

S26 Social Innovation for Sustainable and Inclusive Regions, Communities and Neighborhoods

Social farming as a narrative for ecological social work and environmental justice

How to make communities and neighbourhoods better?

Eliška Hudcová

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1. Introduction

In the 1970s, concepts such as environmental and ecological justice emerged. Alongside social justice as an ideal state in which all members of a society have the same fundamental rights, protections, opportunities, responsibilities and social benefits (Barker, 2003), environmental justice has its relevance to human dignity and well-being in a spatial context. Poor communities and people with difficulties are unequally affected by environmental damage as they suffer most from pollution problems or ecological risks. Poverty, various forms of deprivation and poor living conditions are associated with lower chances of future success. At the heart of environmental justice is the minimisation of environmental damage and equitable distribution of environmental benefits, such as the protection of clean water, the preservation of species integrity, and climate stability, in a way that provides the best for the most significant number of people. *"Environmental justice's first task is to preserve the integrity of the natural environment and its resource potential for the benefit of human welfare"* (Besthorn, 2013, p. 35).

The concept of environmental justice (the alternative and unproblematic use of the term ecological justice in this paper) recognises the strong connection to place, mutual respect and interdependence between humans and nature. It claims all human and non-human species have a just and equal claim to an existence that ensures their well-being. In this article, ecological justice is practically modelled to the concept of social farming, which declares the natural relationship between social work (as continuous efforts for social cohesion and inclusion and support in solving social problems) and nature (as green outdoor and extra-urban spaces). Social farms are places or projects that offer a variety of activities in a farm environment for people who approach complex life challenges due to their mental, intellectual, and physical health problems, as well as conflicted social backgrounds. Social farms aim to improve the quality of life of the people referred to in this paper as 'participants' innovatively. Depending on the participants, social farms offer paid employment, vocational rehabilitation, and valuable daily activities in non-formal places and a green environment. Social farms operate as unique institutions established in the countryside for the benefit of the public, complementing the range of social and healthcare instruments outside the cities (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009) and creating living communities and neighbourhoods.

This article seeks to answer how environmental justice is embodied in social work through the practice of social farms. It illustrates how participants are involved in ecological justice precisely and confront the negative consequences of climate catastrophe in a participatory way and how the academic debate on environmental social work can be concretely performed. The article is structured as follows. The next section explores the theory of environmental justice and environmental/green/ecological social work and introduces the theory and practice of social farming. In addition to presenting and discussing the theories, mixed research methods such as focus group interviews and online surveys are used to get data and analyse the perspective of understanding the concept of ecological, social work on social farms. The

essential and often mentioned perspective of the social farm professionals is that the participants can feel the relevance of keeping the environment healthy after some time spent on the farm, which is the core value of human existence. They learn through their work and their full participation in these safeguarding actions. They become neighbourhoods and communities responsible for nature. They also become active carers instead of passive objects of care, and in this way, they co-create environmental justice.

2. Theoretical background

The entrance to the theoretical passage begins with an eco-social worldview that strengthens relationships with people and places and elevates the knowledge commons. It also states the imperative of resignation to the anthropocentric perspective, which allows one to see the benefits of all human activities for one's purposes and promotes economic growth as an accomplishment of human destiny. At some point, it must coincide with a perspective on sustainability in our work, where "we can then slow down to enjoy the relationships with others in our lives, invest in the connections to place, and take advantage of the opportunities to grow our garden, hang our clothes to dry, or walk/bike, rather than always being in a hurry", as Meredith and Powers (2019, p. 27) explain in their article. The slowness and focus on other beings, the place, and the relationships appear as a must to maintain human and natural well-being. It also closely addresses the issue of the ecosystem's ability to be maintained and renewed within the average balance of life cycles of essential elements of culture, society and nature (idem, p. 28). The eco-social worldview pushes people towards environmental thinking in social work. Ecological justice can be performed in social farming, enabling the supported social groups and individuals to actively participate in bettering the living space and making it fairer. The theoretical part of this paper presents the concept of environmental/ecological social work and social farming in more depth. Above all, it introduces the short history of environmental awareness and what pushed individuals toward more responsible sustainability and nature protection practices.

2.1 Changes in awareness of environmental issues

In the 1960s, the first studies in agriculture (Carson, 1962 In Moldan, 2021, p. 21) pointed to the global context of pesticide effects on ecosystem destruction. The discussion of environmental devastation was thus, for the first time, brought into the spotlight of the general public. Discussion of ecological issues later shifted to the rapid growth of the population (Ehrlich, 1968 In Moldan, 2021, p. 22), for which it would be impossible to provide a quality environment and which would have negative impacts on it. Civil society has made a significant contribution to raising awareness of the need to protect the environment, particularly in the United States, and the notion of environmental threats on a planetary scale arose during this period. In the 1960s, several prominent environmental conferences were held, and influential international organisations for conservation began to work (e.g., the World Wide Fund on Nature was established in 1961). A landmark event was the United Nations (UN) Conference on Human Environment in 1972 held in Stockholm, which identified the current form of human industrial activity as a threat to planetary systems and set out guiding principles for an environmental policy, which resulted in the so-called Stockholm Declaration (Moldan, 2021, p. 25). During this period, the United Nations Environment Programme was founded. The conference also focused on the poor people suffering the most from environmental pollution.

The context of environmental sustainability has increasingly been linked to economic growth, which is still the flagship of the countries. Unlimited growth using limited resources was also problematised in this period, with man's economic activity threatening the very existence on Earth. German-born British economist Ernst F. Schumacher has made a significant contribution in his book *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered* (1973). The Stockholm Conference *One World* publication was followed by another, entitled *Our Common Future* (1987) by the World Commission on Environment and Development. The highlight claims that economic development is necessary, but it must be sustainable; one meets the needs of the present while at the same time does not undermine the opportunities of future generations. In 1992, the UN Conference in Rio de Janeiro produced a sustainability action plan, *Agenda 21*. In 2000, the *Millennium Development Goals* were established and

subsequently expanded into the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs), which were unanimously adopted at a major summit of the UN General Assembly in September 2015.

2.2 Social work and its relationship to the physical environment

While community work, working with groups and individuals, has long been an element within social work, concern for inter-relationships with the physical environment has not been a mainstream issue in many economies. Physical space has been thematised in social sciences and humanities in the fields of sociology, anthropology and psychology. A living condition that influences an individual's growth and behaviour was highlighted in the ecological systems theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977). Another psychologist who integrated the environment into the thought on human behaviour was, among others, Hans Orians in his habitat theory. According to his research, natural selection should have favoured individuals who were motivated to explore and settle in environments likely to afford the necessities of life but to avoid environments with poorer resources or posing higher risks (Orians & Heerwagen, In Barlow, Comides, & Tooby, 1992, p. 561). Other psychologists identified the beneficial impacts of contact with nature on human health, such as positive emotions, or feelings of fear and stress (Ulrich, 1983), enhancing a person's mood (Pretty, 2004), or improving focused attention (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1983). Still, the works mentioned above concentrate on humans as the centre of the focus, where nature plays the role of background serving individuals, and the mutual respect and interdependence between individuals and nature are only at the second level.

Carel Germain (1973) first introduced the ecological perspective to social work as part of the growing trend to conceptualise human development and deteriorating social and biophysical conditions in holistic and systemic terms. Germain understood that persons' physical and social environments must be assessed to enhance human well-being. She and her colleague Alex Gittermant then developed the *Life Model of Social Work Practice* to apply ecological principles to direct practice.

“The life model conceives of problems in living as a result of stress associated with inadequate fit between people and their environments. These problems revolve around stressful life transitions, maladaptive interpersonal processes and environments that become or remain unresponsive despite human intervention to modify and improve them.” (Besthorn, 2015, p. 872).

Social work spoke the ecological and systems language of environments in interaction. In reality, the focus was mainly on individual behaviour in static environments, Besthorn argues. By suggesting that an alternative ecological model of social work must also consider the natural world, the scholars offered something new to social work. Their critique was not just about extending conventional environmental definitions to include the natural world but also advocating for a radical new approach to how social work conceived itself and how it went about its practice priorities. They began, in a similar period, to address the implications of nature's degradations, especially on poor and vulnerable populations, while at the same time exploring the natural world's ethical, aesthetic, mythic, and therapeutic (Besthorn, 2015, p. 871) hand in hand with environmental psychologists remembered above.

Environment and nature protection became more central in social work through the strategic document by the United Nations in the 1980s (IASSW, ICSW, IFSW, 2018, p. 21) and after the set of *Agenda 21*. Environmental problems, injustices, climate change, food insecurity, water shortage, housing pressures, and desertification, including the rapid growth of urban informal settlements, affect people in communities and are, therefore, relevant to social workers and social work as a discipline, as their literal job is to intervene at the intersection between people and their environment and have to go beyond the social to the physical and the whole ecosystem.

“Social workers and social development practitioners work with marginalised communities to address a diverse range of challenges that relate to poverty, deprivation, disease, lack of access to basic service, violence and other rights violations. Most of these are inextricably linked to environmental issues either as a result of the negative impacts of the misuse of the environment, lack of access to productive resources for a living, public health issues resulting

from degraded environments, or conflicts over the control of productive resources such as land, all of which constitute environmental injustices." (IASSW, ICSW, IFSW, 2018, p. 59).

In 2010, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) agreed on *The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development*, followed by a joint *Commitment to Action* on 2012. Four key themes were proposed to guide social work and social development:

- Promoting social and economic equality
- Promoting the dignity and worth of peoples
- Working toward environmental sustainability
- Strengthening recognition of the importance of human relationships.

These four interlinked goals provided social workers with a framework for approaching the new global context of the 21st century. The *2030 Agenda* and its Social Development Goals represent a paradigm change where interrelated and interdependent aspects of sustainability are covered: ecological, social, and economic (IASSW, ICSW, IFSW, 2018, p. 112). Some practice-oriented topics from ecological social work may represent community and family-based sustainable agriculture, community gardens in low-income neighbourhoods, urban agriculture that creates employment, sustainable livelihoods and food security (Gray et al., 2013, pp. 15-16). From this context, green social work (environmental or ecological/ecological social work arose as an academic discourse that rethinks discussion on ecology in social work. Lena Dominelli uses the term green social work and develops it as

"a form of holistic professional social work practice that focuses on the interdependencies amongst people, the social organisation of relationships between people and flora and fauna in their natural habitat; and the interactions between the socio-economic and physical environmental crisis and interpersonal behaviours that undermine the well-being of human beings and the planet earth." (Dominelli, 2012, p. 25)

She offers a profound transformation in how people conceptualise the relationship between people, living things, and the inanimate world. She tackles structural inequalities, including the unequal distribution of power and resources, poverty, global interdependencies, and the use of limited natural resources, such as land, air, water, energy, energy sources, and minerals, for the benefit of all rather than the privileged few. In her view, the concept of green social work determines the new paradigm of rethinking the world context.

2.3 Social farming as theory and practice

In the introductory part of their book, Gray, Coates, and Hetherington present a list of issues to tackle the interdisciplinary approaches toward environmental themes in social work and agriculture, and many of them are covered under the "Sustainable Development and Food Security" umbrella. Most agricultural activities are tied to a permanent place in the landscape: crop, livestock and mixed production. The intensive and industrial models are prevalent; a smaller proportion is small-scale, and a particular category is organic farming (Frouz, Frouzová, 2021, p. 87). Social farming is not yet a relevant segment from the production point of view. Industrial agriculture usually has negative connotations, but the authors offer interventions that could bring change on the conceptual and practical levels. They return to the microlevel growing food in low-income neighbourhoods, focusing on local production and short supply chains (Gray et al., 2013, p. 16). Partly, the *Farm to Fork Strategy* in agriculture pronounces the need for transitive thinking, setting out how to build a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system in agriculture in Europe. An urgent need is to "*reduce dependency on pesticides and antimicrobials, reduce excess fertilisation, increase organic farming, improve animal welfare, and reverse biodiversity loss*" (F2F, 2020, p. 5). Reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic raises awareness of the importance of critical staff, such as agri-food workers, considering the protection of seasonal and undeclared workers, their social protection, working and housing conditions and protection of their

health and safety (F2F, 2020, p. 12). The strategy does not address the need for sustainable local communities and food security for people with lower opportunities or their integration into agri policy. Subliminally, several opportunities for social farming can be perceived but still demonstrate how far these sectors are in strategic thinking.

Social farming is defined as *"the use of commercial farms and agricultural landscapes as a base for promoting mental and physical health through normal farming activities. Specifically, the provision of a structured, supervised programme of health, vocational, social and farm-related activities for vulnerable people"* (Murray et al., 2019, p. 14). The opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Social Farming (2012) captures the main characteristics, stating that social farming is a *"set of activities using agricultural resources, both plant and animal, to create an appropriate environment for people with different disabilities or socially disadvantaged people and the general public, to provide them with employment opportunities and to support their integration into society"* (NAT/539-EESC-2012-1236, p. 4). It is an *"innovative, inclusive, participatory and generative model of agricultural practices that provides recreational, educational and support services. It aims at the social and labour integration of disadvantaged people who, through social farming practices, can contribute to food and agricultural production."* (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009, p. 11). Social farms are then settings or projects that offer a variety of activities in a farm environment for people who have experienced various life challenges due to their mental health problems or complex social backgrounds. Depending on the participants, social farms offer paid employment, vocational rehabilitation, beneficial daily activities in non-formal settings and a green environment. Social farming is a theoretical framework connecting social economy, short-supply chains (ideologically fulfilling the Farm to Fork Strategy), nature and landscape protection, agroecology, and food processing. Its impacts are on social work, which enhances social cohesion in local contexts, strengthens democracy and participation, and enables people from different backgrounds to connect. It is a practical activity in the real world (Harth, Essich, eds., 2023). In social farming, the localisation and shortening of the food chains are at the heart of its practice. Together with environmental justice, which aims to minimise environmental damage and ensure that the benefits of the environment are shared equally, social workers can engage in social farming practices that protect the environment by creating and maintaining green spaces. Through community gardening and social farming, citizens connect with nutrition programmes and participate in community regeneration by planting, weeding and harvesting in space (Shepard, 2013, p. 121).

Jarábková, Chneneková and Varecha provided a systematic literature review of the Definition and context of social farming in 2022 of 134 scientific publications from 2006 to 2021. They identified clusters of the issues summarised under the Definition of social farming, Therapeutic /health effects, social effects, Educational Effects, Environmental effects, Economic effects, Social farming and multifunctional agriculture, Social farming and rural development; Cooperation of partners within social farming, Support policy and social innovation; Other. Environmental effects of social farming were further developed in their article in terms of their positive inputs into increasing biodiversity and maintaining ecosystem service but not as fostering ecological inclusion (Jarábková et al., 2022, p. 552); it represented an 8,2 % share of all reviewed publications. The intersectionality between agriculture and environmental social work was not thematised, which, on the contrary, is this paper's novelty and purpose.

3. Methodology

This article seeks to answer how environmental justice is embodied in social work through the example of social farms. It illustrates how participants are involved in environmental justice precisely and how academic debate on ecological social work is performed. In this study, we thus use mixed methods that

were discussed and collected within the Eco-Social Farming project.¹ from April 2023 to January 2024. The research was based on three focus group interviews and an online structured questionnaire with closed and one open question. The focus group interview lets participants reveal their attitudes, meanings, preferences and priorities in daily life (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 98). The quality of the information is assessed as people check each other's statements, and a balancing of opinions takes place (Hendl, 2005, p. 183). The advantage of the online questionnaire is that it allows the assignment of quantifiable and comparable values to different characteristics and is conducted under the most convenient and similar conditions (Novotná, Špaček et al., 2019, p. 144). All respondents answered identically worded questions and chose from identical response options. The quantity thus enables us to assess how significant a thing is, how many of them there are or how likely we are to encounter one.

During the preparatory phase and before the focus group interviews, the specific elements of social farms that relate to ecology and minimise negative environmental impacts were collected based on the expertise and non-participatory observations of tens of European social farms. These elements and related topics were then discussed on Czech, German, and Slovak farms. The focus group was conducted each time on the farm, working with different participants (people with intellectual disabilities, people with drug addiction history, people with alcohol addiction history and no income). Each time, the group was relatively homogenous, consisting of social farming experts (theorists and academics) and agricultural profession leaders and therapists from the selected social farms. The focus groups took place in April 2023 (Czechia), October 2023 (Germany), and April 2024 (Slovakia).

An online survey based on the results of focus group interviews was carried out, which could be presented for the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Germany. The online survey was sent between 15.11.2023 and 30.11.2023 to 140 contact emails from the field of social farming (farmers, social workers, scientists) in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The same questionnaire was distributed from 10.1.2024 to 25.1.2024 in Germany to a similar target group of 70 receivers. The fundamental question was which elements of social farms promote a sustainable and quality environment; additional questions comprised the type of target group involved in farm activities, the type of activities the target group was involved in, and the most relevant impacts of green works on participants from the target groups. The return rate of the questionnaire was 61, i.e. 29 %. The countable responses are summarised below; the final question was open-ended and addressed the critical impacts of social farms on the environment. This section was developed using content analysis, in which the main categories were identified.

The data collected is managed to a high standard throughout the life cycle of the research data (archiving ten years), managed per FAIR principles, and stored in a secure location, all per the Data Management Plan of Charles University.²

4. Tentative results: How social farming fosters environmental justice and how social farms contribute to ecological social work

4.1 List of environmental manifestations on social farms (preparatory phase)

Elaborating on manifestations contributing to ecological sustainability, Table 1 identifies and presents the scope of activities, characteristics, operations, and material equipment typically connected to social

¹ The small cooperation project funded by the Erasmus+ programme, no. 2022-1-CZ01-KA210-ADU-000083310, lasting from 12/2022-11/2024. It aims to explore elements of environmental sustainability in social work on social farms. By this, I wish to thank my colleagues Thomas van Elsen, Tomáš Chovanec, Anna Holtmann, Jan Moudrý, Ján Kovacs, and Miloslav Kováč who helped with the data collection.

² Charles University. Data Management Plan (online). Available at: [Data Management Plan \(DMP\) - Open Science Support Centre \(cuni.cz\)](#).

farming practice. These tools are not all applicable simultaneously in one place; their performance depends on the habitat conditions, the type of agricultural production, and the setting of the social farmer. However, these are the most commonly used tools consciously linked to the ecological characteristics of social farming.

Water retention in the landscape - building ponds, small water bodies, aquatic biotopes	Short supply chains (limited food miles and lower CO ₂ footprint)
Composting	Organic farming processes
Draws	Photovoltaic panels
Rainwater management on buildings and in the farm yard	Handwork
Animal welfare at the same level as human welfare	Closed farm management cycle
Diversification of production	Distribution on local markets/canteens
Less use of agrichemicals	Positive work with landscape
Consideration of the value of the landscape elements (use of branches for feeding animals)	Use of landscape elements in a logical way
Internal use of production – fostering self-sufficiency and closed farm cycles	Raise awareness of the environmental aspect (water management, reuse, composting) among participants
Environmental education of school classes on social farms	Permanent structures in the landscape – hedgerows, trees, flower stripes, fallow lands
Attitude to the soil as the gift	Less input from the outside and more resiliency
Diversity of activities that diversify the farm management	Special care for precious biotopes
Systematic reuse of tools and machinery: Nothing is thrown away	Green manure, limitation of artificial fertilisers

Table 1. Commonly used ecologically conscious tools on social farms. Source: Matrix of Social Farms, Eco-Social Farming Project, 2024, author's data processing, not yet published.

The table shows a diversity of approaches to environmental issues on social farms. Some are linked to energy savings, water savings, and care for the landscape and animals or soil; some are more concentrated on people's attitudes and education, and some are more focused on non-humans. Landscape and natural heritage maintenance is often the case. The manifestations, which are essential to mention, are not directly connected to the primary agricultural production. They are often unproductive activities that are, for example, economically disadvantageous. On the contrary, they require more time, human energy, and mental and financial resources.

4.2 Social Farming and narratives about environmental justice and ecological social work (focus group interviews)

The identified list of tools was later discussed in the focus groups at three social farms. There was nothing to disagree with from the list given, and participants in all focus groups considered it essential to link the environmental aspects to social farming. The narratives revolved around the intrinsic embedding of social farms in an ecological context. A social farmer on a German farm said:

Twelve people left Berlin and bought this dilapidated farm, and from day one, it was clear that we were going to farm organically. We wanted what was best for nature, but above all, what was best for us. (12.10.2023, author's archive, Social farm for people with drug addiction history)

The social farmer from the Czech Republic went a lot into agriculture's spiritual and aesthetic aspects.

Biodynamic farming and ecology create the beauty of our country. It was given to us that the soil is the foundation of all life on the planet. We cannot farm any other way. (20.4.2023, author's archives, Social farm for people with intellectual disability)

They initially needed to reveal the purpose of participants' involvement in organic farming and planning environmentally subtle measures. Environmental inclusion came later, as the Slovak farmer agreed.

The construction of straw churches, passive housing, and organic farming are naturally combined with the idea of helping people. They do not come here because of their environmental responsibility. They will learn that later. However, it is essential for me. (11.4.2024, author's archive, Social farm for people with alcohol addiction history).

Social workers who come as staff do not have a high environmental responsibility. This fact is often due to their preoccupation with caring for people in the dimensions of social integration and social cohesion.

Social workers generally need to learn more about climate disasters. They work with people in any environment. Only here on the farm, they become aware of other contexts of life and its cycle that they begin to see as important. Then, they naturally start to conserve water and energy. (20.4.2023, author's archives, Social farm for people with intellectual disability)

Moreover, the German farmer adds.

Environmental or ecological social work? What is it? It is an academic construct. We are simply looking after nature and growing food so future generations can farm here. It is considered everyday work outside. The ecological dimension only comes gradually and from the outside. (12.10.2023, author's archive, Social farm for people with drug addiction history)

Responses about low awareness of environmental issues among social workers also appeared in the focus group in the Czech Republic.

Social workers do not think about environmental sustainability, at least not when they come to the farm. It is a long-term job for them, too, requiring them to change their thinking. (20.4.2023, author's archives, Social farm for people with intellectual disability)

After the question of environmental justice and environmental social work was asked, a bridge to agricultural activities had to be made to understand the link. Environmental justice was an opportunity to participate in ecological quality and be an agent of change, and it began to resonate (Gray et al., 2013). In this parallel, the farmers and social workers started to think about the physical conditions of the environment for their quality of living. Partly, they made the transformative change towards the "green social work" concept (Dominelli, 2012, p. 25), although at this stage, implicit.

Similarly, it was also repeatedly said that a farmer who is socially perceptive, i.e. who can see the social misery and relations of the surrounding world, is more inclined to organic farming. According to farmers' narratives, the opposite view that an organic farmer would also see the needs of the disadvantaged is applied to a much lesser extent. Social farm founders and innovators are often embedded in social work rather than agriculture, creating environmentally fair surroundings (organic farming). There is a difference here between the social worker's founders – leaders, and the social workers who come to the farm as staff to assist the participants. In this context, the primary motivations for setting up a social farm are holistic thinking about people and nature, care for the landscape, and an attitude of care for

nature (Besthorn, 2015). Along the same lines, social farmers often mention multidisciplinary cooperation, valuing diversity, and individualised care. Finally, social farmers appear as agents of local change and attentiveness. In the focus group interview reports, attitudes such as general engagement, cultural connections and creativity, attentiveness to local individual and societal difficulties, civic and democratic norms and values, respect for diversity, innovative approaches for society overlapping agriculture and humans, partnership with municipalities, empowerment of the solidarity and interests in common issues were cited.

4.3 Quantitative results of a survey focusing on the participation of disadvantaged people on farms (online survey)

The online survey results provide insight into countable specific activities on farms and the perspectives of those who completed the questionnaires. The questionnaire survey was filled in by 61 respondents, presenting an absolute value of $n=61$. Forty responses are from farmers; the rest are characterised as other professions (not listed). Of the forty farmers, thirty-one perceive themselves as social. Slightly more than half of the representatives speak for the social farming sector as implementers; the others are farmers or stakeholders in social work, social integration and rural development.

The range of farm size of the respondents is from 1-5 ha (11 units), 5-10 ha (5 units), 10-50 ha (12 units), 50-250 ha (11 units) and more than 250 ha (1 unit), the number of employees on farms varies from 2 to 31. The range of participants included in social farms is very diverse. It is impossible to determine whether participants have a single "disadvantage" or if, in some cases, it represents a combination of disabilities. It is not thus possible to state if the social farming leaders (31 subjects) work with an absolute number of 89 participants or if the number is lower than 89.

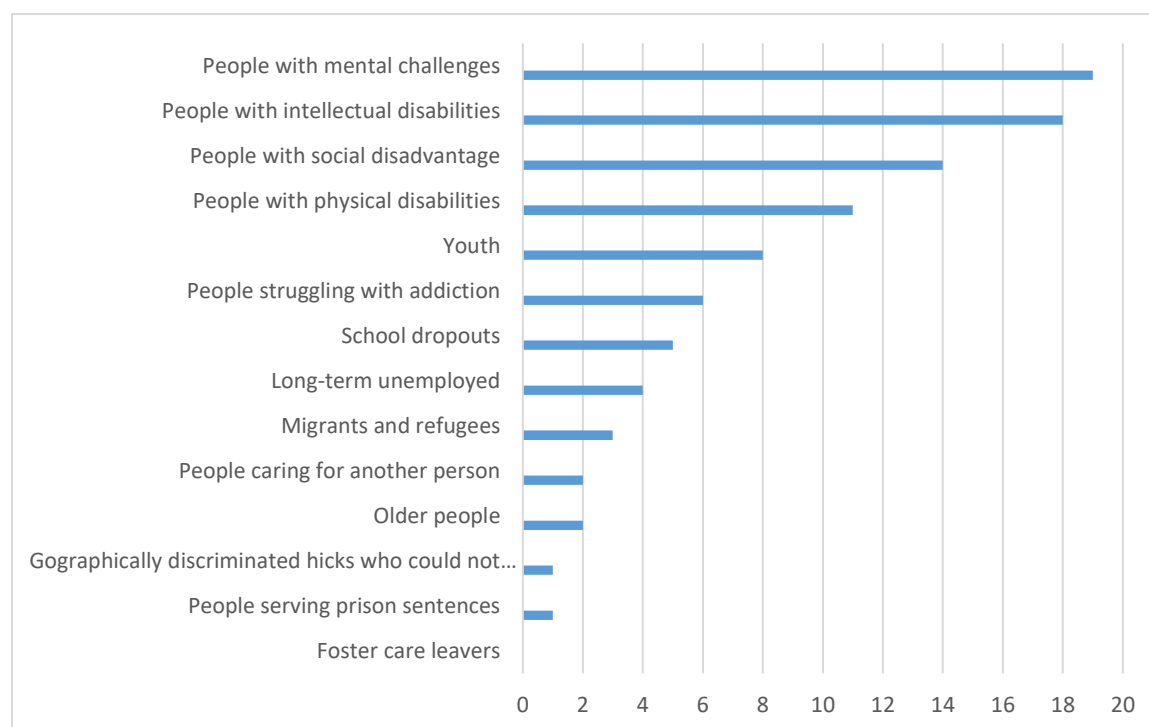


Figure 1. Participants on social farms from diverse socially disadvantaged groups. Source: Online survey, Eco-Social Farming Project, 2024, author's data processing, not yet published.

The questionnaire reveals in which activities the participants are involved. Suppose we assume that the social farms are small-scale farms with a predominance of environmental awareness. In that case, this integration into work presents environmental justice par excellence when helping and working on the farm.

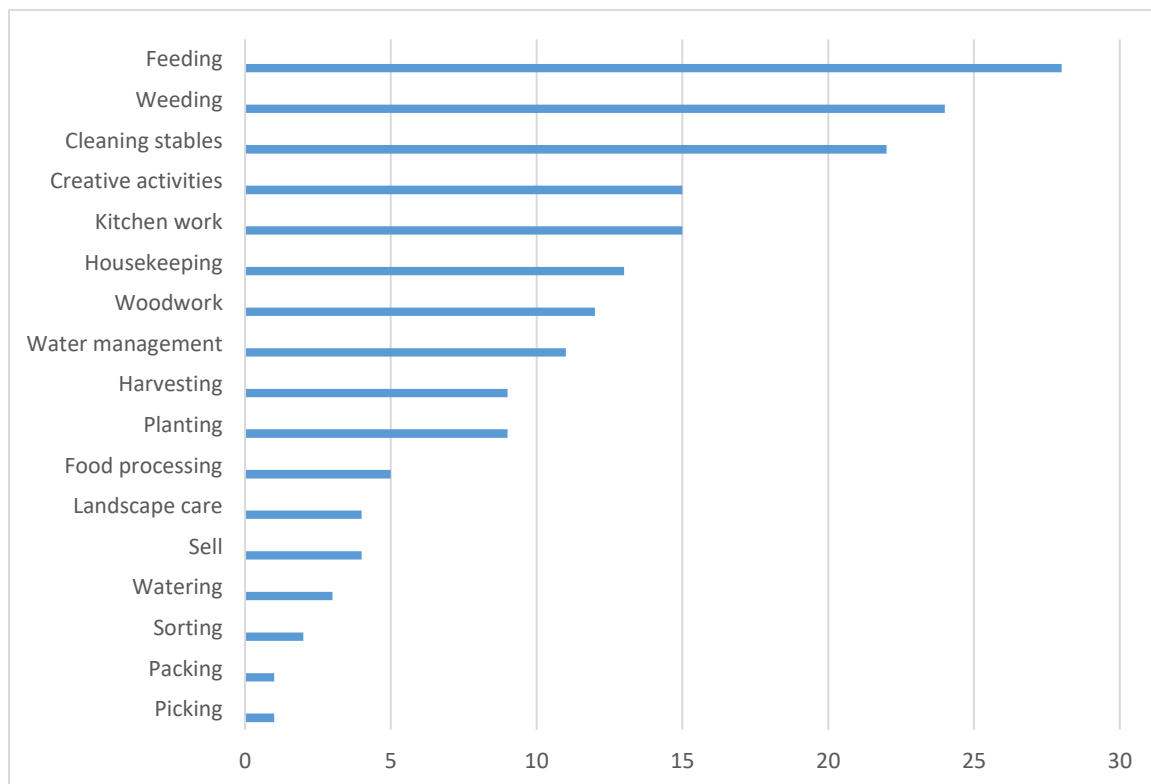


Figure 2. Diversity of participants' activities on social farms. Source: Online survey, Eco-Social Farming Project, 2024; author's data processing, not yet published.

The last chart shows the benefits of social farming for people with different life difficulties identified by respondents. This information was obtained from social farmers, not from the participants. Thus, it is a perspective based on long-term experience and observation from the leaders' point of view.

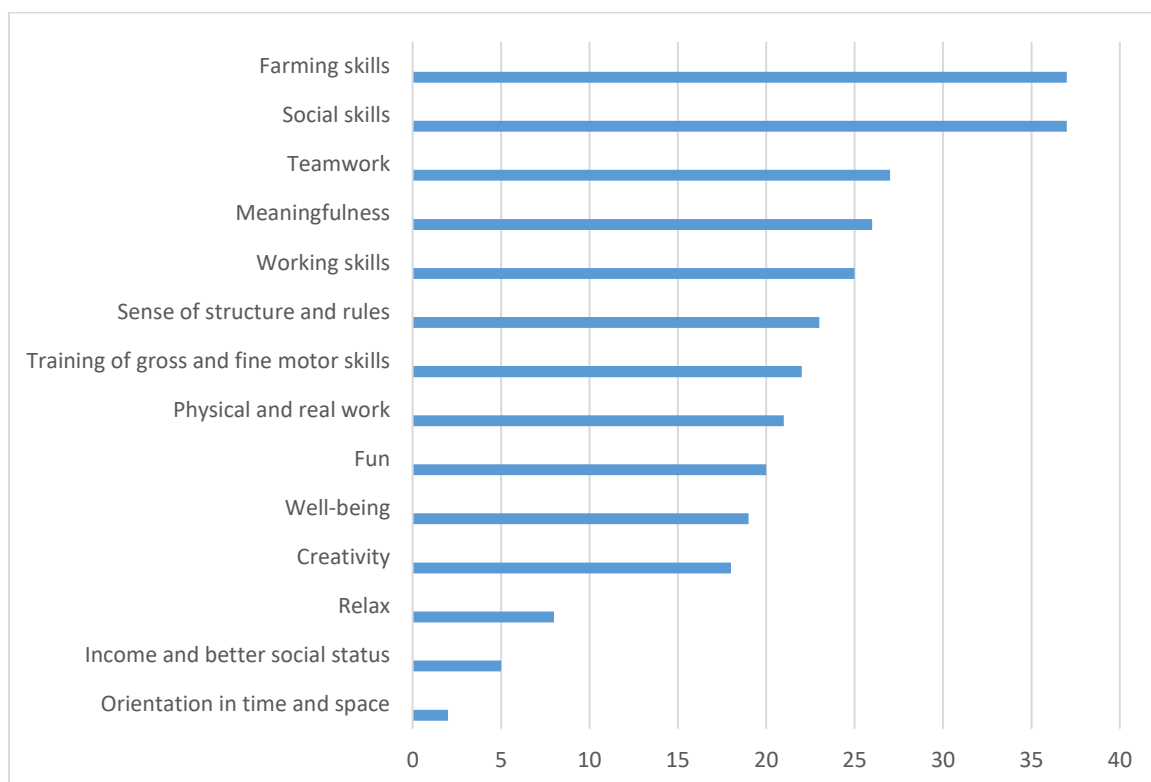


Figure 3. Benefits of working on social farms. Source: Online survey, Eco-Social Farming Project, 2024, author's data processing, not yet published.

The results from the questionnaire surveys do not directly indicate that simply being active on social farms leads to environmental sustainability and equity or increases participants' awareness of environmental social work. However, such connotations can be inferred given the outcomes from the focus groups and implicitly discover the share of participants on ecological justice. The results of the last graph are also crucial in examining the other benefits of this type of informal social work beyond the environmental context that contribute to holistic approaches to social inclusion.

4.4 How social farming influences the environment and what it brings to society (open-ended question)

This section brings the illustrations of the respondents from both the non-agricultural and agricultural sectors and is relevant to the environmental aspects of social farming. Non-agricultural responses remind the landscape protection; they know the need to keep extra-urban spaces varied and diversified.

“Assisting in managing protected parts of the landscape (e.g. assisting in PR management).”

“Proper meadow management significantly increases biodiversity, and we monitor the impact in cooperation with experts and use the findings in education and EVVO programmes.”

In some contexts, landscape care is connected to education but primarily targets the maintenance of biodiversity through landscape cultivation.

“E.g. in the renaturation and rehabilitation of landscapes: cultivation and maintenance of diverse structural elements. Sustainable use of resources, renewable energies, sustainable agriculture.”

In some places, the non-agricultural professionals mention the work aspects.

“Meaningful work to preserve a livable landscape, climate protection and environmental education.”

Other shorter statements linked to the landscape and localism (natural, human and other resources) are as follows:

“Landscape protection, reducing carbon footprint, community building.”

“Use of local resources, use of local old varieties typical of the place, ensuring sustainability. No need for explanation - the primary criterion is local employment.”

“The number of unemployed people would be easily employed in agriculture, replacing machines, increasing ecological approaches.”

“Handwork, no use of chemicals, small area cultivation, localism, community, increasing biodiversity.”

The need to employ less skilled people is mentioned more often.

“By employing disadvantaged people for farming and educating them in organic farming and then using the skills in practice, we create a healthier ecosystem and a demonstration space for education for children and adults. The number of unemployed people would be easily employed in agriculture, replacing machines, increasing ecological approaches.”

Thus, in the imagination of non-agricultural professionals, they discover the link between social farming and environmental issues represented by landscape care, biodiversity and concern for a particular place and community. To this, the respondents added the employment of people with disadvantages and without the necessary skills. Any activity or paid work would enable them to change their status.

Employment is closer to social work, where agriculture is not the only prerequisite. Some linkage between social work and ecology can be found in the last statement from the above paragraph. More detailed illustrations bring farmers' perspectives in their responses. Several categories have been selected in their statements.

4.4.1 Handwork

Handwork is most often mentioned regarding the environmental aspects of social farming. It is an argument for ecological protection compared to intensive farming procedures. Handwork is usually connected to landscape shaping as the two elements are interconnected.

"This is undoubtedly the essential way for responsible action on the earth/creation together with the people we care for, the direct, manual work. However, we are only a very small facility with smaller capacities."

"Everything is done by hand, hardly any machines, little energy and water consumption, no emissions—ways to support biodiversity. For example, insect hotels, wild bee care, lots of hedges, and wild herb harvesting, the garden serves as an insight into ecological and local cultivation on a small scale for visitors from urban areas as part of an event. Social and ecological values are lived and conveyed together. Replacing machines with manual work, promoting the self-efficacy of those involved, communicating the natural cycles clearly and tangibly, raising awareness of how to treat our nature and the Earth."

These statements enable us to understand some critical moments. Apart from the Handwork, there is also the pedagogical dimension of farming, the awareness of caring for another being, i.e. responsibility beyond oneself. The social and ecological values that working together bring are highlighted.

"Our district garden model project combines gardening leisure activities and relaxation with the manual care of the protected landscape and measures to protect species (sand lizards, etc.). The aim is to show as a model that the public horticultural use of an area subject to nature conservation, together with measures for nature, environmental and species protection, can develop synergy effects on the area and small-scale manual care if there is an appropriate concept when viewed together and in coordinated measures can take into account the needs of different types of plants, pollinators and red list species."

In addition, specific types of activities are described, their smaller scale, which enables more direct preservation of nature, saving energy, and contributing to variability (horticulture, nature conservation); it is written about the "expansion of ecological work".

"Much manual work develops specialised plant production, reduces monocultures, expands the palette of ecological work."

"Greater use of manual work; the possibility of building a pond for fish breeding to build a watering hole for watering the garden and vegetables and watering the animals."

4.4.2 Landscape shaping

As has already been stated, landscape care and manual labour are essential, and caring for the land that provides the country's wealth is crucial. The survey declared that people with disabilities are involved in all this, which would not be evident in an institutional social care facility.

"Certainly, by looking after the landscape, building water retention measures in the landscape, and anti-erosion measures. Regarding replacing machines, spraying and machine weeding can be replaced by hand weeding."

"Creativity in using forests, fields, meadows, etc.; soil without chemical fertilisation when clients work with it. It brings animals into the landscape."

The landscape also includes human settlements, i.e., it is not wild nature but cultivated by humans, who appear in social farms to be good stewards.

Restoration of the village's status as a landscape element. Strengthening of life and landscape forces."

"Small-scale gardening with landscape maintenance, strengthening the elemental, replacing machines with manual work, animal care with a strong connection to the human provider."

Small-scale may not ensure the quality of environmental care. Still, on the other hand, it is a better input parameter for an overall overview of the cultivated part of the country. Small scale, variability, and diversity of landscape features are more attractive than large swathes. It gives more work and motivation to explore. Large farms can also be suitable for social farming, but it depends much more on the farmer's attitude and overall economic balance sheet. Moreover, the data from online surveys show the prevalence of smaller farms in social farming.

4.4.3 The soil

The soil becomes the basis of the connection between humans and the Earth. It provides an opportunity for grounding. It also enables one to observe and understand the quality and life of the soil, its laws, and its effect on everything that grows.

"Working on the earth creates a connection to the earth, grounding and an improvement in the value of the soil through the care of it (compost management..., gentle cultivation, crop rotation)."

"Restoring the relationship to the soil, to nature, understanding the laws of nature, from which many people were turned away by the easy availability of technology, care and refinement of the farm surroundings (of so-called non-productive part) that provide biodiversity."

Soil quality is often mentioned in landscape cultivation. It is the basis for life, which people living on the margins of society can usually only discover through direct contact with the land and the countryside or urban farming.

4.4.4 Closed cycle

The closed agricultural cycle creates the logic of organic farming. By staying on a social farm, participants understand the laws of nature and why we need to take care of our shared world. In climate change, they also see its radical effects on everyday agricultural life and food security.

"We practice organic farming with little mechanical support (small tractor, harvesting, weeding and planting by hand), landscape management with sheep and goats of endangered breeds, fertilisation with our own compost and chicken manure, sustainable use of our harvest (marketing via an organic farm shop, then use the fruit/vegetables in our canteen for lunch or as canned food, then feed the leftovers to small animals as green fodder)."

The categories mentioned above, which could be abstracted from the online questionnaire responses, correspond to the quality of social farming or a farming approach that includes people with special needs. The quantity and nature of social farming are discussed in other texts (e.g., Elings et al., 2022). Non-farming experts, unlike farmers, reported an assumption of less use of agrochemicals. Given the strong emphasis on manual labour and a healthy environment, farmers take their reduction as a given.

The human element is key to social farms and is the reason for their existence. In some answers, people are even more important than the economic return. Farm work appears therapeutic or spiritual, as a togetherness with the Earth, people and animals.

"The economic return is the secondary goal; it is primarily about the people. This perspective means that nature is used less than on purely agricultural farms. The areas get more relaxation phases."

"Social farming positively influences and integrates into society, especially the target group of people with various disadvantages (health, social, and cultural)."

"As a biodynamic company, we take responsibility for the well-being of our immediate environment, animals and people. This holistic approach is reflected directly."

"We saw with the supportive community as an action - this event connects us deeply with the spiritual aspect of agriculture, the earth and togetherness."

"Avoiding machines, much manual labour, animals as farm animals in the social-therapeutic context - not as food."

To summarise, we argue that all the categories identified in the farmers' responses - Handwork, landscape shaping, the soil, closed cycle - and similarly for non-farmers - the richness of the landscape, reduced use of pesticides and herbicides, less use of machinery, educational aspect - have a deep relationship with the environment and environmental justice. Although the notions of environmental justice, ecological social work, or other academic discourses are not pronounced, they are implicit.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper aimed to illuminate the environmental perspectives in social work through the practices on social farms. It went deeper than just stating the need for environmental/ecological social work and environmental justice. The results explored more in detail the manifestations of such actions of green social work and how it is perceived. It shows how important the environmental debate of the previous decades has been and how far social work is moving from the environmental space in the *Life Model of Social Work Practice* (Germain and Gittermant in Besthorn, 2015) to a holistic and relational scene of humans and nature which represents green social work by Dominelli (2012) which emphasises environmental justice. This transformation would not have been possible without a societal transformation of thinking about the sustainability of the planet, which is unprecedentedly influenced by human activity (*Agenda 21*, *Millennium Development Goals*, and *SDG*), later integrated into strategies of umbrella organisations of social workers. Finally, the European Common Agricultural Policy for 2023-2027 (CAP 2023-27) also cites environmental care, landscape, and climate change as essential objectives for keeping agriculture sustainable (CAP 2023-27). The social farm, which includes people with special needs in its practice, lets them fully participate in the operations and motivates them to understand the contexts, backgrounds and interrelations of human dwelling and ecological sustainability, albeit on a small scale, fulfils these objectives.

Several levels of social work and ecological approaches can be thus identified on social farms. There are general ideas behind the management of social farms, such as caring for nature, organic farming, holistic thinking of the person in the environment, and caring for the landscape. Then, the general attitudes to social support and welfare aspects, such as an open-door system - acceptance of human diversity, multi-sectoral cooperation at local and regional levels, valuing diversity and individualised care are repeatedly highlighted. In all approaches, it is possible to identify a list of very concrete activities that support the background ideas. Concerning ecosystem theories in social work, the environment in social farming is not a static place ready for human action but space of dependency, responsibility and care between humans and nature. The position of the person is not anthropocentric

but a partner. There is a basic human need for nature, and it must be protected (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1983). What is interesting from this point of view is that people with special needs are generally not used to caring for things. In health and social services, they are often the objects of care. They become active agents of social farming, transforming, improving, nurturing, weeding, watering, and making the place aesthetic and the community viable. This aspect taps simultaneously into the profound mission of social work.

Social farming as a concept and practice still needs to be highlighted more in the discipline of social work. Although it is evident from the research and practice that agriculture as a whole has a significant impact on climate change, soil nutrients, toxic substances, water status, erosion and food security, which in turn has consequences for deforestation, pollution, environmental refugees, social farming offers a positive alternative to this picture. Apart from the economic impact of the social farm on the interconnectedness of local ties and needs, which multiplies the locally generated profit, this research shows, above all, positive environmental and societal impacts at several levels, both at the general of the underlying assumptions and at the level of the social farm participants themselves. It reverses their role concerning society, in which they become active agents of sustainable ecological change that positively impacts local communities and regions.

Informed Consent Statement

Written and informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the focus group interviews.

Data Availability Statement

Qualitative and quantitative data are available by contacting the author.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author proclaims that this is an original article, unpublished previously in the present form and not submitted for publication elsewhere.

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Contact address

Eliška Hudcová, PhD.
Protestant Theological Faculty, Charles University
Černá 646/9, 110 00 Praha 1
Czech Republic
hudcova@etf.cuni.cz
+420 739 244 606