

Low SES communities and climate change: a call for social work action

Jessica McDonald

BSW, University of Sydney

Abstract

Climate change is having profound effects on natural and built environments, creating unstable living conditions for both flora and fauna. It holds implications for all humankind, however, is disparately impacting people living in Low Socioeconomic Status (SES) communities. This paper seeks to discuss what current literature finds to be the most prevalent themes of climate change related disadvantage experienced by these communities. It will then discuss the relevance of these findings in relation to the social work profession and its role to challenge policies and practices that are oppressive and fail to meet standards of environmental sustainability and human rights. Furthermore, it highlights critical social work theory and strengths-based approaches as key considerations for working alongside low SES communities. This paper was written as part of a final capstone unit of study for a Bachelor of Social Work degree.

Key Words

Climate Change, Low Socioeconomic Status, Social Work

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Introduction

Climate change disproportionately impacts low SES communities. Its outcomes are more severe and disparate. Climate change is the alteration of the earth's weather patterns over time with respect to collective human impact on the environment, and accordingly it is a social issue that requires collective action to mitigate its effects (IPCC, 2007). Its effects on the environment include but are not limited to the increase in global temperature, increase in frequency and intensity of natural disasters, increased experiences of extremes in temperature, and rising sea levels (IPCC, 2023). Socio-economic disadvantage is an expansion on the concept of poverty as it refers to the conditions which disallow individuals access to the economic and social resources that enable their participation in society including financial, access related and affordability as well as other non-financial social elements (Akter & Grafton, 2021). Understanding the implications of climate change on low SES communities is of critical importance in order to generate collective action in the immediate and to protect vulnerable communities at risk (Yang & Ho, 2017). It is necessary for social workers also to understand the complexities and compounded disadvantages experienced by low SES communities as their implications traverse the psychosocial, physical, natural and built environments, culminating in an array of disadvantages (IPCC, 2018). Five key themes that emerge from current literature include; compounding of hardship, health disparities, mental health impacts, resource disparity and adaptation. These themes are critical in efforts to build a base of knowledge, with hopes to generate social action and appropriate responses to support low SES communities.

Literature review

The intersection of socioeconomic status and impacts of climate change

Low SES is defined as being unable to meet the level considered an 'acceptable standard of living' (Darin-Mattsson et al., 2017). To this effect, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023)

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classifies low SES communities as those where community characteristics reflect socioeconomic disadvantage such as “lack of public resources, transport infrastructure or experience high levels of pollution”. This suggests low SES communities are excluded socially, financially, and geospatially, which exacerbates and compounds disadvantage (Berry et al., 2018). Climate change increases the likelihood of extreme weather conditions and disasters - such as heatwaves, flooding, drought, and severe storms. These effects are amplified further for those in more vulnerable contexts - such as living in low SES communities - who experience worse outcomes (Bennett & Friel, 2014; Diffenbaugh & Burke, 2019; Ebi, Fawcett, Spiegel, & Tovalin, 2016; Friel, Marmot, McMichael, Kjellstrom, & Vågerö, 2008). It is therefore relevant to explore the implications for communities experiencing SE disadvantage and to highlight current and emerging themes of significance. Through the examination of the current literature on the effects of climate change on low SES communities, power imbalances can be challenged and gaps in knowledge uncovered, playing a vital role in shaping future approaches and strategies.

Compounding of Hardship and disadvantage

A disparity exists for people who live in low SES environments. This includes but is not limited to social exclusion, geospatial exclusion, work and employment difficulties as well as disparate outcomes for education (IPCC, 2018). Such disadvantage is seen in the literature to be compounded when the complexities of climate change are experienced by low SES communities (Griego et al., 2020; Morello-Frosch et al., 2011; Ebi et al., 2016). Cutler (1995) uses the lens of environmental justice to articulate that the effects of climate change are not equal across classifications of race, class and socioeconomic status, finding that the right to access a clean environment and protection from environmental issues is not equitable. With relation to compounding hardship for low SES communities experiencing climate change, literature recognises that the hardship and disadvantage is multifaceted and complex in nature (Barbier & Hochard, 2018).

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Social inequalities such as SES influence the exposure people have to hazardous climate events, as well as influence capacities for anticipating, responding to and recovering from these events (Collins, 2010). This vulnerability influences ‘the degree to which a person's livelihood, property or assets are put at risk by the occurrence of a hazard event’ and becomes further complicated due to the socially ascribed attributes of race, class, gender, age and citizenship status for example (Wisner et al., 1994). Thus the implications of climate change on SES communities can compound already present social disadvantage and make it difficult for people to access resources in the wake of disasters. For example in a Study by Griego et al. (2020) on the implications of Hurricane Harvey in Houston, Texas it was identified that government assistance was deemed exclusionary by community members due to “programmatic restrictions” and “ever present fears regarding deportation”. Further intersectional social disadvantages can make evacuation of climate events a non-viable option due to perceptions of emergency shelter sites as being “unsafe, uncomfortable, or unsuitable for themselves and their family members” (Hernández et al., 2018). The complication in accessing resources lies in social exclusionary factors such as immigration status or other social intersections which compound the disadvantage of living in a low SES position and are already at greater risk of experiencing a climatic disaster. This has further flow on effects to families and communities whereby they are further limited in their capacity for adaptation and collaboration due to stressors surrounding balancing the distribution of already low economic resources (Collins, 2010).

People living in low SES communities also experience a form of powerlessness when they are unable to obtain and/or utilise resources or draw on social capital as a means of disaster planning, mitigation, recovery and resistance (Diekmann et al., 2023). Literature depicts a reality whereby governmental approaches to climate change and its impacts are not addressing the cumulative impacts and health effects of multiple environmental stressors on low SES communities. Collins (2020) utilises a marginalisation/facilitation frame in his work that examines the role of markets and state institutions in the facilitation of a transference of risk,

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creating ‘positive and negative environmental externalities’ that are inequitably distributed. This notion that institutional mechanisms enable elites to externalise risk at the expense of a societal interest is an institutional abuse of power and compounds disadvantage for those who are unable to individually externalise risks presented by climate change. Morello-Frosch et al., (2011) speaks to the environmental justice lens seeing the need to abandon the top down approach of addressing climate change, which does not acknowledge the combined environmental, social, and political stressors that are compounded on vulnerable populations. Power imbalances compound hardship, overlooking the social vulnerability of populations and instead focusing on models that employ equal weighting and additive models regardless of context, which do not speak to the complex disadvantage for low SES communities (Rufat et al., 2015).

Health Disparities

The Environmental Justice movement (EJ) was founded on scientific research regarding the correlation between spatial distribution of anthropogenic pollutants, climate related disasters, and low social and SES environments, specifically that climate events disparately impact these communities (Collins et al., 2015). Whilst some EJ studies have found less of a correlation, the bulk of studies in this field have indicated that the majority of pollutants and disasters sit along SES lines and have drastic health implications (Mohai et al., 2009; Chakraborty et al., 2014; Walker, 2012). Health will be defined here as inclusive of the social, cultural, economic and environmental determinants of health, inclusive of access to adequate resources such as food and water security and access to clean transportation options (ACOSS, 2023). In the wake of climate events the exposure to health related problems increase both in the immediate and in the consequent months and years (Grineski et al., 2020). Health necessities become more difficult to obtain due to instances of food scarcity, water contamination, homelessness and inability to access required medications (Brodie et al., 2006). Health implications relating to climate change are not a singular incidences with a finite time frame in which individuals will feel the effects. As low SES-communities are geographically situated in areas of high vulnerability to pollutants

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and climate impacts and low access to resource centres, the threat of health implications are lasting (Shonkoff et al., 2011). For example moulding of houses in the wake of flooding or the effects of air pollution in the lungs of individuals with conditions created or exacerbated by pollutants. This results in not only costly financial losses but also lasting health related implications which may require medical intervention, producing further costs to individuals, and exacerbating disadvantage and vulnerabilities.

Mental health impacts

Research has found inextricable links between the environment and mental health outcomes (Augustinavicius et al., 2021). Socioeconomic status is recognised as a risk factor for developing a mental illness in the aftermath of climate related disasters (Ebi et al., 2016; Palinkas & Wong, 2020). In the wake of events individuals of low SES are often faced with a complex array of stressors including familial, sociopolitical, housing, worsened power imbalances, financial etc. which can impact greatly on mental health (Ebi et al., 2016; Rothschild & Haas, 2023). Further, Low SES communities generally are located in geo-spatial climates that are more exposed to the impacts of climate change (Jiang & Yang, 2022). This means that their access to resources and finances are impacted by their SES and geospatial location placing them in a state of heightened stress and vulnerability.

A growing area of research focuses on stress outcomes related to the anticipation of climate change events (Augustinavicius et al., 2021). These stress outcomes have been termed eco-anxiety, and have been seen across literature to disproportionately impact low SES communities due to the likelihood of climate impacts and the inadequacy of human response (Ebi et al., 2016; Rothschild & Haas 2023; Jessel et al., 2019). Nahar et al., (2014) and Palinkas & Wong (2020) find that low SES communities are especially vulnerable to eco-anxiety “due to their increased exposure to extreme weather events, high levels of poverty and lack of access to services”.

Although some literature refutes this, finding that there is not yet enough substantial evidence to

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aver that lower income is directly linked to greater climate anxiety (Bhullar et al., 2022). Whilst there are fewer pieces of literature that question the disparity, it raises the important point that it is potentially further stigmatising to add eco-anxiety to the discourse surrounding low SES communities.

Further, literature speaks to the positive effects of eco-anxiety for low SES groups, such as creating greater community cohesion and support networks as well as acting as a catalyst for collective action against climate change (Bhullar et al., 2022; Bryce & Pigeon, 2014; Demski et al., 2017). Shared experiences of climate change and associated stress increases overall salience of climate change and can produce greater personal vulnerability and risk perceptions (Demski, 2017). In this way it can produce a response that motivates social action toward climate change. Thus, whilst eco-anxiety can be perceived as a mental health concern, there are positive outcomes for low SES individuals and communities that can reinforce positive action. It is important to note however, that literature regarding eco-anxiety largely takes a biomedical lens on eco-anxiety as a mental health ‘disorder’ (Bhullar et al., 2022). This is problematic as it sends a pathologising message about individual dysfunction rather than providing a social understanding about complexities at play in the life of the individual which consequently has effects on the mental wellbeing of an individual. It is therefore necessary to question stakeholder motivations in reflecting the experiences of individuals, as these may impact the lens by which people are viewed, potentially exacerbating power imbalances and powerlessness for communities.

Resource Disparity

Recovery for low SES communities is marked by barriers to appropriate and timely disaster relief. Research indicates that recovery assistance to low SES communities can be inequitably distributed in times of climate related disasters, and can have burdensome delays, worsening recovery prospects (Rufat et al., 2015). Without the means to individually fund recovery efforts,

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a reliance on services and external assistance is formed which prolongs shock and distress as well as can perpetuate poverty outcomes (Salim Uddin et al., 2021). Research finds that unsuitable provision of resources or those which do not meet the social, medical and economic needs of the community have been perceived as ‘insults to dignity’ and an added stressor for individuals and communities in their efforts to adapt (Hernandez et al., 2018). Further, access to resources such as energy and water disproportionately impact efforts of recovery for low SES communities. For example, Energy insecurity is driven by “limited and faulty infrastructure, affordability challenges, and service disruptions due to disasters and extreme weather events, often linked to climate change” (Jessel et al., 2019). In this way, unsuitable resources can become a non-viable option to protect communities from climate related events - for example in extended periods of extreme heat or heat waves whereby cooling mechanisms are unaffordable and/or unreliable. Resource disparity however, is not limited to tangible assets provided in the form of government funding or assistance measures.

Resources that appear less in the literature that impact low SES communities include non-governmental assistance including that of NGOs, social networks, and businesses. Research outlines that to a large extent low SES communities have barriers to accessing these resources also (Rufat et al., 2015). For example, aid from social networks can be unevenly dispersed based on socially advantageous or disadvantageous connections. Connections with affluent individuals ‘typically provide greater access to a variety of resources for recovery’, whereas within low-income networks, there is a lower capacity to offer supportive resources (Hawkins & Maurer, 2010). Whilst this reflects that some communities are able to financially support one another, it misses the perspective that resources are not always financial in nature, that physical assistance and community cohesion is an invaluable resource that promotes recovery in communities and bolsters resilience (Nelson et al., 2007).

Adaptation

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The literature points to the adaptation of low SES communities as acts of resistance and resilience to climate change events. Adaptation refers to how an individual or community is “able to increase or maintain the quality of life of its members in a range of environments” (Brown & Westaway, 2011). Adaptability is reliant on a number of elements including tangible assets such as financial or natural resources, as well as less tangible elements like skills and opportunities to implement changes to livelihood or lifestyle (Smit & Wandel, 2006). An example of a low SES community implementing adaptation can be seen in a case study regarding low ses communities in the wake of Hurricane Sandy which reflected that residents felt better equipped to withstand future natural disasters and more confident in recovery because they felt a social connectedness, cohesion and social exchange with others. (Cagney et al., 2016). Ways in which this and other communities have demonstrated adaptation can be seen in the pooling of resources, distribution and sharing of foods and water as well as checking on other residents (Hernández et al., 2018). Therefore, Whilst low SES communities have been noted to have less tangible assets they have been praised throughout literature for their ability to utilise the social elements of their environments as measures of resilience against the effects of climate change. It can be seen that this is not a top down mode of planned adaptation from outside assistance, it is an internal effort that builds local agency and influences the future outcomes of climatic events for these communities.

Whilst most literature points to the positive implications of adaptation in communities, a smaller body focuses on the capacity and motivation for individuals and communities to adopt adaptation strategies effectively. For example, it has been highlighted that willingness for individuals to adopt a strategy is reliant on a number of factors including capacity, connection to community and motivations of others (Manyena, 2006). A study on the rural livelihoods of several African countries affected by climate change induced hazards, shows that the process of renewal is made difficult due to income of individuals in communities, whereby individuals have to balance contribution to enduring poverty as well as contributing to disaster adaptation mechanisms

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(Uddin et al., 2021). It is therefore apparent that adaptation and resilience in low SES communities is affected by a number of other factors which facilitate or inhibit the extent to which they are able to adapt or resist the effects of climate change.

Action for change:

Utilising critical social work theory to support strengths-based practice

This review of literature highlights how the impacts of climate change on low SES communities intersect and overlap with one another. Action for change in one area is likely to support change in another area. For example, addressing the socio-economic needs of vulnerable communities is to support their capacity for adaptation and enhance mitigation strategies (Bastos et al., 2018). Action is required at micro (individual), meso (community) and macro (societal) levels. Research highlights that socio economic position directly affects a household's ability to adopt and adapt climate adaptation strategies (Rahut et al., 2021). Suggestions such as change in household practices, seeking alternative livelihood, saving and other individual strategies can in some circumstances be implemented and are useful in adaptation and protective mechanisms for climate change, but are recognised as difficult due to complex external factors (Omerkhil et al., 2020). Change at the meso and macro level is required to strengthened and support change at the micro level. A power imbalance exists for communities that results in poverty, high dependency on support, low overall economic development (Rahut et al., 2021). This requires decision making bodies to prioritise initiatives that impact on socioeconomic circumstances, climate change and capacity building for low SES households.

As the effects of climate change are a social issue, the responses to it will depend on the social context. Ebi & Semenza (2008) speak to this stating that; “geographic, demographic, social, economic, infrastructural and other adaptation options will be more effective if designed, implemented and monitored with strong community engagement”. Social work practice that

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promotes social connectedness in communities and builds relationships between communities and decision-making bodies is likely to promote more effective social and environmental outcomes. By reframing climate change as a social issue, the responsibility for outcomes are not just individual or community but governmental also (Cagney et al., 2016). It is with this understanding that strategies of climate mitigation intersect with the understanding of the socioeconomic conditions of communities. As mentioned, adaptation is a powerful resource for low SES communities and as such centering the community in adaptation initiatives is crucial (Ebi & Semenza, 2008). However, it is also necessary in some adaptive measures for a more top-down approach. For example, ensuring safe air quality and drinking water for communities. As such, approaches to build community resilience and adaptation lies in practical and joint endeavours.

A practical example of a meso level action is the creation of community green spaces/ roofs to absorb UV and mitigate heat exposure for communities with increased vulnerability to/ experiences of climate related heat disasters. The creation of green spaces or green roofs which utilise shade giving trees, create a microclimate that reduces energy usage related to air conditioning which leads “to a lower demand for power, lower consumption of fuel, as well as lower air pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions” (Dardir & Berardi, 2021, p.2). It is both cost effective and offsets some effects of severe climate events for these communities. (Akbari et al., 2016; Kolokotsa & Santamouris, 2015). Implementing public cool places further mitigates the implications of climate change on low SES communities by significantly reducing heat stress and related health problems caused by excessive heat. (Akbari et al., 2016).

Achieving the outcome of a disaster resilient community is the joint responsibility of that community and decision-making bodies. As mentioned, decision making bodies have an uneven sway of power meaning that low SES communities may be reliant on these bodies and policy to financially support them. Policies must be complementary to both socioeconomic and climate issues due to the inextricably linked nature of both (Liu et al., 2020). For example, increasing

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income support to reduce poverty. This acts as a resilience measure that enables low-income earners to utilise this extra resource for coping, adaptation and climate response both individually and communally (ACOSS, 2023). It is recognised however, that whilst this mitigates the impacts of climate change on communities, it does not reduce the human contributions to climate change which creates this imbalance in the first place. As such there must be practical steps by governing bodies, communities and individuals to change the trajectory of climate change on the whole.

The social work profession aims to “challenge policies and practices that are oppressive and fail to meet standards of environmental sustainability and human rights” (AASW, 2023).

Accordingly, social work practice encompasses advocacy, support and partnership. Critical social work theory recognises that “multiple systems of inequality work with and through one another, at multiple levels of society” (Bastos et al., 2018, p. 211). This paper argues that climate change effects on low SES communities are an intersectional issue, holding implications across multiple societally created identity lines which overlap, creating conditions of oppression for these communities (Koehn et al., 2013). Critical theory is therefore valuable in social work practice to identify and counter the existing imbalances for communities and to allow for a more holistic perspective when assisting communities through understandings of the dynamics at play as well as the strengths that can be utilised. For example, the adaptive capacities of low SES communities can be identified through a critical social work lens as a strength to be utilised for social cohesion and to strengthen advocacy. It is the combination of critical understandings of intersectionality and strengths that community centred approaches can be engaged with effectively, recognising the role of the social work is not to add to the power imbalances through professionalism, rather to work alongside a community to address their identified needs (AASW, 2023).

Conclusion

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Low SES communities are affected disproportionately by climate change, compounding pre-existing inequality, oppression and power imbalances that shape the adaptive capacities of these communities. To address the impact of climate change on low SES communities requires special attention to the livelihood trajectories, adaptive capacities and resilience present in these communities. At the same time, there must be recognition that the social effects of climate change will have a disproportionate impact on those experiencing intersectional disadvantages. Intervention must therefore reflect intersectional understandings, requiring analysis across the levels of the micro, meso and macro to lessen the impact of climate change related events most effectively on low SES communities. There is a growing consensus on the need to ameliorate the effects of climate change on low SES communities, however this paper argues that this amelioration does not curb the trajectory of climate change on the whole if other measures and policies are not taken concurrently.

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