



African Journal of Social Work
 Afri. j. soc. work
 © National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe/Author(s)
 ISSN Print 1563-3934
 ISSN Online 2409-5605

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Indexed & Accredited with: African Journals Online (AJOL) | University of Zimbabwe Accredited Journals (UZAJ) | SCOPUS (Elsevier's abstract and citation database) | Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) | Society of African Journal Editors (SAJE) | Asian Digital Library (ADL) | African Social Work Network (ASWNet) | Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) - South Africa | SJR | CNKI - China | Journal Publishing Practices and Standards (JPPS) | EBSCO

Reflections on integrating environmental social work methods of intervention in Zimbabwean social work curriculum

Tatenda NHAPI

ABSTRACT

Undeniably, natural climatic shocks, poverty and environmental degradation have become intractable challenges Zimbabwe grapples with. Worthwhile to note is how to overcome enduring precarity for predominantly rural and peri-urban communities the enduring livelihood strategy has been to harness natural resources. For instance, Zimbabwe hosts some of the most important biodiversity hotspots in the world and is home to over 5,930 species of plants and over 1,360 animals. Forests currently cover around 45% of the country's total land area, but deforestation is an increasingly pressing issue, resulting in forests disappearing at a frightening rate. Given how developmental social work has become important thinking in social work scholarly discourses, its domains like environmental social work have become important for mainstreaming in social work training curricula and fieldwork. Based on review of secondary literature, the objective of this article is to offer pathways by which social worker educators can embed critical perspectives of environmental social work methods of interventions. This would be embedded in the curriculum components including research and fieldwork practicum. This can aid mainstreaming of environmental social work themes, debates and strategies in delivering courses centred on community, rural and social development. The article concludes by discussing possible constraints and opportunities in galvanising environmental social work visibility in the Zimbabwean and African social work curricula.

KEY TERMS: curriculum, environmental social work, livelihoods, poverty, social work, Zimbabwe

KEY DATES

Received: June 2022
 Revised: October 2022
 Accepted: January 2023
 Published: February 2023

Funding: None
 Conflict of Interest: None
 Permission: None
 Ethics approval: Not applicable

Author/s details:

Tatenda Nhapi, Research Associate University of Johannesburg Department of Social Work and Community Development. Email nhapaz@yahoo.com

Current and previous volumes are available at:

<https://ajsw.africasocialwork.net>



How to reference using ASWNet style:

Nhapi, T. (2023). Reflections on integrating environmental social work methods of intervention in Zimbabwean social work curriculum. *African Journal of Social Work*, 13(2), 118-126. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajsw.v13i2.8>

Special issue on:

Environmental Social Work: African philosophies, frameworks, perspectives and techniques
 Guest Editors: Dr. Mildred Mushunje, Zimbabwe and Dr. Abel Blessing Matsika, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

For developmental social work outcomes realisation Mainstreaming environmental social work in training curricula, research and fieldwork practicum has become important in social work scholarly discourses and thinking. This is line with how in the twenty-first century, social work has been maturing and evolving as a global profession that is increasingly critical of what it is, its purpose, and future local and global level roles. The accelerated human-nature crisis means skilled and robust social workers are required. Social workers are cast as the pinnacle of hope and tasked with somehow squaring the circle between socio-economic progress, planetary sustainability and socio-cultural wellbeing. Arguably, this implies bolstering the conventional curriculum by embedding a broader environmental social work framework that values all species, human and non-human, as worthy of protection. In this anthropocentric worldview, nature is viewed largely in relation to its benefit and utility to humanity. The main argument of this article is that, the necessity of facilitating environmental social work methods of interventions in social work teaching and frontline practice is to facilitate enhanced addressing of community needs and issues. The article's contribution is specifically conceptual, drawing out the epistemologies of environmental social work and offering a conceptual framework to inform its practice. It opens with a critical reading of theoretical and empirical material examining social work and its relation to the natural environment. Attention is drawn to the insights but also limitations of some of this work, particularly its varied ability to engage with the complexities of environmental degradation and livelihoods security.

MAINSTREAMING ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL WORK IN THE CURRICULUM

Advancing understanding of pathways for more environment focused frontline social work is on account of the increasing academic analysis and policy concern in social work regarding inclusive development trajectories. It is noteworthy that environmental degradation is not purely a biophysical phenomenon. Therefore, social workers require knowledge on what can be the social, economic, and political objectives on the frontline towards their involvement in environmental social work. The African Union Agenda 2063 *Aspiration 1* strives for a prosperous African continent based on inclusive growth and sustainable development. However, the reality of Africa is particularly vulnerable to land degradation and desertification, and it is the most severely affected region. Desertification affects around 45 % of Africa's land area, with 55 % of this area at high or very high risk of further degradation (United Nations Environment Programme 2015). By default this situation should position Africa as a hotspot for environmental centred social work learning and research. On the same note environmental social work as an explicit topic is underexplored in Zimbabwean social work curriculum and scholarship, although it is implicitly present in much literature including the National Association of Social Workers Zimbabwe published 2021 book *Professional Social Work in Zimbabwe Past, present and the future*. Domains and discussions about developmental social work community development and social work and human rights discourses are mostly produced in edited books and journal articles from the Global North, containing specific ontological assumptions, value priorities and political agendas associated with these regions. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to offer pathways by which social worker educators within the African context of Zimbabwe can embed critical perspectives of environmental social work methods of interventions.

The article aims to explore aspects of nuances towards greater embedding of environmental social work over matters relating to rights, responsibilities, harms, and benefits; what counts as human and ecological flourishing; and what kinds of professional social workers should be and become in confronting environmental issues. Undoubtedly, social workers are expected to intervene 'in systems at all levels' because all populations are affected by natural hazards' intense disruption of social, economic and environmental conditions necessary for the well-being of people Zakour and Gillespie (2013:7). First article argues need to draw attention to perhaps less familiar and visible understandings of environmental social work. Second, article seeks to address a lacuna in Zimbabwean social work scholarship which has predominantly explored developmental social work's journey in relation to academic research. This is with much less attention afforded to environmental social work work's significance. The motivation for the reflection in this article is because social work education plays a critical role in preparing graduates to transform policy through advocacy practice and critical pedagogy. According to Besthorn's (2012) argument the social work profession must rethink how sustainability and environmental justice are included as a central part of the profession's conceptualisation of its identity and role in the present world.

Furthermore, article sets out the conceptual approach that can be used to frame social work fieldwork during placements in settings where environmental social work can be applied for desired outcomes of overcoming complex problems emanating from climatic and socio-economic challenges induced vulnerability. This article asks 'what strategies can make environmental social work be embedded in current social work curriculum in an era of 'climate emergency'?' Naturally, posing this question invites a panoply of further questions: What do we

mean by environmental social work? What role, however modest, can social work really play in addressing the 'climate emergency', and how is the nature of community work altered by it? To address crucial questions such as these, a good way to proceed is by interrogating the implicit construction of social work curriculum.

Why mainstreaming environmental social work in the curriculum

In this section I articulate why focusing on why mainstreaming environmental social work in the curriculum is vital. The nature of the profession, which involves working with the most disadvantaged individuals, groups, and communities, means social work will be called upon to ameliorate the effects of environmental crises. Undeniably, Africa is at an inflection point given the disproportionate and numerous development challenges it faces ranging from climate change to chronic poverty. However, Africa's endowment with abundant natural and human resources and having a median age of 19 years makes it the youngest continent in the world, underscoring the immense untapped potential (Nkula-Wenz and Brown-Lunthango 2022). In their analysis Mohamed and Huntjens (2023) highlight that theoretically, environmental damage is recognised by economists as negative externalities that must be addressed but practically economies are still largely blind to humanity's dependence upon and reciprocal relationship with nature. Consequently, no one wants to pay for the climate and environmental catastrophe created by economic models that incentivize overconsumption, destroy nature and degrade communal bonds (Mohamed and Huntjens 2023).

Social work practice is a highly skilled activity that calls for an extensive knowledge base and considerable intellectual abilities. Worthwhile to note is how mainstreaming of environmental social work is advocated for in public statements, policy pronouncements and documents and policy options of entities like Council of Social Workers, National Association of Social Workers. However, in the African social work experience little or thorough groundings exist on what the environmental social work concept entails and how African social workers can begin to construct it. For instance, relevant questions include, are there institutional and cultural peculiarities that African social work academics can tap into in embedding environmental social work in the curricula? How can the curriculum be re-engineered in support of an environmental social work agenda and vision? How possible is it to a cadre of social workers that has not only the expertise but commitment to environmental social work. Importantly, mainstreaming environmental social work is by bringing together empirically rich, theoretically profound and collaborative scholarship to produce epistemological and environmental social work relevant multimodal research with and by communities. In the same vein this takes seriously their agency, aspirations and lived experiences, as much as the everyday environmental challenges they face.

It must be highlighted that Zimbabwe's development progress depends on the productivity of its natural resources, principally land, water, and wildlife. Yet Zimbabwe's food, forests, and wildlife are in steep decline driven by roiling environmental degradation. Ongoing climate events, increased poverty, population growth, poor land use planning, and weak governance contribute to serious degradation of natural resources (USAID 2022). Smallholder farmers' agricultural production is declining, thus increasing rural communities' food insecurity. Zimbabwe's predominantly semi-arid climate is extremely variable, with shifting rainfall patterns, droughts and floods exacerbated by substantial environmental challenges including land degradation, deforestation and inadequate water quantity and quality. UNICEF Zimbabwe country office's (2023) Humanitarian Appeal notes climate stressors affect agriculture and food and nutrition security, disproportionately affecting women and girls (UNICEF 2022). In 2023, an estimated 3 million people, including 2 million children,³ are projected to be in urgent need of humanitarian assistance in Zimbabwe due to the impact of food and nutrition crises induced by such natural hazards as drought, floods and disease outbreaks. 1.5 million people (972,000 females and 528,000 males), including 1.1 million children (572,000 girls and 528,000 boys), need life-saving health, HIV and nutrition services (UNICEF 2022).

According to UNICEF Zimbabwe country office's (2023) Humanitarian Appeal, Zimbabwe has a fragile humanitarian context. Climate change and economic instability exacerbates how people chronically grapple with natural hazards as floods and drought. Social work is called upon to defend groups/communities of vulnerable people and vulnerable environments against economic exploitation at a local and global level, denouncing compensatory social policy processes, which only alleviate short-term problems, leading in the future to the maintenance of the same problems and/or new ones (Rocha 2018). These insights contribute to the profession's understanding of social work training and may benefit practitioners, students, and educators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, themes and debates on environmental social work are explored. As the determinant of the growth and operation of all living organisms, the environment plays a fundamental role in the survival, health and development of humankind. Environmental social work is conceptualised by Dominelli (2018) as taking a critical view of social relations and explicitly places the demand for environmental justice within the concept of social justice, an enduring part of social work. The notion that relentless economic growth should be central focus of development being a gold standard for societal well-being measurement and “more money brings more well-being” makes systematic attention on the eco-social worldview as a sustainable alternative needed more than ever (Powers, Rinkel and Kumar 2021). However, Rocha posits this notion as plagued with pernicious environmental consequences, increased inequalities, and unsustainable social structures. The implications of a human-centric worldview are so pervasive that alternative worldviews are highly understudied from an academic perspective. Environmental problems are a consequence of the industrial revolution whose development model, coupled with lifestyles based on continuous consumption, has led to the erosion of natural and energy resources (Rocha 2018). For Nhapi (2021) climate change has become a pervasive challenge to the attainment of social development desired outcomes for which social workers strive. Zimbabwe’s socio-economic turbulence for survival, communities are increasingly engaged in wanton destruction of natural resources. The same natural resources, when harnessed sustainably, transform communities, resulting in the achievement of social development aspirations. Communities’ vulnerability to the intractable challenges of economic instability and climate change impacts is heightened without social workers and other social development actors implementing robust social development interventions.

Klarin (2018:67) goes on to argue that humans endangered the survival of the earth and that they now need to address this damage to ensure that future generations do not pay the price for the behaviour of earlier generations. Consequently, like any other stakeholders, social workers, deal with community predicaments arising from the effects of natural hazards. Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) (2022) contend that while Southern Africa is a climate change hotspot, due to low technical, institutional and financial capacities it is a blind spot for responses to supporting adaptation. This is in no small part because of historical global inequalities, including the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 1990s (PLAAS 2022).

Furthermore, it is worthwhile to highlight that societies continue to change and evolve, and so does their interactions with the ecosystem (Chirisa and Nel 2022). Such dynamics whose defining characteristics are ‘uncertainty and complex’ leading to dynamical challenges requiring a well-framed approach that improves and balances human–nature evolving relations. It has become vital to manage and control humans and their activities as they have a bearing upon the changes that take place on the natural ecosystem (Chirisa and Nel 2022). On the same note, the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (Global Agenda) endorsed commitment by social work and social development communities towards promoting sustainable communities and environmentally sensitive development (Nel 2022). While social work scholarship on the climate and other environmental crises has been growing, much initial literature focused on calls-to-action rather than concrete intervention (Mason et.al 2017). The theoretical, factual and practice basis of social work knowledge was reflected on by Mtetwa. Mtetwa (2016) concluded that social work educators should continue their quest for the latest theoretical knowledge that would enable their graduates to function in a variety of settings both at national and international levels. This therefore calls for the adoption of the appropriate minimum body of knowledge in the training and practice of social work in Africa.

More than ever before, now is the time for critical stakeholders to reimagine and rebrand social work education and practice in Africa. Attaining meaningful transition and success in this regard requires researchers, educators and practitioners’ commitment to foster collaborations and collective actions. Social work practice is a highly skilled activity and one that calls for an extensive knowledge base and considerable intellectual abilities. Hanke et.al (2017) lament that environmental degradation sets people at a more vulnerable state to poverty as the natural source of their livelihoods would have been depleted. The relationship between humans and nature is such that a misuse of nature by humans that leads to exhaustion can haunt back the people as they will suffer the results of poor ecological management. Given the forgoing, some dimensions are explored towards embedding environmental social work.

INTEGRATING ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL WORK METHODS OF INTERVENTION THROUGH RESEARCH AND FIELDWORK

Beyond being a mere empirical lacuna, understanding environmental social work in the Global South also presents an urgent political-epistemic project. To illumine this, previously the Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities (MESA) Partnership Programme was one of UN Environment's initiatives with universities to support the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) (2005-2014). MESA, whose membership consisted of 85 universities in Africa, supported the mainstreaming of environment and sustainability concerns into teaching, research, community engagement and management of universities in Africa. The network of African Universities was established with active participation from UNESCO, United Nations University and the Association of African Universities (United Nations Environment Programme n.d). Therefore, harnessing action research can galvanise university departments efforts on mainstreaming environmental social work. Action research presents as combining evidence gathering and learning from action. It is designed to enable diverse groups to meet over some time to consider evidence and generate theories of change about interventions; plan and programme innovative solutions; test the solutions in real-time, and then evaluate them (Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA) (n.d). According to Appollo (2022) action research key characteristics is being a highly iterative and organic community-led and collaborative process focused on co-creation, co-production and co-implementation of ideas and solutions addressing community challenges. It is noted that a thorough stakeholder and political economy analysis is a critical step in action research preparations for effective identification and securing buy-in from different actors. This ensures that prevailing circumstances are properly documented and considered and serve as a building block for action research.

Homonoff (2008:136) highlights field instruction as being the very heart of social work training and vehicle for students' opportunity to practise skills, knowledge and values taught in class. Therefore, on this basis fieldwork is central to environmental social work mainstreaming. Social work academics and field instructors should be innovative in ensuring brokering fieldwork opportunities for social work students in areas experiencing vulnerability due to environmental degradation. Pointedly, natural and human-made disasters have a record of overwhelming the coping capabilities of their victims when they converge with vulnerability and poor adaptive capacity (Bhatasara, 2018). Undeniably, community members' livelihood is affected by natural hazards impacts which also leave individuals with psychological distress and homelessness. In most instances, at the aftermath of natural hazards social workers' methods of intervention towards individuals coping, responsiveness and adaptation centres on casework because it is clinically orientated. In so doing, social workers will be building individual resilience so that individuals can bounce back to normality and use their experience to prepare for other natural hazards should they occur (Matlakala, Makhubele, & Nyahunda, 2022).

Loss and damage emanating from environmental degradation and climate loss takes forms as psychological, cultural, social, economic and environmental. On the same note it also has psychological distress, cultural, social disruption and dislocation as intangible aspects whilst the tangible loss is damage of lost lives, property, belongings and livelihoods (Kasito 2022).

Therefore, fieldwork in sites where communities are navigating environmental degradation stimulates deep understanding or learning as social work students are encouraged to move beyond just memorising theory. During field instruction placements the expectation for students would be to search for meaning, exploring practice implications and linking theory to work that is being done towards development and evaluation of new ideas (Walker, Crawford & Parker, 2008:40).

BOLSTERING ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL WORK THROUGH INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE INCORPORATION IN SOCIAL WORK CURRICULUM

In disasters and development discourse IKS has increasingly become topical and accepted as integral to addressing multiple challenges faced by rural communities. indigenous knowledge is a body of knowledge existing within or acquired by local people over a period of time through the accumulation of experiences, society-nature relationships, community practices and institutions, and by passing it down through generations (Action Aid Zimbabwe 2022). Scientific knowledge is global in nature whereas indigenous knowledge is considered local. According to Flavier et.al in Action Aid Zimbabwe (2022) as with scientific knowledge, indigenous knowledge is dynamic in nature, continually influenced both by internal creativity and experimentation, and by contact with external systems.

Importantly, traditional beliefs are deeply ecological, with spirits defining territories, controlling rain and

protecting particular sites like sacred groves or pools, where spirit mermaids (*njuzu*) reside (Scoones 2022). It is believed that unless appeased through appropriate forms of supplication and strictly managed religious ceremonies led by spirit mediums, angry spirits can destroy lives and livelihoods (Scoones 2022).

Scoones(2022) notes that across Zimbabwe, collections (*rusengwe*) were made led by spirit messengers (*nyusa*) who would travel to the Njelele shrine in Matobo area of Matebeleland province in South Zimbabwe. Such contributions ensured good rains and successful harvests for those communities. During expeditions hunters drew on assistance of particular ancestral spirits, allowing them to hide from their prey before the kill. Land and resource control were centrally about religious adherence and practice, as the material and spirit world were always connected (Scoones 2022). Especially in rural settings usually certain capacities and knowledge evolving over centuries and tested over time is possessed by local people and would have proven to be sustainable and effective in disasters reduction and hazards management (Shaw et al. 2008). It would be critical that mainstreaming of environmental social work methods of interventions in the curriculum tap on the enduring IKS. Therefore, once social work students are imparted with knowledge on centrality of IKS can their future design of rural and community development and disaster management be enriched towards desired outcomes. This is because they can be reflective on the role of IKS.

IMPLICATIONS

Having explored dominant narratives that justify the need to embed environmental social work in Zimbabwe. I make the following recommendations:

1. Social Work departments of institutions offering social work training in Zimbabwe need to establish a national grouping or association which can be a platform for knowledge management towards embedding approaches as environmental social work.
2. Within this proposed national association, it would be vital to establish special interest groups amongst academics who make up the association of social work departments. One such special interest group could be an Environmental Social Work interest group
3. A Community of Practice on environmental social work encompassing multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary collaboration between academic researchers, practitioners, governmental and non-governmental agencies would catalyse mainstreaming environmental social work. For example, it can be composed of entities as Midlands State University's Tugwi-Mukosi Multidisciplinary research centre, Africa University's Child Rights Research Centre. Entities like The African Mental Health Research Initiative (AMARI) a mental health research capacity building a consortium composed of four African universities namely, Addis Ababa University, College of Medicine - University of Malawi, University of Cape Town and University of Zimbabwe. This community of practice could procreate new languages and imaginaries to grasp human-ecological-geological connections through approaches as action research. This can result in research outputs like working papers, monographs and handbooks incorporating tenets of environmental social work.
4. Embedding environmental social work experiential learning *in situ can be achievable by universities by facilitating* Field visits to locations in the country where environmental degradation is rampant. This could be like for example granite mining in Mutoko can immerse students into gaining better insights into harnessing environmental social work to support communities. City of Mutare based Africa University harnessed this approach by deploying social work students to provide psycho-social support to child victims of the devastating 2019 cyclone Idai in Chimanimani and other areas of Manicaland province. On the same note UNICEF Zimbabwe country office has been co-chairing the Child Protection Working Group (CPWG) jointly with the Ministry of Public Service Labour and Social Welfare. Resultantly, a Child Protection in Emergencies (CPiE) preparedness and response institutional framework has been drafted for ensuring sector's preparedness for and responses to future emergencies. To enhance sector CPiE planning, CPiE and Gender-Based Violence in Emergency (GBViE) are being integrated in sectoral plans of District Child Protection Committees. The building of competent workforce towards emergencies responses has seen UNICEF training 285 social workers to deliver CPiE preparedness and response services.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, article attempted addressing two key questions: how environmental social work methods of intervention can be creatively embedded and grounded in the curriculum. This is as well as proposing pathways towards mainstreaming environmental social work methods of intervention and domains in fieldwork and social work knowledge management. More globally, the article attempts to converse with other social work scholars who are anxious environmental degradation and climate change impacts to vulnerable communities yet frustrated by lack of robust environment centred interventions in social work that can bolster enhanced social functioning of communities whilst using environmental lens. It is an invitation for more scholarly work on the state and dynamics of environmental social work.

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