

Key Themes in the African Environmental Social Work Literature

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the growing discourse on environmental social work in South Africa and Africa more broadly. It highlights distinctive features of African values and traditions, on the one hand, and persistent social problems threatening human and environmental well-being on the other. The discussion begins with a brief overview of the theoretical development of environmental social work that has influenced its development in Africa, noting the extant empirically based literature on this topic and the emergence of African research often overlooked in international reviews and analyses. Thereafter, attention turns to key aspects of African environmentalism, noting the influence of African values and cultural traditions that are both enriching and challenging social and environmental interventions seeking to address inter alia problems of poverty and social development, natural resource use, climate change, food insecurity, and industrial pollution. Finally, the paper presents a typology suggesting possible intervention strategies social workers might use to respond to socio-environmental problems.

Keywords: environmental social work; social development; African environmentalism; socio-environmental problems; South Africa; Africa



Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2708-9355/18173>

Volume 37 | Supp | 2025 | #18173 | 29 pages

ISSN 2708-9355 (Online), ISSN 2520-0097 (Print)

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Introduction

African scholars have long drawn on international literature in their theorising on social work, seeking to adapt ‘outside knowledge’ to local contexts through a process of indigenisation (Gray et al. 2008). Being ofay with Western literature is essential for scholars wanting to bring their knowledge to a wider audience, since most journals seek to address, and accommodate, an international readership. Thus, social work scholars have to take pains to demonstrate the relevance of local knowledge to this global audience, while international writers have to avoid the exploitation of non-Western cultural knowledge. Decolonisation is a counter process to indigenisation that seeks to develop knowledge from within (Gray et al. 2013b). Decolonising literature seeks to convey distinctive aspects of African culture to an international audience. There is a third transversal approach that seeks meaningful opportunities for theoretical bridging as scholars attempt to draw hitherto isolated alternative value systems into the wider global dialogue. This approach entails “careful, critical appropriation of indigenous and ‘outside’ knowledges to help address problems facing Africa and other regions in the global South” (Konik 2018, 271). Focusing on environmental social work in South Africa, and Africa more broadly, this paper’s purpose is to review and critically discuss related literature, drawing attention to distinctive influences like African values and traditions in the spirit of transversal “intercultural engagement in knowledge-making” (Konik 2018, 271). Given the influence of international literature found in African scholarship on environmental social work, rather than be overtly critical of this external knowledge, the author seeks to examine the way in which African cultures might enrich discussions of wider professional engagement on environmental issues. The paper begins with a brief overview of the theoretical development of environmental social work that took place mainly in the USA, before examining the extant empirically based literature on this topic and emerging African research often overlooked in international reviews and analyses. The discussion then turns to key aspects of African environmentalism, identifies key socio-environmental problems, and ends with a proposed typology for environmental social work practice in response to these problems to inform ongoing scholarship in this area and translate theory to practice.

Brief Overview of the Theoretical Development of Environmental Social Work

Social work has long focused on the interactions between human beings and their social environment and the impact of personal and social problems on people’s lives. The profession’s beginnings emerged from the work of its early founders, Jane Addams (1910) in the settlements of Chicago and Mary Richmond (1917) through the Charity Organisation Societies in the USA, modelled after the London Charity Organisation Society, established in 1869. Mary Richmond’s *Social Diagnosis* (1917) laid the foundations for the scientific method pivotal to social work’s development as a profession, as she sought to identify the causes of poverty in the interaction between individuals and their social environment. She conceptualised this interaction in

psychosocial terms as the person-in-environment (PIE). Through the 1970s and 1980s, social work scholars began to embrace several theories to explain human behaviour in the context of the social environment. The most persistent theories are general systems and ecosystems perspectives that provide an explanatory framework from which to view the PIE (Friedman 1997; Germain 1973, 1978; Germain and Gitterman 1980; Grief and Lynch 1983; Meyer 1983; Siporin 1980). The former, drawn from sociology, divides the social environment into systems and conceptualises these in terms of different levels of society in accordance with their distance from the individual, thus the family, group, organisation, community, and broader society, including social structures and policies (Friedman 1997). Systems also comprise institutional sectors and structures that characterise human lives and define human identity, e.g. employment and work, religion and spirituality, recreational and leisure, health and medical, and social services. This led to the idea of the broadened bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective (Zapf 2005). Social work used these theories to devise a unitary or generalist framework for practice, in terms of levels of analysis – micro, mezzo or meso, and macro – suggesting various interventions at these different levels that cohered with its conventional methods of case, group, and community work (Goldstein 1973; Pincus and Minahan 1973). Since practice occurred in a context, mainly through social service organisations, part of the mezzo-level conception included the organisations in which social workers worked and the factors affecting them, such as organisational policy, managerial structure, roles and responsibilities, and requisite knowledge. Methods attached to organisational practice included administration, management, and supervision, while research related to the development of scientific knowledge for practice.

The second social theory drew on biology, specifically an ecology metaphor for practice. Known as ecological social work, ecosystems theory sought a holistic understanding of human behaviour in terms of multiple systems interactions and impacts (Allen-Meares and Lane 1987; Germain 1973, 1978; Germain and Gitterman 1980; Grief and Lynch 1983; Meyer 1983). It thus sought theories to explain the relationship between these systems, i.e. it sought a relational understanding in terms of connections, interconnections, and social networks and the way in which humans adapted to their social environment, e.g. strengths and resilience theory. Critical sociological theories explained these interactions in terms of power relationships as determined by the social constructs of race, class, gender, ability, religion, and culture. They also saw society as comprising economic, social, political, and cultural structures that variously affected people's level of power within these systems. Most importantly for structural analysis, the less power people had, the more isolated, excluded, oppressed, and marginalised they were. Intersectionality theory sought to explain how the interaction between various social constructs, like race and gender, determined people's degree of marginalisation, oppression, and exclusion. For example, they noted that more black than white women lived in poverty.

Within this theoretical social work domain, increasing attention to environmental concerns arose in response to the serious threats of climate change and environmental

degradation affecting Earth's ecosystems. This led to an increased focus on ecosocial social work practice. This was key to the profession's entry into interventions to stem the tide of, and help people cope with the fallout of, environmental problems (Besthorn 2012, 2014; Coates 2003). Ecosocial theories sought to extend social work's human-centred focus to encompass the broader social and physical or natural environment and emphasise the interrelationship between human and environmental well-being (Coates and Gray 2012; Gray and Coates 2012; Gray et al. 2013a). Besthorn (2014, 201) aptly captured the "unprecedented social tension and shifting cultural attitudes" that brought environmental awareness to attention between the 1960s and late 1970s, noting:

A precipitous rise of North Americans and others around the world were beginning to have significant doubts about unrestricted economic growth and unbridled consumption and were questioning the potential long-term environmental costs of these collective orthodoxies. A new populist-imbued, worldwide environmental movement was gathering pace. Its seminal message was that humans were endangering their own lives and the life of the planet through an arrogant and manipulative attitude toward other forms of life (Besthorn 2014, 201).

As the environment became a global concern, the United Nations (UN) called on the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987) to map a path for a sustainable future, thereafter launching a series of conferences, known as Earth Summits, with the first in Stockholm in 1972 generally regarded as the start of the global environmental movement. Conferences followed in Rio in 1992 and Johannesburg in 2002, establishing environmental justice as a human right and linking it to sustainable development through, among other things, eradicating poverty, altering consumption patterns, and managing natural resources. With global warming, policies to mitigate climate change were writ large on sustainable human development and environmental management agendas (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2018, 2022).

Often overlooked in these global events was the intrinsic link between reducing environmental destruction and combatting poverty, the two major global challenges at the start of the 21st century. While the poverty discourse reported the increase in absolute poverty and inequality worldwide, the environmental discourse noted the impact of human development on the environment, depleting natural resources, destroying forests, reducing biodiversity, damaging ecosystems, and fuelling climate change. Most notably, the environmental discourse highlighted the link between poverty and the environment, noting that poor people bore the brunt of the local consequences of environmental damage brought about by an overwhelming focus on modernising economic development, where economic growth trumped environmental protection and human welfare (Coates 2003; Gray 2020; Gray et al. 2017). The poor were heavily dependent on natural resources and often lived in areas directly affected by environmental hazards and natural disasters, such as urban slums affected by toxic waste or rural regions faced with periodic floods and droughts. While most policies focused exclusively on reducing poverty or protecting the environment, the 2030 Agenda for

Sustainable Development (UN 2015) clearly established poverty eradication as the key to a sustainable human future, melding together the discourses on environmental sustainability and poverty eradication in formulating the Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015).

Social work responded with its successive Global Agendas for Social Work and Social Development, committing social workers worldwide to the promotion of social and environmental justice and sustainable social development (International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), and International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) 2010, 2020; Lombard 2015). Lombard (2015) asserted that the global agenda committed social workers to the promotion of sustainability and environmental justice through development initiatives that integrated human, social, and environmental concerns. Most relevant was its third report on promoting community and environmental sustainability (IASSW, IFSW, and ICSW 2018).

Further, there has been a growing body of social work literature seeking to discern a role for social workers in promoting social and environmental justice and sustainable development. However, most of this literature was hortatory, emphasising that social workers *should* play a role as inter alia activists, advocates, brokers, and educators and calling them to action; it failed to go beyond calls for social work advocacy for, or engagement with environmental issues (Gray et al. 2013a). For example, in her small South African study of social workers (n=10) in the Tshwane area, Nel (2019) found that her respondents were aware of the relationship between social and environmental justice and community well-being and social workers' potential involvement, given they had the requisite skills, knowledge, and interventions to promote sustainable development in local communities. However, mostly, there was a lack of literature devising and testing social work interventions to address environmentally induced problems beyond recognition that social work might best contribute through multidisciplinary engagement as members of teams seeking to respond to specific environmental consequences, like natural disasters (Alston 2015; Dominelli 2012; Krings et al. 2020).

Empirical Literature on Environmental Social Work

There were ongoing claims as to the paucity of empirical studies on environmental social work, with most examining social work scholarship rather than developing and testing personal and social interventions and researching the impact of environmental sustainability issues on clients and professional practice (Bexell et al. 2019; Krings et al. 2020; Mason et al. 2017; Molyneux 2010). Most extant international studies were reviews of social work literature relating to the environment. Bexell et al. (2019) and Molyneux (2010) confined their research to scholars who construed environmental social work as a new professional paradigm (e.g. Besthorn 2012; Boetto 2017; Coates et al. 2006; Dominelli 2012; Ramsay and Boddy 2017). Mason et al. (2017) used a

broader approach and found that just over half the authors of the studies in her sample explicitly framed their contribution in terms of broader environmental change. Krings et al. (2020) also took a broad approach, including social work scholarship on related topics like interventions with animals, nature, and wilderness, the impacts of natural disasters, and food insecurity. In their review of environmental social work literature published between 1991 and 2015, they identified 10 domains covered, as shown in Table 1, and mapped them to the issues discussed in this paper (column 2). They noted a need for empirical research to support anecdotal claims and strengthen environmental social work practice (Krings et al. 2018, 2020).

Table 1: Krings et al.'s (2020) findings mapped to themes discussed in this paper

Environmental social work domains identified by Krings et al. (2020)	Themes identified in the literature on African environmental social work are discussed below
Animals, human-animal, human-environmental, or human-nonhuman relationships [Western environmentalism]	Treatment of animals and human-nonhuman relationships “Ubuntu”, “botho”, “hunhu”, “ukama”, and African environmentalism Ecofeminism, ubuntu, and environmental justice
Climate change, global warming, or environmental degradation	Climate change, hotspots, and catastrophic weather events
Conservation, access to nature, wildlife, or green spaces	Wildlife conservation, tourism, and national parks
Ecospirituality or ecocentric values	Ecospirituality, connection to land, and human responsibility
Food (in)security or food (in)justice	Food insecurity
Industrial pollution, toxins, or environmental hazards	Industrial pollution, toxic waste, and environmental hazards
Natural disasters or environmental crises	Natural disasters (under climate change)
Natural resources, including land, water, and fossil fuels	Access to and use of natural resources, including land, water, and energy from fossil fuels
Sustainable development, technologies, or policies, and macro-level interventions	Poverty and social development
Sustainable practices, such as individual-level interventions to reduce environmental footprints and recycling	

Note: Though not explicitly identified as a domain, the papers in Krings et al.'s (2020) study reflected a Western environmental perspective as a counterpoint to the African perspective examined herein. Hence, my addition of [Western environmentalism] (in brackets) to highlight this.

African scholarship is often missing from international reviews, as most authors publish in African journals and are not included in international databases like EBSCO. Of note,

then, is the recent rise in the number of African studies on environmental social work, many of which highlights issues not covered in the international empirical literature on the topic. Examples include Omorogiuwa's (2015, 2017, 2020a, 2020b, 2021) research on child labour; Masogo and Shokane's (2019) study on the use of indigenous environmental knowledge; and Skhosana and Nel's (2024) study exploring challenges in the development of community interventions. African research tends to take a qualitative approach and involve small study samples of social workers in studies focused on participant perspectives. For example, Shokane (2019) studied the impact of natural disasters on households (n=10) in the greater Tzaneen municipality of Limpopo Province based on the assessments of social workers (n=5). Her aim was to discern social workers' roles and the interventions they used following natural disasters. There have also been several small qualitative studies examining social work educators' (n=6) perceptions of the importance and relevance of environmental social work education in South Africa (Arkert and Jacobs 2021a, 2021b, 2023).

Additionally, several qualitative Masters Studies examined environmental social work, also involving small samples of social workers. For example, Nel's (2019) study explored social workers' (n=10) perceptions of environmental social work in the Tshwane area of northern Gauteng in South Africa, which includes the city of Pretoria and its surrounding towns and localities. Nene's (2018) study sample, also from the Tshwane region, comprised social workers (n=13) and sought their perceptions of, and role in promoting, environmental justice. One participant in her study captured dominant perceptions of environmental justice emanating from this local literature: 'Environmental justice is advocacy for all people in society to live in environments that are conducive to their health, their emotional well-being and development' (Nene 2019, 47).

African Environmental Social Work Literature

There is a growing African literature on ecosocial, ecological, green, and environmental social work (Arkert and Jacobs 2021a, 2021b, 2023; Bhangyi 2023; Chigangaidze 2023b; Marlow and van Rooyen 2001; Mukurazhizha et al. 2023; Mushunje and Matsika 2023; Muzingili 2016; Nhapi 2023; Noyoo 2022; Nyahunda 2021a; Nyahunda and Tirivangasi 2021; Pedzisai et al. 2023; Tadesse and Obeng 2022). African scholars tend to draw heavily on the international literature. For example, Chigangaidze (2023b) based his discussion on Krings et al.'s (2020) findings. Arkert and Jacobs (2023) drew mainly on Boetto's (2017) ecosocial model. Nene (2019) used Ramsay and Boddy's (2017) definition of environmental social work, seeing it as a method of practice. Finally, Nel (2019) used Dominelli's (2012) green social work as her theoretical framework, Hawkins' (2010, 68) definition of environmental justice as "the human right to live in a clean, safe, and healthy environment", and Schlosberg's (2007) observation that environmental justice went beyond individual experience, due to human embeddedness in a community.

The theory of social development has also influenced the work of African scholars, especially in Southern Africa, who have sought to define a path for social work in poverty alleviation through developmental social work and its attention to human welfare (Mushunje and Matsika 2023; Nene 2019; Patel 2015). Mushunje and Matsika (2023) reflect this focus in their definition of environmental social work as a collection of strategies and methods social workers use to solve or prevent *social problems*, and facilitate sustainable, environmentally friendly, *social development*.

Some, however, have sought to devise an Afrocentric perspective by examining the importance of indigenous knowledge to environmental social work (Ayeni et al. 2014; Chigangaidze 2023; Dube et al. 2018; Masoga and Shokane 2019; Mukurazhizha et al. 2023; Shokane 2016; Shokane and Masoga 2018). For example, Dube et al. (2018, 8) highlighted the way in which communities prone to flood risk “studied and interpreted the behaviour of certain animals and birds to forecast the magnitude of rains”, yet believed authorities largely ignored their local knowledge. Chigangaidze (2023) demonstrated the importance of indigenous knowledge through his conceptual analysis of “ubuntu”, using it to show how it could expand social work beyond its conventional boundaries to focus on the way in which humans could contribute to the sustainability of the natural environment.

For the most part, however, Western theories have dominated the social work discourse, equating environmental *injustice* with society’s failure to ensure the equitable distribution of natural resources in a way that does not harm the environment, i.e. that is sustainable (Dominelli 2014). However, Indigenous cosmologies have long taught that environmental justice is broader than sustainability. As such, ‘it is not an accounting exercise for rationing ... [Earth’s] resources’ (Bullard 2011, 142). In calling on social workers to ensure their interventions promote environmental justice, environmental social work foregrounds that human survival is conditional on living in harmony with the environment and sustainability goes beyond human interests: it necessitates biodiversity and the preservation of nonhuman species, i.e. it is ecocentric (Besthorn 2012, 2014; Dominelli 2014; Gray and Coates 2012; Hawkins 2010). Against this backdrop, the following section discusses the cultural and contextual nuances informing an Afrocentric perspective on environmental social work.

Key Themes in the African Literature

In reviewing the African literature on, or relating to, environmental social work, the author identified several themes conveying aspects of an Afrocentric understanding of the environment, as follows:

“Ubuntu”, “botho”, “hunhu”, “ukama”, and African environmentalism

Ecofeminism, “ubuntu”, and environmental justice

Ecospirituality, connection to land, and human responsibility

Treatment of animals and human-nonhuman relationships

Wildlife conservation, tourism, and national parks

“Ubuntu”, “Botho”, “Hunhu”, “Ukama”, and African Environmentalism

Several social work scholars argue that African philosophy offers a decolonising, albeit anthropocentric, lens for theorising Afrocentric environmental social work practice through concepts like “ubuntu”, “botho”, “hunhu”, and “ukama” (Chigangaidze 2023; Mabvurira 2020; Mugumbate and Nyanguru 2013; Van Breda 2019). “Ubuntu” and African ethics generally extol the value of life, human beings, and community. Their primary concern is the promotion of community solidarity and harmonious coexistence. In African traditional thought, the community extends beyond the realm of present, living human beings and “includes not only the natural environment but also ancestors and the spirit world” (Horsthemke 2017, 120). As Horsthemke (2017, 120) explained:

This relates to the belief of many Africans about their special connections with particular animals, plants, and sacred sites, which may as a result become revered symbols, clan totems, or family emblems or may be utilized for healing or general medicinal purposes. African ethics therefore emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life, between the human and the nonhuman realms, on the one hand, and the human and the ancestral and spirit realms, on the other ... Pertinent ideas in southern Africa would be *ubuntu* (a Nguni language group term for common or shared humanity or humanness; equivalent concepts are *botho* or *hunhu*) and *ukama* (a Shona concept that expresses the interconnectedness of humans, God, the spirit world, the ancestors, and the environment).

For Le Grange (2015), “ukama” (human relatedness with the cosmos) affirmed humans’ inseparability from their ancestors expressed through ritual Shona religious practices that sought to maintain the relational connection between past, present, and future generations. As such, it was a broader concept than “ubuntu”.

However, the exclusive focus on human beings made “ubuntu” (and “ukama”), by definition, anthropocentric and, therefore, an inadequate concept for the expression of ecocentric values and interests. Horsthemke (2017, 133) saw “ubuntu” as speciesist, since it defined nonhuman species and the biosphere “in terms of human purposes and ends”. Hence, she believed that, “insofar as ubuntu and ukama have any action-guiding content at all, this is unlikely to have any primary, direct beneficiaries other than human beings” (Horsthemke 2017, 135).

Others have sought to refute this widespread “presumption that African thought is essentially strongly anthropocentric and thus unable to make any meaningful contribution to an environmental ethic” (Behrens 2014, 64). As discussed below, Konik (2018) sought to do this by bringing ecofeminism and “ubuntu” together through their shared relational perspective and Behrens (2010, 2014) through the belief “in

interconnectedness and bondedness ... often proffered as the foundation of the unshakable commitment to communitarianism in African ethics” (Behrens 2014, 70).

Ecofeminism, “Ubuntu”, and Environmental Justice

Though South African legislation is anthropocentric, a matter of *human* relationships, the incorporation of environmental justice in the bill of rights and national constitutions permits its links to other social movements for justice and equality, like feminism and ecofeminism (Dodson 2002). The latter brings feminism and environmentalism together, promotes political activism, and offers an intellectual critique of the social structure *vis-à-vis* women. Its major argument is that women’s oppression and environmental degradation are direct consequences of patriarchy and capitalism (Buckingham 2015; Konik 2018). Hence, ecofeminism promotes the need for social change so that the burden of the ecological crisis would not fall so heavily on women already faced with a wide range of issues, including domestic and family violence, HIV and AIDS, unemployment, gender discrimination, and poverty, all of which required social interventions. Like feminism, generally, ecofeminism supports women’s rights and calls for legislation to reduce the oppression, of women and promote environmental justice for them. To this end, Konik (2018, 270-271) sought “to bring ecofeminist thought into conversation with the African indigenous philosophy of ubuntu, given both emphasised interrelatedness and interdependence. Both promoted a relational view whereby “personhood is something earned, through engaging in deliberate ethical conduct, understood in terms of fulfilling one’s obligations to other members of the community” (Konik 2018, 277). Contra other arguments about the anthropocentric nature of “ubuntu” (e.g. Horsthemke 2017), Konik (2018) drew on Behrens (2010), who argued that human-centred considerations did not negate a sense of interconnectedness to nature in African thought. Thus, for Konik (2018), ecofeminism and “ubuntu” promoted women’s and environmental interests borne out of their relational worldview (see also Kanu 2021 below). Arkert and Jacobs (2021b, 163) highlighted that the incorporation of a critical, anti-oppressive ecofeminist perspective questioned “structural inequalities, relating to gender, poverty, and the unequal distribution of resources, ... provide[d] alternative explanations for environmental crises and illustrate[d] an understanding of power relations ... [in a way that] accentuat[ed] the concerns and interests of African women”.

Ecospirituality, Connection to Land, and Human Responsibility

Kanu (2021) noted that African ecospirituality established a connection between Earth’s ecosystems and African spirituality, which he described as Africans’ consciousness of, and relationship with, the supernatural that offered a foundation for human relationships with, and responsible management of, the environment. Grounded in African belief in spiritual interconnectedness and the sacredness of Earth’s ecosystems, African ecospirituality is deeply religious, formulated as it is within traditional African religion and culture comprising inter alia proverbs, mythologies, totems, taboos, and polytheistic deities. It is also cosmological, i.e. it is related to the way Africans understand the

universe and conduct themselves in it: “The universe for the African is anthropocentric” (Kanu 2021, 15). As such, humans are responsible for preserving or maintaining Earth and its resources, and it is in their best interests to do so for their own survival.

Van Breda (2019) connected African ecospirituality to sustainability and social development since, as well as the relationship between spirituality, religion, and the environment, African ecospirituality stressed people’s connection to the land and affirmed its cultural meaning and significance as the lifeblood of most African communities since human livelihoods depended on it. Despite the modernisation of agriculture, numerous African communities continue to survive on subsistence farming. This leads to intractable environmental problems caused by unsustainable agricultural practices, like overgrazing, overcultivation, and soil erosion. Addressing these issues, however, is the terrain of agricultural officers rather than social workers, who would more likely be involving local residents in capacity-building initiatives, such as cooperative income-generating projects based on community gardens or small-scale farming initiatives.

Treatment of Animals and Human-Nonhuman Relationships

Animals have religious and symbolic significance in African society and culture. As Chigangaidze (2023, 1848) noted, Africans generally regard their relationship with the nonhuman world, and environment, as sacred, as they see it “as the source of life, healing, food, water and energy”. Thus, a common feature of traditional African religion and cultural life is that people maintain a close relationship with totemic animals that connect them to their group origin, ancestors, and place (Horsthemke 2017; Olupona 1993). Totemic ideas and practices signify the key roles animals play in the identity construction of individuals, clans, and ethnic groups. They also signify the power of the king and royal ancestors, with animal images featured in artistic traditions and cultural rituals that aesthetically depict revered leadership qualities (Olupona 1993).

However, Horsthemke (2017, 125) highlighted another side to this picture relating to Africans’ use of animals in ritualistic religious, traditional, and cultural practices, such as “animal sacrifice that gives rise to some of the most vexing ethical questions”. Her ethical discussion of the problematic treatment of animals shows that, for the most part, animals serve human interests and are there for humans to use as they please. Thus, despite African ethics’ avowed emphasis on respect for the nonhuman world, animal rights groups and social workers have to grapple with deep-seated beliefs, long-established practices, and moral conundrums to promote environmental justice through the protection, and prevention of the maltreatment, of animals in the face of legislation that offers little provision for their humane treatment (Horsthemke 2017).

Wildlife Conservation, Tourism, and National Parks

Nature and wildlife conservation and tourism are essential to Southern African economies. However, there were many social issues surrounding their maintenance and

management. First, though national parks sought to protect animals from extinction, constant poaching and wildlife trafficking threatened the survival of certain species, including exotic birds, large African cats, rhinoceros, and elephants. Motivations included profit, economic necessity, sustenance, and reduced human-wildlife conflict brought about by negative interactions between humans and wild animals, including competition for natural resources and threats to food security. In particular, human population growth and the transformation of land use had undesirable consequences for people and the environment, as well as for wildlife and their habitats.

Secondly, Büscher et al. (2022, 50) argued that, though the South African conservation sector presents itself as sustainable, it promotes unsustainable fossil fuel dependency and consumerism to serve economic interests while using nature and wildlife as a tourist attraction; these factors place “a major strain on the ways in which South Africa’s biodiversity is ‘saved’ for posterity”. For Büscher et al. (2022), the South African conservation sector was unsustainable, outmoded, and resistant to change. They drew attention to the environment, i.e. its fossil fuel base, and social factors, i.e. the exploitation of insecure, low-wage labourers, drawn from poor surrounding communities employed in wildlife parks. Many of these communities already lacked essential services since many local government councils responsible for service provision and maintenance were close to breakdown (Gray and Lombard 2024). These social implications were largely invisible to tourists, as was the intimidation, racism, and other forms of abuse national park labourers endured (Büscher et al. 2022). Thus, there were many social issues relating to the lucrative tourism industry and wildlife conservation that were of concern to social workers, including racism, exploitation, low wages of black workers, and poverty in surrounding communities.

Socio-environmental Problems

The literature identified several key problems affecting the environment, including poverty, natural resource use, climate change, food insecurity, and industrial pollution. Given social work’s focus on social problems, much of this literature suggested social solutions to environmental problems, hence my reference to socio-environmental problems above. The following section highlights contributions to this literature from African scholars to support the proposed typology below.

Focus on Social Rather than Environmental Impacts

Influential on emerging discourse on environmental social work is developmental social work’s attempts to address persistent social problems threatening human well-being, given the link between poverty and environmental degradation, and their impact on impoverished communities. Concerned largely with human welfare, developmental social work focuses mainly on the poor and their need for survival, drawing on the social development literature. Complementing this is the emerging environmental social work literature highlighting poor people’s exposure to environmental risks; it focuses on

preventing or mitigating the intensification of poverty due to these risks. Suggested interventions all concern individuals, families, and communities affected by environmental problems and natural disasters (Busari-Akinbode and Ibabor 2018; Dube et al. 2018; Ekwesaranna and Eze 2021; Matlakala et al. 2021, 2022; Shokane 2019; Shokane and Nel 2017).

Sustainable development likewise concerns practices to preserve the environment and natural resources for human use by promoting sustainable livelihoods (Skhosana and Nel 2024). It concerns inter alia sustainable agricultural and farming practices to prevent soil erosion and enhance food security, income-generating projects to enhance financial security, microfinancing to support small enterprise development, and community-based initiatives to empower local communities and enhance their independence. For the most part, food security and resource access are problems of rural development largely relating to the agricultural sector. However, they become social development issues due to their impact on poverty and the social problems that result from them.

Social development interventions include social protection programmes to safeguard vulnerable populations from socioeconomic hardship. Though social grants may ameliorate environmental factors affecting household access to food and its production, they rarely meet poor families' nutritional needs (Chokona and Shackleton 2019). Thus, Olaleye et al. (2021) highlighted the need for *social* development solutions and action, including economic support programmes and support for local self-help projects. Likewise, Ekwesaranna and Eze (2021) found that annual flooding in Nigeria led to homelessness, an increase in the spread of diseases, mortality by drowning, and psychological issues that required a *social* development approach, while Busari-Akinbode and Ibabor (2018) noted social workers' absence in disaster responses and Nene (2019) lamented their lack of engagement in environmental justice, generally. For the most part, they focused on social rather than environmental problems. Thus, poor people and impoverished communities across Africa cumulatively have contributed to deforestation, overgrazing, and soil erosion, all of which are problems linked to poverty and human survival needs. Overpopulation, too, puts an immense strain on Earth's finite resources (Nene 2019). Thus, environmental preservation is a complex endeavour that involves balancing human needs and sustainability issues. Overall, poverty necessitates major structural change rather than small-scale local community interventions, which, though helpful, do not address social problems or environmental concerns.

Natural Resource – Land, Water, and Energy – Access and Use

The theory of sustainability links sustainability to human use of natural resources, most notably managing the environment so there are sufficient natural resources to sustain human life for present and future generations. It sees access to natural resources as a human right. Sustainability issues include land distribution and rights, water access and management, and the transition from fossil fuels to reusable energy sources (Scholes et al. 2023). Successive reports on climate change have linked altered weather patterns firmly to human activities, particularly to their overuse of fossil fuels with their heat-

trapping gases. The South African economy, like most modern economies, is “completely dependent on and steeped in fossil fuels and mineral extraction” (Büscher et al. 2022, 50).

Further, local council ineptitude has led to gross service-delivery failures. In recent years, energy blackouts and water shortages have plagued communities, villages, and cities across South Africa and had a devastating impact on the national economy and local economic development. As Ziervogel (2018, 181) observed:

Water access at the household level is critical for productive livelihoods. Many homes in Southern Africa still do not have piped-in water, so household members have to get water from standpipes or buy it from vendors. Time spent fetching water could be better spent on other things like going to school or pursuing economic activities. In years when water is especially scarce, these opportunity costs are greater.

Ayeni et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of incorporating indigenous knowledge on managing natural resources, such as surface water, and building a strong foundation in the interests of long-term water conservation. Their findings showed the serious danger of policymakers failing to recognise and embrace “the significant value of local water rights and knowledge access to water by all users” (Ayeni et al. 2014, 80).

Masogo and Shokane’s (2019, 7) research likewise highlighted how culturally embedded alternative energy practices – like tree felling to secure firewood for cooking and heating – exposed people “to possible prosecution, fines and imprisonment”. They noted that the loss of, or reduction in, access to natural resources, like firewood, threatened food security and had a negative impact on poor people’s livelihoods, especially since they did not have access to other energy sources. Their study participants lacked secure access to, and control, over the natural resources, like land, water, livestock, and trees, that they needed to support their livelihoods and sustain their households (Masogo and Shokane 2019).

Climate Change, Hotspots, and Catastrophic Weather Events

In South Africa, as elsewhere in Africa, droughts and floods are common. Thus, there is a growing African scholarship on climate change and social workers’ attempts to respond to catastrophic weather events (Chikoko and Chihiya 2023; Dube et al. 2018; Mpambela and Mabvurira 2017; Mushunje and Muchacha 2019; Nhapi 2021; Nhapi and Mathende 2018; Noyoo 2022; Nyahunda 2021b; Nyahunda and Tirivangasi 2021; Nyahunda et al. 2019, 2020, 2024; Olaleye et al. 2021; Onyenemerem et al. 2021; Pedzisai et al. 2023; Shokane 2016, 2019; Shokane and Nel 2018). The IPCC (2018) identified South Africa as a climate change ‘hot spot’, implying altered temperatures, extremes of precipitation (floods and droughts), air pollution, and infectious diseases that would affect human health (Chigangaidze 2023; Nene 2019). The Global Change Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand identified five climate risks facing countries in the South African Development Community (SADC): food (in)security,

shortages of clean water, energy transition risk, heat stress in humans, and risks to nature and the bioeconomy (Scholes et al. 2023). The provision of essential services and creation of jobs remain the focus of social development, while the poor endure the most dramatic effects of climate change and social workers attempt to respond to natural disasters that disproportionately affect women (Nyahunda 2021b; Nyahunda and Tirivangasi 2021; Nyahunda et al. 2019, 2020, 2024).

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is an ongoing problem given the high rates of poverty in South Africa and Africa, more broadly, it affects one in three people in Sub-Saharan Africa (Brown et al. 2024). Undernourishment has increased and is projected to increase further by 2030 (Scholes et al. 2023), while food production in SADC countries has not kept pace with the region's growing population (Ziervogel 2018). For the most part, food insecurity is a problem of rural development largely related to sustainable agriculture (UN 2015). The problem is particularly acute in regions "facing significant environmental challenges, such as climate change and water insecurity" (Brown et al. 2024, 2). It has become a social development issue due to the resulting social problems.

Several studies highlighted food insecurity as a social issue (Brown et al. 2024; Chokona and Shackleton 2019; Pillay et al. 2024; Tyabashe-Phume et al. 2024). Tyabashe-Phume et al.'s (2024) examination of the impact of food insecurity on children using an ecosystems framework noted the importance of social protection measures, specifically the Child Support Grant, in keeping hunger at bay. Pillay et al. (2024) reported on the relationship between food security and disability using data from the General Household Survey. In their study population (n=32,187) of food insecure people, 9.64% were disabled, while food insecurity affected more black people with disabilities (91%) compared to those without disabilities (90%), and disabled women (65%) versus non-disabled women (58%). Most resided in KwaZulu-Natal. They found Disability Grants were more effective in lowering food insecurity than Child Support Grants (Pillay et al. 2024). However, rather than sole reliance on social grants, Chokona and Shackleton (2019) called for a broader focus on capacity building, employment creation, and own food production to improve food security in poor households. Brown et al.'s (2024, 19) study of young people in KwaZulu-Natal found sociocultural and gender issues affected perceptions of food insecurity: "Young people talked a lot about how women were expected to prepare food for partners, children, and family members. Generally, across cultures, women and girls play a crucial role in food provisioning and preparation and the 'kitchen space' provides a location in which to perform female gender". Thus, they believed combatting food insecurity required a gender and culturally sensitive approach (Brown et al. 2024).

Industrial Pollution, Toxic Waste, and Environmental Hazards

Concerns relating to industrial chemical, solid, toxic, or hazardous waste disposal and pollution, toxins, e.g. from pesticides, including insecticides, herbicides, and fungicides,

and environmental hazards, such as air, food, land, and water contamination, relate mainly to their impact on human health and well-being and the costs of treatment on severely strained public health systems (Anazonwu et al. 2017; Nene 2019). These environmental hazards especially affected poor people, who collected waste to earn a living. In particular, Omorogiwa (2015, 2017, 2020a, 2020b, 2021) highlighted the dangers endured by children engaged in child labour. She contradicted popular notions linking their engagement mainly to domestic and agricultural work and street trading, noting the large number of children working in extractive industries, such as quarrying granite, artisan mining, and scavenging waste dumps filled with toxic materials. She highlighted the context in which this occurred as follows:

The Afrocentric perspective on child labour identifies the notion of children's work as linked with economic, social, cultural transformation, geographical construction, and how it becomes either rewarding or exploitative. Therefore, while it is vital to view child labour from different perspectives, it is required to consider these thoughts within the multifaceted social and cultural practices of the connected histories and geographies in which children's and family's livelihoods continue to unfold (Omorogiwa 2017, 61).

Her research showed the harmful effects of children carrying loads of goods and garbage, working on construction sites, in factories, and on roads, in often hazardous weather conditions, to help their families sustain their livelihoods. It also underscored the health implications of work on children locked into supporting their families, who were economically dependent on their income (Omorogiwa 2020b). She highlighted that government and non-government organisations and social workers within them needed to do more to protect these children from harm.

What Can Social Workers Do? A Typology of African Environmental Social Work Practice

Several social work scholars have noted that multidisciplinary interventions focused on protecting the environment would benefit from social work skills and values (Dominelli 2012; Zapf 2010). Indeed, social workers are more likely to intervene in environmental issues through participation in broader projects, such as community clean-up campaigns, as part of corporate social responsibility programmes responding to local government service-delivery failures (Gray and Lombard 2024). They are likely to join social action groups advocating for social and environmental justice (Clarke 2014) and be part of community development teams supporting communities following natural disasters and severe weather events (Skokane 2019) or ensuring the involvement of local community groups in the formulation of environmental policies that affect them (Teixeira et al. 2019). Some social workers have participated in multidisciplinary environmental impact assessments (Schenk 2016). Most, however, are broadly involved in social development, so communities become self-supporting in the long term with reduced dependence on government funding and programmes (seldom achieved). Many will be involved in individual-level interventions, helping individuals deal with

psychological distress in the wake of natural disasters (Matlakala et al. 2022; Nhapi 2023). In this regard, and in response to the environmental problems discussed above, Table 2 proffers a typology of African environmental social work practice with examples of key issues and suggested intervention strategies and methods social workers might use to:

Solve and prevent socio-environmental problems, i.e. problems arising from inter alia environmental hazards and degradation, natural disasters, and catastrophic weather events.

Facilitate social development in response to the consequences of socio-environmental problems, such as loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, displacement, and homelessness, in a sustainable, environmentally friendly way, i.e. in a way that does not cause further damage to the environment (Mushunje and Matsika 2023).

Table 2: Typology of African environmental social work practice

Key issues	Suggested intervention strategies and methods
Poverty alleviation and sustainable social development	Issues Problems arise when economic development neglects social impacts, especially on people and the environment; Poverty exacerbates social problems <i>and</i> environmental degradation; Poverty and unemployment lead to multiple problems requiring social and environmental interventions like street children and child labour; Interventions Micro Helping individuals and families gain access to social security and essential support, housing, work, and income-generating projects Mezzo Support local community organisations advocating for women's and children's rights and social and environmental justice Macro Develop, facilitate, and encourage local participation in community development initiatives aimed at empowerment and community-building; Support local groups, such as food cooperatives to address food insecurity; women's groups, burial clubs, and traditional support networks; local economic development for income generation and household maintenance; Become involved in multidisciplinary initiatives conducting environmental impact assessments to assess the environmental impacts of development projects

Key issues	Suggested intervention strategies and methods
Use of natural resources, including land, water, and energy from fossil fuels	Issues Dependence on fossil fuels and mineral extraction compromises biodiversity, while mining, though an important employment sector, is environmentally destructive; Problems relating to land distribution and rights, water access and management, and the unlikely large-scale transition from fossil fuels to reusable energy sources; Interventions <i>Micro</i> Direct practice and consultation on sustainable development and corporate social responsibility. <i>Mezzo</i> Educational programmes teaching about scarcity and environmental destruction; Development of conservation and recycling programmes; Ecosystem restoration programmes, tree planting, and reforestation programmes <i>Macro</i> Participate in advocacy through social action groups protesting against unsafe mining and industrial practices or to stem development harmful to the environment; Initiation and monitoring of policy change and enforcement to protect and restore natural resources; Support Indigenous rights and control over their lands and draw on local indigenous knowledge
Climate change, hotspots, and natural disasters	Issues Fossil fuel use – oil, gas, and coal – is the main source of carbon in the atmosphere and finding alternative energy sources is imperative for mitigating climate change; Disasters, such as drought, mudslides, floods, hurricanes and environmental refugees, are influenced by or result inter alia from climate change, deforestation, soil erosion, pollution, unsustainable farming practices, water diversion, and dam construction; Interventions <i>Micro</i> Crisis intervention and recovery assistance for survivors of floods, tornados, droughts, bushfires, and other climate-related events; Connect individuals and families to disaster relief services; Assess vulnerability and destitution levels caused by natural disasters <i>Mezzo</i> Engage with community organisations offering support programmes following natural disasters and climate or weather events; Connect people to preventive community educational initiatives around preparation for emergencies, having safe evacuation plans, safe places, and emergency survival packages; Education programmes to raise awareness of the dangers of climate change and the behaviour changes needed <i>Macro</i> Plan and organise reception centres for environmental refugees

Food insecurity	Issues Food insecurity leads to malnutrition, threatens children’s healthy development, increases the likelihood of preventable diseases and illnesses; Declining food production is exacerbating hunger and poverty-related diseases; Interventions Micro Support programmes for sustainable subsistence farming and other household practices for food provision and production; Engage in educational initiatives inclusive of indigenous knowledge on sound nutrition, healthy eating, and household hygiene Mezzo Work with local agricultural officers assisting with food production and access to markets for local produce Macro Support irrigation and reforestation initiatives; Respect and draw upon indigenous knowledge on the protection and management of natural resources to support sustainable food production for household consumption and income generation; Support local farming cooperatives and community-supported agriculture to create employment, sustainable livelihoods, and food security; Support policies for poverty reduction and food security
Industrial pollution, toxic waste, and environmental hazards	Issues Air, soil, and water pollution produce health-related issues that result directly from or are exacerbated by air, soil, and water pollution; Poor communities, especially children, exposure to toxic waste likewise produces serious health issues Micro Crisis intervention and referral to health services for assessment and intervention; Case finding for those affected by poor toxic waste management, industrial pollution, and work- or income-generation-based illnesses Mezzo Advocate for improved health access for those affected by chronic illnesses, such as asthma and asbestos-related diseases; Participate in education programmes about the dangers of toxic waste collection and safety precautions; Encourage citizen involvement in clean-up campaigns Macro Participate in advocacy programmes for communities affected by pollution and toxic waste; Support or engage in research and social impact analysis; Support policies and public education programmes highlighting the detrimental and hazardous activities in which child labourers engage that disrupt their overall development

Source: Adapted from Gray et al. (2013a)

Conclusion

This paper discussed the growing discourse on African environmental social work, both enriched and challenged by distinctive aspects of African values, traditions, and cultures, on the one hand, and persistent social problems threatening human well-being on the other. Much of this literature focused on the social impact of environmental problems and suggested social solutions to improve human well-being. It affirmed Mushunje and Matsika’s (2023) definition of environmental social work as a collection of strategies and methods social workers use to solve or prevent social problems, and facilitate sustainable, environmentally friendly, social development.

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