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Agency and Advocacy in Social Work: Promoting Social and Environmental Justice Through Professional Practice

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the role of the concepts of agency and advocacy within contemporary social work, with specific reference to the integrated promotion of environmental justice. Agency is interpreted as a processual and relational dimension of human action, which social work professionals are called upon to recognize, support, and enhance within pathways of individual and collective empowerment. Advocacy is understood as a transformative practice oriented toward structural change. It activates spaces of mediation between community demands and institutional decision-making systems, particularly in contexts marked by environmental inequalities. Building on this theoretical framework, the paper addresses the following research question: How can social work help construct effective territorial alliances to counteract environmental injustices affecting vulnerable populations? To answer this, we developed a qualitative, two-phase study. It involved narrative interviews with Italian social workers and a participatory training and research program, organized with the Professional Association of Social Workers of the Veneto Region (Italy). The eco-social approach served as a key interpretative tool for integrating environmental and social justice dimensions.

Keywords: environmental justice; agency; advocacy; eco-social work; participatory research

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1. Environmental Crises and Social Implications: Epistemic Justice as an Overarching Framework

The twenty-first century is marked by an unprecedented convergence of environmental crises. These include anthropogenic climate change, biodiversity loss, rapid energy transitions, and the depletion of freshwater and other critical resources [1,2]. These challenges are often framed in terms of technological innovation, economic cost–benefit analyses, or geopolitical strategy. However, they also produce significant implications at individual, community, and societal levels. Disruptions to ecosystems and resource availability can undermine physical and mental health, destabilize livelihoods, and erode cultural ties to place, disproportionately exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities among marginalized populations [3,4].

To capture the complex socio-environmental impacts of these crises, the concept of environmental justice has become increasingly prominent and influential. Broadly defined, environmental justice examines how ecological benefits and burdens are distributed, who participates in environmental decision-making, and whose identities and experiences are recognized in policy processes [5]. Over the past four decades, the concept has evolved

from grassroots struggles against toxic waste in low-income and minoritized USA neighborhoods [6]. It is now a robust, multidisciplinary framework for critically interpreting and addressing contemporary socio-environmental challenges at local, regional, and global scales [7–10]. Traditionally, environmental justice has been conceptualized around three core dimensions. Distributive justice involves the fair allocation of environmental goods (e.g., clean air, green space) and bads (e.g., pollution, climate hazards) across different populations [5]. Procedural justice focuses on equitable access to transparent decision-making processes and institutional accountability in environmental governance [11]. Recognition justice demands acknowledgement and respect for diverse cultural identities, knowledge systems, and lived experiences in environmental policy and practice [12].

Despite its analytical power, a growing body of literature highlights limitations in this triadic model, particularly when applied to contexts of rapid socio-ecological change [13,14]. Critics argue that these traditional dimensions, even when considered together, may overlook the relational, cultural, and structural dynamics underpinning modern environmental injustices [15]. Recent debates emphasize the need for more nuanced approaches. These should address not only material distributions and formal procedures, but also the epistemic and power relations shaping whose knowledge counts and whose voices are heard in ecological governance [16–18]. Without addressing these deeper layers, policies may reproduce the very inequalities they aim to remedy, as underserved communities continue to be excluded from shaping the narratives and priorities that govern environmental action.

Recent scholarship has thus turned to epistemic justice as an overarching analytical and ethical framework to foreground the politics of knowledge production. Fricker [19] defined two dimensions of epistemic justice: testimonial justice demands that individuals receive due credibility when sharing their experiences or expertise. Hermeneutical justice requires that social groups have adequate resources to interpret and communicate their collective experiences [20,21]. Together, these dimensions highlight that injustices are not only material, but also symbolic and cognitive: they operate through the silencing, discrediting, or erasure of particular voices and knowledges. Epistemic justice thus refers to the fair distribution of credibility, authority, and participation in knowledge production and decision-making processes.

In contexts marked by environmental crises, epistemic injustices may manifest through the systematic marginalization of certain social groups—particularly vulnerable, minoritized, and economically disadvantaged communities—from processes of knowledge construction and policy development. These communities are frequently denied recognition as legitimate epistemic subjects, with their situated knowledge, local experiences, and cultural narratives dismissed or rendered invisible within dominant institutional and scientific discourses. Specifically, epistemic injustices play out in at least three interrelated ways. First, the marginalization of local, Indigenous, and experiential knowledge often results from the privileging of technical or expert models of environmental governance, leading to policies that overlook context-specific risks and priorities [22,23]. Second, hermeneutical gaps emerge when affected communities lack the conceptual vocabulary, shaped by dominant scientific paradigms, to articulate their environmental suffering and demands [16,21]. Finally, testimonial silencing occurs when policy processes systematically devalue testimonies from vulnerable groups (e.g., low-income, racialized, or remote populations), curtailing their influence over the framing of problems and the selection of solutions [24,25].

Epistemic justice, as an overarching framework, shows how power relations operate. They act not only through the unequal material distribution of environmental goods and bads, but also through the symbolic and cognitive hierarchies that govern access to voice, knowledge, and influence. This perspective emphasizes the co-production of knowledge in truly participatory settings [26,27]. It highlights the structural conditions—ranging from

institutional norms to funding regimes—that perpetuate epistemic exclusion, prompting a critical reflection on who is entitled to define environmental problems, propose solutions, and participate in their governance [28].

In summary, adopting an epistemic justice framework enhances our understanding of environmental injustices by revealing the cognitive and symbolic barriers that perpetuate inequitable environmental outcomes. It sets the stage for exploring how social work, through its commitments to relational practice, can intervene in these knowledge hierarchies, fostering inclusive processes of sense-making and collective action [29].

2. The Role of Social Work in Promoting Epistemic and Environmental Justice

Social work is being called upon with growing urgency to address environmental issues, acknowledging their profound social implications and interconnections with other structural inequalities [30,31]. As a discipline and professional practice historically grounded in the promotion of social justice, human rights, and collective well-being, social work is uniquely positioned to contribute to both environmental justice [5] and epistemic justice [19] agendas [32–35]. Through direct engagement with communities affected by environmental risks and excluded from institutional frameworks, social workers can recognize, validate, and amplify the experiential knowledge of marginalized populations, thereby fostering democratic participation in decision-making processes [8]. In this context, social work emerges as a mediating force that enables the co-production of knowledge and fosters transformative advocacy, challenging dominant narratives that often silence or marginalize subaltern voices.

Within this broader framework, the concepts of agency and advocacy acquire a central role, functioning as both analytical lenses and operational tools for navigating tensions between institutional power structures and grassroots community claims [36,37].

Agency, in particular, is a cornerstone of social work practice, especially in efforts aimed at advancing social and environmental justice. Social workers are called to actively recognize, support, and strengthen the agency of individuals and communities. Understood as a dynamic and relational process, agency is a strategic resource in designing and implementing interventions oriented toward more just, equitable, and sustainable societies [30,33,38,39].

This concept is particularly salient in eco-social work, an emerging field that adopts a systemic and interdisciplinary approach by addressing the social and environmental dimensions of inequality simultaneously. In this context, agency equips individuals and communities to engage meaningfully with ecological challenges, promoting sustainable behaviors, enhancing environmental literacy, and supporting initiatives that link social and environmental justice goals [40,41]. Professionally, exercising agency entails enabling individuals and groups to mobilize their own resources to resist conditions of marginalization, exclusion, and structural disadvantage [42,43].

Agency is not a static attribute but an evolving process, cultivated through reflexivity, dialogue, and participatory engagement. In practice, this means fostering self-determination in helping relationships, moving beyond paternalistic or substitutive approaches, and instead promoting autonomy and decision-making capacity. Agency materializes in the creation of participatory spaces—such as self-help groups, co-design forums, and civic engagement initiatives—where individuals collectively define problems and co-create solutions [44].

At the community level, social workers can strengthen local mobilization, reinforce social cohesion, and build social capital, positioning communities as active agents of change rather than passive recipients of services [44]. This work requires continuous critical

reflexivity by practitioners, particularly with regard to the power asymmetries inherent in helping relationships and the potential of professional intervention to either enable or hinder self-determination [36]. Such an approach affirms a normative commitment to freedom, responsibility, and participation as core human rights, and recognizes every individual as an agent capable of shaping their own life trajectories. Framing agency in this way is key to understanding how social work contributes to advancing both social and environmental justice, particularly when working with populations facing intersecting forms of disadvantage and ecological vulnerability. Here, agency becomes both the means and the goal, allowing individuals to reclaim power over their lives while collectively contributing to the construction of a more inclusive and sustainable society.

The promotion of environmental justice has thus become an increasingly critical dimension of contemporary social work, requiring an epistemological and ethical shift that positions the environment as a constitutive element of human well-being. Environmental justice extends beyond the protection of ecosystems; it is rooted in the principle that all people—regardless of social class, ethnicity, or status—have the right to live in a healthy, safe, and sustainable environment [6,45]. This expanded perspective aligns with the discipline's traditional mandate to defend rights and fight marginalization, extending its reach to encompass the ecological determinants of inequality.

In practice, this commitment translates into a range of interventions across different contexts. In urban environments, social workers support communities exposed to pollution, industrial hazards, or inequitable spatial planning. In rural settings, they may advocate for fair access to natural resources—such as land, water, and biodiversity—often under threat from extractive policies or territorial dispossession [30,41]. These interventions operate at both individual and collective levels, from raising awareness about environmental rights and securing access to legal protections, to facilitating the emergence of grassroots advocacy networks.

Promoting environmental justice also entails valuing local knowledge systems and community-led forms of territorial governance, in contrast to top-down or technocratic planning models. Social workers may act as intermediaries between civil society and institutional actors, helping ensure that environmental decision-making processes are transparent, inclusive, and responsive. Additionally, they play a vital pedagogical role, engaging in environmental education that frames sustainability as intrinsically linked to human rights and social equity [40,44]. In this sense, environmental justice does not represent a marginal concern for the profession, but rather a natural extension of its ethical mission—to safeguard human dignity in all its dimensions, including the right to live in ecologically viable conditions.

A central strategy for pursuing environmental justice is advocacy, through which social workers facilitate dialogue between local communities and institutional systems to amplify the voices of those most affected by environmental harm. This often begins with a grounded, participatory assessment of locally experienced injustices—such as proximity to toxic sites, scarcity of green spaces, or vulnerability to climate-related risks—which are then translated into collective demands and policy proposals. Social workers support communities in navigating regulatory systems, formulating proposals, and engaging with institutional mechanisms such as public consultations and participatory planning [41,46]. Their professional expertise helps democratize access to decision-making arenas that are frequently opaque or dominated by technical elites.

A defining feature of effective environmental advocacy is the creation of cross-sector alliances. In this capacity, social workers act as network builders, facilitating collaboration among citizens, civil society organizations, educational institutions, public authorities, and scientific bodies. These alliances, grounded in shared goals and mutual solidarity, have the

potential to exert political pressure and catalyze systemic change [46]. Through a range of tools—awareness campaigns, civic hearings, participatory co-design processes, and the development of collective position papers—social workers contribute to transforming lived experiences of environmental injustice into public and political discourse. In doing so, they help to position environmental equity as a fundamental human right, reinforcing the inherently political and emancipatory nature of social work [46–48]. Ultimately, this orientation reaffirms that environmental justice is not a peripheral domain of the profession, but a core expression of its enduring ethical imperative: to promote human dignity, equity, and sustainability in all aspects of life [46,47].

3. Rationale and Aims

In light of the increasing interconnection between environmental degradation and social inequality, it becomes crucial to explore how symbolic and cognitive hierarchies contribute to the perpetuation of environmental injustices. Specifically, social work is urged to reflect on its role as an agent of epistemic transformation, capable of recognizing the situated knowledges of vulnerable populations and fostering inclusive, participatory processes of sense-making, advocacy, and collective action. This raises a central research question: how can social work promote both environmental and epistemic justice in territories affected by ecological inequalities? In other words, how can social work acknowledge local knowledge systems, strengthen collective agency, and activate transformative territorial alliances?

To respond to this question, the study investigates several interrelated dimensions: the awareness and theoretical knowledge social workers have regarding environmental injustice; the practices and tools they employ to address it; the structural barriers they encounter in their professional contexts; the emerging needs for training, resources, and institutional support; and the processes through which social workers build cross-sector collaborations to translate localized experiences into public and political influence.

The ultimate aim is to contribute to the theoretical and operational renewal of social work through an eco-epistemic lens. This perspective addresses not only socio-material foundations of injustice, but also symbolic and cognitive ones.

4. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative, two-phase design, conducted entirely online via the Zoom platform from October 2024 to February 2025.

4.1. Phase One: Narrative Interviews

In the first phase, we conducted narrative interviews [49,50] with key informants: Italian social workers. Their professional expertise provides a privileged perspective on the phenomena under study. They act as intermediaries between institutions (local and national) and vulnerable individuals, groups, and communities. For these reasons, we believed social workers were the best figures to consult. In narrative interview, participants are invited to share experiences on the topic under investigation through stories. The interview is not structured but organized as a conversation. The researcher guides the discussion, while participants express themselves freely, using their own words and relevant stories. We invited participants to narrate professional experiences involving environmental issues or crises (e.g., disasters, floods, earthquakes). We were interested in how they acted both as social workers and as social service providers.

First, we presented the research project (step 0: preparation) and asked initial questions (step 1: initiation). We then asked questions to elicit the main narrative (step 2: main narration). Next came more specific questions about experiences and opinions (step 3: questioning). Finally, we introduced concluding topics for further discussion (step 4:

closing talk). Specifically, the general outline of the interview was as follows: We are interested in the opinions and perspectives of social service professionals who work with vulnerable communities in general, as well as those facing ecological transition. Briefly explain the concept of environmental justice if the participant is unfamiliar with it. Invite the participant to discuss their experiences as a social worker in situations or professional events where they have interacted with vulnerable communities on environmental issues (e.g., lack of housing, inadequate services, public parks, proximity to polluting areas, etc.). Are environmental issues part of their professional work? What do they consider to be the main inequalities in their area? What could social services do to mitigate inequalities caused by climate change and transition? What are the obstacles to social services geared towards environmental justice, and if any, what are the strengths and resources already in place? Ask for comments and free reflections on the topic. What would they recommend, both personally and as professionals, for research in general?

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling [51]. Formal invitations were sent by e-mail to the regional secretariats of the Professional Associations of Social Workers and the local branches of the Association of Social Workers for Civil Protection (Asproc) in Italy. We deliberately included professionals working with civil protection because the target audience for this first research phase was key informants with specific expertise in environmental issues. We recognize that their privileged perspective may not represent that of "traditional" social workers. However, the study's primary goal was not to assess Italian social workers' general understanding and engagement. Instead, it aimed to lay the foundation for participatory reflection on promoting environmental and epistemic justice in vulnerable communities and territories. A total of 15 social workers participated, representing seven Italian regions: Emilia-Romagna (5), Lazio (2), Lombardy (2), Tuscany (2), Veneto (2), Liguria (1), and Sicily (1). Five of them were members of Asproc. The interviews were conducted in October and November 2024. They lasted an average of 50 min (range 35–60).

4.2. Phase Two: Discussions in Small Groups

In the second phase, we conducted a participatory training and research program, with the Professional Association of Social Workers of the Veneto Region (Italy). The program consisted of three sequential meetings:

1. Introductory session (December 2024, 1 h). It presented the research project and the structure and rationale of the training and research program. This meeting aimed to frame the overall program.
2. Training session (January 2025, 2 h). It defined the overarching conceptual framework within which the next ones would develop. This meeting aimed to enhance participants' knowledge and awareness regarding environmental justice and eco-social intervention frameworks, drawing on interdisciplinary, historical, and theoretical perspectives.
3. Discussions in small groups [52] (February 2025, 2 h each). They were designed to foster collective reflection on the environmental challenges encountered in social work practice, identify critical issues and resources, and co-construct operational strategies for future action. The authors of this paper participated in the discussions in different roles, alternating as facilitators and observers. Three group discussions were organized after summarizing the key findings from the interviews, which were presented to participants to stimulate discussion and gather feedback. This synthesis also included the perspective favored by Asproc representatives, which was used as further insights to initiate (or foster) a richer and more nuanced reflection.

Participants were free to reflect, discuss, argue their opinion, and recount their specific experiences, also making the most of what was learned at a theoretical level in the previous training meeting. Essentially, we followed the same narrative scheme used for the narrative interviews. The focus was to elicit their perspectives and views on the advocacy function about environmental justice, as well as any strengths, barriers, and emerging needs based on their professional experience.

Participants were recruited through an open call published on the official website of the Professional Association of Social Workers of the Veneto Region, as well as through direct communication with its members. Although primarily aimed at social workers from the Veneto Region, the program was also accessible to professionals from other Italian regions. In total, 29 social workers (21 women and 8 men; 3 Aproc members) participated in the introductory session; 20 social workers (15 women and 5 men; 1 Asproc member) attended the training session; and 14 social workers (10 women and 4 men; 2 Asproc members) took part in the three small-group discussions.

4.3. Data Analysis

Both interviews and small-group discussions were video-recorded and fully transcribed. All participants provided verbal informed consent before their participation. A thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts [53,54] from both phases, using ATLAS.ti 25 software. Through a deductive approach guided by research questions, a coding scheme was developed around some general themes: (i) awareness of unjust environmental outcomes, (ii) existing knowledge, and (iii) practices. Additional themes considered were: (iv) strengths, (v) barriers, and (vi) specific training needs. Then, through an inductive approach, for each theme a number of sub-themes (i.e., codes) emerging from the data were identified. Connections were established among general themes and sub-themes. Finally, we carried out a code-document analysis, which cross-referenced the occurrence of each code in both the interviews and small-group discussions corpora, highlighting potential differences between them. For reasons of synthesis, in Section 5 we will present the most recurring sub-themes: specifically, we arbitrarily chose as a threshold the three occurrences for the description of the general themes (Sections 5.1–5.6) and the six occurrences for the comparison between interviews and small-group discussions (Section 5.7) to facilitate the highlighting of cross-cutting aspects or, on the contrary, the specific aspects emerged from one or the other phase of the study. However, the Supplementary Materials lists all themes and sub-thems, together with their occurrences in interviews, in small-group discussions, and overall.

5. Results

The results of the thematic analysis will now be described following the coding scheme developed to answer the research questions that guide this study (see Table 1), and the presentation of the results will address the most frequent sub-themes, i.e., those that occurred at least three times.

In particular, the following sections will present the social workers' awareness of unjust environmental outcomes, the theoretical knowledge they possess to address these issues, and the concrete actions they put into practice in their daily work.

Then, the subsequent sections will highlight both the strengths and barriers that are recognized, and the training and/or professional needs that emerge from the participants' narratives.

Table 1. Thematic map of general themes and the most frequent sub-themes.

Themes: Awareness, Knowledge and Practices	Sub-Themes (F > 3)
EJ Awareness	Awareness_high Awareness_high, no actions Awareness_low Awareness_low, no actions Awareness_low, house problem
EJ Knowledge	Knowledge_high, environmental issues Knowledge_high, ecosystem, and human relations Knowledge_high, economic poverty&prevention&pollution&rights Knowledge_high, actions Knowledge_high, no actions Knowledge_low, environmental issues Knowledge_low no actions
EJ Practices	Practice_asproc Practice_asproc emergencies Practice_emergencies Practice_citizen participation Practice_mediation&share rights Practice_mediation&animated readings children&green areas
Strenghts, Barriers, and Needs	
EJ&SW Strenghts	Strength_sense of community Strength_mediation&community resilience&citizenship Strength_identity and place attachment Strength_associations and relations with territory
EJ&SW Barriers	Barrier_lack university education Barrier_distrust of institutions Barrier_housing allocations without community work Barrier_social service sectoralization Barrier_structural limits Barrier_distributive injustice Barrier_communication Barrier_poverty&culture does not accept inequality
EJ&SW Needs	Need_sense of community&partecipation Need_EJ education Need_collaboration with other services Need_environemntal competence Need_prevention Need_recognition justice Need_create environmental culture Need_territorial map Need_EJ codification in social service Need_community development Need_beyond sectorialization Need_advocacy actions Need_cooperation agreements

5.1. Awareness

This theme highlights social workers' awareness of environmental issues in general and the unfair environmental outcomes that result from them. As shown in Table 1 below, participants' narratives highlighted both a high awareness of environmental problems and little or no understanding of the connections between social work and the environment.

For example, some participants with high awareness emphasized these interconnections as useful for framing social distress in its complexity.

> There is discomfort, and there are certainly strong links with the economic conditions of households, so that those who are forced to live in extreme poverty or without enjoyment of their rights, and in my experience, they often find themselves living in completely inadequate housing, lacking even the minimum hygiene and sanitary requirements. That is why we are discussing people who may find themselves in overcrowded homes with inadequate sanitation [Interviews_ID3].

> Catastrophic situations, overall, exacerbate the situations that people already experience in their everyday lives. There are two macro areas of concern: one involves people who, up to that point, have lived their lives independently and without major difficulties, as is the case for most of us. Their personal and family lives, in this context, are suddenly confronted with a disruptive event that is not the kind of disruptive event that occurs in personal situations, but rather a disruptive event that involves them personally and their immediate surroundings, as well as the broader context. In this regard, mobilizing resources is not easy, as they have never found themselves in situations of great difficulty, causing them to feel extremely lost [Interviews_ID6].

> For example, one of the most serious problems at this stage is the problem of housing, lack of housing, unhealthy housing, cohabitation that should not exist, let's say people living in the same environment, or living in, well, this is one of the major causes of unrest that we cannot say anything about... [Group3_ID1].

Although some narratives demonstrate a high level of environmental awareness, they also reveal that this awareness is present at the individual level. However, at the social service level, there are no interventions or practices oriented towards sustainability, and environmental issues are generally overlooked.

> Then, for example, at the level of the relationship with the environment, as a service, there is still no culture of these things here, so even our professional action... which could be an action to change processes and open up to the environment, that is, we have it, but we have it as individuals, in a basic way... I don't throw paper here, I throw it somewhere else... We are still at this level; we haven't yet leaped into a local service. In implementing measures that may be environmental or sustainable, which are part of the environment, not only of the individual but of the environment as a territory, we don't have a territory with too many polluting industries, however, the environment in another sense, i.e., the protection of the environment as a territory and the conservation of nature, is not a priority. On this point, yes, because we are in an area with parks, let's say that the culture is present. Still, in terms of services, I regret that we do not have any good practices that could be leveraged to increase, for example, sustainability or projects involving renewable energy. These are all things that are not available here [Interviews_ID2].

Other narratives, on the other hand, highlight a low level of awareness of environmental injustices. Specifically, it is seen as a professional issue that has no direct relation to the work of a social worker. Even when it comes to the sensitive issue of housing, some do not consider it a direct environmental concern.

> If, as you have already done in part, you can help me identify examples of environmental justice, I will explain why. Because, if you ask me to discuss examples

of social justice, inequality, or unequal access to resources that I have observed, I can do so easily, as it is my daily bread-i.e., what I work on. Environmental justice, as far as I can tell, based on my general knowledge or on issues that interest me, is not a professional issue that I deal with, or perhaps I deal with it indirectly, I don't know if that could be an element of justice... it doesn't have access to that kind of right to resources... [Interviews_ID12].

Of course, I agree, but in fact, I completely agree. When I read about this path, it really intrigued me because I had never heard the words' justice' and 'environment' used together... [Group1_ID2].

My specific situation is not that I have direct, immediate experience of these situations. Yes, some young people have suffered damage to their homes and have had to leave them. Still, it's not my job because I deal with reports from drug users, so it's not that I intervene or have any projects or interventions to propose in this regard, except for my sensitivity. Still, it doesn't stem from the type of work I do, which remains unchanged. It can happen that you see people who live in those areas that are all affected, and they may say, "But I come from this area, we've lost a lot," but that's a competence that goes beyond my type of work [Interviews_ID11].

5.2. Knowledge

This general theme brings together narratives about the theoretical knowledge or skills that participants possess to address environmental issues. Here, too, it is possible to divide participants' narratives into two groups: on the one hand, narratives that emphasize a high level of theoretical and experiential knowledge of environmental issues; on the other hand, narratives that highlight a lack of knowledge (cf. Figure 1). The narratives of some participants demonstrate a high level of theoretical knowledge, ranging from the code of ethics for social workers to theoretical approaches to environmental justice, as well as experiential knowledge, especially, but not exclusively, among those associated with Asproc. At the same time, there are reflections on the injustice that arises from the difficulty of finding a rental home.

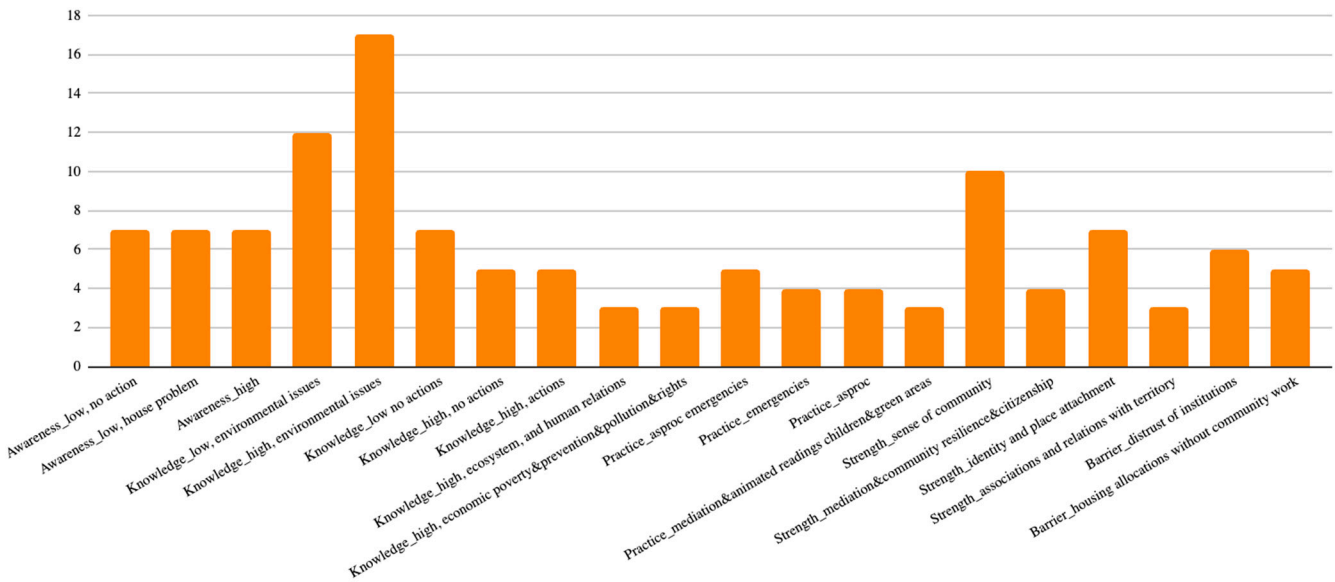

Figure 1. Thematic map of general topics highlighted in the interviews.

So, what can I say about this topic, which, if I am not mistaken, is ecological transition, right, environmental justice, and the role of social workers? I can discuss our code of ethics, which establishes a connection between social services and the environment, [...] It is present because it establishes the interrelationship between the environment, the individual, and society. The code of ethics was updated in 2020, at the start of the pandemic, so we made the update. It specifically refers to two articles: Article 5 and Article 13. We are facilitators of environmental processes, professionals dedicated to the integral development of individuals and communities. This is the role of the social worker, so we are accustomed to seeing them working primarily with individuals, but it spans a range from micro to macro, so I work with the community. [...]. Article 5 of the code of ethics states that social workers uphold the fundamental principles of the Constitution of the Italian Republic, recognize the intrinsic value, dignity, and uniqueness of all people, and their civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights as provided for in international conventions. Article 13 states that social assistance contributes to the production of development models, so it is not enough to simply respect them. Still, we must also contribute to creating something operational, i.e., development models that respect the environment, promote economic sustainability, and ensure social survival, while being aware of the complexities in the relationship between human beings and the environment. Therefore, in our professional work, our goal is the well-being of people. We start from this in each context. Then there are different levels of interpretation: micro, middle, and macro, and so we start from the well-being of the person, thinking from the micro to the macro, starting from the awareness that intervention on the person has consequences on the context and everything around them, i.e., the environment and everything that surrounds us. Social well-being, therefore, presupposes a healthy environment in balance. In our professional activities, we act daily, making the best use of resources, which enables us to transition from the individual to the physical environment and thus recognize the importance of environmental sustainability. I can say this, and I am part of the ASPROC, which you called me because you probably drew from a list that we have in Article 42 of the code of ethics, which talks about the social worker who makes himself available to the authorities, and therefore the task and responsibility of the social worker to society [Interviews_ID9].

Now, something has just come to mind that is unrelated to this. Still, it is symbolically interesting in the context of life and the environment in the broad sense, as we understand them, rather than in social services. One of the activities that my colleague, or rather the two colleagues working in that context, was asked to do was all related to the cemetery. It would never have occurred to me to do something like that, sitting at a desk. Still, the shocks were so strong, we're talking about an earthquake, but it could have been a flood, they were so strong that there was a complete disaster, a disaster at the level of the cemeteries, that is, uncovered graves, those in the niches, in short, I can't describe it, but we can imagine it. So one of the activities that was there at the time, we said to ourselves, but what are we going to do in the cemeteries? It was essential because it's a connection with their past, for them it was excruciating to think that even their graves were... Yes, I mean, it was essential because it's excruciating to think that even their graves were... I mean, when this came out, I said I couldn't believe it, but no, it's not true... The history and memory of people are not the reason why, but it's a bit like that in all countries, not just in Italy, and perhaps in different

> ways, but the cult of the dead is a historical phenomenon. You lose everything, and you also lose the most concrete memory, which is that of a cemetery, where you can find a moment, not just a few things. I'm the one who keeps talking about things for hours [Interviews_ID6].

> I see injustice in terms of housing in the fact that it is increasingly difficult to find private rental accommodation because what is asked for does not correspond to the market, i.e., guarantees are asked for, pay slips are asked for, permanent contracts are asked for, but most people have on-call contracts, fixed-term contracts, and so there is this huge difficulty. So what happens? If you lose your job due to health or family issues, and the company no longer wants to retain you, you may be unable to pay your rent and risk losing your home, as evictions are very high [Interviews_ID13].

In general, narratives that show a high level of environmental knowledge examine issues related to human relationships and the ecosystem, the relationship between health and nature, as well as the central theme of identity and attachment to place.

> So, it is possible to say that where there is less nature, there is less health. In the sense that we know that in environments where there are few plants, where there is a strong urban connotation, and therefore gas, etc., health is... Yes, it's true, it's at risk, and inevitably, where there is less health, there is also less capacity for individuals to be well, not only individually but also within an activity, [...]. Therefore, where there is less nature, there is likely to be more disease or poorer health, and fewer resources are available to invest in other areas [Interviews_ID1].

> However, there is this sense of place, etc., there is a strong connection with nature, but there is also the lake, the territory, the province of Bergamo has two large valleys, the Seriana Valley and the Brembana Valley... [...] [Interviews_ID5].

There are also narratives that, despite revealing a good theoretical understanding of environmental issues, emphasize that no actions or practices can be carried out as a social service to reduce or prevent environmental injustices. For example, some wonder why social workers' skills are not sought when designing living spaces for communities.

> The other sore point is the environmental issue, which is talked about so much in courses and in many things, but then in reality, nothing much is done about it. Although I repeat, it always depends on how involved you are, in the sense that if you look around a bit, you might find something. For example, even regarding the implementation of all aspects related to Agenda 2030, we have had limited contact with social services in terms of involvement, despite these issues being closely related to topics of social justice and environmental justice. So, Agenda 2030 brings everything together, a series of principles that concern environmental justice on the one hand, which goes hand in hand with social justice, because it is one of the founding principles that states that if there is no social justice, there can be no environmental justice either. The issues are related, but I studied them at university, we have brought something to the table, as an order, as an interest, because on international social service days, the environment and inclusion, diversity in communities, remain very important issues [...] [Interviews_ID1].

> If I may, I work in the municipality, and I often wonder why a social worker cannot be of support to the town planning office, for example? Why? Because often when living spaces are created and designed, only the physical space is considered. Still, no thought is given to the fact that a community will live in this physical space, and who better than we, as social institutions, can contribute our

> own perspective on the community, where we may have been working for a long time [Group2_ID2].

On the other hand, some narratives highlight the lack of environmental knowledge. Specifically, the issue of environmental justice is not typically addressed by social services; some participants say this is the first time they've heard of it, while others consider it a taboo subject.

> It was the first time I had ever considered this issue, the very first time, so, from my perspective, there is a significant lack of cultural awareness regarding environmental justice. More than environmental culture, it is a culture of environmental justice. It was interesting, to say the least, the approach, because then I started to think that it would take much more. For me, it remains the case that when I think of environmental justice, I think of natural disasters, rather than everyday life in our local communities and at work [Group2_ID1].

> Yes, now I have to say that I find it a bit difficult to think of anything strictly directly related to environmental issues, except to imagine a context that changes a little depending on the geographical area, so, I don't know, someone who lives in the high mountains, for example, but I don't know, I don't think it's... I wouldn't want it to be a little off topic... [Interviews_ID3].

> In my experience, it's an issue that... ...hasn't yet come to the fore. I know what we're talking about because... because of my interests, I have also researched and studied environmental issues, [...]. Still, I can tell you that during the meetings and gatherings we have, I have never even heard this word mentioned. It's incredible that the connection is not yet being made. Even when we talk about the distribution of resources and access for all, no, it's not an issue [...], well, it seems like a kind of taboo... a taboo subject... the problem is that we still talk about bad weather [...], and then linking this to environmental issues, social justice issues, etc., is a leap that is even bigger and, in my opinion, is not really being made [Interviews_ID7].

5.3. Practices

This theme brings together all narratives focusing on actions or practices aimed at promoting environmental justice that social workers undertake in their daily work within social services. Overall, a picture emerges in which the actions taken refer either to isolated and/or extraordinary events (e.g., an initiative in a forest, a children's committee, actions aimed at citizen participation and involvement, projects with schools) or to emergencies in which action was taken as an Asproc association or as a social emergency response team (cf. Figure 1). Regarding isolated initiatives, for example, one participant recounts the experience of the children's town council, which was established to foster a sense of civic duty and community belonging. Another participant recounts a project to redevelop suburban areas in collaboration with social services.

> That's why we say that the Children's Town Council has been active for many years. The mayor is very keen on this, so he gives speeches too, and let's say that the children's mayor has the aim of making them understand that the municipality is their municipality, that if we take care of public affairs, what belongs to others is also ours. [...] maybe the child who is a little more lost in his own world finds less complicity in the context around him, that is, if you manage to reinforce those children who don't really know which way to go at the beginning, a sense of civic duty with a sense of belonging [...] in short, you give clear communica-

> tion, you clarify the rules that exist, you make it clear what the right and wrong behaviors are... [Interviews_ID5].

> The issue I have also been involved in professionally, for example, the redevelopment of environments... where more peripheral, together I worked a lot in contact with social services and therefore with social workers, and here, that is, social housing is called Ater... and in collaboration to redevelop, create and therefore also give dignity to a place to live that is as adequate and peaceful as possible, it comes to mind, here [Group2_ID3].

However, the most common social services provided relate to emergencies, either through the Asproc association or as an emergency social service provided directly by municipal social services or through an external partnership association. For example, as one participant stated, a valuable tool for intervening in emergencies is to have a sort of database and/or map of vulnerable populations who need immediate help in the event of an emergency.

> In 2017, we launched what I believe to be the first 24-h social emergency service in Italy, operating five days a year. One of the first interventions carried out by the social emergency service was to intervene alongside the fire brigade, the police, etc., which is clearly the health component. There was a terrible fire in one of these small factories, part of which was empty and had been occupied by homeless people who were caught up in the fire. So, there are these situations that we observe which are part of, and the result of, social imbalance and are also influenced by environmental factors, in this case, the presence of very crowded living and working spaces [Interviews_ID14].

In emergencies, the civil protection agency is activated, along with the Asproc association, which supports the social services of the municipalities affected by the environmental crisis. They are primarily responsible for managing housing emergencies after the other services have checked the habitability of the houses. Social workers then intervene with the affected population to assess, on a case-by-case basis, whether temporary accommodation or a return to their own homes is appropriate. As one participant noted, many people yearn to return to their homes, even if they are uninhabitable, due to their emotional attachment to the place and their connection with nature.

> At Asproc, we are starting to create a database of the most vulnerable individuals in our respective areas. This includes the elderly who are not self-sufficient, the disabled, and those who require immediate assistance [Interviews_ID13].

> Asproc [...] intervenes in the event of a disaster or emergency when the civil protection department is activated. Civil protection operates according to the principles of subsidiarity, so when there are sufficient forces in the area, national organizations are not activated. [...]. We were faced, for example, with a system that works quite well, with strong links to what are normally referred to as the technical offices of the municipalities, i.e., those responsible for divisions and so on, which are reinforced by engineers, architects, surveyors, and volunteers who systematically check the safety of houses. So, after checking the habitability, where we were able to do so, where we intervened, we tried to establish a direct link not only to communicate the results to people but also to evaluate alternative solutions because, paradoxically, very often we found ourselves faced with people who had habitable houses but did not want to return for any reason. Any one of us who had experience with family members or had acquaintances or relatives who had experienced such situations. We know very well that these people would rather stay in their cars for months than enter their homes because

> their fear is so great... On the other hand, there were people whose homes were uninhabitable but who did not want to move, even though they were entitled to alternative accommodation. They did not want to know about it because they did not want to move in, so we had to take all these aspects into account, as well as the environment... The working environment is also important. Experience has shown us that for these people, the possibility of keeping their jobs is more important than taking care of themselves, even in emergency situations such as the 2016 earthquake. However, in the initial interventions I carried out in Norcia, the most important thing for these people was to understand how to keep their businesses running, which were often linked to livestock farming, for example. In those cases, paradoxically, the civil protection agencies are united, but everyone is divided into sectors, and the part that deals with personal services is linked to veterinary services. I must say that there was no better combination, because putting pigs and people together is like saying that work and business are equally important. Otherwise, everyone would have been evacuated to the coast and housed in bungalows, rented houses, or hotels, but they returned to their homes every day, precisely because, apart from losing their jobs, it was what gave them hope of getting back on their feet a little. This is interesting because it highlights the difference between individuals who, despite their habitable homes, do not want to return, and others who, despite their uninhabitable homes, yearn to return due to a profound connection with nature [Interviews_ID6].

5.4. Strengths

This theme brings together narratives that evoke the strengths and resources available to social workers in their daily work (cf. Table 1). One of the most essential resources for social workers is their ability to build networks in the community and act as mediators in their advocacy role, representing the most vulnerable individuals experiencing hardship (e.g., family, social, psychological, and economic). From this perspective, the role of social workers in fostering a sense of community and community resilience, which in turn promotes active citizenship, is fundamental.

> So, yes, the work of mediation and networking and, in my opinion, a role of gathering the needs of sections of the population who may have less power and less ability to express their needs, including concerning the right to live in a healthy environment, and therefore acting as a conduit to bring the voice of these contexts to the fore [Group2_ID4].

> Mediation, in this case, is essential, facilitated by social services. It can have a positive impact on community resilience and, therefore, also on active citizenship. This is a central question, given that the role of community promoter is one of the tasks that social workers are increasingly developing. They take what is available in the area and make it available to those who do not have access to it. It is increasingly a matter of gathering community work, [...], so you gather what the community has and, if necessary, develop it and make it available to those who cannot access it [Interviews_ID1].

> In other situations, however, I have observed that, alongside vulnerability, there is a kind of cohesion or resilience among people. As a social worker, I find it easier to see the problems, [...], so elements of strong solidarity, not only among the people who are victims of these disasters, but also between these people and those who come to support them. From the perspective of the tools used, all the work of building small self-help groups has been very effective. This has helped a great deal. We are talking about people who were living in containers, and the

> fact that they were able to talk about their situation, exchange information, and feel very supported by each other and by the colleagues who organized this type of activity [Interviews_ID6].

It is therefore essential to network with local associations, promote empowerment, and enhance the positive aspects that already exist. Every municipality already has emergency plans that social services can refer to when building and/or improving a map of the vulnerable population.

> This is a very valuable tool that all municipalities in Italy have for emergency planning. All municipalities are required to have emergency plans, which include a list of vulnerabilities associated with the areas where people live, spend their days, and form a community. This emergency plan, which the various social workers working in municipalities of varying sizes are familiar with, should be promoted more widely. The law already requires the mayor to organize evening presentations of the emergency plan. This often does not happen, but it is an important tool [Group3_ID4].

> This work in the community is ongoing and a strength. What is sometimes lacking are resources; that is, it is necessary... everyone recognizes that it is necessary and fundamental. Today, if you don't work in the community, you contribute nothing more than what is already there; you stand and observe reality, but there is no investment in this sector. [...] It is one of the fundamental things; this networking and mediation work is essential [Group3_ID4].

> This seems to me to be part of the DNA of our profession, so yes, I feel it is very much ours, and perhaps what distinguishes us from other professions that are perhaps more specialized [Group3_ID3].

Ultimately, it is crucial to strive for identity enhancement, a sense of belonging, and a strong attachment to one's place of residence. In this excerpt, for example, a participant discusses the importance of older people feeling attached to their homes and land, despite the impact of environmental disasters.

> We often think of older people as being dependent on where they live, but we have also seen older people being cared for by people from other countries. These so-called careers have left them behind, so they have transitioned from a supportive environment in their own home, surrounded by familiar surroundings, to suddenly being isolated. Exactly, left alone but then ferried off to community settings they were not used to, uprooting people from their points of reference. Now I always think of the elderly, it was mainly them who, even in situations of severe isolation, especially in small villages, which are quite small, would not leave their homes for any reason, their animals, not just pets but also, I don't know, chickens, for example, and there they were, because they knew they would never see their homes again. And here too, the attachment to the place, the attachment to their land, to their homes [Interviews_ID6].

5.5. Barriers

This theme highlights the primary obstacles to implementing an eco-social service that prioritizes social and environmental justice (cf. Table 1). Among these, participants complain about the lack of specific university training, the major problem of sectorization in social services, communication issues, and the population's distrust of institutions.

> In my opinion, there is a lack of university training on this subject, i.e., extending these concepts to the university level, so that when someone comes to do this

> job, they know that this is also the basis, a starting point from which to view the world and their context. Another point is that, as you are aware, we provide continuous training; we are obligated to do so, and this is what is lacking here, even in terms of training proposals [Interviews_ID12].

> What is interesting is that there are farmers who are aware of the potential damage that they could cause, but they report it to the city and the institutions. The institutions block him because it's not his job to do the work, not only that, it's not his job to decide, and not only that, but they also put him aside and say, "OK, we understand there's a problem, we'll take care of it", but in the end, who knows when they'll get around to it. Exactly, this has been the issue over the last two years, and, in my opinion, this has also accentuated the feeling of injustice. [...] they are very convinced that nothing will change, I mean, I don't know how to say it, the perception when you talk about these things is that yes, there's this, there's that, there's the other thing, there are all these problems, but in the end, nothing will ever change because we can't decide anything. This is very much present [Interviews_ID8].

> Bring these results to the attention of the authorities, because in my opinion, if we don't start to realize that environmental issues are closely linked to social issues, we won't get anywhere. However, this awareness must also be acquired at the political and administrative level, because unfortunately, our work is still very compartmentalized. We are still accustomed to the old mentality, where social services address social issues, health services handle health issues, and civil protection is perhaps more attentive to the environmental aspects of the territory. However, we can no longer think in this way [Interviews_ID7].

Overall, there are structural and systemic obstacles that do not depend directly on social workers, who have limitations in what they can do.

> It is also true that, at least in organizations traditionally staffed by professionals and social workers, the ecological aspect is usually delegated to other departments and other colleagues, i.e., to other officials with different skills. It is also true that the opportunity to express this aspect of the profession is quite limited for those working for a public body or in traditional organizations, such as those where social workers are employed [Group2_ID4].

> Social workers often identify with the organization where they work. They are unable to detach themselves and say,' This is not my job; I have other tasks. I am a bureaucrat because those who pay me ask me to be, but I do not have a moral code or a professional philosophy, and I find this very worrying.' I also agree with the structural issues raised [Group3_ID1].

Regarding emergencies, reconstruction processes, and the unfair distribution of funds, one participant referred to the flood emergency that occurred a few years ago in Emilia-Romagna.

> Some citizens felt they had not received adequate assistance, particularly in the worst-affected neighborhoods. Citizens' committees were established to protest the management of the relief efforts and, above all, the subsequent phase, i.e., the reconstruction, which was not truly reconstruction but rather reorganization, as the primary issue was the budget. I did not follow it personally, so what I know is limited because I heard about it from people who told me, rather than from families affected by the floods that I follow, or through my work. Still, I found out by reading the newspapers, listening to the news, and hearing people

> talk about it... But the problem was that the money didn't reach the neighboring municipalities [Interviews_ID7].

5.6. Needs

The theme of needs brings together narratives that refer to the requirements of social workers to implement a culture of social work oriented towards social justice.

First, it is essential to move beyond the problem of sectionalization in social work, whereby a service deals exclusively with a specific area (e.g., addiction, minors, the elderly) and therefore cannot address other aspects, let alone environmental ones. Participants indicate that specialized university training on these issues is necessary to develop the appropriate cross-cutting skills and an environmental culture, enabling the planning of effective prevention measures.

> Today, we realize that the needs are so many and so complex that we can no longer compartmentalize, because I may have in front of me an elderly person who is homeless and has an addiction, etc. So, can I only work on the addiction target, or only on the elderly target? Well, I think this is the work that needs to be done for the environmental issue as well, because we must work in collaboration with others, but this must go higher up, because maybe we as individual operators may have it in mind because of personal stories or interests. Still, in my opinion, there is no thinking at the political level [Interviews_ID7].

> This new vision of environmental justice, which I believe should also be included in our university education because only in this way, only if we manage to build a critical awareness of the problem, even in places that... by institution, should do this, such as universities or training courses, a bit like we are experimenting with... can also help to highlight and bring to the fore the issues [Group2_ID2].

> For example, Asproc, but I was thinking now, listening to you, that even there the attitude is... let's alleviate the devastating effects of disasters once they have already happened, but never a particular thought about prevention or... thinking before acting on the causes, so again very limited, besides the fact that Asproc is a small association and also completely unknown to most people in our field, which is very interesting and valuable, but very small and partial, in short [Group3_ID3].

To achieve this, it is necessary to regulate shared practices at the political level so that social workers are also legitimate in addressing situations of social injustice. Finally, it is essential to collaborate with other services on the one hand, and to foster greater involvement with citizens in all matters related to environmental issues, starting with recognizing their rights, including everyone, listening to their perspectives, and initiating participatory decision-making processes.

> Therefore, we need to initiate a cultural change, which can be triggered as a regulation or procedure, to ensure that I also achieve this, in addition to the other existing measures. We also need to codify the issue of environmental justice, which is very important [...] because environmental justice is certainly a concept that is part of a much broader discourse on justice. So, it is somewhat transversal to all other concepts of justice, and as such, I would also see it well integrated into the context. We should put it down in black and white, i.e., start a cultural change from the central institutions of the state down to the municipalities, i.e., down to the institutions closest to the citizen, and start thinking in these terms because when we plan, design, propose, make agreements, carry out a whole series of activities that are done to guarantee services to citizens, we should also keep in mind the issue of environmental justice, especially from a modern perspective,

> considering all the transformations that are taking place at this moment in history, right? So, beyond everything we have said, everything is welcome. Still, I would say we need to start putting it down on paper, in the sense of starting to propose to our administrations that we introduce the concept, but not just in theory, with practical implications and therefore in everything we do, continuing to push towards a theme of environmental justice that can be cross-cutting but also a bit 360°, right? So, understanding everything a little bit, because in all activities, there can be the issue of environmental justice. It's not easy because we're still in the early stages of this discussion on environmental justice, but we need to take the first steps, put them into practice, and build on them over time. So, I would say that this is my vision [Group1_ID1].

> When we manage to include an article in our regulations that talks about environmental justice, then we can say that we have taken the first step towards a process of change [Group1_ID1].

> Therefore, we need to recognize the voices of everyone who has experienced hardship, including the people and farmers, and ensure that there is less bureaucracy in the institutions, which can be reduced, and greater awareness and knowledge of environmental issues, which are discussed but not sufficiently addressed [Interviews_ID7].

> If, on the other hand, we manage to integrate social awareness as far as possible, we can also activate measures to recognize rights that, in those contexts, would otherwise remain on the margins. So, I imagine perhaps also social services [Group2_ID5].

5.7. Towards Cross-Cutting Environmental Skills

Figures 1–3 cross-reference the most frequent sub-themes that emerged from the interviews and group discussions (i.e., those that occurred at least six times). Specifically, Figure 1 illustrates the thematic map of the main frequent sub-themes generated in the interviews. In particular, it can be seen that, although there is a high level of environmental awareness, this is not followed by actions or practices oriented towards environmental justice. At the same time, there is also a low level of awareness when it comes to housing for vulnerable citizens. Furthermore, although many participants recognise the fundamental role of mediation and the creation of a sense of community, identity and attachment to place, they often encounter structural obstacles in institutions on the one hand and mistrust among citizens on the other. For example, a sense of community is considered both a strength and a need to be pursued.

Contrarily, Figure 2 shows the thematic map of the most frequent sub-themes generated in the group discussions. Here too, low environmental awareness emerges, but also low knowledge, with the exception of a few participants who are members of Asproc. The central aspect can be summarised in the main critical issues raised by the participants, namely the lack of specialised university training. In addition to this, a series of needs emerge, such as environmental expertise, the need to create territorial maps, collaboration with other services and, in general, the creation of an environmental culture that can legitimise social work in this field.

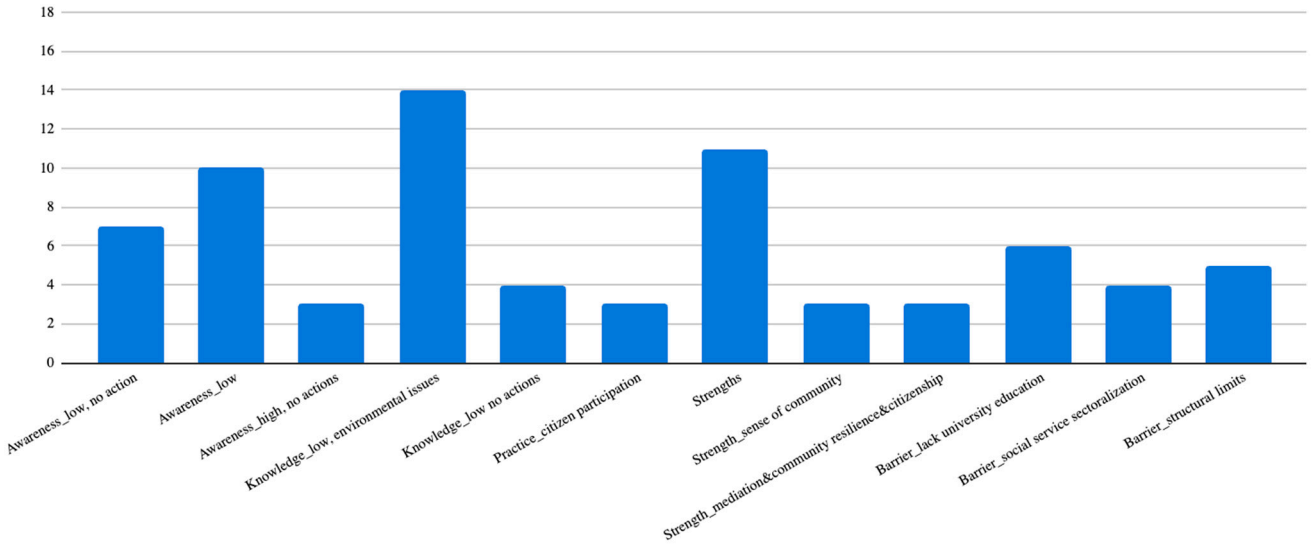

Figure 2. Thematic map of general topics highlighted in the discussion groups.

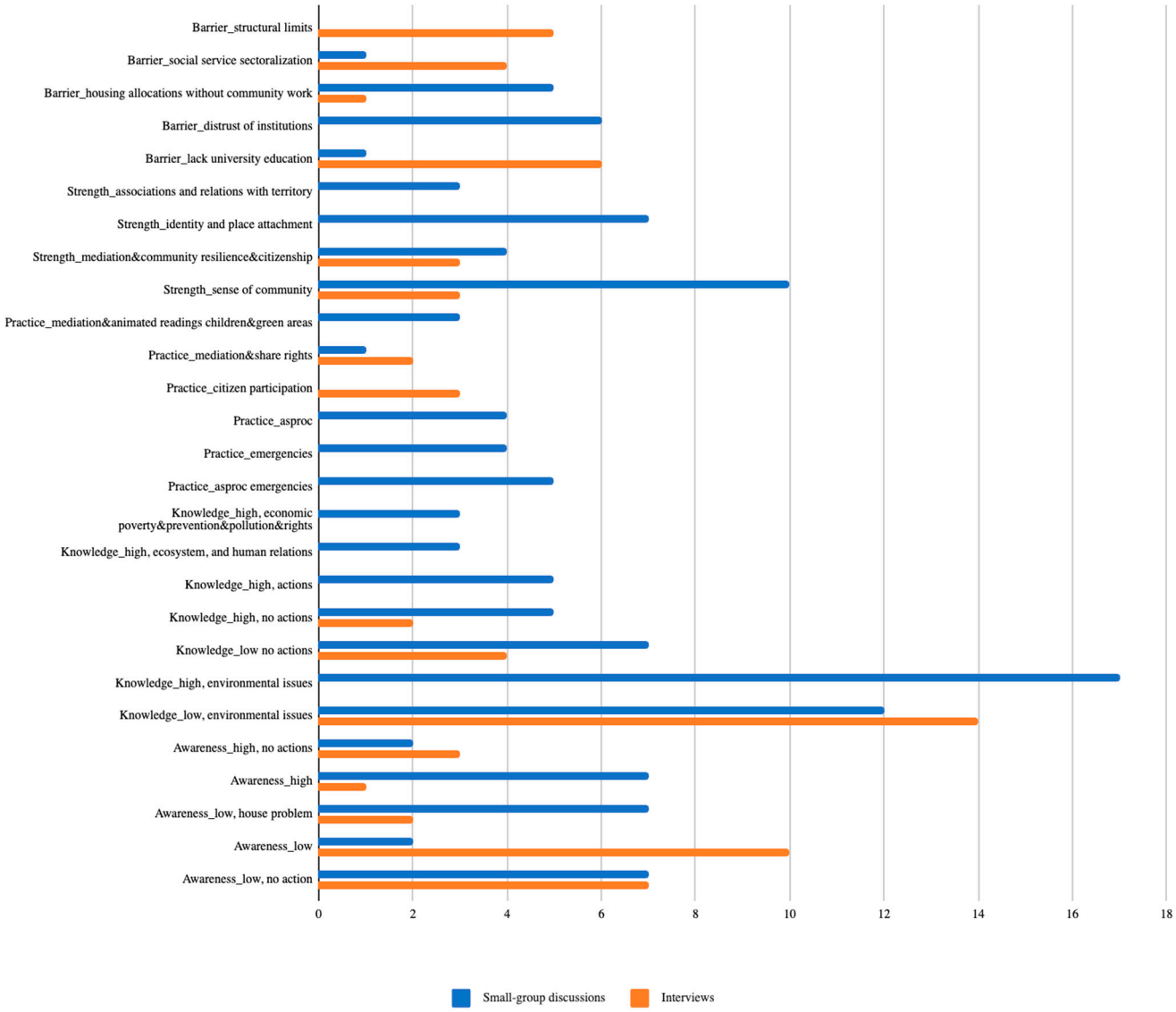

Figure 3. Thematic map of general topics that synthesize interviews and discussion groups.

Figure 3 summarizes the intersections of the most frequent sub-themes generated in the interviews and group discussions. Overall, it is interesting to note that codes related to high awareness and knowledge of environmental issues are more common in the interviews. This is partly due to the presence of social workers associated with Asproc as key informants. In the group discussions, however, there is a greater awareness of the lack of operational tools. Additionally, the interviews highlight codes related to strengthening identity and attachment to the place as strengths, as well as the population's mistrust of institutions. In contrast, the codes that emerge in the group discussions focus on the broader theme of needs, particularly the need for university training on environmental justice, the development of specific skills, and the importance of collaborating with other services. All other codes appeared in both the interviews and the discussion groups. The crucial role of building a sense of community is evident in the interviews, which are seen both as a strength and as an area for development. Similarly, a low level of knowledge about environmental justice is also mentioned, while awareness of it is more limited in the discussion groups.

6. Discussion

The results reveal a rather discouraging scenario, marked by many critical issues. The identification of several structural challenges to implementing effective actions focused on environmental issues is accompanied by a widespread poor environmental culture and awareness, along with a lack of specialized knowledge and training on these topics. Moreover, even when a certain degree of understanding is present, the participants report insufficient operational tools. However, specific practices explicitly address environmental justice issues, such as valuing attachment to place, fostering a sense of community, and encouraging citizen participation in environmental activities like establishing a children's town council. Other more focused practices are common during emergencies, mainly carried out by Asproc members or social emergency services that support social services.

Overall, we propose to summarize the results into three distinct professional profiles related to environmental issues, based on diversified levels of awareness, knowledge, and practices.

(1) Detached approach. The first profile is characterized by low awareness, limited knowledge, and a lack of actions on environmental issues. This generally includes social workers who complain of a lack of environmental culture, a lack of training on environmental justice issues, and who do not see that some social action could also fall within the scope of environmental justice (e.g., the problem of housing). Although the code of ethics also affirms the need to address environmental issues, this profile considers that all environmental concerns are not part of social work in its strict sense.

(2) Sensitive/Conscious approach. The second profile is characterized by high environmental awareness, primarily due to individual sensitivity and extraprofessional interests; however, it is accompanied by low or limited knowledge of environmental justice issues and a lack of action taken on these issues. This profile highlights the critical issues and organizational problems of institutions, such as the sectionalization of various and diverse skills, and considers these objective barriers to be challenging to change. When addressing environmental issues, they often employ inappropriate tools. In other words, they frequently use outdated social work tools to address new environment-oriented problems, which are ineffective. Everything revolves around their interests and personal environmental awareness, which, however, clash with the institutional organization and the mandate expressly requested of social workers, which is certainly not to deal with the environment. Nevertheless, they value the need for actions aimed at building a sense of community and citizen participation, identity

and a sense of attachment to the place. Not only that, they also highlight the problem of sectoralisation and the need to legitimise the issue of environmental justice within the work of social services. Finally, they stress that there is an urgent need to create new skills through specialist training and an environmental culture.

(3) Expert approach. The third and final profile that emerged is characterized by high awareness, extensive knowledge of environmental issues, and action aimed at developing environmental justice. This includes participants who are members of Asproc, which aims to assist and support the work of social services in areas affected by emergencies related to floods and/or earthquakes. Participants include those with experience in social work during the floods in Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany, the earthquakes in Norcia (Perugia) in 2016, Amatrice in 2016–2017, the floods in Tuscany in 2023, and the floods in Emilia-Romagna in 2023 and 2024. This profile is characterized by a high level of awareness, extensive knowledge, and practical experience in the field, particularly in emergencies. Among the characteristic narratives are the need to utilize emergency plans in every city, the importance of adopting a preventive rather than an emergency approach, and the significance of considering the sense of community and identity associated with place and historical memory, even in times of emergency. As anticipated, while we recognize that these professionals' perspectives may bias our study by overestimating the level of understanding and engagement with environmental issues, we believe it has been enriching to bring such a privileged perspective to the discussion.

On the other hand, issues were also raised regarding the strengths of social work, such as mediation and networking skills, the ability to build resilience, foster trusting relationships, establish local alliances with associations, and enhance the community's sense of belonging and professional ethical responsibility. Furthermore, reference was made to the critical role that municipal emergency plans could play as a resource during emergencies, the capacity to promote the positive aspects of a community through empowerment, and the strengthening of attachment to place and community identity. Among the needs for an eco-social service, several key points highlight the importance of collaboration with other services, the necessity to transcend sectionalization (e.g., addiction, the elderly, foreign minors, immigration, disability), and the creation of a cross-cutting environmental culture, including in terms of prevention. University training courses on environmental justice are necessary to develop the environmental competence of social services, including legitimizing practices oriented toward environmental justice through specific rules that reference the code of ethics. However, to accomplish this, it is crucial to overcome existing obstacles in social services, such as sectionalization, insufficient training, and mistrust stemming from the structural limitations of institutions. Overall, as one participant in a discussion group stated, there is a need to foster a cultural shift toward developing more "eco" social services capable of recognizing and effectively addressing environmental injustices in their daily work.

7. Conclusions

The study, conducted in a local context, clearly underscores the urgency of rethinking the role of social work in light of the structural interdependence between environmental degradation and social inequality. To address this challenge, the present contribution has proposed the adoption of an eco-epistemic perspective, conceived as both a theoretical and operational tool for innovation within the discipline. This perspective emerges from the convergence of the paradigms of environmental justice and epistemic justice, and is grounded in the recognition that the production, circulation, and legitimization of

knowledge—particularly situated, experiential, and community-based forms—are central dimensions in responding to contemporary socio-environmental crises.

The interpretative lens proposed here aims to integrate existing knowledge from the eco-social work literature. The eco-epistemic perspective places at its core the epistemological and relational dimensions of social work, calling for critical reflection on how knowledge is constructed and validated within institutional and community settings. In doing so, it not only identifies new domains for intervention but also suggests a reconfiguration of the epistemic foundations that inform professional identity and operational practices.

The conceptual framework of the eco-epistemic perspective is articulated around three core dimensions. First, it promotes epistemological awareness, encouraging the questioning of dominant knowledge regimes and the recognition of subaltern narratives, collective memory, and territorial knowledge as central resources. Second, it emphasizes an ecologically situated vision of social intervention, where the environment is not understood as a neutral backdrop, but as a co-constitutive element of social experience and inequality. Third, it advances the notion of transformative agency, in which professional action is configured as cognitive mediation and political engagement, capable of fostering participatory processes, the democratic production of knowledge, and the strengthening of socio-environmental resilience.

At the operational level, this perspective calls for the development of training tools and institutional mechanisms that can legitimize and make environmental justice work feasible within social services. This entails the formal recognition of environmental competencies within professional mandates, the structured inclusion of environmental justice content in university curricula, the promotion of intersectoral alliances between social work, civil society, the education system, and scientific communities, and the design of participatory decision-making processes that enable communities to actively shape the transformation of their living environments.

The research findings—particularly the identification of three distinct professional profiles—highlight both the potential and the limitations of current practices. While many social workers demonstrate significant environmental sensitivity, their actions are often hindered by institutional fragmentation, lack of specialized training, and limited legitimacy for practices oriented toward environmental justice. Nonetheless, several core professional resources—such as mediation skills, the capacity to build territorial networks, the promotion of community resilience, and the reinforcement of identity and belonging—constitute fertile ground for the development of eco-epistemic approaches.

In conclusion, the eco-epistemic perspective represents not merely an extension of the traditional domains of social work, but rather invites a paradigmatic reflection on the positioning of the discipline itself. It encourages a move beyond a reactive and sectoral view of social intervention, towards reflective, critical, and politically engaged practices that can actively contribute to the construction of more just, sustainable, and inclusive futures—both in everyday contexts and in situations of socio-environmental crisis.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su17209208/s1, Table S1: Code list and occurrences in interviews, small group discussions, and overall.

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