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### Article abstract

The devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic taught us vital public policy lessons in Canada about the necessity of public healthcare, the feasibility of universal and unconditional income support, and the urgency of moving towards a new post-growth economy that is in harmony with the environment and allows people to control their time and life choices. Social work has a key role to play in helping us to navigate our way past the pandemic emergency and towards such a radical new vision of an economically just and ecologically sustainable Canadian society.

# COVID-19 AS A SPRINGBOARD TO A JUST AND GREEN FUTURE? THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK

*James P. Mulvale*

**Abstract:** The devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic taught us vital public policy lessons in Canada about the necessity of public healthcare, the feasibility of universal and unconditional income support, and the urgency of moving towards a new post-growth economy that is in harmony with the environment and allows people to control their time and life choices. Social work has a key role to play in helping us to navigate our way past the pandemic emergency and towards such a radical new vision of an economically just and ecologically sustainable Canadian society.

**Abstr ge :** Les ravages de la pand mie de COVID-19 nous ont appris des le ons importantes en mati re de politique publique au Canada, entre autres concernant la n cessit  du syst me de sant  publique, la faisabilit  d'un revenu minimum universel garanti et l'urgence de passer   un nouveau mod le  conomique qui s'harmonise avec l'environnement et permet aux individus de contr ler leur temps et leurs choix de vie. Le travail social a un r le cl    jouer pour nous aider   naviguer au-del  de l'urgence pand mique, vers une nouvelle vision radicale d'une soci t  canadienne  conomiquement juste et  cologiquement durable.

## **Lessons from the Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic that gripped the world in early 2020 has led to over 6.5 million deaths worldwide.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, there have been over 4.29 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and over 45,000 resulting deaths.<sup>2</sup> The group most devastated by COVID-19 fatalities in Canada has been elderly people. People in Canada who are sixty years old and above account for 92.8% of COVID deaths,<sup>3</sup> although they comprise only 25.3% of the total population.<sup>4</sup> Those in residential care facilities (such

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as nursing homes and assisted living facilities) were particularly hard hit (Clarke, 2021).

In addition to the devastating effects of COVID-19 on many individuals' physical health, it has also had profound negative impacts on the mental health of Canadians (Government of Canada, 2021). COVID-related lockdowns at home have also increased the risk of intimate partner violence (Haag et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a global public health crisis that disrupted taken-for-granted assumptions in many different spheres of everyday life as well as in related areas of public policy. COVID-19 necessitated social isolation on a comprehensive scale to prevent contagion from this deadly virus. One key outcome of the need for social isolation was an economic shutdown of unprecedented scope in Canada and around the globe. The threat of COVID-19 and the resultant shutdown taught us key lessons in three areas of public policy in Canada — in healthcare, economic security, and environmental policy.

My key argument in this brief paper is that we must see these three policy fields as interdependent as we plot a course beyond the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than a return to 'normal' we must set in place new policies and practices to ensure future health, economic security for all, and ecological sustainability in the interests of our children, grandchildren, and subsequent generations.

Paradoxically, the crisis of the pandemic opened the door to new imaginings of potential futures beyond it. COVID-19 shutdowns created opportunities to live differently, at least for a while, and to experience a slower pace of life and a less consumptive lifestyle. To do well during the pandemic, we had to focus on basic needs, our physical and mental health, and our most important human relationships.

Based on our responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, we can develop a clear and compelling vision of a healthier and more just future. We can imagine a Canadian society and global order in which universal and comprehensive healthcare is a right extended to all, not a commodity that must be purchased. We can imagine a new economy in which all have income security regardless of their status in the labour market or other personal characteristics or circumstances. We can imagine a socio-ecological transition in Canada, and globally, that ensures health, ends economic deprivation, and brings economic activity into benign coexistence with the natural environment upon which all life depends.

In what follows, I will offer thoughts on such a fundamental transition and radical vision of the future, starting with lessons learned from Canada's experience so far with the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020.

*The public healthcare lesson*

The pandemic was a stark reminder that public healthcare and population health policy are not challenges that can be left to private, profit-seeking market players. A massive mobilization of government resources was required to contain the coronavirus, to ensure urgent care for those who fell ill from it, and to provide incentives and support for the development of vaccines and other measures to protect us from further ravages of COVID-19. The need for public-sector healthcare infrastructure to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak — and the weaknesses of private sector provision in this regard — was clearly evident in Canada (Pue et al., n.d.) and at the international level (Williams, 2020).

The neoliberal argument that the profit motive in healthcare will lead to efficiencies and innovation was not just irrelevant in the case of the COVID-19 emergency. The private provision of healthcare actually hampered our responses to the pandemic. In a study that encompassed 147 countries, Assa and Calderon (2020) demonstrated that highly privatized healthcare systems had worse outcomes in responding to COVID-19 compared to those in the public sector. They pointed to a large body of research that “questions the ability of privately-financed healthcare systems to cope with the scope and magnitude of infectious diseases, including COVID-19” (Assa and Calderon, 2020, p. 17).

*The lesson on economic security*

As a result of COVID-19 and the resultant social and economic shutdown, to protect livelihoods governments had to mobilize public financial resources on a massive and rapid basis. The pandemic dramatically illustrated the inadequacy of the neoliberal refrain on income security that we have been hearing for many decades — that the best solution to poverty is a job, and that labour market attachment should always take precedence over income support. The rapid introduction of Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) during the early stages of the pandemic in 2020 prevented widespread economic calamity for workers and households, and fended off structural economic collapse. It also was seized upon by basic income advocates as a dramatic illustration of how government intervention can guarantee an economic floor for everyone (Olive, 2021; Stanford, 2022). Such a basic income guarantee could be designed as an ongoing program that would cushion Canadians from future crises arising from economic downturns, public health crises, or environmental calamities.

*The lesson on environment*

The pandemic shutdown gave us a glimpse of a much slower and more benign way of living — one in which frantic economic activity is radically

dialled back and people have much more discretion over how they use their time. This rapid economic slowdown also had significant and generally positive effects on the natural environment. This “anthropause” (Anthes, 2022) created a period of lower levels of pollution and general improvement in the health of the natural ecology, at least on a temporary basis, around the world (Loh et al., 2021; OECD, 2021). Specifically in Canada, greenhouse gas emissions fell by 9% during the pandemic year of 2020 (Reuters, 2022). As Watts (2020) puts it, “[t]he respite was too short to reverse decades of destruction, but it did provide a glimpse of what the world might feel like without fossil fuels and with more space for nature” (n.p.). We learned during COVID-19 shutdowns that there are alternative ways of life to frantic consumerism in a hyperactive capitalist economy, which is leading to the destruction of our planet. A slower and simpler lifestyle is possible and may in fact be desirable and beneficial for our mental and physical health.

### **A Radical Vision of a Just and Green Future**

From these lessons on health, economic security, and the environment that arise from the horror of the global COVID-19 pandemic, we can construct a new vision of a post-pandemic society. This new set of possibilities for Canadian and global society would include:

- *Healthcare and population health systems* that are focused on preventing ill health, proactively managing potential epidemiological threats, and providing healthcare services that are comprehensive and thoroughly decommodified. Health programs and policies must have a strong focus on the social determinants of health, including a guaranteed adequate income, decent and affordable housing, food security, and universal education.
- *Economic security for all* that is achieved through universal basic income and universal public services that line up with the social determinants of health as outlined in the above point. Securing an adequate and resilient economic floor for everyone would be a prerequisite for Canada and other countries to transition to a downsized economy that is both just and ecologically sustainable (see next point).
- *A ‘post-growth’ economy* that ends overall economic expansion and ensures economic security for all through redistribution, both nationally and internationally. Gross economic inequalities would be ended, and the primacy of the profit motive based on anarchic and unending economic growth would be displaced. Instead, a sufficiency ethic that would ensure the practical means for a modest but dignified material standard of living for all in an economy that is steady state (Daly, 2017) and circular (Raworth, 2017).

It is my argument here that each one of these three components are necessary if human society is to have a decent chance to build a just and sustainable future. Crucially, economic security for everyone — provided by a basic income guarantee *and* universal public services (including healthcare, education, social housing, affordable utilities, and education) — is a prerequisite for a just transition to an ecologically sustainable post-growth economy.<sup>5</sup>

### **Role of Social Work in Getting Us to this Future Vision**

Social work's commitment to social justice is longstanding and deep — at least in those aspects of the profession and discipline that have focused on challenging oppression and exploitation, rather than on social control and maintenance of the political and economic status quo.

Over the last several years, social work has also developed a growing awareness of and commitment to ecological values. It has extended its understanding of “environment” beyond its traditional focus on social contexts to incorporate an appreciation of the complex and interrelated aspects of the natural environment. Social work has become increasingly cognizant of how human health and well-being are profoundly connected to the physical and natural ecology of which we are a part (Coates, 2003; Dominelli, 2015; Mulvale, 2017).

This ecological commitment can be seen in both social work practice and education. On the professional practice side, the Canadian Association of Social Workers identifies the ethical obligation on practitioners to “endeavour to advocate for a clean and healthy environment and advocate for the development of environmental strategies consistent with social work principles and practice” (CASW, 2005, p. 25). In social work education, the Canadian Association for Social Work Education-Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS, 2021) recently added this core learning objective to its set of Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards:

#### **9. Environmental Sustainability and Ecological Practice**

Social work students shall have opportunities to...

- a) understand the need to create ecologically sustainable communities, economies and natural and built environments, in which all life forms and eco-systems can survive and thrive;
- b) identify and challenge environmental injustice and racism, i.e. the inequitable burdens borne by those who are socially and economically marginalised in relation to environmental degradation and hazards;
- c) advance environmental sustainability across individual, organizational and professional contexts; and

- d) embrace the role of social workers in advocacy for public policies and social practices that will ensure ecological health and environmental sustainability at local, regional, national and global levels. (p. 16)

How can these broad commitments to value-based ethical standards be applied specifically and concretely in social work practice and education? Space does not permit a full discussion of this question here, but some ideas include the following.

The greening of social work may have differing implications at the different levels of practice — micro, mezzo, and macro. Traditional forms of micro-practice, such as individual and family counselling and group work, may not be dramatically altered in a green social work paradigm. But some minor adjustments to micro-practice could include more attention to the role of the natural environment in bolstering mental health; the use when appropriate of therapeutic inter-species relationships for healing and recovery from trauma; and the judicious use of digital communication technologies to both boost client access to services and save on energy costs of transportation to service sites that carry their own carbon footprints.

On the other hand, at the mezzo- and macro-levels of practice, green social work may have more wide-ranging and profound implications. Areas in which such dramatic shifts may be evident include the following:

- Green social work already plays a vital role in rebuilding in the wake of natural, environmental, and manmade disasters (Drolet et al., 2018). This role is consistent with social work's historical commitment to community development and community organization methods of practice, which can be expanded and enhanced to further green goals.
- Green social work would continue and extend the profession's involvement in advocacy for strong environmental programs, policies, and laws consistent with social work's commitment to social and ecological justice. This work would incorporate aspects of macro-social work practice such as political activism, evidence-grounded advocacy, social movement mobilization, and research on topics related to green social work (such as the inequities in ecological harms and burdens related to class, gender, race, and colonialism).
- Social work associations and agencies could become exemplars of how to leave a minimal carbon footprint and encourage good ecological practices (e.g. energy conservation in green buildings; adherence to good ecological practices with service users and vendors; and use of information and communication technologies to minimize travel).

- Social work educational programs could more thoroughly incorporate green social work knowledge and approaches (including CASWE-ACFTS's EPAS 2021 Learning Objective 9, outlined above) into curriculum and research.
- Leading social work organizations, including CASWE-ACFTS and CASW, could provide leadership in the national debate on the relationship of a greener economy and population well-being.

The implications of the climate emergency (including drought, flooding, calamitous storms, oppressive heat, and rising ocean levels) present existential threats to human well-being. Social work voices need to be heard in the debates on how to avoid these catastrophic outcomes of ecological degradation.

### **Reasons for Hope and Next Steps**

The radical vision outlined above for a just and ecologically sustainable future — and social work's potential role in working towards it — presents an ambitious and complicated agenda for radical transformation. It is easy to succumb to discouragement or even despair about the possibility of moving as a society towards a progressive vision of the future. Even as we continue to recover from the collective trauma of a pandemic that has now lasted (in various stages) for three years at time of writing, we are confronted with more bad news. Right-wing authoritarian populism opposes vaccines and public health measures, and questions the very veracity of scientific research. The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian government of Vladimir Putin has reminded us of the dangers and horrors of war. Politicians are resuming their familiar mantra about the need for austerity as we return to business as usual in a capitalist economy dedicated to growth.

But succumbing to cynicism and hopelessness only makes the worst outcomes more inevitable. We can make an emotional leap of faith and look to signs of hope for radical social transformation that can ensure health, economic security, and a liveable environment. Such hopeful signs include:

- The resurgence of Indigenous culture and political power in Canada and elsewhere, which incorporates a profound environmental ethic of respect and stewardship of Mother Earth.
- The informed and energetic commitment of many young people to the need for radical steps to protect the planet and ensure justice and fairness in our social and economic relationships.
- The desire of a large and growing segment of Canadians for green and redistributive solutions to the environmental crises and social inequities we are facing.



This third hopeful sign was very much in evidence in the findings of the Green Resilience Project (2022). The final report issued from this investigation concluded that communities across Canada want to be resilient in the face of both income insecurity and climate change. People at the local level across Canada are very capable of making the links between environmental sustainability and economic justice in mapping out solutions to these interconnected challenges.

So there are individual and collective steps that social workers can take to help achieve a radical and progressive vision of a just and sustainable future. We owe it to the current and future generations to throw ourselves into this struggle. Not to do so would be a betrayal of our values as a profession and our moral principles as individuals who have made a choice to serve the most vulnerable members of our society.

### NOTES

1. <https://COVID19.who.int/> - retrieved 23 October 2022.
2. <https://COVID19.who.int/region/amro/country/ca> - retrieved 23 October 2022.
3. Figure 4. Age and gender distribution of COVID-19 (cases deceased) in Canada as of October 21, 2022, (n=46,029) – retrieved 23 October 2022.
4. Author's calculation based on Population estimates on July 1st 2022, by age and sex, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1710000501> – retrieved 22 July 2022.
5. For a fuller discussion of components in such a fundamental socio-ecological transition, see Mulvale (2019).

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