Environmental justice: A call for action for social workers

As human beings, we are currently living in way that is completely unsustainable within the world we inhabit. In recent years, growing concerns for environmental and climate change, together with issues of poverty, increasing disparity between societies and the tensions brought by social inequalities have placed sustainable development under the spotlight. The survival of many societies and of the biological support systems of the planet are at risk (United Nations [UN], 2015). Considering environment protection and preservation a collective responsibility, we attempt to analyse the need and role of the social work profession to respond to this call for environmental protection through conceptual and practice engagements in alignment with the UN Global Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

Global environmental concerns

The Earth's average land temperature has warmed by nearly 1°C in the past 50 years as a result of human activity. Global greenhouse gas emissions have risen by nearly 80 percent since 1970, and atmospheric concentrations of the major greenhouse gases are at their highest level in 800,000 years. We are already seeing and feeling the impacts of climate change, with weather events such as droughts and storms and other natural calamities increasing in frequency and intensity. This trend not only threatens the world's ecosystems and biodiversity, but also poses a serious risk for peace, security and sustainable development (UN Environment, 2016).

Pollution affects our health through the food we eat, the water we drink and the air we breathe. Low- and middle-income countries bear much of the brunt of pollution-related illnesses, where the situation is coupled with poor health care and food insecurity. Capital intensive industrialisation, including mining and other natural resources-based industries, has not only created ecological imbalances, but also displaced people from their environments and pushed them into marginal spaces and livelihoods. High levels of consumption and production, fuelled by such industries, require larger inputs of energy and generate larger quantities of waste by-products (Orecchia and Zoppoli, 2007). With 990 pollution-related deaths per 100,000,[1] China has an astonishing number of air pollution fatalities (*The Guardian*, 2016).

Pollution has a particularly disproportionate and negative effect on those who are poor, disadvantaged and marginalised. Although much fewer than China, Pakistan attributed 110,000 deaths in 2015 to pollution (58 per 100,000;[2] *The Guardian*, 2016), and a recent report by Greenpeace India cited pollution as a killer of 1.2 million Indians every year, costing the local economy an estimated 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) (Greenpeace, 2017).

While increasing environmental pollution is one of the major contributors to the catastrophic environmental change being witnessed today, global population expansion is putting enormous strain on natural resources. Coupled with over-exploitation of natural resources and a growth in consumerism, the environmental crisis has accelerated.

Although increasing populations put strain on the environment, due to over-exploitation of resources, there is evidence that industrialisation and capital intensive development aimed at profit

and promoting consumerism have been at the forefront of exploitation of natural resources beyond its regenerative capacity. Furthermore, it is argued that 40 percent of the world's population, classified as the very poor, subsist only on 10 percent of the world's resources, while less than one-third of the world's population, especially the very rich, consumes more than two-thirds of the resources.

Worldwide, 844 million people are living without access to safe water (water.org, n.d.). A WaterAid report in 2016 ranked India among the worst countries in the world for the number of people without safe water. India is not a water-scarce country, with several major rivers and an average annual rainfall of 1170 mm, but lack of conservation and increasing water pollution has made safe water inaccessible to millions of people in India.

Due to such structural inequality imposed by the inequitable distribution of physical resources (Dominelli, 2002, 2012), economically and ecologically fragile communities experience less access to essential resources such as forests, minerals, food and water. Thus the logic of 'neoliberal capitalism', which precludes equitable resource sharing, has failed both the people and the planet. Dominelli presents this as environmental injustice.

Conceptual frame for social work engagements

As far as the social work profession is concerned, sustainable development discourses need to discover the centrality of people. This needs to be viewed both from the perspective of the impact of fragile and depleting environmental conditions on people and from the point of their significant role in collective actions aimed at reducing the same.

As a profession with its rootedness in the 'person-in-environment (PIE)' conception, social work is well poised to seriously engage in planning and executing environmental actions. However, Dominelli (2012) argues that this is possible only if we expand the scope of the meaning of 'environment' in the PIE frame from its exclusive social dimension to include the physical dimension as well. We need to rediscover the physical environment as an important factor under the PIE umbrella (Dewane, 2013). Furthermore, it is argued that having concern for the environment (thinking *about* ecology) is not sufficient: *thinking ecologically* is more important (Marito, 2002, cited in Zapf, 2010). This essentially means that instead of assigning environmental issues exclusively to one discipline, thinking ecologically ensures that knowledge production, practices and engagements become pluralised. Protecting the physical environment becomes the responsibility of everyone. Thus social workers dealing with the marginalities of people cannot afford to ignore one of the significant sources of such marginality emerging from environmental degradation, particularly in the context of the poor, and thereby the action required to preserve and protect.

As is clear from this discussion, pollution of air and water affects the poor disproportionately due to its disastrous impact on the health and livelihoods of people beyond their coping capacities. The environment in which the people are located and the actions that are required to address these structural inequities bring the 'political' dimension of the environment to the fore. In order to foreground this argument, two key interconnected concepts are of high relevance to social work educators and practitioners. They are *environmental justice* and *environmental entitlements*.

Dominelli (2014) suggests environmental justice as a key concept to define the nature of actions that are required of social workers. She explains the idea of environmental justice by defining the negative term environmental injustice as society's failure to ensure equitable distribution of the Earth's resources in meeting human needs, simultaneously providing for the well-being of the people and the planet, today and in the future (Dominelli, 2014). The idea of environmental justice is founded on the fact that socio-economic inequalities are exacerbated by the current development approach by exploiting land, labour and resources at the least economic cost, in a way

that compromises human need. While such resources are predominantly enjoyed by the rich, the negative impacts of such over-exploitation of resources are disproportionately borne by the poor. For example, mining for minerals, by displacing a large number of Adivasis (indigenous people as known in India), not only leads to colossal damage to the environment and ecology for industrial growth, but also dispossesses the local communities of their habitat and livelihoods. Hence, addressing the issue of environmental concerns is not too different from addressing inequalities, keeping the physical environment in mind too. Thus an integration of social justice with environmental justice (Zapf, 2010) is well in line with the social work approach to complex issues affecting human well-being. Hence environmental justice is nothing but an approach aimed at equitable sharing of resources without damaging the ecological balance and without compromising the interests of the poor and the marginalised.

Environmental justice interventions aim to promote a safe, clean environment and meaningfully involve all people in policy and development decisions that affect their environment (EPA, 2014; Mohai and Bryant, 1992; Rogge, 1993, cited in Teixeira and Krings, 2015). Actions by social workers in ensuring environmental justice have two dimensions: 1) promoting the responsibility of the state and the corporations (market) in the use of the world's resources in an ecologically sustainable way, including influencing public policies; and 2) promoting collective actions at the community level in sustainable use of resources, including agricultural and land use practices. Thus a combination of policy practice and local-level collective actions can ensure environmental justice to the benefit of the people.

The environmental entitlement approach considers that, rather than framing environmental problems simply in terms of aggregate population pressure on a limited natural resource base, a more disaggregated entitlement approach considers the role of diverse institutions in mediating the relationships between different social actors (Leach et al., 1999). This conception is an elaboration of the entitlement approach by Sen (1984), where the idea of entitlement goes beyond the normative sense of what people *should* have to a much broader sense of all possibilities indicating what people *can* have. These possibilities are determined by the interaction of a variety of institutions and actors integrating local, national and even international influences on poverty and the environment. Environmental entitlements are therefore potential benefits from the environment over which people have legitimate effective command. They focus on the social structures and networks that allow poor people to have access to resources in order to achieve sustainable livelihoods and minimise poverty. A legitimate and effective command over resources is possible only when one has the capability to negotiate in the dynamics of multiple actors and institutions, both formal and informal, that are embedded in the political and social life of the area. For example, the stubble burning, an agricultural practice of burning the paddy stubble left behind by mechanised harvesting in Punjab and Haryana in northern India, leaves behind huge environmental pollution reaching the capital city of Delhi. Taking cognisance of the toxicity it adds to the poor air quality in the capital city and nearby areas, the Supreme Court of India banned the practice and directed the government to impose a penalty on such practice. However, the practice continues to exist even now. The institutions promoting mechanisation of agriculture and the push for market efficiency play a significant role in farmers adopting this practice, leading to toxic chemicals being released into the atmosphere along with the smoke and damaging the air and soil quality. Intervention is required with multiple actors and institutions in addressing this issue and cannot be dealt with through an effort to enforce legal compliance. Alternative approaches, including institutional remedies and technological solutions, are required in this case. The environmental entitlement approach allows us to look for innovative solutions as an outcome of negotiations among social actors, involving power relationships (Gore, 1993, cited in Leach et.al., 1999), which goes beyond the rules of entitlements encoded in law.

Social work engagements towards environmental sustainability

Recognising the intersectionality of social and environmental inequality (Teixeira and Krings, 2015), and using the frameworks of environmental justice and environmental entitlements, social work can aspire to develop practice models of engagement to promote sustainable living. Such a process of greening of social work (Matthies, 2001: 143) has been founded strongly in the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development initiated jointly by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) between 2012 and 2016. A joint publication entitled 'The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: Commitment to Actions' was aimed at instigating the following actions: (1) promoting social and economic equalities, (2) promoting the dignity and worth of peoples, (3) working towards environmental sustainability and (4) strengthening recognition of the importance of human relationships. These actions clearly indicate the synergy required for promoting social and environmental justice. Close alignment with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Global Agenda brings an interconnected understanding of human needs and concerns that are economic, social and environmental. While unpacking this to operational details, a twin strategy of educating future social workers to view environmental justice as a core component of social justice and bringing social work values and skills to partnerships addressing environmental degradation (Teixeira and Krings, 2015) needs to be adopted. This essentially reinforces the idea that environmental justice is not too different from social justice, which all social workers are concerned with. Social work education needs to reflect this in the curricular structure and field education components. Second, the institutional linkages, substantiated by the environmental entitlement approach, are the foundation of partnerships where social work values and skills as reflected in the Global Agenda would play a significant role.

Conclusion

Environmental issues have not received the much-needed attention they deserve from the social work profession globally. The iniquitous impact of environmental degradation on the people, particularly poorer people, is nothing short of a crisis of social injustice. A sustainable world is not possible without taking account of the human dimensions of the environmental crisis. In this context, social work must define its contribution to the notion of sustainable development on both local and global levels (Matthies, 2001: 127). Appropriate actions in the expanded realm of 'person-in-environment', where both social and physical dimensions of environment are treated as equally important, are captured by the idea of environmental justice. The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development provides the broad framework for action by social workers. More particularly, environmental and community sustainability, the overarching theme of the Dublin Conference 2018, is expected to bring the focus of social work into environmental justice and environmental entitlements. Environmental sustainability is a collective responsibility, where social workers are one of the actors but play a significant role in putting people at the centre of all environmental actions. The environmental entitlement perspective promotes such collective actions through institutional and individual actions. While integrating environmental justice content in social work education and training is a need of the hour, such knowledge and practice models based on social work perspectives, values and skills can ensure that environmental justice is seen as akin to social justice, thereby becoming a central concern for the profession.

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Notes

1. 2015 data, 1.4 million pollution attributed deaths, population 1,397,028,553.
2. 2015 data, 110,000 pollution attributed deaths, population 189,380,513.

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