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## **SOCIAL WORKERS AS ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION VANGUARDS: ZIMBABWEAN PROFESSIONALS' POTENTIAL CHANGE AGENT ROLES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Environmental injustice is one of the challenges facing social workers globally. The article explores pathways for environmental social work engagement in Zimbabwe. The authors reviewed media reports on environmental degradation in selected Zimbabwean locations and discussed the results in light of potential roles of social workers in ensuring environmental justice. The authors recommend inclusion of environmental issues in the social work curricula, including fieldwork and collaboration with state and non-state actors who are currently involved in environment justice.*

**KEY TERMS:** *Social Work, environmental degradation, environmental justice, natural resource governance, person in environment*

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This study explored the potential contribution of the Zimbabwean social work fraternity to discourses surrounding environmental sustainability. Social work professionals as change agents are not only restricted to therapeutic interventions for individuals, groups and communities. Rather, they are also social justice advocates and brokers of service users' social functioning in their natural environment. However, in most countries, social workers have not been visible in environmental justice (Duwane, 2011). In most cases, it is likely that people who live in fragile and infertile environments find it difficult to escape the cycle of poverty without of social workers' assistance. Item 56 of the 2012 UN General assembly's high-level political forum on sustainable development meeting, reflects political commitment to green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. It calls for green economy consideration in sustainable development and poverty eradication improving human welfare and maintaining the healthy functioning of the earth's ecosystems (United Nations, 2012) The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2012)'s Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development prioritised the development of socio-economic structures ensuring environmental sustainability. Arguably, within the profession, discussion of developmental social work and indigenisation of social work in Africa is inadequate without focusing on environmental sustainability. This comes as environmental degradation continually emerges as a rising threat due to extraction of natural.

In the Global South, poor people's livelihoods buttressed on harnessing their natural resources but this end up being one of the key environment degradation drivers. Gray and Coates (2012) contextualise this assertion when they lament that disadvantaged and marginalised groups disproportionately destroy and devastate the environment.

In Zimbabwe, sustainable environmental management and protection issues have always dominated the research agenda of some researchers and development practitioners. Environmental exploitation practically violates the social work principle of social justice one of the key tenets on which the discipline is founded. Social workers are dictated by their code of ethics to safeguard people against social injustice (Council of Social Workers Zimbabwe, CSWZ, 2015). Zimbabwe has an enabling environmental protection legislative framework principally under the Environmental Management Act Chapter (20:27), administered by the country's statutory arm Environmental Management Agency (EMA). The Act's chapter six, section 97 criminalizes failure to undertake mandatory environmental impact assessment (EIA). Moreover, the Ministry of Environment, Water and Climate's slogan is 'The environment is everybody's responsibility' and one of the principles of the Environmental Management Act is that development must be socially, environmentally and economically sustainable. Amongst Zimbabwean environment management non-state actors include Zimbabwe Environmental Lawyers Association (ZELA), Environment Africa (EA), Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG) and Centre for Research and Development (CRD), World Wildlife Foundation (WWF-Southern African Regional Office), UN's Global Environmental Fund Southern African Alliance for Indigenous Resources (SAFIRE), Zimbabwe Environmental Regional Organisation, and (ZERO). Arguably, not much vibrancy has been exhibited by the National Association of Social Workers Zimbabwe (NASWZ) programmatic interventions in articulating the cause of service users' entitlement to biodiversity protection issues.

Given the above context, the article seeks problematising Social Work's limited engagement with environmental degradation. This was analysed through enumerating the extent of

degradation within selected rural and urban areas of Zimbabwe through a study whose objectives were three fold: to analyse Zimbabwean environmental degradation trends and impacts; to explore how social workers' knowledge base can be harnessed towards sustainable natural environment outcomes; and to explore potential strategies for social workers collaborative environmental justice advocacy strategies. Data was collected from newspaper reports and commissioned action research studies.

## **FINDINGS: ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICES IN RURAL AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN ZIMBABWE**

Zimbabwe is endowed with various minerals. Global economic giants such as China and Russia have investments in minerals in Zimbabwe and their investments have been steadily rising where for instance Zimbabwe's trade with economic powerhouse China topped \$1,102 billion in 2013 (Daily News, 24 February 2014). However, such extractive mining investments have brought with them devastating ecological implications. Again, foreign mining companies especially from the Far East, are perceived as bringing in the much needed investment in the face of Zimbabwe's constrained relations with traditionally economically powerful Western countries. This is couched in the current Zimbabwean government foreign policy thrust of Look East Policy.

Moreover, using the lens of big corporates investments in environmentally fragile areas, Chisumbanje in South Eastern Zimbabwe, is the location of an ethanol refinery plant investment by Green Fuel, established as a joint venture company between the Government of Zimbabwe's Agricultural and Rural Development Authority and Macdom Investments (Herald Newspaper, 16 August 2012). The company employed more than 4 500 workers, mostly from Manicaland province and the Environment Management Agency (EMA) reported to Parliament's Senate Thematic Committee that the ethanol project was implemented without an environmental impact assessment. EMA accused Green Fuel of exposing families living in the area to acidic water released from their operations. The Herald newspaper reported that Green Fuel indicated that Green Fuel was directed to make payments of over one hundred thousand United States dollars (US\$100 000) for the engagement of independent experts from the University of Zimbabwe to conduct site visits to the plant and review the EIA through community consultations (Herald, 2012).

Significantly, in the period, 2009-2012, displacement of Chiadzwa and Chisumbanje communities to pave way for diamond mining and biofuels respectively occurred. Villagers were displaced without proper resettlement action plans. Villagers suffered loss of fertile agricultural lands while their riverine systems were polluted (Chimonyo, Mungure and Scott 2012).

Additionally, gold rich Mazowe District in Mashonaland Central province in 2013 saw 11 Chinese miners being ordered to cease mining after an eventual tour by a "crack" delegation of the Environment and Climate Minister and other government extension officials (Herald newspaper, 8 October 2013). Numerous pleas by villagers whose livestock and drinking water was exposed to toxins from extractive mining activities facilitated this. These downstream villagers are communities upon which livelihood activities rely on the river's watercourse especially livestock such as cattle which is valued for draught power and social status.

In the same vein Chimonyo, Mungure and Scott (2012) conducted applied action research in Chiadzwa, Kusena, Chirasika, Chishingwi and Tonhorai communal lands in Marange, on alluvial diamond mining impacts. Their findings indicate soil and water resources have not only loosened soil, but also heavy vehicles and machinery have hardened the soil reducing infiltration, deforestation and enhancing runoff and erosion. The loose sediment with poisonous elements is easily carried away into the riverine systems composed of major rivers as Save,

Odzi and Singwizi rivers and the small dams in the area resulting in skin rash and livestock losses (Chimonyo, Mungure and Scott, 2012). Important fruit trees such as the baobab tree (*adansoniadigitata*) which has social and economic roles in the community were lost to deforestation.

Furthermore, environmental degradation of urban water courses through lack of rigorous environmental by-laws enforcement of local authorities has continued to be unchallenged by social workers. Matemanda and Chirisa (2014:1) note:

‘...Industrial pollution coupled with human manipulation of the natural ecosystem has been key drivers of environmental degradation in cities that has resulted in a compromise of the quality of the natural ecosystem...’

Mutare’s industrial sites have been discharging industrial effluent into Sakubva River, an Odzi River tributary and making part of Save River catchment. This exemplifies environmental injustice which cannot go unnoticed. Advocacy efforts previously by non-state actors as Environment Africa around 2003 to stem the pollution have now since come to nought. However, downstream communities, like in Dora communal lands, relying on Sakubva River bear the brunt and suffer in silence without getting City of Mutare recourse (Mapira 2011).

Furthermore, findings of pollution levels at Lake Chivero, one of City of Harare and its environs water source are alarming (Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, 25 March 2014). Study findings by University of Zimbabwe (UZ)’s Biochemistry Department revealed the lake and all its subsidiary rivers are subject to stress from heavy pollution of metals, pesticides and raw sewage requiring a huge financial commitment for the lake’s rehabilitation for water users benefit (Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, 25 March 2014). The study noted high eutrophic and levels of nutrients in Lake Chivero because of raw effluent, domestic and industrial waste being discharged into it, resulting in blue-green algae blooms and water hyacinth.

Additionally, Harare’s Belvedere suburb’s wetlands area was converted to a Chinese owned and themed state of the art shopping mall signifies another illustration of environmentally significant urban public and social spaces violations. Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) Chief Executive Officer Karikoga Kaseke was quoted by the Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce (ZNCC) defending the construction of the Chinese Mall in Belvedere suburb’s wetlands saying the construction of a USD300 million Mall cannot be stopped (ZNCC, 2012). Besides the natural habitat in the wetlands, there were families and community groups such as churches who regarded the areas as a public and social space for activities as worship. The project went on despite a controversial Environmental Impact Assessment process. Another example is the Meikles Recreational Park land contestations in Mutare whose plan was changed to include a hotel (Daily News, 2 May 2014).

## DISCUSSION: PATHWAYS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS’ INVOLVEMENT

The above section of the paper gave a comprehensive insight into the dynamics of pervasive environmental degradation hampering sustainable environmental management in Zimbabwe. This is despite commitments to international and regional environmental protection protocols and an enabling policy environment superintended by various skilled frontline technocrats across 63 Zimbabwean districts. The paper now discusses how environmental management interventions can be made more robust with inclusion of seasoned human development actors as social workers who can apply their repertoire of lobbying and advocacy skills and flair to engage with grassroots communities. However the social workers factor is also without its challenges in remedies for enhanced environmental protection.

With aid from donor agencies, mining sector players under the auspices of their Corporate Social Responsibility obligations can engage with environmental management actors complemented by incorporation of social workers, the key human development and welfare professionals. This stimulates creation of a unique multi stake holders platforms for opportunities of improved ecological management. Zimbabwe's rural and urban development structures are constituted in such a way that coordination of such is possible. Aided by social workers invoking the eclectic Social Work knowledge base encompassing aspects as Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the Oppressed and Mbigi's Ubuntu concepts, community actors can be reinvigorated to mobilise their capacities and engage the mining sector players, the government. The objective would be through relevant non-confrontational channels, for their voice and concerns to be factored in harnessing of natural resources surrounding them. Enduring Indigenous Knowledge Systems in rural settings can be invoked like for example taboo associated with desecrating sacred groves to advocate the cause of environmentally friendly economic developments. For example, Community Share Ownership Trusts have been established across resource rich Zimbabwean districts. Moreso, Zimbabwe National Water Authority Catchment Councils are in operation alongside District Development Committees constituted by paramount chiefs, district level government frontline bureaucrats and local community leaders. Social workers representative bodies as Council of Social Workers can then harness synergies with such ready existing structures. Important commemorations on the UN calendar as World Wetlands Day, World Environment Day, World Consumer Day, Zimbabwe's own National Tree Planting Day, and World Social Workers Day can be vehicles to engage in advocacy activities through collaboration with above named actors in development work structures to plant trees, engage in clean up campaigns whilst advocating for environmental justice.

However, in critical analysis, donor driven programming is a challenge to initiate such kind of approaches. Any engagement of actors concerned in environmental management to cascade key resolutions to the grassroots is successful until donor funds in programming cycle dry up. Continuity of such initiatives is thus threatened at donor pull out. Coordination of Social workers environmental justice lobbying and advocacy efforts can be leveraged on joint working with the varied extractive sectors players like watchdog groups. This encompasses actors like Chiadzwa diamond fields focused Centre for Research and Development based in Mutare as well as Chisumbanje Biodiesel plant watchdog group. This could be achieved through harnessing non-confrontational channels, for their voice and concerns to be factored in harnessing of natural resources surrounding them. Amongst such channels are participation in Parliamentary Portfolio Committee hearings like the recently concluded 2016 Mining and Minerals Act Amendment Bill Nationwide Public Hearings. However, joint working between different actors where social workers develop synergies for collaboration for the desired outcomes of environmental protection has its fair share of challenges chief amongst them being ownership and accountability. Social workers are more on the communities' engagement side and less concerned with rigours of evidence based reporting scientifically oriented collaborative actors insist on. Social workers are keen on the soft side of interventions outcomes that is what lasting impact have interventions had on communities than how has air and water quality ratings improved in compliance with World Health Organisations standards.

Also social workers as professionals can engage with various societal groups using guided by different intersectionalities prevalent in society, For instance the Environmental Management Agency (EMA) has said Makokoba suburb remains the dirtiest suburb in Bulawayo and EMA Provincial manager Mr Decent Ndlovu said the agency has turned to churches to try and change the mind-set of Makokoba suburb residents when it comes to littering (Chronicle Newspaper, 17 December 2016).

Furthermore, Mutare based Zimbabwe National Army 3 Infantry Brigade in partnership with Forestry Commission of Zimbabwe have embarked on a project to plant trees across Manicaland (Mafere 2016). Deputy Commander 3 Infantry Brigade, Colonel Joel Muzvidziwa indicated

“This exercise shall also be rolled out in all ZNA units located here in Manicaland and this year alone, we target to plant 10 000 trees in partnership with Forestry Commission as well as the local communities that surrounds us in our different areas of responsibility,”(Mafere 2016)

The above instances illustrate potential platforms by which social workers can form synergies with different actor in advancing the cause for environmental preservation whilst applying their skill of engaging humans as social work’s subject matter. In effect social workers are a vital proponents of greening efforts across Zimbabwe and should be active in those endeavors. This is because of their repertoire of skills to engage service users regarding aspects of their public and social spaces and how best they can be enhanced whilst recognising intersectionality involved.

Additionally, social workers should possess Applied and Participatory Social Research core competencies and examining issues like conflict between local control of resources and global capitalism. Global capitalism is a threat to intergeneration equity, which is a concern for activist social workers and ecofeminists because equity and equality are central in human development (McKinnon, 2008). The question to be further interrogated is what best position can social worker’s play in cases like this, besides calling on the EMA to take Social Impact Assessments seriously as a vital component of EIAs.

Moreover curriculum realignment of social work for stimulating environmental justice proactive Zimbabwean social worker is now required. Jarvis (2009) notes that social work institutions have been producing professionals lacking capacity to “address the nexus of environmental justice, social work, and social justice”. This is a global phenomenon as social workers merely train professionals to become caseworkers, group workers and community workers. It is not surprising to note that recently graduated social workers or students currently undertaking the Rural Development module whilst knowledgeable of aspects as Participant Rural Appraisal popularised by Robert Chambers in the 1990s have limited familiarity of current topical environmental issues like Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) and climate-adaptation interventions. Such approaches have gained traction in development thinking and have been galvanised in the current Sustainable Development Goals, successor to Millennium Development Goals.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Social work training institutions in Zimbabwe should enrich their curriculum; to integrate issues of Social Ecology and Climate Change. Although tailor made Masters programmes as Social Ecology are offered by UZ through centre for Applied Social Sciences and that Social Workers may enrol, Social Ecology and Climate Change concepts should gain more traction in critical undergraduate modules as Rural Development and Community Work. Duwane (2011:17) argues that

“it is important that social work courses and field education offer students the opportunity to study the nexus between environmental justice and social work”.

For social workers to be active participants in environmental justice in future, they have to adopt Duwane's recommendation of including multidisciplinary ideas on social work training. Additionally, Jones (2006:6) noted that

Social work education must contribute to the available scholarly research and connect social work's long-established social justice values and commitments with environmental justice issues.

Ideally, social work training institutions in Zimbabwe should enrich their curriculum; to integrate issues of Social Ecology and Climate Change. Although tailor made Masters programmes as Social Ecology are offered by UZ through centre for Applied Social Sciences and that Social Workers may enrol, Social Ecology and Climate Change concepts should gain more traction in critical undergraduate modules as Rural Development and Community Work.

Social workers should operationalise professional institutions and platforms for advocacy. This can be in the form of a working group on environment within the ranks of NASWZ or formation of new environmental pressure organisations which for example could be termed Social Workers for Environmental Justice. In other allied professions such as the legal fraternity, there exists bodies like Zimbabwe Environmental Lawyers Association (ZELA); an organisation dedicated to environmental justice from a legal platform. If social workers are not equipped to form an organisation directly dealing with environmental issues, collaborations could be made with organisations like Environment Africa (EA), Centre for Research and Development (CRD), Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR).

Platforms as the annual World Environment Day and World Social Workers Day (WSWD) and National Tree Planting Day could be used to initiate environmental protection conscientisation strategies through dissemination of information to grassroots communities. Social work practitioners can be extending this by engaging in social action aimed at legislative reforms and raising awareness about environment and also educating communities not to grant 'social licence' to investors who do not implement their Environmental and Social Management Plans.

Community social workers should influence policy makers understanding of social and physical environmental forces as people's needs determinants and social policies have to be responsive. It is vital that professionals be visible in critical platforms such as public parliamentary committee hearings. Additionally, prescriptive planning approach in which the Environment and Sustainable development key state and non-state actors are compelled to develop in line with Zimbabwe's environmental preservation goals should be pursued. Additionally, CSW and NASWZ various chapters across Zimbabwe should occasionally initiate and undertake urban clean up campaigns showing commitment to the environmental sustainability cause. Importantly, press statements should be issued by such entities on occasions as World Environment Day or when large human made disasters such as veld fires occur. Educational material in vernacular language must be produced and distributed by social workers.

Social workers should also collectively advocate for increased financial support for environmental causes from the state and also promote implementation of environmental reclamation programmes through public works programmes. The article therefore calls on social workers to take practical steps towards holistically addressing environmental issues when helping poor people, especially the rural poor in Zimbabwe. This is because people are products of their environment.

## CONCLUSION

This article has emphasised the important role social workers in Zimbabwe could play to address issues of ecological sustainability, as one of the several ways of dealing with poverty. To deal with poverty sustainably, social workers in Zimbabwe, as perhaps in most other countries, need to integrate ecological issues in their work.

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