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# The contribution of social work in climate resilience and environmental justice: A green social work perspective

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## Abstract

The focus that social work places on community is one of the ways in which it differentiates itself from other professions such as psychology, psychiatry and counselling. Social workers include clients' communities while making assessments and formulating intervention plans for social problems. Traveling outside of society, however, is vital and helpful for social workers in order to gain a more holistic knowledge of human suffering. The natural environment in which a culture exists is a crucial factor in shaping human beings. Attempts to center environmental concerns in social work theory and practice are uncommon in the available literature. Therefore, this paper provides an analysis of the role of social work in climate resilience and environmental justice. A desktop method was used to collect data from databases namely, Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar. Data was analyzed through critical discourse analysis and the findings of the study revealed the role that social workers play in the environmental movement as well as the ways that social workers in all capacities feel the impact of climate change and how it can be addressed at all levels of practice.

**Keywords:** Environmental Justice; Climate Change; Climate Resilience; Green Social Work; Social Change

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## **1. Introduction**

The focus that social work places on community is one of the ways in which it differentiates itself from other professions such as psychiatry, psychology, and counselling. When making assessments and providing remedies for social problems, social workers take into account the social environments in which their clients reside (Ritchie, 2010). It is however essential and helpful for social workers to travel outside the boundaries of society in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of human suffering (Kondrat, 2013). The ecological setting in which society lives plays a significant part in the development of human beings. This ecosystem is essential for human life, and as such, it needs to be preserved and maintained so that it can continue to fulfil its function. Miller et al. (2012), social workers have the responsibility to address environmental problems and play a role as intermediaries or advocates, ensuring assistance and support for individuals affected by such issues. Nevertheless, the prevailing environmental catastrophes and their impacts on susceptible individuals require the profession to step up and offer aid to those adversely affected by these events (Alston, 2015).

Problems are likely to arise for humans as a direct result of problems in their natural surroundings. Mugambiwa (2021) asserts that the ecological devastation caused by humans, the loss of topsoil, the pollution of all environmental components, the extinction of species and the depletion of resources have all contributed to the widespread realisation that fundamental societal shifts are required around the world. There is little doubt that the challenges at hand have major repercussions for the day-to-day lives of people as well as their potential to thrive in complicated social structures. In order to have a thorough understanding of social issues, it is necessary for social workers to take into account the entire spectrum of the human and social environment, which includes the natural world (Ritchie, 2010). The major objective of the paper is to assess the role of social work in climate resilience and environmental justice. Shokane (2016) contends that social workers bear a moral obligation to safeguard the most susceptible individuals affected by climate change, thereby making a valuable contribution to the ongoing discourse. The significance of social workers' concern for climate change lies in the disproportionate adverse effects experienced by already vulnerable communities (Dominelli, 2012).

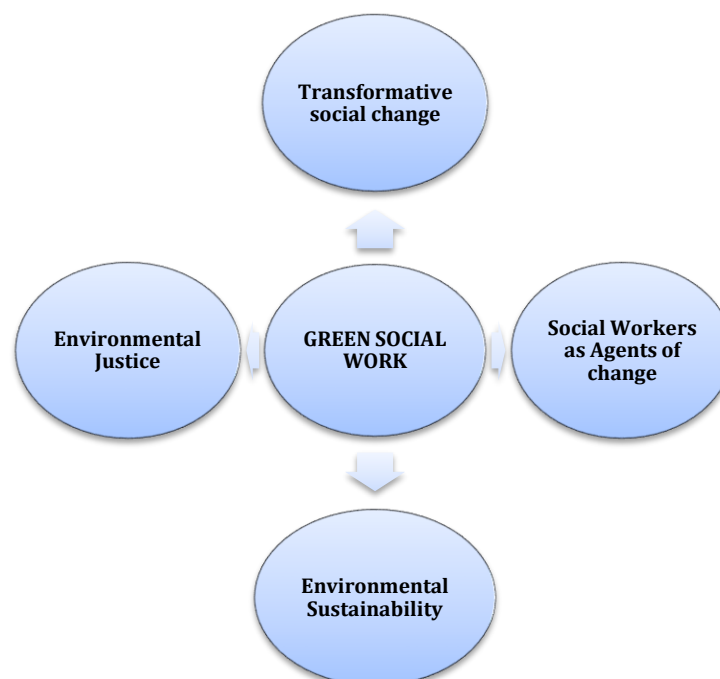
## **2. Research methodology**

The researcher used four databases, namely, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar to search more than 20 items, including 7 research articles and 13 reviews. These databases, which are frequently searched, include significant collections of popular content. The different keywords as (Green social work, Environmental Justice, Climate change, Climate justice, climate resilience, social change, Eco social Work) were used to search the articles from these databases. To take additional information from these articles, the researchers used references from these articles as well. Data was analysed through Critical Discourse Analysis. Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) assert that the term Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) first appeared in the late 1980s. Woodilla (1998) is of the view that CDA is a process of speaking and writing that gives rise to texts through their creation, circulation, and reception. In addition to the more official written records such as news stories, corporation statements, and reports, this category includes not just the written word but also photographs, novels, television series, advertising, and artefacts. The researchers evaluated the data that was gathered from scholarly journals and books. The selected literature was limited to ones that focused on environmental justice and climate resilience in the context of social work. Preference was also given to articles that focused on green

social work principles and practice. Most recent publications were preferred in order to provide the latest findings and trends, however, since the field has not been extensively explored, the researcher made use of both recent and old literature sources.

### 3. Background of environmental social work

Since the birth of the profession in the 19th century, social work has maintained a dual focus of concern, one stream has emphasized the personal needs of individuals, families, and groups and the existing stream has emphasized social reform and social justice, the common collective good (Falck, 1988). This latter stream, driven by Jane Addams of the Settlement movement recognised the significance of the person-in-environment approach, as such viewing the environment as a contextual factor for practice and the recognition of the structural and systemic aspects impacting peoples' lives. Social workers have, from the very beginning of their careers, shown a strong preference for analysing their environments via the lens of social science, as opposed to the natural or physical sciences. Social workers focus their practice on the interconnections between individuals and systems in the social environment, with the ultimate goal of reestablishing harmony and stability in communities that have recently been subjected to upheaval. This is accomplished through the use of a systems approach. In this approach, the real world was not taken into consideration at any point. The canonical literature on social work envisioned a system in which the physical environment would be replaced by the social one once these pillars were in place.



**Figure 1.** Tenets of green social work

Environmental social work is a specialised domain within the field of social work, which prioritises the promotion of ecological and environmental sustainability alongside principles of justice (Rambaree, 2020). The terms environmental social work and related terminology have been employed in diverse contexts to denote a social work approach rooted in the principles of ecological justice. Environmental social work is defined as the utilisation of social work principles, expertise, values, and ethical standards to address environmental issues with the aim of averting further environmental degradation and promoting equitable resolutions (Coates and Grey, 2018). Social work possesses a distinct characteristic compared to other helping professions, as it acknowledges the imperative nature of upholding relationships with nature, conservation, and humanity.

The academic underpinnings of the field of social work and the professional focus placed on providing direct client care are both given similar weight in traditional definitions of social work. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), which was referenced in Ornellas et al. (2018) social transformation and growth, societal cohesiveness, and the empowerment and liberty of people are the goals of social work. Both the academic underpinnings and the hands-on parts of the social work profession are frequently lauded for their liberating and enabling qualities. As a consequence of this, social workers are equipped with the convictions, attitudes, and skills required to effect social change at the individual, group, societal, and global levels in accordance with the emancipatory ideals and principles of social justice and human rights (Kondrat, 2013). One of the central objectives of environmental social work is to safeguard and sustain the wide array of living organisms present on earth. Social workers possess the capacity to address and alleviate the consequences of environmental degradation through the adaptation of their core values, skills, and expertise, thereby facilitating societal transformation (Gray et al., 2013). In the context of Zimbabwe, the academic and professional discourse and practise of social work do not sufficiently address environmental concerns, despite the growing global attention towards these issues (Nyahunda, 2021).

Particularly, the field of social work has been praised as a key agent of societal change in recent years. For this reason, it is stated that social workers have a moral as well as a legal responsibility to work for a society in which everyone can enjoy a greater level of living. The "Person-in-Environment" concept played a major role in the evolution of the social work profession. It is vital for social workers to understand people in relation to the surroundings in which they live, work, and interact with others. This perspective serves as a guiding idea for the field of social work as a whole (Kondrat, 2013). As a result, the field of social work is evolving to integrate a more holistic perspective, one that takes into consideration the numerous links that exist between persons and the biosocial environments in which they find themselves (Hare, 2004). In contrast, the focus of traditional social work education and practise has been on people and the interactions between them, as well as the economic and political components of society, while largely disregarding the individuals' immediate physical environment (Harris and Boddy, 2017).

Mathende and Nhapi (2017) provide empirical support for the notion that the insufficient training of social workers in ecological factors, such as the degradation of the environment and its impact on human development, poses a hindrance to the incorporation of environmental concerns into the practise of social work. The absence of comprehensive training on ecological factors among social workers poses a significant obstacle to the successful integration of environmental considerations into the practise of social work (Mathende and Nhapi, 2017). Contrary to prevailing circumstances, there has been a widespread international

demand for social workers to recognise and incorporate the essential principles of environmental conservation across all aspects of their professional endeavours.

Essential aspects of Environmental Social Work (ESW) include proactive participation in social, human, and ecological development in the community; preparedness for practicing in areas such as natural and man-made disasters and protection of the biophysical environment (Alston et al., 2019). ESW, in its most basic form, is premised on the idea that human flourishing and the flourishing of the natural world are intimately linked. As a result, ESW attempts to cultivate conditions that are conducive to the long-term success of both human flourishing and the flourishing of the natural world (Ramsay and Boddy, 2017). ESW is at the centre of green social work, ecological social work, and ecosocial work (Matthies et al., 2001). The concept of Eco social Work makes use of ecological arguments and explanations to call for social justice. At the same time, it promotes the respect of human rights and participatory approaches through the medium of social work interventions in local communities (Matthies et al., 2001). Social workers are ethically bound to acquire expertise and education regarding the vulnerable state of the natural environment (Chitereka, 2010). They are also expected to advocate for environmental concerns and engage in proactive measures. Furthermore, social workers are responsible for assisting their clients in adopting environmentally responsible behaviours. Nyahunda (2021) asserts that despite a lack of awareness among social workers in training and practise in Zimbabwe regarding the environmental challenges faced by individuals, it is acknowledged by Zimbabwean social professionals that addressing environmental concerns holds great importance in their professional endeavours.

#### 4. Transformative social change

The objective of Green Social Work is to achieve transformative social change that produces a living, sustainable earth with equitable shared and dispersed resources and opportunities in collaboration with other people (Dominelli, 2018a). The global agreements on social work and its commitment towards Social Development (SD) necessitate ESW education and practice all over the world because of the interconnected nature of the social, economic, and ecological dimensions (Ramsay and Boddy, 2017). The global agreements on social work and its commitment towards SD are a prerequisite for ESW education and practise (Rambaree et al., 2019). It is becoming increasingly important for social workers to make a contribution to the development of ecologically sustainable practises (Mary, 2008). This is despite the fact that the vast majority of existing models of social work practise disregard worries about the continued existence of the environment. Moreover, social workers already have the fundamental skills necessary for environmental practise. This is especially true in the areas of networking, linking, and incorporating multiple sections of marginalised groups, which are all essential to the process of sustainable development.

The social work profession, along with other relevant parties, bears the responsibility to effectively address the impact of climate change-induced disasters on its clientele (Cumby, 2016). The domain of social work assumes a critical role in facilitating sustainable development and enhancing public awareness regarding the challenges confronting the environment (Dominelli, 2018b). Social workers serve a broader role beyond providing therapy, addressing poverty, and facilitating access to resources (Mathende and Nhapi, 2018). They are actively involved as catalysts for societal transformation. To put this into perspective, social workers play a significant role as advocates for social justice by enhancing the capacity of their clients to navigate and thrive within their respective environments, while also considering the impact of the broader social context.

## 5. Environmental justice

The field of social work involves a wide variety of professionals, including frontline workers, supervisors, activists, organisers, and community organisers. Social workers are in a particularly advantageous position to advance environmental justice because of the capabilities they possess in the areas of collaboration, networking, advocacy, community building, and capacity enhancement. The preservation of biological diversity is an essential component of sustainability policies, which are designed to ensure the continued existence of human societies over the long term, as well as to promote social cohesion and environmental equity. As a result of their expertise and experience, social workers are good candidates for employment in environmental sustainability since they are able to organise and lead teams comprised of professionals from a variety of fields.

It is necessary to create an alternative narrative to the one that is currently being used to justify and uphold the unjust social systems that are enabling the violence that is being perpetrated against the ecosystem, according to the field of peace and conflict studies. This is necessary in order to put an end to the violence that is being perpetrated against the ecosystem. Hoff and Polack (1993) assert that social workers have a responsibility to ensure that a fair allocation of limited natural resources is maintained. Schmitz et al. (2010) are of the view that critical social work practise entails collaborating with other people in order to change economic structures in order to obtain more fair results, with a special emphasis on the promotion of positive peace and justice.

Social workers offer a diverse range of services to individuals, families, and communities residing in areas that experience a disproportionate impact from environmental injustices (Boetto, 2017). There exists a strong interconnection between social justice and environmental justice (Mugambiwa, 2021). Consequently, the discipline of social work is currently grappling with the fact that environmental issues, including climate change, are posing numerous challenges for vulnerable populations across the globe. Muzingili (2016) posits that environmental justice encompasses a diverse range of subjects, including the equitable allocation of the burdens and advantages associated with climate change. Environmental justice encompasses the implementation of solutions that are mutually agreeable, equitable distribution of environmental hazards, and community involvement in the formulation of environmental management policies (Gray and Coates, 2015; Mugambiwa, 2021).

The dynamics of environmental sustainability and its impact on individual decision-making, the formation of public policy, and economic development have been the subject of insightful observations in a wide range of literature, including that which has emerged from the fields of social work activism, social justice, international business, social entrepreneurship, and the natural sciences. Other fields that have contributed to this body of work include international business, social entrepreneurship, and the natural sciences. In their roles as community organisers, professional social workers can assist in raising awareness about ecological and environmental issues not only in their own neighborhoods, but also on a global scale. Coates (2003) encourages social workers to take on new responsibilities and become actively involved in community practise, stating that the importance of connectedness and relationship makes the re-establishment of a feeling of community of place and belonging a fundamental priority for social work.

It is crucial to acknowledge that environmental issues, including those that are progressively evident due to the phenomenon of climate change, present challenges for the clientele of social workers. Consequently,

social work practise should establish strategies to effectively respond to ecological disasters within its routine interventions (Dominelli, 2018b). It is noteworthy to acknowledge that environmental issues, including those that are progressively emerging due to global factors, hold significant importance. Social workers cannot remain passive in the face of global warming and simply observe the transformative shifts occurring in their surroundings (Tabin, 2015). Social workers should take into account the significance of human rights and social justice when addressing policies pertaining to climate change interventions (Clark, 2013). This is because social workers bear the obligation to work towards improving the well-being of individuals within the framework of human rights and social justice.

### 5.1. Social workers as agents of change

As part of their function as agents of change, social workers participate in social action on both the individual and community levels. They also guide the future research and policy agenda towards goals that most immediately resonate with the people who are most vulnerable to the repercussions of climate change (Mearns and Norton, 2010). They are able to achieve long-term, systemic change by including in their community service both the individual and group decision-making processes (Stocker and Kennedy, 2009). People who are on the periphery of society, particularly those who are impoverished, have a pressing need to have access to information regarding the connections between economic disadvantage and environmental hazards. They also need resources to assist them in advocating for social, economic, and ecological situations that are equal (Mearns and Norton, 2010). In Bangladesh social workers collaborate with local communities in developing community-based strategies which include conducting community based vulnerability assessments and community planning sessions (Ahmed et al., 2017).

### 5.2. Sustainability

It is important that messages and approaches to sustainability be woven into all levels of community life in order to make transformation under difficult circumstances more feasible. There needs to be a mental shift on the side of individuals, communities, and businesses about the significance of the necessity of environmental sustainability (Mearns and Norton, 2010). Therefore, it is necessary for social workers to engage in challenging conversations about the factors that contribute to environmental instability, such as conflicts, acts of violence, and both natural and man-made disasters. It may be necessary to raise public awareness about the negative effects of environmental conditions and politics in order to foster situations in which citizens can become change agents in the process of transforming their communities or countries. This can be accomplished by educating the public about the interconnected nature of these problems.

The eco-social work approach can be viewed as an expansion of traditional social work practises (Grey and Coates, 2015). The integration of environmental considerations into the fundamental practises of social work is broadening their range. Ecological social work involves examining the relationship between ecological health and social welfare (Boetto, 2017). The emergence of eco-social work can be attributed to the recognition that climate change and environmental disasters have a disproportionate impact on already vulnerable communities such as communities in rural Zimbabwe (Mugambiwa, 2018). Similarly, eco-social work necessitates a deliberate recognition of the interconnection between individuals and the ecological surroundings. Consequently, ecosocial workers are ethically compelled to accord utmost priority to

environmental concerns within their professional practice. A study by Norton (2012) demonstrates the substantial progress being made in the field of social work through the application of eco-social work. Numerous approaches have been developed, placing a strong emphasis on eco-social work.

It is possible to bring about change that both alleviates poverty and advances economic development while also preserving the natural environment (Mearns & Norton, 2010). If the professional narrative were expanded to include ecological development and environmental justice, social workers might have an easier time visualising themselves entering environmental practise by employing existing skill sets in novel circumstances. A significant number of the environmental issues are extremely subtle and require an awareness of the interdependence of the many potential policy responses. The unique mix of skills that are brought to the table by a combination of peace workers and social workers who are informed about economic concerns is beneficial to the efforts that are being made to mobilise citizen advocacy and address the imbalances that are involved (Nyahunda et al., 2024). Both social workers and peace workers share a variety of talents, including the ability to act as a facilitator, mediator, leader, and activist.

Nonetheless, the specialised expertise of the two professions is complementary, which makes it all the more fruitful for them to work together (Lederach, 2010). Within the realm of social work, topics such as human rights, community organisation, capacity building, and social networking are all well-known. Additionally, each of these topics is essential to the pursuit of social and environmental justice within the context of integrated environmental practise. Social workers and peace activists share a dual focus on policy, one that comes from the heart and the other from the brains (Lederach, 2010; Matlakala et al., 2022). The issues posed by the environment, especially the distribution of resources, lie at the crossroads of three distinct but related fields: social work, economics, and peacebuilding.

### 5.3. The environment and the individual

Heinonen and Spearman (2006) assert that the primary focus of social work should not be on psychological forces, the environment, or the social structure, instead, the emphasis ought to be placed on the interface or link that exists between the individual and the social environment. Although the physical environment is frequently brought up in theoretical conversations about social work, it is rarely included into models of practise that have been mapped out (Nyahunda, 2021). According to Lehmann and Coady (2001), the environment of a client is defined as any component of the physical, social, and cultural environment, and what is most significant will change with persons, time, and region. Zastrow (2004) asserts that environmentalists, as opposed to social workers, should be concerned with the protection of people from the risks that threaten the natural world and the quality of life it supports. It is probable that the difference in viewpoints between social workers and environmentalists is due to the fact that environmentalists tend to put more of a focus on the social environment than social workers do.

## 6. Conclusions

The major objective of the paper was to assess the role of social work in climate resilience and environmental justice. This study has established green social work facilitates transformative societal transformation, leading to the establishment of a viable and enduring global environment characterised by equitable allocation and



communal utilisation of resources and opportunities. The global agreements on social work and its dedication to Social Development necessitate the widespread implementation of education and practise in Environmental Social Work due to the interdependence of social, economic, and ecological components. The adherence to sustainable development principles and international social work agreements is imperative for the training and practise of environmental social work.

The study has established that green social work is a comprehensive approach to the practise of social work that emphasises the interconnectedness of individuals, the dynamics of interpersonal interactions, the social structure of human relationships, and the adverse impacts of socio-economic and physical environmental crises on the welfare of humanity. The field of social work encompasses a diverse range of professionals, such as frontline staff, managers, organisers, activists, and community organisers.

Social workers possess a distinctive ability to advance environmental justice by virtue of their proficiencies in collaboration, networking, advocacy, community development, and capacity building. To ensure the enduring existence of human societies and promote societal unity and equitable environmental conditions, sustainability strategies must encompass the conservation of biological diversity. Social workers possess the necessary qualifications for employment in the field of environmental sustainability due to their extensive knowledge and experience. Additionally, their adeptness in forming and effectively managing interdisciplinary teams comprising experts from various sectors further enhances their suitability for such roles.

Social workers actively participate in social action at both the micro and macro levels as an integral aspect of their responsibilities as agents of change. Moreover, they strategically align ongoing research and policy endeavours with the primary goals that pertain specifically to the populations that face the highest vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. The integration of sustainability-related concepts and methods across various aspects of communal life is of utmost importance in order to enhance the potential for transformative responses in the face of challenges.

It is imperative for individuals, communities, and organisations to reassess their perspectives regarding the significance of environmental sustainability. Consequently, social workers are required to engage in challenging dialogues with their clients pertaining to the underlying factors contributing to environmental instability, encompassing phenomena such as armed conflicts, acts of violence, as well as both natural and anthropogenic calamities. In order to foster an environment where individuals can effectively contribute to societal transformation within their communities or nations, it may be imperative to enhance public awareness regarding the adverse consequences of political dynamics and environmental factors. Raising public awareness regarding the interconnectedness of these issues can facilitate the desired outcome.

There is a need for social work to prioritise the examination of the interface or connection between individuals and their social environment, rather than focusing primarily on psychological processes, the environment itself, or the social structure. Although the physical environment is frequently examined in theoretical discourse surrounding social work, it is seldom considered in established practise models. The environment of a client encompasses any aspect of their physical, social, or cultural surroundings. The perceived significance of these elements is subject to variation based on factors such as the individual, the time period, and the geographical location.

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