An ecosocial work model for social work education in Africa

Michael Emru TADESSE and James Kutu OBENG

Abstract

There is a growing call for social work to contribute to the international movement towards sustainability to address the interconnected multiple ecological, social, and economic crises created by the global capitalist hegemony. This call is important for African social work given vulnerable people in Africa are primary victims of unsustainability. In this paper, we propose a model of an ecosocial work course for African undergraduate social work education. This proposal is based on our earlier review of the Bachelor of Social Work curricula of 12 universities in four African countries to determine the extent to which ecosocial content were addressed. Our review indicated the absence of an ecosocial approach in the curricula. To fill this gap, we then designed a model of an ecosocial work course based on our international experience in social work, our ongoing studies on sustainability, and relevant literature regarding Africa. We hope this model will be adopted by social work programmes in different African universities and used to shape social work students who will deal with the interconnected multiple crises in their practice. We also hope that this proposal will help African social work play a crucial role in the sustainable development of the continent.

KEY TERMS: *Africa, Bachelor of Social Work, social work curriculum, ecosocial work, environment, social work, sustainability*

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INTRODUCTION

Our recent review study of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) curricula of various African universities indicated that the BSW curricula in Africa were bereft of concepts such as ecosocial approach, natural environment, and ecology. In the current paper, we aim to contribute towards filling such a gap by introducing a model of an ecosocial work course for African Social Work (SW) education. The ecosocial approach is an emerging paradigm that recognizes the interconnectivity of ecological, economic, and social drivers of (un)sustainability. This approach requires us to have a holistic worldview by redirecting our attention from an anthropogenic-centred worldview to an ecologically-centred worldview. This approach is crucial as it helps the profession address its major criticisms with regard to its (i) inconsistent ontology, epistemology, and methodology and (ii) role in sustaining the capitalist hegemony that has been the major cause of unsustainability. Furthermore, as showed in our review, this approach is indispensable in the case of Africa because it promotes the decolonization of professional knowledge; relates to indigenizing social work education; and enhances Africa's drive towards sustainable development. In what follows, we provide a brief discussion of the outline of our proposed ecosocial work course based on African perspectives and examples.

THE STRUCTURE OF ECOSOCIAL WORK FOR AFRICA

Figure 1: Structure of the ecosocial work model for African SW education
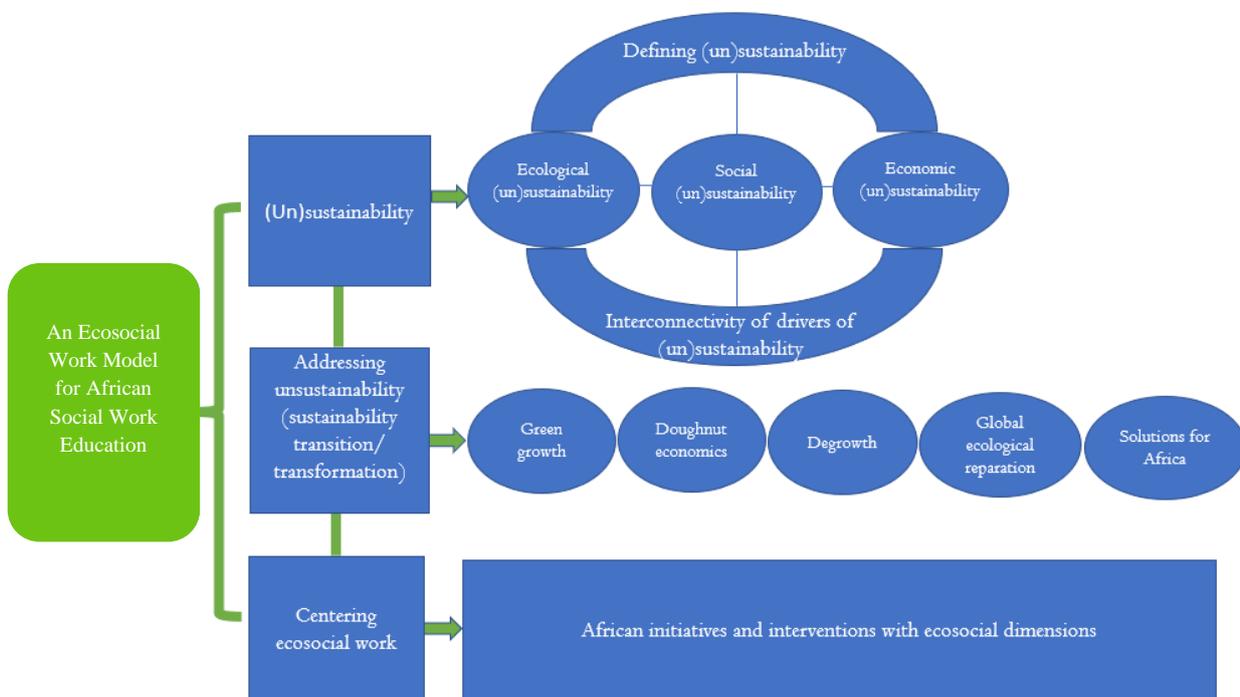
(UN)SUSTAINABILITY

Defining (un)sustainability

As a starting point, the ecosocial work course must introduce the meaning of (un)sustainability to students by using global definitions and narrowing down to culturally relevant African examples. The following introductory points are worth considering in the introduction: the meaning of (un)sustainability, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), multiple crises, and planetary and social boundaries.

The definition of sustainability can be approached from different angles. For example, the United Nations (UN) (1987) defines sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" while following an integrated approach that considers environmental, social, and economic concerns. Sustainability can also be understood in relation to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that contains 17 SDGs and 169 targets, adopted by all UN Member States in 2015 (UN, n.d.).

Another way of defining sustainability can be by examining what unsustainability means, i.e., the multiple and interconnected ecological, social, and economic crises of our time created and exacerbated by the global capitalist system, affecting particularly the most vulnerable. Specific examples of (drivers of) unsustainability, for instance, include climate change, social inequality, and financial crisis.

At the heart of (un)sustainability is the fact that there are ecological and social limits to economic growth which has been the main objective of the capitalist hegemony. There are at least nine planetary boundaries (e.g., stratospheric ozone depletion) beyond which we cannot push Earth Systems without putting human societies at risk (Raworth, 2017).

There are also at least 12 social limits "derived from internationally agreed minimum social standards, as identified by the world's governments in the [SDGs]." These include water, food, health, education, income and work, peace and justice, political voice, social equity, gender equality, housing, network, and energy (Raworth, 2017). These 12 dimensions of the social foundation of sustainability help "to ensure that no one is left falling short on life's essentials" (Doughnut Economics Lab, n.d.). However, these social limits have also been extremely transgressed at local, national, regional, and global levels.

Finally, it is important to underline that, in addition to the international conceptualization, (un)sustainability must be understood and related to existing local examples of what it means to be (un)sustainable. For example, students can be tasked in their homework to inquire from elders in their communities about what local words or actions express (un)sustainability.

Ecological/environmental (un)sustainability

As we identified in the previous section, the natural environment constitutes the base upon which there is a social foundation and an economic system. Environmental sustainability is, thus, when there is harmony among the various lifeforms (including humans) that constitute the biosphere to be able to perform ecosystem processes and yield ecosystem services needed for our survival (Díaz et al., 2006). In this second topic of the course, at least the following ecological drivers of unsustainability, which are related to the major global megatrends and their destructive consequences, need to be discussed in detail - ecological footprint, climate change, human population growth, and degradation of biodiversity. A brief discussion of the first two is provided below.

Ecological footprint

Ecological footprint is about how fast we consume resources and generate waste. It is estimated that humans use the equivalent of 1.8 Earths to provide resources and absorb waste. This figure would increase if all people in all countries were living like people in developed countries that have a very high ecological footprint. For instance, if everyone lived like residents of the USA, we would need 5.1 Earths. This figure is very different in the case of African countries. For example, in the case of DRC, it is 0.5 Earths. Another way of looking at this problem is by asking the question: how many Japans does Japan need to meet its residents' demand on nature?" In this case, Japan needs 7.8 Japans. (Earth Overshoot Day, 2023). Studies show that high-income nations are responsible for 74% of global excess material use. For example, the USA (27%), the EU-28 (25%) and China (15%) are the biggest culprits for global excess material use. Poorer countries of the global south are responsible for only 8% (Hickel et al., 2022a).

Climate change

Climate change is associated with increasing emissions of greenhouse gases and global warming. Human-induced warming has reached 1°C (since 2017) above pre-industrial (1850–1900) levels and is likely to reach 1.5°C around 2040. If it reaches 2°C, it will have a devastating effect on nature including humans. The goal globally is to keep global warming under 1·5°C, as adopted during the Paris Agreement (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Different countries and regions have contributed differently to the climate breakdown. For example, as of 2015, the U.S. was responsible for 40% of excess CO_2 emissions followed by the EU-28 (29%). The figure for the Global North was 92%. By contrast, most countries in the Global South were within their boundary fair shares (Hickel, 2020a). For example, Africa currently accounts for only about 4% of global emissions despite having 17% of the world's population. If we look at historical contributions to CO_2 emissions, Africa's contribution is about 3% (McNair, 2022).

Nevertheless, Africa and its countries remain to be the most affected by the consequences of this problem. "Africa is already facing more severe climate change (e.g., water stress, reduced food production, increased frequency of extreme weather events) than most other parts of the world (IEA, 2022).

The above discussion shows that "climate breakdown is playing out along colonial lines" (Hickel, 2022). "In terms of both emissions and resource use, then, excess consumption in the North relies on patterns of colonization:

the appropriation of the South's fair share of atmospheric commons, and the plunder of Southern ecosystems" (Hickel, 2020b).

Social (un)sustainability

The topic on social sustainability must begin by reflecting on SW's traditional orientation towards fighting social injustice and social unsustainability. Social unsustainability is mainly about the failure of human societies to revere the dignity of all human beings and meet their fundamental needs. In other words, it is about problems in respecting, protecting, and fulfilling human rights.

Human dignity

Human dignity is all about respect and worth to human beings. Human dignity is universal and egalitarian. Furthermore, it cannot be lost. Human dignity justifies duties towards others. It also serves as an overarching principle from which human rights are derived, thereby addressing fundamental human needs.

Fundamental human needs

All human beings share the same fundamental biological, psychological, and sociocultural needs and are dependent on others to satisfy these needs. Examples of specific fundamental needs include subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity, and freedom. Failure to meet these needs endangers the survival and well-being of human beings by causing serious social, psychological, and physical health problems. That is why we have human rights codified at national and international levels. Human rights are there to prevent such critical deprivations from happening. If we examine the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), we can see that each human right corresponds to one or several fundamental needs mentioned above.

Human rights

Human rights refer to the inherent rights or entitlements of each human being without discrimination. Human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent, interrelated, and inalienable. There are 30 articles of human rights that are articulated in the UDHR (UN, 1948). Of these, 24 of them have been codified in UN conventions and covenants to give the declaration legal force (e.g., Convention on the Rights of the Child) (Prasad, 2017). The different human rights can be categorized into three (UN, 1994). The first is political and civil rights such as the right to life and survival. Examples of violations of these rights include: arbitrary arrest, torture, genocide, and forced displacement (Prasad, 2017). The second is economic, social, and cultural rights such as the right to social security. Examples of violations, in this case, include: forcibly evicting people from their homes; failure to ensure a wage sufficient for a decent living; and failure to prevent starvation (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), n.d.). The third is collective and solidarity rights like the right to development. Examples of violations include failures to achieve development, peace, a healthy environment, and intergenerational equity (Ruppel, n.d.).

To provide concrete examples of human rights violation (i.e., drivers of social unsustainability), let us discuss forced migration in more detail. Forced migration is about refugees, internally displaced people, and asylum seekers. Several problematic issues can be identified in this case. First, there is increasing number of forcibly displaced people mainly because of various human rights violations. In 2021, there were 89.3 million forcibly displaced people in the world, and this figure is more than double the number from a decade ago (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2022). Second, there is a colonial dimension to this problem; most of the victims of forced migration are nationals of global south countries including those in Africa (UNHCR, 2021).

Forcibly displaced people are also victims of exclusion and discrimination in their host countries because of problems with the application of human rights. The problem is that human rights, in practice, are not always considered universal rights that everyone has. Instead, they are increasingly considered negotiated legal rights. This paves the way for the social exclusion of such people on the basis of citizenship and immigration status. This means only citizens of a particular country have 'the right to have full rights.' Migrants and refugees do not have all their human rights respected, protected, and fulfilled. Only limited rights are recognized for them, in practice.

The cultural dimension

Finally, we underscore that specific attention should be given to the cultural dimension of social sustainability. Here, deteriorating African cultural values such as collective responsibility, relatedness, mutual respect, and love for family and community must be emphasised. Examples of these age-old values can be gleaned from indigenous African philosophies such as Ubuntu (Mayaka & Truell, 2021; Sarr, 2019).

Economic (un)sustainability

The economy is about the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services. It is also about the money system. The root cause of economic drivers of unsustainability is global capitalism, which, according to Robinson, has been dependent on slavery, (neo)colonialism, genocide, and various forms of violence (1983) to accumulate capital by dispossession (Harvey, 2007). The capitalist economic system is characterized by its emphasis on constant economic growth and problematic assumptions and principles like individualism and self-interest; cut-throat competition; profit maximization and capital accumulation; private property and privatization; free market and free trade; externalization of environmental and social costs; and minimal government regulation. This system is based on a belief that markets work on their own (guided by the invisible hand) and act efficiently. However, such a belief is incorrect, and the idea of the invisible hand is a myth (Harvey, 2007). This system also wrongly assumes that the economy is a closed system, which is the base for everything else. The opposite is true, i.e., the economy is an interdependent subsystem of the natural environment, which is the largest system.

    Within the global capitalist economy, there are specific economic drivers of unsustainability, i.e., problems in the financial market, declining wage and income, labour exploitation, lack of self-sufficient regional and national economies, increasing power of corporations, privatization of commons and public services, problematic global division of labour, unjust international trade, etc. (Elsen & Benedikter, 2021). For instance, the global financial market is characterized by greed, speculation, misallocation of capital, and mismanagement of risk. It is a major factor in causing economic instability leading to rising unemployment, decreasing income, increasing inequality, etc., benefiting the very rich people who created or exacerbated the problem, by redistributing wealth from the poor to the rich (Oswald, 2012). The 2008 financial crisis is a good example in this case.

    In the case of Africa, the economic drivers of unsustainability are mainly related to the history of the slave trade and colonialism which are the major causes of the underdevelopment of Africa. Slavery was one of the biggest forced migrations in history. It was also a forced extraction of labour from Africa; it was the greatest transfer of labour force from one continent to another. Approximately 10-12 million Africans were removed from Africa over five centuries. This forced extraction of labour had a huge impact on Africa's underdevelopment since it "deprived Africa of its ablest young men and women, the very [workforce] that was required for development." Furthermore, this transfer of labour was used to develop other regions (Apata, 2022a; Rodney, 1972/2018).

        Slavery was later replaced by colonialism as colonial capitalism "switched the system around from labour to land, through territorial conquest and sovereign control…Colonialism was the appropriation of territory and the subjugation of a people within their territory." The change to colonialism was more profitable to Europe and the Americas. This is because, during slavery, the system was contained within small areas and revolved around specific commodities. But, during colonialism, almost the entire continent was turned into a vast plantation complex with huge and diverse resources including human beings, gold, diamond, oil, cobalt, copper, bauxite, etc. (Apata, 2022a). "When the citizens of Europe own the land and mines of Africa, this is the most direct way of sucking the African continent" (Rodney, 1972/2018).

    Nowadays, slavery and colonialism are replaced by a much more sophisticated 'liberal' world order of free trade and neo-colonialism, continuing the impoverishment of Africa (Rodney, 1972/2018). Powerful countries want to keep African countries poor using a system of Neo-colonialism. They want to do so because Africa's cheap raw materials and basic agricultural goods are vital for their prosperity. Accordingly, they have been doing everything to stop Africa from industrialisation. There are three methods used by them to keep Africa poor and a producer of raw materials - the global economic structure (aid, debt, monopoly buying structure, free trade agreements); global economic institutions (International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization); and economic ideologies (the doctrine of comparative advantage). All these have been maintained and enforced by political and military interventions. As a result, over the last 50-70 years manufacturing has been declining in Africa (see Moyo, 2009; Nicholas, 2015/17).

Interconnectivity of drivers of (un)sustainability

The ecological, social, and economic drivers of unsustainability are interconnected in a complex way. This interconnection has two aspects. First, there is interconnection within each category of drivers. Second, drivers from one category affect drivers in other categories and vice versa. Before discussing specific examples of

interconnectivity, we first reiterate what we consider is the root cause of the various drivers of unsustainability, i.e., the global capitalist system, which is heavily intertwined with or dependent upon imperialism and ecological imperialism. Imperialism refers to the use of economic, military, social, and other forces to achieve the imperialists' objective, which has to do with economic, military and other forms of expansion. Ecological imperialism refers to "a political-economic arrangement that enforces identifiable structures of domination and socioecological degradation" (Obeng-Odoom, 2022a). This concept helps us to better understand "how the control of nature by force and fraud aided the expansion of the West, and generated disproportionate socio-ecological crises for the rest" (Obeng-Odoom, 2022b).

It is important to realize that the global capitalist system (ecological imperialism) is not just an economic system but a holistic system that involves economic, political, militaristic, sociocultural, ecological, ideological, and psychological aspects. Its main values and principles, which are characterized by a disregard for and deliberate transgression of planetary and ethico-social boundaries, are the main source of policies and actions at local, national, regional, and international levels. This system primarily emphasises economic growth at the expense of everything else and accordingly determines how the economy is organized. By designing the production (mass production), distribution (fossil fuel-based transportation), consumption (mass consumption), and financial (speculation) subsystems based on its problematic principles, it creates and exacerbates economic, social, and environmental drivers of unsustainability (Harvey, 2007; Robinson, 1983).

A general example that shows the interconnectivity of drivers of unsustainability is the relationship between economic growth and unsustainability in terms of ecological breakdown. Studies show that economic growth is highly correlated with increasing resource use, which is in turn highly associated with ecological damage and biodiversity loss (Hickel & Hallegatte, 2022).

Another example of interconnectivity can be found when we examine how imperialists used nature itself for their expansion. For instance, European imperialists used their own colonial plants, animals, weeds, and diseases to wipe out millions of people and control lands and other resources of Africa and the Global South and continue to use Africa and the Global South as sites for dumping ecological waste and ecocide (Obeng-Odoom, 2022a).

Other examples of interconnectivity can also be found if we examine various global industries (e.g., automobile industries) and how they cause unequal economic growth, human rights violations (e.g., labour exploitation), depletion of natural resources, pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss. Biodiversity loss is a very good example to show the interconnectivity of specific drivers of unsustainability. It is estimated that approximately one million plant and animal species (of the estimated 8 million) are at risk of extinction (IPBES, 2019). The primary cause of biodiversity loss is the alterations of ecosystems by economically motivated humans within the context of global capitalism. By significantly influencing its major causes (e.g., destruction of habitats, climate change, pollution, invasive alien species, and overexploitation of the natural environment), the capitalist ways of production, distribution, and consumption substantially contribute to biodiversity loss. Biodiversity loss, in turn, negatively affects ecosystem services, i.e., the benefits provided by ecosystems, which contribute to economic sustainability (through the provision of food, fresh water, fuel, shelter, wood, fertile soil, protection against natural hazards, etc.) and socio-cultural sustainability (by providing aesthetic, spiritual, educational, recreational, disease regulation, and other services). This situation results in the deterioration of the well-being of human beings, especially the vulnerable (e.g., subsistence farmers), by creating and exacerbating poverty, inequality, and marginalization (Díaz et al., 2006).

Even though Africa's "rich and diverse ecosystems generate flows of goods and services that are essential in providing for the continent's food, water, energy, health and secure livelihood needs," the continents biodiversity is at risk. This situation is problematic especially given the civilizing logic of the colonialists held indigenous sustainable land management practices in contempt thereby eroding these values over the years (Boaten, 1998; Le Grange, 2012).

In general, the above discussion on the interconnectivity of the drivers of (un)sustainability shows that there is a need for SW to go beyond social justice and emphasise environmental, ecological, and reparative justice.

ADDRESSING UNSUSTAINABILITY

Solutions to (un)sustainability are usually discussed in relation to the idea of sustainability transition/ transformation (ST) as a mission, covering overarching models like green growth, doughnut economics, and degrowth as well as more specific strategies like circular economy and Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE). There are also proposals for climate and ecological reparation advocated by Global South scholars to address unsustainability by targeting the persisting problem of ecological imperialism (Obeng-Odoom, 2022a; 2022b; Táíwò, 2022).

Sustainability transition/transformation

The first step in the process of realizing ST is to understand the interconnectivity of drivers of unsustainability and to have a holistic worldview. It is also important to understand that many problems of unsustainability are wicked or at least complex in nature, and therefore, there is a need for systemic and radical responses that combine both bottom-up approaches (e.g., community-based initiatives) and top-down approaches (e.g., policy decisions by states).

Green growth

This notion is the basis of SDGs and other international and national policies (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). "Green growth means fostering economic growth and development while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies." Green growth aims to address two challenges at the same time, i.e., expand economic opportunities for all in the context of a growing global population and address environmental crises (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2018). Very specific strategies, in this case, include: restructuring the economy with the aim of simultaneously boosting the economy; emphasising green investment; creating green jobs; and fighting climate change (Pirgmeier, 2013).

Doughnut economics

Doughnut economics aims to enable meeting the needs of all people within the ecological and social limits by bringing about regenerative and distributive dynamics. It proposes the following ways to transform economies at local and global levels: changing the goal from endless GDP growth to thriving within the ecological and social limits and being agnostic about growth; seeing the big picture by recognising that the economy is embedded within and dependent upon society and the living world (i.e., the economy is not a self-contained/closed system); recognising that human behaviour can be nurtured to be cooperative and caring; applying systems thinking to best understand economies, societies, and the rest of the living world (instead of using mechanical equilibrium); and making economies redistributive and regenerative by design (Doughnut Economics Action Lab, 2020; Raworth, 2017).

Degrowth

Like doughnut economics, degrowth is a more transformative concept of change. It is even more radical than doughnut economics (which is agnostic about growth) since it provides a clear stance on economic growth in overdeveloped countries (i.e., degrowth) (Hickel, 2019). "Degrowth signifies, first and foremost, a critique of growth. It calls for the decolonization of public debate from the idiom of economism and for the abolishment of economic growth as a social objective. Beyond that, degrowth signifies also a desired direction, one in which societies will use fewer natural resources and will organize and live differently than today. 'Sharing', 'simplicity', 'conviviality', 'care' and the 'commons' are primary significations of what this society might look like" (D'Alisa, et al., 2014). Specific Degrowth policy strategies include: scaling down destructive sectors such as fossil fuels; ending the planned obsolescence of products; improving public services; introducing a green jobs guarantee; and enabling sustainable development of less developed countries (Hickel et al., 2022b).

Global ecological reparation

This proposed solution has been presented as an improvement over the progressive strategies of doughnut economics and degrowth. Proponents of ecological reparation (not to be confused with mainstream reparation) underline the importance of understanding (un)sustainability in relation to ecological imperialism and propose reparation as a long-lasting solution for (un)sustainability. They argue that ecological reparations help to address historical and contemporary harms and can be oriented towards the future and the whole world. According to them, the design of reparations programmes should be based on three principles: acknowledgement, repair, and closure. They underline that a reparations programme must go hand-in-hand with policies to keep the gap closed (Obeng-Odoom, 2022a; 2022b). One of the most important approaches identified by proponents to do so is to consider land as commons and use the 'single tax.' The single tax "could be created by abolishing all taxes on labour and imposing full taxation of land rents." The revenue from such a tax can be utilised for public uses including social, economic, and ecological ends (Obeng-Odoom, 2022a).

Solutions for Africa

There is consensus among all approaches to development that Africa needs to grow and develop. Africa must grow because it has a very high poverty level and a rapidly growing population. Africa also has a lot of room for growth since it contributed very little to the multiple crises (Hickel & Hallegatte, 2022). Pro-Africa conventional development advocates assert that since no country ever developed without industrialization, the only solution for Africa is aggressive industrialization led by states. Africa cannot afford to remain specializing in raw materials and primary agricultural commodities. Africa also needs to learn lessons from East Asia's development models of the 1950s to the 1980s (Fukuda-Parr, 2023; Nicholas, 2015/17).

Similarly, advocates of green growth suggest the following to bring about development in Africa: finding new industries; investing in global electrification; capitalizing on proximity to renewable energy; keeping the cost of capital low for renewable energy; managing technological risks; exploring carbon sink markets; exploring new areas different from current areas of comparative advantage; and attracting strategic investments and global talent (Hausmann, 2022). De-growth scholars also advise that African countries need to build "sovereign economic capacity focused on provisioning domestic needs, which in turn requires having the freedom to use protective tariffs, subsidies, capital controls, nationalization, social spending, and progressive fiscal and monetary policy" (Hickel & Hallegatte, 2022).

For advocates of ecological reparation, such as Obeng-Odoom (2022b), the objective should be "to build a wider and deeper approach to black political economy, central to which is the study and redress of ecological imperialism by ecological reparations, inclusive delinking [from other models of development and sustainability], and ecological autonomy." Obeng-Odoom emphasises the importance of, among others, redefining reparations to incorporate repatriation (of stolen assets from foreign jurisdictions); considering land as commons; using common resources collectively by communities (not by international development agencies, transnational corporations, or the state); and using the single tax (i.e., land value tax) as key solutions for Africa. He also cautions, in the case of considering land as commons and using the single tax, that such a strategy should "set up a disincentive structure to prevent land monopoly, speculation, sprawl, and absentee ownership, all key axes of ecological imperialism" (2022b).

Here it is also important to briefly discuss some of the solutions proposed by Sarr (2019) in his book "Afrotopia," which presented a holistic Afrocentric vision for Africa. According to Sarr, Africa's vision should be to realize Afrotopia, "an active utopia that takes as its task the cultivation of vast and open spaces of bountiful possibles in order to help them flourish." He asserts that "Africa no longer needs to try to catch up with the rest of the world. It no longer needs to run on the same paths the world indicates for it, but rather to deftly walk the path it will have chosen for itself."

Africa needs to know what it wants for itself. To do so, there is a need for healing the psychological effects of slavery, colonization, and imperialism to regain self-respect. There is also a need for absolute intellectual sovereignty and the decolonization of knowledge. At the same time, Africa needs a cultural revolution involving "a radical critique within Africa's cultures" to question counterproductive values and promote productive values like *jom* (dignity), *téraanga* (hospitality, mutuality), *kersa* (modesty and humility), *ngor* (a sense of honour), etc. Furthermore, he asserted that Africa needs to emphasise its own models of development based on the specific needs of its population and using concepts like *ubuntu* and learning from what worked in other places. In relation to this, he recommends considering policies that can help achieve ecological, social, and economic sustainability, for example, delegating the management of natural resources to institutions that are independent of the electoral cycle and current regimes. According to him, "the large availability of natural resources on African soil, as well as sources of renewable energies, means we can choose more responsible modes of production" (Sarr, 2019).

In short, according to many African scholars in the field of sustainability, sustainable solutions for Africa must most importantly depart from Western-centered paradigms and be pivoted on an Afrocentric paradigm. The Afrocentric paradigm places the uniqueness of Africa at the centre, reflects on the structural historical antecedents of (un)sustainability through (ecological) imperialism, and reembraces traditional African wisdom of sustainability (Bent-Goodley, Fairfax, & Carlton-LaNey, 2017; Kurevakwesu & Maushe, 2020; Mungai, 2015; Schiele, 2016). Finally, we would like to underline that African SW should contribute its share to the solutions by emphasising the ecosocial work approach and methods discussed in the next section.

CENTERING ECOSOCIAL WORK

Regarding (un)sustainability, SW is a guilty party, victim and/or change maker (Matthies, 2022). As a guilty party, SW depends on the growth-oriented market economy and takes after the modernist industrial and managerialist worldview. Consider how professional SW was introduced into Africa. Mwansa (2010) argues that it was imported by colonialists, missionaries, and industrialists. This has led to concerns about the true mission of SW in Africa; for example, Mtetwa & Muchacha (2021, p. 240) describe the profession as "a grand package of colonial

pacifist agenda". As a victim, service users of SW, who are usually the most vulnerable in societies, are disproportionately affected by the social, economic, and environmental consequences of unsustainability. As a change maker, SW receives first-hand access to knowledge about the consequences of unsustainability in local communities and is required to plan interventions for affected people. Therefore, SW ontology must be transformed as being part of nature, epistemology must incorporate perspectives from the natural environment, and methodology must address the interconnections between social, environmental, and economic issues affecting the most vulnerable people. This is what the ecosocial work course seeks to achieve; a transformed philosophical base of African social work that is in sync with African worldviews and aimed at tackling the multiple unsustainability challenges on the continent (Obeng & Tadesse, 2023). Moreover, the ecosocial work course must be attentive to the structural impediments to human well-being (see Mtetwa & Muchacha, 2021), such as the past and present injustices of (eco)imperialism.

Next, we discuss some African initiatives and interventions with ecosocial work dimensions that should be incorporated as practice examples and fieldwork locations for the ecosocial work course. Such initiatives typically (i) are voluntary and not-for-profit; (ii) involve activities that are community/institution-based (e.g., schools, NGOs) or nature-based (e.g., farms, forests, gardens, animals, water bodies); (iii) address the wellbeing challenges of the most vulnerable people in local communities; and (v) promote environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

Holistic well-being through nature-based interventions

The African conception of well-being entails having a meaningful life that transcends the individual and the material and emphasizes the mutually dependent relationships with other humans in the community, connections with nature, spirituality, and collective responsibility and accountability to the past, present, and future (see Chigangaidze, 2022; Le Grange, 2012; Mungai, 2015). This holistic well-being can be promoted through nature-based interventions (NBIs) that are gaining increasing attention in SW. NBIs involve programmes, activities or strategies that utilize nature (natural landscape, fauna, and flora) to promote health and well-being. The examples that follow present interesting cases of NBIs in Africa relevant to the ecosocial work course.

A study by Katisi et al. (2019) on the Balekane Earth programme in Botswana revealed that forest-based activities with African traditional practices enhanced community cohesion by bringing orphaned children together with community elders and other social services. The activities significantly helped to improve resilience, reduce grief and promote the future aspirations of the orphaned children. Another forest-based programme was implemented in the Imfolozi game reserve in South Africa and it improved adolescents' self-esteem and increased young people's connectedness with nature (Barton et al., 2016). It is important to note here that young people's improved connectedness with nature means they will more likely adopt pro-environmental behaviours and live more sustainably.

Environmental management, restoration, and risk mitigation through nature-based interventions

International Labor Organization (ILO) and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) (2022) reported on nature-based projects in Africa that utilize community-based approaches to address environmental problems and risks, promote social cohesion and create employment for women and youth. For example, the Umzimvubu Catchment Partnership in South Africa involves restoration and management of rangeland and removal of invasive species, etc., the ecosystem adaptation project in the Gambia facilitates nature resource-based businesses managed by local communities, the Resilient Urban Sierra Leone project uses community-based reforestation approaches to mitigate the risks of landslides, flash-flooding and urban heat stress, and the Green Great Wall initiative in Burkina Faso uses indigenous restoration techniques like *diguette en terre* (earthen dike) local communities to restore previously barren lands.

Alternative and sustainable economic systems

The need for alternative economic models to the exploitative and oppressive capitalist system cannot be overstated in Africa where there is increasing poverty and widening socioeconomic inequality. Beyond emphasizing ecological reparations as crucial to establishing a just ecological political economy in Africa, the ecosocial work course must take inspiration from local and community-based economic systems like *Ujamaa* and SSE institutions such as burial societies, Rotating and Savings Credit Associations (ROSCAs), Chama, etc.

Ujamaa, contrary to capitalism, was constructed as the new economic policy for post-independence Tanzania and Africa by President Julius Nyerere. *Ujamaa* is a KiSwahili word meaning familyhood. The idea was to build an economy based on cooperative agriculture done by groups of people who live together in villages as a

community, farm as a community, market as a community, and provide local services and small local requirements as a community (Meredith, 2011).

Burial societies of various African countries (e.g., Ethiopian Iddir) are informal insurance institutions that enable the sharing of risks and expenses in the case of death, illness, and accidents. They provide traditional psychosocial support to the bereaving family; participate in community development activities; and help orphans, the elderly, the poor and unemployed, and the sick and disabled (Aredo 2010; Pankhurst, 2008; Tadesse & Elsen, 2023).

ROSCA is an informal financial institution common all over Africa. Various societies in Africa have their own versions of ROSCA with different names (e.g., *Susu* in Ghana and *Equub* in Ethiopia) (Bouman, 1977). A ROSCA can be defined as "[a]n association formed upon a core of participants who agree to make regular contributions to a fund which is given, in whole or in part, to each contributor in rotation". ROSCA has multifaceted functions including the provision of small-scale saving and credit as well as the solidarity of kin-group, neighbourhood, or friendship (Ardener, 1964). ROSCA also helps to diversify finance and the economy (Tadesse & Erdem, 2023).

A related system to burial societies and ROSCAs is the Kenyan *Chama,* which is a Swahili word meaning welfare group. The *Chama* can be described as a community social protection system that is initiated by community members to support each other in critical times of need. It focuses on economic empowerment and poverty reduction among members by encouraging the participation of all community members who contribute financial and other psychosocial support for each other during times like childbirth, funerals, marriages, etc. The system also has a social dimension that admonishes members to visit and help each other in farming, ploughing, planting or harvesting together, cooking, and eating together (Mayaka & Truell, 2021).

The core values underlying these indigenous African economic models (i.e., cooperativism, ethical decision-making, the embeddedness of economic activities in social, cultural and environmental contexts) align with concepts and practices of sustainability. They also facilitate local and regional self-sufficiency in the case of basic goods and services (Elsen & Benedikter, 2021; Tadesse & Erdem, 2023).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we provided brief discussions on the various topics of our proposed model of an ecosocial work course for Africa. We remind readers that our discussion is far from complete; there are still many other issues and perspectives in each section that are not discussed in this paper. We suggest that educators and students explore more in relation to each topic and strive to further centre the pedagogical approach of this course on pedagogical pluralism, highlighting multiple views of sustainability. It is also important to underline the significance of ecosocial field education in this course. In this case, students can be placed in ecosocial initiatives such as SSE organizations (e.g., cooperatives), circular economy organizations, climate advocacy/activism movements, etc. To do so, schools of SW need to collaborate and co-create with such stakeholders. Finally, we want to conclude by suggesting a major way of student assessment for the course. In this case, students could write (i) research papers on ecosocial organizations, indigenous sustainability practices, etc.; (ii) practicum reports on ecosocial initiatives; or (iii) proposals designing an ecosocial project.

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