

Introduction: Foundations of Ecosocial Work Practice

Rachel Forbes and Kelly Smith

Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming whether you like it or not.

—Greta Thunberg, climate activist

Social workers have always intervened where environmental issues are present. From the earliest days of social work practice, the quality and health of the built and natural environments have remained key priorities for the clients and communities whom social workers serve. While the nature of the environmental issues and subsequent practice interventions have evolved over the years in both their form and variety, the commitment to maintaining healthy and safe environments for vulnerable and oppressed populations has remained the same. While social workers in the early days fought for clean sanitation systems and safe and secure housing, today's social workers are keen to practice alongside frontline advocates for climate justice and clean energy access. The profession and practice of social work have historically demonstrated malleability, by evolving in concert with the nature and complexity of social issues and injustices. Adapting to practice needs within the natural environment is no exception (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2020).

Historical Roots of Ecosocial Work Practice

Social workers in today's society cannot continue to advocate for social and economic justice without properly attending to environmental justice. Same was true for social work pioneers. As professionals and educators, social workers are

well versed in economic, political, and social justice; social workers understand and have the skill sets to confront all forms of injustice head-on. Yet, the underlying contexts of environmental injustice have not been attended to in mainstream social work, despite its disparate and expanding impact on communities marginalized by gender, race, ethnicity, and/or income (CSWE Committee on Environmental Justice, 2017).

The communities most affected by environmental hazards and injustices are often the same communities where social workers are established in service of individuals and communities (Teixeira & Krings, 2015). A notable example of the history of social workers engaging where environmental injustice is present is the story of Hull-House, the first settlement house in the United States. Settlement houses were institutions that social justice workers created to offer social services to low-income and immigrant communities. Some of the first recognized social workers, namely Jane Addams and Mary Richmond, acknowledged the importance of the built and natural environments to the health and well-being of their clients and client systems. Mary Richmond also realized the role that the environment plays in the social functioning of human beings (Pardeck, 1988). As such, one of the earliest ecosocial work practice interventions were settlement houses that addressed lack of sanitation for low-income and immigrant communities (National Park Service, 2021). It seems that indeed social workers have been poised to address environmental hazards from the first days of our professional practice.

From this history, social work organizations continue to make strides toward climate stability and ecological justice. National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2020) asserts social workers' vested interest in the viability of the environment in protecting the well-being and survival of all people and in encouraging human beings to exercise their capacity for intelligent and responsible stewardship of Earth by claiming that "humans are but one element of a vast complicated and interdependent ecosystem. Humans are not separate from, nor superior to, other elements of the biosphere" (p. 12).

Additionally, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), and International Federation of Social Workers' (IFSW) Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (Global Agenda; 2018) has made a clear commitment toward environmental sustainability. In 2015, the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare adopted 12 grand challenges to be addressed by the profession; one was to "Create social responses to a changing environment." (Note: In 2020, a 13th grand challenge was added: "Eliminate racism.") This

grand challenge aims to catalyze social responses that strengthen individual and community capacities for anticipating and adapting to environmental changes while reducing the high exposure to environmental risks for vulnerable groups and equalizing access to needed resources. Finally, the Global Agenda theme of “working toward community and environmental sustainability” includes chapters with short lessons accompanied by exercises to help apply the lessons (IASSW et al., 2018; Powers & Rinkel, 2018; Rinkel & Powers, 2017). The Global Agenda is a key part of the strategy and organizational activity of the three primary global social work organizations: IFSW, IASSW, and the ICSW. The Global Agenda is the product of these three organizations working together to achieve a common vision for how social work is to be developed and implemented locally, nationally, and internationally with an intentional focus on responding to global environmental concerns as they relate to forced migration, climate change, ecological destruction, and food and water insecurity.

A Justice Approach to Ecosocial Work Practice

Social work historically utilizes the person-in-environment framework to understand problems, despite a general acceptance of the correlation between natural and physical environments and health and well-being (Teixeira & Krings, 2015). And while social work has proven historically reluctant to engage in environmental issues due to this narrow social interpretation of the person-in-environment methodology, a call to environmental justice exists in social work foundational principles (Coates & Gray, 2012). Highlighting these calls to action can support social workers embracing environmentalism as a foundational principle to the discipline. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA; 2020), “Environmental justice (EJ) is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies” (para. 1).

According to CSWE (2015), environmental justice occurs when all people equally experience high levels of environmental protection and no group or community is excluded from the environmental policy decision-making process or is affected by a disproportionate impact from environmental hazards. Environmental issues are critical to social work education and practice due to the profession’s unique focus on the person-in-environment perspective. At the heart of the concerns are the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation that dramatically affect quality of life on Earth as well as the social,

political, cultural, and economic systems on which human communities depend. Vulnerable populations, including those living in poverty, populations of color, and women, bear a disproportionate share of the consequences, leading to what is now understood as environmental injustice (CSWE Committee on Environmental Justice, 2017).

Many social work scholars would regard ecological justice as synonymous with climate justice. They are very similar, but with some small distinctions. Environmental justice may be considered a type of ecological justice. Ecological justice builds on environmental justice by expanding the focus from working for justice that is primarily only for people to working for justice for people, other species, and entire ecosystems. The concept of ecological justice is innovative and also inclusive of Indigenous* knowledge and practices about the intricate interconnections among people and all living and nonliving things. According to IFSW, the climate crisis is directly connected to human activities and is not merely due to normal patterns of nature. While the climate crisis impacts all of us, those who are marginalized or oppressed are experiencing it to an even greater extent, creating climate injustice for people and the planet. Much of the burden of unsustainable consumption patterns has fallen disproportionately on the most vulnerable people in the world, who typically have the smallest consumption patterns. In addition, these vulnerable people receive fewer of the benefits of the environmental resources. These collective patterns of unsustainable consumption contribute to the climate crisis, making it a global justice issue for people and the planet (IFSW, 2021).

Climate Injustice

Decades of social work research has consistently demonstrated that in the United States racial minorities, especially those living in poverty, face substantially more environmental hazards in daily life than wealthier, White individuals (Beltrán et al., 2016). Even though the toxic burden of pollution falls disproportionately on the impoverished and minority populations that social work endeavors to serve, historically the profession has not intervened in a meaningful way to alleviate this pervasive problem. The economic and social costs of climate disasters expose a widening gap between those with and those without

*With a multitude of voices and identities in these chapters, this text uses NASW Press style and capitalizes Indigenous, Black, and White (but not terms like “whiteness” or when referring to “white supremacy”).

the ability to overcome repercussions from these events. Low-income communities of color are more likely than wealthier neighborhoods to be situated in areas prone to flooding without adequate drainage systems, as exemplified by Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey (Stone & Cohen, 2017). Furthermore, research by Pearson et al. (2018) debunked the pervasive assumption that only wealthy White individuals care about the state of the environment. Through a nationally representative survey experiment the research group demonstrated that diverse populations underestimate the environmental concerns of low-income American minorities, misperceiving them as caring less about these issues than more affluent White Americans (Pearson et al., 2018). The implications for this misperception are vast, as those most vulnerable to environmental hazards are also perceived as the least concerned about the environment. Debunking these myths may support efforts to better incorporate the input of these communities in inclusive and diverse environmental decision making.

As a note, we recognize this volume is influenced by the time in which it was created and published. With the ongoing evolution of language, we acknowledge that some best practices in inclusive language may change over time, and will be cognizant of these changes when updating future editions with new terms and concepts. Please know throughout the volume our intention is to be most respectful, especially with communities that are not our own.

Conclusion

Climate change gravely threatens the human–Earth system, requiring intersectional and interprofessional responses to address the resulting injustices. Social work has indeed begun to heed the call to do its part not only in preventing climate change, ecological injustice, and environmental degradation from the root causes, but also in addressing the downstream impacts on vulnerable and oppressed populations. Over the last two decades, attempts to incorporate environmental justice within social work, including measures by NASW, CSWE, and AASWSW, have recognized the importance of embracing environmental concerns as a discipline. Social work must utilize its deep and historical skill set and ethical commitments to shape policy and offer substantial solutions to the most resonating and complex challenge of modern time. The impacts of climate change on the health and well-being of vulnerable populations have important social work practice implications (Appleby et al., 2017).

Social work's historical focus on building social justice and community-oriented approaches can support proactive responses to climate change (Coates

& Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012). With a focus on positive outcomes for individuals and communities, social work can extend its expertise and collaborate with other disciplines to find best practices to resolve and mitigate the devastating effects of climate change. As the limits of the Earth's ecosystems and atmosphere are continuously pushed to extremes, social work can organize a collective response across disciplinary levels to advance cooperation and activate socially just solutions.

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