

Social Sustainable Development and Social Work

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Introduction: questions

- ▶ Is Sustainable Development (SD) an issue for Social Work (SW)?
- ▶ How connect SD with the mission of SW?
- ▶ Which concept of SD would be appropriate?
- ▶ How conceptualize the relation between a process of SD and the practice of SW?

Introduction: Project

- ▶ 'Orientation of Social Work toward Sustainable Development'
- ▶ Appropriate interpretation of SD:
 - current analysis of the ecological crisis
 - within mission and tradition of SW

Elaboration: double movement:

- greening SW
- strengthening the social dimension of SD

Contents

1. The challenge: social transition
2. What is Sustainable Development?
3. SW & SD: normative questions
4. SW & SD: a general model for practice – the eco-social approach

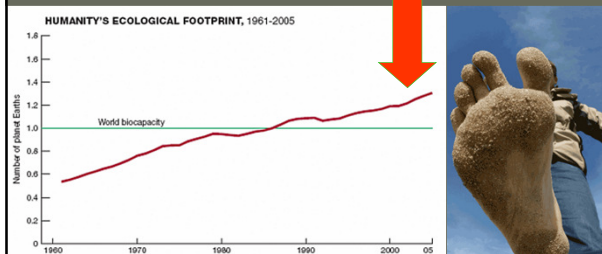
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1. The challenge: from social-ecological crisis to transition into a different society

A clear point of departure that connects the ecological crisis with social problems: the ecological footprint



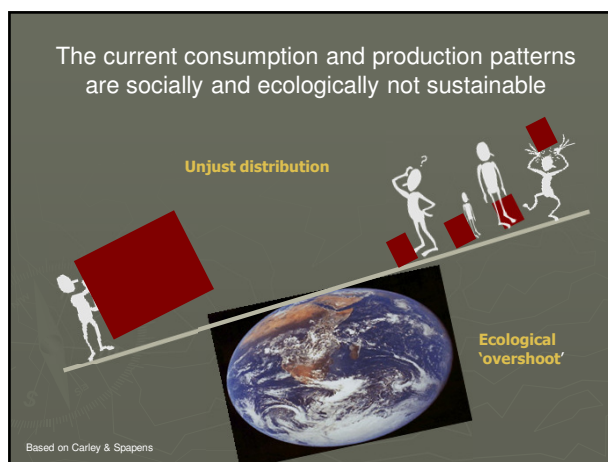
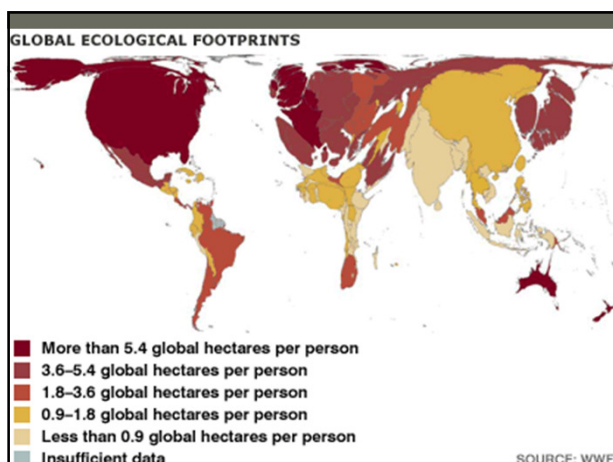
Ecological 'Overshoot'



LPR-report 2008: Global ecological footprint in 2005: 30% above the carrying capacity of the earth

LPR-report 2010: 50% overshoot in 2007 = 1,5 planet

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Impasse: scarcity

Scarcity is not independent of the social system.

"As long as the present-day world system is maintained, there is no other possibility than to navigate between two rocks. The larger the part of the world population that lives in prosperity, the more the ecosystem is in danger; the more the ecosystem is safeguarded, the more it is allied with unlimited misery."

E. Vermeersch
(*De ogen van de panda*, Brugge: Marc Van de Wiele, 1988, p. 41)

Impasse !

- ▶ The current social system has no way out! (so: no *business as usual* - BAU)
- ▶ Central problem:
 - growth economy (cf. Tim Jackson *Prosperity without growth*)
 - related cultural norms and expectations
 - fundamental ways of thinking and of framing problems and answers

= 'paradigm' of our society

The challenge

- ▶ Satisfaction of needs and creation of well-being for every world-citizen while maintaining 'natural capital'.
- ▶ This requires:
 - dematerialization of the economy
 - a just distribution of welfare
 - a new view on well-being (*decisive*)
- ▶ This means: transition into a different society

Sustainable production and consumption:
socially just, ecologically maintainable

quality of life

carrying capacity

justice

power and participation

Based on Carley & Stappers

2. Sustainable Development

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What is Sustainable Development?

Departing from the challenge:

- ▶ Business as usual is impossible!
- ▶ Sustainable Development: a process of social transition that doesn't leave any one domain of society untouched
- ▶ So the demand for a Sustainable Development touches also Social Work

Transition

- ▶ A thoroughgoing process of social change within several generations
- ▶ Interaction between ecological, technological, economic, social, institutional, cultural..... developments.
- ▶ A **sustainability transition** contains a combination of parallel changes in the most important subsystems of society (e.g. energy system, mobility pattern and system, food model, organisation of labour and care, etc.)
- ▶ Involvement of many actors on all levels of society

Complementary strategies

- ▶ Efficiency
 - Higher productivity of resources
 - Closing production cycles
- ▶ Redistribution of use of resources
 - Relation with quality of society (cf. Wilkinson & Pickett, *The Spirit Level*)
- ▶ Sufficiency
 - Quality instead of quantity
 - Well-being as finality is more than material welfare

SD: Brundtland definition

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

It contains within it two key concepts:

- the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which priority should be given;
- and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs."

(WCED, *Our Common Future*, 1987: 43)

Sustainable Development

- ▶ It concerns the **needs** of people
- ▶ Two dimensions:
 - **Space:** here and elsewhere
 - needs of all people
 - global perspective
 - **Time:** now and in the future
 - own and future generations
- ▶ Debate about the meaning of SD

SD: a political concept

- SD is a vague concept: reflects the complexity of the issues at stake
- We regard SD as a political concept (cf. justice): different interest-based standpoints make up its content
- Result: many different conceptualisations, contents, definitions, agendas, representations and images ...
 - e.g. 3P: people, planet, prosperity (profit)
- For SW? Which agenda, criteria, process?

Normative principles of SD

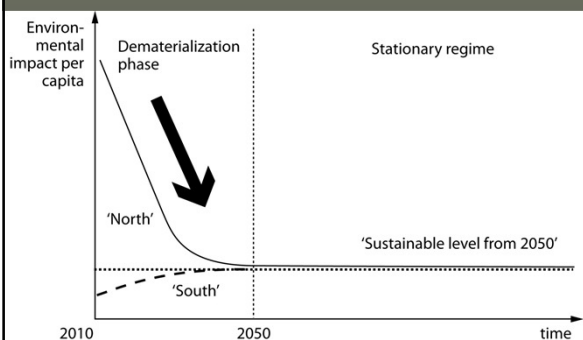
- meeting of needs
- respect for ecological limits
- common but differentiated responsibilities
- global justice
- intra-generational equity/solidarity
- intergenerational equity/solidarity
- active participation
- gender equality
- respect for diversity

(based on the WCED process)

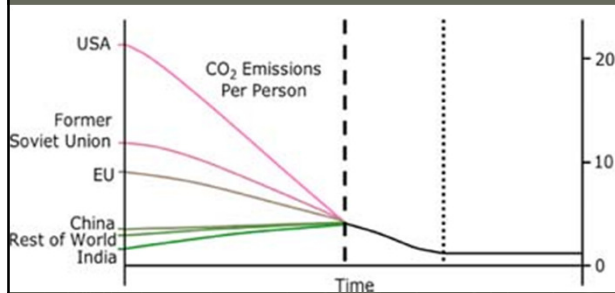
Ecological justice

- ▶ Bringing together respect for ecological limits and demands of justice
- ▶ Contraction and convergence
 - dematerialization of the economy
 - a just distribution of welfare

Contraction and convergence



Contraction and convergence





www.seppo.net

3. SOCIAL WORK & SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: normative questions

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Social Work

'The social work profession promotes **social change**, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance **well-being**. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of **human rights** and **social justice** are fundamental to social work.' (IASSW & IFSW, 2001)

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Comparison of normative principles

| Sustainable Development | Social Work |
|---|---|
| meeting of needs | enhance well-being |
| respect for ecological limits | - absent - compatible: depends on concept of well-being: SW and SD both deal with the problems of our society |
| common but differentiated responsibilities (in the first place between nations) | - implicit: follows from general principles of fairness and attention for the possibilities and limitations of people - characterize also empowerment - focus on difference between individuals and groups in society |
| global justice | yes |
| intra-generational equity/solidarity | yes |
| intergenerational equity/solidarity (typical emphasis within SD) | compatible: depends on concept of responsibility (as differentiated: compatible with empowerment) |
| active participation | yes |
| gender equality and respect for diversity | yes |

Jef Peeters 2008

Similarities between SW & SD

- ▶ Large similarity in the normative principles concerning attention for well-being, justice, human rights, diversity and participation
- ▶ Common characteristics:
 - Process-oriented
 - multi-level
 - multi-actor

SW & SD: strengthen each other

- ▶ SW has to broaden its contextual vision to the biophysical environment
 - take into account the notion of biophysical limits
 - meaning of the natural environment for well-being
 - attention for spatial planning and organisation
- ▶ SW can reinforce the social dimension of SD:
 - strengthen the focus on questions of redistribution
 - emancipatory focus
 - bottom-up approach of empowerment and participation
 - promoting social economy
- ▶ SW can help widen the focus of SD on (basic) needs to other aspects of well-being, particularly those referring to 'new views on a meaningful life.'

Theoretical frameworks

Decisive are among others:

- ▶ An ecological world view:
 - an eco-social conception of SD & SW
 - 'ecological economics' can be inspiring
 - new evolutions in ecological systems theory
- ▶ A choice for participative practice theories
 - empowerment (instead of medically) oriented
 - social learning
 - participative research of eco-social context
- ▶ New ideas about well-being

Ecological traditions in social work

| Time | Approaches of Social Work | |
|--|---|---|
| 1880-1940 beginning of the industrialisation | Addams: urban ecology community work | Richmond: holistic person-in-environment thinking |
| 1950-1960 development of the new environmental conscience | eco-critical approach | systems theoretical thinking |
| 1970-1980 alternative movements and radicalism | <i>Alternativbewegung, Ökologie und Sozialarbeit</i> (1981) | publications since 1973 Germain & Gitterman (1980) Wendt (1982) Meyer (1983) |
| 1985 - risk society discussions | Opielka (1985) Beck (1986) | |
| 1990 - late modern society | Matthies (since 1987) Hoff & McNutt (1994) | Wendt (1990) Germain (1991) Meyer (1995) |
| since ca. 1995 | convergence of different perspectives - ecological social work: Besthorn (1997), Coates (2003) - eco-social approach: Matthies e.a. (2001) | |

After Närhi & Matthies 2001

Well-being

- ▶ Redefining of a 'good life'
- ▶ From individualism to a relational idea of man: autonomy in connection
- ▶ Importance of natural environment
- ▶ Narrative structure of meaning of life
 - difference with happiness as 'feeling good'
 - relation between well-being and citizenship
- ▶ Rethinking of 'emancipation'
 - relation to work and consumption
 - relation to different forms of participation
- ▶ Relation to time: "Time is meaning"

GDP-growth and Life Satisfaction

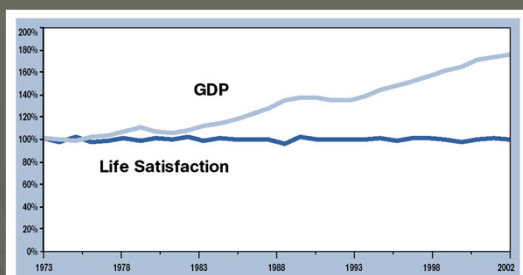
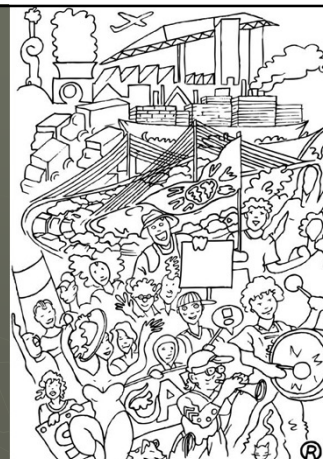


Figure 1: UK Life Satisfaction and GDP – 1973-2002
Zie NEF, 'A well-being manifesto for a flourishing society', 2004

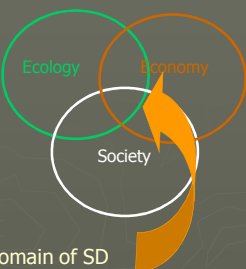
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4. SOCIAL WORK & SD:

a model for practice – the eco-social approach



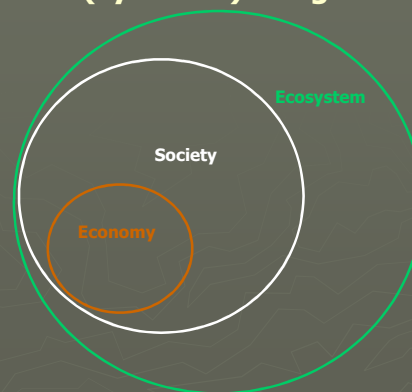
The current image of SD



The domain of SD

SD as a 'balance' of 3 dimensions

An alternative (systemic) image



Advantages systemic image

- ▶ More realistic i.e. more ecological world view
- ▶ States the importance of maintaining 'natural capital'
- ▶ Joins the concept of ecological economics
- ▶ Joins the contextual view in the tradition of SW: "Person-in-Environment means that a new multi-dimensional and holistic way of working can re-build connections between service users, decisions and politics in a given living area." (Matthies 2001:141)
- ▶ Makes clear why ecological questions are also social questions
- ▶ The mediating position of the social sphere for social (and political) action

Economy in SD

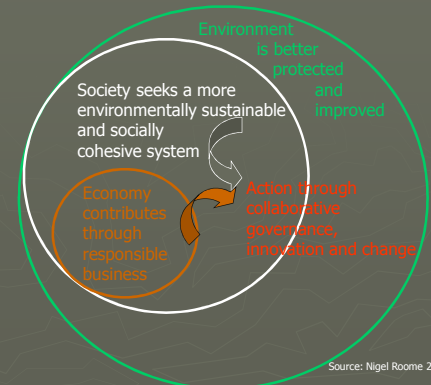
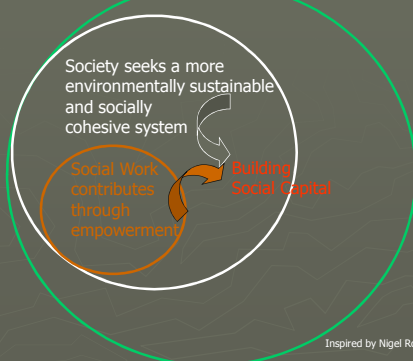
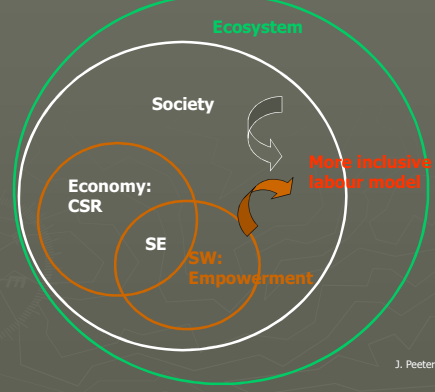


Image of SW & SD: social-ecological approach



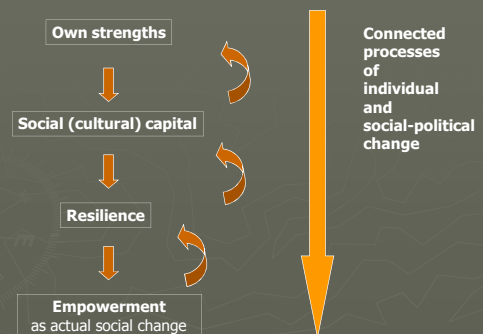
SW & SD: social economy



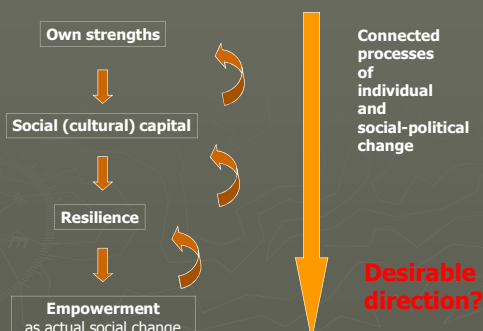
3 connected multilevel concepts

- ▶ Social capital: basis for resilience
- ▶ Resilience: condition for empowerment
- ▶ Empowerment:
 - Practice paradigm: process + result
 - Multilevel: individual to political level
- ▶ Connected by positive feedback

Process of empowerment



Process of empowerment



Paradigm SW: empowerment



Decisive paradigm change in the practice of SW:

switch from a medical/pathological model with emphasis on deficiencies, to a positive view on the own possibilities of clients and target groups, who will be approached as 'partners' of social work, as participants in a process of learning, development and social change.

Empowerment: personal and political

*'Empowerment suggests both individual determination over one's own life and democratic participation in the life of one's community, often through mediating structures such as schools, neighbourhoods, churches, and other voluntary organizations. Empowerment conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights. It is a **multilevel** construct applicable to individual citizens as well as to organizations and neighbourhoods; it suggests the study of people in context.'*

(Rappaport 1987:121).

Power

- ▶ Difference: strength – power
- ▶ Power = relationship **between** people
 - Negative: domination (*power over*)
 - Positive: cooperation – partnership (*power with*)

Empowerment: a process of positive interaction, in which the 'common' capacity for action increases through recognizing and joining together the particular possibilities of individuals or groups.

- ▶ In the case of domination:

Empowerment: a process of building counter-power for social change.

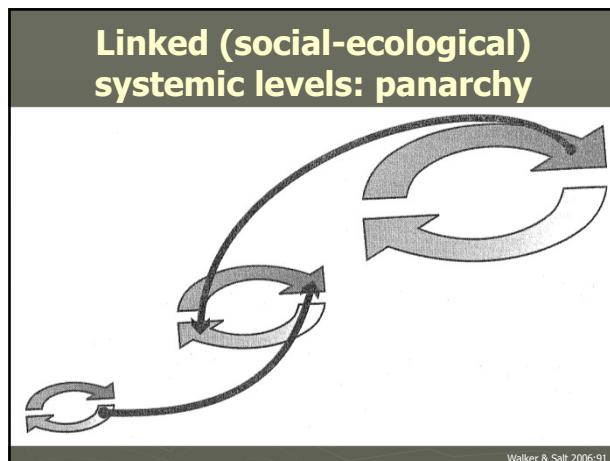
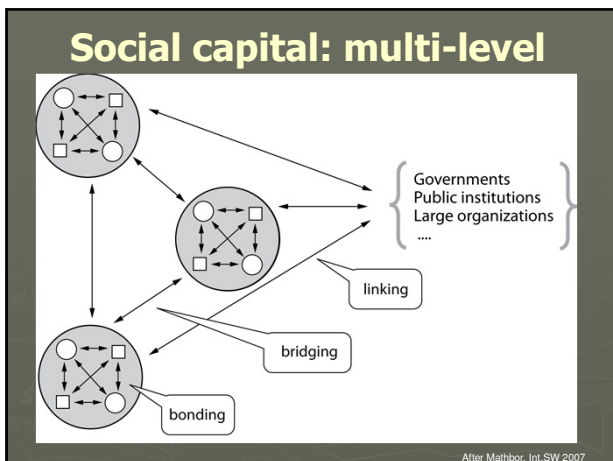
Building social capital

- ▶ For a fundamental transition a society needs a large amount of resilience:
 - diversity and connectedness (see below)
- ▶ Everybody has the right to participate and contribute. This requires solidarity and social inclusion.
- ▶ Building social capital is both an objective and a part of a transition into a sustainable society.

Social capital: a process

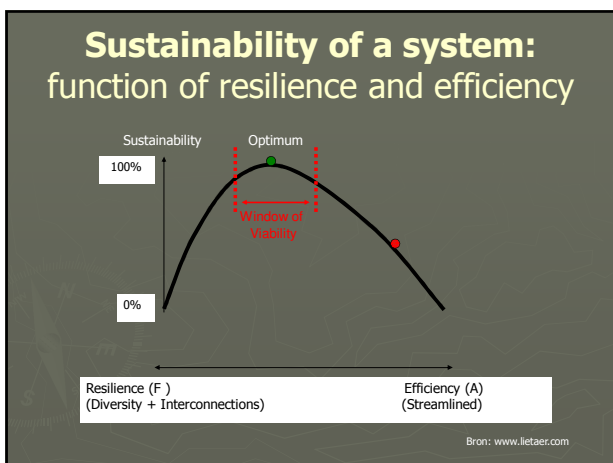
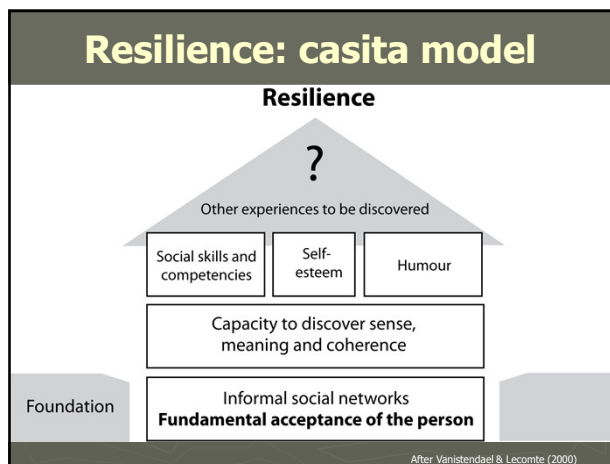
Co-operative and multilevel action:
social capital for social work is

"a process of building trusting relationships, mutual understanding and shared actions that bring together individuals, communities and institutions." (Loeffler)



Resilience

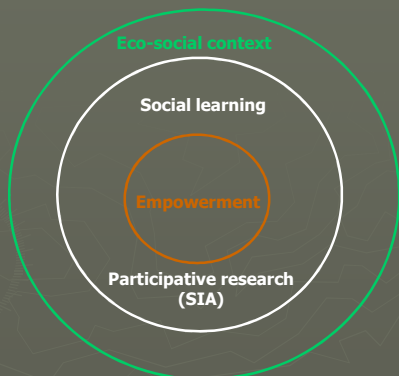
- ▶ Resilience: the capacity of a system to positive adaptation in risk situations or in great processes of (social-ecological) change.
- ▶ We bring together two theoretical lines within one social-ecological approach:
 - Resilience as a condition for empowerment
 - Resilience as a basic characteristic of sustainable social-ecological systems



Empowerment as core

- ▶ *Empowerment* is a more or less developed normative-methodical framework, that enables for SW to connect his work with specific target groups with a broader process of SD.
- In addition the structuring focus moves from 'social exclusion' to 'social capital'.
- ▶ Further elaboration through *The Eco-Social Approach* (research project on social exclusion in European cities): three basic concepts:
 - '*Eco-social approach*' as a broad contextual view, with more attention for the biophysical environment than usual;
 - In the core: the social action concept of *empowerment* and citizen-oriented practice;
 - *Social impact assessment (SIA)* through participative research by social workers connects the two other concepts.

The eco-social approach

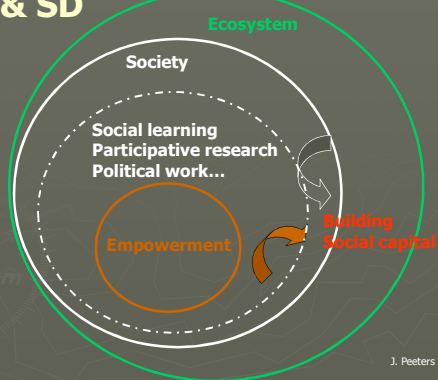


SD as a process of social learning

- ▶ Ways to unsustainability are mostly well known as contrasted with ways to SD, which has to be explored.
- ▶ Solutions that at first sight look interesting, appear sometimes to be contra-productive or even riskful for people now or in the future.
- ▶ Therefore SD presupposes by definition a continuous learning process.
- ▶ *Theory and practices of social learning are crucial in view of SW & SD.*

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Social-ecological approach of SW & SD



**A Resilient Society.
Social work and
Sustainable Development**

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