

**Peter Jusko**

Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica

ORCID: 0000-0003-1401-035X

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## **Eco-Social Needs Associated with Solving Social Problems in the First Wave of the Sars-Cov-2 Pandemic**

**ABSTRACT:** The base of this study is theoretical research which deals with argumentation strategies that were recorded in the media public debate in the period March – April 2020 in the Slovak Republic and discusses their connection with the application of eco-social approaches to solving social problems using the example of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The main research question is: What are the basic needs connected to the ecologically oriented social work application in relation with the solution to social problems during the coronavirus pandemic? On the basis of the presented results these needs are mainly the need for social workers' own experience with "mutual faultification" of social problems when drastic measures were taken in several facilities providing social services, the reflection of global social risks combination during the first phase of the coronavirus pandemic, cessation of self-destructive social trends linked with eco-social risks of creating economic profit and the need to determinate human behaviour not only externally but also internally.

**KEYWORDS:** lifeworld orientation for social work, social problem, eco-social need, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic social pedagogy, environment, human dignity, resilience

### **Introduction and Methodology**

The theme of social work in the field of theoretical reflection on the origin and solution of social problems arising from the relationship between man and nature refers to the work of the German theorist of social work and social pedagogy Hans Thiersch (2015), who refers to environmental social work as lifeworld orientation for social work and social care (Lebensweltorientierung Soziale Arbeit). Systemic threats to the environment, but not only that,

currently represent a viral stage in terms of the genealogy of hostility (Byung-Chul, 2016, pp. 12–13), when, as in the example of an ongoing pandemic, it can be stated that harmful tendencies are directly part of the system and interventions or preventive measures against them need to be reformulated from an eco-social point of view. The global unpreparedness for a solution, as well as the subsequent social functioning under changed conditions, emphasizes the importance of changes in the eco-social society setting. There is a need to reformulate existing solutions to this type of problem primarily in the “realization” of eco-social impacts from exclusively individualized and subjectivised to a more global, and institutional understanding of the consequences and possibilities for solutions. The first wave of SARS-CoV-2 in the world caused an exceptional global synchronization of humanity when it came to the indication of health problems caused by the spread of the virus in the world in the first phase.

In modern society, we can define the following set of social problems: poverty, unemployment, social inequality causing social conflicts, disruption of family relationships, alienation of bureaucratic administration, crime and drugs, discrimination against national and demographic (elderly people, children) minorities, discrimination against women and gender inequality, manipulation of people through the mass media. The mass media name social problems for their mass audience. They can increase sensitivity and focus people’s attention on a certain range of problems. At the same time, however, they evoke a misconception of their scope or concern among the mass audience. The following phases can be distinguished in this process (In: Winkler, 2002):

1. Description of the social event or situation.
2. Interpretation of mass media events.
3. The media illustrates the story as a widespread social problem.
4. Stereotypes of perception of similar events are established in the public.
5. There is panic and feelings of anxiety.
6. There is a growing public demand for policy measures to address the problem.

The need for reformulation existing solutions to this type of problem is also related to the uncertainty of all citizens associated with the loss of social and financial stability (Standing, 2014, p. 146). This creates an atmosphere of fear and anxiety that allows to “blame” the situation exclusively on a particular individual, e.g. assessing the risk of getting infected. The existing “omnipresent” infection threat creates both specific and visible danger associated with fear of infection, as well as anxious thoughts about an uncertain future. To objectify

this state in the form of accepting the influences of the environment and the system, the so-called mutual faultification should be considered, i.e. common, or more precisely mutual causality of a social problem due to the behaviour of the individual as well as the influence on the social environment.

The base of this study is theoretical research which does not work with any specific data. It deals with argumentation strategies that were recorded in the media public debate in the period March – April 2020 in the Slovak Republic and discusses their connection with the application of eco-social approaches to solving social problems using the example of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The research perceives these strategies from a theoretical point of view and conclusions of a theoretical nature are formulated. The Critical Discursive Analysis (CDA) research method was used in this research. This qualitative research method addresses the social problems associated with power that are discursive in nature while this method also examines the power within discourses as well as power over discourses.

The analysis and interpretation of the texts had two phases:

1. The text analysis in the production phase consisted of the specific content, articulated topics and subtopics identification which most constructively formulated the public debate about the spread of the new coronavirus in Slovakia in its first phase, i.e. from March 6, 2020 (detection of the first case of SARS-CoV-2 infection in the territory of the Slovak Republic) to April 22, 2020 (until the beginning of gradual measures release to prevent the spread of a new coronavirus) and subsequent discursive strategies identification (compiled according to Wodak, Meyer, 2001).
2. The phase of reception (interpretation), where so-called contextualizing indications were used (cf. Gumperz, 2009), which enabled interpretation of discourse fragments in ways that relate them to the interpretive frameworks of the questions researched.

The research sample consisted mainly of texts in separate sections on the new coronavirus in the largest Slovak Internet news media. The main research question (MRQ) is: What are the basic needs connected to the ecologically oriented social work application in relation with the solution to social problems during the coronavirus pandemic?

## **Results and Their Interpretation**

The changes in the field of fundamental values and practices in the modern industrial societies after the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic are related to numerous yet unsatisfied social needs. That is why the main research question

focuses on which basic needs are connected to the ecologically oriented social work application in relation with the solution to social problems during the pandemic of the COVID-19. Selected argumentation strategies and discourse fragments are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected argumentation strategies and discourse fragments related to MRQ

Argumentation strategy	Discourse fragment	Source
Topos of danger	"They are in the retirement homes. Many of them in one place, mostly elderly with chronic diseases, relying heavily on assistance of the personnel. If the virus spreads there, we are on the brink of disaster which no one wants to even think about."	<a href="https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/547447-domovy-pre-seniorov-meria-na-pevnosti/">https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/547447-domovy-pre-seniorov-meria-na-pevnosti/</a>
Topos of democracy	"I don't like it the same as you that it has gone so far, having several regions under lockdown. We must ignore the feelings even though the situation concerns us directly. Today we must protect human health and people's lives."	<a href="https://www1.pluska.sk/regiony/nenavistne-komentare-vy-mate-svedomi-zavretie-osad-peterpollak-poviem-ako-je-to-naozaj">https://www1.pluska.sk/regiony/nenavistne-komentare-vy-mate-svedomi-zavretie-osad-peterpollak-poviem-ako-je-to-naozaj</a>
Topos of usefulness	"Decrease in production of pollutants will manifest itself not only in higher air quality but subsequently also in other aspects of the environment – water, soil and the ecosystems. It can have similar effects on the infection and death rates, because polluted air supports occurrence of many lifestyle diseases."	<a href="https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/2135358-mapy-ukazuju-ako-koronavirus-vycistil-ovzdušie-tyka-sa-to-aj-slovenskاپربುದنۇ-dalsie-efekty">https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/2135358-mapy-ukazuju-ako-koronavirus-vycistil-ovzdušie-tyka-sa-to-aj-slovenskاپربುದنۇ-dalsie-efekty</a>
Topos of uselessness	"The media are full of analyses focusing on the economic impact that was caused by the pandemic, information about production being stopped, insufficient state efforts to maintain low levels of unemployment, the experts speaking about the vulnerability of our economy being too open, assembly production character etc."	<a href="https://www.cas.sk/clanok/972135/nepriazniv-ekonomicky-vyvoj-pocas-koronaepidemie-prepustania-sa-boji-71-slovakov/">https://www.cas.sk/clanok/972135/nepriazniv-ekonomicky-vyvoj-pocas-koronaepidemie-prepustania-sa-boji-71-slovakov/</a>

The first sphere where ecologically oriented social work as a means to solving social problems might be applied is a "mutual faultification" in social problems required in practice by the social workers, helping professionals and politicians themselves. International Federation of Social Workers general secretary Rory Truell in this regard said that "social work was one of the most important professions in the fight against the new coronavirus and has contributed to the hundreds of thousands of saved lives across the globe. At the same time, social workers face tremendous ethical challenges in contexts with lack of resources, poor policies from employers and governments as well as vulnerable populations as a whole" (In: *New Partnership to Research Social Work Ethical Dilemmas during COVID-19*, 2020). Challenges in practice, namely the facilities providing social services that were put under lockdown were reflected on in the public debates across Slovakia during the first phase of the coronavirus crisis (<https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/547447-domovy->

pre-seniorov-menia-na-pevnosti/). It is not possible to objectively recognize the causes and links to social problems and the limitations that the anticipated solutions have, without the previous experience, as painful as it has been. The first phase of the pandemic in the Slovak Republic and other countries in the world alike, has shown attitude changes towards potential SARS-CoV-2 disease spreaders in the eyes of its citizens. A good example of this can be seen in the fate of returnees or resettled persons coming back to their homeland. Social problems linked to repatriation (e.g. accommodation problems during compulsory quarantine), as well as frequent feelings of injustice towards returning fellow citizens on the one hand, and presented responsibility takeover on the other are likely to remain among the significant symbols of public debate from this period.

One-sided emphasis of the impact that the social structures have on creating social problems, forms an opportunity to reflect on the global social risks, all the more so, if these are synergically combined. "Combining ecological devastation, poverty, inequalities, ethnic and nationalistic conflicts, terrorism and financial crises" (In: Šuša, Hrubec et. al., 2017, p. 87) poses a global threat. The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has stressed and accelerated the existing social problems and differences and in addition to that caused new global threats to emerge. In order to eliminate these new threats in the context of eco-social approaches in social work, environmental intervention oriented on the community can be used. Its goal is to "mobilize and modify the social support available to the target population in their natural setting" (In: Levická et. al., 2012, p. 168). Public debate in Slovakia during the given period emphasized the community social work in Roma slums under quarantine (<https://www1.pluska.sk/regiony/nenavistne-komentare-vy-mate-svedomi-zavretie-osad-peter-pollak-poviem-ako-je-to-naozaj>). The nature of global threats like the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic emphasizes the techniques used in environmental intervention; among others mostly the so-called network intervention which the greatest potential lies in its ability to avert the threat in question completely.

The society in the medium-term is already on a self-destructive trajectory, which is due to causal links between increasing levels of environmental pollution on the one hand and social turmoil and inequalities on the other. Economic profits and externalization of ecological and social pressures as well as risks towards the majority from the top-tier businesses leads to emphasis on another eco-social need that is based on a rapid halt of self-destructive social trends. One such trend, all the more promoted in the recent decades, was the commercialized holiday travelling among a wider and wider social class

in developed countries together with its ecological and economic contexts. Restrictions raised by the first wave of the pandemic brought a major change. As Krastev (Krastev, 2020 p. 48) states, the elite could travel as any other person during the normal times. During the COVID-19 pandemic they can stay at home. The questions raised by the public debate about the impact that the new coronavirus has on the environment in the context of economic slowdown represents a crucial impulse as it stimulates several social changes, being proclaimed for a long time as needed by those supporting global environmental change (see: *Global Environmental Change: Understanding the Human Dimension*, 1992) (<https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/2135358-mapy-ukazuju-ako-koronavirus-vycistil-ovzdušie-tyka-sa-to-aj-slovenska-pribudnudsie-efekty>). *The first wave of the pandemic emphasized the change for instance as a need to reduce production (manufacture, construction, waste etc.), environmental sustainability of the digitalization and automation changes, or eco-social innovations in employment, education and mental healthcare policies. A very important question being left unanswered, even though the first wave of the pandemic has already passed, is which measures have a temporary effect until COVID-19 is beaten, and which measures will have a deeper long-term and global eco-social impact.*

The first wave of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in the Slovak Republic has shed light on new links between environmental sustainability and employment policy (<https://www.cas.sk/clanok/972135/nepriaznivy-ekonomicky-vyvoj-pocas-korona-epidemie-prepustania-sa-boji-71-slovakov/>). There is a need to look for new solutions in maintaining the employment rates because the first wave of the pandemic only highlighted this crucial question. Based on an international case work study, Stamm, Matthies, Hirvilammi and Närhi (2020), claim that there are already cases of good eco-social innovations practice in merging employment with environmental sustainability that are not yet being implemented into current employment policies.

## Discussion

The aim of this discussion is to interpret what the presented research findings confuse in relation to ecosocial approaches to solving social problems, especially in the area of eco-social needs associated with solving social problems in the first wave of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

According to Hämäläinen (2003, p. 76) Social pedagogy concentrates on questions of the integration of the individual in society, both in theory and in practice. It aims to alleviate social exclusion. It deals with the processes of

human growth that tie people to the systems, institutions and communities that are important to their well-being and life management. The basic idea of social pedagogy is to promote people's social functioning, inclusion, participation, social identity and social competence as members of society. Its particular terms of reference apply to the problems people have in integration and life management in different phases of the lifespan. This orientation can be defined in terms of developing a pedagogical approach to address social problems and social needs, which are connected to the processes of the integration of the individual in society. The eco-social needs identified in our research closely correspond to such an understanding of social pedagogy.

Contemporary social work focuses on the person within their living environment, which is the starting point for this discussion. According to Mátel (2019, p. 22), the relationship between social work clients and their social environment can be described as social functioning. Therefore, social functioning is very important need from the perspective of social work. The concept of social functioning has been elaborated by Bartlett (1970) who defines it as the interactions taking place between the environment and the people. While the world has been globally affected by the first wave of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, new trends emerged and some of the existing ones were enhanced. Mainly global fragmentation and regionalisation could be observed at the time. *The Person-in-Environment* approach has been investigated by e.g. Weiss-Gal (2008) who points out that it is a part of the professional ideology for social workers. The effectiveness of this approach depends on the given person's ability to resist negative stimuli (emerging social problem). The immediate response of a person to these stimuli can be a symptom of exhaustion in the social reality. For example, during the Corona crisis in Slovakia, the public debate focused on the media-covered statements of a social worker from a social services facility in which COVID-19 broke out (<https://www1.pluska.sk/regiony/to-nezvladame-je-to-hroza-zamestnankynadomova-dochodcov-pezinku-slzech>). It is necessary to get acquainted with the situation to understand a person's response. During the Corona crisis, the social services facilities became subject to the so called economic mobilisation, which allowed the responsible institutions to adopt very strict measures (<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/777945/koronavirus-zariadenia-socialnych-sluzieb-mozu-pre-ochranu-obmedzit-pohyb-klientov/>). In the society-wide context, it can be stated that the governmental authorities received extraordinary power after the state of emergency was announced, but every citizen also got the opportunity to judge whether this power was exercised with the citizen's well-being in mind.

Important need in professional social pedagogy and social work is to respect every client's human dignity. The understanding of human dignity as a concept is related to the human rights discourse. Habermas (2013) points out certain discrepancy between the abstract, general human rights vs. their specificity in different cultural contexts. During the first wave, the discrepancy could be observed in different sociocultural contexts. For example, the coexistence of the Roma minority and the majority population has been a social and political topic in the SR for a long time. Human rights were discussed by the public after the Police and Army quarantined several Roma settlements during the pandemic (<https://www.amnesty.sk/zastavme-stigmatizaciu-romov-a-romok-pocas-pandemie-covid-19/>).

## Conclusion

This research based on critical discursive analysis of social reality is mainly focused on basic needs connected to the ecologically oriented social work application in relation with the solution to social problems. Its application was demonstrated on the example of solving social problems during the first phase of the SARS-COV-2 pandemic in the Slovak Republic. The conclusion is focused on answering the main research question and to offer recommendations for research and practice of social work related to solving social problems. These problems correspond with eco-social approaches in social work as well as proposals for social changes and they take into consideration experiences during the first wave of the new coronavirus pandemic in terms of applying eco-social approaches to solve social problems.

Answering the main research question:

What are the basic needs connected to the ecologically oriented social work application in relation with the solution to social problems during the coronavirus pandemic?

These needs are mainly:

- The need for social workers' own experience with "mutual faultification" of social problems when drastic measures were taken in several facilities providing social services. It is justified by the topos of danger and threat.
- the reflection of global social risks combination during the first phase of the coronavirus pandemic in the Slovak Republic connected to the topos of democracy and to the need to protect human rights of people in quarantine.
- cessation of self-destructive social trends linked with eco-social risks of creating economic profit. This need is represented by the topos of

usefulness that is connected to justifying the impact of limited economic activity on the reduction of the environmental burden.

- the need to determinate human behaviour not only externally but also internally is represented by the topos of uselessness, which explains socioeconomic consequences of pandemic on the fact that social problems such as unemployment were created.

Solution of an unfavourable social situation is determined by various resources that someone has available. These resources may be financial, material, natural, personal or informational. In the first wave of the pandemic, ordinary citizens pointed to lack of information sources (quantitative problem) and low information relevance (qualitative problem): In spite of many hoaxes it is still unknown which animal infected the first SARS-CoV-2 positive patient. According to genetic analysis it may be a bat. Infection through a bat soup, or any other heat-treated animal source food, is unverified and implausible (<https://www.tyzden.sk/politika/63285/ochorenie-covid-19-zakladne-fakty/>). As long as sources are natural e.g. related to new job opportunities, it is necessary to assert eco-social approaches. Social work reforms and proposed changes should contain environment-friendly and sustainable use of resources, such as drinking water, electric energy or food. These resources cannot be taken for granted. History shows the problems related to increasing water consumption, unhealthy food consumption or depletion of non-renewable resources.

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic highlighted the importance of time management and concentration when resolving complex social problems. Multitasking was an important skill for survival in the wild and it should not be applied automatically in modern society. According to Krastev (2020, pp. 92–93) the virus revealed the limits of re-nationalisation and accelerated deglobalisation trends caused by the deep recession in 2008 and 2009. These limits are related to ineffective global supply networks (e.g. medical supplies) and the need for a strong national state that can gather necessary resources in the time of crisis. In this age of “liquid modernity” it is better to choose focused deep work when solving current social problems (see Newport, 2016). This meaningful and competent work may bring more effective and sustainable results. It is recommended to expand the research of deep work’s benefits and limits in practice, especially in environmental social work.

At the end of this paper we suggest social changes that take into account the experience during the coronavirus crisis in terms of the application of eco-social approaches to solving social problems:

- The support resilience as a key need for survival in new conditions during and after the pandemic of acquiring skills to cope with difficult

times and to support personal, interpersonal and social factors that support our ability to solve social problems.

- To increase functional participation of social workers in the pandemic outbreaks (e.g. community social work in Roma slums under quarantine, permanent workload of employees in social service facilities with detected SARS-CoV-2 infection, involvement of the Slovak Chamber of Social Workers and Social Work Assistants in the process of accepting and implementation of measures concerning social work target groups).
- To reprofile social work as a profession, field of study and as a science after the pandemic (e.g. to identify and reflect upon ethical dilemmas created by the pandemic, to show the positive influence of imposed economic restrictive measures on the environment, to think about the importance of social cohesion when solving social problems).

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