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Abstract: This chapter explores social work and changing environments, particularly ways in which social, economic and environmental factors are inter-related. A number of case examples are presented, and the relevance of environmental factors to a range of fields of practice is discussed.

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[A] Introduction

Awareness of nature as something more than an infinite resource for human exploitation has been in the public consciousness ever since the publication of Rachel Carson's groundbreaking book, *Silent Spring*, in 1962. Although public interest has varied in the ensuing period, widespread awareness of the impact of human activity on the environment was raised in 2006/2007 as several events converged and momentum was gained. Release of the Stern Review in Britain (Stern, 2006), Al Gore's (2006) documentary film '*An Inconvenient Truth*', and the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2007) report, all confirming that human intervention makes an undoubted contribution to global warming, together with a range of other events around the same time, led to a period of unprecedented public awareness and alarm at the perceived environmental crisis.

Awareness is also developing about the ways in which human wellbeing is linked to a healthy environmental context (Low and Gleeson, 1999; McMichael, 2003; World Resources Institute, 2003). In more recent years, some countries have moved to introduce carbon pollution reduction schemes and other measures designed to reduce human-induced impacts on the environment and to deal with global warming (Owen, 2007; Sherrard and Tate, 2007). A worldwide agreement on emission reduction targets was not reached at the much-vaunted Copenhagen Summit in 2010; hence action could only be taken at the individual country level (Parks and Roberts, 2010). The actions of various countries have been taken under the duress imposed by a strong campaign questioning the validity of the science that identified human-induced climate change (UNEP 2007). Meanwhile widespread and regular reports appear in the media of climate-related natural disasters, and ever-increasing rates of species extinction, loss of habitat and biodiversity.

While these events have taken place in the public arena, there has not thus far been a substantial debate about environmental issues in the social work literature as we struggle to elicit the implications of the environmental crisis for social work theory and practice. Such a debate would go to the very heart of the way social work as a profession is defined, as well as the boundaries of its professional domain.

Perhaps it is the case that social workers generally agree that their expertise is in matters social, and therefore natural environmental factors are not germane to a debate on social work's professional interests. We argue that there is a clear connection for social work with matters environmental, particularly in the links between social justice and environmental justice, and that social work's established expertise can aid ongoing relevance of the profession if a clear focus on environmental sustainability is incorporated into the social work curriculum and into continuing professional development programs.

The nexus of 'social justice', which is commonly regarded as having a legitimate place in social work's professional arena, and 'environmental justice', which is not always regarded as a legitimate aspect of social work, is a broad one, and these two fields are linked in a number of ways. Most notably, it is becoming increasingly obvious that negative environmental consequences are experienced disproportionately by the most vulnerable members of society, the very people with whom social workers most often work (Warren, 2000; Plumwood, 2002; Coates, 2003a; Zapf, 2009). Such effects can be observed around the world in phenomena such as individuals and families who cannot afford to move away from polluted neighbourhoods (Warren 2000); indigenous peoples who have been driven from their ancestral lands as a result of the cutting and burning of rainforest; placement of heavily polluting industries and waste sites

in areas occupied by people on low incomes — most notably people who are poor and non-white; and fishers and indigenous peoples whose livelihoods have been impacted, if not destroyed, by depletion of fish stocks (Coates, 2003a). Climate change in the form of global warming is the outstanding threat for human societies in the current environmental crisis (Owen, 2007), but we also argue that social workers should be aware of the impact of an ever-increasing world population, depletion of natural resources, intensification of political and ethnic conflicts, and soil desertification.

At the heart of this chapter is the notion that the environmental crisis is a social justice issue. For Beck, climate change is a potent example of the links between social justice and environmental issues:

[EXTRACT]

Social inequalities and climate change are two sides of the same coin. One cannot conceptualize inequalities and power any longer without taking the consequences of climate change into account, and one cannot conceptualize climate change without taking its impacts on social inequalities and power into account. (Beck, 2010: 257)

[END EXTRACT]

Dialetachi points out that the direct consequences from climate change will be more dramatic for the most economically disadvantaged populations:

[EXTRACT]

The most fragile, most unprotected, those who have less resource, who have less survival alternatives will be affected intensely: they are small farmers without agricultural insurance when crops fail, residents of the stream's edge who face flooding, slum-

dwellers leaning on the hills, victims of tropical diseases spread to new areas, crab catchers covered by the elevation of ocean level and so on. (Dialetachi, 2009: 246)

[END EXTRACT]

For the social work profession, which has had a long-standing focus on social justice, the goal will be to recognise the dangers for society of ignoring the ecological crisis; recognise the irrational thinking that has led to the current ecological crisis; recognise the ecological impacts of current social forces such as globalisation and consumerism and work with individuals, groups and communities to counter these forces; and work towards development of a place-sensitive culture.

The main objectives of this chapter are to:

[LIST]

- canvass the range of issues relevant to social workers as they are confronted by changing environments;
- demonstrate links between social justice and environmental justice; and
- provide examples of social work practice that address issues related to changing environments.

[END LIST]

[A] History of social work as it relates to changing environments

Poverty has been a key focus of social theory and practice since social work's inception as a profession. Jones (2001) points out that poverty remains the most common problem confronting social work's diverse client population. This focus on poverty reflects in some ways the fact that social work, in most countries where it is practised, arose out of concerns for urban slum-dwellers. For example, interest in the health of children living in such conditions, especially in regard to the need for 'fresh air', drove social interest in taking a

systematic approach to ensuring that the environment was amenable to health. Many children affected by tuberculosis and asthma were sent to attend 'special schools' with access to the aforementioned 'fresh air'. The Charity Organisation Society (COS) in Britain is often quoted as a driving force in child welfare in late-Victorian Britain, though Taylor (2008) makes the point that there were many other forms of organised charity (including those specifically related to child care). Taylor (2008: 687) notes the overall 'coalescence of anxieties around dirt, boundaries and pollution' in the child-protection discourse of the time.

There is also historical evidence of practising social workers in the US who viewed the environment as intrinsically important and incorporated nature into their work. For example, Jane Addams '...never separated the human need for beauty, art and nature from the need for social reform' (Bartlett, 2003: 116). Addams was a health advocate, social reformer, and one-time garbage collector, and understood well the relationship between sanitation and health. She also established the first parks and recreation centres in the city of Chicago. Addams advocated and worked for the creation of public green spaces primarily for workers and their families to find respite from the restrictions of the factories and the harsh working conditions of the slaughterhouses.

Early in the 20th century Mary Richmond acknowledged the physical environment as an important contextual consideration for practice when she was laying the conceptual foundations for the new profession of social work. However, Richmond (1922: 99) perceived the importance of the physical environment to be related to its social aspects, asserting that the physical environment 'becomes part of the social environment' insofar as it 'frequently has its social aspects'. Zapf (2009) claims that, from the outset, the social work profession has been more comfortable using social science lenses to view the environment rather than perspectives from the physical or natural sciences. Yet at a later point, social work did adopt

an ecological perspective taken from the natural sciences. For instance, the ecosystems perspective provided social work with an outlook closely related to biological science, and encouraged a 'simultaneous focus on person and environment' (Suppes and Wells, 2009: 58). But this model, derived as it was from the basic assumptions of systems theory, was also based on assumptions that the person would be interpreted from psychological theory, and the environment could be interpreted by sociological and economic theory (Zapf, 2009). Thus, while 'the environment' is acknowledged in social work literature since the early days of the profession, it is generally conceptualised in socio-cultural terms. The environment is rarely conceived in the social work literature as being about the physical/natural environment.

Over the past decade or so the social work literature has reflected a slowly-increasing interest in environmental factors as they relate to social work. Indeed, in 2001 a survey of members of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) found that some eleven percent of members identified ecological sustainability as one of the top ten policy issues on which they would like the AASW to focus (AASW, 2001). Soon after, the AASW made a change to the code of ethics that introduced the concept of 'social development and environmental management in the interests of human welfare' as an expressed value for social workers (AASW, 2002), and this change was further developed in changes made to the AASW code of ethics in 2010.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), United States National Association of Social Workers (NASW), British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) have now incorporated statements about social workers' responsibilities toward the environment into their codes of ethics/policy statements as discussed later in this chapter.

[A] International context

This chapter is written at a time of intense international pressures. The combined effects of globalisation, climate change, and a number of war zones — most particularly in the Middle East — have contributed to the mass movement of people on a major scale. In addition to the refugee movements arising from war and repressive regimes, there is evidence of movement of peoples due to rising sea levels and other effects of climate change, and also due to economic pressures created by loss of arable land. War zones around the world are not all related to political/ideological conflict as one might assume — some major conflicts are related to food and water shortages. Access to water resources, especially good-quality potable freshwater, and disputes over fishing rights in saltwater environments are expected to provide an ongoing and increasing source of settlement tension. Recent humanitarian crises, such as those in Sudanese Darfur and the genocide in Rwanda have been linked to conflict over water (Tulloch, 2009). There is currently an identified lack of adequate drinking water for some 1.1 billion people around the world, thus increasing future potential for water conflict (Delli Priscoli and Wolf, 2007).

Low-lying Pacific and Indian Ocean islands are identified as being particularly vulnerable to sea-level rises associated with global warming, and people of the Carteret Islands have already experienced loss of villages due to sea-incursion. Some residents, who had to leave the Carterets due to loss of homes and villages as water-levels rose, have been referred to as the ‘first climate change refugees’ (*The Age*, 2009). Tuvalu and the Seychelles are also both acknowledged as potentially needing to shift entire populations from the islands if sea levels rise as predicted (IPCC, 2007).

Extreme weather events, such as storms, floods, droughts, and hurricanes are expected by the IPCC to increase in number and severity due to global warming. The implications for social work of such events are clear: large-scale movements of people, resultant trauma due to permanent or temporary loss of homes, and the health effects of extreme weather will bring a different focus to social work at individual and community levels in affected areas.

Some human-created disasters are also having an impact on large population groups. In Japan in 2011, for example, two natural disasters — an earthquake and the resultant tsunami — were combined with the disastrous effects of the earthquake upon a nuclear power reactor. This situation left the people of Japan dealing with the uncertainties associated with potential radiation leaks and conflicting information about whether or not they were in danger, and eventually resulted in the large-scale movement of people away from residential areas near the nuclear reactor. At the same time, the country was dealing with the grief and trauma associated with the loss of thousands of lives, homes, jobs and industries, as whole villages were swept away by the tsunami. In this instance, the human-created disaster associated with the nuclear power plant was a complicating factor in the country's attempts to recover from the natural disaster. At the time, NASW aimed to lend support to their colleagues in Japan in the belief that social workers were well-placed to assist the population:

[EXTRACT]

In this complex and developing disaster, our colleagues in the Japanese professional social work association are uniquely suited to assess the disaster environment in a culturally competent manner and to provide leadership in promoting effective disaster relief and recovery efforts. (NASW, 2011)

[END EXTRACT]

While we can hope that social workers already possess the skills needed to deal with the humanitarian effects of natural disasters, if the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) prediction that increasing numbers of natural disasters associated with global warming is correct, then social workers will need:

[LIST]

- specific education in dealing with large-scale human movements associated with natural disasters;
- education in regard to dealing with large-scale community trauma;
- to be involved in community-based approaches to preventing the disasters by leading values-based discussions on carbon-emissions reductions.

[END LIST]

Debates about environmental issues have included consideration of various realities — natural, economic and social — and it is important to consider these elements in an integrated way.

Various international agreements have been developed as a response from several societies to help people to think about environmental issues, and those agreements began to be developed around the mid-1980s. In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, about 2000 scientists from the IPCC, a collaboration of the World Meteorological Association and the United Nations Environment Programme, discussed in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development a common agenda of commitments. The resultant convention — the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change: UNFCCC) — was signed by 154 countries, although only about one-third ratified this when it came into effect in 1994 (UN, 2011).

The UNFCCC sponsors the Conferences of Parts (COP) every year. In 1997, when the Convention had already been ratified by 187 signatory countries, it developed the proposition for the Kyoto Protocol (KP) at its conference in Japan. The Kyoto Protocol (to be implemented

from 2005) established objective and progressive goals to reduce greenhouse gases: each signatory country was asked to reduce 5 percent of their greenhouse gas emissions from 2008 levels by 2012. COP meetings in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2009, and in Cancun, Mexico, in 2010, ended with mixed results. As a result, there is a notable air of uncertainty worldwide about the ability of states to agree on a path forward for reducing carbon emissions, and a major stumbling block exists with regard to finding an equitable outcome for both economically-developing and economically-developed nations.

[A] Sustainability

‘Sustainability’ is an over-used term that has lost some of its significance as a result. There is no single accepted definition of sustainability, and it can be considered a complex and contested term (Cocklin and Alston, 2003). Nevertheless, it is an important concept for social workers as we develop ideas about how social work can assist individuals, groups and societies in their quest for sustainability (Ssee also Chapter 3). Cocklin and Alston (2003) suggest that sustainability involves balance and compromise as social, economic and environmental priorities are set, as well as a sense of progress toward preferred futures. Social aspects of sustainability (a focus on social sustainability) must be recognised as interconnected to the economic and environmental agenda.

The interdependence of social, economic and environmental systems is the underpinning ideology of sustainable development (WCED, 1987), as manifested in official documents such as Agenda 21 Global (developed and ratified at the Rio ECO conference in 1992). Agenda 21 provides a guide to balancing the weight of economic, social and environmental factors in each country. However it is difficult to find such balance in modern industrialised nations, controlled as they are largely by the productivist interests of capital (Bauman, 2004).

A specific example of the inherent dilemmas can be seen in the international agreement titled Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD). The Letter of Belém (Brazil) written in October 2009 by 47 entities, forums and Brazilian unions, stated:

[EXTRACT]

We reject market mechanisms as the way to reduce carbon emissions, since we are certain that the market is not capable of taking responsibility for planet life. ...The purposes of REDD, in discussion, do not distinguish native forests from extensive monocultures of trees, and allow economic factors — that historically destroyed the ecosystems and expelled populations who lived within them — to influence the mechanisms of recovery of the forest,...continuing and fortifying its economic and political power to the detriment of those populations...

In Brazil, international negotiations about climate have not been focused on debate about the REDD and other market mechanisms but in the transition to a new model of production, distribution and consumption based on agro-ecology, economy related to solidarity and a diversified and centralized energy matrix, which (together) ensure security and food sovereignty. (Letter of Belém, 2009: 249–50)

The letter of Belém is one of the first documents that identifies the role of development in having a main responsibility for environmental degradation and argues for the impossibility of market mechanisms regulating actions for protecting the environment. The veracity of this statement is evident from the Brazilian experience, for example, the country has changed its energy matrix without this having a significant impact in environmental and social terms.

As social workers consider how they might work towards sustainability in their professional role, it is perhaps salutary to review the ways in which some entire societies have fared historically as they grapple with environmental problems. The American social geographer, Jared Diamond, and Canadian historian, Reginald Wright, have each examined historical cases of a range of societies, some of which lasted for thousands of years, which have eventually collapsed. Such cases can provide some guidance as we look for clues to help us deal with contemporary issues of social sustainability. Diamond (2005), for example, has examined the historical records of a number of major societies, including the Anasazi people of North America, the Rapanui people of Easter Island, the Roman Empire, the Angkor Wat civilization in Cambodia, and Norwegian settlers in Greenland. Diamond found that there are five general predictors of sustainability for any given society. These are relations with friendly neighbours, relations with unfriendly neighbours, ability to adapt to changing climatic conditions, the environmental damage they cause, and cultural response.

Drawing on historical evidence, Diamond postulates, that when any one of the five factors is a problem for the civilization, even a major one, the civilization can generally cope.

However, when the civilization is over-stretched by having to cope with any two or more of the factors at the same time, it is usually just a matter of time before its eventual collapse.

Although Diamond's work has been criticised on the basis of environmental determinism (Gladwell, 2005), he presents strong evidence from the historical record that societies can die out, either slowly or spectacularly, because of a lack of response to impending environmental disaster.

Wright also reviews the history of society on Easter Island, as well as civilizations such as Sumeria and Ur. He found a common pattern among these collapsed civilizations, a pattern

that he speculates could possibly have been used in advance to predict their downfall: a tradition of ‘sticking to entrenched beliefs and practices, robbing the future to pay the present, and spending the last reserves of natural capital on a reckless binge of excessive wealth and glory’ (2004: 79). While in the present period there is a clear political focus on terrorism, Wright identifies this focus as a diversion from the truly important issues, as

[EXTRACT]

terrorism is a small threat compared with hunger, disease, or climate change...[when] 25,000 die every day in the world from contaminated water alone. Each year 20 million children are mentally impaired by malnourishment. Each year, an area greater than Scotland is lost to erosion and urban sprawl, much of it in Asia. (Wright, 2004: 126)

[END EXTRACT]

The factors identified by both Wright and Diamond underscore the need for civilizations to learn from the lessons of the past. Their analysis speaks to the importance of attitudes of adaptability and flexibility, of being willing to examine the interplay of social, economic and environmental issues as they are (not as we might want them to be) and of devising solutions based on the response that is needed — rather than continuing to do things in the way they have always been done. The picture they each present also reinforces the importance for contemporary societies of the interplay between social, economic and environmental systems and the need to view these systems as interdependent rather than as separate structures.

[A] Social work and the environment

What does the mounting evidence of environmental decline mean for the domain and boundaries of social work theory and practice? Professional boundaries established rigidly in the past that did not recognise the importance and relevance of the natural environment to human relations can be questioned. Higgs and Cherry (2009: 8) argue that ‘Climate change is an example of a

universal practice challenge that demands serious study of the very different ways in which people develop understanding, make decisions, communicate, act and, above all, learn to change the way they behave'. That universal practice challenge is equally applicable to the social work profession.

Social workers have engaged with the concept of 'the environment' for many years, yet within the social work literature 'the environment' refers almost exclusively to the socio-cultural or psycho-social environment (Coates, 2003a; Alston and McKinnon, 2005; McKinnon, 2008; Zapf, 2009). Potential links between the natural environment, as characterised by ecological systems, and social work theory and practice have been left relatively unexplored. For example, although there has been extensive use of Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 2005) ecological systems theory in social work, as well as eco-maps to plot the interactions between various social actors and systems, the focus of such theories and methods of analysis has been on the interplay of family, economic, cultural, and political structures — not on the interplay between humans and the rest of the natural world.

Likewise, the person-in-environment concept has been an important element in social work practice theory for many years, and the 'ecological approach' has gained favour as a practice model more recently, though each can be seen to have a substantially psycho-social focus (Healy, 2005). Payne (2005: 91) for example, describes the person-in-environment (or situation) approach as 'focusing on current situations and relationships and seeking better understanding of others, insight into reasons for the clients' and others' behaviour; evaluation of feelings associated with the situation and behaviour'. Such frameworks are not predicated upon social workers' understanding of the links between non-human and human environments.

The IFSW, through its International Policy Statement on Globalisation and the Environment (IFSW, no date) recognises that both natural and built environments have a direct impact on people's potential to develop and to achieve their potential, and that the earth's resources should be shared in a sustainable way. The policy also supports vigorous enforcement of existing environmental protection laws and standards, and urges social workers to work towards a healthier environment and to ensure that environmental issues gain an increased presence in social work education. However the sentiments implicit in this policy statement are still not greatly evident in the social work literature in the form of practice models, though some recent international social work and community development texts have attempted to include it (e.g. Cox and Pawar, 2006; Ife and Tesoriero, 2006).

[B] *Social work ethics and the environment*

In recent years, social work associations in some countries have moved to incorporate into their respective national code of ethics a requirement for awareness of environmental issues among practicing social workers. One example is the series of changes made by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). In 1999 a change to the code of ethics required Australian social workers to incorporate awareness of 'social development and environmental management in the interests of human welfare' into their practice. Further revisions to the AASW code of ethics in 2010 removed the anthropocentric features of environmental awareness for social workers, and included the notion that the social work profession 'promotes protection of the natural environment as inherent to social wellbeing' (AASW, 2010: 13).

Changes in social policy in recent decades have seen increasing levels of deregulation and competition in welfare contexts, which can present ethical challenges for social workers.

Organisational contexts have a substantial impact on professional ethics. Ethical principles are

not absolute, but vary according to the context of practice and the client group. For example, social work education and literature generally pays scant attention to the complex issues involved in working with involuntary clients. As a result, social workers must translate social work theory and value for themselves in order to fit with the context in which they work.

Social workers can find themselves in a similar situation with regard to environmental imperatives because there is little direction in the various codes of ethics to help them address the ethical conflicts that arise when human need or desire is in direct (or sometimes indirect) divergence with non-human needs. Such a conflict might arise, for example, in relation to housing development needed for an increasing population where the proposed location involves the destruction of a forest area that provides valuable wildlife habitat. In times past, there may have been no contest: human needs were always assumed to over-ride non-human needs (Plumwood, 2002). Efforts to save a forest, for instance might have depended on existing residents' views or considerations about catchment management, for example; the needs of local or migratory wildlife would not have provided a reason to over-ride human needs. However, there is increasing recognition that ever-expanding human settlements have negative effects on the natural environment that, in turn, can have multiple negative effects on humans (McMichael, 2003; IPCC, 2007; ABS, 2006). There is also increasing recognition that the non-human (or more-than-human) world is entitled to recognition of dignity and worth for its own intrinsic sake, and not simply for its instrumental value to humans (Warren, 2000; Plumwood, 2002). Such a position raises equity considerations in regard to environmental costs imposed on people who can ill afford to pay them. Social work can take a leadership role in facilitating discussions about such value-issues in the community.

[B] *Social work practice and the environment*

Coates argues that ‘Social work developed and functions within modernity and has been, as a result, limited by its assumptions and boundaries’, and like so many professions, social work shares the underpinning values of modernity — individualism, dualism, materialism and domination. In order to achieve its place and status as a profession within the social welfare paradigm, social work ‘embraced the scientific method and endorsed reductionist efforts toward seeking individual clarity’ (2003a: 58), thus leading to the development of specific intervention methodologies. For this reason, Coates claims that modernity has an ideological stranglehold on social work that gets in the way of our accord with nature, affecting even the so-called ‘radical’ traditions within social work. Changes to codes of ethics in recent decades are seen as a promising way forward for social workers, providing legitimation for considering environmental issues as part of professional practice.

A major criticism of social work has been that, while social work has promoted human wellbeing, it has neglected to connect the exploitation of nature with the exploitation of people. In the context of a debate over modernist and postmodernist ideology, Walker argues for an interpretive approach to social work practice — one that emphasises the local and specific, while at the same time aspiring to broader political action in the pursuit of ‘social and eco-centric justice’ (2001: 36).

The processes of industrialisation are closely associated with the phenomenon of globalisation, and include the multiplicity of social and economic factors associated with the movement of people, technology, commerce, and cultures across national borders. In early industrial society, the side effects of modernisation were accepted because of the rewards it offered in the struggle against scarcity (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). Hunger, however, is no longer the major problem it was for most people in industrial or post-industrial societies, yet people face hazards and risks

that are ‘a wholesale product of industrialisation and are systematically intensified as it becomes global’ (Giddens, 1994: 21). Beck (2010) argues that risk in modern society is, above all, associated with chemical and nuclear production forces and the effects of global warming.

Zapf’s (2009) concept of ‘person as place’ provides the conceptual bridge that would provide a theoretical basis for legitimisation of social work practice that incorporates nature and understanding of the environmental context more generally. ‘Person as place’ provides a conceptual foundation for incorporation of sustainability and protection of the environment as an essential aspect of social work practice. There are some existing bodies of social work literature that touch on the importance of place. Rural and remote social work in particular emphasises the relevance of context, and extends practice to include sensitivity to the environment and as being embedded in the community. Zapf argues that this recognition of attachment to place in rural and remote area social work offers an appreciation that ‘geography affects both where and how people live’ (2009: 181), and with that comes a sense of responsibility for maintaining a healthy physical environment, and a sense of stewardship. This can be illustrated with a case study from Brazil.

[A] Environmental issues, exclusion of sugarcane workers and social work practice in Brazil

In Brazil, in recent years, public policies for social welfare have been advanced through state legal and institutional frameworks: a systemic perspective informs health and social assistance policies. Projects aimed at generating income and employment are included in welfare programmes. Some of these involve materials recycling where ecological issues are considered as an integral aspect of a sustainable development approach. However, there is no public debate about social exclusion which must be considered as a primary element in any consideration of

environmental issues. The relationship between the environment and social issues has also not received much attention from the social work profession, although the Brazilian Association of Teaching and Research in Social Services is promoting discussion through the group entitled 'Environmental, Urban and Land Issues'.

One pertinent example of the issues that must be considered concerns rural workers employed to cut sugar cane. Brazil is one of the largest producers in the world of the bio-fuel ethanol; its production from sugar cane reflects the interests of major national and international businesses. Diversion of sugar cane to ethanol production has avoided collapse of the sugar industry (due to decreased rates of consumption of sugar cane worldwide) and the Growth Acceleration Programme (PAC) announced by President Lula, at the beginning of 2007, reinforces a historic pact with the sugar cane industry. This programme supports the increased output of biofuels with infra-structure projects in strategic areas (highways, railways, ports, airports and waterways), increased energy generation and transmission (including electrical energy, petrol, natural gas and renewable fuels derived from biomass), as well as actions aimed at rural and urban development (including sanitation, housing, transportation, electricity) and water resources.

The promotion of ethanol as a clean source of renewable energy and the possibility of exporting ethanol as a biofuel seemed to accomplish the goals of Kyoto protocol, while also bringing promising prospects for the domestic sugar and alcohol sectors. However, an increase in the number and size of processing plants requires a significant increase in the cultivated area of sugar cane. So, for instance, if a new plant is installed on the edges of the Amazon forest, this will encourage an increase in the acreage of raw materials needed for its operation: the same process occurs across several regions, affecting highly complex bio-environments.ⁱ The development of sugar and alcohol production and related industries is

responsible for destroying flora and fauna, reducing the area of intact parts of gallery forest of the south-central region, and polluting rivers in the Brazilian cerrado, the Pantanal and the Amazon (Silva, 2006; Silva, 2010; Novaes and Alves, 2007; Sant'Ana, 2009).

In regions where sugar cane is already established in a large agricultural area, as is the case in São Paulo, the 'ocean of cane', resembles a green desert; environmental degradation affecting fauna and flora is increasingly evident, and cultivation of other crops is decreased as more land is taken over by sugar cane. Environmental damage compounds the social damage which this monoculture and reliance on one industry produces. Growing sugar cane and its processing requires intensive use of pesticides and generates large amounts of waste as well as increasing carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions and these problems need to be offset against the possible benefits of the production of clean energy, and relative to the role of the original vegetation in dispersal of CO₂ from the atmosphere.

It is important to emphasise that the social damage caused by this industry includes precarious and harmful working conditions which result in the transfer of costs (e.g. of health care, disability or unemployment costs) from the agribusiness activities to the state and society as whole.

The social costs of agribusiness also involve increased public spending on education and housing in municipalities where the predominance of sugar cane activity holds out the prospect of employment to people from other regions. For example, in the southeast, especially in São Paulo, an increase in public spending is attributed to the presence of migrant workers from other regions of the state moving to work in the sector's activities in the harvest period (March–December). In reality, however, these costs are the indirect costs of labour which should be borne by the agribusinesses, not by the state.

Considering working conditions, in the sugarcane industry even in the early 21st century, these remain archaic and cruel, such that discussion on this matter is not just about labour rights, but includes human rights. Workers are not only seeking better pay but also release from unreasonable targets, e.g. of cutting 12–14 tons of cane per day. Reports of deaths of cane-cutters due to exhaustion have gained national and international visibility.ⁱⁱ Studies involving workers who cut cane, whether migrants or not, show the precariousness of labour in the productive chain of sugar and alcohol. The sugar agro-industry wants to legitimise itself as an expression of modernity, because it uses cutting-edge technology and invests large sums of capital in its overall productive chain, but in the context of labour relationships it continues to be the concrete expression of a form of modern exploitation.

Finally, in small towns where rural workers are the main users of health and social assistance programmes, there are no related educational programmes aimed at discussing monoculture, food security, environmental and social risks of intensive use of pesticides, or the living and working conditions of people involved in rural-based industries.

This example indicates how agrarian and environmental issues are intimately bound up with social problems needing to be dealt with in an integrated and comprehensive way by social workers. Brazilian social work is currently taking initial steps towards building a critical debate about environmental issues, but, as this example suggests, these present a significant challenge to be urgently faced by the profession.

[A] Social justice, the environment and social work

Social justice is defined as a core value for social workers, encompassing satisfaction of basic human needs, equitable distribution of resources, fair access, recognition of individual and community rights and duties, equal legal treatment and protection, and social development and

environmental management in the interests of human welfare (AASW, 2002: 4). Social workers are understood to have an obligation to promote social justice, particularly for people or groups of people who are ‘oppressed or victimised by discrimination’ (Zastrow, 1999: 51). In fact, Zastrow (2007) couples the promotion of social justice by social workers with the obligation to promote economic justice, recognising that oppression related to ethnicity, gender, culture, age, class, religion, or disability is generally tied to economic deprivation. Links between social and economic justice are widely accepted in the social work literature, where economic justice is commonly related to issues of employment access, income security, and income parity (Ife, 2002).

Environmental justice, also known as eco-justice, is not so well known in social work. The environmental justice movement is described as a confluence of three great challenges: the struggle against racism and poverty; the effort to conserve and improve the natural environment; and the need to change social institutions away from class division and environmental depletion toward social unity and global sustainability (National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, in Matsuoka 2003).

This concept incorporates the idea that ‘the environment’ has its own intrinsic value, separate from the instrumental value of nature insofar as it provides for the needs of human beings. Harm to the environment, also known as eco-harm, is viewed from within the environmental justice framework as needing attention in the same way that vulnerable human populations need attention, because the environment has few defences against harmful human interventions (Plumwood, 2002).

The concepts of social justice and environmental justice can be seen to overlap in many examples of injustice toward both people and the environment. Following are three examples

taken from both economically-developing and developed countries; Bangladesh, the UK and the US.

In Bangladesh devastating floods have seen the need for entire coastal villages to be relocated as homes and village common land are lost when land subsides due to the combined effects of flooding and sea-level rises. The flooding is, in part at least, related to damage to the environment beyond the state boundaries, and Parks and Roberts (2010) make the point that nations facing rising oceans and other disasters are often those least responsible for the problem and with the least resources to manage these issues.

In the UK, Walker and Burningham (2011) have outlined patterns of social inequality in relation to both flood risk exposure and vulnerability of populations to the diverse impacts of flooding. Their concerns are related to the framing of flood risk and flood impacts, which is directly linked to the level of risk deemed acceptable by government authorities. They conclude that there is evidence of significant inequalities and grounds on which claims of injustice might be made.

Lastly in the US, Rainey and Johnson (2009: 146) document the activist role of people of colour against environmental injustices, and they identify that 'If you are poor, a person of color and female, you are more likely to be a victim of all sorts of environmental dangers and degradation that are life threatening'. Rainey and Johnson detail examples such as 'Chemical Alley'— an 85- mile stretch of the Mississippi River that is home to a quarter of all US chemical plants that also happens to be co-located with primarily black communities. Living near Chemical Alley is associated with a range of health problems, and a population without the resources to relocate to an area associated with better health outcomes.

These examples illustrate that there is a distinct link between large-scale environmental problems and the individuals who are affected by those problems. Social justice and environmental justice are both of interest to social work because they represent a confluence of personal troubles and public issues among the very vulnerable populations with whom social work seeks to make a difference.

[B] *Social workers enacting environmental values*

Jasanoff claims that

[EXTRACT]

The interpretive social sciences have a very particular role to play in relation to climate change. It is to restore to public view, and offer a framework in which to think about, the human and the social in a climate that renders obsolete important prior categories of solidarity and experience. It is to make us more aware, less comfortable, and hence more reflective about how we intervene, in word or deed, in the changing order of things (Jasanoff, 2010: 249).

[END EXTRACT]

It may be open to debate whether social work can claim to be an interpretive social science. However, the relevance of Jasanoff's message for social work is clear. Social workers through their professional role intervene in the lives of individuals, groups and communities, and they are doing so at a time of unprecedented environmental crisis. Social workers can choose to do so in a way that is 'more aware, less comfortable, and...more reflective', as advocated by Jasanoff (2010).

If Urry (2010: 8) is correct, climate change entails ‘the total reorganization of social life, nothing more and nothing less’. What does, and will, this mean for social workers? Shove (2010) alerts us to suggestions that transitions towards sustainability require social innovations in which ‘the contemporary rules of the game are eroded, in which the status quo is called into question and in which less resource-intensive regimes, routines, forms of know-how, conventions, markets and expectations take root’. Processes of fracture and dissolution are also predicted to result from transitional processes that move societies toward more sustainable ways of life (Shove, 2010) and resource-intensive social systems can be expected to yield to less demanding types. There is an expected need for facilitation and legitimation of more sustainable patterns of demand — away from what Urry (2010) refers to as ‘excess’ and from what Beck (2010: 256) refers to as an ‘insatiable appetite for natural resources’.

Ward (2005, as cited in Shove, 2010: 282) concludes that the majority of environmentally-impactful consumption is undertaken ‘not for its own sake but as part of the ordinary accomplishment of everyday life’. Social workers will be interested in understanding how such social practices emerge, are facilitated to persist, and in how they wane. Changing patterns of food consumption and mobility, heating and cooling, water and energy consumption will need to be understood in order to specify and promote social transitions toward more sustainable lifestyles.

Zapf’s (2009) notion of ‘person as place’, understandings about social sustainability, and Coates’ (2003a) suggestion regarding place-sensitive culture are all relevant concepts that provide a way forward for social work. The next step will be to expand current social work practice models to include these concepts. Education is identified as the most important mechanism for developing ecological thinking in social workers due to its role not only for

learning technical skills, but also as a mechanism for developing an accompanying general culture (Bourdieu, 1990). Such a change would help social work to move attention beyond minor adjustments or improvements to capital markets and growth-dominated social structures, and enable a critique beyond purely social matters (Coates, 2003b).

There are many examples of how practitioners and communities are taking environmental matters into account and seeking different outcomes for affected individuals and groups. In such cases social, environmental, and economic factors have provided an integrated basis for assessment, decision-making and action. The following are just a few of the examples of such practice integration in Australia, Europe and India.

In Australia, social workers at Kildonen Care in Victoria are using energy audits as part of their practice and they highlight the relevance of natural environmental issues for social work practice (Borrell et al., 2010). The authors make the point that the overlap between energy audit and social work practice applies to both service user issues and the professional skill base of social workers. There are examples in Europe of the introduction of an eco-social approach to tackling disadvantage by members of a network. This was primarily a Finnish-led social work project aimed at analysing the significance of the eco-social environment and citizen participation in disadvantaged residential areas. At the same time the group has worked on developing new kinds of action models and research methods (Matthies et al., 2000). Finally in India, social workers in a small non-governmental organisation (NGO) have developed approaches to harvesting water to boost agricultural productivity, in a project aimed at reducing poverty in the remote tribal drylands of western India. The authors see this grassroots social work and development model as having the potential to ‘increase agricultural output, guarantee food

security in villages, prevent farmers' suicides, protect natural resources, and above all, eliminate rural poverty' (Agoramoorthy et al., 2009).

[A] Conclusion

At the present time, all people on earth are part of an unfolding debate with regard to the natural environment. Population growth and more than two hundred years of industrialisation have resulted in varying levels of pollution of land, oceans, and air, habitat destruction, exponential extinction rates of non-human species, and now global warming as a result of carbon in the atmosphere. This situation is classed as an environmental crisis by most commentators, yet social work is still developing its response. Leadership is a critical role for all professional groups, and never more so than in regard to the environmental issues that face everyone globally at present. Social work has an opportunity to gear its professional practice, theory and education toward making a difference on these important issues.

This chapter has shown how critical it is for social workers to develop practice models that incorporate an understanding of sustainability. Such models must incorporate the recognition that environmental, social and economic systems are intertwined, and all need to be taken into account if sustainability is to be achieved. There are many isolated examples of ways in which social workers are incorporating understandings of the changing environment into their practice. The challenge now is for such practice and understandings to become commonplace for social workers and for social work education and theory-building to expand the foundation for consistent social work practice in this regard. Social work that is environmentally-aware is a step toward sustainability.

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[A] Notes

i In the sugar cane processing industry, the waste from the industrial plants is also a major environmental problem since 1 litre of alcohol production generates 10 litres or more of stillage. This can be used as fertiliser on cane sugar cane crops, but should not be applied in excess, because it can lead to soil salinisation (due to high levels of sodium and potassium), the contamination of water (causing the death of fish and other wildlife) and the imbalance of soil microbes.

ii According to the Pastoral Care of Migrants, 21 agricultural workers died due to exhaustion at work in the state of São Paulo between 2004 and 2008 (Pastoral do Migrante, 2009, online).