Chapter 8

Ecological Social Work in South Africa and the Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

Internationally, social work has been delayed in engaging with ecological social work. The delay is reflected in South Africa, which is predicted to be a hot spot where the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation are already being experienced. The effects of climate change and environmental degradation are social and environmental justice issues as the marginalized and poor in this country and the world have already been experiencing dire consequences. Social work practitioners and academics, in their roles as advocates for the marginalized and the poor, are therefore duty-bound to act for a sustainable environment for both people and the planet. In this chapter, the authors examine ecological social work in South Africa, its importance, and how it could become part of the global call for an ecological social work approach.

INTRODUCTION

Humankind stands at the brink of a major catastrophe as life on earth is in jeopardy. Rising CO₂ and other greenhouse gases due to the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, and habitat destruction are causing climate change and extreme weather around the world. The ocean is absorbing vast quantities of this CO₂, which is leading to acidification and rising sea levels that are being compounded by melting polar ice caps which are threatening coastal areas around the world. Extreme weather patterns such as flooding, severe drought, hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, and heat waves appear to be on the rise (Carrington, 2020; Hausfather, 2019; The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), 2017; Kelley et al., 2015; Mann & Emanuel, 2006; Stevens-Rumann et al., 2018; United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2007; Wehner et al., 2017). Habitat destruction caused by mining, deforestation, destructive

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farming techniques, and invading alien species is causing grave damage to the already fragile planet and its inhabitants (Wallace-Wells, 2019). This is causing pressure on water and food resources (Cho, 2018) and is leading to a 6th mass extinction event (Ceballos et al., 2017).

In the past three years, numerous groundbreaking scientific reports have been released. These all conclude that if drastic action is not taken urgently to mitigate climate change, calamitous and life-threatening impacts will result. These reports include:

- The United Nations (UN) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2018),
- A 2019 report signed by 11 000 scientists (Ripple et al., 2020), and

From the above reports and the plethora of peer-reviewed scientific data, one can conclude that humankind is now fighting its most important existential battle yet.

Although discussions around ecological social work date back to as early as the 1970’s when “social work theorists began stressing the importance of the person-in-environment perspective” (Pardeck, 1988, p. 133) social work has been delayed in engaging with the issue of ecological social work (Besthorn, 2012; Coates & Gray, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2013; Lysack, 2012; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). As it becomes clear that the effects of climate change and environmental degradation are magnified on the marginalized and the poor, social workers internationally and nationally are becoming duty bound to care for the environment. Bowles, Boetto, Jones and McKinnon (2018) asserted that climate change and the degradation of the environment are posing an existential threat to the planet and mankind. They argue that there needs to be an explicit and unambiguous international definition of social work that includes concern for the environment and sustainability.

To act in an ecologically sensitive manner, social workers need to have a deeper understanding of the context and crisis that is facing the world as well as the power structures that uphold and cause these problems (Dominelli, 2012). Social workers also need to reflect on what it means to be a social worker during such times. This, the authors contend, is the reason why there needs to be a paradigm shift in thinking, both in the world and within social work.

**A Paradigm Shift in Thinking**

Thomas Berry, a leading cultural historian and visionary, states that mankind stands at a defining moment in history, where a paradigm shift in human consciousness will lead away from the “Scientific and Technological Age”, to what he calls the “Ecological Age” (Berry, 1999). This will lead to a new way of thinking and being. For Berry (1999) it involves humans moving from being a disrupting force on the earth to a benign presence.

Coates (2003) describes this new paradigm of thinking as a move from modernism to sustainability. Sustainability for Mary (2008, p. 2) is the belief that “humans need to live congruently and harmoniously with all life forms and the planet”. This needs to be done in a “congruent and harmonious way ensuring that current generations can meet their needs, but not in a way that will threaten future generations” (Mary, 2008, p. 2). Dominelli, who incorporates “a critique of consumerism, hyper-urbanization, neoliberalism and expert-led solutions to the social challenges that currently face humanity” (2013, p. 438), is therefore of the opinion that social-political power structures need to be reformed.
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