



POVERTY AS A THREAT TO ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

Social Work as a profession has a role to play to reduce the impact of environmental degradation arising from poverty and climate change. This paper seeks to articulate the roles to be played by social workers in reducing the impact of environmental degradation. There is a symbiotic relationship between poverty and environmental degradation hence the need for social work intervention; poverty causes environmental degradation and the vice versa is equally true. Social workers are equipped with knowledge and skills in advocating for the rights of the poor and marginalised people (social justice), hence the need for the visibility of social work as a profession in environmental sustainability activities. Social workers can also play a key role in enlightening and building the capacity of the poor and disadvantaged people about the need to protect the environment in order to sustain their livelihoods. The success of environmental sustainability activities is hinged on community participation and this makes the relevance of social work indispensable since social workers are endowed with knowledge and skills in community participation. It was also observed that if social workers do not participate in environmental sustainability activities, it has implications on their work since more people will be rendered vulnerable due to environmental degradation. This research study noted the applicability of social work theories and models such as resilience theory, person-in-environment model and systems theory in environmental sustainability activities. This paper concludes that social work has an important role in reducing environmental degradation.

KEY TERMS: environmental sustainability, social work, poverty, empowerment, social justice

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INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to articulate the relevance and roles that social workers can play in addressing the challenge of environmental degradation. There is need for visibility of social work as a profession in environmental sustainability since relying on physical sciences only is failing to bear the intended results. This paper explains the causes of environmental degradation and their impact on social work practice, and then examine the applicability of social work theories, models, knowledge and skills in addressing the challenge of environmental degradation.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION PERSPECTIVES

Explanation on the causes of environmental degradation has been explained mainly from a Malthusian perspective and as a consequence, the inclusion of professions such as social work has been negated in favour of physical sciences. Pillai and Gupta (2015) point out that prior to the 1980s environmental degradation was attributed to population explosion and as a result, the thinking was very Malthusian. This led to the implementation of measures aimed at curbing population growth such as birth quotas. However, this did not yield the desired results since environmental degradation is not solely caused by population growth.

The Brundtland report (United Nations, 1987) places ecological sustainability on an equal footing with social and economic sustainability. This perspective provides for an interdisciplinary approach to the challenge of environmental degradation unlike the Malthusian approach which only recognizes physical sciences. Kondrat (2002) explains that the recognition of equality among social, economic and physical environments has several implications. This approach allows social workers to participate in environmental sustainability issues since it has been noted that the causes of environmental degradation encompass various factors. This approach was adopted after realising that focusing on one aspect such as the physical environment will not bring about environmental sustainability.

Glasmeyer and Farrigan (2003) point out that poverty is the biggest polluter of the environment; it pollutes systems at all levels: social, economic and physical environment. They further explain that the principle of connectivity suggests that the three are interconnected and that improvement in one may not be achieved without changes in others. This makes it very clear that environmental degradation cannot be addressed unless poverty and other social inequalities are attended to. This idea was noted during the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 where global partnership for sustainable development was called for especially through poverty reduction strategies. This approach brings the participation of social work as a profession in environmental issues to the fore since social work is concerned with poverty reduction.

Environmental degradation is also caused by social inequalities (Marxist perspective). Blowers (2003) argues that environmental problems are structurally induced, despite their personal manifestations; poverty and environmental injustice are both manifestation of structural violence. The quest for economic growth has resulted in ecological crises and exploitation of the poor people by the capitalists. Carrillo (2007) notes that, it is clear that economic development in most developing countries was followed by increases in social inequality. Dewane (2011) explains that the logical consequence of the exploitation of natural resources is the exploitation of people. He further notes that it is the racial discrimination in the enactment or enforcement of any policy, practice or regulation that negatively affects the environment of low-income and/or racially homogenous communities at a rate disparate from affluent communities. Rogge (1996) concurs that poor people in developed and developing countries are pushed aside to physical spaces with the poorest environmental quality relative to residential spaces of the rich, with serious consequences for health of the current as well as future generations of the poor. In Zimbabwe for example, the outbreak of cholera in 2008 affected mainly people in the high density suburbs in comparison to the people in low density suburbs.

It can be noted that the Marxist perspective shows that the environment is being exploited by the rich at the expense of the poor and as a consequence, there is constant violence between the rich and the poor. At global level, for example, it is known that developed countries emit much gases which cause the depletion of ozone layer resulting in climate change. The effects of climate change, however, are being felt by developing countries and poor communities. This explanation (Marxist) of environmental degradation therefore, shows the need for the participation of social work as a profession since there are social issues involved which can be best addressed by social workers.

RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL WORK APPROACHES IN ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Although social workers especially in Zimbabwe are not taking a visible role in environmental sustainability, their knowledge and skills, theories and models are relevant and crucial in dealing with the challenges of environmental degradation. Pillai and Gupta (2015) explain that there are unmistakably recognisable similarities between the ecological and social work approaches. Chapin, Kofinas and Folke (2009) also share the same views by noting

that the ecological sustainability mirror social work methods toward rehabilitating, restoring and maintaining client systems to satisfactory levels of functioning and satisfaction.

Person-in-environment

The person-in-environment is one of the approaches central in the social work profession and it is also applicable in environmental sustainability activities. In social work approach, this model emphasises the need to understand the person in the context of his/her environment in order to come up with ways of addressing their problem. This approach requires social workers to look in all the facets: social, economic and natural environment of a client in order to diagnose a problem. Pillai and Gupta (2015) however, argue that the social work profession, although governed by the person-in-environment principle, has long neglected the environment-in-person; this environment includes not only social and economic contexts but also the natural world. The National Association of Social Workers (Canada) (2000) argues that protecting people and the natural environment through sustainable development is arguably the fullest realisation of the person-in-environment perspective. These arguments show that social workers may not fully work towards addressing challenges encountered by their clients if the influence of physical environment is not recognized during the process of diagnosis.

The person-in-environment approach shares much in common with the systems approach which believes in understanding all the systems of an individual in order to establish the root cause of the problem. If one part of the system is not functioning properly it affects other systems and this may result in problems. This approach is very important in social work practice as well as in environmental sustainability activities. Environmental sustainability can only be realized when other systems are functioning normally. If for example, the challenge of poverty is not addressed, it will have a negative bearing on efforts to sustain the environment. Pillai and Gupta (2015) say that systematic approaches have resulted in theoretical and methodological advances within social work that can be adopted by sustainability advocates, policy makers and theory builders. They further note that if sustainability is a new paradigm, social work as a discipline provides the design for sustainable thinking and actions. This therefore, calls for the application of the systems approach in order to address the challenges of environmental sustainability. This then makes the participation of social workers in environmental sustainability activities inevitable since they are well versed with the tenets of systems theory and person-in-environment approach.

Interdisciplinary approach

Social work as an eclectic profession recognizes the importance of interdisciplinary approach when dealing with challenges affecting individuals, groups or communities. However, utilizing an interdisciplinary approach does not mean dilution of professionalism or compromise of professionalism; each profession plays its part resulting in a holistic (comprehensive) service delivery. The interdisciplinary approach is required in the environmental sustainability approaches in order to realize the objectives. Morito (2002) says that ecological issues cannot be relegated to one separate discipline assigned exclusive responsibility for the physical environment; ecological thinking is a process, a worldview, set of principles, an awareness that must affect all approaches to enquiry and practice. Schmitz et al (2012) argue that the road to an environmentally sustainable future requires an interdisciplinary response that engages both the social and physical sciences. Orr (2011) also notes that contemporary educational and political systems have failed to respond to environmental crisis because of lack of interdisciplinary approach. He further explains that remediation requires a holistic response relying on interdisciplinary knowledge and skills in developing collaborative practices at the local, regional and global levels.

Social workers have knowledge and skills of building teams and ensuring cohesion in the group hence their importance in participating in environmental sustainability activities with other professions. Schmitz et al point out that within ill-defined, interdisciplinary spaces, social workers can operate as collaborators and team builders, bringing their expertise to the interdisciplinary response teams that are essential to address vital and complex sustainability issues. In Zimbabwe for example, social workers can collaborate with other professional such as agronomists, physical scientist and lawyers in advocating and teaching of policy makers and community members about the need to preserve forestry plantations being destroyed by people. The inclusion of social workers in a team like this will make it stronger since social workers have expert knowledge and skills on team work which can lead to the realization of environmental sustainability goals.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND ROLES OF SOCIAL WORKERS

There is a symbiotic relationship between poverty and environmental degradation; poverty causes environmental degradation and the vice-versa is equally true. This shows that the participation of social work in environmental sustainability activities becomes inevitable since addressing poverty is very central in social work practice.

Social workers have a role of advocating for the rights and protection of the poor and marginalised groups since environmental degradation does not affect social classes of people (rich and poor) in a similar pattern. It is usually the poor and marginalised people who bear the brunt of environmental degradation. Teixeira and Krings (2015) explain that environmental degradation is not experienced by all populations equally; hazardous and toxic waste sites, resource contamination and air pollution disproportionately affect low income and minority

communities. In Zimbabwe for example, most industries and factories are found in the western side of the town which is usually also the residential area of the low income earners. As a consequence, the low income earners are predisposed to health hazards caused by the environmental degradation in the form of air and water pollution. This situation requires social workers to advocate for the rights of the poor since social work as a profession is concerned about social justice. Dewane (2011) shares the same notion by saying that environmental justice demand that social work education look at ways in which social workers can help improve the world of their clients. Social workers can lobby for environmental policies like taxing the industrialists in order to benefit the poor people. Teixeira and Krings also explain that social workers should be involved in environmental sustainability since the communities most affected by environmental injustices are often the same communities where social workers are entrenched in service provision at individual, family and community level.

Social worker are endowed with knowledge and skills of working with communities carrying out various roles like working as change agents and enhancing community participation. These knowledge and skills are transferable to the environmental sustainability activities. Mearns and Norton (2010) note that social workers as change agents, participate in social action at the individual and community levels and direct future research and policy toward priorities that most directly resonate with the people who are most vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. Kennedy (2009) also notes that at local level, those marginalised by poverty need information about ecological environmental risks and their interconnection to poverty. Social workers are also aware of the community power dynamics and the influence on environmental sustainability. Dominelli (2012) argues that ecological sustainability approaches do not take into consideration the role of power in the community and as a consequence, they operate on the assumption that ecological sustainability can be achieved through manipulation of population. These arguments therefore, show the need for social workers to participate in the fight against environmental degradation since they have knowledge and skills of working with the community.

Environmental degradation results in the loss of sources of livelihoods like livestock, farming and employment and as a consequence, people become impoverished. This situation necessitates the involvement of social workers since it is a profession designed to work with the vulnerable members of the community. Social workers will be engaged in activities aimed at empowering the vulnerable members so that they are resilient to environmental crisis like the effects of climate change such as drought. Breton (1994) explains that empowerment approach as part of human development is now espoused also by the ecological sustainability. Empowerment involves provision of information on human rights, involving the client at all levels of decision making with respect to problem solving and arriving at a negotiated solution. Pillai and Gupta (2015) also note that developing community capacity through empowerment to preserve and develop local resources is now widely accepted as an integral aspect of ecological sustainability. There is need to build the capacity of community members so that they are able to deal with the effects of environmental degradation and if it is not done, impoverishment of people will be perpetuated.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that there is a symbiotic relationship between poverty and environmental degradation and hence, the inclusion of social work as a profession in environmental sustainability activities becomes inevitable since social work is concerned about addressing poverty at various levels: individual, group or community. It has been noted that efforts to realise ecological sustainability have not yielded desired results because of overreliance on physical sciences while negating the contribution social factors such as power dynamics, social classes, poverty and structural violence. This therefore, calls for the participation of social workers since they have knowledge and skills of dealing with these social factors. The applicability of social work theories, models and approaches such as systems theory, person-in-environment approach and resilience theory shows that social work can play a vital role in the attainment of environmental sustainability. Social workers are endowed with knowledge and skills in advocating for the rights of the marginalized and community participation which are crucial in environmental sustainability approaches. Environmental sustainability can only be realised when people are empowered in various facets of their lives and this is the aim of social work as a profession.

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