

Crossing Borders Without Getting Lost: The Topical Contribution of Susanne Elsen to Social Work and Beyond

Introduction

Urban Nothdurfter – Free University of Bozen-Bolzano

On behalf of the editorial team, I want to highlight, in the introduction to this edited book, the importance of Susanne Elsen's work in research, teaching and practice in the fields of social work, community development and eco-social transformation. This is an honourable and fortunately not too difficult task. First, because both thematic continuity and engaged perseverance as well as a particular openness to new and border crossing issues run as constants through Susanne Elsen's work, which reveal very clearly what she has been interested in and committed to throughout her career, as academic researcher, social worker and citizen. Secondly, the topics and approaches that Susanne Elsen has addressed have become increasingly recognised and are now placed at the centre of current debates even in social work. This is clear proof of the relevance and innovativeness of Susanne Elsen's work, but also of her bravery in tackling complex issues and not letting herself be discouraged by demarcations and canons of academic disciplines or torn between academic research and practice with their different rationales and structures of relevance and recognition. Susanne Elsen has managed to deal with complex and innovative topics underlining in a pioneering way the importance of transdisciplinary and transformative approaches to research and practice. In this sense, the appreciation of her work does not risk to smack of a farewell to merits that have been acquired but fallen out of fashion. On the contrary, current challenges and developments are confirming the innovative and forward-looking character of what Susanne Elsen has achieved and promoted during her career.

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Susanne Elsen studied Social Work and Social Education, Sociology and Economics at the University of Trier in Germany, where she also did her PhD with a dissertation on community-based economy (*Gemeinwesenökonomie*), a topic she further developed for her habilitation at the TU Dresden pointing out its relevance to social work and social policy (Elsen, 2007).

After some years of professional experience in sustainable tourism development, Susanne Elsen began her academic career working with the University of Trier on a project for community-based research and development in a disadvantaged neighbourhood in the city of Trier (Elsen, 2000). In 1993 for her work in this project she received the Schader Award for urban development and housing with Klaus Jensen and Heinz A. Ries (Schader Stiftung, 2023). From 1992 onwards, she was also responsible for training programmes in community work and rural development at the study center of the German protestant church Burckhardtthaus in Gelnhausen. In 1995, she became director of the research and development project EUROSIZIAL at the University of Trier, a project for local labor market development and community-based health promotion in the European border region SaarLorLux funded by the German Federal Ministry for Research and Education. From 1998 to 2003, Susanne Elsen collaborated in the programme “Neue Wege der Arbeitsplatzbeschaffung” (new ways of job creation) funded by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and aimed at creating employment options for women in remote rural areas of Eastern Germany. In 1997, Susanne Elsen became professor for Community Development at the Zürich University of Applied Sciences and, in 1999, she was appointed professor at the Hochschule München University of Applied Sciences, where she also became Dean of the Department for Applied Social Sciences. While staying in Munich, through her contacts within the European Centre for Community Education Susanne Elsen came as contract professor to the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. In 2010, she joined the Free University on a permanent position as a full professor. Here she was appointed Vice-Dean for Research and Coordinator of the PhD programme at the Faculty of Education. Currently, she is Head of the BA programme in Social Education. In South

Tyrol, Susanne Elsen was able to engage with local actors and circumstances making use of the potential given by intersections of different languages and cultures. She has been involved in many research projects, both on the local and the international level, achieving a high record in the acquisition of third-party funded projects. Currently, she is involved in a doctoral network project on Applying Sustainability Transition Research in Social Work (ASTRA) funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme.

As Susanne Elsen's vita shows, she applied her understanding of proactive social work in community-based projects, in which she developed her interest in cooperative solutions and questions of social and solidarity economy, which she pioneeringly (re-)connected with social work and through which she has been involved in many projects at the intersections of research, teaching and practice. Her interest in innovative topics and her acute recognition of the signs of the times have shaped the development of her agenda in both research and teaching and extended it to issues of social innovation and sustainable local urban and regional development.

In this sense, Susanne Elsen represents the tradition of reformist and structural approaches to social work which aim to improve living conditions and opportunities of participation through community-based approaches, cooperative solutions, and strategies of political interference (Närhi & Matthies, 2018). In her work she frequently refers to the understanding of social work by important pioneers in the settlement movement, such as Jane Addams (Elsen, 2011; Tadesse & Elsen, 2023), and to community organizers and activists such as Saul Alinsky (Elsen, 2007). While these approaches also regained attention in the debates on community-based social work, Susanne Elsen was pioneeringly extending the debate to community-based economy (*Gemeinwesenökonomie*) pointing out the importance to engage with issues rather kept on the margins of mainstream social work debates (Elsen, 1998, 2007, 2018). As to her understanding of social and solidarity economy, Susanne Elsen has been particularly interested in the development of cooperative solutions recognising, in this context, the tradition and the model character of the Italian social cooperative movement (Elsen, 2003, 2012, 2022a, 2022b). She always

argued for a broad understanding of social and solidarity economy going beyond approaches of social entrepreneurship and economic debates on social enterprises as they are too narrow in her view. Susanne Elsen rather embraced ideas of social and solidarity economy as a distinctive and participatory approach to sustainable and rights-based development (Utting, 2015). Accordingly, she always framed different forms of social and solidarity economy as particular expressions of solidarity and civic engagement pointing out their potential in terms of social innovation and bottom-up eco-social transformations. With this broad view, Susanne Elsen's work has been recognised and referred to by different contributions on social and solidarity economy (Schulz-Nieswandt, 2021; Borzaga & Fazzi, 2022) but also in the wider fields of social innovation (Heinze, 2020; Howaldt & Schwarz, 2021; Schmid et al., 2021), and sustainability studies (Stamm et al., 2020; Egmoose et al., 2022; Khosravi et al., 2022, Kasper, 2023). Expanding her work to address issues of sustainable development and eco-social transformation, she anticipated many of the questions that have now broadly found their way also into social work and social policy as major social and transdisciplinary challenges of our times (Peeters, 2012; Matthies & Närhi, 2016; Matthies et al., 2020; Hirvilammi et al., 2023).

For Susanne Elsen doing research is always connected to questions of participation and transformation by building democratic relations of cooperation between actors in different roles, by taking seriously their needs and capacities, and by providing space and time for mutual learning and joint action. As Frank Moulaert points out in the opening chapter of this book (pp. 11–30), Susanne Elsen had been pioneering in community-based and participatory action research long before these terms and approaches became fashionable.

From a social work perspective, Susanne Elsen's work makes an important legacy. Social work moves and develops in a field of tension between emphasising its specificity as both profession and discipline on the one hand, and the necessary openness and transdisciplinarity on the other one. Susanne Elsen's work certainly emphasises the latter aspects without losing, however, sight of the relevance to social work. Perhaps she was sometimes too fast for someone

or seen as not specific enough or too transgressive by the strict guardians of orthodox disciplinary canons, as probably all innovators are, at some point. However, Susanne Elsen has achieved a great deal, also for social work, which must not be content or even tempted by tendencies of professional and conceptual narrowness, neglecting larger questions and contexts. Current debates in social work and the signs of the times seem to prove Susanne Elsen right.

This edited book brings together contributions written by different authors from different European countries who have encountered Susanne Elsen and who, being rooted in different disciplines, share an interest in the topics Susanne Elsen has worked on in the course of her career. Conceived as a *liber amicorum*, this edited book does, however, not limit itself to an appreciative retrospective. On the contrary, the book points to current and future challenges in social work and local welfare contexts, which cannot be tackled without the innovation of solidarity systems and comprehensive processes of eco-social transformation from below. Current crises and the imperative of sustainable development pose complex challenges to social work and social policy, but they are also raising awareness of integrative transformative approaches to social innovation and local development, which have a long tradition in social work and are now once again at the centre of the debate. In this sense, this volume makes a very timely contribution pointing out the potential and the urgency of such approaches and of a tradition in social work Susanne Elsen stands for and which she constantly developed anticipating many challenges we must face today.

The opening chapter builds on Susanne Elsen's work to explore the meaning of community-based and participatory action research pointing out the importance of a clear-cut ethical positioning that develops and links research and action in active collaboration, recognizes and promotes the key role of community members and looks for socio-economic and socio-ecological justice. The following chapters address different topics and aspects of transformative and eco-social change in social work practice, research and education, social and solidarity economy, local and rural development as well as fundamental questions of solidarity in times of crises.

As editors, we want to thank all the colleagues who contributed to this joint effort. All of them were enthusiastic about the project and managed to write and revise their contributions within the rather strict timeframe. We also thank the reviewers for their important work and the staff of bu.press, particularly Astrid Parteli, for supporting the project, managing the review process and being precise and patient in finalising this volume.

Last but not least, our gratitude goes above all to Susanne. She has been a mentor, supporter and colleague to whom we are grateful for her professional and personal appreciation. Despite her approaching retirement, Susanne will not rest, but keep on taking an interest in the topics she has worked on throughout her career and she will hopefully also continue to support us in one way or another. We wish her to be able to do what she likes in good health and with much pleasure for a long time to come, unburdened by institutional duties and constraints, that have certainly often stood in the way of her free spirit and her thirst for action and change.

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