British Journal of Social Work (2026) **56**, 3247–3265
https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcag076
Advance Access Publication May 26, 2026

Grounding economic sustainability in ecosocial work: The contribution of degrowth

Luca Pavani [1,*] and Amy Shackelford [2]

[1]Department of Law, Political, Economic and Social Studies, University of Piemonte Orientale (Eastern Piedmont), Via Cavour 84, Alessandria 15100, Italy
[2]School of Natural Sciences and Health, Tallinn University, Narva mnt 29, Tallinn 10120, Estonia

*Corresponding author. Department of Law, Political, Economic and Social Studies, University of Piemonte Orientale (Eastern Piedmont), Via Cavour 84, Alessandria 15100, Italy. E-mail: luca.pavani@uniupo.it

Abstract

This article explores the contribution of degrowth to ecosocial work, arguing that degrowth offers the discipline a coherent economic framework for confronting the structural drivers of polycrises. While ecosocial work has gained visibility in recent years, its engagement with the economic dimensions of sustainability remains underdeveloped, and degrowth has yet to be systematically integrated into the field. Through conceptual analysis, we identify four dimensions of degrowth's contribution to ecosocial work: it grounds the critique of growth as the material foundation of welfare systems; it specifies the structural mechanisms of extractive and colonial political economies; it clarifies the roots of managerial rationalities as obstacles to ecological transformation; and it extends the repositioning of care as a central principle of economic organization. Two challenges in integrating this lens are also identified: the gap between normative reorientation and macro-institutional transformation, and the difficulty of translating degrowth principles into everyday professional practice within growth-dependent welfare organizations. The analysis concludes that integrating degrowth as a lens for ecosocial work requires moving beyond critique towards transformative alternatives at all institutional levels, from everyday practices to welfare system restructuring.

© *The Author(s) 2026. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers.*
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

BASW
The professional association for social work and social workers
www.basw.co.uk

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

Keywords: ecosocial work; degrowth; ecosocial transition; climate change; sustainability.

Accepted: April 2026

Ecosocial work and the necessity of a new economic framework

This article aims to explore the contribution of degrowth to ecosocial work, understanding degrowth as a theoretical lens that enables ecosocial work to more coherently promote environmental and social justice through an alternative economic framework aligned with its core principles.

The increasing evidence that human-caused climate change perpetuates economic and social inequality is shifting ecological concerns to a more central emphasis in social work research (Norton 2012; Ramsay and Boddy 2017; Krings et al., 2020). The IPCC (2022) reports that climate change will continue to impact human and natural systems at detrimental levels, further deepening economic and social inequalities. This polycrisis has promoted a growing awareness of the need to address the structural causes of environmental degradation in social work debate (Molyneux 2019; Krings et al., 2020; Thysell and Cuadra 2023). Scholars have identified the endless economic growth ideology perpetuated through capitalism as a central driver of environmental harm while simultaneously critiquing a conventional social work that prioritizes individual adaptation over the disruption of harmful economic and social structures (Reisch 2013). It is within this context that ecosocial work has emerged as a transformative subfield, with the potential to reorient the discipline towards ecosocial justice (Gray and Coates 2015; Boetto 2017; Rambaree et al., 2019; Matthies et al., 2020).

Ecosocial work hinges on ideals of an 'anti-oppressive model of social work practice that sees the natural world as a central variable in human development' (Norton 2012: 304) and emphasizes themes of sustainability, transdisciplinarity, collectivism, and the interdependence of planetary and human well-being (Närhi and Matthies 2016; Boetto 2017; Närhi 2025). As Boetto (2017) argues, ecosocial work is more than an extension of existing approaches because it demands a paradigmatic shift that challenges the whole of industrial capitalist modernity. Moreover, ecosocial work accounts for a global scale of economic urgency and raises a critique of endless economic growth and global systems of resource extraction, consumption, and exploitation. In this framing, ecosocial work locates degrowth economics as a paradigmatic shift that has the potential to promote local solutions within a global transformation (Närhi 2025). This includes a critique of conventional social work whose assumption is that economic growth is a prerequisite for human and planetary well-being

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

(IFSW 2014). Central to this project is a reconceptualization of the economic dimension of sustainability, a pillar that ecosocial work identifies as essential to improving both environmental and social conditions (Matthies et al., 2020).

For this purpose, the ecosocial work scholarship has engaged with several alternative economic models in search of frameworks compatible with this transformative ambition. Social and solidarity economies (SSE), encompassing cooperatives, social enterprises, and community-based organizations, have received particular attention, as they offer localized responses to economic inequality grounded in democratic governance and mutual aid (Peeters 2012; Elsen 2019). Empirical research on ecosocial innovations illustrates that many already operate within SSE logics, reframing economic purpose towards collective well-being, valuing economic diversity, and democratizing governance (Matthies et al., 2019). Although these examples are valuable, as Matthies et al. (2020) themselves note, a gap remains in theoretical and empirical knowledge about new economic perspectives and their relevance to social work, and SSEs, while significant at the local level, are not inherently positioned to drive a large-scale paradigm shift in economic structure.

Similarly, concepts such as circular economy and green economy have been discussed in relation to sustainability transition, but their embedding within a growth strategy undermines their transformative potential. As Powers et al. (2019) argue, embedding ecological goals within growth-based frameworks will not work because there is no empirical basis for the absolute decoupling of gross domestic product (GDP) growth from resource and energy consumption (Hickel 2020). The circular economy, while useful as a tool for reducing waste, remains in many formulations oriented towards regenerative production within market logic rather than towards a fundamental restructuring of economic purpose (Matthies et al., 2020).

Furthermore, degrowth presents a transformative economic framework, arguing that societies must urgently function within planetary boundaries and shift from growth-based metrics like GDP towards well-being-oriented indicators such as gender equity (Powers et al., 2019). Ecosocial work likewise advocates for restructured or alternative economic systems, with degrowth offering a key paradigm for reorganizing development in ways that are environmentally sustainable and economically just, particularly by advancing decolonization and global equity (Powers et al., 2021; Rao et al., 2022). Although the conceptual overlap between degrowth economics and ecosocial work is evident, practical examples to support social workers in applying these ideas remain limited. Strengthening the alignment between ecosocial work and degrowth scholarship is therefore essential for social work's transition towards maintaining relevance in sustainability efforts (McKinnon 2008; Peeters 2012).

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

To this end, the article is organized as follows: the first section reconstructs the degrowth debate; the second section examines what degrowth contributes to ecosocial work across four interconnected dimensions and addresses the challenges that arise when integrating degrowth into ecosocial work theory and practice, followed by a conclusion that outlines the possible next steps for this imperative theoretical exploration.

Degrowth debates and defining characteristics

This section maps the key debates within degrowth scholarship that are relevant to ecosocial work, identifying the conceptual tools through which degrowth can serve as a theoretical lens for the discipline and the profession.

Over the past two decades, degrowth has consolidated as a field of theoretical and political theme that questions both the possibility and the desirability of continuous economic expansion in high-income societies, drawing attention to the ecological limits that such expansion presupposes (Latouche 2009; D'Alisa et al., 2014). A first level of this reflection concerns the critique of GDP as an inadequate indicator of collective well-being, as degrowth is primarily a critique of the environmental consequences of economic growth and secondly an acknowledgement that such growth has historically been based on exploitation (Hickel 2020). Numerous authors point out that GDP accounts exclusively for market transactions, neglecting central dimensions of quality of life such as care activities, social relationships, available time, non-monetized public services, and the condition of natural capital (Stiglitz et al., 2009). Moreover, GDP records as 'growth' expenditures generated by accidents, illnesses, environmental disasters, or social conflicts, as it counts any monetary transaction regardless of its actual contribution to collective well-being (Douthwaite 1999; van den Bergh 2009; Jackson 2017).

This critique leads to a second level of analysis. If GDP inadequately measures well-being, this is because the economy is habitually conceived as a system of monetary exchanges. Influenced by social metabolism theory, degrowth instead describes economic activity as a material system dependent on flows of energy and matter from the natural environment (Pineault 2023). From this perspective, modern economic expansion is closely associated with the exponential increase in resource extraction (i.e. fossil and mineral resources), their industrial transformation, and their subsequent dissipation in the form of waste and climate-altering emissions, making evident the relationship between growth, extractivism, and ecosystem (in)stability (Meadows et al., 1972).

Degrowth challenges the idea that it is possible to continue expanding the economy while at the same time significantly reducing overall resource use and emissions. This reframes the issue at the political level,

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

shifting attention from improvements in efficiency to the question of how societies organize production, distribution, and the satisfaction of basic needs within ecological limits. Degrowth literature highlights that the problem concerns not only the environmental effects of growth, but also the role it plays in the ordinary functioning of contemporary economies. Modern capitalist economies depend on expansion to stabilize employment, expectations, profitability, debt sustainability, and tax revenues. In the absence of growth, these economies fail, meaning the interaction between rising productivity, the reduction of necessary labour, and aggregate demand tends to generate unemployment, demand crises, and financial instability, with effects that spill over into public budgets and social protection systems (Jackson 2017).

For this reason, growth does not appear as a sustainable or simple objective of economic policy that can be replaced by alternative indicators, but as a condition that makes it possible to maintain a balance between employment, public finance, and social rights (Hickel 2020). Growth allows distributive conflicts to be absorbed and sustains the set of collective expectations that, historically, have accompanied the extension of social rights and services. From this perspective, degrowth refers to a democratically guided reduction of production and consumption in high-income economies, conceived as a transitional strategy for realigning economic organization with ecological limits and social justice. The horizon of this process is post-growth: a steady-state socio-economic order capable of operating within ecological boundaries, where collective decision-making and equitable distribution constitute the institutional basis for prosperity without reliance on continuous expansion (Parrique 2022).

When applied to the institutional arrangements that have historically guaranteed social rights through welfare systems and services, degrowth-oriented reflection highlights a now well-established fact: twentieth century welfare states developed in a context characterized by rising productivity, expanding employment, growing consumption, and the availability of low-cost energy. In this context, the extension of social rights and public services could present itself as a universalistic and progressive project, while economic growth ensured revenue, financial sustainability, and political consensus—at least in the Global North (Koch 2013; Jackson 2017; Koch 2022). This interweaving produced what has been described as a growth-dependent welfare state, that is, a welfare system structurally reliant on economic expansion yet can be environmentally and socially harmful (Koch 2022). However, when growth slows, this dependence tends to translate into pressures towards austerity, service retrenchment, increased conditionality, individualization of risks, and intensifying inequalities, with direct effects on social work practice and on processes of access to rights (Koch 2013; Büchs and Koch 2017).

Starting from this tension between welfare and growth, the debate on sustainable welfare asks how social protection systems can function and

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

be financed in a context in which growth can no longer be assumed as a given. It therefore proposes rethinking social policies in light of biophysical limits, shifting attention from income maximization to ensuring the satisfaction of basic needs within an ecologically sustainable space (Koch 2013, 2022; Büchs and Koch 2017).

Within this perspective, the proposals that emerge include, among others, working time reduction, the redistribution of income and wealth, the strengthening of universal public services, forms of universal basic services, ecologically and redistributively oriented tax reform, and an active role of the state in redirecting economic activities towards sectors with lower material intensity (Hirvilammi and Koch 2020; Koch 2020). This orientation is consistent with the results of a recent systematic mapping of degrowth policy proposals (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). The review shows that the most recurrent and central measures in the literature concern working time reduction, redistribution of income and wealth, universal provisioning of fundamental needs, commons-based arrangements, and community-level infrastructures of care and social reproduction, highlighting how degrowth has progressively evolved into a broad agenda for transforming and supporting welfare, provisioning systems, and everyday socio-economic organization (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022).

Taken together, these proposals outline what is described as a post-growth or sustainable welfare system, in which social protection does not depend on market expansion, but on the capacity of public institutions to guarantee equal access to essential goods, redistribute resources, and reduce pressure on ecological systems (Koch 2022). In this way, the ecological crisis and the welfare crisis are not treated as separate problems, but as expressions of historically growth-bound modes of welfare organization.

Alongside this perspective, a strand of research has developed that analyses the social practices through which social reproduction, care, access to essential goods, and the satisfaction of needs occur outside strictly market logics. It is within this area that concepts such as conviviality, commoning, decoloniality, and provisioning emerge to describe forms of cooperation, shared resource management, and need-oriented interdependent relations that become central to ecosocial transformation (Bollier and Helfrich 2019; Brand and Wissen 2021; Pungas and Gebauer 2025).

Conviviality, taken up and reworked in degrowth literature, defines an idea of freedom that does not coincide with individual self-sufficiency but is conceived as freedom realized in interdependence and in the possibility of sustaining moral commitments and social bonds (Adloff and Caillé 2022). This definition contrasts with the neoliberal assumption that freedom consists in the absence of care obligations, reciprocal responsibilities, and wealth accruement (Latouche 2002; Liegey and Nelson 2020). From this perspective, conviviality refers to an ecology of everyday life in which the quality of relationships and the capacity to care become material conditions of sustainability. This allows care and reciprocity to be read as

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

political dimensions of transformation, rather than as informal residues of welfare. Moreover, conviviality is proposed as a response to the risk of authoritarian drifts associated with ecological transition, emphasizing practices and institutions that enhance collective deliberative capacity within shared limits (Latouche 2002; Vetter and Fersterer 2025). Commoning complements this framework by shifting attention from resources as private property or vertically administered public goods towards forms of shared management based on collective rules, reciprocal responsibilities, and processes of self-organization. In degrowth literature, commoning and conviviality take on a prefigurative value, attributing relevance to practices capable of making a different social order than what exists in the present (Bollier and Helfrich 2019).

The ecosocial scope of degrowth becomes even more explicit when the decolonial dimension is considered. Here, the argument concerns not only the ecological unsustainability of growth, but the ways in which growth has historically been made possible through unequal ecological exchange, asymmetric resource appropriation, cost externalization, and geopolitical hierarchies (Grabner-Radkowitsch and Strunk 2023). The notion of the imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen 2021) operationalizes this insight by linking everyday practices of consumption and mobility, productive infrastructures, and strategies of capital accumulation to a global regime that guarantees disproportionate access to resources, low-cost labour, and ecosystem absorption capacities. The decolonial dimension of degrowth takes on a broader political meaning when it is reconstructed as a practice of 'worldmaking' and as a critique of universalistic narratives of development (Nirmal and Rocheleau 2019). Part of the degrowth literature engages with traditions from the Global South, with post-development perspectives, and with political projects that have centred on sovereignty, international economic justice, and the critique of dependency (Dengler and Seebacher 2019). From this point of view, degrowth appears less as a program 'for the North' and more as a framework that calls for rethinking the geopolitical conditions of ecosocial justice, avoiding the reproduction of a normative universalism that imposes solutions conceived elsewhere onto the Global South (Latouche 2014). References to histories and institutions of transnational solidarity and to alternative imaginaries of globalization allow degrowth to be treated as a conjunctural critique of the present, rather than as a moralization of individual consumption (Stubbs 2025).

A further ecosocial bridge is provided by attention to caring economies and practices of social provisioning. The iceberg metaphor, taken up from ecofeminist approaches, highlights how social reproduction, care, and supportive relations constitute the invisible base that makes monetized economies possible. Within this framework, degrowth proposes a repositioning of care as an organizing principle of economy and politics, with direct implications for welfare systems (Pungas and Gebauer 2025). Proposals such as universal basic services, the foundational economy, and the

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

unconditional autonomy allowance are discussed as tools capable of stabilizing need satisfaction without subordinating social protection to economic growth (Pungas and Gebauer 2025).

When considered in its entirety, degrowth offers ecosocial work a multifaceted economic framework addressing biophysical limits, the dependence of welfare institutions on growth, and culturally mediated definitions of need and regimes of unequal ecological exchange. The specificity of its contribution lies in the assertion that systems of social protection, care provision, and democratic institutions cannot be tied to economic expansion. This position has direct implications for social work: if welfare systems have historically relied on sustained growth for fiscal stability and political legitimacy, and if this condition can no longer be presupposed, then social work as a discipline and profession must confront a structural question concerning its own grounding. The following section examines four dimensions of this contribution in detail.

Degrowth as a theoretical lens for ecosocial work

References to degrowth remain sporadic in ecosocial work, and the two debates have often developed in parallel rather than through sustained conceptual engagement (Powers et al., 2019, 2021; Rao et al., 2022). Nevertheless, when ecosocial debates are examined in light of how welfare institutions and professional practice have been historically organized within growth-oriented political economies, degrowth emerges as a lens capable of specifying, grounding, and extending some of ecosocial work's central commitments. In particular, four dimensions of this contribution can be identified: (1) grounding the critique of growth as the material foundation of welfare, (2) specifying the structural mechanisms of extractive and colonial political economy, (3) clarifying the roots of managerial rationalities within welfare organizations, and (4) extending the redefinition of care as a principle of social provisioning under ecological constraint.

The first of degrowth's contributions concerns the relationship between welfare and economic growth. Within ecosocial work scholarship, a structural contradiction has been identified at the core of the profession. Social work emerged within nationalist welfare states embedded in industrial capitalist economies, and its institutional consolidation became intertwined with modernist assumptions of progress, expansion, and human dominance over nature (Boetto 2017). This historical alignment between welfare provision and industrial development has shaped both the organizational configuration of social work and its underlying philosophical orientation (Boetto 2019). What is at stake, however, is not only the profession's modernist heritage, but the structural coupling between welfare expansion and economic growth as the material condition of social rights. In this context, several ecosocial contributions destabilize the

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

assumption that growth provides the material foundation of social rights. For instance, Peeters (2012) situates social work within a socio-ecological crisis rooted in industrial capitalism and questions the compatibility between welfare expansion and ecological sustainability. In this analysis, productivist development and consumerist models of prosperity are identified as structural drivers of both environmental degradation and social inequality. In a related view, Powers et al. (2019) frame degrowth as a radical orientation for social work, arguing that the profession cannot advance social and environmental justice while remaining embedded in a growth-centred paradigm. Growth ideology is described as a constitutive feature of contemporary welfare arrangements, and the normative coherence of social work is linked to its capacity to engage alternative economic imaginaries.

This argument is grounded and extended by degrowth scholarship, which demonstrates that twentieth-century welfare states developed under conditions of sustained productivity growth, expanding employment, and rising fiscal revenues, leading to what has been described as growth-dependent welfare systems (Koch 2013; Büchs and Koch 2017; Jackson 2017). Under ecological constraint and slowing growth, this structural dependence generates pressures towards austerity, conditionality, and retrenchment.

The question therefore extends beyond environmental awareness and addresses the structural alignment between welfare institutions and expansionary economic expectations. Ecosocial work scholarship implicitly recognizes this alignment, but it is degrowth that makes explicit the macro-institutional mechanisms through which social protection has historically relied on expansion. In this respect, degrowth offers ecosocial work the political–economic vocabulary to name what the profession already senses, namely that social protection organized around expansion becomes structurally unstable under ecological constraints.

A second contribution of degrowth concerns decolonization. In social work debates, decolonization has been developed as a critical project aimed at unsettling the dominance of Western epistemologies and addressing the enduring effects of settler colonialism within professional practice (Gray et al., 2013b; Green 2023). In this context, attention has centred on how social work knowledge has been produced and ways welfare arrangements shaped by colonial modernity continue to marginalize Indigenous and other historically subordinated perspectives. Moreover, decolonizing social work calls into question whose knowledge is legitimized in professional education and research, how social problems are defined, and how institutional practices may reproduce assumptions about development, civilization, and social order (Green 2023). In this sense, it seeks to reposition communities as subjects capable of articulating their own frameworks of well-being and self-determination (Dumbrill and Green 2008; Gray et al., 2013b). Ecosocial work develops this critique further by foregrounding the ecological dimensions of colonial expansion. In particular, colonial

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

modernity is interpreted as a socio-ecological reorganization of land and social relations around extraction and anthropocentric control (Dominelli 2012; Gray et al., 2013a). From this perspective, conservation, development, and welfare policies are historically entangled with projects of territorial governance and resource appropriation. Thus, decolonization entails more than epistemic reform because it involves reconsidering the relationship between the human and non-human, as well as acknowledging how social work was established within exploitative state structures (Rao et al., 2022).

Degrowth specifies the material and structural underpinnings of this critique, focusing on the material and socio-metabolic arrangements that underpin prosperity in high-income societies through unequal ecological exchange (Pineault 2023). In particular, the concept of the 'imperial mode of living' (Brand and Wissen 2021) helps to analyse the everyday patterns of production and consumption in affluent societies that rely on a structurally unequal appropriation of global resources and ecological capacities. It highlights how welfare stability in the Global North has been historically intertwined with externalized environmental costs and unequal resource appropriation, rather than resulting solely from internal productivity gains or redistributive arrangements (Kallis 2018; Brand and Wissen 2021).

In this respect, degrowth offers ecosocial work a structural–material account of what decolonization requires at the level of political economy, showing that the historical intertwining of social protection in wealthy societies with extractive and expansionist accumulation cannot be addressed through epistemic reform alone, but demands a transformation of the global conditions that make the imperial mode of living possible.

A third contribution of degrowth concerns the organizational rationalities through which a growth-oriented political economy is translated into the daily practice of welfare systems. While the previous dimensions have addressed dynamics at the macro level, this one is situated at the mezzo level, that is, within welfare organizations. In social work debate, an extensive body of literature has analysed the impact of neoliberalism and managerialism on welfare organizations, highlighting how local welfare services have been progressively reoriented around audit procedures, performance measurement systems, and criteria of economic efficiency that redefine intervention priorities (Evetts 2009; Lawler and Bilson 2009; Shackelford 2025). In this context, professional autonomy is defined within administratively established objectives; the evaluation of interventions tends to focus on response times and standardized indicators, relegating the quality of relational processes and the capacity to influence the collective conditions that generate vulnerability to the background (Evans 2011; Noordegraaf 2015). Within this framework, ecosocial demands are situated within organizational arrangements already oriented towards resource optimization and the demonstration of measurable results. This

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

means that proposals for ecological transformation must contend with legitimation criteria founded on productivity, efficiency, and administrative control, and risk being absorbed into short-term projects, formal sustainability indicators, or symbolic actions that do not address the structural logics that produce unsustainability (Allegri and Pavani 2026).

It is within this scenario that Dennis and Bell (2025) situate environmental social work, reading the ecological turn of the profession in light of the interweaving of colonialism, capitalism, and the climate crisis. In their contribution, degrowth is explicitly identified as one of the four paradigmatic shifts necessary to transform social services, alongside anticolonial practice, mutual aid, and food sovereignty. It therefore remains to be clarified how such paradigmatic orientations are translated into the organizational rationalities that regulate daily service delivery.

Indeed, empirical research confirms that social workers oriented towards ecosocial approaches identify the main obstacles to practice not so much at the level of individual awareness, but rather in the organizational conditions within which social work is defined and evaluated (Närhi et al., 2026). In this Finnish study, difficulties are attributed to a narrow conception of social work tasks, to management models based on neoliberal logics, and to a superficial interpretation of sustainability, reduced to symbolic or merely administrative practices (Närhi et al., 2025; Narhi et al., 2026). In this context, opportunities for ecosocial practices tend to develop at the local level and in informal ways, thanks to the initiative of individual professionals or small working groups, while consolidated organizations entrench bureaucratic and individualizing operational modes that leave little room for community or transformative interventions. The tension between ecological commitments and managerial governance thus manifests itself in daily work, where practices oriented towards sustainability are often perceived as 'exceeding' organizational mandates.

Degrowth clarifies the political–economic roots of these organizational constraints. Performance measurement, activation policies, and criteria of economic efficiency function as organizational expressions of a system in which welfare must remain compatible with economic expansion (Büchs and Koch 2017; Jackson 2017), and social protection is deemed legitimate to the extent that it contributes to labour market integration, fiscal sustainability, and the stabilization of economic expectations. In this respect, degrowth offers ecosocial work a framework for understanding why ecological transformation cannot be pursued exclusively through project innovations or new professional sensibilities (Boetto 2017), but entails a rethinking of the organizational forms and legitimation criteria that structure welfare provision. Ecosocial work makes the constraints visible at the level of practice; degrowth names their structural origins.

Finally, another contribution of degrowth concerns care and needs satisfaction. Ecosocial work already treats care as a structural element of collective well-being rather than a residual response to market failures. In

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

social work, care is recognized as a fundamental component of professional identity (IFSW 2014). However, in the ecosocial work literature, Powers et al. (2019) demonstrate that justice-oriented practices grounded in care can remain embedded within arrangements that assume economic growth as an implicit parameter of success. Through examples of food banks and employment pathways, the authors show that interventions considered effective because they promote self-sufficiency or labour market integration may nonetheless be consistent with ecologically unsustainable production models. The problem in their analysis does not concern an absence of ethical commitment, but rather the fact that care practices develop within economic structures that define success in terms of productivity and market integration (Powers et al., 2019).

Indeed, without interrogating such assumptions, even radical interventions may reproduce arrangements that generate both social and ecological inequalities.

The degrowth literature extends this insight by offering a structural account of what a care-centred economy would require. Pungas and Gebauer (2025) introduce an understanding of degrowth-inspired 'holistic care economies' as multidimensional economic systems. These systems centre on interconnected care practices that sustain both human and non-human life. As an essential element, 'collective provisioning systems' make available basic services and infrastructure to meet the fundamental needs of all people. Within this framework, care is conceived as a constitutive dimension of economic organization. Whereas growth-oriented capitalist systems relegate care to the margins, as uncounted 'shadow work', degrowth-informed holistic care economies propose to reorganize the entire economic system around care practices and collective provisioning.

Degrowth thus offers ecosocial work the economic framework that its commitment to care already implies. Ecosocial work articulates the tension at the level of professional practice, showing that care cannot be fully transformative while remaining subordinated to a growth-oriented economy (Boetto 2017; Powers et al., 2019). What degrowth makes explicit is what this requires structurally, namely that needs satisfaction and the reproduction of life must constitute central criteria for economic organization, rather than being subordinated to productive expansion. The contribution of degrowth to ecosocial work is significant, yet integrating this lens into the theory and practice of the profession raises at least two challenges that remain unresolved.

The first concerns the gap between normative reorientation and macro-institutional transformation. Ecosocial work insists on a transformation of value frameworks, ontological assumptions, and the purposes of professional action (Boetto 2017), linking the socio-ecological crisis to historical processes of coloniality and capitalism that continue to inform contemporary policies and institutions (Rao et al., 2022). Degrowth strengthens this critique by reconstructing the structural dependence of welfare states on

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

an expansionary economic model, clarifying how the legitimation of social policies has been historically anchored to expectations of GDP growth (Büchs and Koch 2017; Hirvilammi and Koch 2020). Yet the challenge remains that professional and normative transformation may prove ineffectual if the institutional architecture that sustains social protection continues to presuppose economic expansion. Ecosocial work has not yet fully addressed this macro-institutional dimension, and degrowth, while analytically precise at this level, does not in itself provide a roadmap for how welfare institutions might undergo such transformation.

The second challenge concerns the translation of degrowth principles into everyday professional practice. Ecosocial work has identified that alternative practices tend to encounter organizational definitions of success tied to market integration and productivity, which reabsorb even radical interventions within growth-oriented parameters (Powers et al., 2019; Närhi et al., 2025). Dennis and Bell (2025) explicitly locate degrowth among the necessary paradigmatic shifts for social services, yet leave open the question of how such principles might become embedded in the routines, evaluation systems, and financial constraints of welfare organizations. Degrowth, for its part, pushes this question further by interrogating whether welfare institutions stabilized by growth and fiscal expectations can undergo transformation without a rethinking of macro rules, the role of the state, and the financial foundations of welfare in a post-growth horizon (Büchs and Koch 2017; Koch 2020). The practical integration of degrowth into ecosocial work thus remains an open research and professional agenda.

Conclusion

This article has argued that degrowth offers ecosocial work a valuable economic framework for commitments the discipline already holds. When ecosocial work invokes economic sustainability as a necessary pillar of just transition (Boetto 2017; Powers et al., 2019), degrowth renders this pillar analytically operative and structurally specific, grounding it in biophysical limits and alternative forms of provisioning. The ecological critique articulated by degrowth scholarship (Jackson 2017; Kallis 2018) clarifies that economic sustainability cannot be detached from environmental sustainability or social justice, since it presupposes operating within irreversible ecological constraints. Nor can it be reduced to fiscal balance, as often occurs in sustainable welfare discourse, insofar as it entails a radical reorganization of care, commoning practices, and collective provisioning beyond market expansion (Pungas and Gebauer 2025). Degrowth thus furnishes ecosocial work with an economic grammar for the practices it already values, such as reciprocity, collective responsibility, and

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

community-based support, grounding them in a structural analysis of dependence on the growth model and its ecological unsustainability.

At the same time, the degrowth debate has often risked remaining theoretically sophisticated yet insufficiently embedded in the everyday practices of transformation (Parrique 2022). Ecosocial work brings to this the methodological capacity to hold together the micro, mezzo, and macro dimensions simultaneously, analysing and intervening across interconnected levels, contexts, and institutions (Boetto 2017). It does not place individuals at the centre of responsibility for structural conditions; rather, within an anti-oppressive framework, it supports them in re-engaging with collective life and in negotiating the institutional structures that shape their opportunities and constraints. Ecosocial work offers degrowth an anchor in concrete professional practices and in the recognition of people's and communities' capacity to generate forms of mutuality and provisioning, even under current conditions. This is crucial because it forestalls the risk that post-growth transformation remains a theoretical abstraction or a promise deferred to the future, demonstrating instead how principles of mutuality, commons, redistribution, and reciprocal care can already today be practised and learned collectively.

Despite these reciprocal contributions, the articulation of ecosocial work and degrowth remains incomplete in several respects. Although ecosocial work has laid important groundwork for rethinking the profession in light of environmental crises, it has yet to fully grapple with the economic dimensions of sustainability in a systematic and institutionally embedded fashion. Degrowth economics offers a crucial entry point in this direction. Yet, if social work is to maintain its relevance and integrity within the ecosocial transition that becomes ever more urgent, it must move beyond critique to engage with transformative alternatives, both conceptually and at the level of practice.

For instance, at the micro level, the challenge is to co-create everyday interventions based on mutual aid, commons, time-banking, and reciprocal care practices with people and communities, in particular Indigenous or marginalized ones. Evaluation criteria centred on relational sufficiency, ecological footprint reduction, and the quality of social connections need to be developed and monitored over time to understand the extent to which these practices contribute to community resilience and climate justice.

At the mezzo level, centred on welfare organizations, the priority is to integrate the social work's deontological mandates with the institutional mandates, which are currently dominated by managerial, performance-oriented, and market logics. This requires rethinking governance devices such as strategic planning, budgeting, procurement, and quality assessment systems, with the aim of creating spaces of critical autonomy for social workers. It also involves experimenting with practices that are consistent with the principles of sufficiency and slow care, and

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

establishing organizational infrastructures that redistribute time and power among professionals, service users, and the community.

At the macro level, we must consolidate a theoretical framework that integrates degrowth, climate justice, and welfare systems. This framework should critically question the dependence of social work on economic growth and compare circular and solidarity economy models from a transnational perspective. This comparison should identify the models' convergences and deviations from a degrowth paradigm.

Given that existing scholarship remains largely theoretical and macro-structural, future research must prioritize practice-based approaches, organizational case studies, and educational innovation. This includes investigating how degrowth principles can reshape social work curricula, professional training, and institutional policies. Developing concrete examples and evaluative tools across all three levels will be essential to guide practitioners and ensure that social work remains a relevant and transformative actor in addressing climate change, inequality, and long-term sustainability.

Conflicts of interest. None declared.

Funding

This research was supported by the SustainERA project (ERA Chair in Sustainable Futures), funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe programme under grant agreement No 101186958.

Quality of information disclaimer

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

References

Adloff, F., and Caillé, A. (eds) (2022) *Convivial Futures: Views from a Post-growth Tomorrow*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Allegri, E. and Pavani, L. (2026) 'Ecosocial Community Work: Tensions, Transformations and Situated Practices in Italian Local Welfare Services', Relational Social Work, 10: 3–26. https://doi.org/10.14605/RSW1012602

Boetto, H. (2017) 'A Transformative Eco-social Model: Challenging Modernist Assumptions in Social Work', *British Journal of Social Work*, 47: 48–67. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw19

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

Boetto, H. (2019) 'Advancing Transformative Eco-social Change: Shifting from Modernist to Holistic Foundations', *Australian Social Work*, 72: 139–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2018.1484501

Bollier, D., and Helfrich, S. (2019) *Free, Fair, and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers.

Brand, U., and Wissen, M. (2021) *The Imperial Mode of Living*. London: Verso.

Büchs, M., and Koch, M. (2017) Postgrowth and Wellbeing: Challenges to Sustainable Welfare. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

D'Alisa, G., Demaria, F., and Kallis, G. (eds) (2014) Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era. London: Routledge.

Dengler, C., and Seebacher, L. M. (2019) 'What About the Global South? Towards a Feminist Decolonial Degrowth Approach', *Ecological Economics*, 157: 246–52. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2018.11.019

Dennis, M. K., and Bell, F. M. (2025) 'COVID-19 Pandemic, Climate Change and Indigenous Knowledges Informing the Future of Social Work', *Qualitative Social Work*, 24: 301–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250241300308

Dominelli, L. (2012) *Green Social Work: From Environmental Crises to Environmental Justice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Douthwaite, R. (1999) The Growth Illusion: How Economic Growth Has Enriched the Few, Impoverished the Many and Endangered the Planet. Bend, Oregon: New Society Publishers.

Dumbrill, G. C., and Green, J. (2008) 'Indigenous Knowledge in the Social Work Academy', *Social Work Education*, 27: 489–503. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615470701379891

Elsen, S. (2019) Eco-Social Transformation and Community-Based Economy. London: Routledge.

Evans, T. (2011) 'Professionals, Managers and Discretion: Critiquing Street-Level Bureaucracy', *The British Journal of Social Work*, 41: 368–86. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcq074

Evetts, J. (2009) 'New Professionalism and New Public Management: Changes, Continuities and Consequences', *Comparative Sociology*, 8: 247–66. https://doi.org/10.1163/156913309X421655

Fitzpatrick, N., Parrique, T. and Cosme, I. (2022) 'Exploring Degrowth Policy Proposals: A Systematic Mapping with Thematic Synthesis', Journal of Cleaner Production, 365: 132764. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.132764

Grabner-Radkowitsch, C., and Strunk, B. (2023) 'Degrowth and the Global South: The Twin Problem of Global Dependencies', *Ecological Economics*, 213: 107946. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2023.107946

Gray, M., Coates, J., and Hetherington, T. (2013a) Environmental Social Work. London: Routledge.

Gray, M., Coates, J., Bird, M. Y., and Hetherington, T. (2013b) *Decolonizing Social Work*. London: Routledge.

Gray, M., and Coates, J. (2015) 'Changing Gears: Shifting to an Environmental Perspective in Social Work Education', *Social Work Education*, 34: 502–12. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2015.1065807

Green, S. (2023) 'Colonisation, Post-Colonialism and Decolonisation', in D. Hölscher, R. Hugman, and D. McAuliffe (eds) Social Work Theory and Ethics. Social Work, pp. 1–20. Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-1015-9_7

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

Hickel, J. (2020) *Less is More: How Degrowth will Save the World*. London: William Heinemann.

Hirvilammi, T., and Koch, M. (2020) 'Sustainable Welfare Beyond Growth', *Sustainability*, 12: 1824. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12051824

International Federation of Social Workers. (2014) 'Global Definition of Social Work', https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/, accessed 15 Mar. 2026.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2022) 'Headline Statements from the Summary for Policymakers', in *Sixth Assessment Report, Working Group II – Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGII_HeadlineStatements.pdf, accessed 15 Mar. 2026.

Jackson, T. (2017) Prosperity without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

Kallis, G. (2018) *Degrowth*. Agenda Publishing. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5cg82g

Koch, M. (2013) 'Welfare After Growth: Theoretical Discussion and Policy Implications', *International Journal of Social Quality*, 3: 4–20. https://doi.org/10.3167/IJSQ.2013.030102

Koch, M. (2020) 'The State in the Transformation to a Sustainable Postgrowth Economy', *Environmental Politics*, 29: 115–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2019.1684738

Koch, M. (2022) 'Social Policy Without Growth: Moving Towards Sustainable Welfare States', *Social Policy and Society*, 21: 447–59. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746421000361

Krings, A. et al. (2020) 'Environmental Social Work in the Disciplinary Literature, 1991-2015', *International Social Work*, 63: 275–90. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872818788397

Latouche, S. (2002) 'A bas le développement durable! Vive la décroissance conviviale!' [Down with Sustainable Development! Long Live Convivial Degrowth!]', *Silence*, 280: 8–11. https://www.revuesilence.net/epuises/200_299/silence280.pdf

Latouche, S. (2009) Farewell to Growth. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Latouche, S. (2014) 'Imaginary, Decolonization of', in G. D'Alisa, F. Demaria and G. Kallis (eds) *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, pp. 117–20. Abingdon: Routledge.

Lawler, J., and Bilson, A. (2009) Social Work Management and Leadership: Managing Complexity with Creativity. London: Routledge.

Liegey, V., and Nelson, A. (2020) *Exploring Degrowth: A Critical Guide*. London: Pluto Press.

Matthies, A.-L. et al. (2019) 'Ecosocial Innovations and Their Capacity to Integrate Ecological, Economic and Social Sustainability Transition', *Sustainability*, 11: 2107. https://doi.org/10.3390/su11072107

Matthies, A. et al. (2020) 'Ecosocial Innovations Enabling Social Work to Promote New Forms of Sustainable Economy', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 29: 378–89. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12423

McKinnon, J. (2008) 'Exploring the Nexus Between Social Work and the Environment', *Australian Social Work*, 61; 256–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/03124070802178275

Meadows, D. H. et al. (1972) *Limits to Growth*. New York: Universe Books.

Molyneux, R. (2019) 'The Practical Realities of Ecosocial Work: A Review of the Literature', *Critical Social Work*, 11: 61–9. https://doi.org/10.22329/csw.v11i2.5824

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

Närhi, K. (2025) 'Theories of Ecosocial Work Addressing the Contribution of Social Work in Sustainability Transitions', in K. Hermans et al. (eds) Ecosocial Work and Sustainability Transitions: Theories, Methodologies and Practices, pp. 11–28. Bristol: Policy Press.

Närhi, K., and Matthies, A. (2016) 'Conceptual and Historical Analysis of Ecological Social Work', in J. McKinnon and M. Alston (eds) Ecological Social Work: Toward Sustainability, pp. 21–38. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Närhi, K. et al. (2026) 'Social Work Practitioners' Views of Ecosocial Work', *Journal of Social Work*, 26: 120–37. https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173251336105

Nirmal, P., and Rocheleau, D. (2019) 'Decolonizing Degrowth in the Post-development Convergence: Questions, Experiences, and Proposals from two Indigenous Territories', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 2: 465–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848618819478

Noordegraaf, M. (2015) 'Hybrid Professionalism and Beyond: (New) Forms of Public Professionalism in Changing Organizational and Societal Contexts', *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 2: 187–206. https://doi.org/10.1093/jpo/jov002

Norton, C. L. (2012) 'Social Work and the Environment: An Ecosocial Approach', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 21: 299–308. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00853.x

Parrique, T. (2022) *Ralentir ou périr. L'économie de la décroissance* [Slow down or perish. The economics of degrowth]. Editions du Seuil.

Peeters, J. (2012) 'Sustainable Development: A Mission for Social Work? A Normative Approach', *Journal of Social Intervention: Theory and Practice*, 21; 5–22. https://doi.org/10.18352/jsi.306

Pineault, E. (2023) *A Social Ecology of Capital*. London: Pluto Press.

Powers, M. C. F., Rambaree, K., and Peeters, J. (2019) 'Degrowth for Transformational Alternatives as Radical Social Work Practice', *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 7: 417–33. https://doi.org/10.1332/204986019X15688881497178

Powers, M., Rinkel, M., and Kumar, P. (2021) 'Co-Creating a "Sustainable New Normal" for Social Work and Beyond: Embracing an Ecosocial Worldview', *Sustainability*, 13: 10941.https://doi.org/10.3390/su131910941

Pungas, L., and Gebauer, J. (2025) 'Holistic Care Economies. Degrowth Ways of Provisioning and the Global East', in A. Nelson (ed) Routledge Handbook of Degrowth, pp. 266–79. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032650159-23

Rambaree, K., Powers, C. F., and Smith, R. J. (2019) 'Ecosocial Work and Social Change in Community Practice', *Journal of Community Practice*, 27: 205–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2019.1660516

Ramsay, S. and Boddy, J. (2017) 'Environmental Social Work: A Concept Analysis', *British Journal of Social Work*, 47: 68–86. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw078

Rao, S., Teixeira, S., , nd Billiot, S. .(2022) 'Social Work and Environmental Justice', in S. Webb (eds) The Routledge Handbook of International Critical Social Work. London: Routledge.

Reisch, M. (2013) 'Social Work Education and the Neo-liberal Challenge: The US Response to Increasing Global Inequality', *Social Work Education*, 32: 715–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2013.809200

Shackelford, A. T. (2025) Ecosocial Work and Third Sector Organizations: Exploring the Ecosocial Features of an Organization through Case Study Research. Jyväskyla: University of Jyväskyla.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

Stiglitz, J., Sen, A., and Fitoussi, J.-P. (2009) 'Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress', http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport_anglais.pdf, accessed 15 Mar. 2026.

Stubbs, P. (2025) 'Prefigurative Degrowth Politics. Decolonisation and the Non-Aligned Movement', in A. Nelson (eds) Routledge Handbook of Degrowth, pp. 374–88. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032650159-32

Thysell, M., and Cuadra, C. B. (2023) 'Imagining the Ecosocial Within Social Work', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 32: 455–72. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12571

van den Bergh, J. C. J. M. (2009) 'The GDP Paradox', *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 30: 117–35. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2008.12.001

Vetter, A., and Fersterer, M. (2025) 'Conviviality and Commoning', in A. Nelson (eds) Routledge Handbook of Degrowth, pp. 181–95. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032650159-17

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/56/6/3247/8695053 by guest on 11 October 2026

© The Author(s) 2026. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
British Journal of Social Work, 2026, 56, 3247–3265
https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcag076
Original article