



## **Reclaiming and Reconstituting our Understanding of “Environment” in Social Work Theory**

James P. Mulvale

Volume 34, numéro 2, 2017

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1042887ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1042887ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Canadian Association for Social Work Education / Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS)

ISSN

2369-5757 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Mulvale, J. P. (2017). Reclaiming and Reconstituting our Understanding of “Environment” in Social Work Theory. *Canadian Social Work Review / Revue canadienne de service social*, 34(2), 169–186. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1042887ar>

### Résumé de l'article

La théorie du travail social n'a pas toujours été appliquée de façon uniforme à tous les aspects de l'environnement. Dans le passé, la théorie du travail social s'est concentrée massivement sur l'environnement *social* de ceux que la profession sert et a ignoré ou minimisé certains aspects de l'environnement physique et naturel des clients. Au cours des dernières décennies, cependant, le travail social a plus adéquatement théorisé l'importance de tous les aspects de l'environnement. Les approches « idéaliste » et « structurelle » visant à relier le travail social et l'environnement nous ont rapprochés de la théorie de la relation entre la durabilité environnementale et la justice sociale. Les perspectives théoriques du travail social sur l'environnement peuvent maintenant élargir leur portée et leur utilité si elles tirent des enseignements de l'économie politique et déploient un éventail d'idées de politiques publiques pour façonner de meilleurs programmes sociaux et de nouveaux mécanismes fiscaux et de transfert. De cette façon, la discipline et la profession du travail social peuvent apporter une contribution substantielle à la réalisation des objectifs liés de durabilité environnementale et de justice sociale.

# RECLAIMING AND RECONSTITUTING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF “ENVIRONMENT” IN SOCIAL WORK THEORY

*James P. Mulvale*

**Abstract:** Social work theory has had an inconsistent record in regard to adequately addressing the “environment” in all of its aspects. In the past, social work theory has focused overwhelmingly on the social environment of those whom the profession serves, and has ignored or minimized aspects of clients’ physical and natural environment. In recent decades, however, social work has more adequately theorized the importance of all aspects of environment. The “idealist” and the “structural” approaches to connecting social work and the environment have brought us closer to adequately theorizing the relationship between environmental sustainability and social justice. Social work’s theoretical perspectives on the environment can now extend their scope and usefulness if they draw insights from political economy, and deploy a range of public policy ideas to shape improved social programs and new tax and transfer mechanisms. In these ways, the discipline and profession of social work can make substantial contributions to attaining the linked goals of environmental sustainability and social justice.

**Keywords:** Environment, social work theory

**Abstr ge :** La th orie du travail social n’a pas toujours  t  appliqu e de fa on uniforme   tous les aspects de l’environnement. Dans le pass , la th orie du travail social s’est concentr e massivement sur l’environnement *social* de ceux que la profession sert et a ignor e ou

---

*James Mulvale is Dean of the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba. The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editor for their very thorough and helpful comments on the manuscript.*

Canadian Social Work Review, Volume 34, Number 2 (2017) / Revue canadienne de service social, volume 34, num ro 2 (2017)

minimisé certains aspects de l'environnement physique et naturel des clients. Au cours des dernières décennies, cependant, le travail social a plus adéquatement théorisé l'importance de tous les aspects de l'environnement. Les approches « idéaliste » et « structurelle » visant à relier le travail social et l'environnement nous ont rapprochés de la théorie de la relation entre la durabilité environnementale et la justice sociale. Les perspectives théoriques du travail social sur l'environnement peuvent maintenant élargir leur portée et leur utilité si elles tirent des enseignements de l'économie politique et déploient un éventail d'idées de politiques publiques pour façonner de meilleurs programmes sociaux et de nouveaux mécanismes fiscaux et de transfert. De cette façon, la discipline et la profession du travail social peuvent apporter une contribution substantielle à la réalisation des objectifs liés de durabilité environnementale et de justice sociale.

**Mots-clés :** Environnement, théorie du travail social

### **Introduction**

*THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE* is to explore how social work as an academic discipline and profession theorizes and acts upon questions of environmental sustainability, including the ultimate question of ensuring the ecological health of the biosphere so that human and all other forms of life can survive and thrive. There are many different theoretical approaches to understanding the environment that are available to social work. For instance, Carolyn Merchant (2005) outlines theoretical perspectives on the environment that are grounded in ethics, deep ecology, spirituality, social theory, green politics, ecofeminism, and Indigenous thought. Judith Plant (1989) and Mary Mellor (1997) were early writers who drew connections between feminism and ecology. Writers who have drawn upon these perspectives and applied them specifically to social work have included John Coates (2003), Nancy Mary (2008), and Kim Zapf (2009).

In this article, two broad orientations in social work theoretical literature on the environment will be described. One school of thought takes an "idealist" orientation, in the sense that it sets forth new ideas and conceptual tools for linking social work theory and practice with the physical and natural environment. This approach is prominently represented in the work of Fred Besthorn. It argues for a very different form of social work practice that is fundamentally tied to "deep ecological" theory. It sets out the need for social work practice to address the interdependence between human well-being and a safe, sustainable, and high quality physical and natural environment.

The second broad approach adopts a more "structural" orientation. It directly ties social work's theorization and action on the environment

to the need to challenge various forms of inequality, oppression, and domination that are rooted in social structures at the local, regional, national, and global levels. The structural approach is prominently represented in the work of Lena Dominelli, who calls her model, “green social work.” This orientation sees social work’s obligation to address environmental sustainability as part of a broader imperative for economic restructuring and political change, and the need to link the quest for an ecologically healthy planet with the struggle for social justice, human equality, and environmental rights.

I will argue that while the idealist school offers much in the way of new ideas, and does in fact apply these ideas to pragmatic questions of professional practice in social work, the structural school is more helpful in framing social work’s role in bringing about macro-level changes in the political and economic realms that might indeed ‘save the planet.’ I will also argue that there is a need to augment our thinking about social work and the environment beyond the current idealist and structural orientations. As social work professionals and academics we must draw upon critical political economy and progressive public policy literature, if we are to adopt a workable strategy to move our ‘sustainability with justice’ agenda forward. In formulating such a real world strategy it will be helpful to draw upon the “strategic-relational approach” in political economy, and also upon public policy ideas drawn from literature on steady-state economics, basic income, and other specific elements of what might be called a tool-kit for green re-structuring.

### **Some Historical Notes**

Before focusing on the current approaches to theorizing the relationship between social work and environmental concerns, it is helpful to cast a historical glance backwards and review how this relationship has been understood by early generations of social workers.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, social work pioneers Jane Addams (situated within the progressive-pragmatist intellectual current in the United States) and J.S. Woodsworth (situated in the social gospel movement in Canada) *did* address environmental conditions in the rapidly growing and industrializing cities of North America. In the course of her work at Hull House in Chicago, Addams (1910, pp. 281-99) addressed urban environmental problems such as waste management, poor quality tenement housing, and the resulting threats to public health. Woodsworth (1972, [1911]) also addressed the environmental challenges of abominable housing conditions (pp. 60-65), and the need for strong and progressive municipal governments to ensure good housing, plan urban development, and assert municipal control over public transportation and public utilities (pp. 30-42). During this era there was no broadly held conceptualization of an “environmental movement.” However Addams and Woodsworth were

energetically involved in addressing environmental issues – at least those related to the urban, built environment – in a way that was integrated with their overall advocacy for an equitable and just society.

Mary Richmond was a pioneer in social casework in the early twentieth century, and she discussed the importance of environment in understanding and intervening with clients. But according to Zapf (2010), she “perceived its importance in terms of only its social aspects” (p. 31). Many decades later, in the late 1960s and 1970s, this tendency was still evident during the adoption of systems and ecological theories of social work intervention. Zapf (2010, pp. 31-33) documents how “environment” was really understood exclusively as “social environment.” However by the early 1980s, according to Zapf (2010, p. 33), social work began to adopt a broader and more authentic understanding of environment through the work of theorists such as Carel Germain (1981). Zapf argues that Germain “raised alarm that the profession was distorting the ecological perspective by leaving the physical environment unexplored,” and “argued for understanding the physical environment in terms of both the natural world and the built world, further textured by the rhythms of time and considerations of spatial location.”

Social work as an academic discipline and a professional field of practice began to more consistently incorporate a broad conception of environment into its theory beginning in the mid-1990s. Hoff and McNutt (1994) saw the need for a conceptual reorientation in social work and social welfare in order to take account of ecological concerns, arguing for “a re-appraisal and re-orientation of the most basic paradigms that guide the social welfare field” (p. 2). Zapf (2009) described this shift as “thinking ecologically” – not just thinking about ecology (p. 24), and as reframing the “welfare state” as the “environmental state” (p. 16). This shift set the stage for making “important connections between social work, sustainability, human rights, and environmental justice” (Hawkins, 2010, p. 68).

### **Idealist Approaches**

Fred Besthorn is a social work educator who has been central in formulating and disseminating an approach that he calls “ecological social work.” Besthorn (2012, p. 253) points to Naess’ work on Deep Ecology, Daly’s model of steady state economics, and Buddhist ideas as influences in shaping “a growing volume of literature critiquing modern economic dogma premised on the idea of continuing growth and unending progress as unsustainable in the long term.” Besthorn (2012, p. 253) calls for a “global, ecological economics responsive to the finite carrying capacity of Earth’s ecosystems.” This model challenges the idea that prevailing Western economic theory “with its heavy emphasis on self-interest, resource extraction, biotic exploitation and material

accumulation, can be rehabilitated to bring it more in line with the needs of a planet in peril.” Besthorn (2012, p. 253) argues that “it is ultimately impossible to reform capitalist economic ideology due to its inherent anti-ecological ethos.” Reformist projects such as “individual recycling, green consumerism and fuel efficiency, while important, cannot get to the root of the problem.”

Besthorn and Canda (2002) outline a range of possibilities for deep ecological social work practice on two levels. Firstly, they call for “attending to human/nature connections regarding clients’ well being” (p. 94). This level focuses on clients’ relationships in their immediate environment with other species (including pets and plants), access to nature and wilderness, and non-hazardous and just places to live and work (including the avoidance of “environmental racism and ecoinjustice”). At a second level, Besthorn and Canda (p. 94) call for “programming environmentally responsible conduct in the organizational setting for practice.” This level encompasses a range of measures such as “energy efficient lighting, water saving plumbing, recycling programs” and other concrete measures to lower the ecological footprint of locations in which social workers operate.

Besthorn (2015, p. 875) states that an ecological model of social work “holds great future promise to bring the profession closer in line with the emerging global momentum toward ecological and economic sustainability, full democratic participation, unadorned sufficiency, and a post-anthropocentric solidarity with the natural world.” Besthorn (2013) makes a compelling case for “radical equalitarian ecological justice” and for how this paradigm can guide social workers in engaging with environmentalism. However, Besthorn offers little in the way of specific analytical tools, or broad strategies for mobilisation, that could guide social work’s contribution to a fundamental political and economic transformation to true sustainability.

Eco-feminism has had important influences in ‘idealist’ approaches to environmental social work. Eco-feminism can be defined as “bringing together feminism and environmentalism” to demonstrate “that the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are consequences of patriarchy and capitalism” (Buckingham, 2015, p. 845). An example of this approach to environmental social work is found in Norton (2012). She points to “parallels between the oppression of women and domination of nature, and presents feminist ways of relating that may enhance connection with the planet as a whole” (p. 299). Norton (2012) also employs “the concepts of empathy and empowerment from relational cultural theory as important ideas to integrate with social work’s ecosystems perspective.”

Another idealist perspective on the connections between social work and environmentalism can be called the “eco-spiritual” approach that uses spiritual and religious perspectives on ecological values and

environmental justice. For instance, Ferreira (2010) warns against social work uncritically adopting assumptions of social development that view the natural environment as a resource to be dominated and exploited in the pursuit of economic growth. One means of countering this harmful tendency, according to Ferreira (2010, p. 19), is for the social worker to “focus on spirituality as an individual act of inner transformation,” and to practice her profession in a way that recognizes “the relationship between people and environment that is the key to the inner transformation of consciousness for both the social worker and others.” Others who map out an eco-spiritual perspective include Zapf (2009); Coates, Gray, and Hetherington (2006), who emphasize the convergence of eco-social work and Indigenous philosophies; and Van Wormer, Besthorn and Keefe (2007), whose social work textbook “gives serious attention to the environment and spirituality as central to social work practice” (cited in Coates & Gray, 2012, p. 232).

### **The Structural Approach**

The deep ecological theory of social work has made a signal contribution to linking social work and environmental theory. It has mapped out important new ideas – hence its label of “idealist” in this article. It has also mapped general approaches to social work practice that are consistent with its conceptual frame, such as working for safe and sustainable physical environments and for access to green space and nature for individual clients, or using macro-practice approaches to challenge environmental racism.

However deep ecological social work is somewhat vague when it comes to mapping out the connections between environmental challenges on one hand, and social-structural inequalities and forms of oppression on the other hand. As discussed above, Besthorn does allude to the anti-ecological ethos of capitalism, especially in its current global and unregulated iteration. However, his and other ‘idealist’ approaches (e.g. Norton, 2012; Ferreira, 2010) do not offer very sophisticated or elaborate accounts of how their theoretical insights can lead to strategy and action for social work in the struggle for environmental sustainability and ecological justice. We must make this leap from ideas to social-structural analysis and pragmatic action, if we are to engage in political and economic struggles to stop environmental degradation and address ecological threats such as climate change, loss of wilderness and species, and resource depletion.

A theorist who does move us in the direction of deeper structural analysis and the formulation of a strategy for social work in confronting environmental crisis is Lena Dominelli (2011, 2012, 2013, 2015). Dominelli (2012, p. 3) argues that the literature on social work and ecology has been largely restricted to a focus on the social environment,



ignoring the natural and physical environment. She also contends that social work's approach to the environment ignores "power relations based on geo-political social structures that have a deleterious impact upon the quality of life of poor and marginalized populations and the Earth's flora and fauna." Dominelli (2015, p. 385) advocates the adoption of a new paradigm of "green social work" based on "a profound transformation in how people conceptualize the social basis of their society, their relationships with each other, living things and the inanimate world." Green social work requires tackling structural inequalities including the unequal distribution of power and resources; eliminating poverty and various 'isms'; promoting global interdependencies, solidarity, and egalitarian social relations; utilizing limited natural resources such as land, air, water, energy sources, and minerals for the benefit of all rather than the privileged few; and protecting the earth's flora and fauna (Dominelli, 2015, p. 385).

This "critical political approach ... questions the fundamental premises of the current organization of socioeconomic relations," and "differentiates green social work from ecological social work, including the 'deep ecology' movement" (Dominelli, 2015, p. 386). Green social workers "are critical of the unsustainable forms of development encapsulated in contemporary neoliberal capitalist modes of production, reproduction, and consumption" (p. 386). They "tackle structural forms of oppression, environmental degradation, and injustice to empower people and promote their well-being individually and collectively as well as that of planet earth" (p. 386). They situate their work within the human rights framework of the United Nations, including "each person's environmental rights and the pursuit of environmental justice so that each of the earth's inhabitants can lay claim to a protected ecosystem that sustains life for the entire biosphere, which includes human beings now and into the future" (p. 386).

Dominelli (2015, p. 387) connects social and environmental justice to the struggles of Indigenous Peoples as "custodians of significant portions of the earth's biosphere" who struggle "against environmental exploitation and the loss of attachment with the land." Dominelli (2013, p. 433) also underlines the importance of "environmental racism" – the "differentiated outcomes of environmental degradation and disasters [that] affect poor and marginalized people, poor regions and poor environments the most," with particularly deleterious consequences (e.g. toxic waste disposal, water pollution, etc.) visited upon communities that are non-white and racialized. Finally, Dominelli (2015, p. 386) refers to the holistic nature of interventions practiced by green social workers; she states that "their work intersects with and straddles the micro, meso, and macro levels of practice."

The model of green social work, as put forth by Dominelli, goes several steps further than the deep ecological approach of Besthorn



towards a comprehensive political-economic analysis to guide efforts to bring about local and global environmental sustainability. But we can think of ways to build from Dominelli's work that sharpen our political-economic analysis, and that translate such analysis into broad public policy initiatives to attain environmental sustainability. These next steps are outlined in the next section.

### **Bringing in Political Economy and Public Policy Instruments**

The environmental crisis in its various aspects (climate change, pollution, resource depletion, habitat loss, and species extinction) poses a fundamental threat to humanity and the global biosphere. Responding to this crisis will require a comprehensive strategy, if we are to fashion sustainable and ecologically healthy communities and societies for ourselves and for subsequent generations. To this end, social work as an academic discipline and profession can draw usefully on approaches such as deep ecological and green social work, as outlined above. But it will be necessary to draw on other theoretical frameworks and conceptual tools as well, if social work is to be part of a broader coalition of social actors dedicated to genuine environmental sustainability.

What follows is an illustration of how critical political economy as a general perspective, and some specific public policy ideas and mechanisms, can help guide the actions of social work (and other constituencies) as we strive to attain sustainable and just communities and societies.

#### *Political Economy*

As defined by Ramella (2011, p. 445) political economy is "a branch of the social sciences that analyzes how socio-economic activities are regulated in different institutional contexts, underlining the reciprocal influences among economic, social, and political factors." Although political economy is a very broad and complex field of study, my purpose here is to draw upon a particular perspective in this theoretical approach, and to illustrate its utility to social work as a tool in conceptualizing, strategizing, and mobilizing in the quest for both environmental sustainability and social justice.

Authentic environmental sustainability demands a new political-economic paradigm of how humans can produce the necessities of life, and reproduce themselves and their social relationships, in ways that support the flourishing of other species and the ecological health of the biosphere. Such a radical new political-economic paradigm could fundamentally disrupt and reshape globalized transnational capitalism. Such a transformed political economy could, to think in "real-utopian" terms (Wright, 2010), ensure universal economic security in the context of economic redistribution rather than growth. Such a new social formation

could also be based on a steady-state economy that puts human need ahead of profit and concentration of wealth, and makes preservation and protection of the air, water, soil and other living species an absolute priority.

There have been some voices in social work addressing environment questions that have taken a political-economic approach. For instance, Coates and Gray (2012, p. 232) draw a connection between deregulated global capitalism and environmental degradation, and point to the problem of “the Western way of life with its focus on consumerism and individualism, supported by the ‘Neoliberal juggernaut.’” Wallimann (2013, p. 1) argues for the necessity of conceptualizing the unity of environmental and social policy. If we analyze the economic and political aspects of these two policy areas separately, the goal of environmental sustainability will remain elusive. More specifically, Wallimann (2013, p. 3) argues that a variety of policy areas (e.g. health care, water management, tax policy) must be assessed for their consistency with (and for any perverse incentives that will sabotage) sustainability that is framed in integrated social and environmental terms.

A helpful framework drawn from political economy that could inform social work’s theorization and action in regard to the environment is the “strategic relational approach” (SRA), as developed by Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum (2006) and explicated by Quastel (2016). Quastel contends that SRA “points to the possibility of counter-hegemonic strategies and collective mobilization to transform the state and so redirect, control, and contain capitalist relations with nature” (p. 336). Quastel (2016) contrasts SRA with the “Promethean” approach in political economy that argues that capitalism is a monolithic, nature-destroying system that must be abolished and replaced with some non-specified alternative. He also contrasts SRA and with the “sustainable capitalism” approach that places faith in the greening of our current global neo-liberal economic system through ‘market corrections’ undertaken by economic players if they are provided with incentives from political leaders. Drawing on Jessop’s work, Quastel (2016, p. 349) makes the case for “fashioning uncoordinated and localized efforts into articulated movements that form societal projects” that “question core structures of the state and economy.” Quastel (2016, p. 349) contends that such projects must challenge “class divisions” and the “many forms of oppression” if they are to be consistent with Jessop’s adaptation of SRA as a means of moving towards an ecologically benign political economy.

### *Public Policy Instruments*

The previous section illustrates how political economy can help us with ‘big picture’ conceptualization and points the way to how social work can be a player in a broader coalition to address the environmental crisis

and to move us towards an authentically sustainable society. In such a move from ‘theory to practice’ it is important to outline specific public policy measures that could provide practical means to help make a radical transition to sustainability. Part of social work ‘macro-practice’ is the formulation and implementation of progressive public policies that integrate the goals of social justice and environmental sustainability (Wallimann, 2013). Social workers can play a vital role in the construction of public policies for a just and sustainable future.

In this short article it will only be possible to briefly list a number of public policy instruments that could contribute to a just and sustainable political economy. Simultaneous progress must be made in these various areas. It is important to move beyond superficial ‘green washing’ messages, conveyed to us by business corporations and business-oriented governments, that tell us that if only we buy the right ‘green’ products, recycle our waste, or ride our bicycles to work, environmental sustainability will be achieved. What is actually required is a much broader and bolder set of public policy measures that will likely only be possible if we make the transition (as discussed in the previous section) to a new political and economic order based on sustainability and justice.

The specific public policy measures that we need must be grounded in a fundamental commitment to two overarching principles that should frame our public policy and politics:

- ***Steady-state economics*** (cf. Center for Advancement of Steady State Economics, n.d.) including ‘de-growth’ in wealthy countries in which there is wasteful consumerism, and sustainable economic development in poor countries that are striving for a secure and adequate economic livelihood for all people in their countries (cf. International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2016).
- ***Radical re-distribution of wealth*** at sub-national, national, and global levels so that we can ensure an adequate but sustainable standard of living for all, and can put an end to excessive wealth and unsustainable patterns of consumption.

These are not small steps, admittedly. But if we are to make the transition from “welfare state” to “environmental state” – as called for by Zapf (2009, p. 16) – it is necessary to make a radical break with past assumptions and practices in the public policy realm. Social work as an academic discipline and a practicing profession can play a role in challenging the assumption that individuals and corporations are to be allowed to amass and deploy wealth in environmentally unsustainable and damaging patterns of consumption and production. Social work can articulate a position that we must end aggregate economic growth, which is at the heart of our current environmental crisis. Social work can make the case that we must rely on economic redistribution rather than economic expansion, if we are to provide adequate incomes and sustainable livelihoods for all,

particularly for those who are economically dispossessed in the global south and economically marginalized in the wealthy industrial countries. Such radical and multi-faceted action is required, for as Naomi Klein (2014) has argued, the challenge of global warming “changes everything.” Political mobilisation and engagement – of social workers and many others – is required if we are to achieve environmental sustainability and social justice.

Some specific policy instruments to move us towards a steady state economy based on just redistribution would include:

- Universal basic income (Fitzpatrick, 2014) that provides an adequate income floor for everyone, and that ends reliance on paid work in a constantly growing economy (with its deleterious environmental consequences) as the primary source of economic security.
- Guaranteed adequate and affordable housing for all that prioritizes construction or retro-fitting of energy-efficient housing stock.
- Food security policy that ensures good quality and affordable pricing of nutritious food, with priority placed on local sourcing, and access to food retailers close to where consumers live.
- Labour market and job creation policies that support production of socially necessary goods and social care work, and that discourage production of unnecessary and superfluous goods and services.
- Transportation policies that support affordable and convenient public transit for everyone, including those who live in rural areas.
- Ecologically sensible and community-oriented land-use planning, with easy access to public amenities and green space for all.
- Education programs that impart the necessity of environmental citizenship and that teach the practical skills and ethical values necessary for environmental sustainability.
- Health services that promote non-institutional and community-integrated care as high quality alternatives to institutional care, that curb overuse of medication and unnecessary diagnostic tests, and that focus not just on the treatment of ill health but also on disease prevention and health promotion.

Many of the policy mechanisms above, if taken together, would comprise a “social protection floor” (Deacon, 2013; Jones & Truell, 2012). The social protection floor initiative was launched by the International Labour Organization, and has been championed by the International Council on Social Welfare. Measurements of the strength of the social protection floor currently focus on income security and health security (Bierbaum, Oppel, Tromp, & Cichon, 2016). It would be desirable to develop more comprehensive measurements that also test ‘ecological security’ as part of an expanded framework of social protection situated in a healthy and sustainable environment. Nonetheless, the current ‘non-ecological’ approach to social protection could be a stepping-stone to the

mobilization of social welfare specialists and social workers in an allied effort to achieve both environmental sustainability and social justice.

*The Centrality of Indigenous Thought in Addressing Environmental Sustainability*

One constituency that must play a key role in the transformation to sustainable and just societies are Indigenous nations and Peoples from around the world. Indigenous Peoples have had the historical experience of colonization and racism imposed upon them by European imperial powers seeking to appropriate land and extract resources, and colonialism and racism are still alive and well. But Indigenous philosophies and values that honour Mother Earth and all forms of life therein can point the way to ecological justice and sustainable societies (Nelson, 2008; McGregor, 2004; Hart, 2002).

In the Canadian context, the need to learn from Indigenous Peoples on how to connect environmental sustainability with economic and social justice includes a strong imperative to honour the historical and modern Treaties. These covenants between Indigenous nations and the Crown were intended to ensure a “right to a livelihood” and economic development under Indigenous control, according to Beal (n.d.). If the Crown had honoured its Treaty obligations, First Nations in Canada could have combined their traditional knowledge with tools and resources provided through the Treaties, and thereby charted a secure and sustainable way of life alongside the settler population. But instead, the Canadian government ignored its solemn obligations after the signing of the numbered Treaties in the Canadian West in the late 19th century. It proceeded to pass the *Indian Act*, establish Indian Residential Schools, and use other means to marginalize and attempt to assimilate the Indigenous Peoples of Canada (TRCC, 2015). White settler economic development in Canada was entirely focused on the incessant push to break the land for agriculture and extract all possible resources. This process led to the slaughter of buffalo herds on the plains, rampant disease among Indigenous Peoples (Daschuk, 2013), and the seizure of all but a very small amount of traditional Indigenous territories for private ownership and enrichment. The white man’s path of economic development was the antithesis of Indigenous respect for the land and its bounty, and careful stewardship of what Mother Earth offers for the sustenance of the present and future generations.

*Necessary Revenue For the Green Shift*

If the shift to an ecologically healthy society is to occur, we must think about how to restructure the public tax and transfer system in support of this goal. We must ensure adequate public revenue to support the policies and services outlined above, such as universal basic income and

adequate, affordable housing for all. We also must provide the right mix of incentives and disincentives for the achievement of green policy goals such as lowering consumption, curbing environmentally harmful patterns and practices, and supporting individual and community behaviours that are ecologically desirable. Some general directions that would seem promising include:

- A shift *to* carbon taxes designed to lower individual and collective carbon footprints (e.g. robust taxation on resource extraction and the use of fossil fuels) and *away from* income tax on low and middle range incomes. Even with a universal basic income in place, and a relatively jobless economy in our increasingly IT-oriented economy, it will be important to ensure that available jobs are filled by capable people who (at low and moderate income levels) can retain most of their earnings
- The elimination of grants and tax reductions for economic activities that harm the natural environment, such as mining and fossil fuel extraction.
- Use of a graduated sales tax regime that imposes high rates on luxury items and environmentally harmful goods and services (e.g. fuel inefficient vehicles, large and second homes, non-reusable products) and that maintains low rates or exemptions for goods and services that are locally sourced or that contribute to energy efficiency.
- An increase in tax on gasoline for private vehicles and the extended use of highway tolls, and the re-investment of this revenue directly into public transportation infrastructure.

## Conclusion

Social work has taken important steps in connecting environmental sustainability and social justice, and having this link reflected in social work ethics, standards, practice, education, and research. One indication of this progress is the fact that professional bodies that govern social work have, in recent years, included a concern for the environment in their codes of ethics, standards of practice, and other guiding documents.

For instance, in its “Global Definition of Social Work” the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014) makes mention of social work’s responsibility to participate in “social change initiatives [that] recognize the place of human agency in advancing human rights and economic, *environmental*, and social justice” [emphasis added]. In its statement on “Globalisation and the Environment” the IFSW (2012) “recognises that the natural and built environments have a direct impact on people’s potential to develop and achieve their potential, [and] that the earth’s resources should be shared in a sustainable way.” This policy calls for the improvement of laws and standards for environmental

protection, and for the development of “environmental responsibility and care for the environment in social work practice and management today and for future generations.” It also challenges social work to collaborate with other professions on environmental problems, and “to ensure that environmental issues gain increased presence in social work education.”

National social work bodies have also built recognition of environmental issues into their codes of ethics and standards of practice. For example, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2005, p. 5) states that the “pursuit of social justice” includes the imperative for social workers to “promote social development and environmental management in the interests of all people.” CASW (2005, p. 25) also expects that social workers “advocate for a clean and healthy environment and advocate for the development of environmental strategies consistent with social work principles and practices.” Similar statements about social workers’ responsibility for environmental standards can be found in the ethics and standards documents of other national social work associations, such as the ones in Britain and Australia – although curiously not in the code of ethics of the National Association for Social Workers in the United States. However, the Council on Social Work Education in the US made “Promoting Sustainability in Social Work” the theme of its annual program meeting in 2010 (Dewane, 2011).

Social work as a profession and as an academic discipline must build on these commitments. Social work practitioners, theorists, and researchers can continue to advance green social work practice and knowledge. They can participate and provide leadership in broader progressive alliances to advance environmental sustainability linked to social justice. One such alliance that has developed recently in Canada is built upon the Leap Manifesto (This Changes Everything Team, 2015), a bold and comprehensive call for fundamental transformation in a range of public policies and social values.

It is important to recognize that environmental concerns may have differing valences based on the level of social work intervention (micro-, meso-, or macro-practice), and on the circumstances of a particular individual or collectivity being served. For instance, the physical and natural environment may be a less immediate concern when one is working with a client who is well housed and has an adequate income, but who is struggling with acute mental health or addiction issues. On the other hand, environmental concerns would be more prominent in social work intervention in a community struggling with poor housing stock, toxins in the environment, or loss of access to clean water or sustainable and affordable food supplies. But particular circumstances notwithstanding, a holistic and authentic commitment to ecological welfare should be a fundamental aspect of all social work practice.



The ‘arrival’ of environment as a key issue in social work has implications for social work theory. The extension of “person-in-environment” intervention to include the physical and natural environment in which clients live, as well as their social environment, has been discussed above. It can be argued that there is a general lack of attention to the physical environment and natural ecology in Canadian literature on anti-oppressive practice. One piece of evidence in this regard is that environment or ecology are not topics that are addressed in prominent Canadian textbooks on structural social work and anti-oppressive practice (AOP), such as the texts by Carniol (2010), Mullaly (2010), and Baines (2017) – although one article by Lysack (2010) is part of an edited collection by Hick, Peters, Corner, and London (2010). Despite this lacuna in most of the AOP literature in Canada, it is apparent that the scholars discussed in this article have laid the groundwork for connecting social justice and environmental sustainability – not just in social work theory, but also in our professional practice and advocacy roles.

A focus on the physical and natural environment should be factored into everything that we do as social workers. A truly green model of social work must draw on the ideas and structural analysis that social work and other theorists have developed to date. It must also draw upon concepts and frameworks from other fields of study such as Indigenous knowledges, critical political economy, steady state economics, and literature on basic income. Through drawing upon such insights, social work can be in the forefront of a green social revolution, and can contribute to the goal of ensuring a healthy and habitable planet for the generations to come.

## REFERENCES

- Addams, J. (1910). *Twenty years at Hull-House, with autobiographical notes*. New York, NY: The Macmillan Co.
- Baines, D. (Ed.). (2017). *Doing anti-oppressive practice: Social justice social work* (3rd ed.). Halifax & Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing.
- Beal, C. (n.d.). The Manitoba Treaties and the Right to Livelihood (Parts I and II). Winnipeg: Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba. Retrieved from <http://www.trcm.ca/research/research-strategy-2/>
- Besthorn, F. (2012). Deep ecology’s contributions to social work: A ten-year retrospective. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 21, 248–259. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00850.x
- Besthorn, F. H. (2013). Radical equalitarian ecological justice: A social work call to action. In M. Gray, J. Coates, & T. Hetherington (Eds.), *Environmental social work*. (pp. 31-45). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Besthorn, F. H. (2015). Ecological social work: Shifting paradigms in environmental practice. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (2nd ed.), (Vol. 6, pp. 871–877). Elsevier Science.

- Besthorn, F. H. & Canda, E.R. (2002). Revisioning environment: Deep ecology for education and teaching in social work. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 22(1/2), pp. 23-79.
- Bierbaum, M., Oppel, A., Tromp, S., and Cichon, M. (2016). *A social protection floor index: Monitoring national social protection policy implementation*. Berlin, Germany: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Retrieved from [http://www.icsw.org/images/docs/SPF/SPFI\\_Monitoring\\_2016.pdf](http://www.icsw.org/images/docs/SPF/SPFI_Monitoring_2016.pdf)
- Buckingham, S. (2015). Ecofeminism. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (2nd ed.), (Vol. 6, pp. 845-850).
- Canadian Association of Social Workers. (2005). Code of Ethics. Ottawa, ON: CASW. Retrieved from [http://casw-acts.ca/sites/default/files/attachements/CASW\\_Code%20of%20Ethics.pdf](http://casw-acts.ca/sites/default/files/attachements/CASW_Code%20of%20Ethics.pdf)
- Carniol, B. (2010). *Case critical: Social services and social justice in Canada* (6th ed.). Toronto, ON: Between the Lines.
- Center for Advancement of Steady State Economics. (n.d.). *Definition*. Retrieved from <http://steadystate.org/discover/definition/>
- Coates, J. (2003). *Ecology and social work: Towards a new paradigm*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Coates, J. & Gray, M. (2012). The environment and social work: An overview and introduction. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 21, 230–238. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00851.x
- Coates, J., Gray, M., & Hetherington, T. (2006). An ecospiritual perspective: Finally, a place for Indigenous approaches. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 36(3), 381-399
- Daschuk, J. (2013). *Clearing the plains: Disease, politics of starvation, and the loss of Aboriginal life*. Regina, SK: University of Regina Press.
- Deacon, B. (2013). *Global Social Policy in the Making: The foundations of the social protection floor*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Dewane, C. J. (2011). Environmentalism & social work: The ultimate social justice issue. *Social Work Today*, 11(5), 20
- Dominelli, L. (2011). Climate change: Social workers' roles and contributions to policy debates and interventions. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 20, 430-438.
- Dominelli, L. (2012). *Green social work: From environmental crises to environmental justice*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity.
- Dominelli, L. (2013). Environmental justice at the heart of social work practice: Greening the profession. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 22, 431-439.
- Dominelli, L. (2015). Green social work. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (2nd ed.), (Vol. 10, pp. 385–391). Elsevier Science.
- Ferreira, S. B. (2010). Eco-spiritual social work as a precondition for social development. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 4(1), 3-23. doi: 10.1080/17496531003607891
- Fitzpatrick, F. (2014). *Climate change and poverty: A new agenda for developed nations*. Bristol, United Kingdom: Policy Press.

- Germain, C. B. (1981). The physical environment and social work practice. In A. N. Maluccio (Ed.), *Promoting competence in clients: A new/old approach to social work practice* (pp. 103- 124). New York, NY: Free Press.
- Hart, M. A. (2002). *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal approach to helping*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Hawkins, C. A. (2010). Sustainability, human rights, and environmental justice: Critical connections for contemporary social work. *Critical Social Work, 11*(3)
- Hick, S., Peters, H., Corner, T., & London, T. (Eds.). (2010). *Structural social work in action: Examples from practice*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Hoff, M. D. & McNutt, J. G. (1994). *The global environmental crisis: Implications for social welfare and social work*. Brookfield, VT: Ashgate.
- International Federation of Social Workers. (2012). Globalisation and the environment. Retrieved from <http://ifsw.org/policies/globalisation-and-the-environment/>
- International Federation of Social Workers. (2014). Global Definition of Social Work. Retrieved from <http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/>
- International Institute for Sustainable Development (2016). Supporting the Global Shift to Sustainability (Annual Report, 2015-16). Winnipeg: IISD Retrieved from <http://www.iisd.org/sites/default/files/publications/iisd-annual-report-2015-2016.pdf>
- Jessop, B., and Sum. N.-L. (2006). *Beyond the Regulation Approach: Putting Capitalist Economies in Their Place*. Cheltenham, United Kingdom: Edward Elgar.
- Jones, D. & Truell, R. (2012). The global agenda for social work and social development: A place to link together and be effective in a globalized world. *International Social Work*. Published online. doi: 10.1177/0020872812440587
- Klein, N. (2014). *This changes everything: Capitalism vs. the climate*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Lysack, M. (2010). Practices and skills for building social and ecological resiliency with individuals and communities. In S. Hicks, H. Peters, T. Corner, & T. London (Eds.), *Structural Social Work in Action: Examples from Practice* (pp. 211-228). Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Mary, N. L. (2008). *Social work in a sustainable world*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books
- McGregor, D. (2004). Traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable development: Towards coexistence. In M. Blaser, H. A. Feit, and G. McRae (Eds.), *In the Way of Development: Indigenous Peoples, Life Projects and Globalization* (pp. 72-91). Ottawa, ON: International Development Research Centre.
- Mellor, M. (1997). *Feminism and ecology*. New York: New York University Press.
- Merchant, C. (2005). *Radical ecology: The search for a livable world* (2nd Ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mullaly, B. (2010). *Challenging oppression and confronting privilege* (2nd Ed.). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Nelson, M. K. (Ed.). (2008). *Original instructions: Indigenous teachings for a sustainable future*. Rochester, VT: Bear & Company.
- Norton, C. L. (2012). Social work and the environment: An ecosocial approach. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 21*(3), 299-308.

- Plant, J. (Ed.) (1989). *Healing the wounds: The promise of eco-feminism*. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers.
- Quastel, N. (2016). Ecological political economy: Towards a strategic-relational approach. *Review of Political Economy*, 28(3), 336-353. doi:10.1080/09538259.2016.1145382
- Ramella, Francesco. (2011). In G. Ritzer & J. M. Ryan (Eds.), *The concise encyclopedia of sociology* (pp. 445-46). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- This Changes Everything Team. (2015). *The leap manifesto*. Retrieved from <https://leapmanifesto.org/en/the-leap-manifesto/#manifesto-content>
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRCC]. (2015) Canada's residential schools: History, part 1. Origins to 1939. *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Volume 1*. Montreal, QC & Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press. Retrieved from [http://www.myrobust.com/websites/trcinstitution/File/Reports/Volume\\_1\\_History\\_Part\\_1\\_English\\_Web.pdf](http://www.myrobust.com/websites/trcinstitution/File/Reports/Volume_1_History_Part_1_English_Web.pdf)
- Van Wormer, K., Besthorn, F., & Keefe, T. (2007). *Human behavior and the social environment: Macro level: Groups, communities, and organizations*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Wallmann, I. (2013). *Environmental policy is social policy – Social policy is environmental policy: Toward sustainability policy*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Woodsworth, J. S. (1972 [1911]). *My neighbour*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Wright, E. O. (2010). *Envisioning real utopias*. London, United Kingdom: Verso.
- Zapf, M. K. (2009). *Social work and the environment: Understanding people and place*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Zapf, M. K. (2010). Social work and the environment: Understanding people and place. *Critical Social Work* 11(3).