Occupational therapy and sustainable development
– from a Swedish perspective
Occupational therapy contributes to sustainable development

The concept sustainable development

Sustainable development is a concept which is attracting increasing focus. An active debate is being conducted, both internationally and nationally, about how to foster and sustain prosperity in a world which is constantly reminded of ongoing climate change and the physical, social and economic consequences these entail at present and in future.

The concept sustainable development was first used by the United Nations in the 1980s to describe development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs\(^1\). Sustainable development is about humans and the environment: about a society based on nature’s needs and putting them in relation to people’s needs. In its political context, sustainable development is seen to be multidisciplinary, meaning that the work entailed has to be integrated into all fields of policy. The goal should be joint efforts towards building a sustainable society that encourages good health on equal terms, meets demographic challenges and promotes sustainable growth\(^2\).

The concept sustainable development is based on three dimensions: economic, ecological and social. These dimensions are in constant interaction with each other, meaning that sustainable development encompasses much more than just our relationship to nature. It is also about democracy, participation, diversity and human rights. The holistic view of the individual and society which is implicit in the concept sustainable development means that actions must be implemented at various levels of society. Both private and public sectors must integrate the pursuit of sustainable development into their work, but every individual’s own responsibility and participation is also an important starting point.

\(^1\) In accordance with the Brundtland Commission, 1987
Occupational therapy supports the pursuit of sustainable development

The aim of occupational therapy is to promote people’s ability to live a worthwhile life in accordance with their own wishes in relation to the demands of society. In order to achieve this, occupational therapists work at individual, group and community levels to prevent reduced capacity to partake in occupations, improve or maintain capacity for active participation and compensate for any reduced ability.

Occupational therapists have unique expertise about the relationship between occupation and health. Occupational therapists also have knowledge of how individuals, environment and occupation interact and stimulate participation and health. This expertise is important in society’s aspirations towards sustainable development, competence that society ought to take advantage of to a greater degree.

Occupational therapy as part of an individual’s pursuit of sustainable development

Nowadays many people have integrated efforts towards sustainable development when conducting their daily activities, at home as well as at work/school and in leisure time. More people are choosing to consume climate-smart and health-promoting goods or services when it comes to purchasing groceries, transportation etc, as well as when choosing leisure activities and holidays.

The ability to promote sustainable development is affected if a person’s occupational capacity has been reduced because of injury, illness or change in the environment. Occupational therapists support a person’s ability to achieve sustainable development through individualised interventions such as prescribing aids, assisting in housing adaptations, or working out individual strategies. A cognitive aid can support a person with reduced perception of time to save hot water. Individualised checklists with supportive images can enable a person with intellectual disabilities to plan purchasing and cooking in a climate-smart and energy-saving manner. Adaptations in the home can facilitate sorting household waste at source for a person who is using a wheelchair.
Occupational therapy as part of planning for a sustainable society
As part of efforts towards building a sustainable society, the products and services developed must be sustainable over time and work for as many citizens as possible, without requiring adaptation or special solutions. Here, occupational therapists have competence and skills that society must use to a greater extent. Avoiding special solutions for people with special needs is economically advantageous as well as being in line with sustainable development. When building new houses current regulations have to be followed in order to reduce the need of individual housing adaptations later on. Then, more people will have the possibility of living in ordinary housing which also has a positive effect on people’s ability to experience participation.

Sustainable development, however, is not just about the physical design of the environment we build, nor simply about products, but also on how information is given and how the ranges of various services and activities are set up. In such circumstances it is customary to use the terms universal design and sustainable design. Through the development of sustainable products and services in the community it is thought that the need for action in various social security systems will decrease. To increase accessibility and usability so that more people can make use of the ordinary range of services and products is an issue that affects more and more people, especially when considering the increasing proportion of the population aged 80 and older. A sustainable society must take into consideration that the needs of citizens vary and change and that demands to have access to the same range of goods and services as everyone else is increasing.

In connection with efforts to set up a sustainable development, occupational therapists can contribute their expertise concerning the impact of occupational limitations in relation to participation and health. One example could be working to increase access to public transport for people with physical, sensory or intellectual disabilities, enabling possibilities for more people to use trains, buses, subways or other forms of public transport. Another example is influencing the design of waste separation systems so that people are mentally and physically able to make use of them.
The Swedish association of occupational therapists and sustainable development

The Swedish Association of Occupational Therapists (FSA) is an independent, non-political and non-denominational association of occupational therapists. FSA is both a professional organisation and a trade union. Occupational Therapy courses are conducted at eight universities in Sweden. After taking a Bachelor’s degree, you apply for registration by the National Board of Health and Welfare. There is also the possibility to continue to study towards a Masters Degree or Doctorate. Currently there are approximately 130 occupational therapists with PhD degree in Sweden.

There are about 11 000 registered occupational therapists in Sweden and about 90% are members of FSA. Nine out of ten occupational therapists in Sweden, work for health and hospital services. They work in a variety of settings for example geriatric care, psychiatric care, physical illness hospital care, in primary care, with social services caring for those with learning disabilities, in adult and paediatric rehabilitation, assistive technology centres, penal institutions and at the Labour Market Institute.

The society as a whole does not make sufficient use of the skills that occupational therapists possess. FSA believes that occupational therapists’ expertise when it comes to community planning is underutilized, especially in relation to the pursuit of a sustainable development. With this brochure we hope to initiate positive change.