



Ethical considerations in social work practice for environmental and community sustainability

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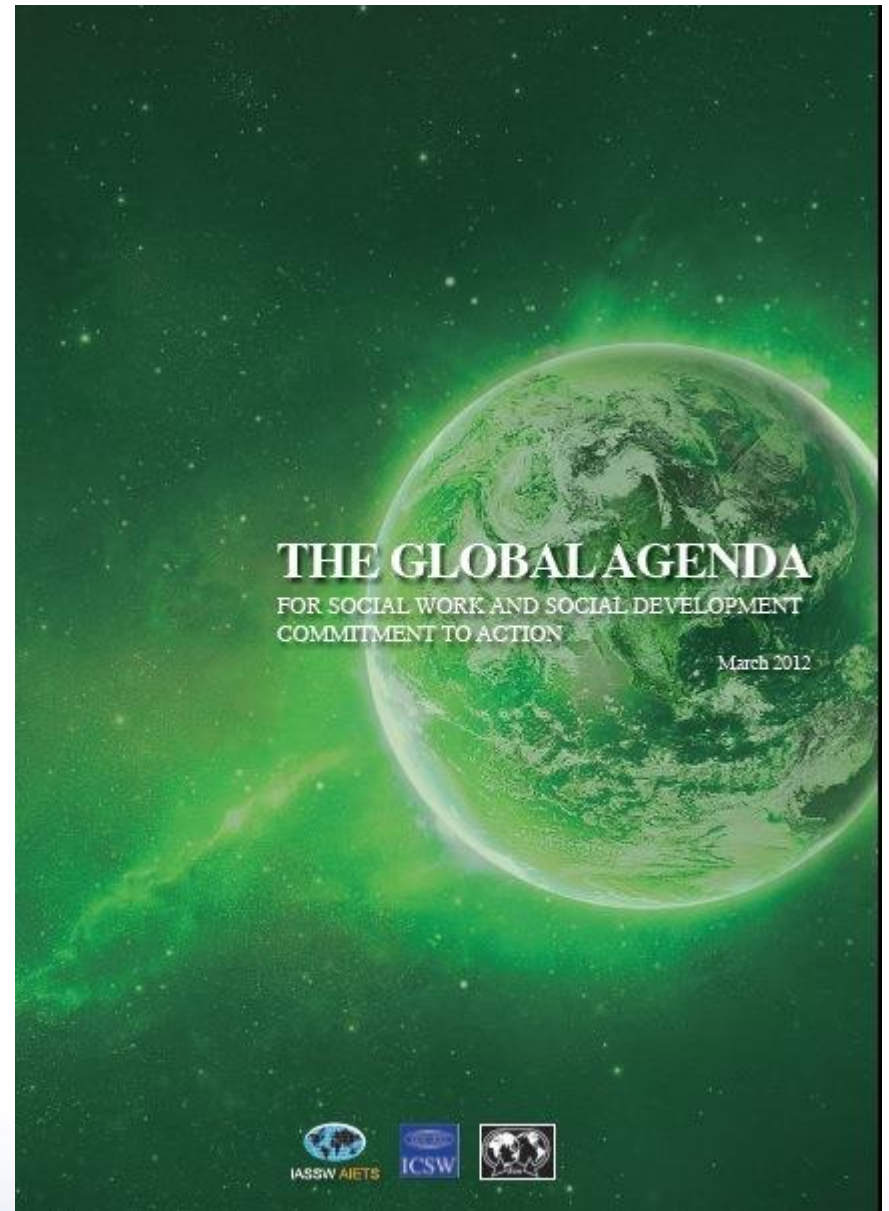
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The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development designed by IASSW, ICSW and IFSW to strengthen the profile of social work and to enable social workers to make a stronger contribution to policy development. It was released in **2012**



Global Agenda Commitments

Four themes:

- Promoting social and economic equality
- Promoting the dignity and worth of peoples
- **Promoting environmental and community sustainability**
- Strengthening recognition of the importance of human relations

Each is promoted and researched with regard to best practices and challenges - across the world through Regional Observatories - in cycles of two years per theme.

Protecting the natural environment is a key feature

- to promote economic and social justice, particularly for poor people.
- It necessitates an emphasis on sustainable development.
- *Nature will continue to provide (us) humans with resources in the future only if (we) they use them wisely in the present.*

Social work thru an ecological lens

- IASSW commits social work education to prepare social workers with knowledge, values, and skills for professional practice through an **ecological lens** in responding to poverty, structural inequalities, socio-economic disparities, global interdependencies and limited natural resources.



This should be achieved by

- protecting the environment
- while promoting the capacities and resilience of affected communities and their physical environments.

- Thus, IASSW reiterates its commitment to the principles which underpin the Global Agenda:
- ***Equitable development*** for every one across the world.
- ***Equitable distribution and claims*** on all resources by all people
- ***Social justice and environmental justice for all***

Environmental issues

Pollution

Depletion of natural resources

Impact of overpopulation on ecosystems


Disasters

Climate change

- How do we view the natural environment? Do flora and fauna have equal rights for existence?
- When there is conflict over use of and overexploitation of natural resources?
- Development vs People's well-being?

Theoretical frame

- A. Coates (2003) who sees social injustice in the “quest for economic growth and profit.” He lists environmental concerns which are exploitative to both humans and the environment.
- B. Ecofeminism that views oppression of the vulnerable and poor including women akin to exploitation of the environment in a patriarchal /capitalist society.

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- Peeters (2011) who suggests an ecologically sensitive social work approach by extending social work principles to environmental action like human well-being, empowerment, participation, global justice, gender equality and respect for diversity.

Coates (2003) illustrates with examples:

- **Deforestation** has deprived indigenous people of their homeland.
- The **toxic pollution** of Love Canal in upstate New York resulted in unprecedented disease counts in members of the community.
- **Environmental racism** is rampant, demonstrated by industries dumping waste in poor neighborhoods.

- **Overfishing** has depleted both the oceans and the livelihood of people dependent on the industry.
- **Environmental illnesses** have dramatically increased in recent years, including higher rates of asthma in urban children.
- “**When the Earth has been senselessly exploited and polluted, social injustice has been a result**” (p. 24).

Anthropocentrism

Ecocentric

Biocentric

Anthropocentric



A human centered view of nature. Anything not providing positive benefit to people is considered of negligible value.

Who is most affected?

- The most oppressed groups are the ones that are immediately and profoundly affected by environmental changes.
- These include women, the poor, people of colour, natives and indigenous people and people who reside in countries of the global South.

- People living in poverty lack the resources to cope with impending environmental destruction.
- While the rich are able to insulate themselves against ecological damage for much longer than the poor (McNutt, 1994 in Muldoon, 2006).

Values in Ecofeminism perspective

- Ecofeminism relates the oppression and domination of all subordinate groups (women, people of color, children, the poor) to the oppression and domination of nature (animals, land, water, air, etc.). All of these subordinate groups have been subject to oppression, domination, exploitation, and colonization from the Western patriarchal society that emphasizes and values men. (Warren 2000).
- Ecofeminists believe that these connections are illustrated through traditionally "feminine" values such as reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation, which are present both among women and in nature.

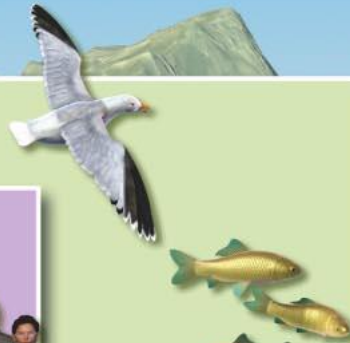
Ecocentric



Considers the integrity of ecological systems – not just individual animals (or species). Recognizes the need to preserve not just entities, but also their relationships with each other.

Biocentric

Anthropocentric



Ecocentric


Biocentric →

Anthropocentric



All life has ethical standing, and any actions taken consider the effects on all living things, or the biotic world in general. .



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- It is thus virtuous to stand for the rights of animals and plants and to protect them against extinction.
 - This is a moral stand which is also supported in several religious teachings.
 - It is an extension of the value of not harming human and non-human entities.

Example: Bishnoi community lives in harmony with nature

- The Bishnoi (also called Vishnoi) is a religious group found in western Thar desert in Rajasthan. The Bishnoi faith is a religious offshoot of Hinduism founded on 29 principles, most of which promote environmental stewardship. Bishnois strictly forbid the harming of trees and animals. The religion was founded by Guru Maharaj Jambaji in 1485 AD in the Marwar (Jodhpur) desert region of western Rajasthan, India.

- Of his 29 tenets (Bish or *bees*=20, *noi*=9), ten are directed towards personal hygiene and maintaining good basic health, seven for healthy social behaviour, and five tenets to the worship of God. Eight tenets have been prescribed to preserve bio-diversity and encourage good animal husbandry. These include a ban on killing animals and felling green trees, and providing protection to all life forms. The community is also directed to see that the firewood they use is devoid of small insects. Wearing blue clothes is prohibited because the dye for colouring them is obtained by cutting a large quantity of shrubs

Compassion for all living things or *Praan daya*



Bishnoi movement precursor of Chipko movement against cutting of trees



What is the Social Work view?

- To extend our ethical principles and acknowledge the right to live in harmony with the environment.
- While recognising the right to life and well-being, we need to understand the symbiotic relationship between human well-being and overexploitation and degradation of the natural resources.
- Let's take some illustrations where ethical decisions have to be made.

What are the ethical issues with respect to environment and community sustainability?

- Tribals in India living in harmony with nature vs industrial development and displacement



- Maasai tribe in Kenya and Tanzania living in harmony with nature vs ecotourism and displacement

Industry polluting rivers and degrading land



- Birla's rayon industry polluting Tungabhadra river leading to fishkills and loss of livelihood
- Forests being replaced with monoculture of eucalyptus to supply wood for rayon
- Usurping common property resources
- Mining

Native peoples of America don't own their lands

- Members of the San Carlos Apache Nation in Arizona are fighting the sale of their sacred Oak Flat site to foreign mining conglomerates.



The Kanaka Maoli in Hawaii are fighting to protect their sacred mountain Mauna Kea from the construction of a 30-meter, \$1.4 billion telescope.



We need a Paradigm Shift: Understanding Sustainability

- Sustainability is commonly understood to require the balanced pursuit of three goods: ecological health, social equity, and economic welfare.
- It is grounded on the ethical commitment to the well-being not only of contemporary populations but also the well-being and enhanced opportunities of future generations (Kibert, Thiele, Peterson, Monroe, 2012, p.5).

Environmental sustainability requires that

- “Natural capital remain intact,” ; natural resources should not be used in excess of their rate of renewal.
- Nonrenewable resources should be guarded and used minimally.
- How can social work address these three elements of sustainability in equal portion?

Social work has to actually broaden its contextual ambit

- To embrace ecological concerns and the Earth's biophysical boundaries;
- questions of ecological justice;
- access to, quality and fair distribution of natural resources;



Recognize the normative concurrence between social work and sustainable development

In terms of attention to:

- well-being,
- equality,
- human rights and
- participation,

Each reinforces the other.

- a critical attitude towards consumerism;
- concerns with spatial planning, the quality of living conditions and the importance of the natural environment for human well-being.

- Social work should mobilize around notions of appropriate distribution of resources and responsible management of waste.
- “The challenge here is complex as it calls on the rich to reduce consumption of resources (and thereby reduce pollution to levels which Earth can effectively absorb) so the poor can have equity” (Coates, 2003, p. 118).

- Social work's focus on the 'social' can reinforce the social dimension and participative practices of sustainable development and its focus on questions of redistribution and the emancipation and empowerment of people and communities (Peeters 2011: 9)

Summary of Ethical considerations based on the Normative Principles by Peeters, 2011

Enhancement of human well-being:

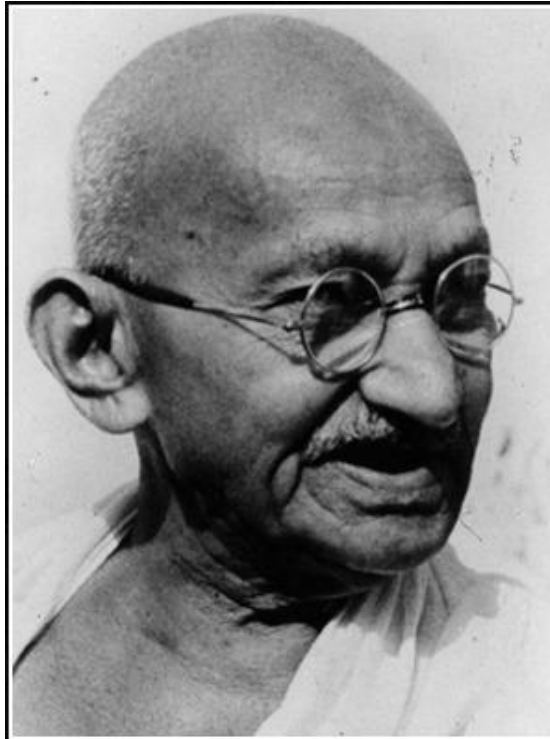
- This implies the satisfaction of needs but has a broader focus.
- Can needs be satisfied without sacrificing the environment?

Ethics of empowerment:

- Social work holds people accountable for their actions, but fairness implies attention to the different possibilities and limits of people, both individuals and groups.
- Social work believes the state has a role in providing for its citizens.
- In an equitable manner; is this not feasible?

- Social work is aligned with the goal of global justice which implies equitable distribution of resources and responsibility.
- Social work extols social solidarity, diversity and empowerment, especially with disadvantaged and marginalised populations.
- This principle is compatible with social work's concern with people's futures which include stopping the overexploitation of the environment which serve the few.

- Active participation of service users is highly valued in social work. Participation in protecting the environment is part of this responsibility.
- Social work promotes gender equality and respect for diversity.



Earth provides enough to satisfy
every man's needs, but not every
man's greed.

— *Mahatma Gandhi* —

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