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Sustainability, Human Rights, and Environmental Justice: Critical Connections for Contemporary Social Work

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Abstract

Social work has a long-standing tradition of emphasizing the interaction of people and their environment, although this systems perspective has focused almost exclusively on the importance of social relationships. There is an emerging emphasis within the profession regarding the need to pay more attention to the critical role of the physical environment. The last fifty years has seen a growing global ecological movement, and the profession is joining the call to action for sustainability. Social work must extend this mission to include environmental justice, the human right to live in a clean, safe, and healthy environment. The world's most poor, vulnerable, and oppressed people often live in the most degraded environments and have no control over resources. The important connections between social work, sustainability, human rights, and environmental justice in our contemporary world need to be more clearly articulated in the scholarly literature. An understanding of these separate but closely linked concepts is necessary for the profession to effectively pursue the goal of making the world a more just, humane, and sustainable home for all life.

Introduction

The 2001 United Nations annual report on "The State of World Population" focuses on population and environmental change. It begins with a fascinating analogy regarding preserved footprints of early human ancestors found near a remote lake in Tanzania. These footprints are a geological marvel, made over three and a half million years ago, when few humanoids roamed the planet and their survival was far from certain. The report goes on to note that, at present, our human footprint affects every part of the planet. Over the course of a very short history, humans have spread to every ecosystem on the planet, altered the balance of nature, changed the world's climate, and threatened the sustainability of Earth itself. The greatest challenge facing humanity in the 21st century is to address the resultant ecological calamity before we destroy the very environment that sustains us.

Social work has a vital role to play in shaping an effective global response to the environmental crisis and to the human rights issues that accompany it. The profession is uniquely situated to face these challenges due to its historic focus on a social systems theoretical perspective, as well as its advocacy-based and action-oriented framework for practice. Unfortunately, social work has traditionally focused on the primacy of social relationships in our pursuit of social and economic justice. Tempering the negative effects of modernity, capitalism, and globalization, with their rapid rate of uncontrolled growth, and resulting environmental consequences, will require an unprecedented level of international cooperation. Effective solutions will be predicated on an understanding of and commitment to universal human rights (Hawkins, 2009). To be relevant in the contemporary world, social work must move beyond our traditional focus on social and economic justice. We must actively advocate for environmental justice and pursue sustainable development so that all people can live in a clean, safe, and healthy environment.

It is important for social workers to understand the language used to discuss concepts that are quite similar and closely related, yet distinctly different. The over-arching movement for change goes by many names, such as environmentalism, ecology, conservation, sustainability, stewardship, sustainable development, environmental justice, environmental human rights, eco-justice, and eco-efficiency. Sustainability is a very broad term which generally refers to the process whereby humanity is able to meet current needs while maintaining the ability of future generations to meet their needs. This process is closely linked to the environmental movement, which has gained world-wide momentum over the past fifty years, as well as deep a concern for social justice and regard for spirituality. In the late 1960s, the United Nations (UN), which is the primary advocacy body for the world's most poor and vulnerable people, began to formulate policy in terms of *sustainable development*, described as encompassing equally social, economic, and environmental justice. It specifically addresses how resources can be equitably distributed for the benefit of all people, as opposed to current models of consumption which so disproportionately benefit already affluent societies. The environmental justice movement argues that it is a human right of all individuals to live in a clean, safe, and healthy environment. This position emphasizes that the world's poorest and most oppressed people often live in the most toxic environments, which can further impeded their social and economic development. The UN has a well-established framework for human rights and sustainable development, which are linked through the goal of environmental justice. In turn, the sustainability movement has been an effective mobilizing tool in advocating for environmental justice.

While the profession of social work has a long-standing tradition of advocating for social and economic justice, the interconnected concepts of sustainability, sustainable development, environmentalism, human rights, and environmental justice have yet to be fully incorporated into the core knowledge and value base of social work education and practice. The profession must acknowledge the severity of both the environmental and human rights crisis facing the world and convey this content to our students. Social work practitioners must pursue a policy of enhancing environmental justice and human rights given the extensive inequity in living conditions across the world. The profession must prepare students for effective practice at the global level such that, while still advocating for the environmental human rights of all people, it can also actively advocate for the environment itself.

Social work and a “new” ecological paradigm

The distinguishing theoretical orientation of social work among the helping professions is the singular emphasis placed on the crucial role of the environment in human functioning. While social work is a very broad and complex profession, it is generally unified through the theoretical foundation of systems/ecological theory. This emphasis is most notably evident in the curriculum area of Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HBSE), which focuses specifically on the interrelationships of people within their environment. Social work has focused almost exclusively, however, on the social environment with relative neglect of the critical role of the natural environment on human functioning (Besthorn, 2003; Rotabi, 2007). A quick perusal of popular HBSE texts used in the U.S. provides anecdotal evidence to support this long-standing theoretical focus (e.g., Ashford, LeCroy & Lortie, 2006; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007; Hutchison, 2008), although Van Wormer, Besthorn and Keefe (2007) is a notable exception. Coates (2003) observes that, as a result of this one-dimensional focus, "... the environmental crisis has remained largely outside of social work discourse, and the profession has instead played a largely mitigating role in addressing social problems ... without a critique of fundamental assumptions" (p. 39).

This split in social work theory reflects the larger dualism found in Western culture. This worldview is predicated on fundamental distinctions, such as mind vs. body, culture vs. nature, and human vs. non-human. The consequences of this worldview tends to be focused on exploitation of nature, resource extraction, efficiency management, and a belief that technology can solve all problems (Lopez & Luiggi, 2008). As such, the only viable solution to the environmental crisis is to adapt a worldview that is holistic and relational, that moves from control to participation, and that respects the whole community of life. Coates (2003) addresses the need for a new ecological paradigm in social work, which emphasizes a core theme that environmental exploitation results from the same pressures that create social injustice.

The planet cannot sustain current levels of human consumption. Global consumptive patterns became unsustainable in the mid-1980s, when human demand for resources exceeded Earth's ability to regenerate. This non-sustainable pattern varies enormously in terms of consumption levels between economically developed and economically developing countries. For example, if all nations were to match the current levels of consumption in the U.S. then it is estimated that the Earth could sustain only one-half billion people; while at current Mexican levels the Earth could sustain 20 billion people; and at current African levels, 40 billion people (<http://www.ecofuture.org>). The social work focus on the social environment has the unintended effect of diminishing the significance of the natural environment on human welfare, especially for the poorest and most vulnerable, who typically inhabit degraded environments and also have less social and political power. It should be noted that environmental inequity also exists within industrialized countries, with poorer segments of the population disproportionately living in environmentally degraded conditions. Therefore, working toward a sustainable future is hampered by the overwhelming influence of economic forces, which puts greater value on profit than on ecological or social well-being.

The Earth's resources are finite, and humanity is at a critical juncture. Human population, pollution, and consumption continue to grow at an alarming pace. Human

population exceeded six billion in 1999, and it could exceed 11 billion by 2050 (UN Population Report, 1999). Rapid urbanization is creating many new challenges; in 2008, more people lived in urban rather than rural areas (UN Population Report, 2008). According to the most recent Footprint Analysis conducted by Redefining Progress, "humanity is exceeding its ecological limits by 39% ... we would need to have over one-third more than the present biocapacity of Earth to maintain the same level of prosperity for future generations" (<http://www.redefiningprogress.org>). The future looks very bleak unless humanity, particularly affluent societies, can learn to live within their means. "Moderate UN scenarios suggest that if current population and consumption trends continue, then by the mid-2030s, we will need the equivalent of two Earths to support us" (<http://www.footprintnetwork.org>). Even more alarming, "If everyone lived the lifestyle of the average American, we would need five planets" (<http://www.redefiningprogress.org>).

The consequences of failing to recognize this ecological crisis and to respond to it accordingly will result in the destruction of the very environment that sustains human life. The time has come for social work to bridge this epistemological divide and to transform professional education and practice from "anthropocentric" to "ecocentric." There are many social work educators who have already begun to envision this paradigm shift. Besthorn and Saleebey (2003) and Muldoon (2006) contend that the social work curriculum should specifically include content on the natural environment. Coates (2003) examines the theoretical roots of modern anthropomorphic social work and outlines a path toward transforming current policy and practice to a "mutually beneficial community-focused one." Bartlett (2003) details an undergraduate level course that links environmentalism and social welfare. Mary (2008) echoes much of this earlier literature and proposes a unified model of sustainable social work which calls for expanding the mission and value base of the profession in order to pursue sustainable policy and practice. Jones (2010) presents a teaching model based on transformative learning theory that engages students in a process of reflection, dialog, and action with regard to ecological issues.

Clearly, the profession must join the call to action for a new ecological paradigm. Integrating content on the natural environment is particularly relevant at this time when the profession is becoming more globalized, and global society is realizing that environmental interdependence extends beyond national boundaries. Further, we must recognize the implicit connections between sustainability and human rights, so that we can envision not only a world-wide culture of environmental sustainability, but one that is fair and just to all.

Social work and human rights

From its inception, social work has had an international perspective, although individual countries have typically focused on domestic issues. This narrowed field of interest needs to shift if the profession is to be more effective in addressing the many pressing problems facing humanity today. There is an emerging emphasis for incorporating international content into social work education (e.g., Hokenstad & Midgley, 1997; Healy, 2001; Ramanathan & Link, 2004; Lyons, Manion & Carlsen, 2006; Mapp, 2008).

A critical component of a legitimate international perspective is the recognition of the pivotal role of human rights. Human rights lie at the very heart of social work. In the U.S., both

the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) call for social work education to include content on human rights (Reichert, 2006). According to Lundy and van Wormer (2007), while the NASW Code of Ethics does not specifically address human rights, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics does (including reference to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). The International Federation of Social Workers' 1996 International Policy on Human Rights states that human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (<http://www.ifsw.org>).

The United Nations Charter (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) created a vision for global justice. The UDHR was unanimously approved in 1948 and became the ~~clear~~ international standard articulating what constitutes basic human rights (i.e. human rights are not merely a desire or a privilege). It was the first document of its kind and the first international statement to use the term *human rights*. The historical importance of the UDHR cannot be overstated. It is a very straight forward document, containing a preamble and thirty articles. This is the most translated document in the world, available in 360 languages, and the full text is easily accessible via the UN website.

The United Nations has ratified seven subsequent documents clarifying and expanding upon these universal human rights. These include: Convention against Genocide (1948); Conventions on the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field (1949) (also known as the Geneva Convention); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (1966); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1976); Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979); Convention against Torture (1985); and, Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Taken together, these documents comprise the United Nations "Agreements on Human Rights." In 1966, the "International Bill of Human Rights" was formulated and consists of the UDHR, ICESCR, and ICCPR (<http://www.pdhre.org>).

There were several criticisms of the UDHR at the time that it was ratified. For example, it was championed by Western nations that were also colonial powers. Further, there has been ongoing debate about the concepts of universalism versus cultural relativism. Ife and Fiske (2006) argue that the principle of universality does not necessarily negate what is culturally appropriate; rather, universality refers to an overarching value of human worth which orients cultural appropriateness.

There is a long-standing gulf between the ideal of humanism and the reality of continued inequality. Bagaric and Dimopoulos (2005) note that the past century witnessed a proliferation of human rights discourse, laws, and instruments, yet these efforts have been largely ineffectual in that they have bypassed most of the world's population. Douzinas (2006) observes that, paradoxically, despite good intentions, the triumph of humanitarianism has been drowned in human disaster. Of particular current relevance, Article 18 of the UDHR addresses religious freedom and expression, which lies at the fault line of many contemporary global conflicts.

Human rights are typically defined as universal and indivisible. As such, all humans are entitled to every basic right by virtue of their humanity. These rights apply regardless of one's nationality, culture, political or economic system, religion, or any other qualifier. A declaration,

unlike a treaty or convention, imposes no obligation on a ratifying government to fulfill the principles contained within the document. There is an extensive scholarly literature that examines the many aspects of human rights, and there are several noteworthy resources focused specifically on social work (e.g., Ife, 2008; Mapp, 2008; Reichert, 2003, 2006; Wronka, 2008). It is instructive to note, however, that the current literature on human rights, including social work, makes little or no mention of environmental justice.

Sustainability, sustainable development, and environmental justice

The world has changed substantially since 1948. Some human rights advocates call for amending the UDHR so that environmental justice will be addressed equally with social, political, cultural, and economic rights (e.g., Davies, 2008). Others argue that Article 28 could be interpreted to address international environmental concerns. This Article states, "Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration can be fully realized." As such, collective rights (also known as solidarity or third-generation rights) pertain to world-wide problems that require international collaboration, such as environmental treaties to address global warming (Reichert, 2003). While human rights are a statement of principle, they must be ensured through political or legal action. Anderson (1996) observes that the past century witnessed an unprecedented increase in legal claims for both human rights and environmental rights. Yet, human and environmental abuses persist and, in many respects, are getting worse. "The need for stronger international norms protecting human rights to a safe and sound environment ... needs to be included as a component of environmental protocols" (Adeola, 2000, p. 686).

Sustainable development is not to be confused with social development, although the concepts are highly compatible. "Social development consists of interventions aimed at providing the conditions whereby human beings change existing social relations by using resources to express their creativity and grow to their full potential" (Dominelli, 1997, p. 75). The central feature of social development is the contention that economic growth alone is not enough to provide for basic human needs. People also require effective social programs in order to substantially improve their lives. Sustainable development is a broad socio-political movement that aims to achieve an ongoing balance in the global ecosystem between the Earth, people, and the entire web of life. Thus, the global economic system, contemporary social problems, and the ecological crisis are linked. Speaking in terms of sustainable growth, Hoff (1997) writes that, "the critical condition of the planet and the impoverishment and destitution of an increasing proportion of the world's population are rooted in a global economic system devoted to profit, growth, and monopolization of resources by fewer and fewer players—namely transnational corporations and the international financial systems that support them" (p. 35). Sustainable development particularly calls for economic and social policy that meets the needs of all people, rather than concentrating wealth in a few countries and producing luxury goods for the affluent, while most of the rest of the world's people live in varying degrees poverty. Hoff also notes that extreme wealth and extreme poverty are similar in that they both degrade the environment, except in different ways. A sustainable approach to development encompasses social development and is rooted in human rights; and, confronts social and economic inequities both within and between countries.

The United Nations speaks in terms of sustainable development and environmental justice, although these two terms are not interchangeable. As previously mentioned, sustainable development is broadly defined by the UN as the social, economic, and environmental process of balancing production and consumption so as to meet current needs while preserving Earth's resources for future generations. In the past, the UN definition of sustainable development comprised social and economic justice. Now, it also includes environmental justice. Environmental justice refers to the right of current and future generations to a clean, healthy, and safe environment. Hancock (2003) defines "environmental human rights" as the human right to live in an environment free from toxic pollution and to exercise control over local natural resources. "Although countries may never agree on a definition of environmental justice, there is global agreement on protecting the basic human rights that make environmental justice possible" (Sachs and Peterson, 1995, p. 1). Sachs (1996) calls for recognition that the poorest people pay the greatest cost for ecological damage, including loss of access to natural resources. Therefore, securing environmental justice as a human right must be clearly emphasized.

The UN has specifically pursued environmental justice as a human right through several highly significant conferences. The first UN global environmental conference that addressed human rights was the UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972. The Conference is regarded as the beginning of the global environmental movement. The Declaration on the Human Environment (referred to as the Stockholm Declaration) was a seminal document in that it was the first official UN statement which recognized the right to a healthy environment. It led to the formation of the UN Environmental Program (<http://www.un.unep.org>).

The Stockholm Declaration was never formally ratified into international law, yet it was a significant step in creating the linkage between social and economic justice on the one hand and environmental justice on the other. It established a reciprocal understanding, recognizing that social and economic justice are not possible if the Earth is destroyed, and that environmental justice is not possible if people do not have social and economic power. It reinforced the idea that economics, politics, culture, and sustainability are intricately intertwined.

The next major UN environmental event that addressed human rights was the UN Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Earth Summit, which was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Its goal was to seek strategies for pursuing economic development while stopping escalating pollution of the planet and destruction of natural ecosystems. The Summit's central theme was that "poverty as well as excessive consumption by affluent populations place damaging stress on the environment" (<http://www.un.org>). As a result, "eco-efficiency" needed to become a guiding principle for governments and businesses regarding production, alternative energy, public transportation, and water scarcity.

The Earth Summit was the culmination of an ongoing process initiated at the Stockholm Conference twenty years earlier. It produced several key environmental documents, two of which are specifically relevant to environmental justice: Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. The Rio Declaration is an important statement on sustainability and set forth numerous principles to guide world-wide sustainable development. Its stated purpose was to build upon the Stockholm Declaration, establish new and equitable global

partnerships, work toward international agreements, and protect the integrity of the global environmental and developmental system (<http://www.un.org>). Agenda 21 entails a wide-ranging blueprint for action to achieve sustainable development worldwide and established the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. Of note, "The Earth Summit influenced all subsequent UN conferences which have examined the relationship between human rights, population, social development, women, and human settlements -- and the need for environmentally sustainable development" (<http://www.un.org>).

The next major UN meeting specifically relevant to environmental justice was the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002. It convened ten years after the Earth Summit, so it is also referred to as Earth Summit II. It produced the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, which reaffirmed previous UN environmental agreements and called for enhanced international cooperation. The introduction to the Johannesburg Declaration states that respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and cultural diversity are essential for achieving sustainable development and ensuring that it benefits all people equally. The document goes on to address the specific targets for achieving environmental justice: poverty eradication, changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development, globalization, and specific geographic concerns.

The Johannesburg Plan focuses less on actual environmental issues and more on sustainable human development. It emphasizes a balance between social, economic, and environmental justice. The agreement focuses particularly on "the worldwide conditions that pose severe threats to the sustainable development of marginalized peoples, which include: chronic hunger; malnutrition; foreign occupation; armed conflict; illicit drug problems; organized crime; corruption; natural disasters; illicit arms trafficking; trafficking in persons; terrorism; intolerance and incitement to racial, ethnic, religious and other hatreds; xenophobia; and endemic, communicable and chronic diseases, in particular HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis" (<http://www.un.org/documents>). The Plan recognizes that the planet is at a critical point, with the interaction of widening social and economic inequity and the need to improve living conditions for the extremely poor weighed against the increasing rate of environmental degradation, most notably climate change.

Environmental justice and human rights

Another major UN initiative related to sustainable development is the Millennium Project, a massive global human rights campaign. The Millennium Summit was held in New York in 2000, following a decade of preparatory conferences and summits. Representatives from 189 countries and leading development institutions have adopted the UN Millennium Declaration (<http://www.un.org>). The Declaration laid out fundamental values regarded as essential to international relations in the twenty-first century: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and shared responsibility. It also addressed peace and disarmament; development and poverty eradication; protecting the environment; human rights; democracy and good government; protecting the vulnerable; meeting the special needs of Africa; and, strengthening the United Nations. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) target eight

specific areas for change by 2015: 1) poverty and hunger, 2) primary education, 3) gender equality, 4) child mortality, 5) maternal health, 6) disease (especially HIV/AIDS and malaria), 7) environmental sustainability, and 8) responsibility of developed countries toward developing countries. The MDGs were endorsed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Earth Summit II) in 2002.

The MDGs recognize explicitly the interdependence between growth, poverty, and sustainable development. Goal 7 directly addresses the need to ensure environmental sustainability through four specific targets: integrate the principles of sustainable development into governmental policies and programs, reduce biodiversity loss, halve the proportion of the population without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation, and achieve a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers (The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2008). The statistics are daunting. For example, although there is not yet a global water shortage, almost half of the world's population faces a scarcity of water and water use has grown at twice the rate of the population for the past century. More than one-sixth of the world's population does not have access to safe drinking water. Although there has been a marked improvement in sanitation world-wide, in developing regions, nearly one in four people use no form of sanitation and another fifteen percent lack access to hygienic facilities. These problems are especially severe for rural dwellers, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, but they also extend into urban slums. Slum conditions are defined as lack of improved sanitation, water facilities, durable housing, and sufficient living area. "In 2005, slightly more than one-third of the urban population in developing regions lived in slum conditions; in sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion was over sixty percent" (p. 43).

Several of the other MDGs are clearly linked to Goal 7. For example, people living in extreme hunger and poverty (Goal 1) depend more directly on a healthy ecosystem, have insecure rights to resources and inadequate access to information, lack participation in decision-making, and are more vulnerable to natural disasters. Universal primary education (Goal 2) is linked to sustainable development since the heavy household responsibilities of families living in poverty often prevents their children, especially girls, from attending school. In turn, school is the most critical avenue for empowering the future generation to pursue their rights as well as educating them in the principles of sustainability. Gender equality (Goal 3) addresses environmental justice since females are over-burdened with collecting water and fuel, have limited input in decision-making, and often lack access to land ownership or resources. Child mortality (Goal 4) is highest among children under the age of five due to lack of sanitary living conditions, unclean water, and indoor air pollution. Maternal health (Goal 5) is damaged due to indoor air pollution, the excessive burden of carrying water and collecting fuel, increased incidence of malaria due to deforestation and water mismanagement, and vulnerability to man-made natural disasters.

The MDGs are closely linked to the professional mission of social work, especially the call for advocacy and action toward securing universal human rights. The most recent 2009 MDG Report documented substantial progress related to the four goals of poverty reduction, universal primary education, reduced child mortality, and some aspects of environmental sustainability (e.g., ozone depletion) (<http://www.un.org>). However, the recent global economic recession has reversed much of this progress. The report notes that environmental justice has

especially lost ground. While almost every region improved the living conditions of the urban poor, progress in barely keeping pace with rapid growth of slum areas. It indicates that efforts to preserve the natural resource base are not forceful enough, especially regarding climate change, fisheries, forest, and water. The report concludes that, while we are the first generation that has the ability to eliminate poverty, apparently, we lack the resolve to do so.

There are other programs under other auspices in the UN that are related to environmental justice. The Division for the Advancement of Women held the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. One of their twelve Strategic Objectives pertained to "Women and the Environment." The Platforms for Action included a detailed discussion and three action steps directed at involving women in environmental decision-making at all levels, integrating gender concerns and perspectives in policies and programs for sustainable development, and strengthening or establishing mechanisms across levels to assess the impact of development and environmental policies on women (<http://www.un.org>). The World Health Organization (WHO) adopted a General Comment on the Rights to Health in 2000 which affirm health as a basic human right (<http://www.who.org>). This document states that this right extends not only to health care but to the determinants of health, such as clean water, adequate sanitation, safe food, housing and working conditions, and access to education and information, including sexual and reproductive health. Environmental justice is at the center of a human right to health, since medical care (treatment) has far less of an impact on population well-being than social and environmental factors.

Despite the tremendous efforts of the UN and advocacy groups from around the world, progress toward environmental justice has been slow. Adebawale *et al.* (2001) argues that, despite these international efforts, environmental problems continue to worsen since implementing "soft laws" have largely failed, globalization has intensified, and resource depletion continues at an unsustainable rate. They conclude that existing human rights approaches are inadequate (since environmental rights are not directly addressed) and argue for explicit, stronger international agreements. In the current climate of global capitalism, concern for human safety and environmental protection are consistently subjugated to economic growth and the maintenance of inefficient patterns of production and consumption. Hancock (2003) claims that this double standard accommodates the destructive forces of capitalism, which perpetuates systematic environmental degradation and human rights violations.

Social work and environmental justice

The linkages between social work and human rights are explicit. Taylor (2000) argues social development is a prerequisite for social justice. Mapp (2008) notes that "a lack of social development creates situations in which violations of human rights can thrive" (p. 23) and specifies three main interrelated barriers to human freedom: poverty, discrimination, and lack of education. Reichert (2006) cautions that social workers often fail to see how human rights are closely linked to social work policies and practices. She identifies six primary interventions to foster basic human rights: challenging oppression, empowerment, strengths perspective, ethnic-sensitive practice, feminist practice, and cultural competence.

Social work educators have also called for the need to address environmental justice as a critical component of social and economic justice. McKinnon (2008) urges that, "social work has the opportunity to be part of the solution rather than an uninvolved bystander to the emerging environmental predicaments" (p. 266). While the human rights movement has a clear record of actively advocating for environmental justice, social work education (at least in the U.S.) has failed to incorporate this perspective into the curriculum. While human rights are typically discussed in terms of "spatial" relationships regarding the obligations of nations or communities to each other, the new discourse on sustainability represents a "temporal" extension to future generations (Ife, 2008).

In this global era, social work students must be assisted to engage in an informed discussion of the universal aspects of human rights and environmental justice. They must be helped to gain awareness about the pressing problems of inequality around the world (especially for children) and to identify sustainable solutions to the very real environmental crisis facing humanity today. The concept of sustainability has "long been familiar to many workers engaged in social and community development programmes" (Lyons, Manion & Carlsen, 2006, p. 191). Acquiring a knowledge base that links social work practice with universal human rights, environmental justice, and sustainable development will help them to envision the world as a more just and humane place.

A paradigm shift is occurring around the world regarding sustainability and environmental justice. It has not reached a critical mass necessary for global change, since humanity has yet to respond effectively. Social work, as the helping profession that traditionally focused on linkages across systems, must actively join this movement if we are to stay relevant in the contemporary global 21st century. Our professional mission of advocating for and acting toward social and economic justice must be expanded to include environmental justice. We must overcome any remaining xenophobia and extend this commitment to the entire world, as the ecological crisis does not respect national boundaries and affluent countries have an obligation to help the disadvantaged everywhere. It is incumbent upon social work education to prepare students for this challenge, and for social work practitioners to embrace sustainability. Our very survival, and the survival of future generations, depend upon it.

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