Why is climate change a pertinent issue for social work and how can social workers contribute to efforts to address it?

Rose Anderson
BSW, University of Sydney

Abstract

This article considers the relevance of climate change for social work and discusses the ways that social workers can contribute on macro, mezzo and micro levels to efforts to address climate change. The approaches of adapting to climate change and mitigating climate change are discussed, including the benefits and limitations on each, showing that it is necessary to peruse an integrated approach which combines adaption and mitigation. Social workers have a duty to contribute to efforts to both adapt to and mitigate climate change as well as undertake other forms of 'environmental social work' as climate change is a social justice and human rights issue. By extending the concept of person-in-environment to include physical environment social workers can approach the issue in a way which is in line with existing social work theories and approaches and incorporate a responsibility for the environment into their practice.

Introduction

Climate change is a pertinent issue for social work as social work is concerned with promoting wellbeing and social justice, and climate change poses a significant risk to this. Climate change has many social implications, and these social issues will have a disproportionate impact on already vulnerable populations (Mearns & Norton, 2009; Alston, 2015; Levy & Patz, 2015). Current approaches to addressing climate change focus on developing strategies to adapt to its impacts and strategies to avoid emitting excessive greenhouse gases to mitigate the impact. Drawing on ecological theories, social work practice can aim to respond to climate change at the macro, mezzo, and micro-level. At the macro level, social workers through their advocacy can add social perspective to debates and policies and facilitating or mediating discussions about future action. Social workers are also well placed to contribute on a mezzo level as they can mobilise communities to take actions which enhance community members' wellbeing while ensuring that resources are preserved for future generations. At the micro level, social work practice can also seek to address climate change in more indirect ways through individual 'environmental social work'. This may focus more generally on recognizing the connections between people and the environment and considering the myriad of ways that people are affected by disruptions to the environment.

Climate change and its impacts

Human induced climate change is creating fundamental challenges. Since the industrial revolution, the global average temperature has increased by 1.1°C (Climate Council, n.d.). This is due to the release of greenhouse gases which trap some of the heat from the sun in the earth's atmosphere and this rise in temperature causes the earth's climate to change (Climate Council, n.d.). Greenhouse gases are released through human activities such as burning fossil fuels, agriculture and land clearing (Climate Council, n.d.). Climate change causes the weather to become more extreme and causes an increase in climate-related hazards or disasters (Gasper, Bolm & Ruth, 2011). For example, 'cyclones become more powerful, sea surges and storms become more violent, rainfall and flooding become more extreme, wind-assisted wildfires become fiercer and drought severity increases' (McMichael, 2014, p. 10). The rising temperature also causes the polar ice caps to melt, which is causing the sea level to rise (May & Caron, 2014). The sea temperature is also becoming warmer which damages coral and krill and in turn endangers the sea creatures that depend on them (May & Caron, 2014). Climate change also poses a risk to many plants and animals on the land, as the changing climate may destroy the environment in which they live (May & Caron, 2014).

Climate change poses a significant risk to humans because it is resulting in significant loss of biodiversity, which is detrimental to the ecosystems that humans depend on to fulfil many of our needs (Committee on Understanding and Monitoring Abrupt Climate Change and Its Impacts (CUMACCI), Board on Atmospheric Sciences and Climate, Division on Earth and Life Studies, & National Research Council, 2014). Ecosystems provide essential services such as

moderating weather, regulating the water cycle and delivering clean water, protecting and keeping agricultural soils fertile, pollinating plants (including crops), providing food (particularly seafood), disposing of wastes, providing pharmaceuticals, controlling spread of pathogens, sequestering greenhouse gases from the atmosphere, and providing recreational opportunities (Tercek and Adams, as cited in CUMACCI et al., 2014, p. 127).

Disruption to these ecosystems will therefore result in issues such as damage to agricultural yields, shortages of water and other essential resources, destruction of areas where humans live and important infrastructure, and damage to important natural spaces (CUMACCI et al., 2014). Clearly there is a direct physical hazard that climate related disasters pose to humans (McMichael, 2014), however these issues highlight the *indirect* impacts that climate change will have on humans' health. For example, disruption to eco-systems can cause infectious diseases and food and water insecurity, and economic disruption or conflict related to resources shortages can impact on people's mental and physical health (McMichael, 2014).

This disruption to ecosystems that humans depend on means that climate change will likely result in many social issues such as increased poverty, mass forced-migration, political and economic instability, conflict, and social disruption. Additionally, these issues will not have an even impact as the poorest and most vulnerable groups in society are threatened the most (Mearns & Norton, 2009; Levy & Patz, 2015). Existing inequalities cause considerable differences between how different individuals and communities are able to respond to the effects of climate change (Alston, 2015). As climate change multiplies and exacerbates existing vulnerabilities, the people most at risk include people living in developing countries, poor people, people of colour, Indigenous people (Mearns & Norton, 2009), people with chronic diseases or disabilities and women (Levy & Patz, 2015). It is also important to note that while developing countries produce the least amount of greenhouse gas emissions, they bear the brunt of the consequences of global emissions (Mearns & Norton, 2009; Levy & Patz, 2015). Mearns & Norton (2009, p. 21) argue that

> the global injustice of a world in which responsibility for the causes of climate change is inversely proportional to the degree of vulnerability to its consequences calls for equity and social justice to be placed at the heart of a responsive agenda on climate policy and action.

However, currently, the response to climate change largely focuses on scientific and technical aspects of climate change and this takes attention away from the disproportionate affect that it will have on these populations (Alston, 2015). Social work is well placed to bring attention to these uneven impacts and ensure the consequences for vulnerable populations is at the forefront of approaches to address the climate change.

Approaches to addressing climate change

A key approach to addressing climate change is to improve society's ability to respond and adapt to the changes that will occur. This is an important strategy as we are already seeing the early impacts of climate change (Shalizi & Lecocq, 2010). In adapting to climate change, societies aim to 'improve their ability to manage climate risks and climate functions' but also alleviate climate related poverty and reduce vulnerability to climate change (Mearns & Norton, 2009, p. 226). For this reason, there needs to be an emphasis on improving resilience in developing countries (Mearns & Norton, 2009). As many people living in developing countries are provided with little protection from governments and market-based instruments, they require the development of social policies that aim to improve their ability to respond to and withstand climate related hazards (Mearns & Norton, 2009). To build resilience it is also necessary for the international community to have *ongoing support* for humanitarian assistance, rather than providing it only when a situation is 'at the brink of collapse' (Mearns & Norton, 2009, p. 228).

Existing adaption initiatives are often community-led, both because climate change 'manifests by locality' and because communities often have to adapt out of necessity in the absence of formal protections (Mearns & Norton, 2009, p. 230). Community-led adaption initiatives are extremely valuable due to communities' unique knowledge of local ecosystems, however they often lack the external support they need (Mearns & Norton, 2009). To address the need to adapt to climate change, governments need to support community-led initiatives but also consult local communities when developing initiatives for country wide adaption to utilise their individual strengths and knowledge.

Adaption strategies may however be unreliable due to the uncertainty of the location or magnitude of damage caused by climate change and the risk that too much of the damage will be irreversible (Shalizi & Lecocq, 2010). This highlights the necessity to develop and implement strategies to *avoid* emitting excessive greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and mitigate climate change. Early mitigation is central in avoiding irreversible losses and the potentially catastrophic consequences of climate change (Shalizi & Lecocq, 2010) and in ensuring the protection of people's health (Levy & Patz, 2015). Mitigating climate change has also been predicted to cost less than adapting to it (Shalizi & Lecocq, 2010; Haines et al., 2007). Mitigation policies can be implemented in many different sectors (Levy & Patz, 2015). Examples include policies that provide or promote the use of renewable energy, policies that promote sustainable forms of transportation such as bicycles and policies that decrease meat production (Levy & Patz, 2015).

Many commentators argue that due to the global nature of climate change, mitigation policies will have a limited impact if global action is not taken (Shalizi & Lecocq, 2010). It is therefore important to develop and provide *global* access to non-polluting and sustainable sources of

energy (Haines et al., 2007). It is particularly important that developed countries such as the United States of America commit to mitigation as they are the largest emitters of greenhouse gases (Shalizi & Lecocq, 2010). However, considering that mitigation strategies only aim to limit global warming to 2°C (Haines et al., 2007) and there are already evident impacts of the current 1.1°C increase, it is clear that both adaption and mitigation are required. It is therefore necessary to develop an integrated approach which combines mitigation and adaption efforts to reduce the risk of catastrophic damage while planning for the damage that will inevitably occur.

Social work theories and approaches

Climate change is a social justice and human rights issue requiring social work attention. The United Nations argues that

> human rights and the environment are intertwined; human rights cannot be enjoyed without a safe, clean and healthy environment; and sustainable environmental governance cannot exist without the establishment of and respect for human rights (United Nations Environment Programme, n.d., 'What are environmental rights?', para 1.)

The right to a healthy environment has been formally recognised by more than 150 countries, however its practical application has been limited (Environmental Defenders Office, 2020). As two central principles of social work are advocating for the rights of people (IFSW, n.d.) and protecting vulnerable groups from oppression (Australian Association Social Workers, 2020), the violation of this human right is particularly important as climate change affects vulnerable populations the most (Levy & Patz, 2015). It is necessary for professionals such as social workers to contribute to the climate change debate to bring a social justice perspective to the issue and ensure the effect on vulnerable populations is at the forefront of debates (Dominelli, 2011). 'Green social work' is a term coined by Dominelli (2012, p. 27) which refers to 'that part of practice that intervenes to protect the environment and enhance people's well-being'. Green social work is important in individual social work as people may experience grief and loss because of climate change. Micro practice with those affected will be enhanced by awareness and education on the impact of climate change.

Through ecological systems theory, social work already has a focus on the 'person-in-environment'. Until recently this 'environment' has related primarily to the social environment, however due to the challenge of climate change, this concept is being extended to encompass physical environment (Alston, 2015; Norton, 2012; McKinnon, 2008). It is requisite on social workers to recognise the influence of the physical environment *on* the social environment and incorporate a responsibility for the environment into their practice (International Federation of Social Workers as cited in Alston, 2015. p. 359-360). Social sustainability is a concept which may assist social workers to understand how to incorporate environmental concerns into their practice. Social sustainability occurs when

processes, systems, structures and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities. Socially sustainable communities are equitable, diverse, connected and democratic and provide good quality of life (Western Australian Council of Social Services, as cited in McKinnon, 2008, p. 265).

It is well established in the research literature that there is a direct link between the health of society and the health of the environment. Accordingly, it follows that social work practice must focus on ecological justice issues and social sustainability (McKinnon, 2008). In fact, existing social work skills are likely to have highly effective in responding to both climate change and the need for greater environmental sustainability.

Approaches which view climate change as important only for its impact on humans have however been criticised as being anthropocentric (Norton, 2012). Social work has generally accepted a shallow ecological conceptualisation of the environment, which still primarily focuses on human's needs (Coates & Gray, 2011). Deep ecology and ecofeminism are two theories which may help social workers to reconsider the relationship between the environment and people. 'Deep ecology' argues that all living things are interconnected, and all have intrinsic value. In a similar vein, ecofeminism argues that the earth is exploited because of human's perceived superiority over other living things. Norton (2012) argues that social workers can work from both these perspectives to promote an understanding for the relationship between people and the natural world and develop a deep empathy towards the natural world. It would seem there is strong 'fit' between this 'ecosocial' approach and social work values and ethics as it adopts an anti-oppressive model that challenges human dominance over the natural world. Developing a deeper awareness of the interconnectivity of all living things helps to foster global consciousness, a deep attachment to the earth and the valuing of planetary wellbeing (Norton, 2012). Additionally, these understandings are in line with Indigenous Worldviews which are founded on a 'symbiotic relationship to the earth and a belief in the delicate balance among all things' (Morisette, McKenzie & Morrissette, as cited in Coates & Gray, 2011, p. 233). It would seem there are many lessons and new insights available to social work through learning from these Indigenous ways of knowing and doing which promote harmony between humans and the environment.

Macro, mezzo and micro environmental social work practice

Ecological social work practice theories appear to be very relevant to environmental social work. In macro social work, social workers can contribute to debates and policies on climate change. Social workers can add a social perspective to debates to expand the scope of discussions on climate science and predictive modelling (Alston, 2015). The involvement of social work will also bring attention to the social issues that will arise through climate change and the social supports that will be required to address these issues, particularly for those most vulnerable. (Alston, 2015). As social science professionals social workers may consider

questions that other scientists do not, such as how different individuals and communities may respond to climate disasters and the best way to achieve collective action (Victor, 2015). As social workers are skilled in considering the 'bigger picture' and mediating between different groups, they are well placed to facilitate discussions on the challenge of addressing climate change (Dominelli, 2011). In doing this, they may consider the different values and assumptions that underpin these disputes, which helps us to understand why there continues to be disagreements when the scientific facts are clear (Victor, 2015). Through social work's understanding of existing inequalities and social justice aims, their contribution may result in greater attention to the need for equitable sharing of resources and increases in aid for those who are most vulnerable.

At the mezzo level, social workers play an important role in working with the communities that are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. In the absence of national government action, there is a need for action at a community level, however many communities may require mobilisation to reduce their emissions (Dominelli, 2011). There are still many people who deny or are sceptical about the importance of climate change, and social workers who are well-informed about climate change can combine this with their professional interpersonal skills to engage with communities and raise awareness. To facilitate understanding and motivation, it may be helpful to assist communities to understand the global concerns on climate change in relation to their specific local context (Dominelli, 2011). It is necessary though to not only lobby for local action but also provide support to communities who are taking action (Dominelli, 2011). This may include facilitating access to resources or technologies, facilitating discussions about different strategies or providing advocacy. Social workers also play an important role in providing support to communities that have experienced climate related disasters. In responding to the aftermath of disasters, social workers can advocate for the allocation of resources and humanitarian aid, provide therapeutic support to individuals and support communities to act.

Social work is particularly suitable for working with communities on this issue as the profession is familiar with complexity of enhancing the wellbeing of individuals and communities whilst preserving the earth's resources for future generations (Dominelli, 2012). This challenge could be approached by using a social sustainability approach as this approach aims that 'future generations will not be disadvantaged by the activities of the current generation' (McKinnon, 2008, p. 264). Social sustainability is particularly relevant as it also focuses on fostering a sense of community responsibility, identifying community strengths and needs, creating ways for communities to fulfil their own needs, maintaining equal access to services, and increasing political participation of community members (McKinnon, 2008). The Transition Town Movement provides an example for social workers wishing to contribute towards social sustainability using a strengths-based and solution-focused approach to increase community resilience (Bay, 2016). This approach aims to increase communities' self-sufficiency and teaching people to live more simply and frugally to ensure that there are enough resources for all (Bay, 2016). Examples of initiatives include community gardens, exchanging of unwanted goods and reskilling schemes for fixing and reusing machinery (Bay, 2016). Social workers are well placed to support community development activities by promoting and

encouraging 'local communities to collectively investigate their conditions and explore ways of making changes to promote carbon emission reductions' (Bay, 2016 p. 94).

In micro practice, social workers need to be continuously aware of the various ways the natural environment impacts on service users (Erikson, 2016). For example, if climate change results in an individual being exposed to an unhealthy or unsafe environment, this may negatively impact their functioning. This would involve considering how service user's behaviours are influenced by the environment when making assessments and deciding on interventions (Erikson, 2016). Additionally, in doing strengths-based practice with individuals and families, social workers could explore how service users may use contact with nature as a coping mechanism (Norton, 2012). Research has shown that spending time in nature can improve cognitive functioning and mental clarity (Berman, Jonides & Kaplan, 2008) which suggests it could have positive mental health effects (Norton, 2012). Social workers who provide therapeutic counselling could utilise this by introducing nature to therapy sessions or recommending service users spend time in nature as part of their therapy. Acknowledging the importance of the environment in micro practice is particularly important for social workers working with Indigenous people as Indigenous people are significantly affected by changes to their ecosystems due to their unique connection to their land and their history of suffering from environmental injustice (Billiot & Mitchell, 2019). Billiot and Mitchell (2019) argue that to work with Indigenous people in a way which promotes their wellbeing and connection to the environment, social workers need to consider vulnerability, adaption, and resilience within an Indigenous context.

Conclusion

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues in the 21st century and it is essential that social workers become more engaged in efforts to address it. The impact of climate change must be recognised as a social justice issue. Social work has an obligation to bring attention to the disproportionate impact of climate change on vulnerable communities and the need for an equitable sharing of resources. This paper has argued that responding to climate change draws heavily on existing social work ecological practice theories. Social work responses to climate change expands the existing concept of 'person-in-environment' to include physical environment. This is more than understanding of the effect the environment has on people but includes an understanding of the environment's intrinsic value and the interconnectivity of all living things. Adopting this stance, social workers can learn from Indigenous Worldviews and incorporate a deep empathy to and responsibility for the environment into their practice. Social workers can and should address climate change in their practice drawing on relevant skills and knowledge at the macro, mezzo and micro level.

References

Alston, M. (2015). Social work, climate change and global cooperation. *International Social Work*, *58*(3), 355–363. doi: 10.1177/0020872814556824

Bay, U. (2016). Biopolitics, complex systems theory and ecological social work: Conceptualising ways of transitioning to low carbon futures. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, *28*(4), 89–99. doi: 10.11157/anzswj-vol28iss4id290

Berman, M. Jonides, J. & Kaplan, S. (2008). The cognitive benefits of interacting with nature. *Psychological Science*, 19(12), 1207–1212. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02225.x

Billiot, S. & Mitchell, F. (2019). Conceptual interdisciplinary model of exposure to environmental changes to address indigenous health and well-being. *Public Health (London)*, *176*, 142–148. doi: 10.1016/j.puhe.2018.08.011

Climate Council. (n.d.). *What is climate change and what can we do about it?*. Retrieved November 17, 2020, from https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/what-is-climate-change-what-can-we-do/?atb=DSA01b&gclid=Cj0KCQiA48j9BRC-ARIsAMQu3WQxufAr3fUHveU3ET1YoNL-vhOc8Mq3KsQ1bh4YRQNbGrMhoUosXl0aAtctEALw_wcB

Coates, J. & Gray, M. (2011). The environment and social work: An overview and introduction. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *21*(3), 230–238. doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00851.x

Committee on Understanding and Monitoring Abrupt Climate Change and Its Impacts, Board on Atmospheric Sciences and Climate, Division on Earth and Life Studies, & National Research Council. (2014). Areas of concern for humans from abrupt changes. In *Abrupt impacts of climate change: Anticipating surprises* (pp. 127-146). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

Dominelli, L. (2011). Climate change: social workers' roles and contributions to policy debates and interventions. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *20*(4), 430–438. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00795.x

Dominelli, L. (2012). Introduction. In *Green social work: From environmental crises to environmental justice* (pp. 16-45). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Environmental Defenders Office. (2020). *Legal analysis: The right to a healthy environment in Australia*. Retrieved November 17, 2020, from https://www.edo.org.au/2020/01/09/right-to-healthy-environment-in-australia/

Erikson, C. (2016). Social work practice with individuals and families toward environmental justice. In *Environmental Justice as social work practice* (pp. 108-129). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press

Gasper, R., Blohm, A., Matthias, R. (2011). Social and economic impacts of climate change on the urban environment. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, *3*(3), 150–157. doi: 10.1016/j.cosust.2010.12.009

Haines, A. Smith, K., Anderson, D., Epstein, P., Mcmichael, A., Roberts, I., … Woods, J. (2007). Policies for accelerating access to clean energy, improving health, advancing development, and mitigating climate change. *The Lancet (British Edition)*, *370*(9594), 1264–1281. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(07)61257-4

International Federation of Social Workers. (n.d.). *Global definition of social work*. Retrieved December 22, 2020, from https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/

Levy, B. & Patz, J. (2015). Climate change, human rights, and social justice. *Annals of Global Health*, 81(3), 310–322. doi: 10.1016/j.aogh.2015.08.008

May E. & Caron, Z. (2014). *Global warming for dummies cheat sheet*. Retrieved November 17, 2020, from https://www.dummies.com/education/science/environmental-science/global-warming-for-dummies-cheat-sheet/

McMichael, A. (2014). Earth as humans' habitat: Global climate change and the health of populations. *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, *2*(1), 9–12. doi: 10.15171/ijhpm.2014.03

McKinnon, J. (2008). Exploring the nexus between social work and the environment. *Australian Social Work*, *61*(3), 256–268. doi: 10.1080/03124070802178275

Mearns, R. & Norton, A. (2009). *Social dimensions of climate change: Equity and vulnerability in a warming world.* Washington, D.C: World Bank Publications.

Norton, C. (2012). Social work and the environment: An ecosocial approach. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *21*(3), 299–308. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00853.x

Shalizi, Z. & Lecocq, F. (2010). To mitigate or to adapt: is that the question? Observations on an appropriate response to the climate change challenge to development strategies. *The World Bank Research Observer*, *25*(2), 295–321. doi: 10.1093/wbro/lkp012

United Nations Environment Programme. (n.d.). *What are environmental rights?*. Retrieved November 17, 2020, from https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/environmental-rights-and-governance/what-we-do/advancing-environmental-rights/what

Victor, D. (2015). Climate change: Embed the social sciences in climate policy. *Nature*, *520*(7545), 27–29. doi: 10.1038/520027a