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# Social Work Practices and the Ecological Sustainability of Socially Vulnerable Communities

Helena Belchior Rocha

ISCTE-University Institute of Lisbon, 1649-026 Lisbon, Portugal; helena\_rocha@iscte-iul.pt;  
Tel.: +351-936226218

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**Abstract:** Environmental problems are also social problems. Social work, as a scientific area, has increasingly assumed the importance of including environmental problems in social intervention. This close linkage to ecological issues is particularly relevant when addressing vulnerable communities. In this article, we analyze the results of a study focused on social work intervention in two Portuguese eco-neighborhoods in the context of ongoing urban regeneration projects, which suggest that social vulnerability accentuates the damage of exposure to environmental threats and amplifies its effects. The analysis of data collected from social workers, through 9 semi-structured interviews and through questionnaires (N = 131), with the residents of the neighborhoods together with non-participant observation, allowed to highlight the difficulties, contradictions, but also the potential of this type intervention. Results appear to support an eco-social model which may help social worker to promote social transformation and change, respecting community rhythms, promoting empowerment of individuals, addressing the challenges of socially vulnerable communities within the complexity of a globalized world.

**Keywords:** social work; eco-neighborhoods; social vulnerability; vulnerable communities; social sustainability

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## 1. Introduction

Environmental problems are a consequence of the industrial revolution whose development model, coupled with lifestyles based on continuous consumption, has led to the erosion of natural and energy resources. Environment is now an integral part of the urbanistic thinking, in search of new models. At present, the discourse on the environment has been focused mainly on climate change, depletion of natural resources and energy issues as well as other factors such as the increase of urban population and territorial expansion. More than twenty years ago, Hogan [1] already emphasized the need to understand environmental change and population dynamics in all its complexity, not only in growth rates, but also through the processes of internal migration in metropolitan areas. In fact, it is more and more clear that environmental problems are human problems and that they impact on all the dimensions of human living. Hence, in the last decade, there has been a proliferation of approaches that defend the need to definitively abandon the conceptual nature/culture divide [2] to establish a direction for research and action based on the re-framing of environment–society links. Environmental sociology, for example, recognizes human–ecosystem interdependence and the biological constraints on social phenomena and, in the reverse sense, claims awareness to the role that issues as social inequality may play in modeling human/environment interaction [3].

The study presented in this paper aims to understand how the intervention of social work can promote the ecological sustainability of socially vulnerable communities, through a qualitative and quantitative methodology approach that explores the different dimensions of two urban rehabilitation projects with an environmental sustainability orientation. The interest in the elaboration of this

research stems from the awareness of the indispensability of critical and propositional analyzes on the action, as well as the urgency of the production of knowledge in the area of Social Work that qualify for both teaching and practice in the field, being scarce the scientific production of Social Work in environmental issues related to community intervention. Faced with the ethical and operational challenges that emerge from the imperative of seeking sustainable development in all dimensions (economic, social, political-institutional, cultural, ecological, territorial, human), a conceptual reflection on environmental sustainable development emerges as relevant.

The starting question was: In what way does Social Work intervention promote the ecological sustainability of socially vulnerable communities?

This gave rise to the following propositions:

- (1) The socio-environmental practices in Social Work stimulate actions of mobilization and empower the populations, promoting their community integration.
- (2) The social reality of communities manifests the needs and interests of individuals as well as the relationship with the operative dimension of social responses developed by Social Work.

The research process was organized into four axes of analysis: (1) the historical-cultural context of globalization (characteristics of uncertainty, risk, confrontation between local and global), production of inequalities and socially vulnerable contexts and communities; (2) the context of urban socio-environmental and territorial intervention (institutions, groups and people working in the field of the fight against poverty and social exclusion combined with environmental issues and socio-environmental practices); (3) the institutional political context of the socio-environmental intervention of the social worker, participatory and integrated processes of global and sustained community development, interactive and alternative to public policies and capable of multiplying spontaneously, concrete experiences from the local dynamics and realities; (4) the residents (their needs, interests, forms of interaction, culture and ways of life).

In a recent review of environmental social work, [4] few examples were found of actually implemented practices, other than just social work education. Therefore, by focusing on an experience of community social intervention with environmental concerns, this paper also intends to contribute to filling this gap. By collecting and comparing data from the social work practitioners involved in the projects and the residents of the neighborhoods, it was analyzed and interpreted the different dimensions of sustainability, seeking empirical and theoretical support for an eco-social intervention model in social work.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The eco-social approach, add different theoretical approaches to social work that have emerged since the 1970s as a response to the ecological crisis faced by modern society [5,6]. In the Anglo-Saxon methodological tradition, the ecological approach highlights a holistic and systemic view of social problems and the reciprocity of the relation between individuals' life system and their social environment [7–9]. This approach to social work is understood as a holistic way of to glimpse at the environment of life, and as a concrete way of involving individuals in local politics and urbanism, as well as an attempt to achieve theoretical conceptions of social work that would be compatible with sustainability. Social work needs a holistic analysis of the micro, meso and macro-structures of the contexts of the resources and problems of individuals and communities. The consequences of ecological crises and shortage of natural resources have strongest impact on the most vulnerable people (space, food, energy, health, recreation). Social work itself as a profession is part of the modern industrial system which is destroying the environment [10]. The relationship between the living environment and human well-being from the point of view of sustainable development should therefore be highlighted, which is an "umbrella concept" that provides a conceptual tool to study the links between environment, the human being and issues of ecological and social sustainability [11].

Today, a new paradigm prevails in all spheres of public life and where there is a subjective change in the way future is seen. It is no longer with the security of the old days, but with the discouragement that the uncertainty of the unknown, the awareness of a faster social change, the new and multiple dimension of the profession to which it has to find responses, and the new knowledge available about general systems theory, ego psychology, and ecology all contribute for the emergence new ways of practice in social work [9,12].

However, over time, the biophysical environment is no longer perceived in the theoretical thinking of the general theory of social sciences and social work systems which, to distinguish themselves from other disciplines, began to focus on the social environment [9,12]. This situation gives rise to criticisms of this paradigm, namely that it ignores the environment and the nature of the thoughts and actions of the person-in-environment, does not define a position on global environmental issues and the relationship between them and the human being is not seen as a political issue [11,13–16]. Economic globalization creates the demands of a social globalization, i.e., the multinational structure of economic life, global capital, has impacts on local economic structures, it is also at this level that new demands are created on social work that must reflect their own action and the development of societies with the criteria of sustainable development [17,18]. These new demands on social work include, first of all, recognizing their role and responsibility to local social problems and opportunities linked to the overall development of economic and environmental issues. Secondly, social workers should be responsible for sharing their knowledge and expertise in multidisciplinary teams, to promote a model of socially just and democratic society. Thirdly, social work is called upon to defend groups/communities of vulnerable people and vulnerable environments against economic exploitation at a local and global level, denouncing compensatory social policy processes, which only alleviate short-term problems, leading in the future to the maintenance of the same problems and/or new ones. Finally, it is essential to analyze the eco-neighborhood concept in social work intervention, with a multifocal vision [19] through an empowerment approach, in which communities and their partners are co-authors, in a participatory process of collective construction of integrated development models and sustainable development.

Building integrative communities is both a process and an expected result of empowerment, that several authors [19–21] argue for the centrality of the dimension of this process, since this is the area where social workers work for change.

“The empowerment approach is a paradigm for international social work practice as its framework specifies the ingredients needed to practice with poor and oppressed groups beyond national boundaries and throughout the world. (...) Additional to a range of social work skills, consciousness-raising, empowering group process, and the process of praxis—action-reflection-action—are the core process of empowerment approach and social development practice” [19] (p. 403), e.g., based on values, principles and competencies that are integrated into a global conceptual framework that includes help in processes of awareness and dialogue as a methodology to be used among individuals, small groups and the community. It appears as a value, a political and technical/methodological principle and as an instrument of social policies, in management, in education sciences, in psychology, in economics and in socioeconomic development, in health and rehabilitation intervention.

Adams states that empowerment does indeed have a “multifaceted meaning with different meanings for different people” [20] (p. 49) and different meanings are found between academics and/or practitioners who put it into practice, or between the various areas of intervention. In this sense, it can be affirmed that the concept is not static, it evolves and reformulates according to the experiences of the individuals who put it into practice.

The multifocal vision of Lee [19] presents as epistemological basis for its theoretical foundations, theories and concepts centered on the person, such as concepts and situations of oppression concerned with the historical aspects of oppression; problems and relations between ethnicity and class system (ethclass); global ecological and critical perspectives; cultural and multicultural approaches; feminist perspective regarding the adaptive potential of women regarding to their process of individuation, socialization and cognitive-behavioral learning, with a view to solving social problems in the area

of housing, family, groups and communities, collaborating for a systemic macro-social perspective, aiming at the concretization of processes of structural change, that allow the personal, interpersonal and political empowerment of individuals.

### 2.1. Environmental and Social Sustainability

In the last decade of the XX century, laypeople representation and academic debate on sustainability concept tends to emphasize almost exclusively the economic and the environmental components and to ignore social dimension [22]. But, in fact, sustainable development encompasses several dimensions. In the influential formulation of Sachs [23], the concept of sustainability has seven main aspects, including economic, ecological, cultural, spatial/territorial political, social and environmental sustainability. At the core of this theoretical proposal two ideas prevailed in the later discussions of the concept of sustainability: environmental problems are the center of a crossroads of complex interrelations between phenomena of different nature, and social sustainability is a social process that “must rest on the basic values of equity and democracy” [23] (p. 27), and is partially influenced by the environmental constraints. Taken together, these ideas point to define social sustainability as concerning the way individuals in communities live to meet the goals they set to themselves taking into account the environment problems [24].

Despite the different interpretations of the concept, specifically within the context of urban areas, housing and built environment, most authors consider that basic needs, equity, engaged governance with participatory democracy, and social justice are fundamental pillars of social sustainability [24,25].

The multitude of descriptions and interpretations associated to the complexity of the concept of sustainable development, allows the emergence of generic conceptions that correspond to combinations of different dimensions of human development life, whether economic, sociological, political, cultural, technological or environmental, according to different visions of human life, giving salience to a preferred axis of action (e.g., political, economic). But, in what concerns social sustainability, for individuals and communities, the challenge is clear: preserving their standards of living and maintain technological development without depleting the planet’s natural resources and supporting a set of measures designed to promote the balance and well-being of society, through initiatives aimed at helping individuals and members of society who face conditions of vulnerability. For Sachs, the problems of poverty and the environment can be avoided because there are no ecological limits or lack of technology to prevent them from overcoming, and concludes that “the obstacles are social and political” [26] (p. 19). This means that there is no good in promoting a preserved and cared environment, undertaking with a sustainability policy, if living conditions are not offered to the populations inserted in each context of this environment.

### 2.2. Social Work and Environment

Social work has always been linked to the social conceptual framework for the promotion and defense of human rights. Social justice and human rights motivate and legitimize its action in promoting social integration, leading to transformation and change. To think of the environment as a universal right is to realize that, early on, it is connected to social work. In the first publication of “Social Diagnostics” [27], the social work pioneer Mary Richmond integrates the environment as one of ten factors to be investigated in a “Family Questionnaire” [27] (pp. 378–381), based on the basic principle of looking at the “individual in his environment” defining social case work as “those processes which develop personality through adjustments consciously effected, individual by individual, between men and their social environment” [28] (p. 98), including the natural and physical environment which has reciprocal relations of influence on human living: “physical environment has its social aspects . . . it becomes part of social environment” [28] (p. 99).

Already a decade earlier, Jane Addams [29] considered that the shortcomings of certain groups are not “biological characteristics” but the result of certain social circumstances. The Hull House Settlement in 1889, in its first action in a public kitchen, of a multicultural neighborhood in Chicago

had an “ecological effect” directing its intervention to the healthy food of the families of workers: “Better food was doubtless needed, but more attractive and safer places for social gatherings were also needed” [29] (p. 68). The Settlement then is an experimental effort to aid in the solution of the social and industrial problems which are engendered by the modern conditions of life in a great city [29] (p. 67). Addams further emphasized that the environment included both the physical, sanitary and economic aspects of housing and the social character of the neighborhood [29]. Housing cooperatives, feed, coal, waste treatment and waste services were created, along with labor movements and struggle for better working conditions [30].

Thus, it is not unheard of for the argument that environmental problems are linked to social problems, social inequality and social changes at global and local levels. Since the historical beginnings of the profession, social work acknowledged the environment as an important element of context of human living, and stated clearly that where people live influences their well-being, with consequences on social justice. After Richmond and Addams, various authors [8,30,31] have stated over time that issues such as the local economy, the preservation of nature, housing, planning and community intervention are crucial challenges for structural and preventive social work. In brief, as Kemp noted, “an integrative focus on person and environment has long been a defining element of social work’s professional identity” [32] (p. 1200). Although in the past decade there have been some criticisms of the non-inclusion of ecological perspectives in the practice of social workers, recent assessments of the state of art in empirical social work research on environmental issues [4,33] confirm an increased interest on environment-related problems and their impact on human living.

Beyond the initial argument that is social workers’ duty to act in order to mitigate the human consequences of global environmental [34], one of the prevailing assertions is that environmental factors are associated with people’s health and well-being, which are elements of the traditional target of social work [35]. Nowadays, a main approach places the interventions of “green social work” in the field of promoting and enhancing environmental justice, i.e., the search for equity in the sharing of resources [36] and acknowledges that social justice is at the center of interdependent relationships between environment, sustainability and poverty [37].

Perhaps one of the signs that most clearly indicate the importance of environmental issues in social work is the evident relevance in the literature assumed by the training of the professionals. There is an increasing convergence in affirming that the need for ‘greening’ social work practice claims for an education transformation integrating environmental content in social work curricula [38], including the field training [39,40] in order to allow future practitioners to address sustainability and social justice promotion in their communitarian intervention [41].

### *2.3. Linking Social Vulnerability, Environment and Poverty*

Social vulnerability is commonly associated with natural and technological disasters, risk situations, and the resilience of individuals and communities. That is, it refers to the incapability of individuals, organizations and societies to withstand the adverse impacts arising from the manifold pressures to which they are exposed. Risk is explicitly defined as a function of disturbance and stress. In this way, the surrounding dynamic pressures translate into specific processes of insecurity in which vulnerability is expressed in time and space, such as those induced by the physical environment, the local economy or social relations [42]. These impacts are due in part to characteristics inherent in social interactions, institutions, and systems of cultural values. Hence, many advocate the integration of biophysical and socio-cultural factors in the analysis of social vulnerability [42–44], which implies a broader perspective, in that vulnerability is seen as a concept of political ecology and integrates a multidimensionality of factors: economic, demographic and political, social class and ethnicity. Although there is some consensus in the results of the reflection on this concept, some other relevant factors are mentioned in the literature [45–47] referring to population propensity for hazards or loss of economic resources and close dependence on physical, social, political, economic, cultural and institutional constraints of the territories. As regards structural factors and their explicit integration

into land-use planning, an ecological and political vision [46–48] adds the interaction between the human being and the environment, which is seen as a key factor in promoting a culture of resilience and consequent risk reduction.

Despite some differences in perspectives among scholars, there is unanimity that social vulnerability is not only due to exposure to hazards, but is also a consequence of conditions of social inequality related to multiple factors such as poverty, age, gender, or social class [44,47,49–51]. Therefore it can be said that vulnerability components vary according to the characteristics of the communities, resulting from the size of their economic development, the possibility of access to resources, ways of life and the livelihoods of individuals and families, and thus populations are in a condition of vulnerability not only because of their exposure to dangers but also because of the marginalization, exclusion, and stigma they live in [51].

The poor are often the most affected by environmental problems. For instance, regarding the costs associated with urban pollution, the poor, as they have less means to afford defensive spending against it, tend to suffer more from its effects. In general, poverty is perceived as both a factor of environmental degradation and also a result of ecologically vulnerable environments [52]. But setting the directions of causality is a complex task if one considers only the link between environment and poverty. Environmental and social sustainability are related to poverty and consumption levels of the population. For instance, a study on the environmental standard of urban consumption in Brazil [53] indicated that higher income levels can give way to environmentally cleaner consumption patterns, inducing a technology trajectory with less intensity of consumption-associated degradation. Reports from the global public agencies have since long rejected the commonplace idea that environmental improvement can wait until economic growth may relieve poverty through income rising, which, in turn, would increase the resources available for environmental protection activities. This reasoning “ignores the importance of environmental goods and services to people’s livelihoods and well-being, and how the diversity of these goods and services contribute to the poor’s opportunities for moving out of poverty” [54] (pp. 2–3). As Sachs [55] (p. 7) puts it: “In addition to money, poverty also has something to do with access to nature, to a social community, to basic public services, and to political decision making”.

A World Bank report focused on environmental issues [56] argues that the conservation of natural areas, biodiversity, protection of the common global heritage, although they do not lead to the reduction of poverty in the short term, make possible collateral benefits in relation to poverty in the long term. On the other hand, several environmental interventions that aim to reduce the effects of poverty also have benefits for the environment.

Because of its multifaceted nature, social vulnerability is intrinsically linked to human rights, in that it refers to individuals or groups that are weakened in the exercise of their citizenship, namely in guaranteeing the promotion and protection of their rights, because they are deprived of their capacity to have access to equipment and social and economic opportunities that the market, society and the State can offer. Thus, as has long been advocated [57] social worker’s first concern as a professional is to defend human dignity, human rights and social justice, assuming the role of mediator between the individual and the institutions.

#### *2.4. Social Work Intervention in Eco-Neighborhoods: Promoting Empowerment and Citizenship*

An eco-neighborhood project is characterized by an approach that addresses three dimensions: global issues of the planet, local issues related to improving the quality of life of individuals and families, and contributing to sustainability [58]. Essentially, the eco-neighborhood concept implies the search for urban and social insertion through the requalification of the territory, through eco-sustainable buildings, articulated to a qualified public space. An eco-neighborhood aims to reduce the environmental and socio-economic impacts associated with urban areas, improving the quality of life and daily life of the populations. By ensuring physical accessibility and communication for all, it links sustainable urbanism to an ecological lifestyle, and its operationalization depends on

integrated action in various fields, from energy to water, mobility and transport, waste and techniques and building materials.

In a pioneering article of the ecological approach in the social work, it was already argued that this approach allows social work practitioners to deal with needs and problems of diverse levels (individual, groups, community) and is conducive to “easily shift from a clinical role to a policy and planning role within the board framework of the ecological approach” [59] (p. 134).

Two central orientations of the social worker’s in community practice can be considered in an eco-neighborhood, namely one that seeks to promote long-term work, in order to support the change in social structure, and another one that emphasizes the need to respond to immediate needs of subjects. Both are important, because only through the combination of these two dimensions practice can be thought of with potential for sustainability. Being social work committed to the promotion of human dignity, the struggle for the realization of universal human rights and building a more just and equitable society, implies the responsibility of the social worker with the current problems, be they social exclusion or environmental degradation, and this means an increasing demand in their professional practice, encouraging individuals to build a society in which all aspects of civic and personal life are compatible with sustainable development [60]. In this sense, based on participatory actions and practices that value and sustain “ecological processes of support to life” [60] and that are based on “values that enable personal and social change” [61] (pp. 104–105), it is important to realize the idea that sustainable development is the result of a collective commitment between individuals, institutions, local authorities and governments.

Building inclusive communities as it was said before, is both a central process and an expected result of empowerment [19–21,62] since this is the area in which social work can act towards change, which can mean for individuals the control of their life project. And change can also be seen as an adaptation by professionals who follow the eco-systemic paradigm of the individual-environment relationship. For this to happen, it is important to combine this new form of social intervention with empowerment, as a process of recognition, creation and use of resources and instruments by individuals, groups and communities, in themselves and in the environment, leading to an increase in power that allows these subjects to increase the effectiveness of exercising their citizenship.

Empowerment, as a proactive and goal-directed process, has taken place in a number of areas, such as: ethnic and migrant minorities, women, the unemployed, homeless, mentally ill, victims of violence or sexual abuse, rights and citizenship promotion, sustainable development, and community intervention. It seeks to encourage effective citizen participation in social, economic, political and cultural life and a more equitable distribution of resources, and the whole process requires time and opportunity to exercise skills and rights and to learn new attitudes. The aim is to lead the disadvantaged populations to autonomy and promote their participation on an equal footing by establishing a concept of partnership with the various systems, social, formal and informal, based on synergetic relationships, where each individual is viewed as someone with rights and duties, potentialities and needs. On the other hand, the aim is to achieve a more equitable distribution of resources. This process focuses on expanding the capabilities, potentialities and resources of the person, the surrounding population and the community as a whole. It is about developing an attitude of involvement and empowerment so that the other person feels that he/she participates in the strategies that involve his/her life project, and the “power” and motivation that this empowerment gives him [19].

The modes of intervention should not be understood only in the technical–operative instrumental dimension, but also in a theoretical–scientific reference in the apprehension of everyday facts, phenomena, processes and practices. This knowledge is necessary and pertinent since the profession originates from the needs and possibilities offered by the unequal development of society. Dealing with social–ecological issues requires practitioners to change their traditional approach in a way that social work can contribute to sustainable development [22], “through enhancing capabilities of people and building social capital” [63] (p. 295), by focusing on empowerment and fostering cooperation with other social actors.

### 3. Methodology

The object of this study were communities in socially vulnerable contexts under a public intervention based on an integrated sustainable model for community intervention, within the framework of the Creation of Neighborhood Integrated Programs and also included in the Cities Policy—Partnerships for Urban Regeneration. These programs are included in the National Strategic Reference Framework for the implementation of the European Union's policy on economic and social cohesion in Portugal in the period 2007–2013 [64], which aim at the integrated qualification of neighborhoods, based on a strategy of environmental sustainability and eco-efficiency that lead to the creation of eco-neighborhoods. This strategy entails an urban and environmental reconversion, through the creation and remodeling of existing infrastructures, and the adoption of new eco-efficiency techniques, as well as measures for the economic, social and cultural promotion of the neighborhood to strengthening cohesion and social integration.

The research process was guided by the interpretative paradigm and by a mixed approach to field research using quantitative and qualitative methods, such as non-participant observation, questionnaire survey and semi-directive interviews.

The observable universe consisted of projects of socio-environmental intervention in neighborhoods or other socially vulnerable communities, with the presence of social workers in multidisciplinary teams.

The unit of observation was determined in a systematic and intentional way, and the data collection techniques were applied to social workers and residents of the neighborhoods.

Regarding the questionnaire applied to the residents of the districts, it was applied to an intentional sample, although it was oriented in order to consider the largest possible variety in terms of age groups and a balanced distribution by both sexes, in order to characterize the living conditions of the residents and find their sociodemographic, socioeconomic and cultural profile, although it has not always been possible. Respondents are mostly women, just made sure that they were all over the age of eighteen. We opted for non-probabilistic sampling, also because it was not our goal to do a statistical validation of data, but only to perceive the perception of the residents in the process of urban regeneration in progress.

For the questionnaire survey the descriptive statistical analysis was used, and for the data treatment the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software v. 22.0 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA) and statistica v. 12.6 (StatSoft (Europe) GmbH., Hamburg, Germany).

The data were later inserted and treated in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software, and a descriptive and multiple correspondence analysis was developed. Data on open responses were categorized and analyzed individually.

The study was specifically, focused on two Portuguese eco-neighborhoods socio-environmental intervention projects. In addition to a non-participant observation, the approach was twofold. Firstly, in order to understand the implementation process and the social intervention carried out in these eco-neighborhood projects, 9 face-to-face semi-directive interviews (Appendix A) were conducted with social workers. The contents of interview data recordings were systematized and analyzed according to a previously established categorical framework. Semi-directive interview technique led the script towards categories and dimensions of analysis, simultaneously allowing freedom for the interviewees' responses. Secondly, a questionnaire (Appendix B) was administered to a convenience sample of 140 inhabitants to assess their perception of social and environmental conditions of the neighborhoods, but only 131 questionnaires were valid. The questionnaire combined open and closed questions. In the closed questions participants answered dichotomous and fixed choice response using 4 and 5-point Likert-type scales. The questions covered two areas: (1) residents' perception of the eco-neighborhood project and environmental issues; (2) community development and social action. Participants were aged between 18 and 73 years old ( $M = 45.10$ ;  $DP = 0.12$ ), being mostly female (62%). The education level of the sample was quite low: only 4.6% have a graduation degree, and 38.93% of the participants



were unemployed. Approximately half of the participants (51.90%) moved to the neighborhood on their own initiative, in search of better housing conditions, or following rehousing processes.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Interviews—Content Categorization and Analysis

The interviews content analysis allowed each previously established category to be elucidated through several facets. Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use and according to Krippendorff, “The point of requiring that content analyses be ‘validatable in principle’ is to prevent analysts from pursuing research questions that allow no empirical validation or that yield results with no backing except by the authority of the researcher” [65] (p. 39). In the following points, these facets are presented, and we briefly describe the characteristic content of each, supported by the discourse of the interviewees.

#### 4.1.1. Category 1—Implementation of the Eco-Neighborhood Project

##### Framework of the Project

In social housing processes relocating people obeys to several criteria and is based on the evaluation of socioeconomic situation of the families to rehome. For the interviewees, housing has never ceased to be a problem, a problem of social, economic and political ideological level. Over the course of many years, several solutions have been carried out, though most of the time with no satisfactory results. The situation became more and more complex, with successive rehousing, rehabilitation and immigration processes. As a result, there emerged a series of complex problems such as housing overcrowding, hygiene issues, buildings degradation, discomfort in the face of vandalism, and others.

*This project will certainly bring good things but it is still not a finished project, because to do something it takes time. We know through the parish council and the municipal, in relation to this area so deprived that three applications have already been made in order to solve the root problem, now we hope that with this project there will be changes for the better. (Interviewee 1)*

*I think that this intervention is a positive intervention in the first place because we are talking about a neighborhood where the population is not from this parish, much less this specific place, and therefore, the relocation in this neighborhood has brought many difficulties of insertion, arising always the questions of belonging such as the preservation of the space itself and all this intervention that is being done at the moment can in fact contribute to this. (Interviewee 2)*

*I must say that I see with great expectation the eco neighborhood project.*

*There is not the divulgation that I think should have to the level of the residents in the neighborhood but it is also true that people nowadays derived from the problems of life do not want to know very much about these things and when they are already tired of promises only when they only believe when they see things on the ground but I believe. (Interviewee 5)*

##### Difficulties in Implementing the Project

The biggest difficulty pointed out by respondents is undoubtedly the lack of financial resources and time management, this is due to the fact that each technician has many processes and simultaneously very bureaucratic administrative requirements, consequently taking the time that should be spend intervening in the field with the population.

This type of constraint, according to the interviewees, has very serious consequences for the population, because of the expectations that have been created and because it is often very complex to

explain to the residents what has happened, leading to misunderstandings and difficult conflicts. All this provokes tension and revolt. But there is also a mismatch between the willingness of the local government to respond to the population's expectations and the central government's political response.

*It has serious consequences, there are issues that can't stop, we are talking for example of a total restructuring of the network of water and sewage and it is clear that this can't be halfway! But it all depends on whether we have funds or if we do not have funds. (Interviewee 3)*

*In addition to finance issues, time is another matter, we can't reconcile bureaucratic work, requests, processes and work with the population, all at the same time, and it is an overload. (Interviewee 5)*

*Exactly, we are dependent on the money! This are works of great magnitude. The financial comes from the QREN, we are dependent. We do not have funding, so then everything depends on it. (Interviewee 6)*

### Impact of the Economic Crisis on Project Implementation

The economic crisis can have consequences at two levels: on the one hand, the suspension of the implementation of planned actions due to the decrease of available funds, on the other hand, the increasing difficulties families have encountered, including the impossibility of meeting the needs and the fulfillment of their obligations, may lead to greater discontent and incomprehension about the execution of certain works in the neighborhoods.

*Yes it is definitely difficult and not only for these people, for any of us to realize how people are going through difficulties because the vast majority of the residents in this neighborhood are receiving social benefits. (Interviewee 1)*

*There have been massive cuts in funding and this undermines our intervention. (Interviewee 7)*

### Impact on Quality of Life of the Resident Population

It is unanimous that these projects have a positive impact on people's quality of life. It was also the unanimous opinion of the respondents that the leisure and entertainment venues promote the participation of people and their welfare. The neighborhood's transport network, namely the state of conservation of the roads, bus stops and the issue of accessibility for the disabled, will promote a clear improvement in the quality of life of residents. The interviewees mentioned that the possibility of cultivating urban gardens, and fostering activities like walks, excursions, dances, is important for everyone, especially if these activities can be undertaken with the elders.

*The positive part, of course as I have already mentioned it will make this area more welcoming, so this project will allow us to have an improvement in relation to the quality of life in this area. (Interviewee 5)*

*We are talking here of a rehabilitation that tends to provide the land and territories with leisure facilities and other infrastructures, therefore an investment on citizenship, work on people participation and well-being. (Interviewee 8)*

### Impact on the Sustainability of Neighborhoods

This rehabilitation was considered very important for future generations and an improvement for residents, i.e., to the social organization and community of environmental issues neighborhood, namely the collection and treatment of waste, sanitation, water and sewer networks, network transportation, roads, gardens, common spaces, valences, neighborhood relations, security, with intervention in the issues of crime and domestic violence, bullying, drugs, and is recognized as relevant to its ecological sustainability.

*I have some difficulty in specifying one or another group, I think that all groups have many advantages, some in the long term, for example children and young people because they can come to enjoy their future life and therefore an improvement in quality of life, because we are talking here about a rehabilitation. (Interviewee 4)*

*In the long term, I believe that the main beneficiaries of the model's applicability will be children and young people—the concepts of urban ecology and sustainability associated with the model, and their impact on the quality of life of the populations will produce qualitative effects in future generations, which directly will contribute to social integration. (Interviewee 8)*

*It is very easily perceived that improving the neighborhood's ecological well-being will improve the psychological and social well-being of its residents, so I think that with the eco-neighborhood it will be possible for them to replicate the model of what they see happening in their neighborhood, to be able to happen in their own life, right? (Interviewee 9)*

#### Evaluation of Implemented Programs

Although considered of extreme importance, it was found that interviewees also had difficulty in finding an evaluation that allowed having data of what was done previously, mainly in qualitative level.

Both at local and national level there is an urgent need to set up information systems for evaluation and monitoring of the implementation process of these projects.

*I do not remember beyond the numbers of the rehoused families or similar things having ever seen any evaluation made, exactly the evaluation of another nature from a qualitative point of view in relation to what was done in the rehousing process. (Interviewee 6)*

*This has been a big gap, there is no qualitative assessment, only statistical numbers, of course they are important, but people are not numbers there are questions that can't be quantified. (Interviewee 7)*

*There should be a mid-term and final evaluation from a qualitative point of view, a follow-up of the whole process and not only the reports justifying the funding. (Interviewee 9)*

#### 4.1.2. Category 2—Social Intervention in the Eco-Neighborhood Project

##### Type of Intervention and Specificities

Social workers felt that a questioning and distancing posture was fundamental, without which they would incur the risk of professionals becoming mere administrative and bureaucratic executors. So, they placed the question of “help” in the teleological field, that is to say, in the realm of the meaning of the profession. They recognize the importance of the Social Workers in the community, however, they argue that the constant changes introduced in public services bring about a functional devaluation and often leave them with no reference. They reinforce that the social worker is a professional who is at the forefront of social problems, face to face with individuals and as such should have a constant presence in the neighborhoods.

*In my perspective let's say the true meaning of what an eco-neighborhood is means the sustainability, it has to go far beyond this question because it has to be something participatory and as much as has I know this participation is actually being demanded, population has been in a process of great involvement, but we have to be there with them and most of the time we can't be there because of the bureaucratic work, or because there are changes in the local or the central government, so we often feel that our work is undervalued. (Interviewee 1)*

*For me, it will always have to be a model of participatory community development if we want to call it that, because only in this way we can achieve local development, and local development can't be determined only by what standards executive power or of a particular local authority determines, so*

*we should be in the field and not doing bureaucratic work, it has to be a process that also allows what is to be built that is going to be built to last somehow in time. (Interviewee 7)*

#### Role of Local Partnerships in Social Intervention

The interviewees consider the existence of these partnerships to be fundamental, despite some problems such as the lack of articulation between partners, overlapping of tasks, conflicts of process and relationship, differences in the way the funds are used, also that sometimes people are conditioned by their work, deadlines, and bureaucratic issues, and that this has implications for the community.

*I think that partnerships are very important, but the articulation becomes difficult, each one is turned to itself for its problems, to manage the conflicts and the differences turns out to be exhausting and clear this is reflected in the community. (Interviewee 3)*

*Partnerships have a fundamental role, in fact they have, but often things do not work, everyone wants to have the power to decide, sometimes results, but on the basis of good relationships between colleagues and if money is not in the middle, I mean the funding issues. (Interviewee 6)*

#### Constraints to Social Worker Intervention

The interviewees highlight the fact that we are facing new social issues resulting from new societal changes and globalization. It is clear the concern of the interviewees on the need to reformulate community intervention, building a culture of action that meets the real needs of individuals and also that social workers become agents of change, with a more participatory approach to national and international dialogue.

*Today society has undergone a major transformation, we can't keep the same model, we have to innovate our intervention, in a critical, constructive, holistic way. We need to promote the participation of people in their life project, to be part of their community, to leave this culture of poverty. We leave in a globalized world, this people have no idea, besides what's happening in their neighborhood. (Interviewee 6)*

#### Potential for Social Work Intervention

Respondents were unanimous in considering that these challenges are also potentialities, namely: innovation for new forms of work, even on their own initiative, new identity constructions and accountability in helping policy makers to create new forms of social organization, more adjusted to the needs of individuals, groups and communities.

*I think that the fact that I am rehabilitating the neighborhood and the fact that there is a programming in urban reconstruction of some parts of some zones and of the total construction of others, seems to me to be fundamental to improving the socioeconomic conditions and allied to the housing aspect comes a series of other factors that contribute to the vision that the residents have of their life and their life paths. (Interviewee 4)*

*It is an opportunity to do well, to meet once and for all the expectations of this population. (Interviewee 6)*

#### 4.1.3. Category 3—Importance of the Role of the Social Worker in the Correction of Inequalities

In global terms, respondents consider that most social policy measures cannot address inequalities, and that their contribution to community sustainability is relevant.

#### The Professional Practice of the Social Worker

The social worker's role in the community reveals not only the professional's commitment stance, when he develops actions aimed at making institutional mechanisms of responses feasible, as close as

possible to the individual's expectations, but also demonstrates specific skills for dealing with adverse situations. The perspective of the social workers interviewed, although they were recently in the position, is generally resigned to the change of the "state of affairs", however it is perceived that there is a self-criticism about the need to be strengthened and then work on strengthening the individuals and in questioning the procedures of the institutions in which they perform their functions.

*Any intervention here is only productive, we only achieve something if it is integrated and has to respond in parallel to the closure of the deficits in the four pillars of sustainability, unfortunately when we question the intervention role of the social worker it will be questioned a posteriori it would probably be interesting to question this a priori, this because, because the social worker is the technician of the field that knows the population better, who knows his habits better, their customs, but most of the times it is prioritized the material aspects of these programs, that are absolutely necessary, this is not questionable, but neighborhoods without people do not exist. In this sense it seems to me that the role of the social worker since it can't be taken a priori, at least, should be included in the processes afterwards. (Interviewee 1)*

### Close Relationship with Individuals

Some of the interviewees consider that the main objective of the profession, the capacity for empathy, has been lost, eventually creating a relationship of distance because social workers are very much involved in administrative processes involving work overload. Almost all respondents say that the issue of proximity is crucial and that change can occur only through it. It is through the relationship with the other that the practice is constructed and it is also in this relationship that the social worker finds the meaning of her action.

*When I walk in the streets of the neighborhood and call me by name I'm glad because I somehow gave something positive to that person. (Interviewee 2)*

*The most important is the relationship of proximity, empathy, which has been lost because we cannot spend more time on the field. (Interviewed 5)*

*Empathy is the key concept of our intervention but how? We have 200 processes to which we have to respond, we do not have time to be with the residents. (Interviewed 8)*

*It is the basis for the promotion of change and we have been losing that capacity. (Interviewed 9)*

### Skills Required for an Informed Practice

Some of the respondents consider important to gain new skills, critical vision and creativity, as well as reflective attitude, ability to provide input to multi-disciplinary level monitoring in order to enable a more striking intervention in the design of social policy measures. Teamwork and networking, the ability to mobilize resources, promoting the participation of citizens and partners in all areas, is also part of the skills required for sustained and effective intervention. Others believe that the fact that the social workers, through their training, dispose of tools that allow them to look at reality as "experts of the whole" can have a marked position in the contribution to change. They also refer the humility to be able to look at their errors as an essential feature of professional development.

*I feel that it is necessary to find innovative responses to solving problems through cooperation, diversification of professional performance, continuing training and skills in other areas of the social sciences. (Interviewee 4)*

*We have to be humble and realize that we often fail to carry out this mission and seek to develop new competencies. (Interviewed 5)*

*We have to update ourselves, although our training has given us very valuable tools, but we all have to try to do better. (Interviewed 6)*

### Others' Representation of Social Worker

The first major challenge the social worker is facing today is structural in nature: the employment crisis, the climate of uncertainty, socio-demographic and economic transformations, and new forms of governance in a globalized world and an intensification of social problems. Another challenge concerns the affirmation of the profession itself, in the view of the policy makers and beneficiaries of the services, which maintains an “assistentialist” and technocratic image of social workers. The interviewees also consider that given the current model of society, social workers are subject to high pressures due to the complexity and diversity of the social phenomena that affect their performance and therefore point to redefine the boundaries of professional practice. Lastly, in the opinion of some of the interviewees, there is also some inconsistency in the professional group, and social workers often do not know how to define their role in the institutions.

*We are very pressured in our area, it is not enough just to make social diagnoses and then not be on the field to follow the process. (Interviewed 5)*

*Our professional class should be more united, have more strength, to be able to overcome these pressures to which we are exposed, any day we are nothing more than administrative workers. (Interviewed 5)*

*Nowadays the problems are more and more, more complex, on the contrary we increasingly have less power of decision. (Interviewed 8)*

### Integrated/Participatory Social Intervention

As a result of societal changes and globalization, it is clear to the interviewees, that there is a demand to build a culture of action that is more in line with the real needs of individuals, and that social workers may become political agents of change, with a more participatory posture in the process of national and international dialogue and not only as “parts for the fulfillment of political agendas”.

*I believe that the involvement of the residents with the team in the search for solutions that improve the daily life of the neighborhood is an essential condition for raising awareness of their rights as citizens and promotes a proactive participation in the future. (Interviewee 3)*

*Urban development projects, when accompanied by individual participation, foster their involvement in the decision-making processes and, consequently, a greater degree of acceptance and satisfaction with the solutions carried out. On the other hand, allow a greater understanding and sensitivity about the constraints that may arise during the process and contribute to a more supportive attitude that favors community ties and feelings of belonging. (Interviewee 8)*

### Interdisciplinary Intervention in Social Work Practice

As far as interdisciplinary intervention is concerned, the interviewees think that it is important not only because of the sharing of knowledge, which leads to a more consistent and legitimate analysis of the problems, but also because everyone wins. Interdisciplinary, as it is invoked here, supports the possibility of linking social issues to environmental issues, set on the demand for sustainable social and human development.

*The multidisciplinary teams when they work are of enormous richness, the contributions of each area, e.g., psychology, sociology, architecture. (Interviewee 1)*

*Personally I really like working with a multidisciplinary team, it is always much better, looking at problems in different ways but with a common goal. (Interviewed 4)*

*Everyone wins in a multidisciplinary team, we, the professionals and the people with whom we intervene, and then there is a sharing of knowledge. (Interviewee 7)*

## 4.2. Survey of Neighborhood Residents: Perception of Social and Environmental Conditions

### 4.2.1. Residents' Perception of the Eco-Neighborhood Project and Environmental Issues

Overall, 96.9% of the participants say they care about environmental issues, adding comments such as “... look at that garbage there, this is a shame, the other day my son stuck an iron in the foot, which is a danger”. Using a 5-point Likert scale most of the participants (93.7%) consider the environmental problems of the neighborhood to be serious or very serious ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ). Additionally, participants answered an open-ended question about neighborhood problems. The answers were identified in discrete categories, counting the number of mentions. From a broad list of social and environmental problems, participants identified those who looked the most serious in neighborhood spaces, in their opinion (Table 1). It is find that the greatest concern is the degradation of buildings, of the surrounding spaces, garbage, and the concern of the respondents for the recycling of garbage, energy saving and habits that promote the environmental sustainability of the neighborhood.

**Table 1.** Perception of social and environmental problems (multiple answers).

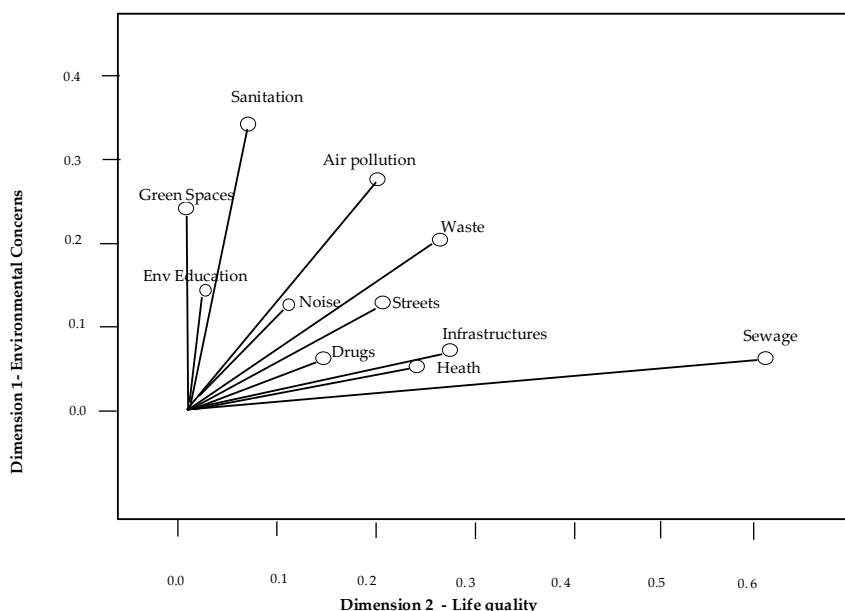
Environmental Issues	n (N = 131)	%
Vandalism	110	83.97
Poorly paved streets	93	70.99
Sewage treatment	59	45.04
Energy (electricity, water, gas, etc.)	42	32.06
Air pollution	40	30.53
Sound pollution (noise)	30	22.90
Hygiene	46	35.11
Poor local government	52	39.69
Safety	55	41.98
Waste Recycling	53	40.46
Basic sanitation	43	32.82
Poor Environmental Education	47	35.88
Others	9	6.87

In order to the possible multidimensionality of the perceived social and environmental problems of the neighborhoods, we performed a Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA). The first phase was to identify the variables to analyze, retaining those that present an acceptable value of variance (Table 2). To that end the variables “Others” and the ones related to energy problems were excluded.

**Table 2.** Perception of social and environmental problems—Multiple Correspondence Analysis.

Environmental Issues	Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Mean
Waste	0.240	0.259	0.249
Poorly paved streets	0.133	0.116	0.124
Sewage treatment	0.611	0.087	0.349
Air pollution	0.136	0.287	0.212
Sound pollution (noise)	0.066	0.093	0.080
Safety	0.003	0.015	0.009
Health	0.276	0.053	0.165
Infrastructures	0.288	0.053	0.170
Drugs	0.073	0.045	0.059
Sanitation	0.029	0.323	0.176
Poor environmental education	0.036	0.102	0.069
Green spaces	0.004	0.236	0.120
Active total	1.893	1.670	1.782

Although the two extracted dimensions have mean/low consistency (Cronbach's alpha),  $\alpha = 0.51$  in dimension 1 and  $\alpha = 0.43$  in dimension 2, considering the discrimination measures (Figure 1), it is possible to verify that the variables that discriminate the most are the problems of sanitation, air pollution and green spaces in dimension 2, and the problems of sewage, infrastructure and health in dimension 1. That is, dimension 2 seems to characterize more typical aspects of environmental concerns, while dimension 1 seems to cover more basic quality of life problems.



**Figure 1.** Multiple Correspondence Analysis—discrimination measures.

The majority of respondents (96.2%) consider that negligent behavior should be everyone's concern. When asked about what should be done, most refer to the need for external intervention (55%), especially in the area of education, information and environmental training. A significant proportion of respondents (78.63%) expressed their intention to participate in one or more community activities, when they were inquired about the forms of participation developed in the neighborhood.

#### 4.2.2. Residents Attitudes towards Community Development and Social Action

Participants were asked about their life in community. Firstly, they stated their reasons to consider the neighborhood a pleasant place versus unpleasant. The dominant opinion points show the importance attributed to interpersonal relationships: the most remarkable reasons to consider the neighborhood pleasant are the friends (71.7%) and the vicinity (38.1%), although the location is also very important (42.2%). Insecurity (42.7%) and lack of social spaces (36%) are considered as the main unpleasant aspects of neighborhood life. Watching TV (approximately 85%) and socializing with neighbors and friends (41%) are the preferred forms of occupation of the neighborhood residents' leisure time.

When asked about their expectations regarding the neighborhood regeneration project, about 6% of the respondents did not indicate any clear expectation. More than half of the respondents expressed generically optimistically. Having been the information obtained through an open question, its content was analyzed and categories were created in order to contain the sense of the answers, as shown in Table 3.



**Table 3.** Expectations about the neighborhood regeneration project (multiple answers).

Categories	n (N = 131)	%
Generic positive expectations	44	33.58
Negative Expectations	8	6.10
Material improvements (works) in housing	33	25.19
Generic Neighborhood Improvement	25	19.08
Specific neighborhood improvement (Aesthetics)	9	3.81
Conditions (health, market, common spaces, cleaning)	8	6.10

What would you be willing to do to participate? Nearly half of the participants (49.61%) responded to this question, revealing generic intention to participate, but they were unable to mention a concrete way.

The last part of the questionnaire focused on the attitudes of residents towards social action and the relationship with social workers. 61.8% of participants reported never having been met by a social worker. In the group of residents who were assisted by a social worker, the main reasons for the requests were related to the RSI (“Social Integration Income”, a subsidy from the Portuguese state temporarily assigned to persons without any income), food support, unemployment, housing or health-related issues. The perceived influence of social action in the neighborhood was assessed by residents using a 4-point Likert scale (1—No influence, 4—Too much influence). As can be seen in Table 4 there was no response in all the topics. Respondents consider that social action in the neighborhood is more influential on issues that respect the RSI and unemployment.

**Table 4.** Influence degree of social action in the neighborhood.

Focus	n	M	SD
RSI	120	3.29	0.92
Unemployment	121	3.20	1.03
Seniors	111	2.98	1.07
Health Care	116	2.90	0.98
Children and Youth	110	2.86	1.04
Large families	109	2.86	1.12
Drug addiction	102	2.33	0.87
Handicapped	104	2.27	0.91

Apparently, the nature of the activities carried out by few residents (floral arrangements, handicrafts) was not appealing to residents: about 93% of all respondents indicate that they did not participate in any activity organized by social workers.

## 5. Discussion

Taken together, results suggest that both social workers and neighborhoods residents seem to have awareness, albeit diffused, of the mutual implications between environmental intervention and social problems. But this awareness is far from intentional action. The social priorities seem to take all the time and energy by hampering the creation of necessary synergies between the actors involved. For instance, the fact that half of the residents are available for neighborhood regeneration initiatives (including environmental issues) while the overwhelming majority has never participated in an initiative of social workers seems to show a strong asymmetry between the social action guidelines and the unspoken views of residents.

The results of the study indicate that social workers make use of the theoretical and methodological dimension in a fragile and inconsistent way. There is heterogeneity of conceptions about the social issue, although they have difficulty in understanding it from their common genesis (capital/labor conflict) and its contradictory dimension (inequality/resistance). It is considered that they reveal a reductionist

and economic understanding of the social issue, since it is reduced to poverty, which makes it impossible to apprehend the object in its entirety. While the challenge for social worker in vulnerable communities is “maintaining momentum and grassroots support for interventions when trying to operate within bureaucratic systems” [4] (p. 81), it seems clear that the professionals in our sample are prone to use intervention techniques in a fragmented way and that they appropriate the institutional object as if it were the professional object itself.

Although the incorporation of scientific research into social worker practice is not new, findings show that it has little use in practice, as the results seem to confirm. To a greater extent it serves to assist in the preparation of diagnostics and in the planning of activities, or execution of policies, and not in the deepening of social issues.

Even so, theme highlights an innovative alternative for Social Work in community intervention and its contribution to the ecological sustainability of communities, and may contemplate the initial propositions of this work with the intention of answering our starting question: how does Social Work intervention promote the ecological sustainability of socially vulnerable communities?

In fact the socio-environmental practices in Social Work may be considered operational: carry out mobilization actions, through awareness raising and awareness of individuals of their rights and duties of citizenship and social participation, being attentive to all dimensions whether they are economic, environmental, ethical, political or cultural; involving all agents (institutions, local groups, associations), that can give these same individuals possibilities and means to initiate these processes in order to combat a relation of dependency and to lead them to their integration; organize and empower populations by promoting their integration into the community, fostering their autonomy in a proactive way, giving them back the feeling of belonging to the group, the capacity to develop actions, sharing of responsibilities and participation in the decision making of collective action, allowing the extension of learning, socialization and communication processes.

The social reality manifests and translates: (1) the needs and interests of the individuals, because it is underpinned that through the closeness, the active listening and the daily experience of the problems by those who live them, one acquires the knowledge about the reality where one intends to act. It is important to emphasize that the processes often involve many facets of life, such as social and family interaction, access to institutions and services, possibilities for professional qualification and schooling, employment, civic and political participation, among others. As such, there is a need to create spaces of autonomy and to develop strategies that reinforce the self-esteem of populations. (2) Reality translates the relationship with the operative dimension of the social responses developed by the Social Workers in the communities, because only through the social dynamics and the demands placed by the subjects, be they micro, meso or macro, the social worker can define both the purpose of the action to be taken. This definition is made through perception of the needs of the population and their living conditions, and also through the production of knowledge.

The professional faces difficulty in creating, re-creating and implementing proposals that are consistent with the reality presented daily, so the management and the ability to plan and organize professional action proactively become instruments of great importance in the formulation of proposals to confront the challenges to the Social Work professional. This is because, the need for action planning and the development of managerial skills, namely change management, that supports a set of structures, processes, tools and techniques helping individuals and teams to adapt to the new and transformational leadership for problem solving, process optimization, training, attraction and retention of talent, creation of efficient management policies, elimination of bureaucracies and hierarchical barriers.

This study has some implications for how social work approaches intervention in vulnerable communities and suggests recommendations for practice that integrate the environmental dimension. Complex problems require complex action and a coherent socio-ecological (or socio-environmental) approach has to meet various conditions. The first one is a “relational” worldview where individuals should be seen as part of a network of relationships, embedded in an ecosystem. Indispensable is

the adoption of a multi-level and multifocal approach to systems (micro, meso, macro) and networks, where social action occurs at all levels of these networks, conceptualizing them as eco-social systems, in order to help a realistic view of action and its impact on social change. This implies that social action must simultaneously touch all levels and connections between them and that social work must build alliances with other social actors. Other conditions are the co-creation of social change seen as a general denominator for the process of bottom-up collaboration and participation, and the construction of communities and networks, in its multiple dynamics and variables, focusing on the mechanisms of resilience and empowerment for change that requires the social worker to work with individuals or families to articulate all processes. Finally, this approach requires ethical-political reflection as a continuous exercise through which the process of social change is conducted in the desired direction of sustainability based on social justice.

The intervention of social work must go beyond the assistance dimension and its presence in institutions and organizations operating in the social area is a reason for them to play a decisive role in solving social problems and not in perpetuating them. The assistance dimension is necessary to support individuals to overcome problems that require an immediate response, but later it is decisive to work on other dimensions in terms of individuals, families, communities, and influence over political power.

## 6. Conclusions—An Eco-Social Model for Social Work Practice

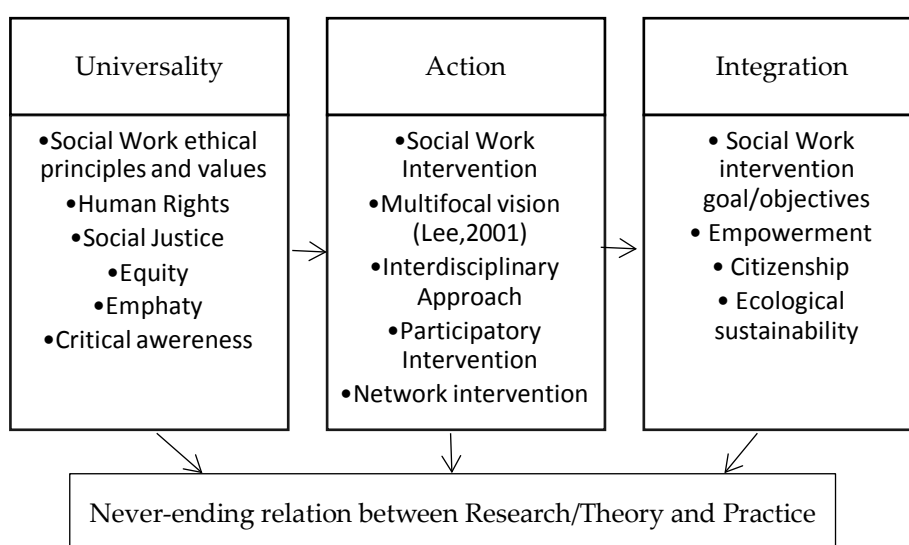
The reflection on the observations of urban regeneration projects, as those which were the focus of this study, seems to point to the need for an eco-social model for social work intervention which has been developed in recent years [66].

The construction of an intervention model that may lead to the ecological sustainability of vulnerable communities arises from the need to move towards a balanced society with regard to environmental, economic and social factors, to deepen the recovery of values and to stimulate society to think in a new worldview. It supports theoretically the ecological perspective, the empowerment approach through a multifocal vision [19], articulated with the eco-neighborhood concept and is organized into five levels: individual (traits and behaviors, life history); relational (relationships, social support); environmental (built and imposed environment); (laws, policies, social and economic systems) and superstructures (social justice, human rights, equal opportunities). The focus on needs lead to state that the center of any intervention is the individual, understood in terms of his/her actual needs and not in the institutional logic of available resources [66].

This direct intervention work must be interconnected at its different levels and based on four dimensions. The assistance dimension (food, medicines, subsidies, living conditions) allows the social worker to make the first contact with the individual, and what is important is to perceive what is her immediate need and to respond. Only then the professional can analyze the situation and move to the dimension of human promotion, understanding the circumstances which led to the situation of need, i.e., whether he/she is unemployed, why, what qualifications he/she has, what to do. The community dimension of socio-local development is an exogenous, but the origin of problems can also arise from the environment where the individual lives. The differences between rural and urban are an example: an individual who experiences poverty in a large city neighborhood faces a situation with more difficult and more complex contours, whereas an individual living in a neighborhood in a rural area may have a subsistence economy but end up having more difficult access to health services and others. Finally, the socio-political dimension indicates that the causes of the problems may be neither in the person nor in the place where they live, but in the social structure. It is at this level that socio-political intervention must be put into operation, drawing the attention of political power through studies, reports, networking, and proposals for legislative changes. This dimension is intended to “stir in the structures”, and it is certainly the most difficult because of the many factors that underlie it, but the social worker cannot stop fighting for it, because if the problems are found to be in social policy measures that need to change, the challenge is to develop strategies that lead to this change.

This intervention model leads to a holistic view at various levels and within different systems through the combination of the ecological perspective and the systems theory. Specifically, it considers that the influence of environmental factors at different levels (family, school, community, nation ...) that shapes individual behavior, and the “key concept is interrelation in which each system operates interconnected with the functions of another system” [66] (p. 152).

As shown in Figure 2 Universality, Action, and Integration are the conceptual cornerstones of this model. Universality refers to the ethical principles and values of social work (human rights, social justice, empathy, and critical awareness), which ought to format Action of social workers in their practice. This one is supported by multifocal vision [19] through an interdisciplinary approach, implying a participatory and networked intervention, aiming at Integration of the target person or group. Constant articulation between theory and practice allows attaining Integration, the main goal. It leads to ecological and social sustainability, through empowering individuals and groups in vulnerable communities [66].



**Figure 2.** An eco-social model for social work practice (Adapted from Rocha and Ferreira [66] (p. 155)).

The term “eco-social” is intended to incorporate a range of emerging ecological perspectives that advocate a greater focus on environment in social work theory and practice, some even placing the ecosystem at the center of practice [4] leading to support and reinforce mutually beneficial individual-environment relationships. Based on perspectives such as social ecology and deep ecology [14,67,68] and critical ecological perspectives [69], this theoretical framework emphasizes human interdependence with all living beings and with natural systems; critical individual-environment relationships involving degradation, control, and exploitation; and advocate a focus on social work based on social and environmental justice, management and sustainability.

The multifocal vision [19] gives the possibility to support practice in seven theoretical axes, the historical view of oppression, including the history of social policies related to oppressed groups; the ecological vision, with a comprehensive knowledge of individual potentialities and ways of adapting them in dealing with power structures and inequalities; an ethclass perspective, which facilitates the understanding of the interrelationships and components that constitute the realities of social class structures, ethnic group, national and regional identity and what impact it has on each individual or group affected by racism, ethnocentrism; the cultural perspective that values the different ways people structure their behavior, cognitions, beliefs, values, norms, patterns and rhythms of life and build a worldview. Here the term culture has a broader perspective than ethnicity and can be applied to individuals, age, sex, sexual orientation, religion, region and other diversities.

Multicultural training provides respect and dignity as an attribute of each group; the feminist perspective, regarding the slow and constant positioning of women, with the evolution of their rights, not forgetting the oppression of women caretakers, agents of profound social changes, with the achievement of basic rights such as voting, to be voted on, to study, to work, to educate their children and to participate in family decisions, but which still has in many countries a lower condition; the global perspective that allows for knowledge that goes beyond local boundaries and is necessary for problem solving and the worldwide violation of human rights that moves us beyond ego and ethnocentrism to intercultural competence in the emancipation and construction of integrating communities; and the critical perspective that enables critical reflection and awareness of the whole described above.

The potential of this model lies in the combination of systemic concepts and ecological structure, a holistic approach focused on the interaction between the parties, a theoretical instrument that serves as a bridge between professionals from various disciplinary areas and support for practice [66].

Social sciences (and social work in particular) have the imperative responsibility to reflect on the singularities and specificities of the present moment. This entails for social work a challenging transformation in its project, where “changes and uncertainties present potential dangers but at the same time offer new opportunities for a more dynamic and innovative practice” [70] (p. 293), an effective action that allows the sustainable development of societies and individuals and in which the construction of knowledge constitutes an indispensable condition. This proposal aims to transform neighborhoods into communities (eco-neighborhoods) where people can live, work and prosper in a participatory process of collective construction of integrated and sustainable development and as a promoter of ecological sustainability, well-being and social integration, within the framework of socio-urban transformations.

Like all investigations that have a defined time horizon, it is necessary to establish limits in order to meet the deadlines. This case was no exception, but it opened new lines of research in which currently a work is being done towards having evaluation indicators for the social sustainability of these communities and measure the success of social policies by comparing it with the indicators established in these projects.

In 2010, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) declared sustainability as “the social justice issue of the new century” [71]. In this sense, thinking the logic of sustainability, which is present in the eco-neighborhoods, is beyond the requirement of the new times, it is an ethical requirement. Integrated and sustainable local development is a way to promote social and human development, which enables the emergence of more sustainable communities capable of meeting their immediate needs, discover and awaken their local vocations and develop their specific potentialities, to be part of the solution, thus contributing to the ecological sustainability of the most vulnerable communities.

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## Appendix A. Interview Guide—Social Workers

1. According to your professional practice how do you define the intervention in this neighborhood identified as an eco-neighborhood project?
2. What difficulties do you stand out in view of your experience in implementing this type of neighborhood?
3. Do you consider that the current economic crisis has consequences for the implementation of this type of neighborhood? If so, try to make your analysis and your contributions explicit.
4. In your opinion, what alternatives can the eco-neighborhood model offer to improve the quality of life of residents and their social integration? (Government, municipality, parish, population, family and neighbors).

5. From your knowledge which target group can benefit most from the eco-neighborhood model? (Children, young people, the elderly, drug addicts, alcoholics, the unemployed, the disabled, immigrants, others).

6. What entities have a partnership in the intervention and support of the neighborhood and what is your opinion on the role they play?

7. Given that you are a social worker in a neighborhood, where an eco-neighborhood model is intended to be implemented, tell us the differences that you identify in the type of intervention developed compared to the intervention of a social worker in another type of neighborhood? (Health, education, home support, day care center, kindergartens).

8. Regarding the social and community organization of the neighborhood, how do you classify it at the environmental level (collection and treatment of waste, basic sanitation—water and sewage networks, electricity network, transportation network, common spaces, valences, neighborhood relation, security (crime, domestic violence, bullying, drugs etc.).

9. How does the neighborhood's transportation network work? (State of conservation of roads, transportation accessibilities, bus stops, etc.).

10. How do the issues of associative action and participation of the population work?

11. What is the relation that establishes as social worker between social work/environment/eco-neighborhood, in particular, what constraints have you detected in your intervention experience (political, institutional, population, colleagues, staff—ethical dimensions)?

## Appendix B. Questionnaire

This questionnaire is intended to collect information about the residents' perception of the neighborhood eco-neighborhood project and environmental issues.

All information collected is anonymous and confidential.

**Table A1.** Socio-demographic characterization.

Age _____	Marital status
Gender	1 <input type="checkbox"/> Single
1 <input type="checkbox"/> M	2 <input type="checkbox"/> Married
2 <input type="checkbox"/> F	3 <input type="checkbox"/> Divorced
	4 <input type="checkbox"/> Widow
Household composition	
1 <input type="checkbox"/> Lives with parents and/or siblings	Number of children
2 <input type="checkbox"/> Lives alone	<input type="checkbox"/> Age ___ / ___ / ___ / ___ /
3 <input type="checkbox"/> Lives with spouse and children	
4 <input type="checkbox"/> Lives with spouse	
5 <input type="checkbox"/> Lives with only children	
6 <input type="checkbox"/> Another situation. Which one? _____	
Educational Qualifications	
1 <input type="checkbox"/> None	Work & employment
2 <input type="checkbox"/> 1st cycle	1 <input type="checkbox"/> Student
3 <input type="checkbox"/> 2nd cycle	2 <input type="checkbox"/> Worker—Student
4 <input type="checkbox"/> 3rd cycle	3 <input type="checkbox"/> Employed
5 <input type="checkbox"/> Professional degree	4 <input type="checkbox"/> Self-employed
6 <input type="checkbox"/> University degree	5 <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed
7 <input type="checkbox"/> Other. Which one? _____	6 <input type="checkbox"/> Retired
	6 <input type="checkbox"/> Other. Which one? _____
How long have you lived in the neighborhood? _____ years	
Are you aware of the neighborhood regeneration project (eco-neighborhood)?	
Why did you move to the neighborhood?	
1 <input type="checkbox"/> Yes	
2 <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Do you agree? To what extent?	
1 <input type="checkbox"/> Born in the neighborhood and always lived here	1 <input type="checkbox"/> Totally agree
2 <input type="checkbox"/> Where I lived before there were no conditions	2 <input type="checkbox"/> Agree
3 <input type="checkbox"/> I was re-housed	3 <input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree
4 <input type="checkbox"/> I like the neighborhood	4 <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
5 <input type="checkbox"/> I live with relatives	5 <input type="checkbox"/> Totally disagree
6 <input type="checkbox"/> I immigrated and was placed in the neighborhood	
7 <input type="checkbox"/> Other. Which one? _____	

**Table A2.** Perception of the eco-neighborhood project and environmental issues.

<p>There are environmental problems in the neighborhood?</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Yes 2 <input type="checkbox"/> No 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know</p> <p>If so, which ones?</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Waste 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Poorly paved streets 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Sewage system 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Network 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Air pollution 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Sound pollution (noise) 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Safety 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Health 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Infrastructures 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Drugs/alcohol abuse 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Basic sanitation 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Environmental education 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Green spaces 14 <input type="checkbox"/> Others. Which? _____ _____ _____</p>	<p>How do you characterize the environmental problems you indicated?</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Very serious 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Serious 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Not very serious 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Not serious 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Not serious at all</p> <p>Do you consider the lack of concern for the environment an issue ...</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Very serious 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Serious 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Not very serious 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Not serious 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Not serious at all</p> <p>Do you consider that negligent behavior should be a concern for all?</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Yes 2 <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>In your opinion what should be done? _____ _____</p>
<p>What kind of participation you undertook in your neighborhood?</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Association of residents 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Participatory council 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Community work 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Event Promotion 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Maintenance of common spaces 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Cleaning 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Environmental education 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Others. Which? _____ _____ _____</p>	<p>If you did not participate, would you like to participate in the future?</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Sim 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Não</p> <p>If yes, which ones?</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> Association of residents 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Participatory council 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Community work 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Event Promotion 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Maintenance of common spaces 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Cleaning 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Environmental education 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Others. Which? _____ _____</p>
<p>Every citizen can look at his/her neighborhood in a pleasant or unpleasant way. So, please tell us: Reasons that make you consider the neighborhood a pleasant place:</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> The neighbors 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Friends 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Localization 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Common/communal spaces 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Others. Which? _____ _____</p>	<p>Occupation of Free Time:</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> TV 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Radio 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Reading 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Sport 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Chat with friends and neighbors 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Parties and events 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Others. Which? _____</p>
<p>Reasons that make you consider the neighborhood an unpleasant place:</p> <p>1 <input type="checkbox"/> The neighbors 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Insecurity 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of transportation 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of common living spaces 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Others. Which? _____</p>	

**Table A3.** Community Development vs. Social action.

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Have you been attended by a social worker?

1  Yes  
2  No

What were the reasons that led you to ask for support?  
\_\_\_\_\_

What kind of support did you receive? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

In what activities (organized by the social worker) did you participate? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What are your expectations regarding the neighborhood regeneration project? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What would you be willing to do to participate in the neighborhood regeneration project?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

---

In your opinion, what is the influence of Social Action in the neighborhood?  
Use the following scale to respond.

1. Has a lot of influence;  
2. Has some influence;  
3. It has little influence;  
4. It has no influence at all.

RSL.....1 2 3 4  
Health.....1 2 3 4  
Children and Youth.....1 2 3 4  
Elderly.....1 2 3 4  
Handicapped.....1 2 3 4  
Drug addiction.....1 2 3 4  
Unemployment.....1 2 3 4  
Large Families.....1 2 3 4  
 Don't know/No opinion

Thanks for your collaboration.

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