sector
<b>#20</b> (50–60, M, high school deputy manager)	J: municipal public sector

### **Data collection**

Before data collection, organisations and potential participants received written information by post describing the study and its ethical considerations. When staff roles and contact details were available on organisational websites, individuals were contacted directly before a formal request was submitted to the organisation. When such information was not available, managers were contacted instead.

Data were gathered between September and December 2019. Prior to the group discussions, all participants gave both written and verbal consent, and their identities were protected using numerical codes. After obtaining consent from both organisations and participants, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews lasted 30–60 minutes. The interview guide was refined in summer 2019 following two pilot interviews. It covered three thematic areas: (1) the organisation's activities, (2) work related to the Sustainable Development Goals and ecosocial concerns, and (3) conditions for what participants described as effective or successful work with youth. The guide included 22 open-ended questions, although not all questions were used in every interview. All interviews were conducted in Swedish.

### **Data analysis**

The data analysis combined Abductive Thematic Network Analysis (ATNA) (K. Rambaree, 2018; K. Rambaree & Faxelid, 2013) with Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017; T. H. Khan & MacEachen, 2021). Taken together, these approaches constitute a form of thematic discourse analysis (see Taylor & Ussher, 2001), which understands language as a context-dependent phenomenon and as shaping how people think and act. The analysis examined recurrent patterns in how participants spoke and made sense of their context through repeated formulations, concepts, and interpretive logics that shaped their accounts. These recurring interpretive structures formed the discourses identified in the study.

I initiated the analysis using ATLAS.ti. It began with an inductive, open-coding, data-driven approach. Relevant segments of the empirical material were coded, with decisions about what was 'worth coding' guided by the research aim and questions. Themes were then developed through coding, categorisation, and analytical reflection. The themes were considered as part of an interconnected network that supported the overall analytic interpretation. This process resulted in a model that offered a coherent explanation of the data patterns in relation to the research aim. The themes were then further examined in relation to the research aim and theoretical framework, in consultation with the second author, Komalsingh Rambaree, and the third and fourth authors.

Throughout these steps, Foucauldian discourse analysis was also applied to analyse and interpret both the themes and the model. This involved identifying discourses that enabled or constrained what could be spoken, by whom, and in which contexts, as well as recognising what remained unsaid (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017). In doing so, Foucauldian discourse

analysis helped highlight how language, spoken or written, operated within power relations, shaping subjectivities and producing practices through power/knowledge dynamics (T. H. Khan & MacEachen, 2021).

## 4.2. Study II

Study II examines how youth in Gävle perceive relationships between their health, well-being, and working-life capacities and environmental conditions in everyday life.

### **Sample and recruitment**

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants (see Table 9).

Table 9. Participants in Study II, adapted from Chang et al. (2025, p. 402).

Group	Age, gender	Information
<b>Group 1</b>	#1 (18, M)	Final year of upper-secondary school; Part-time employment
	#2 (18, F)	Final year of upper-secondary school
	#3 (19, F) *	Final year of upper-secondary school; Member of a youth centre
	#4 (15, F)	Secondary school; Member of a youth centre
	#5 (18, F)	Final year of upper-secondary school; Part-time employment; Member of a youth centre
<b>Group 2</b>	#6 (16, M)	Upper-secondary school; Part-time employment; Member of a youth centre
	#7 (18, M)	Final year of upper-secondary school; Summer employment
	#8 (19, F) *	Almost full-time employment
	#9 (19, M)	Final year of upper-secondary school
	#10 (16, F)	Upper-secondary school; Part-time employment; Member of a youth centre
	#11 (19, F)	Almost full-time employment

\* 19 years old when consented to participate but turned 20 before the group discussion.

Recruitment, however, was much more difficult than expected. The process began in January 2022 with a local youth environmental group, Fridays for Future, being contacted – but I was informed that the group was no longer active. I then approached schools, youth organisations, youth centres, and private networks via email, telephone, and in-person visits. Young people were also approached directly. Many organisations reported that workload and other organisational pressures limited their ability to facilitate access to youth groups. Most young people who were contacted declined to participate, often citing a lack of time or limited interest in the token of appreciation offered. After several months, only three participants had been recruited. At that point, the second author, Päivi Turunen, joined the recruitment efforts. Despite our combined efforts, only eleven participants had been recruited by the end of January 2023, which was below the intended minimum of fifteen. The main criteria for participation were that individuals had to be aged 15–19 and either live in Gävle, attend school there, or regularly take part in activities in Gävle, specifically within programmes offered by the organisations included in Study I. Participants also needed to have access to a mobile phone with a camera.

### **Data collection**

The eleven participants were divided into two groups for the photovoice discussions. Photovoice was used as the primary method for data generation because it positions participants as experts in their own lives and enables them to document and communicate their experiences through photographs (C. C. Wang, 2003; C. C. Wang & Burris, 1997). A central aim of photovoice is to support empowerment by helping participants identify and present their strengths and concerns in ways that can initiate social action and change (C. C. Wang, 1999; C. C. Wang & Burris, 1997). In this sense, empowerment is an inbuilt concept in photovoice (C. C. Wang, 1999, 2006), which aligns with the focus of this thesis on youth participation and voice. This focus on participation is important because youth voice has clear implications for social work practice, yet it remains limited in (eco)social work discourse (Schusler et al., 2019). Social workers can use different approaches to engage and promote youth voices in research and practice, and photovoice is one such method that makes youth participation visible and meaningful (Sprague Martinez et al., 2018). In Nordic countries, however, photovoice has been used to only a limited extent in research on young people’s health and well-being (Lögdberg et al., 2020). The photovoice method involves three steps: producing photos, discussing them in groups, and sharing the results with stakeholders who may support change (C. C. Wang, 2006). Dissemination is a central component of photovoice, as it aims to promote dialogue, raise awareness, and promote potential social action (C. C. Wang & Burris, 1997).

Before taking photographs, both groups attended an online information session led by either me alone or the second author and me. We explained the study’s purpose, expectations for participation, the photovoice process, and the ethical and legal issues related to taking and sharing images. Participants were then asked to photograph aspects of their daily lives related to health

and well-being, as well as their current or anticipated working life. After two weeks, they selected five photos to submit. Before the group discussions, all participants provided written and verbal consent, and their identities were protected using numerical identifiers. The discussions were moderated by the second author and me, and followed the SHOWeD framework: What do you *See* here? What's really *Happening* here? How does this relate to *Our* lives? *Why* does this situation, concern, or strength exist? What can we *Do* about it? (C. C. Wang, 2006, p. 151). The SHOWeD framework was adapted to include questions related to health, well-being, and sustainable development. Participants briefly introduced their five photos, then discussed one in depth. Group 1's discussion lasted about eighty minutes, and Group 2's about seventy. Additional follow-up discussions were held with participants #2 in one session, and with participants #3 and #5 together in another, to clarify earlier contributions. At the end of each session, participants identified the main points that had emerged and reflected on their significance. All discussions were held in Swedish and recorded; I transcribed and translated them into English.

Participants were also asked to comment on the recruitment difficulties. They suggested that more engaging communication, research topics presented in ways closer to their interests, monetary compensation, and the involvement of young people in the recruitment process might have encouraged greater participation. Their reflections indicated that our initial recruitment strategies did not fully resonate with the intended participant group.

### **Data analysis**

The data were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke's (2021b) approach. This process involved familiarising ourselves with the data, generating codes, developing and reviewing themes, and producing the written analysis. Although we adopted an inductive approach, it was 'grounded in' the data rather than a form of 'pure' induction, as researchers cannot enter a theoretical vacuum when conducting thematic analysis (see Braun and Clarke, 2021a, 2021b). For this reason, the codes were repeatedly cross-checked against the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, which provided direction, albeit not a prescription, regarding what to attend to and ensured relevance to the research aim and questions. Codes that shared patterned meaning were grouped, interpreted, and developed into themes. I conducted the primary analysis using ATLAS.ti, while the second author conducted an independent analysis using Word documents. We met regularly to review, refine, and name the themes, which we then examined in relation to the research aim and theoretical framework in consultation with the third and fourth authors. Consistent with Braun and Clarke (2021a, 2021b, 2021c), the analysis relied on a flexible interpretation, with codes and themes shaped through the interplay of data, analytical work, and our subjectivity. In line with Braun and Clarke (2019), we did not seek consensus but prioritised engaged and reflective interpretation.

### 4.3. Study III

Study III explores how municipal social services and social units in Gävle conceptualise ecosocial perspectives in practice to promote youth health, well-being, and working-life capacities, and how they connect this work to sustainable development within local communities.

#### **Sample and recruitment**

Ten participants were recruited through purposive sampling and organised into two groups (see Table 10).

Table 10. Participants in Study III, copied from Chang, Sjöberg, et al. (2026, p. 6).

Group	Participants (group.participant number)	Working with
<b>Group 1</b>	1.1 <sup>†</sup>	Casework with clients up to 18 years old
	1.2 <sup>‡</sup>	Outreach work directly in neighbourhoods, aimed at all municipal citizens, but especially children and youth
	1.3 <sup>‡</sup>	Casework with clients aged 6 to 20
	1.4 <sup>‡</sup>	Same as 1.2
<b>Group 2</b>	2.1	All municipal citizens
	2.2	Adults in various organisations working with children and youth
	2.3	Same as 2.2
	2.4	Same as 2.1
	2.5	Same as 2.2 and 2.3
	2.6	Specific municipal citizens using the service of the organisation

**Note:**

\* Social work degree

† Statutory role

‡ Non-statutory with a preventive/support role towards clients or municipal citizens

## **Data collection**

Participants for this focus group study were recruited through purposive sampling via emails and phone calls by the first and second authors. The participants were then divided into two focus groups, which is within the recommended range for focus group discussions (see Guest et al., 2017).

Data were collected through two focus group discussions. In each discussion, participants explored the study topics by drawing on their knowledge, experiences, perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes through moderated interaction (Clark et al., 2021; Krueger, 1998; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Follow-up questions were asked when needed to clarify or deepen the discussion (see Clark et al., 2021). Focus group discussions are designed to generate data not only on what participants think, but also on how meanings are formed through group interaction (Barbour, 2018; Krueger & Casey, 2015). The open discussion format supports in-depth interaction and collaborative meaning-making, enabling participants to agree, disagree, and build on one another's perspectives. This group dynamic is a key strength of focus groups and differs from that of individual interviews, which do not capture the same negotiation and shared sense-making (Guest et al., 2017; Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Group 1 consisted of four professionals from municipal social services, but recruitment here was challenging because many staff were experiencing heavy workloads and organisational changes, especially within the child welfare unit. Group 2 included six professionals from other municipal social units. Some of these participants had previously taken part in Study I, which may represent a potential limitation due to responder bias, as their earlier involvement could influence their responses during this study.

Before participating, all participants received written and verbal information about the project and provided written and verbal consent. The focus group discussions were held in Swedish, recorded, and lasted 75–90 minutes. The second author and I moderated the group discussions, using open discussion and introducing specific questions as needed (see Clark et al., 2021). The method relies on interaction and collaborative meaning-making among participants, which was central to the data collection process in this study. Participants were invited to discuss three central questions related to their work with young people: how they understood the relevance of an environmental perspective in their work and the interconnectedness between social and environmental perspectives and sustainable development; how these concepts were connected to their efforts to promote youth health and well-being; and what opportunities and challenges they encountered in this area. These questions were designed to gather institutional and professional perspectives, explore development and implementation possibilities, identify practical barriers, and highlight gaps between knowledge, policy, and practice relevant to the research aim.

### ***Data analysis***

The analysis drew on Braun and Clarke's (201b) approach to thematic analysis, which emphasises reflexivity and shared interpretation among authors. After each focus group, the second author and I discussed the session and our initial impressions. I transcribed the recordings, translated the material into English, and carried out the first round of inductive open coding. These early codes were organised according to their shared meanings and developed into initial thematic groupings. The second author then read the transcripts, considered the emerging themes, and added additional codes.

As we continued working with the material, both of us adjusted and refined the themes and the conceptual framework guiding the study. This process indicated that although our analysis was inductive, it was grounded in the data rather than representing a form of 'pure' induction, since researchers inevitably bring theoretical awareness to the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). We repeatedly compared the data with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, thereby engaging in an abductive process. In the final stage, the themes were reviewed and refined in collaboration with the other co-authors, resulting in the final thematic interpretation presented in the findings.

### **4.4. Study IV**

Study IV explores how local social policies and practices in Gävle can be understood and further developed to incorporate an ecosocial perspective that strengthens youth health, well-being, and working-life capacities in relation to sustainable development.

#### ***Sample and data collection***

This study builds on data collected initially for Studies I, II, and III. For Study IV, these datasets were revisited and re-analysed to address its specific research aim. As such, Study IV is not a synthesis of the results of Studies I, II, and III. While the original studies focused on various aspects of sustainable development, including youth perspectives, professionals' views, and ecosocial practices, the re-analysis in Study IV applied a new analytical lens centred on the concept of 'needs' within the frameworks of ecosocial work, sustainable development, and ecosocial policy. This reorientation enabled the identification of new patterns and insights that had not been the focus of the earlier analyses.

### Dataset 1 participants

Twenty qualitative interviews were carried out in 2019 with professionals engaged in work with and for youth across different settings. The interviews, which each lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, were conducted in Swedish and subsequently transcribed in their substantial parts.

### Dataset 2 participants

A photovoice study was conducted in 2023 involving 11 youth, divided into two groups. The group discussions lasted between 70 and 80 minutes. Three participants from the first group were interviewed again for verification. All discussions and interviews were conducted in Swedish and subsequently transcribed in full.

### Dataset 3 participants

Two focus group discussions were conducted in 2023 with ten municipal staff members – four from social services and six from other social units – who were engaged in work both directly and indirectly with youth. The group discussions lasted between 75 and 90 minutes, were held in Swedish, and were transcribed in full.

**S1 refers to participants in Dataset 1, S2 to participants in Dataset 2, and S3 to participants in Dataset 3**

Municipal employees	Youth (15–19 years old)	Employees in non-profit organisations
S1.1 S1.12 S3.1	S2.1 S2.6	S1.7
S1.2 S1.13 S3.2	S2.2 S2.7	S1.8
S1.3 S1.14 S3.3	S2.3 S2.8	S1.9
S1.4 S1.15 S3.4	S2.4 S2.9	S1.17
S1.5 S1.16 S3.5	S2.5 S2.10	S1.18
S1.6 S1.19 S3.6	S2.11	
S1.10 S1.20 S3.7		
S1.11 S1.21 S3.8		
S3.9		
S3.10		

Figure 2. Participants in Study IV, copied from Chang, Rambaree, et al. (2026).

### Data analysis

The analysis was conducted using an abductive thematic approach, informed by J. Thompson's (2022a, 2022b) work and inspired by reflexive thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2021b, 2022). In abductive research, the researcher does not approach the material as a blank slate. Existing concepts and theoretical perspectives provide a frame that helps to focus attention and avoid drifting towards observations that are not relevant to the research aim (van Hulst & Visser, 2025). At the same time, the analysis does not aim to fit the data into predefined categories or to confirm a theory. Rather, abductive reasoning seeks the most plausible and meaningful interpretation through an ongoing dialogue between empirical material and theoretical perspectives while remaining open to revising or combining theoretical ideas when needed (Thompson, 2022a, 2022b).

I began the analytical process by repeatedly listening to the recordings and carefully reading the transcripts. An open and inductive coding strategy was

used to identify initial meanings in the material. Codes that showed shared patterns of meaning were then grouped into preliminary themes. Throughout the analysis, emerging themes were continuously compared with relevant theoretical perspectives. This iterative movement between data and theory supported the identification of explanations that were consistent with the study's aim while remaining grounded in the empirical material. The final themes were reviewed and refined in discussion with the co-authors. The purpose of these discussions was not to reach consensus or establish inter-rater reliability, but to critically reflect on interpretations and to treat researcher subjectivity as a resource in the analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b).

#### **4.5. Ethical considerations**

The doctoral project received approval from *Etikprövningsmyndigheten*, the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Ref. 2021-00426; March 2021), and comprises three empirical datasets presented across four studies. Based on the study design and target participants for Study I, and in consultation with guidance from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, the research team concluded that a formal ethical review was not required. Nonetheless, a full description of Study I was included in the application submitted to *Etikprövningsmyndigheten* to ensure complete transparency throughout the overall project approval process. All studies were conducted in accordance with the Swedish Research Council's guidelines on good research practice (Swedish Research Council, 2017, 2024) and the university's policy for the treatment of personal data, as outlined in the General Data Protection Regulation. Before data collection, the team also reviewed and followed the Swedish Act (2003:460) concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans (*Lag (2003:460) om etikprövning av forskning som avser människor*) (Riksdagen, n.d.).

Participants comprised adult representatives from youth organisations and municipal units (Studies I and III), as well as young people aged 15–19 years (Study II). Recruitment proceeded via organisational telephone and mailing lists, as well as professional networks, with no dependency relationships or gatekeeping that could compromise voluntariness. Information sheets detailing the study aims, procedures, anticipated time commitment, potential risks and benefits, data handling, and participant rights were distributed to all prospective participants.

Written informed consent was obtained before any interview, focus group discussion, or photovoice session. Participants were reminded that participation was voluntary, that they could decline to answer any question, and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty or the need to provide a reason. For youth participants in Study II, participation and consent procedures complied with applicable Swedish guidance for research with minors and institutional policy. Young people from 15 years old are considered competent to provide their own consent to participate, unless specific circumstances indicate otherwise (e.g. limited decision-making

capacity or safeguarding concerns), in which case parental/guardian consent and the young person's agreement should be obtained (see Etikprövningsmyndigheten, n.d.). As a token of appreciation, each youth participant in Study II received two cinema tickets at the end of the photovoice session; this modest reimbursement acknowledged the time contributed without constituting undue influence.

With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Direct identifiers (e.g. names, email addresses, and telephone numbers) were stored separately from transcripts. Audio files, digital photos, transcripts, and other associated analytical materials are held in ATLAS.ti, where each study project is password-protected. The projects are accessible only via ATLAS.ti installed on my university-provided computer, which is itself password-protected and subject to institutional access controls. Only the research team had access to the data, and this access was granted only when I shared the data through access-controlled university systems. The participants were informed that the findings would be disseminated in anonymised forms through national and international conferences, peer-reviewed articles, and this thesis.

I chose to name Gävle rather than use a generic description (for example, 'a mid-sized Swedish town') for three main reasons. First, place matters analytically in ecosocial work. When implementing a global framework such as sustainable development, or responding to global ecosocial challenges like climate change, both the possibilities and limitations for practice are shaped by local histories, infrastructures, governance, and environmental conditions. Naming the municipality therefore preserves this specificity and strengthens the study's explanatory value. Second, making the setting explicit allows readers, particularly (and hopefully) practitioners and policymakers, to judge more accurately how the findings may apply to their own contexts, including comparisons with municipalities of similar size, governance, or socio-ecological features. Third, identifying the field site supports transparency and auditability of the research methods, such as the feasibility of recruitment routes or policy timelines. Regardless, I am aware of the possibility that some participants may be 'traceable', particularly those in roles with only a few individuals. However, in alignment with good research practice, it was assessed that the risk of harm is low and that individual identities remain protected. Additionally, in the application to the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, which was granted approval, it was clearly stated that the municipality would be named. Participants were also informed of this in the consent form they signed, and they had the option to withdraw at any time.

## 5. Results

The results from each study are summarised and presented separately below. The original articles are provided at the end of the thesis.

### 5.1. Study I: Youth empowerment for sustainable development: Exploring ecosocial work discourses

#### *Main results in relation to the study's aim*

The study explores how an ecosocial perspective is incorporated into youth empowerment activities and practices in Gävle and how these practices relate to sustainable development. The findings indicate that ecosocial ideas are present in youth empowerment work and expressed mainly through local, practical environmental actions such as waste sorting, litter picking, and neighbourhood improvement projects. These activities are often justified through social aims, including safety, belonging, participation, reduced stigma, and preventive work with young people. As a result, ecological engagement is framed mostly as supporting youth well-being rather than as promoting structural socio-ecological change. Ecosocial perspectives vary across organisational roles. The participants who work directly with young people, such as field social workers, youth centre staff, and family therapists, describe more concrete socio-ecological practices, but their work largely focuses on individual support, with some elements of local community empowerment. Even in frontline work, ecosocial practices remain practical and locally oriented, with weak links to broader structural issues.

Sustainable development is commonly discussed through the Sustainable Development Goals and Education for Sustainable Development, especially in schools, where Education for Sustainable Development aims to build young people's sustainability knowledge and action skills. However, a clear gap appears between school-based sustainability education and youth empowerment practices outside school. While Education for Sustainable Development addresses global and structural sustainability in theory, everyday youth work prioritises local 'green' activities and individual responsibility. Two factors shape how ecosocial perspectives are incorporated: knowledge and power. When participants are strongly familiar with Sustainable Development and Education for Sustainable Development, they connect social issues, ecological concerns, and youth empowerment more easily; when knowledge is weaker, sustainable development is harder to translate into practice.

Governance conditions constrain implementation in several ways. Youth empowerment work operates within hierarchical and segmented municipal structures, with divided responsibilities and fragmented funding, which limit collaboration and make integrated sustainability efforts difficult. What is

possible to do is shaped by access to resources and networks, while cross-sector collaboration is seen as important for capacity building. At the same time, governance pressures and demands for measurable outcomes further shape practice. New Public Management logics encourage countable activities, even though ecosocial issues are complex and difficult to measure, and political priorities influence both ambitions and the type of sustainability work undertaken. Although collaboration in the youth network supports resource sharing and local initiatives, fragmented structures and limited platforms for youth participation constrain deeper engagement. This produces several gaps: a knowledge–practice gap between holistic sustainability education and individualised practice; an actor gap, where private-sector perspectives are largely absent; and a voice gap, where institutional priorities continue to define what counts as empowerment.

Youth empowerment in Gävle is linked to sustainable development mainly through local environmental practices and through discourse related to Education for Sustainable Development. The ecosocial perspective is strongest when environmental improvement is tied to social well-being, while climate action, justice, and structural critique are less developed, particularly outside school contexts. In practice, ecosocial ideas often become instrumental and focused on behaviour: young people are positioned as sustainability ambassadors or role models, while institutional and infra-structural causes of unsustainability largely remain unaddressed. This pattern is reinforced by municipal strategies, including the Environmental Strategy Programme, which guides local Education for Sustainable Development and frames empowerment through knowledge and measurable action skills. Youth centres and partner organisations translate this into individual and some community-based initiatives, sometimes youth-led, but centred on local environmental care and behavioural change rather than collective or structural transformation.

The findings point to a need to move beyond individualised, behaviour-focused activities towards more collective and structurally oriented ecosocial youth empowerment. Local environmental activities may support belonging, agency, and empowerment, but there is also a need for stronger integration of climate justice, structural critique, and socio-political engagement. The knowledge–practice gap highlights the need to deepen participants' understanding of sustainable development and ecosocial dimensions in their professional roles. The actor and voice gaps indicate the importance of widening participation, including private-sector actors, and strengthening meaningful youth influence in shaping sustainability agendas. The results highlight the importance of examining how governance, power relations, and anthropocentric discourses shape what is treated as empowerment and sustainability in practice.

## **5.2. Study II: Youth perspectives on health, well-being, and sustainable development: A photovoice study**

### ***Main results in relation to the study's aim***

Study II examines how youth in Gävle perceive the relationships between their health, well-being, and working-life capacities and environmental conditions in everyday life. The findings suggest that participants connect well-being and working-life capacities primarily to individual and relational factors in everyday life. Sustainable development and environmental conditions are experienced as distant and weakly connected to their immediate concerns, and collective forms of empowerment remain limited.

The participants recognise sustainable development mainly from school, where they have long been exposed to Education for Sustainable Development. However, they describe it as repetitive and abstract, with limited personal relevance. Sustainable development is primarily understood as environmental sustainability and associated with everyday habits such as sorting waste, avoiding littering, choosing more environmentally friendly modes of transport, reducing plastic use, and adjusting food choices. Social and economic sustainability are rarely identified as part of the concept, even though related issues are implicit in their accounts.

Health and well-being are mainly described in terms of 'feeling good', rooted in everyday activities and close relationships. The participants connect well-being to physical exercise, leisure, comfort in daily routines, and supportive relations with friends and family. Their accounts strongly focus on built and indoor environments, such as gyms, bedrooms, workplaces, and youth centres. The natural environment plays a limited role and is often described as a backdrop to social activities rather than as a source of well-being in itself. When discussing environmental conditions, participants often describe the connection to their own well-being as weak or indirect. Environmental problems and climate change are framed as distant in space or time, affecting others more than themselves, and Sweden is seen as relatively protected. This distance reduces the urgency of sustainability in their daily lives.

Working-life capacities are mainly understood in instrumental terms, linked to education, qualifications, and future income security. School demands, grades, and career-choice uncertainty are described as central sources of stress. Environmental sustainability intersects with working-life capacities mainly through practical constraints, such as transport, safety, and financial limitations. When sustainability ideals conflict with practical needs, such as driving to work because public transport is unreliable, practical concerns take priority. Although participants are aware of environmental issues, their choices are more often guided by time, money, safety, and convenience. Sustainable development therefore remains peripheral to what matters most in their everyday life.

Tensions appear between sustainability knowledge and daily practice. The participants acknowledge that some activities that support their well-being, such as travelling or using a car, may be environmentally problematic, but

they justify these actions as necessary or as having a limited impact. They also express frustration about inconsistencies among adults, institutions, and companies, and they perceive a gap between sustainability messages and actual behaviour. Responsibility is often individualised: they regulate themselves within socially accepted limits, not wanting to harm the environment more than ‘ordinary people’, but also not wanting to be seen as overly committed environmentalists. At the same time, they see older generations and large companies as major contributors to environmental problems, which creates a sense of unfairness when young people are expected to make sacrifices.

Empowerment is mainly experienced at the individual level. The participants describe empowerment as coping, self-management, and the use of personal skills in daily life, especially when handling school-related and future-oriented stress. Although some participants show awareness that powerful actors shape environmental conditions, they do not express strong collective agency or interest in political participation. This is visible in their limited engagement with the participant-led dissemination stage of the photovoice method. While they value the opportunity to express their views, they do not seek mobilisation or public advocacy. The Swedish framing of empowerment as *egenmakt* reinforces this individual orientation, encouraging a focus on personal responsibility rather than collective action. As a result, empowerment within sustainable development is experienced as inward-looking and centred on managing one’s own life, with limited pathways to shared influence over broader social and environmental conditions.

### **5.3. Study III: A call for ecosocial community work: Challenges and possibilities for ecosocial work in local neighbourhoods in Sweden**

#### ***Main results in relation to the study’s aim***

Study III explores how municipal social services and social units in Gävle conceptualise ecosocial perspectives in practice to promote youth health, well-being, and working-life capacities, and how they connect this work to sustainable development within local communities. The participants initially described their work as clearly linked to social sustainability and, to a lesser extent, economic sustainability, while expressing uncertainty about its relation to environmental sustainability. As discussions developed, they increasingly recognised that environmental aspects are present in their practice, mainly through attention to built and outdoor neighbourhood environments. However, the broader ecosystem remains peripheral, and environmental issues are framed primarily in terms of human well-being and safety rather than planetary well-being or ecological justice.

In practice, ecosocial perspectives in participants’ work are mainly conceptualised through neighbourhood conditions that influence youth and community life, especially the concept of *trygghet* (meaning both security

and safety). Green areas, parks, and outdoor spaces are described as important, but often in terms of safety. For example, poorly maintained spaces or dense shrubbery are seen as creating a sense of insecurity, which can lead to decisions that prioritise perceived safety over ecological considerations. Environmental features are therefore treated as elements of the local living environment that support or undermine social well-being, rather than as ecological systems with intrinsic value. The ecosocial elements remain largely implicit, although a few participants describe deliberate efforts to reflect on how environments shape clients' situation or to meet clients outdoors.

A central theme is the gap between knowing and doing. The participants acknowledge socio-ecological connections but describe limited organisational conditions for developing ecosocial work. Social workers in statutory roles emphasise heavy administrative workloads and bureaucratic routines that restrict preventive and community-oriented work. They express uncertainty about how to access arenas such as community planning and question their mandate to influence neighbourhood or environmental decisions. Participants in other municipal units also identify barriers, particularly limited resources. Across groups, limited ecosocial knowledge and a professional culture centred on individual casework further constrain development.

Youth health, well-being, and working-life capacities are mainly promoted through community-based initiatives that strengthen safety, belonging, participation, and everyday support. Examples include youth centres, sports halls, apprenticeships, summer jobs, neighbourhood co-design, and improvements to public spaces. This work is often framed as community development rather than youth-specific intervention, reflecting an understanding of young people as embedded in wider neighbourhood systems. Participation is described as beneficial for empowerment and local ownership, yet some initiatives remain expert-driven, which limits bottom-up influence.

The participants link their work to sustainable development primarily through local development and social planning approaches, supported by collaboration with other municipal actors, civil society, and voluntary organisations. Collaboration is seen as functioning relatively well and as a key condition for strengthening local capacity. At the same time, segmented municipal structures, fragmented responsibilities, restricted ecological mandates, and limited resources constrain deeper integration of ecosocial perspectives. Governance and political conditions shape what is possible and prioritised, and municipal social services often lack recognised entry points into planning processes that influence youth environments.

Nevertheless, there are opportunities to strengthen ecosocial work. Existing community-based practices, established collaborations, and growing interest in early and preventive interventions create favourable conditions. The participants express a wish to work more integratively across social, economic, and environmental dimensions. However, ecological considerations remain secondary and are mainly addressed when they align with

human or security priorities. As a result, current practices support youth well-being and participation but include only limited and mostly implicit ecosocial content.

Strengthening ecosocial practice requires not only continuing community-based work but also addressing structural conditions. Clearer mandates shared cross-departmental goals, stronger planning interfaces for municipal social services, and more participatory structures that give youth influence over local environments would improve the integration of social and ecological aims. Further development of ecosocial community work may be promising, as it connects community work with intergenerational, intertemporal, and community perspectives and moves beyond individual casework towards a more integrated socio-ecological approach.

#### **5.4. Study IV: A call for the development of local ecosocial policies for youth in Sweden: Youth perspectives and local practices in sustainable development**

##### ***Main results in relation to the study's aim***

Study IV explores how local social policies and practices in Gävle can be understood and further developed to incorporate an ecosocial perspective that strengthens youth health, well-being, and working-life capacities in relation to sustainable development. The findings suggest that sustainability work is organised through separate municipal programmes and departments, where social and environmental agendas run in parallel rather than as an integrated whole. Professionals describe this structure as segmented, with separate leadership and programme logics, which makes it difficult to address the interdependence of social, environmental, and economic dimensions in everyday practice.

Most professionals frame their work mainly in terms of social sustainability and, to some extent, economic sustainability, while expressing uncertainty about their role in environmental sustainability. Ecosocial elements are often present but remain implicit, partly due to a lack of shared language for integrating social and environmental perspectives across services. Environmental concerns tend to enter practice through concrete local actions, such as recycling, waste sorting, and neighbourhood projects that combine social aims with environmental measures. There is some collaboration with environmental actors, but it is limited and not systematic. Youth participants also understand sustainable development primarily as environmental sustainability, associated with small individual behaviours. Education for Sustainable Development is described as long-standing and repetitive, which can lead to fatigue and reduce its meaning. Environmental risks are perceived as distant in time and space and therefore less relevant to current well-being. At the same time, young people discuss safety, inclusion, participation, employment, and future security, all of which relate to social and economic sustainability, even if they do not label them as such.

Both youth and professionals describe limits to participation and influence. The participating youth show low motivation to engage beyond routine behaviours and decline opportunities to disseminate their views to decision-makers. The Youth Council's inactivity and declining interest in influencing municipal development suggest unmet needs for autonomy and meaningful participation. The professionals value participation but are cautious about placing additional climate responsibility on young people, who already face significant pressures. When discussing working-life capacities, they emphasise present-oriented opportunities such as summer jobs, neighbourhood projects, and work experience linked to improving local environments. These initiatives build skills, confidence, and a sense of belonging while connecting social and environmental aims, even if not explicitly framed as ecosocial.

Although ecosocial perspectives are present in both local policy and practice, they are unevenly developed. Municipal structures separate social and environmental responsibilities, fragmenting work on need satisfaction and limiting holistic approaches. This separation also shapes how young people interpret sustainability, as they often associate it with individual tasks rather than broader structural conditions, participation, and long-term security. Professionals often recognise social–ecological interconnections in practice, particularly when addressing safe green spaces, stable environments, and opportunities for meaningful activity, but these links are not always reflected in policy language. Youth tend to emphasise *doing*, focusing on immediate activities that support well-being, while professionals emphasise *having*, such as safe environments, inclusion, and stability.

Several structural challenges hinder further integration. Segmented governance, limited coordination between programmes, restricted ecological mandates, and a lack of shared vocabulary make ecosocial links less visible. Youth express concerns about intergenerational and intertemporal injustice, while professionals focus more on present needs. Feelings of unfairness and resistance to 'sacrifice' can be understood as responses to a perceived imbalance in responsibility. Without credible reciprocity, future-oriented appeals to sustainability risk reducing engagement rather than strengthening empowerment. At the same time, there are clear opportunities to strengthen ecosocial work. Existing community activities, safe green spaces, youth projects, and collaborations already connect social and environmental goals. By addressing the gaps in governance and language, municipalities can make these connections more explicit and coherent. Developing a clearer ecosocial policy framework can align welfare provision with ecological limits and social justice and embed sustainability within everyday well-being rather than presenting it as a sacrifice. Linking youth employment to environmental goals, supporting green skills, and strengthening participatory structures such as youth councils and co-creation arenas can enhance autonomy, critical awareness, and agency. In this way, youth well-being, participation, and working-life capacities can be more closely connected to sustainable development within local communities.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Synthesis of results in relation to the thesis's aim and theoretical and conceptual framework

In this thesis, the theoretical and conceptual framework (see Chapter 3) is used to synthesise the findings across the four studies in relation to the overall aim of examining how an ecosocial perspective is incorporated into youth-related social work in Gävle, and how this relates to health, well-being, working-life capacities, and sustainable development. Below, the synthesis is structured in line with the framework, moving from *ecosocial work* (e.g. Matthies & Närhi, 2017a; Närhi & Matthies, 2017) as the overarching perspective to the *transformative ecosocial model* (Boetto, 2017), then to the *Having–Doing–Loving–Being model of relational well-being* (Helne, 2021; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015, 2017, 2019; Hirvilammi & Helne, 2014), and finally to the theory of *psychological empowerment* (Zimmerman, 1995, 2000). In the final part, the connections between these frameworks are made explicit.

The empirical findings suggest that an interconnectedness between people and place is often recognised in principle within youth work in Gävle. Professionals describe how safety, neighbourhood quality, access to activities, and stable environments shape young people's lives. Young people similarly refer to comfort, belonging, routines, and local spaces as central to feeling well. These accounts are consistent with a relational ontology in which individuals are understood as embedded in contexts. However, the participants rarely articulate the ecological dimension of this relationality as an explicit socio-ecological interconnectedness. An understanding of socio-ecological interconnectedness helps clarify why, from an ecosocial perspective, youth health, well-being, and working-life capacities are shaped by interconnected social, environmental, and structural conditions. Across the four studies, the *ecosocial work perspective* in youth-related social work in Gävle is neither absent nor fully integrated. Rather, the perspective appears unevenly and often implicitly. The overall picture is therefore not as simple as a question of 'ecosocial work versus no ecosocial work', but it rather reflects a pattern of selective integration shaped by both professional intentions and institutional feasibility. Professionals do not always explicitly link social and ecological dimensions; environmental aspects instead often remain in the background of everyday practice. The ecosocial perspective becomes most visible in specific arenas such as neighbourhood work, schools, youth centres, and project-based initiatives, where it is expressed through familiar framings of safety, belonging, inclusion, participation, and employability. Within these arenas, professionals collaborate with other actors and community members.

This does not mean that all such practices should be defined as ecosocial work. Work at the community level where ecosocial perspectives are present may also be understood as, for example, community work or preventive work, depending on the conceptual lens applied. From a community work perspective, these practices can be interpreted within a community development framework, where attention is given to the broader environment, including both the natural and the built environment, to support good living conditions. From an ecosocial work perspective, the same practices may be analysed in terms of relationality and interdependence between social and ecological conditions, where community work functions as one method within ecosocial practice at the meso and macro levels. Similarly, animal-assisted therapy within social work practice can be understood as an example of an ecosocial perspective in practice. Within ecosocial work, it may be conceptualised as micro-level ecosocial work, as it recognises the relational connections among humans, animals, and environments. However, in other professional or disciplinary contexts, it may simply be referred to as animal-assisted therapy. These examples suggest that community work (and other methods) and ecosocial work are not identical, but they may intersect and, at times, converge in practice.

This distinction is useful for interpreting how the ecosocial perspective appears empirically in youth-related practice. It is most visible when the environment is understood as a concrete local condition, for example in terms of neighbourhood quality, green spaces, litter, maintenance, and the social use of public space. Since these issues are visible and manageable, they are more easily linked to everyday youth work and empowerment. Practice that includes an environmental perspective is therefore seen as legitimate when it creates safer environments, reduces stigma, strengthens belonging, and enables meaningful activities. In this way, such practice can have a double effect. On the one hand, it creates a practical bridge between sustainable development, youth work, and empowerment by making sustainability visible in everyday practice and integrating environmental concerns without major changes to job descriptions or organisational mandates. On the other hand, it can narrow the ecosocial perspective. When practice with an environmental perspective is mainly justified by immediate social benefits, this weakens broader ecosocial dimensions such as socio-ecological justice, climate risk, intergenerational responsibility, and structural drivers of unsustainability. The ecological dimension is then often incorporated in an anthropocentric and prevention-focused way, turning sustainability into a set of manageable tasks rather than a framework for understanding how social and ecological conditions are produced together across place and time.

The ecosocial perspective in the empirical material can be examined more closely through Boetto's (2017) transformative ecosocial model, which distinguishes between *being* (ontology), *thinking/knowing* (epistemology), and *doing* (methodology), with methodology encompassing practices across *personal, individual, collective, community, and structural levels*. At the level of *being*, many professionals appear to hold relational assumptions, viewing young people as situated within families, peer networks, schools, and

neighbourhoods. This view aligns with both person-in-environment traditions and ecosocial thinking. At the same time, the ecological dimension of this ontology remains limited. The results indicate that the environment is valued mainly for its effects on human well-being, and less attention is given to the intrinsic value of non-human nature or to ethical responsibilities arising from ecological interdependence. Thus, the ontological shift towards a more ecocentric or interdependent worldview remains partial, even when relationality and place strongly matter in the professionals' accounts.

At the level of *knowing*, sustainable development functions as a shared reference point in local policy and rhetoric. It is visible in the school-based Education for Sustainable Development and in municipal strategies. However, knowledge about sustainability is fragmented, and local actors do not appear to have a shared, integrated understanding. Professionals tend to position themselves within social sustainability, and sometimes economic sustainability, while expressing uncertainty about environmental sustainability as part of their mandate. Young people, in turn, primarily understand sustainable development as environmental sustainability, often associated with individual behaviour such as recycling or reducing consumption (Study II). These parallel understandings only meet partially in practice. Sustainable development is acknowledged in theory but not fully integrated as a shared socio-ecological framework guiding welfare work. This produces a tension between knowing and doing, where professionals recognise the importance of sustainability, yet return to statutory duties, measurable outcomes, and established routines in everyday practice. It also shapes what young people expect sustainability to mean in practice and how they relate it to their own lives. This is because sustainability is described holistically in education and policy, yet in practice it is often translated into individual responsibility and 'green' personal choices.

At the level of *doing*, the ecosocial perspective is most strongly incorporated where environmental elements can be integrated into existing welfare activities. Examples include community initiatives, neighbourhood improvement projects, youth employment schemes linked to environmental care, and the use of green spaces for activities (Study I and Study III). These practices support safety, belonging, participation, and skill development. They connect environmental improvement to social goals, thereby aligning with institutional priorities. However, the interventions remain focused on the individual and, to some extent, the community level. Structural and political forms of action, such as advocacy, cross-sector influence, or engagement with broader socio-ecological inequalities, are less developed. Professionals describe fragmented mandates, limited resources, and low access to planning arenas. As a result, ecosocial ambitions are often contained within micro- and meso-level activities, while macro-level transformation (through social policy) remains limited. In Boetto's terms, coherence between *being*, *thinking/knowing*, and *doing* is incomplete, and alignment across intervention levels is uneven.

Governance conditions may provide an important explanation for why this unevenness persists. Sustainability work is organised through parallel

municipal programmes and departments with separate leadership logics (Study IV). This fragmentation of responsibility makes it difficult to stabilise integrated socio-ecological practice. Professionals describe limited cross-sector coordination between the social sustainability and environmental sustainability programmes, restricted ecological mandates for actors located mainly in social sustainability work, and pressure to deliver measurable outputs. These conditions shape what is defined as legitimate youth empowerment and what counts as ‘successful’ sustainability work. They also help explain why ecosocial practice becomes dependent on individual key persons and projects, often short-term or limited in time, rather than embedded in routine welfare practice. This is a critical point when addressing the thesis’s aim, as it suggests that incorporating an ecosocial perspective is not only a matter of professional values or awareness but also of institutional design and governance interfaces that enable or constrain social work and other welfare interventions at all levels.

The *Having–Doing–Loving–Being model* (Helne, 2021; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015, 2017, 2019; Hirvilammi & Helne, 2014) further clarifies how well-being is conceptualised and promoted in practice and why sustainability does not easily connect to youth experience. In the empirical material, *doing* and *loving* are particularly strong, especially from the youth’s perspective (Study II). Youth well-being is closely linked to participation in meaningful activities, leisure, and structured programmes, as well as to friendships, belonging, and supportive relationships. Both youth and, especially, professionals emphasise *having* and address it safe environments, access to facilities, summer jobs, apprenticeships, and support that strengthens material security and future prospects (Study II and Study III). By contrast, *being* appears to be less explicitly developed. Although identity, recognition, and meaning are present in young people’s narratives, sustainability is rarely integrated into their sense of purpose or a deeper connection with ecological contexts. Environmental sustainability is often experienced as behavioural *doing*, such as recycling or avoiding littering, rather than as part of *loving* (care for the more-than-human world) or *being* (a sense of harmony with ecological systems). This difference matters because it shapes how sustainability can be experienced as either meaningful or burdensome. Youth describe health and well-being mainly as ‘feeling good’ in everyday life, such as through activities, relationships, belonging, routine comfort, leisure, and managing school demands and future uncertainty. Environmental risks are perceived as distant in time and place, and the relationship between environmental conditions and personal well-being is described as weak or indirect. This should not be read as ignorance. Rather, it reflects a mismatch between the present-oriented conditions through which well-being is lived and the future-oriented framing of sustainability that young people often experience as repetitive and abstract.

Within this *Having–Doing–Loving–Being* interpretation, when sustainability is communicated primarily as a behavioural discipline and a matter of personal responsibility, it is difficult to integrate it into lived well-being. When sustainability is framed primarily as a moral responsibility, it

risks being experienced as a sacrifice, and even as a punishment, rather than as a route to living well. This is particularly clear when sustainability ideals compete with practical *having* needs, such as transport, time, safety, or financial limits, where young people may prioritise what is workable in daily life. Additionally, the youth participants express frustration with inconsistencies among adults, institutions, and companies, particularly when these actors do not act in accordance with what they preach and contribute to environmental harm to a greater extent than young people themselves. They also regard it as unfair that they are expected to bear responsibility for harms caused by older generations and to sacrifice aspects of their own lifestyles for the sake of future generations. This sense of intergenerational and intertemporal unfairness can be understood as affecting *being*, because it undermines recognition, meaning, and fairness. It may also weaken motivation for sustainable *doing* when young people perceive that responsibility is not equally shared and when they experience sustainable *doing* as punishment.

Zimmerman's theory of *psychological empowerment* (Zimmerman, 1995, 2000) provides further analytical depth regarding participation and power, and it helps make visible why empowerment tends to remain individualised even when young people are aware of larger issues. The *intrapersonal component* is relatively strong in the findings. Young people develop confidence, skills, and coping capacities through projects, summer jobs, and supportive environments. They often express belief in their ability to manage everyday life and future work. The *interactional component* is more uneven. Many young people show awareness of social and environmental problems and identify powerful actors, including institutions and older generations, as shaping environmental outcomes. This reflects a degree of critical awareness. However, they often lack clear pathways to influencing decision-making processes. Participation structures, such as youth councils, are fragile or underused, and formal influence appears limited.

The *behavioural component* at the collective or political level is comparatively weak. Young people engage in small-scale actions, such as tidy-up campaigns or project-based initiatives. They also discuss empowerment mainly as self-management and their individual ability to cope, especially in relation to school stress and future uncertainty. In Study II in this thesis, they even decline opportunities to disseminate their perspectives to decision-makers. This disinterest is not simply 'low engagement'. It may reflect how empowerment is structured and communicated as well as the limited opportunities and fora for participation. Empowerment therefore remains largely individualised and perhaps episodic. From an ecosocial perspective, this creates a tension. Young people are encouraged to take responsibility for sustainable behaviour, yet structural conditions – such as the inactivity of the Youth Council, a forum for youth political participation – limit their ability to influence the socio-ecological determinants of their lives. Empowerment is supported at the level of personal development, but less so at the level of collective agency and structural change.

This becomes particularly evident when considering working-life capacities, which serve as a bridge between present well-being and future orientation. Youth describe working-life capacities mainly through instrumental concerns such as education, qualifications, future income security, and stress linked to performance and making choices. Environmental sustainability enters into their accounts mostly through practical constraints such as transport, safety, and financial limitations, rather than as a central perspective for the future. Professionals describe working-life support through present-oriented opportunities such as summer jobs, apprenticeships, and local projects, sometimes linked to improving local environments. These initiatives can strengthen meaning, recognition, belonging, confidence, and skills to promote health and working-life capacities, but the studies suggest that working-life capacities are not yet systematically connected to sustainable development in a way that youth experience as meaningful. The implication is not that youth need 'more motivation' but that sustainable futures need to be made credible and liveable through supportive conditions, clearer pathways, and recognition of what youth value in everyday life.

At this point, the possibilities for development identified across the studies become especially important, as they indicate areas where stronger ecosocial coherence could realistically be built upon existing practices. There already are community activities, safe green spaces, youth projects, and collaborations that connect social and environmental goals in everyday practice. Youth employment measures and neighbourhood co-design are particularly important because they can connect activity and participation with material and environmental conditions while also supporting belonging, recognition, and meaning. These practices are potential building blocks for an ecosocial approach that is less moralising and more enabling, precisely because they connect sustainability to concrete improvements in everyday life and to credible forms of participation. They also illustrate that ecosocial work does not need to be invented from scratch. It is already emerging where social and environmental conditions intersect in local life, but it remains uneven and vulnerable when it depends on project logics and key persons. Ecosocial practices can be developed by strengthening the ecosocial perspective within existing practices, such as community-based work.

When the framework of ecosocial work, the transformative ecosocial model, the *Having–Doing–Loving–Being model of relational well-being*, and *psychological empowerment* are brought together, several connections become clear. Ecosocial work provides the normative and analytical perspective, emphasising interdependence, justice, and sustainability. Boetto's model explains why the incorporation of the ecosocial perspective remains partial: *ontological* and *epistemological* shifts are incomplete, and *methodological* action is concentrated at lower intervention levels, partly because institutional mandates and governance segmentation restrict what is feasible. The *Having–Doing–Loving–Being model* clarifies which forms of well-being are currently enabled. Youth emphasise *doing* and *loving*, and professionals emphasise aspects of *having*, but both youth and professionals

less explicitly emphasise being and ecological embeddedness. This orientation helps explain why sustainability messages often feel distant and why ‘sustainability on an individual level’ becomes the dominant translation of sustainability in everyday life. Zimmerman’s framework shows how empowerment is shaped within this configuration: *intrapersonal capacities* are developed, but *interactional* and *behavioural empowerment* at the collective and structural levels remain limited, making it difficult for young people to connect sustainability knowledge to credible influence and meaningful change.

Together, this synthesis suggests that youth-related social work in Gävle contains important relational and community-oriented foundations for ecosocial practice. However, sustainable development is operationalised mainly as local environmental care and individual responsibility, with limited connection to a broader understanding of socio-ecological interdependence and transformation. ‘Acting locally’ is comparatively strong, while ‘thinking globally’ remains limited. Localising global challenges and developing locally grounded solutions is important because ecosocial commitments must be enacted within welfare systems and municipalities. This means that sustainability cannot be treated as a generic agenda that sits outside local constraints, mandates, and practical possibilities. Instead, ecosocial work requires action models that are credible in everyday practice, strengthen community resilience, and support an ecosocial transition towards sustainable development. At the same time, local action should remain connected to the global context. Responding to global challenges through local practice requires recognising the intertwined nature of global and local processes and calls for context-sensitive responses that are attentive to these complex linkages.

The findings also indicate that fragmented governance, segmented knowledge, and limited structural mandates constrain deeper integration. The main development challenge is therefore not to add more ‘green tasks’ but to improve coherence across levels and actors. This includes building a shared ecosocial discourse that connects social and environmental dimensions in policy and practice, thus strengthening planning interfaces so that welfare actors can influence and stabilise community work beyond short-term projects. It also involves strengthening participation structures so that the youth voice becomes a real influence mechanism rather than a symbolic ideal. Without such changes, sustainable development risks remaining an individualised responsibility project that produces fatigue and disengagement, rather than an empowering route to living well within limits.

This synthesis leads to three interrelated conclusions. First, ecosocial perspectives are articulated and enacted mainly through local, practical, and human-centred practices. This makes them feasible in everyday services, but it limits their transformative capacity and keeps them within an anthropocentric frame. Second, the forms of well-being enabled in practice strongly align with relational and everyday conditions, yet sustainability is often framed in ways that do not connect to these conditions, especially when it comes to *being* and broader meanings of responsibility and care. Third, working-life

capacities and empowerment are supported mainly through individual coping and local opportunities, while collective influence and structural empowerment remain underdeveloped due to governance segmentation and weak participation pathways. These conclusions point to *ecosocial community work* as a promising direction for further development – but only if institutional conditions, mandates, and participation structures support action beyond the ‘behavioural routines’. In practical terms, *ecosocial community work* would involve designing community programmes and ecosocial planning and policies that generate local and relational benefits, such as increased safety and belonging, while also strengthening participation structures that allow young people to influence local ecologies and economies in meaningful and sustainable ways. These programmes, plans, and policies should also create concrete possibilities for young people and other citizens to live well, where existential needs are met in ways that support feeling good in everyday life while ensuring that need fulfilment happens through sustainable and relational pathways rather than through individualised or environmentally costly solutions. In this context, ‘feeling good’ is not necessarily unsustainable, and it might be combined with sustainable development.

### ***Beyond individualism: Building collective empowerment***

The findings indicate a pattern of partial alignment between professional values, sustainability knowledge, and everyday interventions. Professionals acknowledge that young people’s lives are shaped by social relations, neighbourhood conditions, and environmental contexts. However, their forms of action and practice tend to correspond to established mandates and measurable outputs. Within this configuration, sustainability is often translated into behavioural expectations from individuals, locating responsibility primarily in personal conduct, while structural and institutional drivers of unsustainability remain comparatively unchallenged (see Cho et al., 2013; Ranger, 2025). The issue may thus be not a lack of concern but rather the way responsibility is distributed.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that this tendency is reinforced by the way work is organised across different intervention levels. Individual support is highly institutionalised, particularly in statutory services, where administrative routines and case management shape daily practice. Such environments offer limited scope for addressing broader socio-ecological determinants. This is also seen in earlier studies (K. Rambaree, 2020; K. Rambaree, Sjöberg, et al., 2019) that suggest how institutional logics within Swedish social work can limit professionals’ scope for independent judgment and action in implementing the ecosocial perspective. Community-based initiatives, including youth centres, neighbourhood collaborations, and co-design processes, offer greater opportunities to incorporate ecosocial perspectives. Yet even here, activities are often framed as time-limited projects rather than as sustained governance processes. Structural and political engagement among young people remains limited (Study II and Study IV). For professionals, access to planning arenas is restricted,

responsibilities are fragmented across departments, and preventive work is constrained by time pressure. In Boetto's (2017) terms, there may be reflection and awareness, but methodological action at collective and structural levels remains inconsistent.

Young people's perspectives in this thesis's studies help explain why an individualised sustainability discourse has limited resonance. Health, defined as physical, mental, and social well-being (WHO, 1946), is shaped by determinants that exceed individual control (Fisher et al., 2022; WHO, 2024). In this regard, well-being needs to be approached as relational, structural, and personal. This framing suggests that well-being is not only about individual choices, but also about quality of life, social inclusion, and access to supportive relationships and resources in everyday contexts. Accordingly, well-being is commonly discussed in relation to quality of life, social inclusion, the importance of supportive personal relationships and networks, and access to both emotional and material resources within one's social and economic environment (Lelkes et al., 2021). In that sense, well-being can be understood subjectively as people's own assessment of their overall quality of life, including whether they feel their needs are being met (Voukelatou et al., 2021; Western & Tomaszewski, 2016). At the same time, it can be understood objectively as measurable conditions of life and development, including the extent to which needs related to education, employment, health, housing, income, security, environmental quality, and political and social inclusion are met (Western & Tomaszewski, 2016).

When interpreted through the Having–Doing–Loving–Being framework, this orientation becomes clearer. *Doing* and *loving* appear as dominant dimensions, referring to activity, belonging, and present enjoyment. *Having* is treated pragmatically as stability and material security. *Being*, associated with deeper identity, recognition, and existential meaning, is less articulated. Woodgate (2010) similarly found that young people often conceptualise health as *doing* rather than as an existential *being*. Within this pattern, the studies in this thesis suggest that when sustainability is framed as a long-term sacrifice, it struggles to connect with lived experience. When environmental responsibility competes with practical needs such as transport, time, or income, immediate feasibility understandably takes precedence. The difficulty thus lies not in ignorance but in a disjunction between future-oriented moral discourse and present-oriented well-being.

Empowerment follows a similar configuration. The *interpersonal* component is comparatively strong. Young people describe gains in confidence, skills, and coping through local initiatives, summer employment schemes, and other neighbourhood-based activities. The *interactional component*, however, is weaker. Although young people recognise power imbalances and intergenerational injustice, they report limited influence over decision-making arenas. Participation structures, including youth councils, are fragile or inactive. The *behavioural component* at collective or political levels is correspondingly limited. Small-scale actions occur, but sustained collective agency remains rare. Empowerment thus becomes centred on self-management rather than shared governance. This is where the focus on the

individual level of sustainability becomes particularly visible. Young people are encouraged to adopt sustainable behaviours, yet structural conditions restrict their capacity to shape socio-ecological determinants. Responsibility is individualised while influence is not redistributed. Moving beyond this pattern requires strengthening collective empowerment in ways that connect agency to institutional power. Collective empowerment within local communities offers a possible alternative. Place should not be understood merely as the setting of activities, but as a site of governance, identity, and ecological interdependence. Neighbourhoods, public spaces, and local labour markets are arenas where social and environmental conditions intersect. For example, when youth employment schemes improve green spaces, when co-design processes influence neighbourhood planning, and when community collaborations address safety and ecological quality together, sustainability becomes embedded in lived environments rather than presented as an abstract obligation.

For such initiatives to challenge the predominant individualistic view on sustainability, they must provide credible pathways from participation to decision-making. Youth engagement needs to extend beyond consultation to shared influence over planning and policy priorities. This requires functioning participation structures, cross-departmental coordination, and leadership commitment. Without these conditions, collective empowerment risks remaining symbolic. Importantly, collective empowerment does not replace individual development, nor does it replace individual-level social work practice with community work; rather, it situates individual development within shared responsibility and interrelated levels of practice (see Sjöberg et al., 2015). It should not be framed as an either-or approach, but as complementary and mutually reinforcing. Programmes that improve safety, belonging, and meaningful activity while also reducing ecological strain demonstrate that well-being and sustainability need not be in tension. When sustainable practices enhance everyday life rather than restrict it, they become credible and motivating. In this sense, what feels good is not inherently unsustainable. Unsustainability arises when need fulfilment is disconnected from relational and ecological contexts.

Building collective empowerment, therefore, requires both institutional redesign and cultural change. It demands integration across departments, stable support for community work beyond short-term project cycles, and a shared ecosocial discourse that links well-being to ecological interdependence. It also requires recognising young people as co-shapers of local environments rather than as targets of behavioural correction. The central challenge is therefore not to add further green tasks but to redistribute responsibility and influence. An individualistic view of sustainability narrows sustainability to personal adjustment. Collective efforts, such as community empowerment, reframe sustainability as shared governance of local socio-ecological conditions. Only through such redistribution can youth well-being, working-life capacities, and ecological responsibility reinforce one another within a coherent and participatory local welfare system.

### ***Challenges and possibilities for developing ecosocial practice in local welfare systems: Ecosocial community work***

The findings of this thesis need to be understood in relation to wider institutional and academic debates on ecosocial work. A common argument in the ecosocial work literature is that there is a persistent gap between broad structural critique and practical strategies for everyday work (Appleby et al., 2017; Boetto, 2016, 2017; Molyneux, 2010). Although ecosocial work explicitly calls for interventions across micro, meso, and macro levels (Boetto, 2019; Coates & Gray, 2012), translating this ambition into everyday welfare practice remains difficult (Molyneux, 2010; Shackelford, 2025). The challenge therefore does not primarily lie in a lack of theoretical clarity but in the operationalisation of ecosocial principles within existing planning processes and welfare systems.

One reason for this gap is the wider governance context shaping human services. Studies from Finland and Australia suggest that neoliberal governance and managerial logics can constrain the development of ecosocial practice in human services (Boetto et al., 2024; Kokkonen et al., 2018; Nöjd et al., 2025). In such contexts, organisations often prioritise efficiency, performance measurement, short-term project funding, and fragmented or specialised responsibilities (Boetto et al., 2020, 2022; Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; McKinnon, 2013; Närhi et al., 2025; Nöjd et al., 2024; Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021). These arrangements can make it difficult to sustain long-term work and to address structural conditions. At the same time, the literature also suggests that organisations can enable ecosocial practice when leadership, collaboration, and institutional commitment support ecosocial orientations (Boetto et al., 2020, 2022; Donkers & Robinson, 2025; Nöjd et al., 2025). The findings of this thesis are consistent with both sides of this argument. Participants working within organisational settings shaped by neoliberal principles described limited cross-sector coordination, restricted ecological mandates, and pressure to prioritise measurable outputs, which constrained ecosocial practice. However, they also emphasised collaboration as an important enabler and highlighted the need for stronger climate leadership on the organisational level.

Within the municipal context examined in this thesis, sustainability is often discussed in narrow, fragmented, and instrumental terms. Most participants articulate social sustainability as a core value of social work, while environmental sustainability is only partially integrated into professional reasoning. In practice, human well-being remains the primary focus. Environmental perspectives are included mainly when they do not challenge this priority. This approach can be described as anthropocentrically compatible; this pattern has been identified in other empirical studies of ecosocial practice reviewed by Thysell and Cuadra (2023). While this compatibility enables environmental elements to be incorporated into existing services, its transformative potential is limited, as ecological concerns are kept subordinate to immediate human-centred objectives. Despite these constraints, the findings also point to concrete possibilities for

development. Strengthening ecosocial work requires translating global sustainability frameworks into locally meaningful action (Närhi et al., 2025; Nöjd et al., 2025). Instruments such as the Sustainable Development Goals provide normative direction, but it is at the municipal level that social workers and other welfare professionals encounter tangible expressions of socio-ecological challenges (Nothdurfter & Pedroni, 2025). Local welfare systems therefore represent both constraints and opportunities.

The tension between ambitions and practical limitations is also reflected in the ecosocial work literature. The literature discusses ideas relevant to both direct work with individuals and wider systemic and structural transformation (F. Bell et al., 2019; Boetto, 2017; Coates & Gray, 2012; Norton, 2012; K. Rambaree, Sjöberg, et al., 2019; Shackelford, 2025). Ecosocial work can be carried out across three interconnected levels: micro-level assessment and intervention, meso-level organisational and community work, and macro-level advocacy and policy engagement. Across these levels, the integration of economic, ecological, and social sustainability reorients conventional social work towards an ecosocial model (Matthies, Krings, et al., 2020; Matthies, Peeters, et al., 2020; Närhi & Matthies, 2018). This reorientation situates social work within a broader societal transition and calls for multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives (Matthies, 2025; Närhi & Matthies, 2025). In practice, ecosocial work may involve individual, group, and community interventions that incorporate environmental awareness and sustainability considerations (Närhi et al., 2025). However, this ambition has often been developed more in theory than in practice.

The literature also cautions that ecosocial work requires more than adding environmental elements to established methods (see Boetto, 2017). Without a deeper shift in professional ways of *being, thinking/knowing*, and *doing*, practice risks reproducing dominant discourses that contribute to ecological exploitation (Boetto, 2017; Gray & Coates, 2015). Ecosocial work therefore calls for moving from individualised approaches towards collective and global orientations, and for a more relational understanding of well-being. Despite these ambitions, practical applications of ecosocial work remain limited (Miller & Hayward, 2014; Norton, 2012; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017; T. V. Shaw, 2011). Frameworks for ecosocial practice at the micro level are emerging, although their scope is still developing (Boetto et al., 2020, 2024; Mason et al., 2017). This body of work explores how sustainability and environmental awareness can be integrated into direct practice, including through eco-therapy (Burls, 2007), nature-based intervention/therapy/healing (Lytzen & Kineweskwêw, 2024), animal-assisted therapy (Legge, 2016; Mims & Waddell, 2016), and wilderness therapy (Besthorn, 2002). Boetto (2016) proposes an ecosocial framework that assists caseworkers in linking theory and practice by engaging with the natural environment, sustainability, and environmental justice. Although illustrated through casework, this framework also encompasses community, organisational, and policy-level action.

At the macro level, ecosocial work is reflected in advocacy, policy engagement, environmental justice, and community work (Boetto, 2017;

Coates & Gray, 2012; Mason et al., 2017, 2024; Obeng et al., 2023; Powers, Schmitz, et al., 2019). Frameworks for ecosocial practices that address community and organisational levels remain relatively underdeveloped (Boetto et al., 2020; Park, 2025), with examples such as community gardening (Mama, 2018); recycling, upcycling, and community-supported agriculture (Matthies et al., 2019); and communities of practice among social workers (Boetto et al., 2020). This leaves the meso level as a less explored area of ecosocial practice. As Norton (2012) notes, greater attention to organisations and communities is needed if ecosocial work is to influence societal change and position social work as an active contributor to the ecosocial transition.

This gap in ecosocial practice on the meso level is significant because this level often serves as a bridge between individual interventions and structural transformation. The findings of this thesis suggest that community-level youth work represents a particularly viable arena for ecosocial practice, since wider ecosystems and social systems can be engaged simultaneously (Stamm et al., 2023). Mason et al. (2017) similarly note that many interventions that address global environmental challenges operate at meso and macro levels, including community programmes and policy-oriented work. If the meso level is understood as a bridge, it also becomes a realistic site for the changes needed. A study by Aschero et al. (2026) points out that it is often seen as more feasible to expand ethical frameworks in social work to include more-than-human perspectives by gradually adjusting training and policy than by rapidly transforming them. Institutional change is thus possible, but it is more likely to occur incrementally than through abrupt paradigm shifts. This suggests that ecosocial practices, including in Gävle, will most likely be developed within existing routines and organisational structures rather than by creating entirely new systems or radically restructuring established work.

In this regard, community work becomes especially important. Community work can be situated at both meso and macro levels of practice (Bronwyn, 2023; Netting et al., 2021; Tice et al., 2020) and it therefore provides an important point of connection between everyday interventions and broader structural change. Building on earlier research and the findings of this study, this thesis identifies the potential of *ecosocial community work* as an integration of community work and ecosocial work, grounded in their shared concerns. Several scholars have discussed this convergence. K. Rambaree, Sjöberg, et al. (2019), for example, refer to ecosocial community work (p. 14), but they do not offer an explicit definition. Other authors, such as Närhi and Matthies (2018), K. Rambaree et al. (2023), and Stamm et al. (2023), also examine similar points of intersection and convergence between ecosocial work and community work, but they do not use any specific term.

Both community work and ecosocial work are community-oriented and emphasise the importance of social and built environments, structural change, collective empowerment, and sustainable living conditions (Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; Turunen, 2004). In this way, they challenge the individualising orientation of mainstream social work by addressing systemic issues and promoting long-term well-being. Community work foregrounds local en-

agement, participatory processes, and social justice. Ecosocial work extends this orientation by incorporating ecological perspectives and linking well-being to intergenerational and planetary responsibilities. *Ecosocial community work* can therefore be understood as making explicit the ecological dimensions that are already present, but not always articulated, through community practice. It strengthens community work as a core method in social work, broadens its environmental scope, and emphasises the interdependence between human and non-human life. Relating to more-than-human nature in this way involves recognising its intrinsic value and moving beyond a strictly anthropocentric perspective. However, this shift does not require abandoning human needs (Sterba, 2022). Rather, it involves situating human needs within a wider ethical and ecological context, where human well-being is pursued alongside responsibility towards the more-than-human world. In this sense, *ecosocial community work* may offer a concrete pathway for connecting ethical expansion with practical action at the meso level. It aims to promote both human and non-human well-being through community participation and to foster more sustainable and socially just living conditions.

Based on the discussion above, advancing ecosocial practice in local welfare systems requires stronger coherence across intervention levels. It calls for organisational support, leadership, and cross-sector collaboration, as well as conceptual clarity and a shared ecosocial language. It also requires recognising social work's role in integrating policy, law, and practice to address societal challenges, as shown by Li and Xue (2025). In practical terms, this means enabling professionals to act not only as service providers but also as agents of sustainable transformation within their communities. Without such institutional alignment, ecosocial practice risks remaining fragmented, project-based, and individualised. With sustained commitment and interdisciplinary collaboration, however, local welfare systems can become important arenas for linking everyday practice with broader socio-ecological change. To build this kind of alignment, a key requirement is that professionals continuously reflect on such matters collectively. Research suggests that communities of practice can deepen practitioners' understanding of the interconnections between social and ecological dimensions (Boetto et al., 2020, 2022; Närhi et al., 2025). Participants in this thesis (in Study III) similarly reported that shared discussions about environmental perspectives broadened their understanding of how sustainability relates to everyday social work. Such dialogue strengthens the epistemological dimension of ecosocial practice, even if methodological change remains partial. Personal, professional, and organisational learning processes are therefore central for the sustained development and implementation of ecosocial work.

## **6.2. Theoretical contributions**

This thesis strengthens the meso level as an important area for ecosocial work, both in theory and in practice. Community-level youth work is understood as linking individual support with wider socio-ecological

conditions. At the same time, it is often shaped by short-term projects, divided responsibilities, and limited access to planning and decision-making arenas. This helps fill a gap in the literature, where meso-level ecosocial practice is less clearly described than micro- and macro-level work.

A further contribution is the development of ecosocial community work as the conceptual and empirical intersection between community work and ecosocial work. This intersection is defined by shared concerns about local living conditions, social and built environments, collective empowerment, and sustainable well-being, while it also extends community work through a clearer emphasis on socio-ecological interdependence and responsibility towards the more-than-human world.

Boetto's transformative ecosocial model highlights how the gaps between *being*, *thinking/knowing*, and *doing* are shaped not only by professional values and knowledge but also by institutional conditions. Partial coherence is shown to be produced by professional values or knowledge as well as by governance fragmentation, segmented sustainability programmes, and managerial pressures that shape what counts as legitimate action. This adds a stronger organisational and governance dimension to the model's explanatory use in local welfare contexts.

By integrating ecosocial work with the Having–Doing–Loving–Being model and the theory of psychological empowerment, the thesis offers a relational account of why sustainability often is individualised in youth welfare practice. Well-being is strongly connected to *doing* and *loving* in everyday life, whereas sustainability is often framed as a set of behavioural tasks. Empowerment is strengthened mainly at the intrapersonal level, with weaker interactional and behavioural pathways for collective and structural influence.

### **6.3. Thesis contributions and limitations, with reflections**

This thesis explores and analyses how an ecosocial perspective is incorporated into social work practices with youth in Gävle to promote their health, well-being, and working-life capacities. Based on three empirical studies and four articles, the thesis examines how social work practices engage with sustainability while promoting health, well-being, and working-life capacity among young people in a municipal welfare context.

The starting point is social work's holistic person-in-environment perspective. Traditionally, the concept of 'environment' in social work has referred mainly to the social environment, while the natural environment has been marginalised. In contemporary society, however, human well-being is increasingly intertwined with ecological conditions. Social work scholars have therefore argued that social work needs to integrate ecological perspectives more explicitly, as human well-being is embedded in wider ecosystems. This integration has been conceptualised, among other things, as ecosocial work. Although ecosocial work has developed a relatively strong theoretical foundation internationally, empirical research remains limited, including in the Swedish context. This thesis contributes to this emerging field by

providing empirical analyses of how ecosocial ideas are interpreted and operationalised in local youth-related practice.

A key contribution lies in its multi-level perspective. At the micro and meso levels, the thesis centres on young people's voices by examining how they understand well-being in relation to the environment and sustainable development. Their narratives indicate tensions between individual and collective understandings of responsibility, sustainability, and well-being. At the meso and macro levels, the thesis analyses how professionals working with and for young people reflect on environmental aspects within the framework of sustainable development. This analysis identifies both opportunities and structural constraints in translating ecosocial ideas into municipal practice. It shows how professionals navigate established welfare traditions, governance arrangements, and sustainability goals. The findings offer conceptual and practice-oriented insights into how ecosocial approaches may be more coherently integrated into municipal strategies and cross-sector collaboration, not least in community work. This is particularly relevant to the aim of the thesis. From a municipality's perspective as a public actor, municipal policy measures can integrate ecological sustainability and social welfare into governance and planning (J. Khan et al., 2020). Through their regulatory and democratic functions, municipalities can also shape the legitimacy of formal decisions and their implementation (Cuadra et al., 2025; Kronsell & Mukhtar-Landgren, 2018). Municipalities such as Gävle therefore play a central role in sustainability work (see Fenton & Gustafsson, 2017; Gustafsson & Krantz, 2025; Krantz & Gustafsson, 2021).

Given that the working-life capacities explored in the thesis are closely shaped by broader social and environmental conditions, the municipal perspective is of particular interest. This is particularly so because the young people in the studies, aged 15–19 years, are still attending school and are in a formative period of developing competences, experiences, and capacities relevant to their future working life. Schools can therefore be understood as workplace-like settings (see *Högskolan i Gävle*, 2018) where such capacities are developed in practice. The findings are thus relevant not only for social work with youth, but also for understanding how municipal environments, institutions, and collaboration between actors can support health, well-being, and future working-life capacities through a more coherent ecosocial approach.

The thesis also situates ecosocial work within the historical and institutional development of social work. It highlights how the profession has responded to social challenges over time and how it is currently confronted with the social consequences of ecological crises. In doing so, it contributes to existing scholarship on rethinking the role of social work in ecological and social transformation, both in Sweden and in the wider global context of sustainable development.

At the same time, several limitations need to be acknowledged. The empirical data were collected in a single municipality, and the findings are shaped by local organisational structures and sustainability initiatives. Additionally, although the overall focus is on youth, only one of the three

empirical studies directly involved young participants. The other studies relied primarily on professionals who work with or for young people. Some of these professionals were engaged in broader welfare and community contexts rather than exclusively in youth services. While professional perspectives are important for understanding the institutional translation of ecosocial ideas, they cannot replace young people's lived experiences. A more consistent inclusion of youth across all studies would have allowed for a more balanced and dialogical analysis. Recruitment constraints, particularly in the youth study, may also have limited the range of voices represented. Across all studies, and particularly in Study II where the participants are young people, youth are treated as a broad category. As a result, important intersections pertaining to dimensions such as gender, class, socio-economic background, and other social positions are not given sufficient attention in the interpretation of their accounts. In addition, the studies were conducted at different points in time and used different methods. This strengthens the breadth of the material but limits direct comparison of identical questions across all participant groups. The synthesis therefore makes pattern-based interpretations rather than claiming to comprehensively cover ecosocial practice in Gävle or its direct effects on health and well-being outcomes.

The data were collected over several years, during which sustainability discourses and policies continued to evolve. Municipal priorities, climate debates, and public awareness may have shifted. The findings therefore reflect a specific institutional and societal moment. At the same time, this temporal situatedness provides insight into how ecosocial perspectives were interpreted under specific governance conditions. Structural tensions identified in the analysis, such as fragmentation, project logics, and the individualisation of responsibility, are likely to remain relevant even as policy frameworks change.

Another limitation concerns the depth of analysis of professionals' personal environmental values. While the thesis examines how ecosocial perspectives are articulated in practice, it does not systematically explore how personal environmental beliefs shape professional reasoning. Earlier research suggests that social workers are not necessarily more environmentally conscious than the general population (Nöjd et al., 2023; T. V Shaw, 2011). Other studies indicate that professionals with a personal interest in environmental issues tend to engage more with ecosocial practice (Boetto et al., 2020, 2022; Nöjd et al., 2024). Personal environmental awareness and lived experience may thus shape professional understanding and influence how ecosocial perspectives are interpreted and enacted. A more explicit exploration of this relationship could have provided deeper insight into the interplay between personal conviction, professional mandate, and organisational culture. Such awareness is shaped not only through education but also through experiential learning, collective reflection, and institutional support.

A further limitation concerns the literature's geographical orientation. Interest in international social work has increased significantly in recent decades. This development is reflected in the growing number of textbooks

for social work students and practitioners that address international perspectives in the field (Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2024a). The intensified international orientation of social work can be understood in several ways, with globalisation being one important factor (Payne & Askeland, 2016). Through globalisation, social problems and socio-ecological challenges have become increasingly transnational in character. As a result, social workers and social work students are expected to develop new forms of knowledge and competencies to address these challenges (Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2024a). For this reason, international perspectives in social work are also considered relevant for domestic social work practice (L. Healy & Thomas, 2021). At the same time, the notion of an international perspective in social work has often been associated with the global spread of the profession itself. In practice, this has sometimes meant that social work models and knowledge systems originating largely from Western contexts have expanded to other contexts (D. Cox & Pawar, 2013; Gray & Fook, 2004).

This broader tendency is also reflected in the present thesis. Although the empirical study is situated in Sweden, much of the theoretical and conceptual framework draws on Anglo-American literature. This is partly due to the limited body of Swedish research in some of the areas addressed in the thesis, particularly ecosocial work and community work. However, it may further indicate gaps in my engagement with Swedish-language literature, especially within traditions of community work. This imbalance may have influenced the study's conceptual framing. A stronger integration of Nordic and Swedish scholarship could therefore have enhanced the contextual sensitivity of the analysis.

Representation within the literature also deserves to be reflected upon. Many of the cited works are written by male scholars, which may reflect publication patterns within the field. Knowledge production is shaped by power relations, including the dimensions of gender and geographical location. Although several of the central theoretical contributions in the thesis are written by women, they are largely situated within Anglo-American contexts. A more explicit engagement with gendered perspectives and scholarship from the Global South could have broadened the thesis's epistemological base.

These limitations define the boundaries within which the findings could and should be interpreted.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis explores and analyses how an ecosocial perspective is incorporated into social work practices with youth in Gävle to promote their health, well-being, and working-life capacities. The analysis suggests that ecosocial elements are partial, uneven, and often implicit. The main challenge therefore lies not in a lack of initiatives but in limited coherence across intervention levels, actors, and areas of knowledge.

At the local level, several practices already connect social and environmental dimensions. Community work, local activities, and summer

employment schemes link safety, belonging, participation, and skill development with improvements in local environments. These initiatives are also relevant for health promotion and health-promoting working life. Health and well-being are shaped by social determinants, including employment (Fisher et al., 2022; WHO, 2024). Across Europe, many young people experience unemployment and insecure forms of work (Nielsen et al., 2023), and unemployment is associated with poorer physical and mental health (Bartelink et al., 2020). Youth employment initiatives therefore matter not only for labour market inclusion but also for long-term health and future working-life trajectories. Additionally, work – whether paid, unpaid, or in the form of care work – is central to sustainability because the fulfilment of human needs depends on labour (Littig & Griebl, 2005). From this perspective, working-life capacities should not be reduced to individual competitiveness. In contexts where young people face insecure labour-market conditions, working-life capacities must also include access to stable and meaningful work that supports health and well-being. An ecosocial approach broadens the narrow focus on employability to include the quality and purpose of work and is concerned with both individual abilities and the social and environmental conditions that shape possible futures. It also involves purpose, inner motivation, recognition, and meaningful participation in society. These dimensions are central to a health-promoting and sustainable working life.

Establishing a broader understanding of work and sustainability within mainstream social work is not easy, however. Environmental and ecosocial approaches have historically struggled to gain space, especially in traditions centred on individual therapy and casework (Gray & Coates, 2015). In Sweden, contemporary municipal social services operate within managerial and neoliberal governance models that emphasise measurable results, efficiency, and individual responsibility. Such models make it difficult to address structural determinants of health, work, and sustainability. When welfare mainly is framed in terms of individual effort or economic productivity, this weakens the shared responsibility for sustaining social and ecological systems (Sewpaul, 2006).

At the same time, the current Social Services Act in Sweden signals a potential shift in how municipal social services are expected to work. The Social Services Act (2025:400), which entered into force on 1 July 2025, aims to create a long-term, sustainable, knowledge-based, and more preventive social service system in closer contact with the service users (Regeringskansliet, 2025). It requires preventive approaches across all areas and strengthens responsibilities related to children and young people, including crime prevention (Socialstyrelsen, 2025). The Act also emphasises accessibility, planning, quality, knowledge, and improved follow-up (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2025; Regeringskansliet, 2025; Socialstyrelsen, 2025). This preventive orientation can create space for more community work and health-promoting work that integrates social and environmental perspectives. However, expanded responsibilities and documentation demands may also reinforce managerial pressures, especially in municipali-

ties with limited resources. The legislative framework may thus both enable and constrain the development of ecosocial practice.

The thesis suggests that the development of ecosocial work is shaped by local governance, policy design, institutional mandates, and everyday professional practice. By situating youth health, well-being, working-life capacities, and empowerment within socio-ecological and socio-economic conditions, and by relating them to current Swedish legislation, the thesis offers a critical account of how ecosocial work can contribute to sustainable development in ways that are relational (concerning human and non-human beings within the ecosystem), preventive, community-based (within a glocal context), and intergenerationally responsible.

## 7. Practical implications and future research

Drawing on the findings across the four studies, several practical implications for social work practice, municipal governance, and youth policy can be identified. Stronger ecosocial integration requires a shift from primarily individual casework and behaviour-focused routines to more collective, community-based, and structurally informed forms of practice. This involves strengthening collaboration across sectors, expanding mandates so that social workers can participate in planning and environmental decision-making, and reducing fragmented organisational structures that limit holistic work.

The studies suggest that community work practice already provides important foundations in belonging, safety, participation, and skill development. These foundations can be developed into more explicit ecosocial strategies. Policy and planning can support this process by aligning social and environmental goals and by embedding sustainability in everyday well-being, safety, and opportunities for influence, rather than treating it as a set of isolated tasks. Participation structures also require renewal. Youth councils, co-creation arenas, and community forums need to be strengthened to enable meaningful intergenerational dialogue and shared agency.

These implications must be understood within a broader municipal and national context. The division of responsibility between environmental and social concerns in Swedish municipalities can partly be traced to historical developments. Until about two decades ago, sustainability work mainly focused on environmental issues. Only more recently has the approach broadened to include economic and social dimensions (Krantz & Gustafsson, 2021). This historical separation helps explain why environmental and social work often still operate in parallel rather than in an integrated way.

Municipalities also play a central role in translating the Sustainable Development Goals into local strategies, as they provide many services that shape residents' everyday lives (Chang, Rambaree, et al., 2026). However, research indicates that it often is unclear how the Sustainable Development Goals are interpreted and implemented at the municipal level, partly because of the complexity of local governance and practice (Fenton & Gustafsson, 2017; Gustafsson & Krantz, 2025; Krantz & Gustafsson, 2021). The patterns identified in Gävle therefore reflect not only local organisational conditions but also broader challenges in operationalising sustainability within Swedish municipal systems. These challenges are also linked to sustainability remaining relatively marginal within mainstream professional social work in Sweden (Brusman & Turunen, 2018) and to the limited role of natural-environment perspectives in both research and practice (Cuadra & Ouis, 2022; K. Rambaree, Sjöberg, et al., 2019). This marginal position also has a historical dimension. Questions about how social and environmental factors affect the development, prevention, and treatment of diseases were part of

social work education until the 1970s, but were later removed (M. Olsson, 2008). Although ecosocial scholarship is increasing in Sweden (Ahlin, 2024; see e.g. Chang et al., 2022; Chang, Sjöberg, et al., 2026; Chang et al., 2025; Cuadra & Eydal, 2018; Cuadra & Ouis, 2020, 2022; Kaffrell-Lindahl, 2025; K. Rambaree et al., 2022; K. Rambaree, Sjöberg, et al., 2019; Thysell & Cuadra, 2023; Turunen, 2024), it is still developing. The uneven incorporation of ecosocial perspectives in Gävle thus reflects a professional field in transition.

Against this background, several directions for further and future research emerge. There is a need to examine how ecosocial community work can be developed and operationalised in municipal contexts, particularly in ways that integrate youth agency, civil society, local ecological conditions, and intergenerational responsibility. Future research could explore governance models that enable cross-sectoral ecosocial practice and reduce the ‘knowing–doing’ gap identified in this thesis. More studies are also needed on the socio-ecological determinants of youth well-being and working-life capacities, including practice-based research that designs, implements, and evaluates ecosocial interventions.

There is also a need for research that examines social workers’ awareness and understanding of ecosocial perspectives within the profession. This includes how social workers define the ‘environment’ in person-in-environment work, how they interpret sustainability in relation to everyday practice, and what they view as legitimate professional responsibilities in relation to socio-ecological issues. Such research could explore differences across service areas (e.g. child welfare, youth work, social assistance, and community work), organisational levels, and professional roles. It could also examine how awareness is shaped by education, workplace culture, leadership priorities, and access to continuing professional development. Attention also needs to be paid to how organisational and governance conditions influence whether ecosocial awareness can be translated into action, including how managerial routines, time pressure, and documentation requirements affect professional reasoning and priorities. Such research is important because ecosocial integration depends not only on policy ambitions but also on how practitioners understand their mandate and how they link social problems to ecological and structural conditions.

Further and future research could also investigate how young people understand intergenerational justice and how this shapes their engagement with sustainability. Such knowledge would help clarify how social work can respond to youth perspectives in more transformative ways. Finally, research is needed on the awareness, knowledge, and views of social work practitioners and educators in Sweden regarding ecosocial work. Strengthening this knowledge base is important for supporting professional development and for integrating ecosocial perspectives more systematically into social work education and practice.

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**Papers**

Associated papers have been removed in the electronic version of this thesis.

For more details about the papers see:

<http://urn:nbn:se:hig:diva-49512>