



Eco-social work, environmental protection and sustainable development: A review study

Dr. Anam Aftab

Guest faculty, Department of Social Work, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

Environmental degradation, climate change, and unsustainable development patterns represent some of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century. These challenges disproportionately affect marginalized and vulnerable populations, deepening social inequalities and threatening human wellbeing. The worsening environmental catastrophes and the growing environmental consciousness had led to the emergence of a new approach of development known as "sustainable development". While environmental protection and sustainable development have traditionally been addressed through natural sciences, economics, and policy frameworks, the role of social work has increasingly gained recognition. The paper focuses on the protection of environment and steps taken to enhance the environmental quality through sustainable approaches and social work intervention. It also explores social work's engagement at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. At the onset of paper, a brief discussion on various forms of environmental challenges to development, followed by an analysis of how the approaches of sustainable development and social work method can articulate the environment-development linkages in both practical and intellectual terms have been projected. It synthesizes existing literature, practice examples, policy implications, and challenges, highlighting the need for integrating environmental concerns into social work education. The paper concludes that social work is uniquely positioned to bridge social justice and environmental sustainability, advocating for inclusive, participatory, and people-centered development.

Keywords: Environmental protection, sustainable development, social work intervention, environmental justice, climate change, social policy

Introduction

The environment is man's greatest gift. The environment could be looked at as the basis for man existence. The misuse or misappropriation of the constituents of the environment could hamper the overall health, socio-economy and peace of the nation. This may lead to state or national security (UNEP, 2021). It is essential that man should design a way for its sustainability. Environmental protection and sustainable development have become central global concerns due to accelerating climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, deforestation, and the depletion of natural resources (United Nations, 2015; UNEP, 2021). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) warns that environmental degradation threatens not only ecosystems but also human survival, economic stability, and social cohesion (UNEP, 2021). The adverse impacts of environmental degradation—such as food insecurity, water scarcity, displacement, and health crises—are disproportionately borne by poor and marginalized communities (Bullard, 1990)^[5].

Sustainable development, defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987)^[4] as development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, emphasizes the integration of environmental protection, social equity, and economic growth (Brundtland Commission, 1987)^[4]. Despite this holistic definition, development practices often prioritize economic growth over social and ecological considerations.

Social work, as a profession committed to social justice, human rights, and community wellbeing, is increasingly recognizing the environment as a critical determinant of social welfare. (Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2013)^[7]. Environmental problems are not merely ecological issues;

they are social problems shaped by power relations, inequality, and governance structures (Dominelli, 2012)^[6]. Therefore, social work interventions are essential in addressing the human dimensions of environmental crises.

This review paper aims to examine the role of social work in environmental protection and sustainable development. It seeks to analyze theoretical foundations, intervention strategies, practical applications and challenges, thereby contributing to the growing discourse on green social work and environmental social work. (Dominelli, 2012; Gray *et al.*, 2013)^[6, 7].

Conceptual Framework

▪ Environmental Protection

Environmental protection refers to practices and policies aimed at conserving natural resources, preventing pollution, and maintaining ecological balance. It includes efforts to protect air, water, soil, forests, wildlife, and biodiversity. Environmental protection is closely linked to public health, livelihoods, and quality of life, particularly for communities dependent on natural resources. (UNEP, 2021).

▪ Sustainable Development

Sustainable development integrates three core pillars: a) Environmental sustainability – preserving ecosystems and natural resources. b) Social sustainability – ensuring equity, inclusion, and human wellbeing and c) Economic sustainability – promoting long-term economic stability without ecological harm. Social sustainability, often underemphasized, is where social work plays a crucial role. (United Nations, 2015; Dominelli, 2012)^[6].

▪ Eco-Social Work Intervention

Social work intervention involves planned actions aimed at enhancing individual, group, and community wellbeing.

Interventions may occur at: a) Micro level: individuals and families, b) Mezzo level: groups and communities and c) Macro level: policies, institutions, and social systems (IFSW, 2018) [8]. Applying these intervention levels to environmental issues allows social workers to address both immediate needs and structural causes of environmental degradation (Gray *et al.*, 2013) [7].

Theoretical Perspectives Linking Social Work and Environment

▪ **Ecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes the interaction between individuals and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) [3]. Social work has long applied this perspective to understand social functioning. Extending this theory to include the natural environment highlights how environmental degradation disrupts social systems and individual wellbeing.

▪ **Environmental Justice Theory**

Environmental justice theory asserts that environmental harms disproportionately affect marginalized communities based on race, class, caste, gender, and geography (Bullard, 1990) [5]. Social workers, with their focus on equity and advocacy, play a key role in challenging environmental injustices and promoting fair distribution of environmental benefits (Dominelli, 2012) [6].

▪ **Green Social Work**

Green social work, as conceptualized by Dominelli (2012) [6], integrates environmental concerns into social work practice. It emphasizes: environmental sustainability, social justice, community resilience and structural change
Green social work recognizes climate change as a social crisis requiring collective action.

▪ **Human Rights Approach**

Environmental protection is increasingly recognized as a human rights issue. Access to clean water, safe housing, food security, and a healthy environment are fundamental rights (United Nations, 2015; IFSW, 2018). Social workers advocate for these rights, particularly for vulnerable populations.

Methodology

The study is based on the data collected from the secondary

sources. The secondary sources mainly involve research articles, books and government reports and already published national and international reports.

Sustainability of Environment and Eco-Social Work

Social Work Profession, over a period of time has undergone and still is undergoing changes in its philosophy, approaches and ethics. Its goal of addressing the problems of individuals, group, community and society at large is being addressed in a suitable manner in keeping with changing scenario of present times and in view of changing complexity of problems. One such new dimension is to understand the desirability and possibility of associating problems of human beings vis-a-vis physical environment. Social workers like other environmentalists can work towards addressing the problems confronted by human beings as a consequence of environmental degradation and other related issues. Social Work since its inception, development and acceptance as a profession, underwent a significant changes both in its philosophy (from charity, to right based approach) and methodology of addressing the problems of individuals, groups, communities and society at large (IFSW, 2018). Environment Conservation is the act of conserving or saving our natural resources through management. This means we can use the resources but wisely and responsibly. It is nothing but protecting the natural environment for the benefit of both humans and nature. The present subject is yet to become an area of focus and intervention in social work (as either to social work has focused on social components of the environment (like customs, culture, habits, income, occupation, religion, etc) and not much on physical (water, air, soil etc.) and biological (like planet and animal life) components of the environment (Gray *et al.*, 2013) [7].

The recent incidents of natural disasters have demonstrated beyond doubt that these two components also have significant bearing on the lives of human beings. Thus social work has a role to play in ensuring environmental conservation, as it is necessary for sustainable development. Social work having the objectives of facilitating and empowering people for their development strongly believes in sustainable development. Mary Richmond way back in 1922 [2] itself acknowledged the physical environment as an important contextual consideration for Social work practice.

Social Worker intervention in Environmental Issues

Issues	Interventions
Destruction of Natural Resources	Micro Mental Health & Personal Growth initiatives oriented toward changing consumption-oriented values. Educational programs teaching about scarcity and environmental destruction; teaching about alternative lifestyles [simple living, voluntary simplicity movement]. Crisis intervention with persons who have lost needed resources.
	Macro Develop Conservation & Recycling programs, Eco-system Restoration programs. Direct practice and Consultation on Sustainable Economic Development: [Worker & Community-owned Businesses] Initiate and monitor enforcement of Policy Changes to protect and restore resources, Social Action & Advocacy around patenting of genetic materials [protect biodiversity and reduce corporate commodification of life]
Global Warming & Climate Change	Micro Health interventions with skin cancer victims & other diseases, Crisis intervention & Recovery assistance for victims of floods, tornadoes, and other climate-related Disasters and Educate about Dangers, Values & Behavior Changes: [e.g. public vs. private transportation; burning of fields, etc.]
	Macro Develop urban gardening & tree-planting; develop Reforestation Programs, Develop and support Bicycle & Pedestrian -friendly urban design, Initiate and monitor enforcement of policy changes re pollution emissions; Redirect policy toward soft-path Energy Systems (Wind and Solar Power development)
Toxic Materials Production	Micro

& Waste Disposal	Crisis Intervention around stress issues on the Individuals, Families -- especially impacts on children, Workers and Communities. Material Emergency Services (health, housing, income). Coordination of Health and Social Interventions around hazards; case finding for workplace-based illnesses. Educational materials warning of dangers & safety precautions; education on use of alternative, non-toxic materials.
	Macro Community Relocation, Community Development for victims of hazardous waste accidents or irreparable sites. Policy Development and Enforcement of Workplace safety Standards. Advocacy for Research on development of non-toxic products for Workplace & Home use. Advocacy for Monetary Compensation and Psychological Recovery programs for victims of Toxic Waste. Social Impact Analysis of setting of production facilities
Air and Water Pollution	Micro Crisis Intervention & other mental health intervention around stress caused by exposure [e.g. support groups for asthma sufferers]. Health Services for persons with acute or chronic illnesses. Health Assessment & Service aimed at children [e.g., lead levels]
	Macro Develop Public Education programs about the dangers of air and water pollution & how citizens can support clean-up. Improve Public Monitoring and Enforcement of air and water quality standards. Promote and enforce Policy Changes to reduce air & water pollution. Develop Advocacy programs for victims of air & water pollution (esp. low-income communities). Support Research and Social Impact Analysis
Species Extinction	Micro Mental Health & Personal Growth initiatives oriented toward changing consumption-oriented values. Educational initiatives to teach about ecological science (species interdependency) and sustainability.
	Macro Develop habitat conservation programs. Sustainable Economic Development initiatives with communities to support species preservation. Community and Family-based Sustainable Agriculture (research and policy on community-based food systems). Improved Policy measures to support endangered species & habitat; support for preservation of agricultural seed diversity. Advocacy and Public Education on the dangers and social injustices of corporate patenting of life-forms.

Significance and Importance of Social Work Intervention

The devastating effect of the environment degradation has on human life and natural resources. Environmental degradation is nothing but detonation of the environment through depletion of resources such as air, water and soil and also the destruction of ecosystem. Social work has to address these issues because positive eco system is a base for sustainable development (Dominelli, 2012) [6]. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) declared that environmental exploitation violates the principles of social justice and the profession’s ethical standards (NASW, 1999, as cited in Gray *et al.*, 2013) [1, 7]. Sustainable development from a social work perspective emphasizes equity, long-term wellbeing, and ethical responsibility rather than narrow economic sustainability (United Nations, 2015). The social worker by performing various roles in different context helps the people to survive in the negative circumstances by making the situation favorable for them.

- Development means using the environment for better quality of life for all organisms. But instead of harnessing the environment and being with it, we are exploiting it which is evident if one looks at the application of chemicals / pesticide etc. in agriculture, pollution generated from industries, mining, land degradation, destructive, logging of our forest, flooding, destruction of wet land, natural landslides etc. Discussion on this has relevance as Social workers have the responsibility of working towards restoring the environment / natural resources and equity of distribution of it for social justice.
- The observations and declarations made in the Conferences and Social Work Associations have highlighted the role that social work has to play in conserving environment and equally focusing on all components/ dimensions of environment, and not just social aspect. For example the National Association of Social workers (NASW) delegate assembly in 1999 [1]

proclaimed that ‘ Environmental Exploitation violates the principle of social justice and is a direct violation of the NASW code of ethics’ which led to further deliberations on policy for Social work interventions in this sector. The improved and better environment is a pre requisite for quality of life. The deterioration of environment should be the concern of social workers as the detonation affects the quality of life.

- Sustainable development from social work perspective is very important as sustainability is very often erroneously interpreted; to some it is economic sustainability, meaning having adequate finance for the present and future needs of the organization. It is also looked at as sustaining the institution or organization itself in any form even with compromising with original ideology.
- Poor Human - Nature relation can negatively affect a person’s wellbeing. We have heard and seen application of social work methods and principles to promote the persons well being is in terms of assessment, diagnosing, and working out interventions for him. There are theories and empirical data on this. But much needs to be done regarding the methodology of working with and in the environment to utilize environment (with all its components) for maximizing development and preventing many environment related disasters and diseases which ultimately disrupts the well being of society in which people form part.

Social Worker as a Catalyst for Environment Conservation and Sustainable Development

Social workers as catalysts, - as by definition, catalyst means ‘an event or a person causing a change’. Social workers have worked and are working to effect a positive change in the lives of people by facilitating change in them. What is required now is, they should use the environment for positive change and work on in building/incorporating environmentalism in social work profession and in

development sector. To be more specific the social workers can do /perform the following roles which are catalytic in nature.

- a. Creating awareness as social workers can play an important role in advocating the cause of environment conservation and sustainable development. They can do it by sensitizing the public, policy makers and all stake holders of development sector (including social work activist) on various positive dimensions of environmental conservation specially its relative relevance, and to some extent, its inevitability for sustainable development.
 - b. Social workers are expected to address social issues related to development and environment. They can effectively do it by creating critical awareness on the importance of conservation of natural resources and biological diversity, control of environmental pollution, and finally stabilization of human population and environment.
 - c. Social workers can/may develop familiarity with conservation issues and programmes both at micro and macro level. For example, over the past three decades the Government of India has launched a large number of environmental health programs such as:
 - **Ganga Action Plan:** Reducing water pollution in the Ganges.
 - **Malaria Control Programme:** Using bio-organic techniques in Malaria eradication.
 - **Water Technology Mission:** Providing safe drinking water to water scarce villages, etc.
- The Social workers can mobilize community resources, participation for these programmes by not only creating awareness about the importance of these programmes but also by making them partners of such development initiatives (UNEP, 2021)^[9].
- d. Many of the problems and ill effects of environmental degradation can be effectively addressed/ mitigated by adopting a policy of sustainable development. According to Odette (1993) to achieve sustainable development involves a judicious use of natural resources such that the carrying capacity and the productive capacity are not overexploited.
 - e. Interventions based on social work principles can be developed and implemented to deal with environmental issues like destruction of natural resources, global warming and climate change, toxic materials production, and waste disposes, and also air and water pollution. These can be both for micro levels and macro levels problems.

Environmental Protection through Social Work Practice: Case Examples

- Climate change and displacement is increasing due to floods, droughts, and sea-level rise. Social workers assist displaced populations through relief and rehabilitation, livelihood restoration, community rebuilding and advocacy for climate migrants' rights.
- **Rural Development and Natural Resource Management:** In rural areas, social workers support

sustainable agriculture, water conservation, and forest protection by mobilizing community participation and integrating indigenous knowledge.

- **Urban Environmental Challenges:** Urban social work addresses issues such as waste management, air pollution, housing, and access to green spaces. Social workers collaborate with urban planners to promote sustainable cities.

Challenges in Integrating Environmental Concerns into Social Work

Challenges include limited environmental content in social work education, institutional constraints, fragmented policies, and ethical dilemmas in balancing immediate needs with long-term sustainability (Gray *et al.*, 2013; Dominelli, 2012)^[6, 7].

1. Limited environmental focus in social work education as many social work curricula lack structured training on environmental issues, limiting practitioners' capacity to engage effectively.
2. Institutional and resource constraints as environmental initiatives often require long-term investment, which may not align with short-term funding cycles.
3. Policy fragmentation on environmental and social policies often operates in silos, reducing the effectiveness of integrated interventions.
4. Ethical and professional dilemmas for balancing immediate client needs with long-term environmental goals can create ethical tensions in practice.

Conclusion

Environmental protection and sustainable development are inseparable from social justice and human wellbeing. Protection of environment is the global issue since the Rio summit because the situation is becoming worst day by day. As a citizen of the nation, all the people must help and take initiatives to protect the environment. Various Government and Ngo's have already come together to preserve the environment. Besides these, various social activist and environment workers joined their hands to protect the environment and make it sustainable for the future generation. Social work profession as a helping profession helps the individuals, groups, society and community at large to protect the natural resources and social development. Social Action as one of the important methods of Social Work helps the number of people from the negatives and harmful situation which adversely affect them and makes them sustain in the society.

Social work offers a unique perspective that integrates ecological sustainability with social equity. Through interventions at multiple levels, social workers contribute to environmental awareness, community resilience, policy reform, and sustainable development. Strengthening this role requires educational reform, policy support, and interdisciplinary collaboration. As environmental challenges intensify, the relevance of social work in shaping a sustainable and just future becomes increasingly critical.

To strengthen the social work contribution in environmental protection and sustainable development, environmental education must be integrated into social work curricula. Governments should recognize social workers as key stakeholders in environmental governance.

Funding mechanisms should support community-based sustainability initiatives. Interdisciplinary collaboration must be institutionalized.

References

1. National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Environmental policy statement. NASW Delegate Assembly, 1999.
2. Richmond M. What is Social Case Work? Russell Sage Foundation, 1922.
3. Bronfenbrenner U. The Ecology of Human Development, 1979.
4. Brundtland Commission. Our Common Future, 1987.
5. Bullard RD. Dumping in Dixie, 1990.
6. Dominelli L. Green Social Work, 2012.
7. Gray M, Coates J, Hetherington T. Environmental Social Work, 2013.
8. IFSW. Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles, 2018.
9. UNEP. Making Peace with Nature, 2021.
10. United Nations. 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2015.