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The Sustainable Welfare and Eco-Social Policy Network

Currently, we are witnessing the emergence – and the further development – of a new research field: eco-social policy research. The relationship between environmental and social policies was previously studied mainly in sub-strands of different fields (e.g. sustainability studies, environmental economics, or in niches of welfare state research), which also means that many different concepts on, understandings of and approaches towards the intersection of social and ecological issues have been developed. Whether “eco-social” refers, for instance, to greening the welfare states, to policy integration in environmental and social policies, or to a just economic “green transition” has been differently addressed and defined in different research strands (for different approaches, see e.g. Bohnenberger, 2020; Hirvilammi & Koch, 2020; Mandelli, 2022; Zimmermann & Graziano, 2020). The exchange between these strands was usually scarce. However, in light of the climate crisis, increasing public attention to environmental problems, and political and economic change, more scholars now address the interaction between different environmental and social concerns in their research. A common understanding is that eco-social policies are public policies explicitly pursuing both environmental and social goals in an integrated way. Examples of such policies would include for example decarbonisation of social housing, green investments through pension funds, and reskilling workers for green jobs.

The booming interest in eco-social research is shown in the increasing number of publications around the concepts of eco-social policies and sustainable welfare (comprehensive literature reviews are still in the making; for an overview and a collection of sources, see Galgóci & Pochet, 2022; McGann & Murphy, 2022). Also, the demand for impact-oriented research in this area has grown which is reflected in the increasing salience of eco-social topics at different conferences organised, for example, by the Council for European Studies, the European Society for Ecological Economics, The European Network for Social Policy Analysis and the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics. The interest is also seen in the enthusiastic attendance of workshops, lectures, and roundtables on the topic.

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The development of the network

These activities have paved the way for closer interaction between previously separated scholarly communities. After two years of online interaction due to the pandemic, it soon became clear that there is a strong need for interdisciplinary and sub-strand-bridging scholarly exchange. We need to learn from each other, build a common ground, delineate research gaps, and define new areas of specialisation. To institutionalise and foster such exchange and interaction, the authors of this research note founded in autumn 2022 the Sustainable Welfare and Eco-Social Policy Network. The idea of the new “EcoWelfareNetwork” is to expand and strengthen existing networks, fostering a collaborative spirit among academics in this growing research area, while also promoting a set of common activities and services. This newly-established Network currently involves researchers and practitioners from all across Europe, with few participants also coming from non-European countries.

The practical starting point for the network was basically to merge two existing scholarly communities: the “Sustainable Welfare Network” and the „ESPAnt Eco-Social Policy Group”. The Sustainable Welfare Network was established in autumn 2018 by researchers studying the role of the welfare state in Ecological Economics. Until its merge with the ESPAnet Eco-Social Policy Group it served as a coordination point for special sessions and conference streams at Conferences (e.g. Degrowth, Ecological Economics). Since the beginning, the network provided an open mailing list that informed about topical events and calls. The ESPAnet Eco-Social Policy Group was never a properly institutionalised group, but rather a lose connection of interested scholars from the European Social Policy community (ESPAnt). After some individual-level contacts and a few eco-social papers in various streams at previous conferences, at the annual ESPAnet conference in Stockholm in 2019, Philippe Pochet and Denis Bouget organised a stream on “Reconciling ecological and social citizenship?”. In this context, also a mailing list for the group was created, and the members organised eco-social streams at all subsequent annual ESPAnet conference. These streams were usually comparatively small – until 2022, when the topic was extremely dominant at the annual ESPAnet conference in Vienna.

The Sustainable Welfare and Eco-Social Policy Network was then officially kicked off at an online meeting on September 19, 2022 and officially launched in the context of the Social Policy Biennale at University of Bremen. Following widespread invitations that had been sent around via various newsletters, more than 80 scholars from all across Europe joined the online kick-off and engaged in very lively and interesting debates. The initiators presented their ideas on the network’s organisation and activities, and on how to push forward the eco-social field in general. At – and in the aftermath of – the kick-off meeting, a number of activities were set up, which we here spell out in greater detail.

Network activities

Colloquium

The network organises a bi-monthly online colloquium in which the members can come together to discuss progressive ideas on eco-social policies and sustainable welfare in general. The colloquium provides a space where the researchers can share their ongoing work on the topic and where young scholars get engaged with others in the field. The meetings will seek a common understanding on what are the key research topics in eco-social policy research and how to apply research findings to practice for solving current ecological, social, and economic crises. The colloquium started at the end of October 2022 with an opening lecture by Professor Ian Gough on “Valuing what matters: an economy of sufficiency and its implications for social policy” (see also Gough, 2015; 2016; 2021). The future plans for the colloquium are open to members’ ideas. The topics for the colloquium that were suggested in the kick-off meeting include a great variety of topical issues such as a just transition and social transformation, degrowth, energy and well-being, taxation, green employment policies, and methodology of eco-social research.

Young scholars’ community

Mirroring the spirit of the broader network, informal gatherings and common activities will be organised for young scholars and early-career academics approaching eco-social research. Proposed activities will include: “Peer-to-peer reading groups” to get feedback from peers on work in progress; the creation of a virtual space for informal chatting; and exchanges of literature and other materials. Periodic informal Zoom get-togethers will also be organised to get to know each other better and to exchange ideas and experiences (e.g. about publishing, self-organisation, conferences, supervisors, etc.).

Mailing list

The network has a mailing list with more than 500 members from over 16 countries. We aim to use this mailing list to distribute information among researchers and policy makers on new publications, events, calls for papers/participation and projects, job postings etc, relating to sustainable welfare and eco-social policies. Registration is free and open to all experts and interested researchers: <https://t1p.de/EcoWelfareList>.

Newsletter

A newsletter has been set up which will provide information on events, new publications, call for papers, jobs, projects, policy briefs and reports, educational resources, and other relevant activities in the field. The idea is to provide scholars with an easy access to relevant information also across established disciplinary

(sub)strands. To do this, we collect information from different journals, mailing lists and websites – but we also encourage colleagues to send interesting events, calls, publications and jobs to the newsletter's administration mail account: ecosocial.wiso@uni-hamburg.de. The newsletter will be distributed four times per year.

Stakeholder dialogue

A series of Stakeholders' Roundtables will be organised starting in Spring 2023. These will involve a selected group of expert academics and stakeholders (i.e. policymakers, civil society organisations, social security institutions, trade unions, practitioners, etc.) working on different eco-social issues. Stakeholders' Roundtables will be periodic and hybrid and they will explore various themes – such as EU eco-social policies, green healthcare and labour environmentalism – and/or national challenges – e.g. in Italy, Ireland and Germany. The goal of these roundtables is twofold: i) to promote dialogue and to exchange experiences between researchers and stakeholders; and ii) to help them building a strategic cooperation, by sharing practical tools to overcome the usual obstacles for joint mobilisation. In particular, for academics in this growing – yet still largely theoretical – field, Stakeholders' Roundtables could be an opportunity to hear about best and worst practices worth to be studied, while, for stakeholders, the insights from research could help making sense of real-life dilemmas.

In addition to these activities, the Sustainable Welfare and Eco-Social Policy Network also serves as a coordination point for common conference streams and as a general "hub" for researchers working on eco-social topics. As such, it is a very timely initiative. Aiming to bridge disciplines and research strands, it brings together scholars from multiple disciplines, working on the interaction of social and environmental concerns – a topic that becomes increasingly relevant in times of the climate crisis. So far, the network is a voluntary and unfunded service by engaged scholars, but the aim is to further institutionalise it also in terms of financial resources. We invite all scholars who work on eco-social topics to join us – either as subscribers to our mailing list, or by engaging in specific activities of the network. More information can be found by registering for the mailing list (<https://t1p.de/EcoWelfareList>).

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