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Learning to practice ecosocial work: competence development and professional awareness in Italy

Apprendere il lavoro ecosociale: sviluppo delle competenze e consapevolezza professionale in Italia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how social workers construct ecosocial knowledge and skills, and how ecosocial orientations take shape within diverse organisational and territorial contexts. Drawing on a qualitative multiple case study of 18 initiatives across Italy (a Southern European welfare context characterised by fragmented policies and uneven professionalisation) the study explores situated learning processes and configurations of ecosocial awareness emerging in practice.

Findings indicate that ecosocial competences develop predominantly through experiential, reflective, and interprofessional learning rather than formal academic training. Three configurations of ecosocial awareness are identified: fragmented, implicit, and integrated. Key knowledge forms (environmental awareness, multidisciplinary, professional hybridisation, and creative thinking) are mobilised alongside relational, educational, and project management skills.

The analysis shows that these configurations are shaped by a combination of micro, meso, and macrolevel factors. Ecosocial orientations do not emerge within stable, coherent communities of practice: rather, social workers navigate between organisational systems, professional cultures, and policy environments that are often divergent and in tension. This positions them as brokers who must simultaneously translate meanings across boundaries and manage structural contradictions between systems with different logics and objectives. The study contributes an empirically grounded framework for understanding ecosocial professional development as a situated, relational, and structurally contested process.

ASTRATTO

Questo articolo esamina come gli assistenti sociali costruiscono conoscenze e competenze ecosociali in diversi contesti organizzativi e territoriali. Basandosi su uno studio di caso multiplo qualitativo di 18 iniziative realizzate in Italia (un contesto di welfare sudeuropeo caratterizzato da politiche frammentate e professionalizzazione disomogenea) lo studio esplora i processi di apprendimento situato e le

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configurazioni di consapevolezza ecosociale emergenti nella pratica professionale.

I risultati indicano che le competenze si sviluppano prevalentemente attraverso un apprendimento esperienziale, riflessivo e interprofessionale, piuttosto che attraverso la formazione accademica formale. Forme chiave di conoscenza (consapevolezza ambientale, multidisciplinarietà, ibridazione professionale e pensiero creativo) si affiancano a competenze relazionali, educative e di gestione progettuale. Vengono identificate tre configurazioni di consapevolezza ecosociale: frammentata, implicita e integrata, condizionate da fattori micro, meso e macro.

Esse non emergono all'interno di comunità di pratica stabili: gli assistenti sociali navigano tra sistemi organizzativi, culture professionali e contesti di policy in tensione e conflitto, assumendo il ruolo di broker chiamati non solo a tradurre significati tra prospettive differenti, ma anche a gestire le contraddizioni tra assetti istituzionali con logiche e obiettivi incompatibili. Lo studio propone un framework empiricamente fondato per comprendere lo sviluppo professionale ecosociale come un processo situato, relazionale e istituzionalmente mediato.

Introduction

In recent decades, the interconnections between social and environmental issues have become increasingly evident. Climate change, environmental degradation, and resource depletion are reshaping patterns of vulnerability, inequality, and social exclusion, placing growing demands on welfare systems and social work practice. These developments have fostered the emergence of eco-social perspectives that seek to integrate concerns for social justice and environmental sustainability, thereby challenging established paradigms of professional knowledge and intervention.

Within social work scholarship, ecosocial approaches have been recognised as an important avenue for rethinking the profession's role in promoting transformative change across multiple levels of practice (Boetto, 2017; Dominelli, 2013; Matthies & Närhi, 2017). While normative and theoretical debates have expanded considerably, empirical investigations into how ecosocial approaches develop within everyday professional contexts remain limited. Much of the existing literature focuses on conceptual elaborations or on experiences from Northern and Central European contexts. This leaves a significant gap in empirical understanding of professional learning processes in Southern Europe, where welfare arrangements, organisational cultures, and trajectories of professionalisation differ markedly (Krings et al., 2018; Matthies & Närhi, 2017).

The present article addresses this gap by examining the Italian context through the following research question: how do social workers construct ecosocial knowledge and skills, and how do eco-social practices take shape within diverse practice, organisational, and policy contexts?

Investigating these questions is relevant not only for understanding processes of professional development, but also for informing broader European debates on social work education, welfare transformation, and sustainability transitions. By analysing ecosocial knowledge and skills alongside learning trajectories embedded in real-world practices, the study provides empirically grounded insights into how these orientations are constructed and mediated within specific organisational and policy environments.

The article is situated within the framework of the national research project PRIN 2022 ECOSOW ('Social Work and Sustainable Local Development in Italy: Towards Ecosocial Work?'), funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research. The project explores emerging ecosocial practices across Italy, analysing how ecological and social concerns are embedded within professional roles, organisational settings, and local welfare configurations. It aims to identify initiatives characterised by transformative potential in local development processes. In this respect, the Italian case offers a valuable analytical lens, highlighting tensions between institutional constraints and innovative

experimentation and shedding light on how ecosocial orientations take shape in fragmented policy environments where formalised strategies are still evolving.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews relevant literature on ecosocial work, professional learning, and competence development. The subsequent section outlines the methodological framework and research design. The findings are then presented in three parts, examining (1) modes of knowledge and skill acquisition, (2) forms of knowledge and skills identified by practitioners, and (3) configurations of ecosocial awareness in practice. The paper closes with a discussion of the findings, a reflection on the study's limitations, and a concluding statement on the implications for research, education, and professional development within the European social work landscape.

Ecosocial social work and competence development: theoretical positioning

Over recent decades, research across the social sciences has increasingly incorporated ecological perspectives, highlighting the need to address social problems connected to environmental degradation, climate change, and resource scarcity (Krings et al., 2018). Despite this growing awareness, ecological and sustainability dimensions remain marginal within everyday social work practice and are often confined to practitioners' personal commitments rather than embedded within professional mandates (McKinnon, 2013). This tension underscores the difficulty of translating environmental concerns into concrete intervention frameworks and has prompted scholarly debate on the competences required for ecosocial practice.

Ecosocial social work literature emphasises the need for professionals capable of critically interpreting the interconnections between social inequality, ecological crisis, and environmental justice (Dominelli, 2013; Matthies & Närhi, 2017). Within Boetto's (2017) framework, ethical and value-based commitments are conceptualised as antecedents to methodological action, positioning ecological justice as foundational to transformative professional strategies. Accordingly, social workers are framed as agents of change whose role extends beyond service delivery to encompass political and community-oriented action supporting sustainable development across multiple levels of intervention (IFSW, 2022). Recommended practices include collaborative networking, participatory identification of local sustainability needs, engagement with communities affected by environmental disruption, and institutional advocacy aimed at integrating ecological awareness into policy and organisational agendas (Boetto, 2017).

Professional action, however, unfolds within structured organisational and policy environments that shape competence development and knowledge acquisition (Garrett & Bertotti, 2017). A situated understanding of learning processes therefore requires attention to institutional norms, organisational cultures, and participatory infrastructures that mediate professional practice (Bifulco & Facchini, 2013). From this perspective, competence development is not solely the outcome of formal education but emerges through participation in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Within such communities, knowledge is not transmitted but co-constructed through shared engagement in practice, mutual accountability, and the negotiation of meaning over time. Professional identity and competence thus develop as situated achievements, shaped by the specific organisational and relational contexts in which practitioners operate. In this framework, practitioners who engage with multiple communities – crossing organisational, disciplinary, or sectoral boundaries – may act as brokers of meaning, translating knowledge and perspectives between different worlds of practice (Wenger, 1998). Where such boundary crossing involves navigating between systems with divergent logics, rules, and objects – as is often the case in ecosocial work, where social, environmental, and institutional domains intersect – this brokering function may also entail managing structural tensions and contradictions between different activity systems (Engeström, 2007; 2008).

This perspective aligns with practice-based approaches to knowing in organisations (Nicolini et al., 2016), which emphasise that professional knowledge is inherently embedded in action, context, and social interaction rather than residing solely in individual minds or formal curricula.

For ecosocial social work, this has direct implications: it suggests that the development of ecosocial orientations cannot be understood independently of the organisational conditions, territorial resources, and interprofessional relationships that either shape practitioners' learning trajectories.

At the same time, the potential for transformative ecosocial practice is constrained by institutional rigidity and administrative logics oriented toward stability rather than innovation. These structural tensions produce contradictions between professional motivation and systemic limitations (Hermans et al., 2025). Empirical research indicates that training systems remain insufficiently equipped to prepare practitioners to address structural barriers, resulting in fragmented or resistant responses rather than systemic change (Cellini et al., 2024; Pavani et al., 2025). This highlights the need to move beyond professional education focused primarily on micro-level relational competences toward approaches capable of engaging with economic, political, and structural dimensions of practice.

Recent developments in social work education reflect attempts to respond to these challenges. Emerging educational frameworks advocate integrating critical theory, experiential learning, and ethical reflection through participatory and practice-based methodologies (Forde et al., 2024). Emphasis is placed on competences related to environmental crisis management (Anand et al., 2024), engagement with sustainability transitions and degrowth perspectives (Whelan, 2024), and a focus on community interventions (Freitas, 2024). Across international scholarship, the 'greening' of curricula reflects a shared commitment to reconfiguring disciplinary knowledge bases and reshaping professional identity through innovative educational strategies (Androff et al., 2017; Hillock, 2024; Jones, 2018).

Nevertheless, important gaps remain. While environmental concerns are increasingly recognised, curricular and professional transformations proceed unevenly across welfare regimes. In Italy, limited integration of social work education within academic curricula restricts the development of specialised competences (Cellini & Dellavalle, 2022), and professional engagement in emerging welfare domains such as urban regeneration or ecological transition remains limited (Fazzi, 2022). Traditional generalist training provides multidisciplinary grounding but often neglects organisational, planning, and creative competences, thereby reinforcing bureaucratic modes of practice.

These conditions highlight the importance of transversal competences enabling professionals to navigate managerial constraints and institutional complexity (Garrett & Bertotti, 2017; Pavani et al., 2025), particularly within third-sector environments where participatory and advocacy-oriented practices may flourish (Bifulco & Facchini, 2013). Shifting toward process-oriented professional logics expands agency, fostering relational and creative engagement and enabling more horizontal stakeholder interaction.

Overall, the literature portrays ecosocial professionalism as an evolving and still unsettled domain (Närhi et al., 2025). It requires practitioners capable of interpreting structural inequalities and facilitating change through participatory, critical, and climate justice-oriented approaches. Such development aligns with lifelong learning trajectories integrating methodological, organisational, social, and reflexive dimensions of professional formation.

Methodological framework and research design

The empirical material for this study was generated within the national multi-university research programme PRIN ECOSOW, involving four universities located in different regions of Italy. The programme follows an exploratory research design based on in-depth qualitative inquiry into emerging ecosocial practices.

Within this framework, a qualitative multiple case study approach was adopted to investigate situated processes of professional learning and competence development across diverse organisational and territorial contexts. This design was selected for its capacity to capture how ecosocial knowledge and competences are constructed and enacted in real-world settings, and to address 'how' and 'why' questions concerning emerging professional phenomena (Yin, 2017).

A total of 18 case studies were selected, encompassing third-sector organisations, public services, and mixed partnerships engaged in initiatives combining ecological and social dimensions across

four intervention domains: social and work inclusion, social agriculture, urban regeneration, and sustainable local development.

Case selection followed a purposive and theoretically informed sampling strategy guided by six explicit criteria: (1) a structural and transformative integration of social and ecological dimensions, excluding initiatives with exclusively therapeutic, educational, or instrumental uses of the natural environment; (2) diversity in intervention domains; (3) diversity in territorial contexts, including urban peripheries, rural areas, and settings with varying welfare infrastructures; (4) diversity in organisational arrangements and network configurations, ranging from third-sector organisations to public-private partnerships with different degrees of integration into local welfare systems; (5) geographical representativeness across Italian macro-regions (North-West, North-East, Centre, and South and Islands), reflecting the country's marked territorial inequalities; and (6) a clear and consolidated social work dimension, guaranteed by the presence of qualified social professionals within each initiative. Priority was also given to medium- and long-term experiences, considered more analytically significant for examining processes of consolidation and professional learning over time.

An initial national mapping phase, based on document analysis, web-based searches, and exploratory consultations with key informants and networks, generated a broad pool of potential cases, subsequently refined through collaborative deliberation among research teams.

Data collection relied primarily on 102 semi-structured interviews with key actors involved in each initiative, including social workers, project coordinators, administrators, and, in some cases, beneficiaries and community members. Interviews were conducted between July 2024 and May 2025, lasted between one and two hours, and were audio-recorded and transcribed with informed consent. Documentary sources and contextual materials gathered during field visits complemented interview data, enabling triangulation and enhancing contextual interpretation.

Data analysis followed a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021), combining an initial inductive, data-driven coding phase with iterative cycles of refinement and conceptualisation informed by ecosocial theory and competence-development literature. Interviews were structured around thematic areas defined a priori by the research group – including learning modalities, forms of professional knowledge and competence, and configurations of ecosocial awareness – but were used flexibly, adapting the order and depth of questions to each context and interlocutor. The interpretive process was guided by a multidimensional analytical framework aimed at identifying the transformative levers, individual, organisational, and policy conditions, and attitudinal factors shaping practitioners' ecosocial learning trajectories across micro, meso, and macro levels, supporting systematic movement between within-case interpretation and cross-case comparison. The analytical process was not confined to confirming initial hypotheses: several unexpected themes emerged and were integrated into the framework – including the prevalence of fragmented ecosocial awareness even in contexts selected for their transformative potential, and the marginal role of formal academic education in competence development. All data were managed using ATLAS.ti. Analytical robustness was strengthened through multi-case integration, collaborative interpretation across the four university research teams, and transparent coding procedures.

The research team's involvement in the broader PRIN ECOSOW programme, while ensuring deep contextual familiarity with the field, also required sustained reflexive attention to avoid interpretive closure. Analytical rigour was supported through systematic coding procedures, peer debriefing across research units, and ongoing critical engagement with disconfirming evidence.

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, the coordinating institution of the research project (protocol no. EDU_ECOSOW_2024).

Findings

The findings are organised in three parts, each addressing one of the research sub-questions. The first examines the modes through which social workers acquire ecosocial knowledge and competences. The second maps the forms of knowledge and competences practitioners identify as relevant

to ecosocial practice. The third analyses the configurations of ecosocial awareness observed across different organisational and territorial contexts.

Methods of acquiring knowledge and skills

The analysis identified four main learning modalities through which participants developed ecosocial knowledge and competences. These modalities should not be understood as mutually exclusive categories, but as interconnected dimensions of professional development that often coexist within practitioners' careers. Table 1 summarises their main characteristics and provides illustrative extracts from the interviews.

As shown in Table 1, experiential and reflective learning emerged as particularly salient in participants' accounts. While formal education was generally described as providing a broad professional foundation, ecosocial competences were more commonly developed through practice, critical reflection, and interprofessional collaboration. These findings suggest that ecosocial learning is predominantly situated and relational, rather than primarily acquired through formal training pathways.

Knowledge and skills

Following the analysis of learning modalities, the study explored the knowledge and skills practitioners consider most relevant for practising ecosocial work. Responses refer both to the practices in which social workers are currently involved and to a professional ideal progressively constructed through experience, training, and interprofessional comparison. Interviewees tend to differentiate between knowledge – theoretical frameworks and concepts acquired through education – and skills – the capacity to apply such knowledge in practice, encompassing both attitudinal and operational dimensions (Ryle, 1949; Trevithick, 2012).

Knowledge

Among the knowledge considered central, participants highlighted environmental awareness (Närhi et al., 2025), multidisciplinary, professional hybridisation, and creative thinking. Environmental awareness was described as the ability to recognise the interconnections between ecological conditions and social well-being, shaping how practitioners interpret problems and orient professional action.

«Taking care of the place becomes therapeutic (...) if you manage to transform it into a moment of revenge and awareness of what I am capable of doing». (i27)

At the same time, interviewees emphasised the importance of integrating perspectives and knowledge from different disciplinary fields, such as agronomy, urban planning, and local development. This multidimensional perspective was associated with a more systemic understanding of socio-

Table 1. Main modalities of ecosocial learning identified in the interviews.

Learning modality	Main characteristics	Illustrative extract
Formal learning	Limited contribution of university and continuing education programmes to ecosocial competence development.	<i>'I have never even taken a course ... on social work and the environment' (i8)</i>
Experiential learning	Learning develops through direct engagement with practice, local contexts, and personal experiences.	<i>'Those who do these things develop countless skills' (i10)</i>
Reflective learning	Critical reflection and supervision help practitioners reinterpret experience and question routine assumptions.	<i>'I have to question myself, I have to rethink' (i92)</i>
Collaborative and interprofessional learning	Knowledge develops through collaboration with professionals from different disciplines.	<i>'They bring together various skills' (i16)</i>

ecological issues and often led practitioners to combine traditional social work competences with environmental and territorial knowledge.

«I have developed the ability to adopt a 360-degree perspective, to engage with different dimensions simultaneously and connect them (...) the common good is not solely a matter for social work». (i2)

In several cases, this process resulted in forms of professional hybridisation, where established social work methods were adapted to non-conventional settings such as social agriculture or community regeneration projects. Participants also referred to creative thinking as an important resource, enabling experimentation with alternative practices, the reinterpretation of professional roles, and the development of innovative responses to local socio-environmental challenges.

Skills

Regarding skills, interviewees placed great importance on educational and networking competences. Educational skills were described as essential for promoting environmental awareness among children, young people, and local communities through workshops, training activities, and community initiatives.

«We held workshops on civic education and environmental management with the children». (i50)

Alongside educational skills, the ability to build and sustain relational and collaborative networks also emerged recurrently as a core operational competence. Practitioners describe networking as a structural component of ecosocial practices, essential for engaging institutional stakeholders, third-sector organisations, and citizens:

«We started from an informal network of contacts. Our objective was to formalise the relationships, involve the institutions (...) and create moments of sharing». (i27)

Configurations of ecosocial awareness

The analysis of the interviews reveals three recurrent configurations in the way practitioners integrate social and environmental dimensions within their professional practice. These configurations do not represent fixed categories, but rather empirically observable patterns reflecting different forms and modes of ecosocial awareness across organisational and territorial contexts.

The first configuration can be described as a fragmented ecosocial orientation. In these cases, social and environmental dimensions are present within practice but remain functionally separated rather than conceptually integrated. In some instances, natural settings or environmental activities are primarily employed as tools to pursue social aims, such as work integration pathways or workshop-based interventions. In other cases, interventions are mainly oriented towards environmental protection, with social elements playing a secondary role. In both situations, the ecological and social components coexist without forming a coherent ecosocial perspective.

A second configuration reflects what may be termed an implicit ecosocial orientation. Practitioners in this group do not necessarily draw on explicit theoretical references to ecosocial work, yet their practices incorporate elements consistent with this approach. The environment becomes a meaningful component of intervention, although awareness of its structural, political, and systemic implications remains only partially articulated.

«I think that sometimes my colleagues carry out ecosocial actions (...) but without being aware of it». (i3)

The third configuration corresponds to integrated ecosocial awareness. Here, social and environmental dimensions are closely intertwined, and the environment is regarded as constitutive of individual and community well-being. In these cases, practitioners articulate a systemic understanding of the interdependence between ecological conditions, social justice, and professional responsibility,

and demonstrate competences oriented toward co-design, network-building, and integrated needs analysis.

«Care for people, care for the territory, care for the environment: even environmental care activities can become a tool for building welfare and promoting inclusion for people» (i4).

The differentiated configurations of ecosocial awareness are also reflected in the knowledge and skills referred to by interviewees.

Within fragmented ecosocial orientations, the skills mentioned largely correspond to those traditionally associated with community work, such as networking, fostering local participation, and carrying out awareness-raising initiatives. In these cases, ecological and social components tend to remain functionally separated, and competences are mobilised without an explicitly integrated framework.

Within implicit ecosocial orientations, more hybrid skills emerge, often developed through prior experiences and interprofessional collaborations. These include place-based project design, the adaptation of social work tools to non-conventional settings, and ecological observation. Here, integration between social and environmental dimensions becomes more visible in practice, even if it is not always explicitly theorised.

Within integrated ecosocial awareness, more systemic competences are highlighted, such as the integrated analysis of social and environmental needs, participation in co-design processes, and the use of participatory research methodologies. In these configurations, practitioners articulate a more explicit understanding of the interdependence between ecological sustainability and social justice.

The analysis of the case narratives also makes it possible to identify a set of individual, contextual, and organisational factors associated with integrated ecosocial orientations.

Individual factors that appear to support the development of more integrated ecosocial orientations include ethical commitments, reflective dispositions, and previous training experiences. One interviewee, whose account reflects a well-developed ecological awareness, describes her work as grounded in strong political commitment and emphasises how training oriented towards self-reflection fosters a critical understanding of one's professional role and its concrete contribution to the wider social context. This perspective connects professional practice to a broader systemic and political vision, which also underpins an integrated understanding of social and environmental issues:

«Social work is political work; it embodies a specific vision of the welfare system and of social coexistence. Technical work between practitioner and service user becomes political work done poorly if the underlying vision is not recognised, because without it the effectiveness of one's actions is ultimately dispersed». (i12)

Among the contextual factors, the social capital of local contexts and the presence of pre-existing collaborative networks emerge as key resources for developing connections between ecological and social dimensions:

«Working within large networks (...) the eco-welfare-social-environmental hybridisation (...) the cross-fertilisation between profit and non-profit actors facilitated the alignment of objectives». (i20)

Public policies are described as ambivalent. In some cases, cross-sector calls foster collaboration and integration of practices:

«We had already tried to bring us together because we had already seen some similarities. This call for proposals effectively provided the opportunity to channel them together and find this good team result ». (i61)

In other cases, administrative and regulatory constraints are perceived as limiting design autonomy:

«I need lightness (...) autonomy (...) I don't want to be subjected to colonising logic». (i12)

Finally, organisational factors also play a significant role. Interviewees distinguish between low-resource and highly bureaucratised contexts, in which the professional repertoire appears constrained and it becomes difficult to design or initiate ecosocial interventions:

«in our municipality there is only one social worker who has to do everything on his own, ... if he even has a thought about certain things, it ends there. There is great professional poverty» (i22)

and more flexible, community-based contexts that allow for greater experimentation and interprofessional collaboration:

« Accept challenges, (...) be relational as much as possible, seek alliances, be innovative (...) think divergently ... ». (i68)

Discussion

The research findings portray a professionalism in transition (Närhi et al., 2025), called upon to address the growing interconnection between social and environmental issues (Boetto, 2017; Matthies & Närhi, 2017) and to reconsider its role within contemporary welfare systems (Forde et al., 2024; Hermans et al., 2025). The analysis of learning methods, knowledge, skills, and configurations of ecosocial awareness shows that ecosocial work is not yet a consolidated professional orientation, but rather an emerging and unevenly institutionalised field shaped by heterogeneous practices and organisational conditions.

A first interpretative issue concerns the role of academic training. The findings highlight how university education appears substantially absent or inadequate in providing specific theoretical and methodological references for ecosocial work (Cellini & Dellavalle, 2022; Fazzi, 2022). This gap helps explain why many ecosocial skills are developed predominantly outside formal curricula, through situated experiences and informal learning. Participants frequently described the need for more practice-oriented and specialised learning opportunities, including internships focused on community work and sustainability, as well as advanced training programmes addressing emerging fields of practice.

The findings also suggest that ecosocial competence development involves more than the acquisition of technical knowledge. Participants emphasised the importance of advocacy, ethical and political sensitivity, and the capacity to critically engage with organisational and policy contexts. Equally important was the ability to develop a deep understanding of local communities through direct territorial engagement and sustained presence in everyday social environments. These dimensions indicate that ecosocial learning is closely connected to relational, contextual, and value-based forms of professional development.

Within this framework, the learning strategies deemed most significant by interviewees are rooted in engagement with personal and professional experiences, often recognised only in retrospect as transformative (Illeris, 2017; Kolb, 1984). Equally relevant are opportunities for interprofessional collaboration, which allow for the expansion of the repertoire of knowledge and the experimentation with hybrid intervention methods. However, it is above all reflective learning that emerges as a central formative resource (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; Sicora, 2017), as it allows for the critical reworking of experiences, the connecting biographical experiences with professional practice, and the attribution of meaning to the actions undertaken.

The identification of differentiated configurations of ecosocial awareness allows us to interpret the variety of emerging positions as part of a dynamic process rather than a static categorisation. The three ecosocial orientations identified – fragmented, implicit, and integrated – reflect different modes of integration between the social and environmental dimensions and show how ecosocial awareness is constructed within organisational practices and contexts. In this sense, awareness does not appear as an individual attribute, but as a situated outcome of the interaction between educational trajectories, professional experiences, and structural conditions.

These configurations are shaped by a combination of micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors. At the micro level, ethical and value orientations, a disposition toward reflexivity, and educational trajectories play a significant role. At the meso level, organisational conditions influence the scope for experimentation and innovation: bureaucratic contexts tend to constrain the professional repertoire, whereas flexible, community-based organisations foster more exploratory and collaborative approaches (Garrett & Bertotti, 2017). Finally, at the macro level, public policies, local social capital, and funding strategies may either facilitate or impede the development of integrated eco-social practices (Matthies et al., 2019; Matthies et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, the three configurations should not be read as a linear progression toward a single optimal goal. Among the three, integrated ecosocial awareness represents the orientation most consistent with the transformative aspirations of ecosocial work. Where the necessary organisational and contextual conditions are absent, however, fragmented awareness should not be read merely as a deficit. Although it does not fully integrate social and environmental dimensions, it can foster engagement with ecological issues, involving people directly, strengthening their sense of belonging, and broadening the scope of social initiatives. In resource-scarce or institutionally constrained contexts, such practices may represent important stepping stones towards more integrated ecosocial approaches. This is particularly evident in urban and peripheral contexts marked by significant challenges, where interventions often resemble community social work, which fits well within the ecosocial framework (Boetto, 2017; Landi, 2023) and is frequently adopted by practitioners without explicit ecosocial awareness.

Conversely, a more intentional and ambitious ecosocial approach may struggle to take root because of the institutional and organisational barriers outlined. The lack of integrated policies and funding is a major obstacle, particularly when funding schemes target either the social or the ecological dimension (e.g. agriculture) without connecting the two. In such contexts, a more implicit orientation may paradoxically lay the foundations for change by generating positive spillover effects despite limited room for action.

Therefore, assuming a direct relationship between the degree of ecosocial awareness and project outcomes – that greater integration necessarily leads to better results – may be misleading unless the actual opportunities for innovation are considered. Nevertheless, ecosocial work is distinguished by its commitment to systemic change (Boetto, 2017), and its long-term aim remains the transformation of welfare systems through the integration of social and ecological dimensions. Where projects develop in supportive local contexts – engaging diverse actors and organisations and benefiting from receptive public administrations – integrated ecosocial awareness becomes considerably more effective, enabling projects to become embedded locally, influence organisational culture, leverage institutional support, and support the upscaling of innovative practices.

In light of these elements, the need to strengthen social workers' ecosocial awareness through a dual approach emerges. On the one hand, it appears a priority to intervene in training by greening curricula, introducing experiential and reflective methodologies, and enhancing internships in eco-social contexts (Forde et al., 2024). The findings indicate that the development of a systemic and eco-social perspective remains challenging in professional environments that continue to be strongly oriented towards individual casework. This suggests that strengthening ecosocial awareness requires not only curricular innovation but also organisational and cultural changes that support broader ecological and community-oriented understandings of practice.

The findings further suggest that the economic sustainability of ecosocial initiatives represents a critical area for professional development. Participants frequently referred to the need to complement traditional social work competences with project management, resource mobilisation, partnership building, and financial sustainability skills, reflecting the increasing complexity of ecosocial interventions.

On the other hand, it is necessary to act on macro- and mesosocial factors (Hermans et al., 2025), supporting the economic sustainability of projects, promoting flexible organisations, and strengthening the conditions that enable cross-sector collaboration.

The conditions required to make this possible extend beyond the responsibility of professional training or practitioners alone. They depend on strengthening the role of public services at the local level, moving beyond cost-containment approaches (Fazzi, 2023; Matutini et al., 2003), building constructive partnerships with the third sector and across organisations – including private companies – and fostering greater institutional openness to participatory practices. These conditions can be promoted through the effective implementation of existing policy instruments, particularly co-design (Vicario et al., 2024), one of the most innovative tools in the Italian context and especially suited to the development of ecosocial initiatives. Co-design brings together public and third-sector actors to jointly plan and deliver local social interventions through participatory, bottom-up processes. However, despite its potential, the urgency and tight timeframes surrounding its implementation often hindered its coherent application (Vicario et al., 2024).

Against this background, communities of practice (Nicolini et al., 2016; Wenger, 1998) represent one area in which the profession can play a direct role, assuming a strategic function as interdisciplinary and interprofessional learning contexts. Boetto et al. (2022) have shown how intentionally established communities of practice can strengthen practitioners' ecosocial capacity; the present research extends this insight by highlighting the conditions under which similar processes unfold within ordinary organisational settings, without deliberate design. Knowledge is constructed through action and shared reflection (Närhi et al., 2025), but its activation depends on favourable organisational conditions such as time availability, operational autonomy, and institutional recognition. Within these spaces, social workers can act as brokers of meaning (Engeström, 2008; Wenger, 1998), facilitating dialogue between different languages, knowledge, and perspectives and contributing to the construction of shared ecosocial paradigms rooted in local communities.

Overall, the findings and their interpretation suggest that ecosocial work represents a direction for the development of social work that requires an integrated rethinking of training, organisations, and policies. Only through alignment between these levels will it be possible to sustain practices capable of responding to contemporary environmental and social challenges and contributing to the construction of more resilient, equitable, and sustainable communities.

Limitations

This study intentionally selected cases on the basis of externally observable criteria – namely the potential for integrating social and ecological dimensions within each initiative – rather than on practitioners' self-identification as ecosocial professionals. This allowed the study to examine whether and to what extent practitioners themselves framed their work in ecosocial terms, and to identify the factors mediating the development of such awareness. As a consequence, the configurations of ecosocial awareness identified may not capture contexts where ecosocial professional identity is already explicitly consolidated and institutionally recognised.

The reliance on retrospective narratives introduces the risk of recall bias: participants may reconstruct their learning trajectories more coherently than the lived experience warranted, and may articulate ecosocial visions in interview settings not fully reflected in everyday practice. However, the interviews were not conceived as neutral data extraction tools but as reflexive devices designed to stimulate critical reprocessing of experience – prompting participants to reorganise their trajectories from different perspectives and surface aspects previously tacit or marginal (Lainson, 2020). In this sense, the interview functioned as an occasion for critical and potentially transformative reflection, inviting practitioners to reconstitute the meaning of their practice rather than merely report it (Schön, 1983). The retrospective character of the narratives is therefore not merely a limitation but a methodological resource: what the interviews generated is a critically informed reconstruction of professional learning – which is precisely the object of this study.

A related concern involves the potential for selection bias introduced by the criterion excluding cases where the natural environment served purely therapeutic or instrumental purposes. While theoretically grounded, this criterion may have filtered out precisely the more fragmented or

instrumental contexts that the study subsequently identifies as a significant configuration of ecosocial awareness. Two considerations address this concern. First, the criterion targeted exclusively instrumental uses – not contexts where ecosocial awareness was still partial or emerging. In practice, fragmented orientations proved pervasive even within cases selected for their transformative potential, suggesting that fragmentation characterises the Italian ecosocial landscape even under relatively favourable conditions – a finding consistent with the broader Italian context, where ecosocial social work remains a marginal and weakly institutionalised field. Second, the study maintained an explicitly critical orientation designed to avoid idealised representations and to document both possibilities and structural constraints. The emergence of fragmented orientations within a purposively selected sample may therefore indicate that their prevalence is even greater in contexts not captured here – a question that warrants further empirical investigation.

Further comparative and longitudinal research, examining how ecosocial learning processes and orientations evolve over time and across different European welfare regimes, would help consolidate and extend the framework proposed here.

Conclusion

This study contributes an empirically grounded framework for understanding ecosocial professional development as a situated, relational, and organisationally mediated process. By documenting how ecosocial knowledge, skills, and awareness emerge – and are constrained – within specific institutional and territorial conditions in Italy, the research moves beyond normative prescriptions of what ecosocial social work should be, toward an empirically grounded understanding of how ecosocial orientations actually develop within specific organisational and institutional conditions.

The findings suggest that social workers engaged in ecosocial practice do not operate within a single, coherent community of practice. Rather, they navigate between organisational systems, normative frameworks, and professional cultures that are sometimes collaborative and sometimes divergent – a condition that calls not only for the translation of meanings across boundaries (Wenger, 1998), but also for the active management of structural tensions between systems with different logics, rules, and objectives (Engeström, 2007; 2008). Understanding ecosocial professional development therefore requires attending to both the relational and the structural dimensions of this brokering role.

The findings are necessarily bounded by the exploratory design and the specificity of the Italian welfare context, and should be read as an analytical starting point rather than a definitive account for the broader European debate on ecosocial professionalism.

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Author contributions

CRediT: **Davide Galesi**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Riccardo Bavastro**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Alessandro Sicora**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations. Participants consented to be interviewed for the purposes of this study but did not provide consent for full transcripts or raw data to be shared beyond the research team.

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