Dr Jef Peeters has been a professor in social philosophy
and ethics at the department of Social Work of Leuven
University College. He headed the research project
entitled "Orientation of social work towards sustainable
development" (2007–2010), funded by the
government of Flanders, and published "A resilient
society. Social work and sustainable development"
[*Een veerkrachtige samenleving. Sociaal werk en
duurzame ontwikkeling*] (2010a).
Correspondence to: Department of Social Work,
Leuven University College, Groeneweg 151,
B-3001 Heverlee, Belgium.
E-mail: jef.peeters@khleuven.be

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A MISSION FOR SOCIAL WORK? A NORMATIVE APPROACH

JEF PEETERS

ABSTRACT

Sustainable development: a mission for social work? A normative approach
The answer to the current social-ecological crisis requires a transition to a sustainable society. Such a transition will touch on all aspects of life, so social work too has to think about the meaning of sustainable development for its practice. Until now, the awareness of ecological limits has remained mainly beyond the scope of the field of social work. However, many social and ecological problems are increasingly linked and this is the very focus of the concept of sustainable development. This article sets out how social work could, on the basis of its own mission, join a process of sustainable development. To this end, we compare the normative framework of the Brundtland view on sustainable development with the mission of social work as implied by its international definition.

This analysis allows us to formulate some guidelines on how social work can contribute to a transition to a sustainable society.

Keywords

Social-ecological crisis, ecological justice, sustainable development, normative principles, transformational social work

SAMENVATTING

Duurzame ontwikkeling: een missie voor sociaal werk? Een normatieve benadering
De huidige sociaal-ecologische crisis vraagt om een transitie naar een duurzame samenleving, en die raakt aan alle aspecten van ons leven. Daarom moet ook het sociaal werk nadenken over de betekenis van duurzame ontwikkeling voor zijn praktijk. Tot nu toe bleef het bewustzijn van ecologische grenzen grotendeels buiten het aandachtsveld van het sociaal werk. Nochtans is het steeds maar groeiende verband tussen veel sociale en ecologische problemen de centrale focus van het concept duurzame ontwikkeling. Dit artikel argumenteert hoe het sociaal werk op grond van zijn eigen missie kan aansluiten bij een proces van duurzame ontwikkeling. Daartoe wordt het normatieve kader van de Brundtland-visie op duurzame ontwikkeling vergeleken met de missie van het sociaal werk die besloten ligt in zijn internationale definitie. Die analyse maakt het mogelijk om enkele voorwaarden te formuleren voor een bijdrage van het sociaal werk aan een duurzaamheidstransitie.

Trefwoorden

Sociaal-ecologische crisis, ecologische rechtvaardigheid, duurzame ontwikkeling, normatieve principes, transformationeel sociaal werk

INTRODUCTION

It is surprising – to say the least – that a discussion of normative ecological principles has until now been largely absent from social work. Although good social work always includes the environment, it is often limited to the social environment (Coates, 2003; Peeters & Bevers, 2009). And because social workers associate sustainable development primarily to environmental awareness – as is the case in the broader society – they do not usually consider it an issue for social work. However, with the worsening ecological crisis, it is becoming increasingly evident that there is a genuine

link between a large number of social and ecological problems. For example, climate change is affecting the availability of water and fertile land, which in turn is leading to a growing stream of environmental refugees; the loss of open space, air pollution and traffic noise are related to health problems; and the worst-off are suffering the most from the rise in prices for energy, food and other goods. As a result, ecologically oriented practices have become more frequent in the field of social work (cf. Peeters, 2010a, 2012b). This development has yet to result in any fundamental change in the theoretical framework of social work. Nevertheless, following some initial theoretical steps from the mid-1980s onwards, growing numbers of scholars are now beginning to view the natural environment and sustainability as important questions for the core of social work (cf. Coates, 2003; Närhi & Matthies, 2001; Peeters, 2012b), and we can see this at the international level too (International Federation of Social Workers, IFSW, 2011).

At the Department of Social Work at Leuven University College, we have developed a framework to connect sustainable development with social work both as an ethical-political mission and as a paradigm for practice (Peeters & Bevers, 2009; Peeters, 2010b, 2011, 2012b). This paper discusses how sustainable development is relevant to social work from a normative-ethical point of view[1]. In a subsequent article we will present a model for social-ecological practice[2].

THE URGENCY OF ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE

Before we discuss the principles of sustainable development, it is worth looking at the heart of the matter: the magnitude and impact of the ecological crisis is such that it has become an enormous challenge for society. Here, we assume that our readers will be aware of the growing number of reports which indicate the severity of the global situation. But by way of introduction, we will briefly discuss how it is nothing less than a "transition" to another society that is at stake.

Generally, the ecological crisis can be defined as a double crisis. First, we have the crisis of the global environment: our ecological footprint is too great[3]. Human society is using more ecological "services" – resources, sinks, ecosystem services – than the earth can provide us with in a sustainable way. This excessive burden on the environment is called "ecological overshoot". According to the 2010 Living Planet Report (World Wide Fund For Nature, 2010), the global ecological footprint in 2007 was around 50% larger than the earth's ecosystem can sustainably support.

Secondly, we have a crisis of social justice, both at the global level and within individual nations. When we compare the ecological footprint of countries, we notice a large disparity in

access to and the use of resources and ecosystem services. In addition, neoliberal politics has brought about an ever-widening gap between rich and poor within individual countries (United Nations Development Program, 2010). It is therefore clear that in response to a situation of ecological overshoot, a policy of redistributing wealth without respecting ecological limits is not the right response. In particular, the idea that fairer distribution of welfare depends on further economic growth poses many problems (Jackson, 2009). As a consequence, there is a real danger of our ecosystem collapsing, with potentially disastrous consequences for human society. The question of ecological limits thus radicalizes the issues of distribution and redistribution. *Ecological justice* implies genuine redistribution of current access to resources (Peeters, 2010b, 2012b).

It is time to recognize that our current patterns of production and consumption have brought us to an impasse of a structural or *systemic* character. More than twenty years ago, Vermeersch (1988) called this situation the "Scylla-Charybdis principle":

> As long as the current world order remains in existence, the only possibility is to steer between two cliffs. The larger the part of the world population living in wealth, the more our ecosystem is in danger; the more the ecosystem is protected, the more this results in endless misery [author's translation]. (p. 41)

The new challenge that we face is to meet human needs and bring about well-being for every world citizen while preserving our *natural capital*. This will require a radical dematerialization of the economy, the just distribution of wealth, and a new perspective on well-being. All of this means no less than a transition to another society. Sustainable development may provide an answer, but any solution will entail a process of social transition that leaves not a single area of society untouched. That is why people define sustainable development sometimes as a "new paradigm" for our society (Peeters, 2010b, 2012b). The issue of sustainable development is, therefore, also inextricably linked to social work. From this perspective, sustainable development will serve as a new framework to guide social work.

THE NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In order to discover to what extent social work can be linked to sustainable development, we will first discuss the latter more thoroughly. Here, it is important to evaluate the interpretation of the concept in light of the current crisis and the necessity of a thorough social transition as argued.

Definition

In order to discuss the mission of sustainable development from a normative point of view, we will begin with the definition from *Our Common Future*, the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987), also known as the Brundtland Report. This is the most influential definition of sustainable development in the world regarding politics and policies, as evidenced by an increasing number of national and international organizations and governments that use it (Baker, 2006). The definition reads as follows:

> Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without com-
> promising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two
> key concepts: the concept of "needs", in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to
> which priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology
> and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs. (WCED,
> 1987, chap 2, §1)

Usually only the first sentence of this definition is cited. However, prioritizing the needs of the poor and recognizing limitations is of major importance to the correct ethical interpretation of sustainable development.

Under the Brundtland approach, sustainable development clearly has a global focus. Moreover, the first explanation about prioritizing the needs of today's poor implies that the way of life of the rich will also be affected. This immediately leads us to the following questions: what are *needs*, or *basic needs* and how can we distinguish these from *desires*? Since we know that increased wealth *seems* to bring about increased needs, the call for appropriate, and probably modified, views on the definition of well-being and *a good life* is essential.

Similarly, the Brundtland Report mentions that economic growth needs to be stimulated primarily in developing countries. But we need more than simple economic growth as we have known it hitherto. Sustainable development requires a specific type of growth.

> It requires a change in the content of growth, to make it less material- and energy-intensive and
> more equitable in its impact. These changes are required in all countries as part of a package of
> measures to maintain the stock of ecological capital, to improve the distribution of income, and
> to reduce the degree of vulnerability to economic crises. (WCED, 1987, chap 2, §35)

As far as the notion of limitations is concerned, we see an implicitly optimistic vision for the future. Today's limitations are not absolute and may be altered by new technology as well as through social progress. Nevertheless, the report admits that there are limitations. Ultimately, growth is limited somehow.

> The concept of sustainable development does imply limits […] imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. (WCED, 1987, overview §27) Sustainable global development requires that those who are more affluent adopt life-styles within the planet's ecological means. (WCED, 1987, overview §29)

Although Brundtland's descriptions remain somewhat vague and require further specification for the benefit of future policies, they nonetheless clearly indicate the direction that needs to be taken at the normative level. Concepts that were developed later, such as "environmental space", "ecological footprint" and "ecological justice" (Jones & Jacobs, 2006), are clearly the results of movement in this direction. They are powerful instruments connecting the two main issues relating to sustainable development, namely the growing poverty gap between and within the North and the South, and increasing environmental degradation. Their ethical choice is that every human being has an equal right to use the natural resources of the earth, an idea which has far-reaching consequences for the way our society works.

A political concept

For over twenty years now, ever since the publication of *Our Common Future*, there have been numerous attempts to define sustainable development. But even more frequent still is the use of the term "sustainable", which has become problematic in a number of cases from the perspective of sustainable development.

Is this multitude of descriptions and interpretations a problem? It reflects, in the first place, the complexity of the concept of sustainable development. At the same time, however, the dispute about sustainable development is clearly intertwined with the conflict of interests which has emerged in connection with the agenda of sustainable development (Baker, 2006; Dresner, 2008; Sachs, 1999; Sneddon, Howarth & Norgaard, 2006). Although the Brundtland definition has become widely accepted in international discussions regarding the environment and economic development, this does not mean that all parties accept the implied agenda of change. It is

therefore important to remember that sustainable development is not primarily about management, but is a political process that will involve redefining the very foundations of today's society. The lack of conceptual clarity may actually turn out to be an advantage, then, because groups of different interests may find common ground on which to advance concrete political action (Baker, 2006).

This is also consistent with more fundamental considerations about the nature and function of political concepts like "democracy", "freedom" and "social justice". Sustainable development fits into the list of these political concepts. Apart from discussion concerning the basic meaning which can be easily understood and accepted at a political level, there is also a deeper contestation around the core ideas. Sustainable development is thus a fundamentally contested concept. The concept now forms part of the democratic struggle about the direction in which our society should evolve (Lafferty, 1995).

It should come as no surprise, then, that how sustainable development is actually implemented will be continuously disputed because such a political struggle can never be settled completely. Consequently, sustainable development and related policy models are interpreted variously depending on the social actors involved – governments, companies, trade unions, social movements, and so on. This does not change with today's use of the concept of sustainability *transition* (cf. Peeters, 2012b).

That is why we would urge social work to reflect on its own agenda, criteria and processes when it comes to sustainable development. This means, for instance, that we must find out how the principles of ecological justice can be applied to the real situations that social workers face. After all, this is about concepts which were developed on the basis of people struggling to maintain the quality of their living environment or having access to resources. How should we raise awareness of major injustices in these areas? And which side should social workers take when the fundamental conditions that people need to achieve well-being are threatened?

Normative principles

Based on the definition of sustainable development, meeting basic human needs – in particular those of the poor – and protecting ecological resources have become prominent as a kind of ethical yardstick. The international commitment that followed the publication of the Brundtland report brought other normative aspects into the discussion. To draw up a list of ethical principles (cf. table 1), we took the comprehensive study of Baker (2006) as our starting point and

compared this with some related discussions (Dresner, 2008; Jones & Jacobs, 2006; Paredis, 2001; Peeters, 1999). Some of the principles discussed may overlap, but they are mentioned specifically because of their particular emphasis. What is more, all these perspectives have to be understood in relation to one another.

The general objective of sustainable development is to enhance the quality of life of all. The idea of ecological limitations and the need to redistribute claims to ecological resources means that we must rethink our concept of satisfying everyone's (basic) needs through the commonly accepted (i.e. growth-based) concept of prosperity. It is precisely the current link between *development* and *economic growth* that is one of the main reasons why the concept of sustainable development is often ambiguous or contradictory (Jones & Jacobs, 2006; Peeters, 1999; Sachs, 1996, 1999). More generally, this criticism is in line with the fundamental criticism of Western ideas of development. It is here that we find the systemic impasse of which we spoke, which implies that sustainable development cannot achieve its objectives.

> "Development", as a way of thinking, is on its way out. It is slowly becoming common sense that the two founding assumptions of development have lost their validity: first, that deve-lopment could be universalized in space and, second, that it would be durable in time. In both senses, however, development has revealed itself as finite, and it is precisely this insight which constitutes the dilemma that pervades many international debates since the UN Conference on the Environment in Stockholm in 1972. The crisis of justice and the crisis of nature stand, with the received notion of development, in an inverse relationship to each other. (Sachs, 1996, p. 24)

The concept of development must therefore be reappraised in light of the principle of *respect for the earth's ecological capacity to sustain*, which is obviously a basic precondition for sustainable development. The Brundtland approach demonstrates a clear anthropocentric approach – that of surviving and meeting the needs of mankind. The purpose of sustainable development can therefore be translated as "sustainable production and consumption patterns". In our view, sustainability should be interpreted in a *strong* sense, namely that *produced* capital is no replacement for *natural* capital, and on the contrary the latter should be restored wherever possible (Jones & Jacobs, 2006; Peeters, 2012b). This is also necessary to allow space for the life of other species.

Since we humans all share a common destiny, all countries share responsibility for our global environment. However, there is a difference between industrialized countries and developing

countries. Industrialized countries bear the greatest (historical) responsibility with regard to environmental issues, and also have the greatest means at their disposal to address them. In the interests of fairness, then, they should take the lead in adopting measures to address environmental problems. This is the principle of *common but differentiated responsibilities*, which plays an important role within international negotiations and underlies the idea of *contraction and convergence* (Global Commons Institute, 2011; Peeters, 2012b).

Globalization, the existence of biophysical limits, and the resulting interdependence all mean that it is no longer sufficient just to look at social equity and wealth redistribution within one's own society. *Global justice* is an important principle, and, typical of sustainable development, it has both intragenerational and intergenerational aspects. *Intragenerational equity* means equal access to, and use of resources, in both North and South, as well as within the individual societies. What is more, Brundtland stresses that poverty can also be both the result and the cause of unsustainable behaviour. This functional relationship between poverty and sustainable development means that reducing poverty is considered a significant precondition for environmentally friendly development. However, attributing so much weight to the behaviour of the poor is problematic. One tends to forget that it is rich people's way of life that is responsible for the use of the majority of the environmental burden on the earth, in terms of pollution and the use of resources. We, by contrast, would like to emphasize that Wilkinson and Pickett's (2009) empirical study demonstrates a strong relationship between greater equality and the quality of a society, including for the better-off. This insight impacts directly on the question of well-being and facilitates the search for alternative interpretations.

From a normative point of view, the concept of *intergenerational equity*, by which we mean taking moral responsibility for future generations, is probably the most innovative aspect of the Brundtland vision. Although this dimension of sustainable development is often emphasized, its application can present distinct problems. For example, how far into the future do we have to think? And how can we understand today what future generations will want? Moreover, the occasional overemphasis of the time dimension of sustainable development means that the current unequal spatial distribution of life opportunities can be overlooked (Sachs, 1996). This critique implies that principles of global justice always must be applied in concrete contexts because they remain a question of justice for "real people in real places" (Blowers, 2003, p. 71). That question forms the basis for the emergence of social movements for ecological or environmental justice (Agyeman, 2005; Debruyne & Peeters, 2010; Peeters, 2011).

Questions of equity also relate to the distribution of power, so that decisions which impact on people's lives must be subject to active involvement and *popular participation*. Furthermore, sustainable development deals with issues that are heavily values-based and therefore require democratic decision-making. Apart from these basic normative ideas, there is still much work to be done in terms of how participation can be structured, and where various opinions on democracy can play an active role. In addition, there are functional arguments in favour of broad participation in the decision-making process. This enhances the quality of decision-making and increases legitimacy and the acceptance of the decisions made (Baker, 2006), for instance. The problem remains, however, that broad participation does not provide any guarantee of quality in decision-making. The urgency of today's major ecological issues may lead one to wonder whether participatory decision-making processes are still by definition morally superior. In that respect, moral and social leadership become all the more important (Parkin, 2010).

The principles of equity and participation both imply attention to the differences between people and real differences in social tasks. This involves principles of *gender equality* and *respect for diversity*. The impact of environmental degradation varies between men and women and sustainable development therefore requires a gender-oriented assessment of needs. This approach can also be broadened to other differences that are relevant to sustainable development, such as ethnicity, culture, age, and so on. Taking account of differences in needs is clearly related to the principles of human rights and non-discrimination.

Overall, the moral basis of sustainable development – at least the Brundtland version of sustainable development – is the principle of equality that was born of the Enlightenment. While paying attention to real equality of opportunities and – where possible – of outcomes, and based on a pragmatic approach to the issue of economic growth, it is consistent with social democracy in ethical-political terms (Dresner, 2008). In this respect, it is an irony of history that sustainable development appeared on the agenda of the global community just at a time when world leaders were embracing neoliberalism. However, the ambivalence of the Brundtland Report on the question of the limits to growth opened the door for a *weak*, market-based interpretation of sustainability which was even defined in terms of "sustainable growth". This is probably one of the reasons why so much time was wasted, and it appears that the severity of today's ecological crisis requires a more radical interpretation of the basic principles of sustainable development.

MISSION OF SOCIAL WORK

We would now like to make a comparison between the normative principles of sustainable development and the mission of social work. We will use the international definition of social work as our benchmark. This was defined by the IFSW and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in an effort to clarify the position and identity of social work. The fact that it has met with global acceptance, as well as its normative character, make it an appropriate basis for our analysis.

> The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IFSW & IASSW, 2004)

The ethical principles mentioned were specified further in an international statement of principles (IFSW & IASSW, 2004). "Human rights and human dignity" imply: respecting the right to self-determination; promoting the right to participation; treating a person as a whole; identifying and developing strengths. "Social justice" implies: challenging negative discrimination; recognizing diversity; distributing resources equitably; challenging unjust policies and practices; working in solidarity.

Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on the *process* of social work as evidenced by concepts such as *social change*, *empowerment* and *liberation*. Empowerment is an essential concept in today's social work and a complex, layered and above all highly normative concept. From the perspective of the definition as a whole, empowerment should be understood in conjunction with the concept of liberation. This is an indication of the emancipatory focus of social work, and the related ideas of well-being. Ideally, social work intervention builds on people's own actions. It is therefore vital to pursue and promote participation.

People's actions are considered as interaction with their environment. The interaction begins with social relations in the immediate environment, but also includes broader social structures. Basically, it also involves the physical environment which was previously understood mainly as being related to quality of life and aspects of health (Närhi & Matthies, 2001). In any case, *good* social work is multi-level in character, with a political and policy-oriented focus as well.

Sustainable development	Social work
Satisfaction of needs	Enhance well-being

Respect for ecological limits	– absent
	– compatible: depends on concept of well-being
	  social work and sustainable development share the
	  problems of our society

Common but differentiated responsibilities (in the first place between nations)	– implicit: results from general principles of fairness
	  and attention for the possibilities and limits of
	  people
	– characterize also empowerment
	– emphasis on difference between individuals
	  and/or groups in society

Global justice	Yes
Intragenerational equity/solidarity	Yes
Intragenerational equity/solidarity	Compatible: depends on concept of responsibility (as differentiated: compatible with empowerment)
Active participation	Yes
Gender equality and respect for diversity	Yes

Table 1: Comparison of the normative principles of sustainable development and social work.

Since we are looking for normative elements, the international definition of social work is interpreted as a *mission statement* for the purposes of this concise analysis. Many common types of social work will correspond only partially, and sometimes barely, to this. Nevertheless, today it serves as a benchmark for what good social work should be. The utterly emancipatory nature of the international definition stands in contrast with the controlling, control-oriented and socially affirming functions which social work has often been attributed with since its origin.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL WORK COMPARED

Our discussion of the definitions of sustainable development and social work, and their respective normative consequences allows us to make a brief comparison of the two. Table 1 lists a few similarities and a few differences. We will take the principles of sustainable development

mentioned previously as a starting point (left column). We will then list similarities with and differences or differentiations from the normative framework of social work (right column). The prominence of social-ethical principles in the sustainable development column and the importance of its social dimension is thus striking. In fact, the table demonstrates the significant normative similarity between social work and sustainable development in terms of attention to well-being, equity, human rights and participation. The differences lie mainly in the differentiations, although this does not lead to incompatibility. However, we would like to mention that the focus of social work on well-being is broader than merely satisfying needs. We would also like to stress that the principles of fairness are important at all levels of society and the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" is important in social work, for example as part of the ethics of empowerment (Peeters, 2010b). Beyond these normative aspects, we would like to bear in mind the following general, shared aspects: process-oriented, based on multiple levels and multiple actors.

Set against these similarities is the obvious absence of any ecological norm in the definition of social work. There is no explicit mention of, for instance, the principle of "ecological sustainability". Also, while the "Statement of principles" (IFSW & IASSW, 2004) refers to a number of international treaty texts as an ethical framework for social work, there is no mention whatsoever of, for instance, the international agreements that relate to the environment and development. This is characteristic of the way in which social work theories are developed, as demonstrated by others (Coates, 2003; Närhi & Matthies, 2001), and as confirmed by our own research (Peeters & Bevers, 2009).
Provided that this void is filled, the concept of sustainable development can provide opportunities for social work. We would like to refer to the following statement by Aila-Leena Matthies in this regard (2001):

> Externally, social work has a legalised possibility to demand that social aspects are taken seriously in the overall development of communities. Secondly, by applying criteria of sustainability social work can internally reflect on its own influence on the social environments of human beings. Especially the intra-generational point of view in the concept of sustainability leads social work to question the direction in which it is developing itself [...]. (p. 134)

Our argument is not simply that social work should shift its focus to sustainable development out of social necessity. In our opinion, building on the best sources within the tradition of social work, the sector can support the holistic approach that is required to address the social, ecological and

economic dimensions of a social problem. In other words, social work and sustainable development can strengthen each other. As part of this, we would like to mention the following points by way of inspiration.

Firstly, social work must include the physical environment in its contextual approach. This means, for example, considering the notion of *biophysical limitations*, which is also an important aspect of the idea of sustainable production and consumption patterns; emphasizing the meaning of the natural environment for the purpose of human well-being; and becoming increasingly involved in processes of planning and building living environments.

Secondly, social work can help to strengthen the social dimension of sustainable development: its emancipatory focus can improve the social aspects of sustainable development. The bottom-up approaches of empowerment and other participative practices are viewed as assets in this respect[4]. Social work's focus on social justice could reinforce its focus on the issues of distribution and redistribution during sustainable development processes. Sustainable development can also be an influential perspective in order to develop new routes for the social economy.

Furthermore, social work is well-placed to broaden the focus of sustainable development on needs, thus bringing in other aspects of well-being, particularly those that relate to new concepts of what constitutes a meaningful life. We are clearly talking about a social-cultural shift which must be supported by new ideas about well-being. This requires a reconsideration of important aspects of life such as: the notion of emancipation and its relationship to labour and consumption; the meaning of citizenship and its associated entitlements; and the kind of activities that are seen as meaningful participation in society (Peeters, 2010b).

TRANSFORMATIONAL SOCIAL WORK

We would like to return to our previous statement that it is crucial for social work to contribute to sustainable development as a political concept. As a matter of fact, good social work also has a political focus: when social problems are caused by society, they have to be tackled at the level of society; if not, social work will merely provide sticking plaster solutions. In general, ethical ideas of social work cannot be implemented without continuous social debate and political struggle. A reorientation towards sustainable development will not put an end to those struggles. On the contrary, as mentioned before, sustainable development is itself subject to a struggle between social interests about how it should be interpreted and how it should be implemented.

If it is to contribute to the development of a political view on sustainable development, social work will have to focus on the normative struggle about sustainable development as it arises from social movements. Here, it is not enough that many social workers themselves are involved in these social movements themselves. Social movements are crucial to achieving ecological justice. So we think that social work, as a profession, may contribute to the challenge of a transition towards sustainability not only through the practice of advocacy with governments, but even more by building networks and coalitions with social movements within civil society (Peeters, 2012a, 2012b). Social work must focus particularly on movements that work *bottom-up*, such as user organizations.

In order to frame this political view even further, we would like to cite Malcolm Payne's (2006) interpretation of social work practice as a mutual interaction between social change and the development of individual well-being. Here, actual practice depending on the social context is always a social construction that, according to Payne, combines three different approaches: therapeutic, social order and transformational. This also implies a somewhat tense relationship with the mission of social work. So, both the need for a transition towards a sustainable society and the mission of social work itself lead us to the conclusion that a shift towards more transformational practice is needed.

By way of conclusion we would like to emphasize that social work, as an actor in society, must always remain critical of ethically inadequate interpretations and programmes of sustainable development. As a consequence, social work can become a critical partner of government or an opponent of government, depending on the nature of the programmes that are set up. The agenda for sustainable development must meet criteria which correspond to the real magnitude of the current socio-ecological crisis, meet the needs of the poorest throughout the world, and are based on the opportunities of participatory citizenship. There is still much work to be done!

NOTES

1 This article is an adapted version of an article in Dutch in a Flemish social work journal (Peeters, 2009).

2 Peeters, J. (2012). Social work and sustainable development: Towards a social-ecological practice model. *Journal of Social Intervention: Theory and Practice*, (forthcoming).

3 The ecological footprint is a composite indicator that estimates the total human impact on the Earth's ecosystem (cf. www.footprintnetwork.org).

4 A practice model related to social work and sustainable development which focuses on empowerment is the "eco-social approach", developed for a research project about social

exclusion and sustainable living environments in three European cities. (Matthies, Närhi & Ward, 2001). Our model for social-ecological practice builds on this work (Peeters, 2010b, 2011).

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