



SOCIAL WORK AND THE ENVIRONMENT

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC

IASW ONLINE

9TH OCTOBER 2024

1-2PM

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ABOUT REBECCA

- Originally from Dublin.
- Bachelor of Social Science, specialisation in Social Work (UCD, Ireland).
- Masters of Applied Social Work (Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand).
- PhD at the Social Work Department of the Faculty for Educational Science (Bielefeld University, Germany).
- Before the ASTRA programme I lived in Aotearoa/New Zealand for 7 years.
- Social work practice history: Statutory child protection, community-based mental health, and community development.



ABOUT EILEEN



LCT Services

Lauster
Counselling
& Training

- Originally from Detroit, Michigan, based in Galway for 26 years
- Bachelor of Social Science with a concentration in Social Work Community Development, Michigan State University
- Master of Social Work in Administration and Community Development, Wayne State University
- Full-time PhD student, Durham University, England
- External Tutor with the University of Galway, MA in Social Work Programme in the School of Political Science and Sociology
- Self-employed trainer and consultant through LCT Services
- Social Work practice areas: Social Enterprise Officer, Researcher and Trainer on CPVA and NVR intervention, Community Development, Child Welfare and Residential Services.



OLLSCOIL NA GAILLIMHE
UNIVERSITY OF GALWAY

ABOUT ASTRA PROJECT

- Prof Aila-Leena Matthies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland, ASTRA Principal Investigator
- Relating Social Work and Sustainability: not how Social Work can contribute to, but also how Social Work can benefit from Sustainability.
- Such a network of diversity also reflects diverse views on Social Work.
- Understanding Social Work not only as a profession or activism but as a research area, a scientific discipline.
- By doing high-quality research of Social Work, also Social Work practice can be promoted and critically reflected.



<https://www.jyu.fi/en/research/astra>



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LEARNING OUTCOMES

For both webinars:

- Gain knowledge on the importance of expanding social work to include the natural environment from a sustainability lens.
- Understand the connection between social, environmental, economic and climate justice and their relevance to social work.
- Incorporate innovative ecosocial actions into your current social work role.





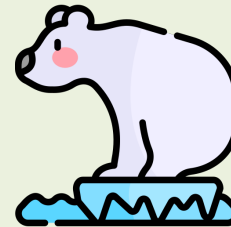
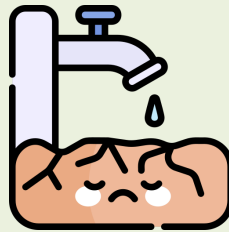
EXPLORING OUR AGENDA

Day 1: Introduction to the topic

- Current situation
- Relevance for social work
- Evolution of ecosocial work
- Justice issues
- Sustainability and social work
- Social work's ethical obligation
- Our responsibility and skill set
- Shaping social work education

CURRENT SITUATION

- **Multiple crises:** Climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, species extinction, ocean acidification, overconsumption, pollution and desertification.



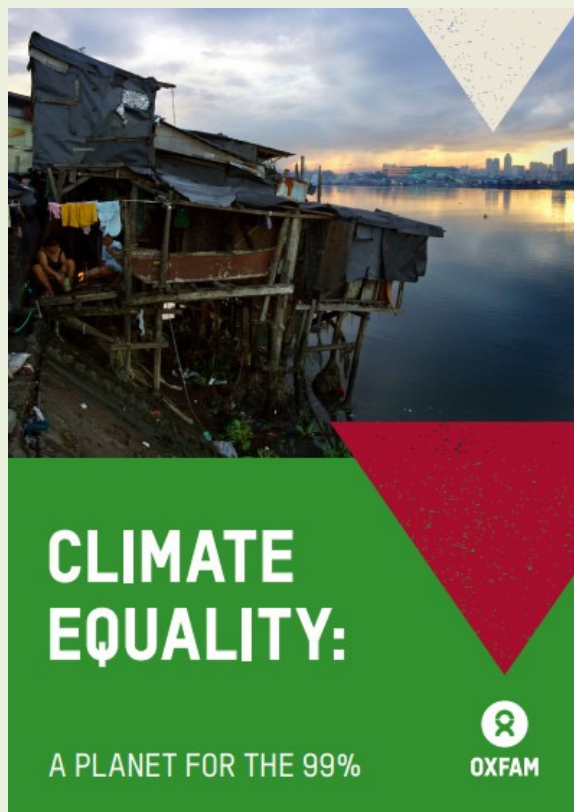
(Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022)

- Climate change is also a “**crisis multiplier**” meaning it can lead to, or exacerbate, conflict.

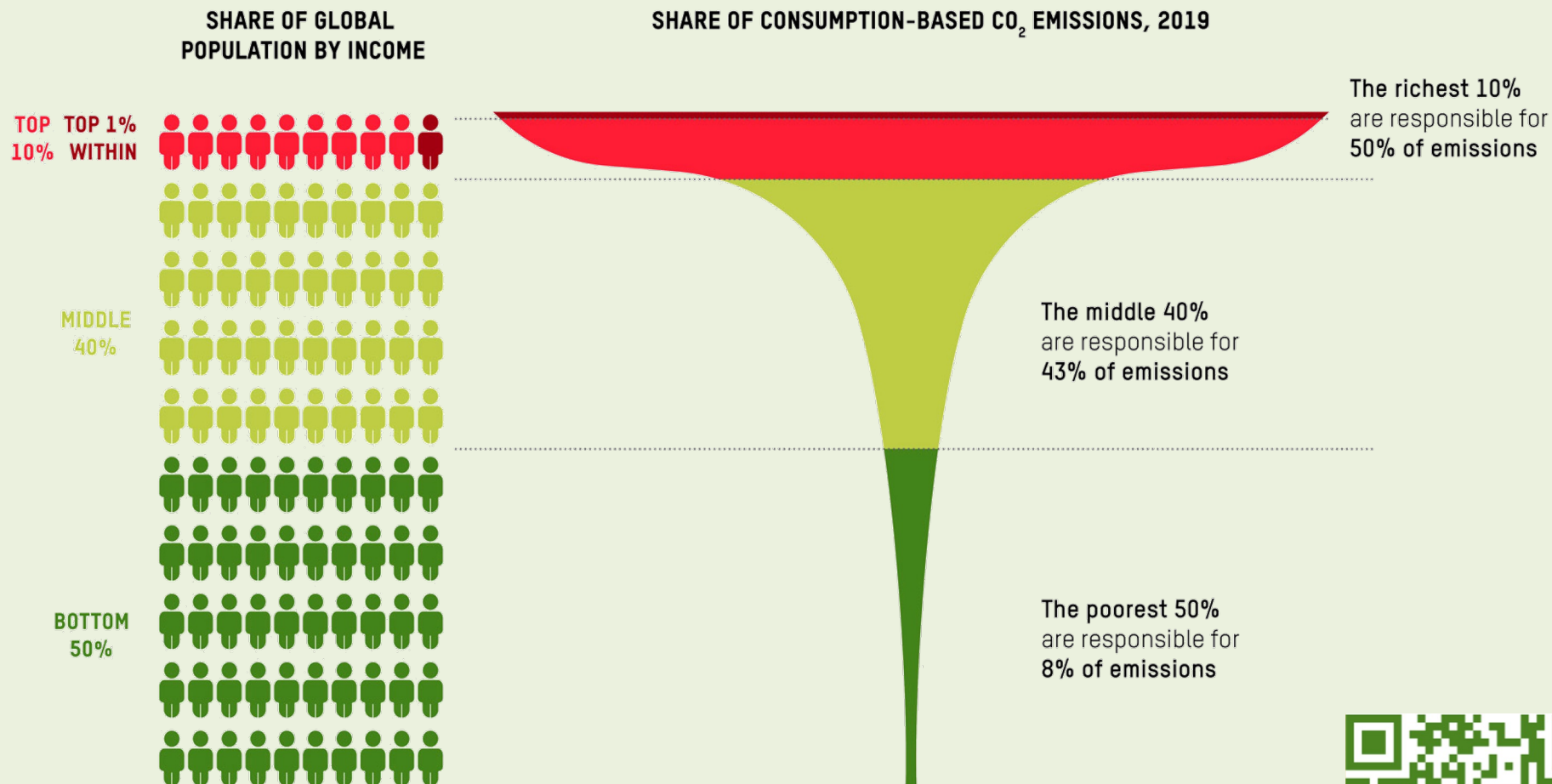
(International Federation of Social Workers, 2022)

- Mostly **plutocratic**, meaning they are caused by the actions of the super affluent, e.g. increased concentration of greenhouse gases, endless economic growth, etc.

OXFAM REPORT 2023



(Khalfan et al., 2023).



RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL WORK

- Climate change **disproportionally affects** those in marginalised, precarious, or poor situations with whom the social work profession most often works, such as BIPOC, older people, women, LGBTQI+, people living in rural areas, etc. (Krings et al., 2020; Teixeira & Krings, 2015).
- These crises directly **increase** the social, emotional, economic and environmental **challenges** of people, communities and the natural world.
- It is a matter of **social, economic, environmental and climate justice** which directly link to the values, ethics and skill set of the social work profession. (Des Marais et al., 2016)
- Social workers are well placed and mandated to **advocate** for people and the environment and to support communities to **build resilience and hopefulness** in the face of multiple crises. (Masoga & Shokane, 2018; McLafferty Bell et al., 2019; Powers et al., 2021)
- It is critical for social workers to **incorporate knowledge of the natural environment** into our work, education and research, and to play a major role in the sustainability transition to tackle the impacts of climate change. (Besthorn & Saleebey, 2003; Norton, 2011).

EVOLUTION OF ECOSOCIAL WORK

Early 20th Century

Person-in-Environment
(PIE) perspective
(North America)

See: Addams, 1912; Hill, 1998;
Richmond, 1922

1970s

Ecological Systems
Theory
(North America)

See: Bronfenbrenner,
1977; 1979

Deep Ecology
(Norway)

See: Naess, 1973

21st Century

Ecosocial Work
(Finland, Germany)

See: Matthies
et al., 2001

Environmental
Social Work
(USA, UK)

See: Krings et al., 2020;
Rambaree, 2020;
Ramsay & Boddy, 2017

1950-1960s

Systems Theory
(North America)

See: Parsons, 1951;
von Bertalanffy, 1968

1970s – 1990s

Ecofeminism
(France, USA)

See: d'Eaubonne, 2022;
Griffin, 1978; Mellor,
1997; Shiva, 1988

Eco-Spiritual
Social Work
(Australia, UK,
Canada)

See: Besthorn,
2002; Besthorn et
al., 2010; Coates et
al., 2006

Green Social
Work (UK)

See: Dominelli, 2012;
2018

Ecological
Social Work
(USA, UK)

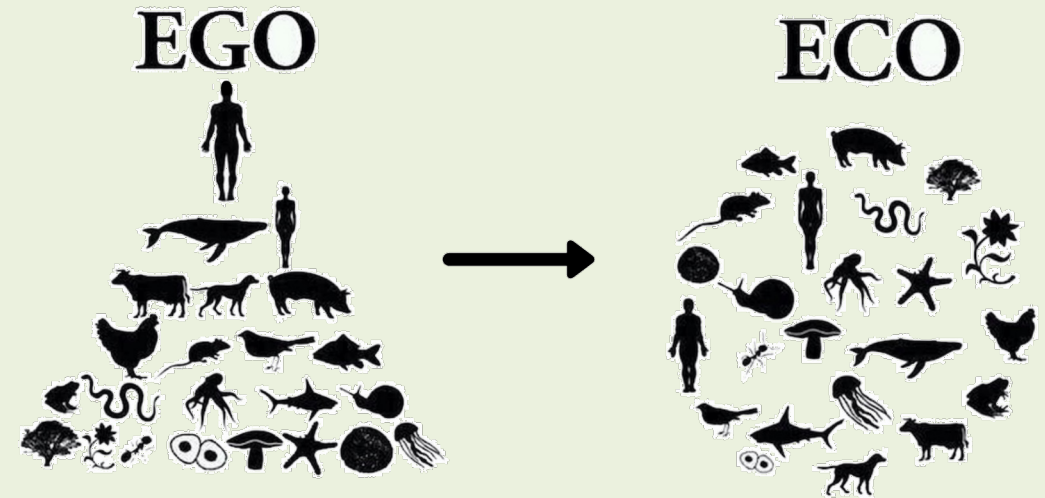
See: McKinnon &
Alston, 2016

Sustainable
Social Work
(USA)

See: Mary, 2008

ECOSOCIAL APPROACH IN SOCIAL WORK

- Transformative way for social work to tackle environmental threats to human well-being (Boetto, 2017).
- Emphasises a **holistic and interdependent** view of humans and other-than-humans embedded in the natural world for improved well-being (Närhi & Matthies, 2018).
- Shift from anthropocentric/egocentric to **ecocentric**.
- Values social justice, community-based social work and anti-oppressive practice by questioning structural inequalities (Boetto, 2017).
- Useful in **combatting social exclusion** through diverse living environments (Turunen et al., 2001).



WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE?

- Environmental justice considers that all people and all communities are entitled to equal protection under environmental health laws and regulations (Bullard, 1996).
- Environmental justice is a social movement that arose from the desire to ensure that all communities, regardless of colour, income, origin, or race, have access to healthy environments.



ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

- All environmental issues involve social issues.

Video 1 (Mary Robinson on Justice): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JVTirBEfho>

Video 2 (Peggy Shepard on Sacrifice Zones): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJX_MXaXbJA

- The social and biophysical factors are interconnected and, in order to achieve environmental justice, it is necessary to incorporate social justice ideals, by:
 - promoting respectful forms of collaboration,
 - highlighting the voice of those who have been silenced,
 - decolonising our actions, and
 - supporting just green transitions.



ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN IRELAND

Climate Change and Health

Everyone has a right to breathe clean air

Public authorities in Ireland need to adhere to World Health Organisation air quality guidelines

Join the Revolution to Stop Air Pollution!

and adopt a national clean air strategy to reduce our emissions, clean our air, and save lives

Air pollution, is responsible for an estimated 1,300 premature deaths per year in Ireland¹

and according to the Irish Heart Foundation, it "harms nearly every organ in the body"²

The head of the World Health Organisation has warned that air pollution is "The New Tobacco"

although he noted that you can move away from cigarette smoke³

By contrast, when your home or school is surrounded by air pollution - There's No Escape

According to the EPA's Air Quality in Ireland Report for 2020, levels of particulate matter ("air pollution") exceeded the WHO guidelines at 38 of Ireland's 67 monitoring stations

Most of these were as a result of pollution from the burning of solid fuel (coal, peat and wood) for home heating

Air pollution can cause respiratory illness, heart disease, and shortened life expectancy

While air pollution impacts all of society, some groups are affected more than others

Women, who are more likely to be primary caregivers, are more exposed to indoor air pollution

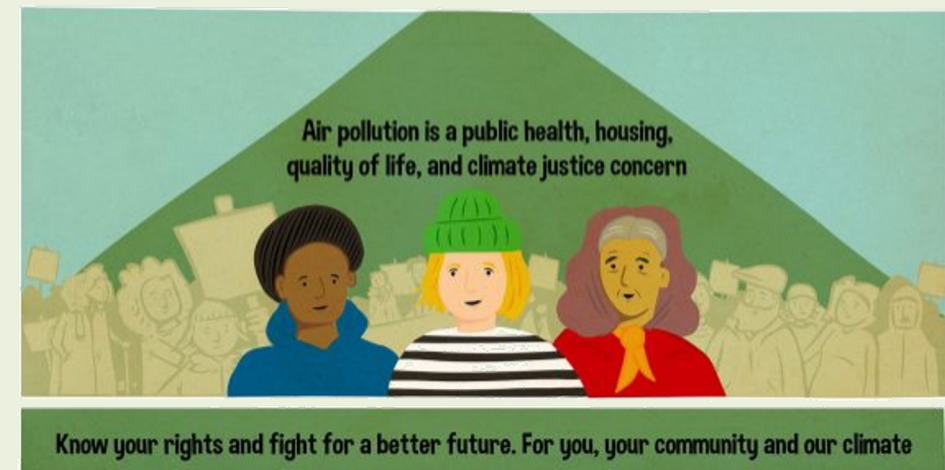
Children are more vulnerable to air pollution as they take more breaths

such as from an open fireplace

for longer periods of time, with resulting health impacts

and their shorter height means they are closer to many sources of pollution (such as car exhausts)

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN IRELAND



Know your rights and fight for a better future. For you, your community and our climate

SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

- ...encompasses the **procedural aspects of social inclusion** that enhance social health and well-being, and the **social institutions** that support environmental and economic sustainability for current and future generations (Dillard et al., 2009).
- Social sustainability, which is traditionally seen central to social work, **cannot exist without also considering other dimensions of sustainability** (Närhi et al., forthcoming).

Social justice and equity

Human well-being and quality of life

Cultural diversity

Democratic and engaged governance

Democratic, participatory and empowered civil society

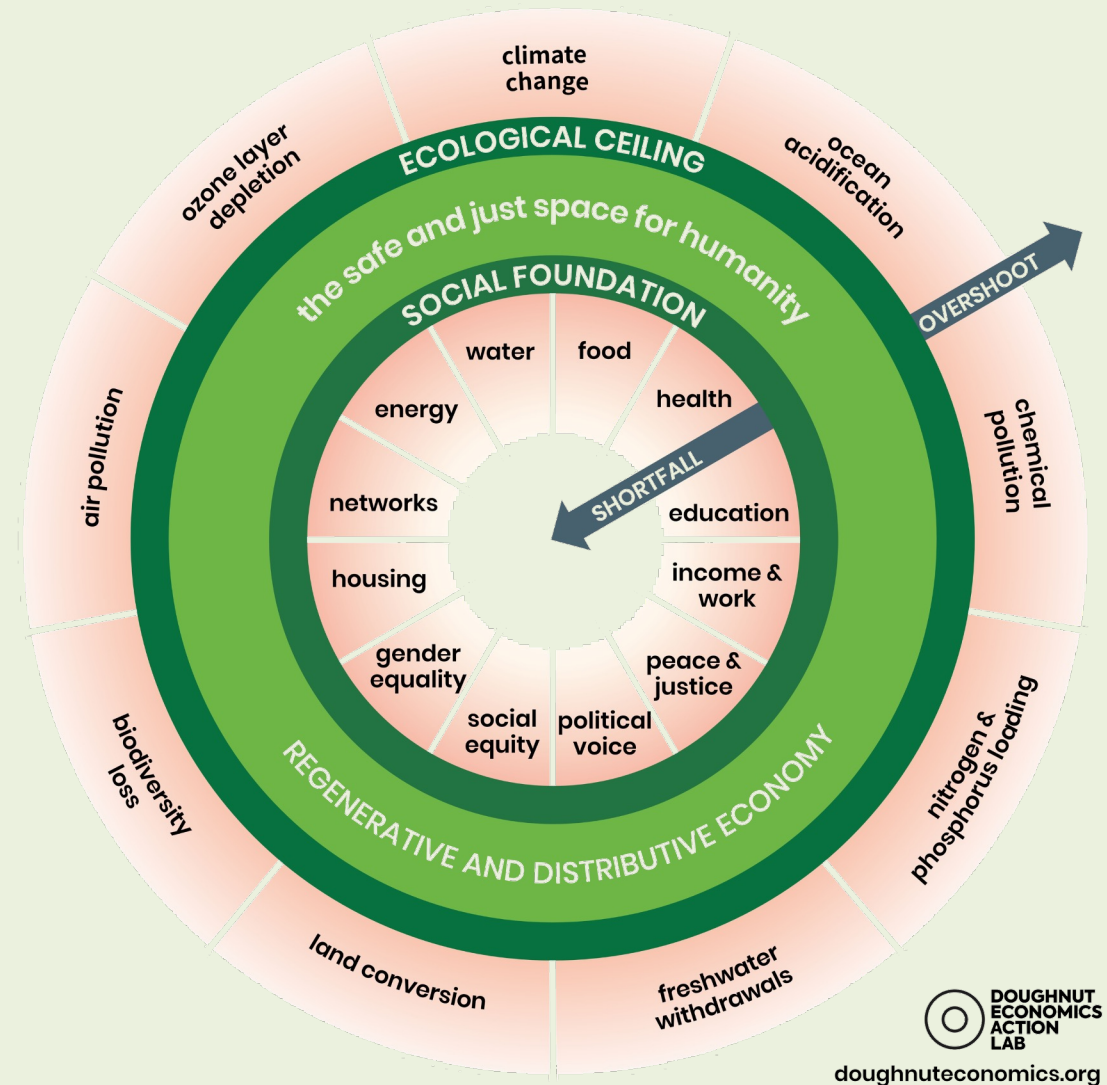
Social capital, cohesion and interconnectedness

Social infrastructure

(Boström, 2012; Cuthill, 2009; Magis & Shinn, 2009; McKenzie, 2004; Murphy, 2012; Sachs, 1999; Vallance et al., 2011; Western Australian Council of Social Service Inc., 2002)

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

- A sustainable social foundation of human life can only develop in an inherent interdependence with the overall ecological boundaries and regenerative and distributive economy (Raworth, 2017).
- The Doughnut Model recognises that sustainable development occurs within the space between planetary and social boundaries.
- Provides a clear framework for understanding the **interconnectedness between environmental and social factors** in achieving sustainability.
- Makes space for social justice.



SOCIAL WORK CODES OF ETHICS

- Some progress towards articulating the profession's relationship with the natural environment has recently been made in national codes of ethics, such as those of the **British Association of Social Workers** (BASW, 2021), **Australian Association of Social Workers** (AASW, 2020) and **Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers** (ANZASW, 2019).
- The BASW (2021) code of ethics states that “social workers should... seek to engage with the person and their wider social systems such as family, community, societal and **natural environments**” (p. 6).
- The AASW (2020) mentions the natural environment many times, e.g.:
 - “Social workers will **advocate for and promote the protection of the natural environment** in recognition of its fundamental importance to the future of human society” (p. 20).

IRISH ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

CODE OF ETHICS

- The members of the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW, 2023) acknowledge:
 - That the **climate emergency** affecting the world is significant and urgent, and particularly its impact on the lives of social work service users. **The social environment is part of the wider natural environment** where the relationship between humans and all other species and the planet are mutually interdependent. IASW supports and stands in solidarity with its social work colleagues and service users in Ireland and around the world in their efforts to work to **address the devastating effects of climate change**.
- Principles of Social Work Practice
 1. The social worker's primary focus is the needs of the person or people using the social work service. While respecting the social, cultural, and **environmental context** in which they live, this focus must recognise, take account of and balance possible conflicts between their needs and the human rights of different individuals, families, and the communities in which they share their lives. This focus must take precedence over the self-interest and personal convictions of the social worker.

SOCIAL WORK RESPONSIBILITY – What can we do?

- As climate change impacts on ecosystems, communities, individuals and marginalised populations, social work is responsible for addressing these issues as it is the **only profession with social justice ingrained in its definition** (Crumby, 2016; Dominelli, 2012; Ellis et al., 2018).
- Social workers have a responsibility to **stay informed about climate change** and its effects on the people we work with, and the interdependency between humans and the natural world.
- Social workers can widen our moral and ethical scope to extend to the natural environment and ecosystem of those we support by way of holism, shifting our perspective **from anthropocentric to ecocentric**.
- Ecosocial work can serve as a lens from which we approach all social issues, structures and problems, and conduct social work practice.

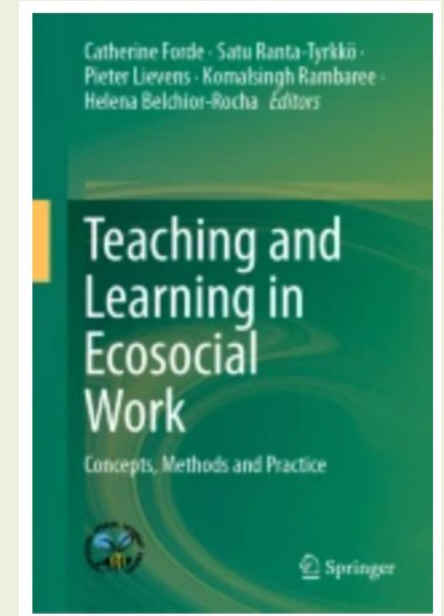
SOCIAL WORK SKILLS – How can we help?

- Social workers possess a specific skill set, including
 - crisis preparedness and response;
 - capacity building;
 - promoting equality, solidarity, human rights and the dignity and worth of all human beings;
 - use of a social justice lens;
 - crisis counselling skills;
 - community organising skills;
 - orientation toward policy;
 - assessment skills on community level
 - skills and experience working in complex systems and,
 - advocacy.

(Crumby, 2016; Dominelli, 2012, 2013, 2018; Drolet et al., 2015).
- The psychosocial, therapeutic work done by social workers following the negative impact of climate change is also important in supporting communities and fostering resilience in clients (Dominelli, 2018).

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION – What we can learn?

- Social work education is lagging behind in terms of directly addressing the interrelationship between human beings and the natural environment
(Reu & Jarldorn, 2022).
- Despite this, there are some **examples of universities infusing the natural environment into curricula** in social work degrees
(Boddy et al., 2018; Boetto & Bell, 2015; Ellis et al., 2018; Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021).
- There is also evidence of students engaging in **ecosocial work placements** during their studies
(Crawford et al., 2015).
- The Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS), also states that “Australian entry-level professional **social work education recognises** that social work operates at the interface between people and their social, cultural, spiritual and **physical environments**” (AASW, 2020, p. 5).



SUMMARY

- Global crises highlight society's divisions, **intensifying inequality, exclusion, and marginalisation**. The effects of these are disproportionately felt by those in the most vulnerable situations.
- Until recently, social work has played a marginal role in advocating for true sustainability.
- Emerging environmental approaches in social work highlight the need for a transformational shift to **approach all social issues and structures through an ecological lens**.
- Social work should view **environmental and climate justice as core components of social justice**. We can also use our skills to highlight social justice by addressing environmental degradation.
- To honour the fundamental rights of humans, we must **develop and implement approaches to resolve environmental issues**. We must work together to achieve a solution by framing policy and taking action.
- Social workers have a responsibility and the necessary skills to **advocate for people and nature**.
- Some professional bodies are recognising this responsibility in their **codes of ethics** and academics are beginning to incorporate this into **social work education and research**.



EXPLORING OUR AGENDA

Day 2: Theory to practice

6th November 2024, 1-3pm

- Individual and family-level practice (micro)
- Community practice (meso)
- Structural change (macro)
- Practice research
- Case studies
- Breakout sessions

Preparing for Day 2: Theory to Practice

Please bring one or two examples of ways you can incorporate environmental, economic, and social sustainability into your work.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

- Practice tool from UK in incorporating ecosocial work into practice: https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/2797_Helping_social-workers_eco-practices_in_their-work_21pp_v2.pdf
- IFSW workbooks on 'Social Work Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability'
 - Volume 1: <https://www.ifsw.org/product/books/social-work-promoting-community-and-environmental-sustainability/>
 - Volume 2: <https://www.ifsw.org/product/books/social-work-promoting-community-and-environmental-sustainability-volume-2/>
 - Volume 3: <https://www.ifsw.org/product/books/social-work-promoting-community-and-environmental-sustainability-volume-3/>
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