

Green Social Work for Environmental Justice: Implications for International Social Workers

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Abstract:

Green social work is a holistic perspective that seeks to secure the well-being of people and the planet through reforming socio-political power structures (Dominelli, 2012). It is an eco-centric perspective that respects not only humans, but also values the natural environment in its own right within the ecosystem. Humans are in a symbiotic relationship with the environment, but the impact humans have on the ecosystem often put the environment and humans at great risk and have created a global, ecological crisis. Unrestricted, environmental problems often lead to more complex ecological crises. For example, the production and use of toxins contaminate soil, air, and water, causing insufficient and/or unsafe access to food and water for all living species. Such ecological problems also create social and political conflicts as people try to access and control what is left of the viable, natural resources; these can lead to unprecedented levels of human suffering and forced migration (Basher, 2008; Besthorn and Meyer, 2010; Dominelli, 2012; Willett, 2015b). The ecological crisis is complex, requiring global, interdisciplinary, and community-based responses (Schmitz et al., 2012). While the ecological crisis affects the whole ecosystem, the specific impacts these hazards have on vulnerable and historically marginalised people are the focus of environmental justice work (Dominelli, 2012).

Keywords: social workers | environmental justice | green social work | advocacy

Article:

Introduction

Green social work is a holistic perspective that seeks to secure the well-being of people and the planet through reforming socio-political power structures (Dominelli, 2012). It is an eco-centric perspective that respects not only humans, but also values the natural environment in its own right within the ecosystem. Humans are in a symbiotic relationship with the environment, but the impact humans have on the ecosystem often put the environment and humans at great risk and

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Environmental justice highlights the linkage between environmental degradation and power imbalances as the mainly human victims of environmental degradation also must contend with injustices related to class, gender, race, ethnicity, and locale (Bullard, 1994; Nixon, 2011). Environmental injustice occurs at the macro-level as global economic and political inequalities unjustly shift environmental hazards and burdens away from wealthier countries and onto poorer countries (Healy, 2008). Environmental injustice also occurs at the micro/local level, particularly within developing countries, as poor people bear a disproportionate burden of environmental degradation (Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2005; Dominelli, 2012; Hoff and Rogge, 1996; IPCC, 2014; McKinnon, 2008; Zapf, 2009). These injustices exist because of global systems of inequality, and global collaboration is necessary to confront them.

Social workers are increasingly being called upon to engage in the global response to address environmental injustices, as these problems affect the clients and communities they already serve (Weick, 1981; Soine, 1987; Berger and Kelly, 1993; Estes, 1993; Hoff and Rogge, 1996; Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2005; Gitterman and Germain, 2008; Mary, 2008; McKinnon, 2008; Zapf, 2009; Jones, 2010; Dominelli, 2012; Peeters, 2012; Narhi and Matthies, 2016; Powers, 2016). In fact, many of the early pioneers in social work focused on holistic community practices that involved environmental justice issues such as creating improvements in sanitation and waste management, developing parks, and working to decrease the spread of communicable diseases (Addams, 1970; Kelley, 1970). In addition, national and international social work associations have identified environmental justice as a core issue within the profession (e.g. inclusion within several standards including in the new Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for the Council on Social Work Education, 2015; in the 10th Grand Challenge of the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, 'Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment', see Kemp and Palinkas, 2015; and earlier internationally as the third agenda item in *Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: Commitments to Action*, 'Working Toward Environmental Sustainability', see IASSW, ICSW, and IFSW, 2012). Due to environmental injustices being disproportionately found in the developing world, social workers from the US and other developed nations may often engage in international, cross-cultural practice and research contexts. Thus, the profession has to develop ways to equip and train social workers to not only become better prepared to address environmental injustices, but also to learn how to address the unique challenges of working in international, cross-cultural settings (Dominelli, 2000; Healy, 2008; Mary, 2008; Dominelli, 2012).

In this chapter, three cases of research and practice will illustrate three social workers' contributions to and challenges within international, cross-cultural contexts as they worked alongside multiple stakeholders to address environmental injustices. These cases include: (1) Willett's work in a collaborative research role alongside an Advisory Board in impoverished rural communities in Kenya which have been impacted by climate change; (2) Hayward's identification of the need for long-term work with local community members to preserve land and address destruction of natural resources in Jamaica; and (3) Mathias's work to build trusting relationships within a campaign to stop factory pollution in a village in India. To understand the lessons of these cases, two points must be noted. First, Willett, Hayward, and Mathias are American (US) social workers. While they present their cases from an international point of view, social workers from other nations may have different experiences of working in cross-cultural, international contexts. Second, in the communities in which they worked, there was little to no local social work presence and their collaborators had no social work training, thus there may be different lessons in communities that are actively working with local social workers. The conclusion of this chapter includes a discussion related to how green social work can serve as a mechanism to meet challenges and opportunities when working in international, cross-cultural settings on environmental justice issues.

Case examples of green social work in international, cross-cultural contexts exploring the impacts of climate change in Kenya: collaborative research using a local Advisory Board

Kenya is among the countries most affected by climate change and yet the first-hand impacts of climate change on vulnerable people and communities have not been explored fully. This case offers brief findings from an international social worker's research exploring the impacts of climate change in two rural communities in Kenya—Mutito and Wamunyu, alongside a collaborative model for exploring green social work issues in local communities (Willett, 2015a).

Mutito and Wamunyu are semi-arid, rural, and impoverished locations. The predominant livelihood strategies for community members are based on access to productive land. Prior to climatic changes experienced in recent decades, the communities were semi-arid with two rainy seasons, which allowed community members to farm consistently. However, due to climatic change, survival in these areas has become increasingly challenging. Community members in Wamunyu and Mutito spoke of increased drought and desertification since their childhoods, and explained that instead of two rainy seasons, they are fortunate if they see one period of consistent rain annually. The relatively wealthy community members have been able to adapt through installing irrigation systems and boreholes, but the livelihoods of poor residents have been decimated. Food insecurity and famine have increasingly become the norm. Businesses are shut and children are pulled out of school to gather water during periods of drought, which impacts long-term opportunities for the impacted community members.

In addition to droughts, community members detailed that rather than a steady rainy season, there are now short bursts of heavy rain which often result in flash floods. These flood waters sweep away the top layer of fertile soil, further decreasing land productivity. Again, the relatively wealthy community members are able to adapt through buying fertilizers to mitigate flash flood-induced soil depletion. The poor community members struggle to survive with decreasing farm yields.

Climate change is a global environmental injustice as the wealthy countries contribute more to the causes of the crisis while, as this case demonstrates, poor communities in the least developed countries bear the brunt of the consequences and must adapt to volatile climate changes locally. In addition, as seen in this case, climate change can exacerbate local inequality within affected communities as the wealthy are able to adapt to changes while the poor community members cannot, and consequently become even more impoverished.

Despite minimal responsibility for the global climate crisis, affected communities in developing countries receive little support to mitigate and cope with the problems resulting from this crisis (IPCC, 2014). In Mutito and Wamunyu, poor community members struggled to identify key players who were willing to consistently work on these issues with them. They reported that the Kenyan government provides food aid only on an ad hoc basis. Aid from foreign or international organisations was rarely available. When it was, it was often provided in exchange for work, a practice that most local community members considered an abuse of their desperate position with respect to basic human needs for food and water. Community members were upset with these measures but did not know how to navigate local, national, and international aid systems to advocate for their communities. They also lacked experience organising their communities to pressure aid actors. These gaps present opportunities for support from green social workers, including social workers from outside of Kenya.

International social workers should take an inclusive, participatory approach to promoting green social work within communities that have historical legacies of marginalisation and exclusion – histories which are often the source of ill feelings towards national and international actors. In this case, this was done by forming an Advisory Board of people in the communities who were poor and impacted by the severe climate changes in their local environment. All members were rural to urban migrants who fled droughts in Mutito and Wamunyu. Advisory Board members and the international social worker met through work on a separate project and developed their relationship over a period of several years to build trust and understanding. Advisory Board members agreed to guide the project after negotiating what they would need to be successful partners (e.g. payment, hours of work, location of work). Tangible benefits were stressed over theoretical or trickle-down benefits by the international social worker and were the key to the successful forming of the Advisory Board.

The Advisory Board ensured that the international social worker (and the project) benefitted from a local viewpoint and that the Advisory Board benefitted from the international social worker's contributions. To ensure a local viewpoint, members introduced the international social worker to local community members, explained the study to community members, included topics within the study that were important to community members (which were often different from those assumed by the international social worker), helped develop culturally competent methods, and promoted the trustworthiness of the data. In turn, the Advisory Board members gained paid work experience through the project and worked on developing skills they desired, such as when the international social worker trained the Advisory Board members on basic computer skills. At least one Advisory Board member obtained a job later based on the work experience gained.

The Advisory Board model has many positives but it is not without challenges. The inclusion of female participants was limited in this project, despite the fact that the international social worker was a woman. This was attributed to the all-male membership of the Advisory Board. As is common with this situation of internal, drought-based migration in Kenya, the Advisory Board members were young men whose home communities had sent them to urban areas to earn money for their families. Despite discussion about the need for gender diversity, they were reluctant to value female inclusion in the study when a male was available for participation. Relatedly, there were limitations regarding the ethnic breakdown of participants as well. The Advisory Board members were all of a single ethnic group, and they wanted the study to focus on their ethnic group only, which was attributed to enduring ethnic tensions in Kenya. In contrast to requesting more female participation, the international social worker largely agreed to adhere to these inclusion criteria.

While green social work aims to protect the well-being of people and the planet through reforming socio-political power structures, these end goals are difficult to accomplish as an individual social worker. Variations in the Advisory Board model could be used with social work on environmental justice issues in cross-cultural situations to shift socio-political power structures at a micro-level through the empowerment and self-determination of local community members. However, it is important to acknowledge that while the model may successfully challenge certain inequities, it may also perpetuate other inequities, such as the exclusion of women and people of diverse ethnicities in this case.

Crisis in the cockpit: identifying long-term engagement to address bauxite mining in Jamaica's protected lands

Jamaica, like other developing, small island nations, faces immense pressure for development and the extraction of limited natural resources. International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank development mandates, limited land, and rare mineral resources have created ecological crises for such nations. Environmental and community groups in Jamaica continue to face challenges related to (mostly foreign) development projects. Coupled with the effects of climate change, including rising sea levels, protected areas in Caribbean nations are increasingly at risk and land-use issues in these developing nations are of increasing importance. The need for employment in economically struggling communities further complicates efforts for land and community conservation. Jamaica has a long history of both environmental injustice and social movements, and there are several organisations working to preserve protected land and space as well as fight for environmental justice. However, these conservation organisations and community members often face conflicting interests and claims to protected areas. Indigenous groups residing on potential sites for bauxite mining are but one constituency, along with nature conservationists and other community groups, who usually have complementary, but sometimes competing agendas.

One current issue in Jamaica is the potential siting of bauxite mines in Cockpit Country, which is of paramount concern to both environmental and community groups. Cockpit Country is an area of rural Jamaica with sparse human population but a dense and complex ecology of rare indigenous plants and animals. Cockpit Country is also an historic Maroon tribal territory (a politically independent and sovereign tribal nation of Africans who escaped and resisted slavery

by using the rugged terrain to their advantage and successfully hiding from their oppressors). The area is approximately 1,100 square kilometres and is mostly inaccessible by major roads, which has afforded the area some protection from most types of development. A recent ecosystem evaluation noted several important features that the area contributes including: gas and climate regulation (carbon mitigation), water regulation (the unique topography mitigates flooding) and water quality (filtrations through the limestone and underground caves), soil stability, pollination of local species, habitat for indigenous plants and animals, timber and forest provision for local communities, and recreation and cultural uses (Edwards, 2011). Several groups have coalesced to address the threat of mining in these protected areas including conservation groups, local community groups, representatives from the Maroon nation tribes, the University of the West Indies, and other smaller groups interested in protecting various species (e.g. bird watching groups). Social workers are not often present at the table in large numbers but could contribute to these efforts in various ways.

Using a green social work perspective with its environmental justice framework, the international social worker interviewed stakeholders to identify the key roles that social workers could potentially play in efforts to address potential threats to this area. An identified important role for social workers was working with local communities to collect data for community profiles. Little information is available regarding the census and socio-demographic makeup of more secluded rural areas. Social workers, in partnership with local community leaders and community members, could collect important data such as population demographics, access to water, food availability, and the number of households affected by any local or upstream mining. Despite an overall commitment to protecting the land, the most important motivators for local residents may be economic. Without alternative mechanisms for livelihood, buy-outs from mining companies may represent economic stability for families that have few other options, despite the immediate and long-term ecological hazards they would face as a result of mining. Another important issue in Cockpit communities is access to fresh water for farming and living. Without addressing the concrete needs (food, water, shelter) and economic needs (alternative mechanisms for generating income), environmental education programmes maybe offer only superficial solutions and prove to be ineffective.

The work of protecting these lands ultimately falls to Jamaicans and outside help is often (rightly) perceived as intrusive. To work with local communities and understand their economic and social challenges, a green social work perspective can serve as a framework to navigate the power and socio-political structural dynamics within environmental justice problems in an international context. International social workers, foreign NGOs, and Peace Corps volunteers, for example, would benefit from spending several years in communities to engage with stakeholders in order to address power imbalances, establish rapport, and understand better the ways of helping effectively. Hiring research staff from within local communities is necessary as a first step in developing a culturally competent research or community organising agendas. With these approaches social workers can engage in environmental justice work in international, cross-cultural contexts, as green social work advocates.

Being the international outsider: building relationships with the Gandhamur factory campaign, Kerala, India

Whereas the first two cases describe how American social workers contributed to environmental justice interventions, this case explores the complex positionality of social workers engaged in such work. Between 2010 and 2014, the American social worker conducted ethnographic fieldwork on a campaign to shut down a gelatine factory in the village of Gandhamur, in the southern Indian state of Kerala. In contrast to the cases described earlier in the chapter, the village of Gandhamur was a mixed-class, mixed-caste community that, taken as a whole, does not easily wear the label 'vulnerable'. Nonetheless, village residents were in a vulnerable position vis-a-vis the gelatine factory, which was jointly owned by a Japanese corporation and the Kerala state government. According to village residents, when the factory opened 30 years earlier, it had been welcomed as a boon to the local economy, particularly by those from lower castes and socio-economic strata. However, by-products of the gelatine production process included a blackish sludge that the factory dumped into a nearby river and a stench that spread throughout the village at night. The smell kept people awake coughing and many complained of itching and rashes from the river water. In 2008, some residents formed an action council to demand an end to the pollution. Upon its inauguration, this local action council immediately began to collaborate with environmental activists from across Kerala.

These environmentalists were part of a network of Kerala activists who provided support for environmental justice campaigns in the forms of scientific expertise, media support, and legal contacts. They had been looking for an opportunity to take action against the Gandhamur gelatine factory since the mid-1990s. Thus, when the local action council formed in 2008, they were ready and waiting to assist. These environmental activists introduced the social worker to the Gandhamur action council in 2010, and he observed their collaboration intermittently between 2010 and 2013.

In the summer of 2013, the campaign against the gelatine factory intensified after police charged protesters gathered at the factory gates and beat them with wooden batons. Both local and non-local activists were injured, and the campaign against the factory became a major story in state-wide newspapers and TV news. Many politicians and civil society figures expressed their support. Both leading up to and in response to this event, support from non-local environmental activists increased greatly, with some taking up residence with action council members to work on the campaign full-time.

The social worker's position in this collaboration was in many respects more that of an observer than a participant. As a foreigner, there were strict legal limits on supporting such campaigns, and he was careful to stay within those limits. Nonetheless, his past experience working on environmental justice issues in the US and India was crucial to his relationship with both the Gandhamur action council and environmental activists. It was through contacts from this past experience that he had been introduced to the Kerala environmental activist network, and through that network, he had arrived in Gandhamur. Despite his being legally barred from supporting the campaign in any way, action council members invited him to participate in whatever ways he could. Moreover, in conversations with other village residents, they often claimed him as a supporter. Similarly, key figures within the environmental activist network invited him to events, included him in discussions, and requested that he evaluate their work. The social worker accepted these invitations, but also accepted those from opponents of the campaign to maintain the neutrality required by law. Also, he was open about his past participation in

environmental justice work and broader concerns about these issues. Thus, while participation in the campaign against the factory was limited, the research relationship between campaign participants and the social worker was grounded in mutual recognition of a common commitment to environmental justice.

The social worker's position became more complicated shortly after a beating by police, which opened a rift between the local action council leaders and the environmental activist network. The company that owned the factory claimed that Maoists, who were leading armed rebellions in other parts of India, had incited the violence. The environmental activists demanded that the leaders of the Gandhamur action council refute these claims loudly and publicly, but local leaders made no move to do so. Many environmental activists felt betrayed by this silence and began to withdraw their support for the campaign. The specifics of why and how the collaboration between the action council and the environmental activist network came apart are analysed elsewhere (Mathias, in press). In this section, we explore the challenges that this breakdown in collaboration created for the social worker as an international outsider.

If members of the environmental activist network were outsiders in the Gandhamur campaign, then the social worker was doubly an outsider. He had been introduced to the leaders of the action council by members of the network and was, at least initially, only 'a friend of a friend'. Thus, as environmental activists began to withdraw from the campaign and cut ties with the action council, it was unclear whether his connection with the action council would also be severed. As the conflict between the two groups became more severe, the social worker found his own alliances and commitments called into question by some local leaders in the action council. At one point, it seemed the action council might end the research relationship altogether.

That is not what happened. Instead, the more that locals and outside activists withdrew from the collaboration, the more the social worker found himself in a limbo, neither in one camp nor the other. This ambiguous position brought its own challenges. Some members of the environmental activist network teased or chided him for continuing to study the Gandhamur campaign, which they increasingly talked about as corrupt. Local action council members were not so explicit, but some seemed more guarded around him, particularly when they were speaking about the solidarity organisers. Nonetheless, both groups continued to invite him to attend events, observe their work, and participate to the extent that he could.

With the collaboration over, the social worker had to find his footing again with both groups; this did not make him more of an outsider in Gandhamur. Over the ensuing 10 months, he continued to build deeper relationships with members of both groups. He continued to accept invitations to attend meetings and campaign actions as well as religious festivals, rice harvesting events, school plays, and afternoon teas. In Gandhamur, he was no longer 'a friend of a friend', and this was in part because his participation in the everyday life of the village formed the basis of many new friendships. But it was also because the environmental activists were no longer around to mediate his relations with the action council. Instead of arriving in Gandhamur in the company of these 'outside' activists, he was now arriving alone, and this opened up new possibilities for more direct relationships. Over time, the social worker became a mediator between the Gandhamur residents and members of the environmental activist network, each of whom would ask him for updates about the others.

This is not to say that the American social worker ceased to be an outsider. Nor that he was less of an outsider than the Kerala-based environmentalists. In many ways, they were still more on the inside. For example, environmentalists may have chosen not to participate in the campaign anymore, but the social worker *could not* participate in the campaign because of his lack of citizenship. In addition, he remained marked as an outsider by his accented Malayalam, his American wealth, and his whiteness. None of these things had changed. Moreover, one might say that his position with respect to the campaign had not changed much either. What had changed most were the positions of everyone else relative to each other.

Being from outside India did not simply make the social worker more of an outsider than those who were Kerala-based. It made him an outsider in qualitatively different ways. Distinctions between insiders and outsiders are neither binary nor fixed (Cui, 2014; Edmonds-Cady, 2011). Being from the US made the social worker something of an anomaly with respect to the dominant insider/outsider distinctions in environmental justice campaigns in Kerala, which concerned relations between locals and members of the all-Kerala environmental activist network. This anomalous position foreclosed certain kinds of participation in the Gandhamur campaign, but also opened up forms of relationship that were not available to others. Moreover, the researcher's position with respect to local insider/outsider distinctions shifted over time. While these shifts resulted in part from the researcher's own efforts to build alliances and friendships, they were largely out of the researcher's control. In particular, the researcher's position changed as the result of changing relations between others involved in the campaign.

Discussion and conclusion

The three cases we provide in this chapter serve as tools for understanding the green social work perspective as it relates to how to negotiate collaborations as social workers in international, cross-cultural contexts when addressing environmental justice issues. Each case demonstrates ways to engage with marginalised communities with few resources, ways to navigate relationships at multiple levels, and appropriate roles for a green social worker engaging in environmental justice issues.

As illustrated in these three cases, social workers can engage in culturally appropriate work when engaging with environmental justice issues, such as the use of participatory methods for practice and research. This means promoting social work values of inclusivity and empowerment of self-determination in order to avoid 'colonising' local initiatives to address environmental injustices, as green social workers advocate (Dominelli, 2012). For example, the social workers in the cases presented each supported community-driven actions, rather than top-down decisions made by outsiders to the communities. The green social worker's role was often to listen, value local expert knowledges, help all voices to be heard, and assist in bringing resources to the table. Through participatory research and practice methods the social worker can also encourage the community members to identify problems and potential solutions, teach advocacy skills, and link community members to resources that support their goals. This type of work allows for outcomes that the community finds more beneficial for their desires, and equips and empowers them to continue their work on their own.

Importantly, green social workers must recognise that while environmental issues are often discussed in scholarly scientific arenas using technical jargon, marginalised communities are experts in understanding these problems as they live with the severe impacts of environmental degradation in their daily experiences. Their voices should not be discounted due to an inability to engage in the technical discourses. Social workers in international settings can approach from a stance of partner and look to the locals as experts in their own communities.

Social workers addressing environmental issues in international settings also often must contend with conflicts between varying conceptions of environmental injustice and local values regarding the environment and social justice. They must practice diplomatic skills and help different perspectives and voices to all be heard.

Relatedly, social workers must also recognise their own position of power and privilege when operating across political boundaries in international, cross-cultural settings, so as to be a collaborative advocate in their work, rather than reinforce the unfair global power dynamics that affect such communities. Also, green social workers must identify the structural and sociopolitical power dynamics within the groups who are working on environmental justice issues and within the local communities in order to understand the holistic contexts at play.

In international settings, social work on environmental issues is compounded with the challenges of navigating relationships on multiple levels with a variety of local and non-local actors. In each case presented in this chapter, the authors found that these insider/outsider collaborations cannot happen overnight. Thus, social workers must be willing to dedicate the time needed in communities to develop such relationships, especially when many non-governmental organisations and local projects are not long-lasting; perseverance is key.

Another lesson to be drawn here is that being an outsider is not simply a matter of degree. There are qualitatively different ways to be an insider or an outsider with respect to the organising process. In the community organising literature, it is common to think of insiders and outsiders spatially, in terms of metaphorical distance from the centre of a campaign or issue (e.g. Rivera and Erlich, 1992). This mode of thinking seems particularly natural when considering insiders and outsiders in grassroots environmental movements, which are often geographically localised. However, spatial metaphors obscure the many kinds of relationships involved in the organising process and, by the same token, the qualitatively different ways whereby one can be more or less 'inside' a community, campaign, or movement. In addition, social workers pursuing grassroots collaborations internationally should be prepared to face such complexities and ambiguities, in which the inside and outside of a movement are constantly reforming themselves, and fluid.

From the cases presented in this chapter, the green social work perspective enabled these social workers to serve a supporting role in addressing climate change in Kenya, to identify a potential role for social workers in long-term community-based work to address land preservation in Jamaica, and to be flexible and build trusting relationships in an anti-pollution campaign in India. The cases provide examples that can be used as a teaching tool to explore environmental injustices, and to humanise and understand the local impacts of climate change. These cases can also be used to understand better community organisation and community development.

Green social workers must learn how to work within and reform local and global systems of inequalities; and to become part of the global collaboration that works alongside marginalised communities, such as the ones presented in this chapter. The social work roles presented offer lessons on engaging in collaborative practice when working for environmental justice in international, cross-cultural settings. They are also relevant for working with domestic communities affected by similar issues. Green social work promotes environmental justice within a larger framework of promoting human and non-human well-being and addressing both global and local impacts of ecological crises.

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