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Environmentally Displaced Persons: Broadening Social Work's Helping Imperative

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Abstract

This article traces the evolution and trajectory of a new class of oppressed persons—Environmental Displaced Persons (EDP). It argues that helping cannot limit itself to one's neighborhood or even country, and that environmentally displaced persons must become a central focus of attention for social workers and other helping professionals. The causative factors forcing the displacement of millions of people are a matter of grave concern for social workers who are called upon to advocate for global justice and basic human rights. It also suggests several alternative models such as a human-rights based approach and anti-oppressive theory and practice which may prove useful as social workers struggle to come to terms with the plight of millions of environmentally displaced persons and the underlying injustices their predicament reveals.

Introduction

It appears that the emerging green revolution and new earth friendly practices are finding a receptive audience in the consumerist world of American entrepreneurialism. This is a welcomed trend, for many have known for at least a generation that humanity is experiencing an ecological crisis of epic proportions that requires immediate action (Coates, 2003). Each day seems to bring more scientific data that the crisis is on the verge of becoming a worldwide catastrophe (van Wormer, Besthorn, & Keefe, 2007). Conserving energy, buying locally, recycling, using alternative fuels and buying energy efficient cars are all becoming viable options now that saving an ailing planet appears to have become an international priority. While this call to action is welcomed and necessary to stem the tide of ecological decline, it is only one piece of a very complex issue (Cox, 2006).

Often overshadowed in the current impetus to protect natural systems is the impact of environmental crises on socio/cultural institutions and human populations (Besthorn, 2008). The deterioration of the planet's natural systems is creating an ever increasing population of human refugees attempting to escape their unsafe, threatening, and dangerous natural environments. By

2010, there will be 50 million environmental refugees—a figure over five times greater than the number of political refugees predicted for the same time period (Moss & Ember, 2006). While it is difficult to calculate the exact number of ecological refugees, it is incumbent on governmental and non-governmental organizations and the helping professions to begin to address this difficult problem. If global environmental deterioration continues at the current pace the number of displaced persons will grow exponentially (Gorlick, 2007, Townsend, 2002). As Myers (1997) suggested, well over a decade ago, we are experiencing an ever increasing number of “marginalized people driven to [and from] marginal environments” (p. 168).

The plight of millions of persons, dislocated as a direct result of ecological decline, has become an issue of global justice. Although these people are found in virtually every nation, including the United States, ninety-six percent are from the developing world (McConahay, 2000, Unruh, Krol & Kliot, 2005). In many cases, it is the major economic and political powers of the global north that have helped create the worst conditions leading to large scale decline of ecological systems. This causal relationship between the wealthy and impoverished peoples of the world represents a kind of “widespread systematic discrimination” (Segal, 2007, p. 309).

The fact that millions of people are displaced due to environmental crises raises many core concerns for social workers across the globe but, especially, in industrialized nations. Social work must begin to examine this crisis in order to understand the mechanisms creating it while at the same time be willing to advocate for change when it is necessary. This article offers a brief analysis to help social workers more fully understand the plight of environmentally displaced persons and offers suggestions for the profession in order for it to support its historical value commitment to promote “the general welfare of society, from local to global levels” (National Association of Social Workers, 1996, p. 26).

Global Ecological Crisis

Currently, there are signs that the natural environment is undergoing dramatic change—unlike anything seen in recorded history. Though a few continue to debate the scope and depth of this crisis (Gray, 2008), it is becoming increasingly difficult to contest the preponderance of scientific data painting an unsettling picture of natural systems in alarming decline.

Global warming captures most of the media attention and much international concern, but it is not the only worry for policymakers and average citizens. Increased flooding, incessant drought episodes, more intense and frequent storms, evaporation of fresh water, and rising sea levels generate a great deal of global concern and are, in all likelihood, the immediate consequences of global warming trends (Brown, 2004; van Wormer, Besthorn & Keefe, 2007). Other significant changes in planetary ecosystems are also a cause for alarm. Land degradation and the attendant loss of irreplaceable topsoil is a growing worry among world agri-scientists (Freudenburg, 2006). Desertification, an often predictable by-product of topsoil erosion, turns millions of acres of productive land into uninhabitable desert. In China, the Gobi Desert grows by approximately 2700 square miles—comparable to turning an area half the size of Connecticut into desert every year (Brown, 2004, Patton, 2001). The wholesale logging and burning of thousands of square miles of the world’s last remaining virgin forests not only depletes the atmosphere of valuable oxygen, but destroys natural beauty and bio-diversity. Deforestation

weakens the soil's ability to retain water, thus increasing mud/landslides, floods, and debris flows and disrupts the earth's natural cycles such as rain, wind, and atmosphere (McGuire, Mason, & Kilburn, 2002; Myers, 1997).

Unlike the often gradual and sometimes imperceptible deterioration of ecological systems, natural disasters (including earthquakes, landslides, tsunamis, wildfires, floods, avalanches) have a shorter duration but are often strategically connected to larger system decline. McGuire, et al. (2002) asserts that these natural disasters and the "changing environment are intimately linked" (p. IX) and warns that global citizens should most certainly expect a rise in the frequency and potency of the disasters. Ironically, the UN deemed the 1990s as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR) (UN General Assembly Resolution 236, 1989) while those years produced more earthquakes, fires, storms, and floods than ever before (Abramovitz, 2001).

Other environmental harms are on the rise as well including pollution of air, water, and land. The World Health Organization (2007) estimates the worldwide death toll from significant air pollution is approximately 2.4 million individuals per year. Many in the developing world are forced to be concerned with pollutant fog and poor air-quality warnings urging people to remain indoors due to unhealthy air. There are harmful chemicals and poisons such as heavy metals, chemical pesticides and mercury in our lakes and streams—many of which provide potable drinking water to large metropolitan areas. Pharmacological agents such as estrogen, antibiotics, and Prozac may all be found in the earth's supply of fresh water (Hossay, 2006). In Alabama, the Monsanto Corporation contaminated thousands of acres of virgin soil with PCBs which have been shown to cause cancer in human beings (van Wormer, Besthorn & Keefe, 2007). Lopez (2007) also suggests that war, both its duration and aftermath, is one of the single largest causes of land pollution in the developing world.

Environmentally Displaced Persons: Defining the Population

The world community has been slow in recognizing the reality of persons dislocated from their geographic locale due to serious environmental threats (Lopez, 2007). One reason for this tepid response is the difficulty in formally defining and categorizing this population. Initially, this population was given the generic label of *environmental refugees*. This terminology was challenged, however, because the label requires fulfillment of a detailed criteria of displacement, usually based on political realities, and includes movement outside one's home country of origin (Falstrom, 2001). Further, the term refugee is widely overused and misunderstood. An example is when US official's designated survivors of Hurricane Katrina as refugees, creating a maelstrom of public criticism ("United States: A Cooling Welcome," 2006).

Next, the terms *environmental migrant or emigrant* were introduced as alternatives to refugee but the term migrant suggested a voluntary movement (Bates, 2002). This is not generally the case for those dispossessed by serious environmental conditions. An environmentally dispossessed person has little choice when leaving his or her home. In fact, it is usually a matter of survival that necessitates their movement (Myers, 1997). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) eventually developed the terminology:

Environmentally Displaced Person (EDP). Brian Gorlick (2007), Senior Policy Advisor to the UN, suggests that environmentally displaced persons are:

people who are displaced from or who feel obliged to leave their usual place of residence, because their lives, livelihoods and welfare have been placed at serious risk as a result of adverse environmental, ecological or climatic processes and events (p. 1)

This definition includes the key features of compulsion and threat but does not suggest persecution or movement outside one's home nations. This builds upon an earlier description offered by Falstrom (2001) who broadly defines an environmentally displaced person as "one who leaves his or her home and seeks refuge elsewhere for reasons related to the environment" (p. 1).

Despite definitional exigencies, there is agreement among many policy experts that protection of this identified group falls most appropriately under the authority of the United Nations (Biermann & Boas, 2008; Diagne & Entwisle, 2008; Falstrom, 2001; Myers, 1997). The specific role that the UN ought to play, however, is still a matter of discussion. Some have suggested that the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (UNCRSR), established under the auspices of the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, provides the best mechanism to support policy initiative. Proponents suggest that environmentally displaced persons fit the broad criterion of a distinct population experiencing well-founded fear, persecution, and membership in a uniquely identified social group (Falstrom, 2001; Cohen & Deng, 2008). Others have countered that environmentally displaced persons are, in fact, not refugees and there are difficult philosophical and definitional questions yet to be addressed to more fully understand their unique status (Lopez, 2007). For instance, can the earth fulfill the requirement of being a persecutor (Townsend, 2002)? Do environmentally displaced persons meet the definition of a specific, immutable social group sharing common characteristics central to their identity (Falstrom, 2001, p. 6)? Falstrom also disputes the utility of the UNCRSR suggesting, rather, that a new international treaty should be drafted that specifically focuses on the conditions creating and maintaining environmental exile. For Falstrom, the treaty should be modeled after the Convention against Torture because of "its balance between affirmative obligations for signatory states and the rights that it grants in individuals" (p. 10).

What is indisputable is that the number of environmentally displaced persons will continue to increase. Townsend (2002) estimates that at least 5000 people a day are added to the ranks of environmentally displaced persons—5000 people whose "livelihoods and welfare have been placed at a serious risk as a result of adverse environmental, ecological, or climatic processes and events" (Gorlick, 2007, p. 1). The evidence detailing the significant social impact of devastating ecological damage is compelling. The struggle of environmentally displaced persons is dramatic, unacceptable, and alarming proof that human activities are seriously impacting the survival of persons in their environments.

Environmentally Displaced Persons: Contributing Factors

One way to more fully understand environmentally displaced persons is to look at those contributory factors that have helped to create this new group of the dispossessed. Lambert (2002) describes five factors contributing to environmental displacement. These are natural disasters, gradual degradation of the environment, development projects, accidental disruptions or industrial accidents, and conflict and warfare.

Natural disaster. Natural disasters can include droughts, floods, tropical storms, and earthquakes—all of which can be exacerbated by human abuse of the planet. For example, former US Vice-President Al Gore's award winning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (Gore & Geuggenheim, 2006), details that when oceans get warmer as a result of global climatic change, it causes more powerful storms because ocean temperature has a profound impact on the climate. Devastating natural disasters occur worldwide and dramatically alter the community's experiencing their onslaught. The spring of 2008 left Chinese villages in Sichuan province inaccessible and desolated after a powerful series of earthquakes killed and injured over 90,000 residents (Flor-Cruz, 2009). In November of 2009, more than 500 people died and 11,000 were missing after swollen rivers flooded and nearly obliterated the town of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (al-Ahmed, 2009). A vast number of the city's remaining four million residents either fled or were left to fend for themselves without electricity, sanitation or medical care. Flooding in Asia in 2004 affected more than 100 million Bengalis, Chinese, and Indians (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2007). And few Americans can forget the devastating impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans and Gulf Coast communities.

Eco-System Degradation. As suggested earlier, another contributing factor to environmental displacement is the gradual degradation of natural eco-systems which include such things as air pollution, desertification, deforestation, soil erosion, and potable water availability (Lambert, 2002). McConahay (2000) notes that "environmental degradation has put people in harm's way. . . the human impact on earth today is responsible for the displacement of millions" (p. 70). This brings to mind the historical incident of Love Canal—a small housing development located near Niagara Falls, New York. Residents, nearly thirty years ago, were first evacuated from the site and then discovered they were suffering from numerous health problems after learning the neighborhood was built on top of a toxic waste dump (Bates, 2002).

Development. Uncontrolled building and infrastructure development projects often force native peoples off their land to make way for various profit-driven activities. For example, the Narmada Dam Project in India will "submerge an area of land greater than the size of New Delhi" (Lambert, 2002, p. 6)—displacing a government-estimated quarter million citizens. Not only will hundreds of thousands of Indians be forced to leave their homes (many sentenced to suffer disease and hunger due to inadequate resettlement schemes) but the productive and aesthetic beauty of the land and river will be despoiled.

Similarly, citizens can be displaced due to rapid urban development, which seems paradoxical considering much of the movement of displaced persons is towards urban areas. However, as Barrow (1994 p. 17) points out, "the growth of giant, poorly constructed and poorly managed *megacities* in highly vulnerable areas creates pockets for destruction and further

environmental unsustainability” signaling a dangerous cycle of displacement and ecological degradation.

Industrial Accidents. A fourth contributory factor to environmental displacement is industrial accidents (Lambert, 2002). Chernobyl is a widely recognized example of this. Nearly 100,000 people were permanently displaced in and around a thirty-mile radius surrounding the accident site—near the present city of Kiev, Ukraine. This area is still uninhabitable to this day. The 1976 nuclear reactor meltdown at Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania which forced over 100,000 families out of their homes is yet another example of the high social cost of large-scale industrial accidents (Lopez, 2007).

War: “War can be both a cause and a result of environmental degradation” (Lambert, 2002, p. 4). The destructive and dangerous use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War and Saddam Hussein's arson of the oilfields of Kuwait are two prominent examples (van Wormer, Besthorn & Keefe, 2007). Most sobering for social workers and professional helpers in the global north is the fact that those countries most concerned with environmental issues are the same countries which hold the greatest potential to harm. Indeed, “the United States, with its massive arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. . .[poses] the most subversive threat to world peace and the environment” (van Wormer, Besthorn & Keefe, 2007, p. 229) and the potential displacement of millions.

Again, *An Inconvenient Truth* calls the audience to “think of the impact of a couple hundred thousand refugees when they're displaced by an environmental event [such as those of Hurricane Katrina] and then imagine the impact of a hundred million or more” (Gore & Guggenheim, 2006). While the numbers are nearly incomprehensible, individual stories help illustrate the wrenching human toll.

McConahay (2000) chronicles the struggles of Jairo, a Honduran who was displaced as a result of the 1998 Hurricane Mitch. The hurricane first threatened the lives of Jairo and his family, and then, sparing the family, left his hometown of Tegucigalpa torn apart in ruins. Though he survived, Hurricane Mitch had “thrown him up with his roots in the air like the trees scattered unnaturally on the rivers' banks” (p. 69). Jairo was without a home or a job and even questioned his own personal identity. Without any other options, he began on foot to find a new, adequate place to call home hoping to survive a journey to Mexico or the United States. Jairo made it to America, beginning his new life at a shelter in Houston, suppressing his hopes of returning to his beloved family and homeland where the place he once worked is now “a mere impression on the grass among ghostly frames of ruined buildings” (p. 70).

There are several things to consider in Jairo's story. First is the lasting emotional and psychological trauma he, his family, and his community experienced as a result of being forced to leave their homes and family as a byproduct of a horrific natural disaster. Secondly, is the fact that widespread migration compromises the socio-cultural cohesion which binds communities together in mutual support and collective identity. When a community is forced to scatter in many directions in order to survive or to find new livelihoods their once shared culture is slowly decayed. Third, is the fact that the devastating effects of Hurricane Mitch were worsened by human negligence. Noemi Espinoza (as cited in McConahay, 2000), executive director of the

Christian Commission for Development, confirmed that “Mitch would have never been so deadly if our country hadn't been permeated by inequality and environmental destruction” (p. 70).

Environmental Justice North and South

The degradation of the earth's natural environment can, in most cases, be traced back to human greed and callousness (Besthorn, 2004). The resulting environmental impact of these attitudes falls disproportionately on the world's poor and marginalized and creates fundamental conditions of inequality and injustice. Abramovitz (2001) speaks of the uneven social impact of what she describes as *unnatural disasters*, which are normally occurring hazards:

made more frequent or more severe due to human actions. By degrading forests, engineering rivers, filling in wetlands, and destabilizing the climate, we are unraveling the strands of a complex ecological safety net. We are beginning to understand just how valuable that safety net is (p. 6).

Injustices in the global south are created when inequality in the control and use of land creates a condition where “the lion's share of farmland is owned by a tiny fraction of the population” (Abramovitz, 2001, p. 7). A small group can despoil the land to such a degree that the majority population of a region, through no action of their own, suffers significant hardship. Another example includes the overall ecological impact of each country and how these are differentially disturbed among the nations of the world. The United Nation's Environmental Program (2002) describes the ecological impact of human societies on the earth's natural systems. It refers to this impact as the *ecological footprint*—a calculation of how much ecological burden (including pollution, land degradation, CO₂ emissions, etc.) is encumbered on the planet. North America's ecological footprint is four times as much as that of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific combined. Indeed, the average individual footprint per person in the United States was over eleven times that of low-income countries (Hossay, 2006).

By examining the ecological footprint according to area, one gets a clearer picture of who is having the largest impact on a struggling planet. In most cases it is first world, high-income, capitalist countries with high standards of living (Besthorn, 2004, “First World”, 2008). Compare this with the environmentally displaced who are most often found in third world countries principally noted for their high levels of poverty, lack of basic resources such as adequate food and clean water, persistent warfare and conflict, and government corruption. From even the most general observation it is clear that the humans who are impacted most by ecological harm are *not* the ones responsible for its most of its creation. Those responsible for recklessly abusing the planet are not likely the ones suffering the most immediate and most threatening consequences. Environmentally displaced persons are caught in a vicious cycle in which the detrimental effects of environmental misuse are wholly intensified by existing social and political conditions and distributions of power creating an unhealthy relationship (Freudenburg, Gramling, Laska, & Erikson, 2007). The synergistic relationship of poverty, unemployment, lack of governmental programs and involvement, ethnic conflicts, foreign debt, and environmental collapse all add to the equation of devastation and displacement (Myers, 1997).

Dominelli (2002) points out that the mechanisms of injustice and oppression first divide people into groups of superior and inferior allowing the superior group to limit the availability of resources and “deny agency” (p. 8) for those in the inferior group. Even in the wealthy and industrialized United States, Hurricane Katrina “served to highlight disparities in health and well-being that already existed in the region and to bring into public view the vulnerabilities of the poor, working class, and minority communities” (p. 153). Many believe that Hurricane Katrina provided a glaring example of ongoing structural injustice to the degree that residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast were denied immediate aid and the resources to respond to the disaster (Freudenburg, 2006). Hurricane Katrina is an unfortunate example of how a government's ignorance or refusal to approach an issue, even in an affluent and progressive country, can cause tremendous loss of life and ongoing peril and privation for survivors (Dass-Brailsford, 2008; Laska, 2008).

Implications for Social Work Professionals and Educators

Social Work Values and Environmentally Displaced Persons

A core value of social work and many other helping professions is the commitment to fair, adequate and just treatment of the individuals and groups it serves—especially those most deleteriously impacted by existing social structures and systems. For social work, this is often defined as an obligation to social justice. Both the CASW and the NASW Codes of Ethics call social work professionals to pursue social justice, for example the NASW Code (1996) states “particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people” (p. 5). In a similar manner, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2004) strongly encourages social workers around the world to make social justice a primary “motivation and justification” (n.p.) for action.

A second core value of social work is a commitment to understand the human condition in the context of environment—how the individual and her environmental continuously and dynamically influence each other (van Wormer, Besthorn & Keefe, 2007). The problem of environmentally displaced persons offers the profession an opportunity to reconsider this core construct—making it more expansive and more finely nuanced in order to better understand individual and planetary environments as interconnected segments in a larger global tapestry.

A third, and equally critical piece of social work's value commitment, is found in the profession's dedication to social and political reform—not only helping individuals in need but amending policies that allow and exacerbate collective human distress such as that experienced by environmentally displaced persons (Johnson & Yanca, 2007; Segal, 2007). Social worker's ethical obligation must now extend to work for social, political and environmental equity thus ensuring that all systems contribute to providing “equal access. . .[and] basic human needs” (NASW, 1996, p. 27).

Social Work Theory and Environmentally Displaced Persons

The problem of environmentally displaced persons is also calling social work to consider new ways to think of community—that of participation as a global citizen in a global commons (Nash, Wong, & Trlin, 2006). It is critical for the profession to better understand not only the causes of but the communal nature of human struggle and suffering. Social work's conventional modes of thinking, seeing, and being have too often evolved around the individual or the local—that which is near and dear—while large portions of the global world are easily overlooked (Besthorn, 2003; Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Schriver, 2001). Considering the current and future prospect of a vastly different ecological landscape, social work must expand its traditional view of community as a collection of individuals fettered within the borders of individual nation states.

Even justice movements (environmental, social, economic) are segmented from each other—assuming clear lines of demarcation—when, in reality, the causal roots of injustice run so deep as to be inseparable. Best practices in social work will recognize the interdependence of the human and the natural, the nation state and the global commons, and the rights of individuals and the rights of the collective (Nash, Wong, & Trlin, 2006). An alternative conceptual approach which brings disparate justice orientations into sharper relief is the focus on human rights (Ife, 2001; Lyons, Manion & Carlsen, 2006; Reichert, 2003). Working to ensure basic human rights for every global citizen encourages social workers to envision themselves as active *global change agents*—working to create a just and equitable world community. A rights-based approach inculcates the idea that human rights consist of more than civil and political rights while, at the same time, providing a more comprehensive and specific set of justice guidelines for practice (Lyons et al., 2006; Reichert, 2001). A rights-based approach encourages greater awareness of the plight of environmentally displaced persons who lack security and rights to a basic standard of living as guaranteed by Article 25 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights; 1948).

The International Federation of Social Work (2004) describes social work as a profession which relies on evidence-based practice revolving around the intersection of human agency and ones immediate environmental surroundings. This commitment has often been operationalized in terms of ecosystems and ecological models (Germain & Gitterman, 1980) and those bio-psycho-social factors contributing to and impinging upon human well being. While it is clear that biological, psychological and social factors must be considered in the profession's efforts to empower vulnerable persons and groups; it is equally clear that broader conceptualizations are necessary. Only recently has social work begun to include the natural environment as a critical component to its historic eco-systemic and bio-psycho-social understanding of the human condition (Coates, 2003; Hoff & Pollack, 1993; Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Rogge & Cox, 2001; Zapf, 2009).

Social Work Education and Environmentally Displaced Persons

Currently, most western models of social work education focus on the importance *cultural competence*. While the study of cultural competency encourages respecting and learning about various cultures it is, unfortunately, too often limited to theory and practice applicable to

national and regional circumstances (Suárez, Newman, & Reed, 2008). Instead, an international and globally aware culturally competent curriculum is crucial for effective social work helping, especially with environmentally displaced persons. As global climatic conditions worsen it, by necessity, increases the likelihood of profound interconnections between diverse nations and cultures—as both the world’s powerful and poor struggle to cope with rapidly changing conditions. It is predicted that social work will be the field that is “by definition, most likely to engage with people who are adversely affected by the processes of globalization” (Lyons, Manion, & Carlsen, 2006, p. 35)—including the impact of global environmental displacement.

An international, globally aware culturally competent curriculum for examining the *total* environment of individuals and groups is critical if “social work educators are to avoid creating cardboard people to fit particular stereotypes” (Dominelli, 2002, p. 23). A singular focus on social environments largely nested in the confines of national borders obscures the powerful influence of natural environments on global human populations. This has the potential of leading to a kind of *climatic-oppression* where the voices of developing countries—those most directly impacted by severe climate change—are pushed to the periphery while rich nations collude with other rich nations to establish the parameters of the international climate debate (Raman, 2009).

Anti-oppressive practice is an emerging curriculum emphasis which can help practitioners and students better understand what’s at stake (Dominelli, 2002; Strier, 2007). From this perspective, learning about a client would require a social worker to think not only of a client’s social and local environment, but those institutional, national, global, and natural environments which profoundly impact human well-being (Besthorn & Canda, 2002). An anti-oppressive perspective has at its heart a commitment to international social justice. From this viewpoint, social workers would focus principally on barriers to ecological equality and environmental justice. The scope of their examination would not be limited to regional or national levels but would be, indeed, worldwide. There would also be meticulous emphasis on not only meeting the immediate needs of environmentally displaced persons but working to change the mechanisms that have created the problem. This means that while professionals are working with environmentally displaced persons directly, they are also expressing their collective voice in the political arenas to advocate for them. Individual adjustment and coping strategies of the environmentally displaced cannot be considered solely personal issues. They are a matter of international, public concern. All of these efforts help contextualize a more in-depth and exhaustive understanding of the environmentally displaced person’s total environment, thus creating the potential for better service and advocacy.

Social work does not yet have a strategic plan for addressing the global problem of environmentally displaced persons. As Zapf (2009) notes, there is no “how-to manual for ecological social work” (p. 191). There are, however, places to begin. As a starting point, students might be asked to flesh out what a culturally competent and anti-oppressive practice approach to environmentally displaced persons might look like. They could be asked to develop a strategy to address the range of competing ideological perspectives that both define the problem and offer solutions. They might then be asked to apply their ideas to a current issue, for example, the Copenhagen Climate Summit held in December 2009 to see how various groups like The Alliance for Small Island Nations (Aosis) or the coalition of Least Developed Nations

(LDC) are working to address the issue of environmentally displaced persons and how this compares with the proposals of larger, so-called G-8, industrialized nations (Vidal, 2009).

Conclusion

The careless and harmful practices of the privileged few have become the shackles around the neck of the poor and disenfranchised many. The discrimination, indifference, and devastating effect of ecological harm on millions of environmentally displaced persons, many of whom are voiceless and politically powerless, has created a new class of the oppressed. This article has argued that environmentally displaced persons must become a central focus of attention for social workers and other helping professions. Helping cannot limit itself to one's neighborhood or even country. The causative factors forcing the displacement of millions of people should also be a matter of grave concern for social workers who are called to be involved in and advocating for global justice and basic human rights. Social workers must attend not only to aiding survivors of environmental threats and displacement, but also be concerned with the reasons *why* so many millions are being forced from their homes.

Coates (2003) affirms that “ecological devastation and social injustice result from the same processes and belief systems” (p. 6); processes and systems that are a product of modernity—the same system which has contributed strongly to social work’s own traditional views of helping (Besthorn, 2001; Imre, 1984). We have suggested that several alternatives such as a human-rights based approach, or anti-oppressive theory and practice may prove useful as social worker’s struggle to come to terms with the plight of millions of environmentally displaced persons and the underlying injustices their predicament reveals.

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