

Seeing the Connections: Climate Change and Migration

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Abstract:

As social workers we are taught to see how things are interconnected-person in environment. We often work in situations to intervene with service users when the environment is no longer healthy or sustainable, such as in a case of domestic violence, where we would encourage the person to move themselves out of harm's way, while also working to provide intervention services to the victim and perpetrator. Or in a case with an older adult who may need to move from their home to an assisted living facility for increased health care and socialization benefits. Well, the same is true for understanding cases of migration. We have to look at the whole environment to see what may be problematic in the social, political, economic, and/or ecological environment, making it inhospitable, and even dangerous for people living in those situations.

Keywords: climate justice | social work | climate change | environment

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Seeing the Connections: Climate Change and Migration

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As social workers we are taught to see how things are interconnected-person in environment. We often work in situations to intervene with service users when the environment is no longer healthy or sustainable, such as in a case of domestic violence, where we would encourage the person to move themselves out of harm's way, while also working to provide intervention services to the victim and perpetrator. Or in a case with an older adult who may need to move from their home to an assisted living facility for increased health care and socialization benefits. Well, the same is true for understanding cases of migration. We have to look at the whole environment to see what may be problematic in the social, political, economic, and/or ecological environment, making it inhospitable, and even dangerous for people living in those situations.

For over two and a half decades, I have worked at the nexus of climate change and migration, having been a refugee and immigration specialist for over a decade in direct practice, an English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) teacher to adults, and now as a professor, teaching and overseeing students during their internships with the refugee and immigrant populations. During this time, I have found great joy in welcoming immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers to our community. I found personal and professional satisfaction as their case manager in helping to get them established in schools, work, and helping them as they learned to navigate their new communities and eventually found a new sense of normal. I was struck by their resilience and hope, despite all they had been through, and I was also confronted with my own secondary PTSD as I listened to their stories of horrific events, forced migration, and family separations. Many times, I went home at night, weeping for their pain and suffering and the world in which we live that created such wicked problems.

This work caused me to question the "why?": Why are people migrating in the first place? And, then, it led me to look for answers of "how" we can work to prevent these issues from happening, so that people can migrate out of desire alone and not out of desperation. The more I worked with this population and studied in my social work education, the more I started seeing the connections between climate change and migration. I started to realize that their stories of political unrest, war, famine, disaster, economic hardship, all of the reasons they indicated, led back to the environment and was exacerbated by climate change. Whether the environment was slowly degrading and becoming inhospitable for growing crops and sustaining livelihood, or whether people were fighting over natural resources, either locally or with international political powers at play, or whether there was a catastrophic disaster-these environmental issues all led to forced migration. (For

more on this see the open access article "Environmental Migration: Social Work at the Nexus of Climate Change and Global Migration.")¹

As a result of these professional endeavors, I have been on a lifetime journey to help social workers see our role in addressing climate change and the related environmental injustices², such as forced migration. This has led to one of my current roles as a co-leader at UNCG on the Humanities Action Lab (HAL) Climate Migration consortium³ with Rutgers University and our local partner, FaithAction International House⁴ in Greensboro. Within this project, I have trained and led students as researchers in interviewing immigrants and refugees in the Greater Greensboro community to see what were some of the "push factors" of climate change that created the need for migration, and what are some of the current environmental injustices they face as they have resettled in the community. This data is currently being analyzed and will be integrated in the HAL national traveling exhibition for awareness and advocacy. This journey has also led to my partnership with an amazing colleague to co-edit a workbook series full of incredible chapters written by social workers all over the world: Social Work Promoting Sustainable Communities and Environments, published by the International Federation of Social Workers^{5,6} (free pdf downloads).

Educating ourselves about climate change and what we can do to promote sustainable communities and environments is one way we can create positive change in our world to prevent unnecessary, forced migration in the first place. And, as we already have a climate crisis, we can work to promote environmental justice and to continue welcoming those who migrate, affirming their human right to "freedom of movement"⁷ and working with organizations such as FaithAction International House and El Pueblo, Inc. in Raleigh who are actively seeking to come alongside and empower immigrant communities to fight for rights and against policies such as HB 370⁸. ●

References

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- 2 Powers, M.C.F. (Nov. 2018). "Disaster, Environmental Justice, and Eco-Therapy: Social Work in the Face of Climate Change". *The North Carolina Social Work Newsletter* November/December/January 2018-2019 V. XLII No. 4 https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.naswnc.org/resource/resmgr/newsletter/NovDecJan_2018_Newsletter.pdf
- 3 <https://www.humanitiesactionlab.org/projects>
- 4 FaithAction International House faithaction.org
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- 8 El Pueblo, Inc. CALL YOUR SENATOR TODAY, URGING THEM TO VOTE NO ON HB 370. <https://elpueblo.org/stop-hb-370/>

