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Social sustainability: what implications for social work?

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Abstract

This paper addresses the lack of clarity regarding social sustainability and the scarcity of guidance on how social workers may achieve it in their daily practice. The research delves into the concept from the viewpoint of 140 Italian social workers, presenting findings from exploratory research conducted between September 2022 and January 2023. The research aims to answer two questions: 1) How do social workers perceive the link between social sustainability and social work? 2) What conditions favour or hinder the social sustainability of social work in its daily practice? The study employed a structured online interview with closed and open-ended questions, investigating the social sustainability definition and its implications for social work. The results shed light on equity and social justice as the main elements of socially sustainable social work. They also highlight the importance of inter-sectoral collaborations and organisational interventions to contribute to social sustainability.

Keywords: social sustainability; ecosocial work; social justice; equity; inter-sectoral collaborations.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, sustainability has emerged as a significant topic in academic literature and political discourse, providing an opportunity to bridge social justice concerns with environmental issues (Backer *et al.*, 1999). Sustainability has become a prominent topic of discussion in scientific debate due to urgent issues such as global warming, the climate crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic and their social consequences.

The interpretation that sustainability consists of three interrelated pillars, comprising economic, environmental and social dimensions, is widely spread in the literature (Khan 1995; Kunz 2006; Schoolman *et al.* 2012; Vogt & Weber 2019). These pillars represent the interconnected dimensions that must be considered and integrated to achieve sustainability. While the economic dimension refers to a production process aimed at maintaining capital (Khan, 1995) and the environmental dimension involves retaining waste emissions in the environment without causing damage (Goodland, 1996), there is no shared definition in the literature for the social dimension (Vallance *et al.* 2010; Cuthill 2010; Eizenberg & Jabareen 2017; Purvis *et al.* 2019). However, the concept of the social pillar has gained prominence in the sustainability discourse due to the acknowledgement that economic and environmental crises disproportionately affect vulnerable individuals and communities (Moldan *et al.* 2012).

The United Nations played a significant role in advancing the sustainability discourse with the publication of 'Our Common Future', also known as the Brundtland Report. The report introduced the concept of sustainable development, defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Wced, 1987). Although this definition emphasises the interdependence of generations by balancing human needs, environmental management, and economic progress, it fails to address the social dimension of sustainability or how it can be pursued or measured. This confirms the lack of a solid theoretical development of the concept of sustainability (Purvis *et al.* 2019).

In light of these ongoing debates, Global Social Work Organisations have called attention to the importance of sustainability in the Global Social Work Agenda 2020-2030. Within this document, social work plays a crucial role in promoting sustainability and contributing to a fairer and more equitable world. However, it's worth noting that the document doesn't specifically address the social aspect of sustainability, which creates ambiguity in approaching all three dimensions of sustainability within the field of social work.

This article aims to address the lack of clarity regarding social sustainability and the scarcity of guidance on how social workers may achieve it in their daily practice. The purpose of the study is to answer two research questions: 1) How do social workers perceive the link between social sustainability and social work? 2) What conditions do favour or hinder the social sustainability of social work in its daily practice? The upcoming section examines the literature on the topic and explores diverse endeavours to define social sustainability within the context of social work. The following section presents the research design and method of exploratory research carried out in Italy. The sections about the findings and discussion display the collected data and link them with the existing literature, arguing what social sustainability is according to Italian social workers and what actions contribute to developing it. Eventually, the conclusion brings back the reflection on a general and overall level, summing up the elements which shape social sustainability in social work and indicating the main factors that the social work discipline should further develop to make its work more sustainable.

THE SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN SOCIAL WORK

The representation of sustainability in three pillars has received considerable attention in the literature. In particular, there have been several definitional efforts, especially in relation to the economic and environmental dimensions, while the social dimension has been lacking in theoretical frameworks (Cuthill 2010; Vallance *et al.* 2011; Dempsey *et al.* 2011), leading to conceptual uncertainty (Murphy 2012).

The literature presents two distinct positions regarding the implications of the tripartite representation of sustainability. In the first position, the environmental, economic, and social pillars are viewed as distinct but interacting systems (Barbier, 1987; Hancock, 1993). Each pillar has specific objectives assigned to it, but the goal is to maximise the objectives of all three systems through an adaptive process of trade-offs. The second position (Brown *et al.*, 1987; Munasinghe, 1993; Goodland, 1996) sees the pillars as three distinct but interrelated perspectives. According to this perspective,

sustainability is not merely the outcome of a compromise between the three systems, but rather the result of their synergy and interaction. Therefore, the first position highlights the interaction and compromise between the pillars, while the second underscores the complementarity and interconnection between the different perspectives, emphasising the need for transdisciplinary study.

While the economic and environmental pillars are clearly defined, social sustainability remains an elusive topic that is often mentioned, but not fully explored, leading to confusion and disorder, even if efforts have been made in the literature to try to clarify the concept.

The debate on social sustainability developed relatively late, and two distinct periods of discussion can be identified. The initial stage, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, garnered little attention in social sciences, leaving the social dimension often mentioned without a clear definition. Goodland (1996) highlighted the dissociation between dimensions, which left the social undefined, and impractical, making it seemingly impossible to pursue and facilitate. Social sustainability found a place in literature only when connected to the environmental dimension, as seen in the work of Littig and Grießler (2005). The second wave, spanning the last fifteen years, saw a significant rise in interest in social sustainability, particularly in urban studies. The city emerged as a clear context where human vulnerability manifests diversely concerning environmental externalities, natural disasters, and climate change. During this period, the debate took on operational characteristics, with research focusing on potential solutions to reverse climate change and protect planetary resources from excessive use while allowing for a continuous consumption of these resources. Both waves share a common thread: social sustainability is intricately woven into various themes and concepts, encompassing social capital, social justice, equity, risk and participation. These concepts are continuously debated, posing a challenge in defining and measuring social sustainability.

Vallance, Perkins and Dixon (2011) have proposed a valuable perspective on social sustainability, through a threefold conceptualisation: the 'sustainability of development' raises important questions about the equitable distribution of power and resources as well as inter- and intra-generational justice; the 'bridging social sustainability' relates to the active and explicit encouragement of pro-environmental behaviour; the 'maintenance sustainability' refers to the preservation and enhancement of traditions, places and practices important to people. In this context, the goal of economic growth is replaced by a commitment to promoting human well-being, supporting social justice, advancing democracy and respecting ecological limits.

Another attempt to define social sustainability was made by Cuthill (2010), who suggested taking into account 1) social capital as a theoretical foundation; 2) social justice and equity as an ethical imperative; 3) participation as a methodology; 4) infrastructure as an operational viewpoint. Although Cuthill's contribution originated from urban studies, it has significant implications for social work, suggesting that welfare services can be socially sustainable when they foster the development of social capital through participatory processes guided by social justice and equity.

Concerning the specific literature on social work, there is a lack of clarity regarding the dimensions of social sustainability and how social workers can contribute to it. Indeed, works addressing the theme of sustainability seem to align more with the perspective of the three distinct but interacting pillars. However, many works on sustainability tend to overlook or unclearly address its social dimension. For instance, Stamm's work (2021) points out that viewing social sustainability merely as the long-lasting positive effect of services is a narrow perspective, without defining what social sustainability should be. Although the author's title refers to social sustainability, the text actually discusses sustainability as a whole and highlights the importance of social work in addressing the environmental dimension. In the same way, Rantamäki and Kattilakoski (2017) refer to sustainability in general terms, using Gibbs's five core principles that span the different dimensions of sustainability. As such, the authors do not provide a clear definition of social sustainability, nor do they specify the dimensions in which it is expressed or the actions that can be taken to pursue it independently of economic or environmental sustainability.

Similarly, Matthies and colleagues (2019, 2020) initially focus on the economic dimension before addressing sustainability as a whole, thereby missing the social dimension. After four years of research on ecosocial innovations, the authors argue that social work can be considered sustainable if it meets certain criteria. Firstly, it must be able to break down the boundaries between different sectors and foster collaborations between public actors, third-sector organisations, private companies, and informal groups of citizens. Secondly, it should enable the participation of marginalised groups and empower them. Lastly, it must involve concrete ecological content and contribute to environmental sustainability. These contributions underscored the importance of adopting a persuasive economic perspective that goes beyond profit-driven capitalism. Without such a perspective, social work is unable to make meaningful contributions to the cause of social and environmental justice.

Other works explore the link between social work and the environmental dimension. The green social work approach (Dominelli, 2012) addresses social injustice in the unequal distribution of Earth's resources. It involves social workers actively promoting environmental justice, assisting individuals in organising efforts to protect their surroundings during disasters. In addition, the transformative ecosocial work model (Boetto, 2017; Boetto *et al.*, 2020) challenges the traditional modernist assumptions ingrained within the profession and underscores the necessity of reorienting the ontological (being), epistemological (thinking), and methodological (doing) aspects of practice, emphasising a holistic perspective and recognizing the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world (Boetto, 2017). Within this framework, social work achieves sustainability through interventions spanning five levels: 1) personal, which delves into how social workers perceive and connect with the natural environment in relation to their own selves; 2) individual, which involves understanding that human wellbeing is holistic and relates to natural, physical, social, cultural and political contexts: in a nutshell, how practitioners work with service users; 3) group, that involves developing community of practice with service users, colleagues and organisations; 4) community, where the emphasis lies in adopting culturally sensitive and community-

based strategies to activate the strengths and wisdom inherent in local networks; 5) structural, that concerns actions on a broader societal scale, encompassing social and political dimensions to drive societal change and empowerment. By addressing these levels, practitioners can effectively tackle not only the social problems they face daily but also the multifaceted and intricate nature of environmental challenges. (Boetto *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, Raineri and Calcaterra (2016) have contributed to the debate by defining social work as intricately sustainable. They argue that sustainability in social work extends beyond the notion of resource conservation and renewal, but also encompasses the enhancement of people's resources through the activation of caring processes and trust within communities. They highlight how individuals in distress must place a significant level of trust in seeking assistance by approaching a professional for help. This trust must not be eroded or undermined through practices that may lead to dependency or excessive welfare provision. Preserving and respecting this trust becomes essential in maintaining the sustainability of social services and ensuring that individuals feel empowered rather than reliant on external support. However, the definition does not explicitly guide achieving social sustainability within the realm of social work, despite shedding light on its multifaceted nature and introducing trust as a new, difficult-to-measure concept among many associated ones.

Therefore, we concur with Parra (2013) that limiting the social aspect of sustainability to poverty alleviation and environmental justice risks reducing the sustainability debate to a rivalry between economic and ecological logics. As such, we aim to embrace the challenge posed by Goodland (1996) to social scientists and generate research that contributes to defining the social component of sustainability.

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODS AND SAMPLE

This contribution aims to delve into the concept of social sustainability through the perspective of Italian social workers and presents the findings of exploratory research carried out in Italy from September 2022 to January 2023. The research was driven by two main questions: 1) How do social workers perceive the link between social sustainability and social work? 2) What conditions do favour or hinder the social sustainability of social work in its daily practice? To answer these questions, we conducted a structured interview, which involves asking the same - open and closed - questions and in the same order to all interviewees and offering them the same response options (Bichi, 2007). This technique was applied online and in a written form, enabling us to reach a broader audience of social workers, particularly since our objective is to delve into their definition of social sustainability and its implications for social work practice. Therefore, having a larger number of responses was crucial in this context.

The interview consisted of two sections, comprising a total of 28 questions. The first section concentrated on gathering personal and job-related information, containing 6 closed-ended questions. The second section consisted of 22 questions, focusing on the definition of social sustainability and its direct impact on social work practice. Within this section, 8 open-ended questions explored the definition of social sustainability and

deepened the relationship between social sustainability and social work. The 14 closed-ended questions utilised a Likert scale to probe the social workers' standpoint about enabling and hindering conditions for social sustainability and to uncover the challenges and complexities that social workers encounter in their day-to-day practice.

To recruit participants, a cover letter was sent to the twenty regional Councils of social workers. Additionally, the research proposal and the questionnaire were shared within exclusive social network groups dedicated to social workers. Before the official distribution, the questionnaire underwent a pre-testing phase involving five social workers, whose feedback was used to improve the formulation of some questions.

The questionnaire was conducted among 140 social workers who voluntarily participated, thus forming a non-probabilistic sample. It is important to note that the responses obtained from this sample cannot be considered statistically representative of the entire population of Italian social workers¹. Indeed, the research was carried out on a small sample, the participants do not cover all Italian Regions, and most of them were social workers from public service, so it is not possible to generalise the findings. Despite this limit, rather than develop generalisable results, this study aims to explore themes and meanings about social sustainability that emerged from professional perspectives.

The respondent's sample exhibits a diverse range of characteristics, as depicted in Table 1.

Insert here Table 1.

Out of the total number of 140 responses, a majority of 87.9% (123) was contributed by female social workers, while 11.4% (16) was provided by their male counterparts; one respondent identified themselves as 'other' when asked about their gender. Regarding age distribution, nearly 40% (55) of the participants fell into the age group of 46 and above. Geographically, the participants were from Northern Italy, accounting for 70.7% (99) of the respondents, followed by Southern Italy and Islands with 17% (24), and Central Italy with 12.1% (17). Regarding the educational qualifications, approximately half of the social workers (74) held a Bachelor's degree, while 42.1% (59) possessed a master's degree, and a smaller percentage of 5.0% (7) had completed a postgraduate qualification. In terms of employment sectors, the respondents' distributed 80.8% (113) in the public sector, 10.0% (14) in the private sector, 6.3% (9) are self-employed, and 2.9% (4) report being unemployed.

The empirical material was analysed using the frequency distributions of the closed questions (Corbetta *et al.*, 2001) and the content analysis method for the open-ended questions (Ritchie *et al.*, 2003), with Excel sheets serving as a thematic map. Each response from the questionnaire was recorded in the first column of the Excel sheet and assigned a sequence number to identify its source. Concurrently, in the adjacent column, a relevant keyword was assigned to capture the main topics discussed, applying the salience attribution process (Saldaña, 2016). By employing the filter function, quotations

¹ The total number of registered social workers in the Italian Professional Register as of 30 September 2022, was 46784, comprising 93.3% (43669) females and 6.7% (3115) males.

pertaining to the same themes and sub-themes were grouped. Subsequently, concept maps were created for each theme, enabling the extraction of underlying meanings and providing an overall understanding of the interviewees' perspectives.

FINDINGS

The Social sustainability-Social work nexus

Most social workers considered their work socially sustainable in all Italian geographical areas (Tab. 2). Their majority also evaluated their work as socially sustainable regardless of work area (Tab. 3) and belonging organisations (Tab. 4).

Insert here Table 2.

Insert here Table 3.

Insert here Table 4.

The respondents were asked an open-ended question to define social sustainability concerning their work. Their answers were distributed in six main groups depending on the mentioned topic (Tab. 5).

Insert here Table 5.

More than half of the answers identified social sustainability as equity and social justice.

«Social sustainability for me is that set of policies, actions and interventions aimed at concretely realising the right of everyone to have the opportunity to fully express themselves, beyond the socio-economic conditions of the family they belong to and the environmental context of growth and education» (Social Worker (henceforth SW) n. 119)².

Some respondents meant that social sustainability is the capacity for welfare services to distribute the resources equally and for beneficiaries to have equal opportunities; some others, instead, meant that social sustainability is composed of all the interventions aiming at equity, empowerment, and independence from services. Therefore, the confusion between social sustainability as a process and as a product was notable. In the first case, social sustainability was the approach, the prerequisite, or the necessary condition to achieve equity and social justice, while, in the second case, it coincided with the just and equal result of social work favouring individual empowerment and autonomy.

«Activities and interventions aimed at making people independent of the social assistance system» (SW n. 56, social sustainability as a process)

² Since the research focuses on Italian social work, the interviews were conducted in Italian to give participants the freedom and ease to speak in their native language. Thus the interviews' quotations are translated into English by the authors.

«The possibility for people to live in a socio-economic and environmental context that allows them to express their individuality through active participation in decision-making processes concerning their life project» (SW n. 17, social sustainability as a product)

The definitions of social sustainability as “appropriateness and feasibility” pointed out the ability of services to respond to individuals’ and communities’ needs, effectively assessing the resources required to do so³.

«Sustainability is the ability to understand new and old, visible and hidden needs, and to have the means and tools to respond adequately to these needs» (SW n. 71).

“Resource circularity” consisted of definitions discussing social sustainability as the valorization of territorial and community resources, the avoidance of resource wastage or the use of resources in respect of future generations. It is thus possible that these respondents confounded the social dimension of sustainability with its environmental dimension. Obviously this is also an important element of making social work more sustainable, but as we discuss below it tackles a personal and environmental approach to the issue, rather than a collective and social approach. “Working organisations” comprised definitions of a welfare approach based on collaborative networks, participation, and prevention.

«[social sustainability] means changing the vision of welfare, from a traditional and charitable welfare system to an innovative system that aims to regenerate available resources towards a more participatory and inclusive community welfare» (SW n. 79).

“Non-definitions” include the null answers (not given). “Multi-topic definitions” grouped the definitions which regarded more than one topic among the four identified topics.

Enabling and disabling conditions for social sustainability

The respondents were asked both open- and closed-ended questions to reason on the conditions for social sustainability. Most answers hit the collaborations with other organisations involved in social work as a necessary condition to improve the social sustainability of their work (Fig. 1). Then they chose more staff, more economic resources and more time. The last option (“something else”) collected different answers among which a greater participation and community work, more expertise, training and supervision on the specific subject of sustainability, and a paradigm shift, including a more pragmatic and less ideological way of working, the modernisation of operational bureaucratic procedures, a shared approach within the workplace and more collaboration with colleagues, and shared planning and design directions with local politics.

³ Using the general word “resources”, the social workers mean personnel, time, money and networks of collaborations to deliver social services.

Insert here Figure 1.

Delving into their perceptions about what makes both the process and the product of social work more sustainable, the respondents underlined even more the importance of networks and cooperation among different sectors and professionals and between social services, families, communities and beneficiaries.

«The figure of the social worker, together with a multi-professional team (in my specific case: doctors, nurses and any specialised territorial services, local authorities...) becomes fundamental to guarantee accompaniment to the real enjoyment of rights» (SW n. 76).

«[The social work] begins to be more sustainable when we expand the opportunities to work with and for relationships, with people and communities, building trust and cooperation» (SW n. 55).

Since collaborations seemed to be a strong and shared factor to develop social sustainability, it is interesting to inquire to what extent social sustainability is determined by other professionals' collaborations (Fig. 2) and other organisations' collaborations (Fig. 3).

Insert here Figure 2.

Insert here Figure 3.

Among the participants who replied 4 and 5 to the last question (129 in total), 83 of them also indicated what further collaborations would be necessary to make their work more sustainable. The social workers belonging to public entities seemed to retain fundamental a greater variety of actors as they might be already used to working with them. Notably, it emerged the urgency to develop more collaborations with the judiciary system, including the juvenile court, and the employment centres to facilitate the interventions of labour inclusion. The collaborations with the Third Sector and associationism are valued as crucial regardless of the belonging organisations, as well as the collaborations with for-profit actors (Fig. 4).

Insert here Figure 4.

On the side of disabling conditions, the social workers pointed out a high perceived responsibility in the policy-makers, who often interfere with their operational work, and the structure of social policies. Secondarily, other hindering elements were the relationships between public entities, the difficulties of collaborations between different organisations, and the rules and procedures characterising the social workers' organisations internally (Fig. 5). According to them, the latter included the excessive

workload, the lack of personnel, and the exorbitant bureaucratisation. They also added strongly hierarchical and poorly conciliatory work processes and unfair access parameters to social services in the cases where the ISEE (*Indicatore Situazione Economica Equivalente*, *Equivalent Economic Situation Indicator*) is the only considered criterion.

Insert here Figure 5.

Social workers' contribution to social sustainability

In terms of social workers' personal contribution to social sustainability, the respondents were asked how much attention they pay to ensuring that their daily work is socially sustainable (Fig. 6).

Insert here Figure 6.

They could then specify what actions in particular make their work more sustainable. 111 answers were selected out of the total replies (140), not considering the two respondents who declared not to pay attention to the sustainability of their work and those who did not mention any specific actions or strategies (i.e. "I don't know" or "Thinking about social sustainability daily"). The valid answers were distributed in four main groups depending on the mentioned actions and corresponding to four different levels (Tab. 6).

Insert here Tab. 6.

Only the 4% of (111) respondents associated the possibility of generating more social sustainability with personal actions such as using digital tools in the management of communications and procedures, optimising appointments on the agendas and consequently limiting travel or moving by bike and public transport, or sorting waste and in general reducing energy waste. These answers signalled a confusion for few respondents between the dimension of social and environmental dimensions since the mentioned strategies are more specific to the care for the environment. Most respondents (46%) focused on interventions addressed to their beneficiaries as individuals in the care of social services, by mentioning actions such as analysing properly the needs, listening to the person, making sure to give everyone the same opportunities, and using resources appropriately according to the individual needs.

«With attention to each person's issues and background, with attention to his or her will, to what is best for each person, in a word to the individuality carried by the person» (SW n. 50).

The interventions addressed to the community and the territory, which the beneficiaries are involved in, were the minority after the personal actions (16%). This group included designing shared projects with the beneficiaries and their families, creating networks and providing beneficiaries with contacts and relations, and enhancing resources and skills of various actors on the territory (associationism, Third Sector, informal groups of citizens).

«I try to relate with other organisations and make the most of the resources in the territory. I also try to acquaint the beneficiaries with the volunteer organisations of the area» (SW n. 44).

«Creating generative processes that can continue independently of my role and external funding. Focusing on relationships and quality, creating links and territorial alliances» (SW n. 98).

Eventually, the 34% of actions referred to the organisational dimension, that is the working modalities of social workers. These actions concerned meeting and confronting daily within the work teams, circulating information on singular beneficiaries, collaborating both inside and outside the work area, training and keeping up to date with what is happening in the area, and always looking for new solutions.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the social workers considered their work socially sustainable, but delving into their answers depicted many specific definitions of sustainability and favourable or unfavourable conditions to make their work more sustainable. The first research question of this contribution was how social workers perceive the link between social sustainability and social work. It emerged that social work was considered socially sustainable by more than half of respondents when, firstly, it distributes the resources equally and it aims at equity, social justice, empowerment, and independence from services and, secondarily, when social services are able to meet individuals' and communities' needs, assessing appropriately the resources required to do so. This aligns with Sanfelici's research (2021), wherein the concept of equity within social work manifests in two distinct dimensions: equity as impartial treatment and equity as an equal avenue for opportunities. The identification of social sustainability with equity and social justice may be caused by the fact that these two goals are the main principles of social work for decades. Therefore, it is possible that the respondents reacted to the request to define an unknown concept (social sustainability) with a typical behaviour (Moscovici, 1961), that is referring to well known values of their work (equity and social justice).

The concern for an equal distribution of resources recalls previous studies about the sustainability of social work. In particular, it seems coherent, on the one hand, with the green social work (Dominelli, 2012) which builds upon the notion of social injustice and refers to the unequal distribution of Earth's resources, and on the other hand, with the conceptualisation of social sustainability of development (Vallance *et al.*, 2011), which reasons on the equitable distribution of power and resources as well as inter- and intra-generational justice. Moreover, the consideration for the active involvement and participation of beneficiaries sticks with Cuthill's work (2010), where emerged that welfare services and social work can be socially sustainable when they foster the development of social capital through participatory methodologies guided by social justice and equity.

The second research question addressed the enabling and disabling conditions for social sustainability to increase within the social work. Collaborations with other professionals and organisations able to break the boundaries between different sectors were considered determinant as enabling condition by more than 60% of social workers. Therefore, this element seems fundamental to generate social sustainability and not only to address economic sustainability as Matthies and colleagues found (2019; 2020). Concerning new collaborations to develop, the social workers mentioned principally the Third Sector, for-profit companies, actors belonging to the judiciary system and the employment centres, highlighting the difficulties with the first two types of organisations and the complete lack of dialogue with the last two types.

The criticalities within the relationships between different organisations appeared also as one of the most hindering conditions for social sustainability. Even if the reasons were not addressed in this research, the literature about new models of governance (Ganugi & Prandini, 2023; Parra, 2013; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012) and the co-creation of public services (Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006; Euricse, 2023; Loeffler & Bovaird, 2021; Voorberg *et al.*, 2017) offer insights about the possible causes. These might be the incomprehensibility between different professionals due to the languages and operational practices of each sector, the extension of the design and production phases of services if network and collaborative models are adopted, the risk of creating too high expectations in the beneficiaries in the cases of their active involvement, and the need for a change in the role of professionals and organisational culture. Other hindering conditions for social sustainability were recognized in the interference of policymakers and the rules and procedures of social workers' organisations internally, such as the excessive workload, the lack of personnel, and the exorbitant bureaucratisation.

Attempts to change the work practices to make social work more socially sustainable was one of the main actions stated by social workers as contributing to social sustainability (organisational actions). The other actions regarded the personal, individual and community spheres. This categorization builds on the work of Boetto (2017). Even if she refers to the environmental dimension of sustainability, the classification has a resonance with social work, so the analysis is organised through five levels of actions aimed at achieving social sustainability: personal, individual, group, community, and structural. However, the data collected in this case shows that the structural level is never addressed in the daily working practices of the social workers interviewed. and the group approach is not used to make the social services more sustainable for their beneficiaries. The absence of structural actions might be due to the perception that in Italy only policy-makers and, in a minimum part, services' responsible have the power to impact the system structure, while social workers only perform operational tasks. Instead, the absence of the group level might be correlated with the lack of diffusion of this approach, which is mainly applied in the adoption and foster care services. So, the participants in the research stressed the commitment at the individual level, followed by the organisational, community and personal levels.

The last remark concerns community work, which was found to encompass the enhancement of people's resources and sustainability of social work through the activation of caring processes and trust (Raineri & Calcaterra, 2016). Among the

interventions that social workers acknowledged as contributing to social sustainability, the community actions covered only 16% of the answers, showing that social work takes care of the beneficiaries, still rarely considering the social, cultural and territorial context in which the person is located. The explanation of this outcome can be deciphered from various angles. Firstly, it can be attributed to the growing influence of managerial logic (Freidson, 2001) in the Italian context, a trend that has become increasingly prevalent (Tousjin & Dellavalle, 2017). This trajectory raises the concern of social services becoming overly enmeshed in case-work, rather than community work (Allegri, 2015). Secondly, this result can be found in the complaint made in several answers to the interview about excessive workload and insufficient personnel, which force social workers to “succumb to daily emergencies” (SW n. 59)

CONCLUSIONS

The convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalating climate crisis underscores the pressing and imperative need to redefine how sustainability is approached within the realm of social work. Specifically, it becomes increasingly crucial to ascertain how social workers effectively integrate the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability into their daily professional practice. Since the economic and environmental dimensions are already more clearly defined and operationalised, the urgent task of social scientists is defining the social dimension of sustainability and advancing the research about it to help society achieve it and avoid the misconception of the social pillar always defined in relation to the economic or environmental ones. This study contributes exactly in doing so, by exploring the social sustainability concept within the realm of social work and underlining precisely social - and not economic or environmental - elements assembling its definition.

The most crucial theme that establishes a strong connection between social work and the pursuit of social sustainability resulted in equity and social justice. But besides this, other three important issues are the appropriateness and feasibility of social services, the resource circularity, and the organisation of work. The latter is recalled by social workers as a fundamental factor to impact social sustainability. Indeed, the rules and procedures characterising the social workers’ organisations internally, such as the excessive workload, the lack of personnel, and the exorbitant bureaucratisation, are some of the most cited disabling factors for social sustainability. At the same time, the organisational sphere resulted as the second most important dimension through which social workers contribute to enhancing social sustainability. Most of the respondents, however, contribute to the social sustainability of their work by acting on the individual dimension of social work, meaning their work and relationship with service users. Eventually, based on the findings of this study, the collaborations with both other professionals - in terms of multidisciplinary teams - and other organisations involved in the welfare services play a dual role in the social workers' perception. On the one hand, the capacity to create and maintain networks of collaborations is considered the most important enabling factor to develop social sustainability. On the other hand, the social workers recognise the

difficulties in implementing these collaborations, therefore placing it among the hindering factors.

Therefore, we state that social sustainability must be considered as an ensemble of principles aimed at making social work fair and socially just, through the empowerment and participation of beneficiaries, and working practices aimed at improving the working environment of social workers, in terms of multi-professional and inter-organizational collaborations, debureaucratization, and balanced workload.

After identifying the main elements shaping social sustainability in social work, on the basis of our research, we strongly believe a double effort is important to continue reasoning on the topic and to move forward with the achievement of social sustainability. The first effort is requested to policy-makers and social services managers to evaluate the working conditions of social workers and re-organise, if necessary, the operational practices, which play a key role in relation to social workers' ability to pursue social-sustainability through their work.

The second effort is in charge of social scientists for enhancing a theoretical framework, particularly due to the evident lack of a comprehensive paradigm that intrinsically guarantees the sustainability of social work across the social, ecological, and economic dimensions. Requiring a theoretical framework that encompasses the social dimension opens avenues for advancing ongoing educational initiatives, akin to the transformative ecosocial work (Boetto, 2017). This becomes especially pertinent given the existing absence of national education standards in this domain, as observed in Italy (Campanini, 2020).

Moreover, some aspects emerging from the research are worthy of a more in-depth analysis. For, instance, collaborations were perceived both as enabling and disabling factors for social sustainability, indicating that there might be specific features to implement to favour social sustainability. Investigating this issue would add more insights on socially (un)sustainable practices in social work contextualising the latter on the basis of the organisation type. Other elements to dig into would be the reason why social workers perceive policy-makers and social policies as hindering factors for social sustainability, or the reason why the community actions aimed at social sustainability are so low compared to other types of interventions carried out by social workers. Additionally, there is a need to analyse how sustainability can be effectively pursued at various levels of intervention. Such research endeavours would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable social work practices.

In conclusion, there is an absolute urgency to incorporate social sustainability into discussions on sustainability, so that this dimension can be interconnected with the economic and environmental dimensions. Indeed, elevating the social dimension of sustainability alongside the economic and environmental dimensions presents a compelling and promising opportunity to harmonise the aspirations of both human well-being and environmental preservation, aligning human progress with ecological vitality and ensuring a balanced and lasting trajectory of advancement.

Disclosure statement

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