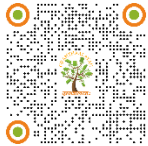


# GREEN SOCIAL WORK AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: GLOBAL TO LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

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## ABSTRACT

Green social work is an emerging and futuristic concept within the realm of social work profession. It aims to identify the overlaps between ecological issues and social problems, including poverty, inequity, and social exclusion, in light of a rapidly mounting universal environmental crisis illustrated in climate change, disasters, biodiversity loss and pollution. By promoting social and ecological well-being through sustainable practice and in the spirit of environmental justice, green social work aims to initiate balanced development in the social and ecological well-being of individuals, especially the vulnerable groups who are at the periphery of development. Literature in Green Social Work acknowledges the necessity of contesting this scenario in order to integrate completely ecology within social work practice, policy and advocacy for social justice. This article describes the various approaches of the green social work in practice, including its theoretical roots, methods, challenges, and future implementation for lively and sustainable co-existence of human and the environment. Green social work also is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 13 (Climate Action), 10 (Reduced Inequality), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) highlighting its contemporary relevance to society and practice at grassroots to complement the SDGs concerns globally.

**Keywords:** Green Social Work, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Climate Change, Human well-being

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. CONCEPTUALISING GREEN SOCIAL WORK

Green social work is holistic, transdisciplinary practice that responds to interdependent relation of individuals, groups and communities with their environment. It emphasizes on the value of preparing social workers with competencies and knowledge to effectively intervene in disaster situations, ecological and ethical issues through developing specialised skill sets. The concept of green social work has been formally conceptualized and popularized by Dominelli

in her book "Green Social Work: From Environmental Crisis to Environmental Justice" in the year 2012, focusing on the need for a green perspective in social work practice towards human wellbeing. The term was also used in the context of disaster among local and global communities, emphasizing on environmental justice and sustainability. Green social work is prevention and mitigation efforts to reach the root causes of disaster, and not relief-oriented. It is a collaborative process involving various stakeholders to formulate integrated solutions that places the health of the people and the planet first. By integrating environmental concerns into social work practice, green social work aims to build more resilient, sustainable and climate-smart communities with just social order in a changing climate.

## **1.2. RELEVANCE OF GREEN APPROACH IN SOCIAL WORK METHODS**

Green social work has the immense potential to tackle the causes rather than symptoms through developing an understanding of the interdependence of socio-political and ecological problems. Green approach adopted in social work intervention will serve environmental and social justice by highlighting the interdependencies of social, economic, and anthropogenic impacts. Green social work interventions focuses on the emerging challenges resulting from rapid industrialization and urbanization to help communities create a more equitable and environmentally conscious society by promoting sustainable practices. This approach also emphasizes the need for different sectors to work together in finding solutions to complex problems and ensuring positive change. (John & Tiani, 2012.).

## **1.3. ROAD MAP TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

The road map of Sustainable Development ultimately encompasses addressing the list of needs and interests that different groups in a community may have, working to challenge the most dominant and exploitative interests, aligning coherence of priorities at the local level, and encouraging a perspective that values the more local knowledge that decision makers, implementers of these initiatives may have in terms of contributing towards a local sustainability agenda. There are 17 goals, 169 targets and 231 indicators as put forward by the United Nations as components of SDGs and those play a crucial role in assessing progress towards sustainable development to be accomplishment by the year of 2030. However, ensuring sustainability is a complex task due to the holistic nature of sustainable development and the challenges of breaking down a complex system into its component parts. Good governance and participation of people are essential to the effective achievement of sustainable development objectives. Green social work can be of great use by linking and enabling people's participation in building a sustainable future.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This article has gone through a comprehensive literature review by thematically canvassing peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports published between the years 1985-2023 in scholarly databases (e.g. JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Social Work Abstracts). The keywords used were "green social work," "environmental social work," "social work and sustainability," "social work and environmental justice," and "green social work and SDGs." articles, books,

reports and case studies were used to understand the field in its entirety and its uptake of the SDGs.

## **2.1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF GREEN SOCIAL WORK**

### **2.1.1. ECO-SOCIAL THEORY**

Eco-social theory is the theoretical foundation for green social work, which synthesizes ecology and social justice. The theory addresses the interdependency of human existence and nature and contends that practice in social work must address social and ecological issues (Dominelli, 2012). The theory contends that the environment impacts people's and communities well-being and hence social workers must practice interventions that reverse ecological devastation and promote social justice.

### **2.1.2. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE**

Environmental justice is one of the core values of green social work, particularly among disadvantaged communities that are vulnerable to environmental degradation. Disadvantaged and poor communities are disproportionately impacted by environmental policy, leading to health disparities, displacement, migration and loss of resources, as argued by (Agyeman, et. al., 2003). Green social work ensures fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens in a way that the disadvantaged are not left behind in striving for a sustainable future. Social workers advocate for policies that reduce environmental risks and provide clean air, water, and proper housing to all people, regardless of socio-economic status (Bullard, 1990).

### **2.1.3. SUSTAINABILITY THEORY**

Theory of sustainability demands meeting the needs of the present without reducing the ability of the future generation to meet their needs, ( Brundtland , 1987) developed the theory of sustainable development that demands meeting the social, economic, and ecological needs. Theory of sustainability in green social work demands practice development such as the utilization of renewable resources, reducing waste, and sustainable utilization of resources that is consistent with overall environmental sustainability goals.

## **3. DISCUSSION**

### **3.1. COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

The Green Approach emphasizes community organization as the key element in achieving environmental sustainability. It involves active member involvement of community members in projects that promote green behavior and environmental justice. Among the key findings of a number of studies, one of the key observations identifies community-participatory action research as a key element in achieving environmental sustainability (King, 2021, Szetey, 2021). The approach enables marginalized communities to be directly involved in conducting research in their own context, resulting in improved comprehension of the issues at hand and more sustainable solutions (King, 2021). The "Our Voice citizen science" research approach, for instance, demonstrated active youth involvement in various phases of the research process in various continents resulting in positive impacts in their own

localities (King, 2021). Participatory planning, as advocated by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has also been described as a key means of achieving local sustainability (Szetey, 2021). The approach directly involves people in community organization through ensuring that members of a community are engaged in planning and implementing sustainability projects (Szetey, 2021). The success of such projects largely relies on the establishment of effective local networks and partnerships (Smith, 2015), which is a core component of community organization in the green social work approach.

However, in-house programs are different from community-level programs in terms of challenges (King, 2021), (Mitchell, 2021). Financially constrained communities, are potentially more likely to participate in sustainability programs due to the potential for co-benefits (King, 2021), may encounter significant implementation difficulties (King, 2021). It has been argued in literature that decision-making towards community-level sustainability initiatives is primarily influenced by interest group pressure, the severity of the problem, and the strength of the network (Mitchell, 2021). Also, the trend of burden and benefit distribution between environmental issues like urban heat and greenspacing provision is not equitable, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations (Mitchell, 2021). This directs the importance of studies and policy analysis that investigate social inequities through the lens of environmental justice (Mitchell, 2021). Using the lens of an environmental justice frame of reference in policy analysis is important to enhance fairness in outcomes (Gonzalez, 2020). Public health community-based research studies (Israel, 1998) offer valuable information on collaborative strategies, however without a specific focus on environmental sustainability in social work interventions.

### **3.2. ADVOCACY AND LOBBYING FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

Advocacy and lobbying are central to the green social work practice, with an emphasis on policy influence and resource mobilization for green projects. These involve lobbying for environmental protection legislation (Domhoff, 2005), mobilizing for the financing of green projects (Domhoff, 2005), and mobilizing public opinion for the importance of sustainability (Domhoff, 2005, Jaiyesimi, 2016). Eckersley's work emphasizes democratic accountability in environmental policy-making and the need for citizen participation in decision-making (Domhoff, 2005). Increasing environmental multilateralism, robust take-up of sustainable development and ecological modernization by governments and companies, and convergence of environmental activism in civil society are seen as desirable trends (Domhoff, 2005). Citizen participation in policy advisory committees and participatory monitoring are necessary to achieve maximum environmental advocacy (Domhoff, 2005). Furthermore, the take-up of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) involves heavy financial outlays and robust accountability measures (Jaiyesimi, 2016), which underscores the need for robust advocacy and inter-stakeholder coordination (Jaiyesimi, 2016).

However, advocacy and lobbying can be influenced by a number of factors for its success. The intricacy of SDGs implementation in developing countries like India is enormous (Jaiyesimi, 2016). They include the availability of adequate finances, capacity building, accountability, and the resolution of potential trade-offs between various development goals (Jaiyesimi, 2016). Moreover, the socio-economic and political environments can play a decisive role in determining the success of advocacy (Jaiyesimi, 2016). Uncertainty in defining and implementing sustainable

development (Mensah, 2019) also becomes a challenge to advocacy. The multiple interpretations of sustainable development (Hopwood, 2005) can lead to conflicting priorities and the failure to create a unified advocacy agenda. The need for interdisciplinary collaboration between social science and environmental science (Domhoff, 2005) is needed for increased knowledge of state practice and for designing effective advocacy campaigns.

### **3.3. INTEGRATING ECO-THERAPY AND SUSTAINABLE LIVING**

The Green Approach advocates for the incorporation of eco-therapy and sustainable living practices into direct social work practice. Eco-therapy employs the natural environment as a therapeutic intervention to address clients' mental and emotional well-being (King, 2021). Social workers can promote clients' sustainable living practices (King, 2021) and facilitate clients' access to green resources (King, 2021) and utilization thereof. The focus on community-engaged participatory action research (King, 2021) highlights the possibility of physical and social environmental change with direct implications for health, well-being, and environmentally related outcomes (King, 2021). By connecting clients to nature and promoting environmentally friendly practices, social workers can facilitate individual and group well-being.

The incorporation of eco-therapy and sustainable living practices into social work, however, must be further developed and researched. There is very little literature on specifically incorporating eco-therapy into counselling sessions (King, 2021). While the advantages of being connected to nature are well established, the precise mechanisms by which eco-therapy affects mental health are not well known. Moreover, promoting environmentally friendly practices among clients must be conducted with a culturally responsive and equitable practice (Rothman, 2007), taking into account the varied social, economic, and environmental contexts in which clients live. The inclusion of cultural competence (Rothman, 2007) into eco-therapy and sustainable living interventions is required to facilitate equitable access and successful outcomes. Moreover, facilitating support for clients to access green resources requires knowledge about the availability and accessibility of such resources in varied communities (Mitchell, 2021).

### **3.4. RESEARCH ON ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS AND GREEN SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTIONS**

Research is a significant green social work practice, and it seeks to explore the impact of the environment on social issues and develop effective social work interventions. This entails research on the impact of environmental determinants on social issues (King, 2021, Whitmee, 2015), prompting research on green social work interventions (King, 2021), and the participation of environmental scientists in research (King, 2021, Davies, 2011). In addition, understanding the complex inter-relations between nature and human systems is at the core (Daz, 2014), including inter-disciplinary partnerships that integrate different knowledge systems, such as indigenous knowledge (Daz, 2014). Research on the implications of environmental degradation on human health (Whitmee, 2015) and the requirement for transformative actions to safeguard interests of future generations (Whitmee, 2015) reflects the need for research in proving sustainable practices and policies.

Although there are significant gaps in research in the green social work approach. More systematic research is needed on the effectiveness of green social work interventions (King, 2021), their impact on individual and community-level



outcomes (King, 2021). Absence of a robust evidence base for eco-therapy interventions (King, 2021) necessitates further studies to prove their efficacy and effectiveness. In addition, interdisciplinary collaborations between environmental scientists and social workers (Davies, 2011) must be researched extensively in methodology and integration of diverse knowledge systems (Daz, 2014). The complexity of social-ecological systems (Ostrom, 2007) and the challenge in the development of predictive models (Ostrom, 2007) require a sophisticated research design and data analysis approach.

### **3.5. POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND ANALYSIS THROUGH AN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE LENS**

Policy development and analysis are the keys to the incorporation of green principles in social welfare programs. This involves policy analysis from an environmental justice standpoint (Gonzlez, 2020), policy advocacy for climate change and environmental degradation (Gonzlez, 2020), (Whitmee, 2015), and policy engagement with policymakers to incorporate green principles in social welfare programs (Jaiyesimi, 2016), (Whitmee, 2015). The SDGs provide a model for the incorporation of sustainability across sectors (Whitmee, 2015), with an emphasis on policy that addresses the interdependence of social, economic, and environmental issues (Jaiyesimi, 2016). Policy analysis from an environmental justice standpoint is key to the identification and response to the disproportionate nature of the effect of environmental issues on vulnerable groups (Gonzlez, 2020). This requires an understanding of the intersectionalities of racial capitalism, environmental degradation, and climate change-induced displacement (Gonzlez, 2020). Moreover, the incorporation of green principles in social welfare programs requires planning for the long-term sustainability of such programs and their implications for human and environmental well-being (Whitmee, 2015). The public procurement imperative of sustainable food chains (Morgan, 2008) provides a special case of the type of policy intervention that can improve green initiatives.

However, the development and enforcement of effective policy with the objective of improving environmental sustainability are fraught with challenges. The complexity of the implementation of SDGs at the national level (Jaiyesimi, 2016) requires extensive coordination and cooperation from different stakeholders (Jaiyesimi, 2016). The vagueness and different interpretations of what sustainable development entails (Hopwood, 2005), (Mensah, 2019) can hinder the development of coherent and effective policy interventions. Moreover, the need for interdisciplinary collaboration (Davies, 2011) among social workers, environmental scientists, and policymakers is required to develop policies that can effectively respond to social and environmental challenges.

### **3.6. EDUCATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING ON ECO-FRIENDLY PRACTICES**

Education and capacity development are required to promote green social work. This involves integrating green principles into social work training and education, training green social workers, and educating clients about sustainable living means (King, 2021, Jaiyesimi, 2016). Integrating sustainability into social work training is required to prepare future social workers with necessary knowledge and skills to resolve environmental issues effectively (King, 2021, Jaiyesimi, 2016). Training programs should emphasize community-based research capacity development (King, 2021), advocacy (Jaiyesimi, 2016), action and eco-

therapy actions (King, 2021). Educating clients about sustainable living means requires a culturally sensitive and accessible approach (Rothman, 2007), considering the varying needs and contexts of different communities (Mitchell, 2021).

Incorporating green principles into social work education and training is not an easy task. Appropriate curricula and training material must be developed, which effectively respond to the critical interplay between social and environmental concerns (King, 2021, Jaiyesimi, 2016). Further, making training programs accessible and relevant to the varying needs of social workers, entails consideration of numerous factors such as cultural context (Rothman, 2007), geographic location (Mitchell, 2021), and availability of resources (Jaiyesimi, 2016). Integrating interdisciplinary approaches (Davies, 2011) is required for developing holistic and effective training programs. Unavailability of readily available resources and standard best practices (King, 2021) requires research and development in this area.

### **3.7. CHALLENGES**

Green social work faces several challenges that hinder its widespread implementation and influence.

#### **3.7.1. LACK OF RESOURCES**

Most social work agencies are underfunded, and hence cannot prioritize environmental concerns. This translates to poor training and support for social workers to implement green practices in their daily field work (Gray & Coates, 2012). Environmental projects are typically underfunded, particularly where social concerns such as poverty are prioritized.

#### **3.7.2. RESISTANCE TO CHANGE**

Stakeholders and communities may resist implementing green social work practices due to habits or ignorance of the long-term benefits of sustainable practices. To overcome such resistance entails education, advocacy, and demonstration of the actual benefits of green practices (Dominelli, 2017).

#### **3.7.3. COMPLEXITY OF INTEGRATION**

Integrating environmental concerns in social work practice is complex because it entails balancing short-term social concerns with long-term environmental sustainability. Social workers may need extra support and training to address the broader ecological implications of their work in an appropriate manner (Dominelli, 2017).

### **3.8. GREEN SOCIAL WORK IN PRACTICE**

Green social work is applied in most areas, including urban planning, climate change adaptation, disaster recovery, and environmental health. Social workers play a significant role in these areas by advocating for policies that promote environmental justice and by directly engaging with communities to implement sustainable practices.

### **3.8.1. SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT**

Social workers are involved in promoting sustainable urban development, for example, the campaign for green spaces, green buildings, and sustainable public transport. Social workers collaborate with developers, local authorities, and communities to plan urban areas that are grounded in equity and sustainability. Social workers facilitate participation in decision-making by communities to ensure that urban development is equitable and serves everyone, including vulnerable populations (Lombardi et al., 2012).

### **3.8.2. CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION**

Green social work is vital in empowering communities to respond to climate change effects, such as sea level rise, weather extremes, and droughts. Social workers collaborate with communities to educate them on climate risks and build resilience. The methods include agitating for policy and legislative reforms, promoting disaster preparedness, and advocating for transitioning to low-carbon economies (Miller & Hendricks, 2019).

### **3.8.3. DISASTER RECOVERY AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESILIENCE**

During recovery after environmental disasters, green social work is involved in recovery processes that integrate sustainable rebuilding strategies. Social workers facilitate the rebuilding of communities through advocacy for the incorporation of green materials and renewable energy. This practice not only offers immediate relief to disaster-affected communities but also ensures long-term environmental sustainability (Hick & McLoughlin, 2016).

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The Green Approach to social work practice is a significant and timely development, integrating environmental sustainability into every aspect of social work practice. While the literature review finds an increasing body of evidence supporting the key principles of this approach, significant gaps in the research and challenges need to be met. Further research is needed to fully understand the effectiveness of green interventions, to respond to social inequities and environmental concerns, and to determine effective ways of integrating sustainability into social work education, practice, and policy. An interdisciplinary approach, strengthening of social work methods with particular focus on participatory action research, collaboration, and a robust emphasis on environmental justice, is critical to the realization of a truly sustainable and equitable future. The need for further research, particularly on the effectiveness of different interventions, is pressing. The profession will strengthen in the direction with robust evidence base and confidently highlight specific action and policy recommendations. Social work education programs are beginning to integrate environmental concerns into curricula, and acknowledgment of the importance of sustainability to the profession is widening. The future of green social work is promising, as global focus increasingly takes into account climate justice and sustainability. As the world grapples with environmental crises, the demand for green social work will intensify for building a sustainable world.



## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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