

Children's Views on Poverty and Environmental Risks: Lessons for Ecological Social Work and Ecological Citizenship

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Abstract

Climate change has a disproportionate effect on people who are socially and economically excluded and live in degraded environments. Children's current and future well-being are the hardest hit. However, children need not necessarily be passive victims: They have agency to engage meaningfully and contribute sustainable solutions. This research draws on a qualitative study with five children who were purposefully selected to share their views on poverty and environmental risks through photo-voicing and one-on-one interviews. The aim was to draw lessons from children's experiences of poverty and environmental risks to inform ecological social work and citizenship. The data were analysed according to themes. The findings indicate that children understand the multidimensional nature of poverty and its interrelatedness with environmental risks. Furthermore, they have an environmentally oriented attitude towards being responsible citizens for themselves and the community. They proposed strategies to engage in action that can contribute to sustainable development. The study concludes that children's participation can and should play a significant role in informing ecological social work. Furthermore, developing ecological citizenship is fundamental for social work to contribute to a new eco-social world with a sustainable approach to the environment and justice for all.

Key words: child participation; ecological citizenship; ecological social work; environmental risks; poverty; qualitative research



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Introduction

Poverty in all its forms disproportionately affects developing countries, disadvantaged communities, and children (World Bank and United Nations Children's Fund [WEF] 2022). An estimated one billion children in developing nations living in multidimensional poverty suffer at least one significant deprivation: lacking access to nutritious food, sanitation, clean water, health care and/or education (Rudra et al. 2020). Three out of every four children worldwide do not have any form of social protection (International Labour Office 2021).

Environmental risks such as water, land, and air pollution threaten children's health and cognitive development, and aggravate the degradation of ecosystems essential to a healthy environment (UNICEF 2021a). These conditions are deepened by the impact of climate change. Children contribute least to climate change, but are those most affected by the challenges it poses to their well-being, access to human rights, and a future (Save the Children 2015). The World Health Organization ([WHO] 2016) has set minimum standards for air quality, but over 300 million children globally live in places with outdoor air pollution caused by factors such as burning rubbish and the use of coal and wood for cooking and heating. In Africa, 520 million children live in polluted places, and the poorest people are the ones most susceptible to illnesses brought on by contaminated air (UNICEF 2016). Furthermore, studies have shown that children without access to sufficiently safe water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) are less able to resist infectious diseases and respond to treatment, which affects both the spread of vector-borne diseases and water-related infections and are among the leading causes of child mortality (UNICEF 2021b).

A report by Statistics South Africa (2020) on the status of child poverty in South Africa indicates that 62.1% of children under the age of 17 are multidimensionally poor, meaning they experience deprivation in at least three out of seven dimensions (housing, protection, nutrition, health, information education, child development, and WASH). The World Health Organization ([WHO] 2022) report on the Environmental Health country profile for South Africa indicates that 51% of deaths from diarrhoea are caused by unsafe drinking water, a lack of sanitation, and inadequate personal hygiene. These intersecting challenges of child poverty and environmental health risks highlight the urgent need to consider how children's voices can inform more just and sustainable interventions.

The premise of this study is that children's lived experience of poverty and environmental risks enables them to speak out on these topics as responsible citizens who can contribute to finding sustainable solutions. Hence the aim was to explore children's views on poverty and environmental risks in their lived communities, and draw lessons for ecological social work and ecological citizenship. Ecological social work emerged as a global response to the environmental crisis and related human rights issues (Hawkins 2010). It includes a call for social work to include the natural

environment (Besthorn 2012), to envision a world of “environmental sustainability, but also one that is fair and just for all” (Hawkins 2010, 71). Ecological citizenship entails civil society engagement and taking responsibility to protect the natural environment as a principled commitment (Dobson et al. 2014).

Poverty, Climate Change, and Environmental Risks

South Africa’s ongoing poverty and high levels of inequality are deeply rooted in the country’s historical inequalities, which contribute to the complexity of child poverty in South Africa (UNICEF 2020). The report on Child Poverty in South Africa (Statistics South Africa 2020) was the first to measure multidimensional and money-metric poverty among children and to present comprehensive estimates of child poverty and deprivation in the country. This was achieved by using a multiple overlapping deprivation analysis (MODA), underpinned by international and national legal and policy frameworks such as the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (United Nations 1989) and the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (Statistics South Africa 2020). The MODA methodology used child rights and life cycle approaches to analyse data from the 2014/2015 *Living Condition Survey* by looking at basic needs of children across the seven dimensions of child well-being at different life stages (Statistics South Africa 2020). Poverty, an indicator of socioeconomic status, can lead to psychological deprivation, as hardships mean that children living in poverty are more likely to suffer from mental health problems as adults than children from affluent families (Kim, Kabir, and Kabir 2015).

Environmental risks are also not evenly distributed between the poor and better off populations. Environmental risks take various forms, including pollution, lack of access to clean water and adequate sanitation, as well as harmful chemical waste that can disrupt the ecosystem balance and harm the health of people (WHO 2020). Environmental risks disrupt harmonious relationships between children and their immediate environment because of the substantial health effects on their lives (UNICEF 2015). Confined use of land and overexploitation of limited resources by overpopulated communities endanger soil fertility and environmental health in these communities (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP] 2020). There is a strong link between poverty and exposure to environmental risks, stemming from air pollution by households, lack of access to safe water and sanitation, vector-borne diseases, industries, and climate change (UNICEF 2021a). The 2019 Global Carbon Atlas rated South Africa as the 12th greatest polluting country in the world and the top emitter in Africa, emitting a projected 470 million metric tons of carbon dioxide (Statista 2022).

Climate change and environmental degradation intensify the multidimensional nature of poverty, particularly for children. Its impact can severely affect children’s food security and health, destroy schools and sanitation infrastructure, and contaminate water and the air (UNICEF 2021a). However, if risks are identified early, especially by including children’s perspectives, their impacts can be mitigated. In consultation with

children in Somalia, researchers reported on the impact of hunger on children, their families, and communities (Save the Children 2021). The intersection of poverty with environmental risks is evident in the alarming consequences for vulnerable groups such as children, who often suffer health effects when they live in overpopulated and degraded areas near landfills, with few green spaces. However, such risks can be constructively addressed. In the built environment, unsafe infrastructure poses risks like injuries, but also offers opportunities to transform physical space into “green” areas such as playgrounds, or “blue” spaces such as water features, which can advance health (UNICEF 2021a). Children have the right and ability to indicate how they are affected and to contribute ideas towards sustainable communities (UNICEF 2023).

Child Participation and Ecological Citizenship

The notion that children’s rights matter in efforts to advance development has become more prominent in child participation discourses (Arts 2017). Children have the right to participate and present themselves and future generations effectively or to be represented on matters that affect them (United Nations 1989; Vaghri 2018). In the context of our study, child participation refers to “children having the opportunity to express their views, influence decision-making, and achieve change” (O’Kane 2013, 1).

Ecological citizenship enables citizens to take action to challenge unsustainable production and consumption patterns, to reduce the human footprint, and promote a more equitable division of ecological space (Humphreys 2009). It is a set of actions by citizens inspired by green ideas to protect the environment and to create a sustainable society in a creative and socially responsible manner (Dobson 2007). Ecological citizenship includes the role of civil society in achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Commitment to the SDGs has stimulated interest in gathering evidence-based knowledge regarding the importance of young children’s participation in development and sustainable futures as responsible citizens (Ndofirepi and Cross 2015).

Social responsibility and sustainable living are particularly crucial for young generations to achieve a range of socioeconomic, environmental, and health outcomes (Butcher, Seballos, and Whitehead 2010). Being exposed to poverty and environmental injustices, children know the associated risks and must have opportunities to give input (Vambe 2018). Research shows that children are not passive bystanders of adverse circumstances (UNICEF 2015), but rather active change agents in matters that affect and interest them (Dzvimbo, Monga, and Mashiza 2017; Lombard and Viviers 2014). Therefore, children have a vital role to play in building their own and their communities’ resilience to climate shocks and poverty, by adopting a more sustainable, low carbon lifestyle (UNICEF 2015).

According to Iliopoulou (2018), findings from a study of 30 nine-year-old learners at two state primary schools in a provincial city in central Greece, indicate that young

children can take proactive steps to eliminate land pollution in a sustainable way. Recommendations included both immediate remedies, such as continuing the practice of dumping trash in recyclable bins, and long-term solutions, such as banning littering through restrictive policies (Iliopoulou 2018), and children emphasised waste reduction through everyday routines that discourage people from contributing to more environmental problems. Similar findings were reported by Van Niekerk (2014) regarding the waste management behaviour of school children in Mpumalanga, South Africa, showing that children were prepared to talk to peers about environmental problems. Furthermore, it shows an enthusiastic mindset which is a first step towards an environmentally friendly attitude.

Research Methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach and case study research design to obtain an in-depth understanding from five child participants about their knowledge and their experiences of poverty and environmental risks, in line with Nieuwenhuis (2016). Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select five children between the ages of 12 and 16 years who were registered with, and recipients of, the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Camp Sizanani Life Skills, and who attended its youth clubs in their respective communities. The facilitators from the respective youth clubs recruited participants who showed interest and met these inclusion criteria, and introduced them to the researchers on a WhatsApp group. The parents gave Camp Sizanani Life Skills informed consent to allow their children to participate in the research and the children gave written assent. Ethical clearance for the study was provided by the University of Pretoria (approval reference number HUM014/0820, dated 27 August 2020).

Data collection methods included photo-voicing and semi-structured one-on-one interviews conducted via WhatsApp, guided by an interview schedule. The WhatsApp discussions were held during agreed-upon times for calls and text messages. Photo-voicing was used as it enhances storytelling with children (Fournier et al. 2014). Participants took multiple photos of poverty and environmental risks in their communities. From these, each participant selected four photos, two depicting poverty and two showing environmental risks, to discuss in one-on-one WhatsApp interviews with the researcher. Each photo was discussed in a separate time slot of approximately 45 minutes. The WhatsApp voice recordings were transcribed, and the text responses were compiled into a Word document. Data were then thematically analysed using Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield's (2015) process. The phases included becoming familiar with the text, generating initial codes, searching for themes, and finally reviewing, defining, and naming the themes.

Participant Profiles

The five participants in the study resided in Orange Farm, Poortjie, and Protea Glen (townships in the Johannesburg area) and in Braamfontein (a Johannesburg suburb),

South Africa. As mentioned earlier, the invitation to participate was extended to all recipients of Camp Sizanani Life Skills who met the inclusion criteria. This approach aimed to provide all club participants in the Johannesburg area with the opportunity to engage. Furthermore, including various geographical communities ensured a broader range of viewpoints based on lived experiences in these townships. These locations were randomly named A, B, C, and D to ensure confidentiality. All the participants (P1 to P5) were aged 16 years, although they were in three different grades. Their gender identification, location, grade, and number of years' involvement in Camp Sizanani are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of participants.

Participant	Sexual orientation/ gender	Community	Grade	Years in Camp Sizanani
P1	Homosexual	A	11	2
P2	Female	B	12	5+
P3	Female	A	10	1
P4	Male	C	10	1
P5	Female	D	10	1

Findings and Discussion

The participants experienced and/or were exposed to poverty and environmental risks. This has had an impact on their lived experiences, for some on a more personal level than for others. They understood the multidimensional levels of poverty and how it is interrelated with environmental risks. They recognised the importance of individual and collective commitment and action to fight poverty and environmental risks and made suggestions towards this end. The findings are discussed below in four overarching themes, quoting some responses verbatim.

Theme 1: Multidimensional Levels of Poverty

Participants' own experiences of poverty ranged from not being "born into poverty like other kids" (P1) to "grow[ing] up in poverty" (P3). However, all the participants were exposed to poverty because they lived in the community, "because I was born in a bad environment" (P4). He (P4) explained a bad environment as a place where "people don't have a high quality of life. ... Windows are broken and [there] is no good security. ... They don't [have] enough resources. ... It influences me and my family because my family don't feel safe on the roads, and thief teach you to steal" (P4). For the participants, a bad environment threatens their safety, and also influences their relationships and social networks, as well as their dignity, resulting in social exclusion: "Unhealthy environments are those that threaten safety, that undermine the creation of social ties and that are conflictual, abuse[ive] and violent" (P5).

For some participants, experiences of economic and social exclusion were personal in how they influenced children's opportunities and dignity: "Missing [a] lot of opportunities because we can't afford the price given, can't be considered as people because we wear [things] different from them; children at school make jokes about our torn uniforms and that makes us to be scared to go to school because we know we'll be laughed [at], and people feel pity for us. And people judge us" (P3). A better-resourced participant spoke about the unfairness of children's suffering: "But you know ... sometimes on my way to school I see kids, school kids walking to school with their dirty ripped uniforms then I look at myself and ask myself why does life have to be so unfair huh? ... [T]hey have to be enjoying their childhood" (P1). Internalising the suffering of other children made P1 question his/her life: "Like this sometimes makes me feel like I don't deserve the life I'm living."

The different dimensions of poverty and its psycho-social implications for overall well-being show the interconnectivity between poverty and the environment: "Living in the shack, eating cheap food, wearing cheap clothes and shoes, do their hair only at Christmas or people feel sympathy for them and being given almost everything" (P3). The findings confirm the multidimensional nature of poverty as reported by Statistics South Africa (2020), and the interconnection between nutrition, health, education, protection, and WASH. P1 stated that for "children living in poverty the daily impacts that come easily to mind are hunger, illness, instability, etc." P2 described the housing infrastructure in her community as densely populated shacks with little sanitation: "As you can see [in the picture], it's a skwatta [squatter camp] and they don't have toilets. ... [P]eople are overpopulated that's why we end having more skwatta."

Participants pointed out the associated WASH challenges in their communities, including the struggle to access clean water, a lack or sharing of toilets, and overflowing sewage because toilets are not drained. All these challenges contribute to poor hygiene that affects people's health. As Van Vuuren (2014, 17) points out, "[w]ater is our life blood, our future, and the promise of a better tomorrow." The implications of the scarcity of water were aptly voiced by P3: "[W]e might run out of water and can't do some of my house chores, can't bath, can't cook."

The Water Research Commission confirms water resource limitations and the scarcity of water in relation to the "inequities in the physical, social, administrative as well as institutional access to this important resource," which applies especially to the poor and disempowered majority, who are deprived of water allocations (Van Vuuren 2014, 42). As a life resource, water is central to the survival of the entire ecosystem, not only of human beings. Water pollution is thus an environmental risk that threatens the health of people and contributes to degrading ecosystems, reducing the likelihood of a healthy environment (UNICEF 2021a). Poverty and exposure to environmental risks are therefore closely related (UNICEF 2021a).

Theme 2: The Nexus of Environmental Risks and Poverty

UNEP (2020) points out that impoverished communities frequently put pressure on the land, which increases their susceptibility to poverty-inducing circumstances. In this context, land exploitation presents as a cause and a symptom of poverty. P5 commented: “I think poverty often causes people to put pressure on the environment ... [as the] difficulty to meeting the community needs often leads to pressure on land, over exploitation of soil and deforestation.” However, poor people are disproportionately exposed to environmental risks, and are often “unduly blamed for their role in damaging nature,” for example, by cutting trees for firewood to cook and stay warm (Lombard 2022, 51). Dumping waste also contributes to land, air, and water pollution and associated health risks, as mentioned by two participants: “We are breathing pollutant air ... [due to] ... burning all [the] stuff” (P2); and “Many people pollute the water by throwing their dirt in the water and many of us depend on that water bcoz [because] there are not taps nor a JoJo tank this side so we go there and boil the water b4 [before] using it. ... The problem is that we sometimes get ill by using that water” (P3). These findings demonstrate the interrelatedness of multidimensional poverty and environmental risks, as well as the nexus between humans and the natural environment.

The intertwining of environmental risks and poverty is confirmed by the 25-year country review report for 1994 to 2019 (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 2020), which states that a lack of infrastructure and services in informal settlements, such as waste-removal services, stormwater drains, and sewerage systems, contribute to extensive littering and the overall environmental degradation, with severe health implications. Participants mentioned safety and health risks arising from waste: “We are looking at [an] unhealthy environment ... [W]e all know the bad things of a dirty environment: infectious diseases and public health burdens” (P5); and “Dumping of trash ... brings rats and cause sickness, especially kids, they like to play in the dumping areas” (P2). Participants understood the service delivery challenges in the community regarding waste collection, commenting: “They don’t have enough dust bin[s] in that environment” (P4); and “The dustbin trucks don’t show up” (P3).

Although participants understand the implications of a lack of services, they do not see it as an excuse to pollute the community. They believe that littering shows that people do not regard the environment as important and furthermore do not care. Accepting responsibility for the environment is a cornerstone of ecological citizenship (Dobson et al. 2014).

Theme 3: Importance of Ecological Citizenship

Participants were disturbed by other community members’ carelessness and ignorance about the environment and its health implications for people and the environment. The following views express their concerns:

...[P]eople in my community don't ... care and other than that they are ignorant so yeah hay I think it's still going to be like this up until I don't [know] what happens. (P1)

How careless we are as people and it's not good for the environmental health ... people expect to be healthy with no illness while we are not even taking care of our place. (P3)

I feel bad ... because some of us need that water to survive and seeing other people playing with water make me feel angry coz [because] they would at least share that water with us. (P3)

P4 expressed a similar concern, namely that "people don't take care of the environment and they don't fix or replace things" and then risk being injured, for example, on broken stairs. He contextualised the lack of resources involved, adding that "people live in an insecure place that don't have enough funds to repair the damage." While he understood the resource restrictions of poverty, he had less empathy with a careless attitude and the lack of appreciation and ignorance that people display of the environment's role in their protection: "[P]eople don't care about the environment ... they don't know that the environment gives us shelter" (P4).

Their experiences of the poor environment and carelessness of the broader community regarding the environment evoked various responses from participants. Some felt unhappy and hopeless, like P5: "When you feel unsatisfied or hurt by the environment and the behaviour of people in the environment, it's hard to feel happy and health overall. My mood just dip, along with my energy level." Others felt encouraged to act: "Makes me feel like getting my community start cleaning around and ask the municipal to organise transport for all the dirt. ... [It] influences me to crave for success and my family to keep on encouraging me to focus on my schoolwork." (P3)

Participants emphasised the importance of a positive mindset in dealing with the hardships of poverty and environmental risks, as people do not live in a poor environment by choice:

Many people try their best to provide shelter for their kids and a place doesn't have to be luxury for it to be clean ... you keep it [environment] clean by choice but not living in it by choice so it kinda says home is home whether you're rich or poor. (P3)

People do not want to live in a poor environment, but not having enough resources makes them living there. (P4)

Participants believed that engaging the community in cleaning and taking care of the environment started with themselves and other children, if they accept responsibility for a better life and future:

Taking this thing serious ... take responsibility for our communities so that we can live better. (P2)

[R]esponsibility begin with individuality, meaning if us as individuals do not speak to ourselves to keep our environment clean so that we cannot expect the other person to also do the same. Change starts within us. We have to teach the upcoming generation that our environment represents who we are as a community. A clean environment means a clean and healthy community. (P1)

Theme 4: Strategies to Mitigate Environmental Risks and Poverty

Participants suggested several strategies to mitigate environmental risks and poverty, in which they see a role for themselves, other children, the community, the government and NGOs, among other stakeholders and role players. Participants were well aware of the need for human, financial, and physical resources and the impact of a scarcity of resources.

As a starting point, participants emphasised creating awareness and the need “to be more careful with what’s around us; take care of our water, air, land and body” (P3). Looking inward, they emphasised self-care and respecting themselves and the environment, despite their circumstances. Camp Sizanani Clubs play an important role in this regard, “because they teach us to respect ourselves and to care about the environment” (P4).

Other strategies included that government should provide access to water through taps or JoJo tanks (P3), build more toilets and manage sewage (P2). Additionally, more jobs should be created, including jobs cleaning the environment (P1, P4, P5). The community should have knowledge and be informed about pollution (P2), and the importance of water and how hard life can be without water (P3), to act responsibly in mitigating environmental risks. Schools can teach learners about environmental risks, pollution, and water pollution in particular (P2). The community must undertake clean-up campaigns (P3, P4). Air pollution must be curbed by stopping burning waste (P2), and all community households must be given waste bins (P2). A recurring theme was the importance of reducing, reusing, and recycling (P2, P3, P4). Social and visual media such as pamphlets and posters can assist with information-sharing (P2, P4).

The importance of going to school and being educated was emphasised as a pertinent commitment and responsibility of children. P3 mentioned the need to stop using drugs and to avoid teenage pregnancy, which both contribute to school dropouts, entrenching poverty and increasing the risk of being unemployed. Her lived experiences in her impoverished community encouraged P3’s vision for herself: “[T]o focus on education - I believe that with education I can do whatever I want with my life.”

Children also have a role in the broader public and global domain to protect the environment by participating in “a legal strike that people must take care of the environment” and to post statements on social media to “advise the world to stop polluting” (P4). Collective action is important to bring about social change, which means that people must “be united in my community [to] discuss a way forward to develop our community” (P2).

Lessons for Ecological Social Work and Ecological Citizenship

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 recognises children as important stakeholders in the design and implementation of policies, plans, and standards (UN 2015). To fulfil this role, children need agency, which involves developing their capabilities to make choices and decisions about matters that concern their lives and futures. This agency fosters resilience through adaptation strategies that help them address adversities such as environmental risks and poverty (UNDP 2014). The findings confirmed that children have agency and resilience in their lived experiences of poverty and environmental risks, and can share their views and participate meaningfully as responsible citizens to contribute to sustainable change.

Our findings can be distilled into specific lessons for ecological social work and ecological citizenship. Nine lessons are highlighted for ecological social work: (1) social and economic exclusion are indeed rooted in multidimensional poverty; (2) multidimensional poverty and environmental risks are interrelated; (3) the historical legacy of inequality, unemployment and poverty, maladministration, and corruption needs ongoing consideration; (4) resource allocation requires an equity framework; (5) structural social work is advanced through an ecological framework; (6) social justice must extend to include environmental and ecological justice for sustainable development; (7) humans and nature are equally important for sustainable development; (8) micro, meso, and macro practice levels are relevant; and (9) engagement at the global and local levels are important in the ongoing search for a relevant eco-social model. The lessons from the findings for ecological citizenship are that (1) children know that the community has a responsibility to participate and take action to stop environmental destruction, (2) individual and especially collective ecological citizenship are relevant, (3) ecological citizenship is a moral-ethical issue and takes time to develop, and (4) children are well informed, responsible, and willing to mobilise their communities to become ecological citizens.

The data demonstrate that social and economic exclusion is deeply entrenched in multidimensional poverty. People live in impoverished environments only if they have no choice and are then trapped in the cycle of contributing to pollution and land degradation. The experiences and observations of this study's participants correlate with the findings of the 25-year democratic state review (RSA 2020) and the ten-year NDP review (National Planning Commission [NPC] 2023). Despite the foundations of democracy in South Africa, "the nation's transformation is far from complete" (RSA 2020, 235). The participants' circumstances reflect the historical legacy of deep-rooted inequality, unemployment, and poverty (RSA 2020, 20) and affirm the importance of a new eco-social model to address slow progress (NPC 2023). As the findings indicate, entrenched inequalities and poverty are interrelated with the disproportionately high level of environmental degradation, reflecting environmental racism and injustice (Besthorn 2012). If the historical legacy that created these communities is not addressed, inequalities will be exacerbated (Bullard 2019). Ecological social work must thus be

committed to changing the lives of the invisible and left-behind people in impoverished communities who must be allocated resources through an equity frame (Bullard 2019).

The structural injustices reported by the participants reinforce the extension of ecological social work's focus on social justice to include environmental and ecological justice in a sustainability framework (Lombard 2022). The distinction between environmental and ecological justice is helpful to understand ecological social work, although both are linked to social justice and a rights-based approach. The rights-based approach of environmental justice addresses the rights and needs of people affected by environmental degradation, for example, by pollution and deforestation, and a lack of access to sustainable nourishing resources (Miller, Hayward, and Shaw 2012). It considers the risks and needs of people's social environment in relation to "environmental inequity and environmental racism" (Miller et al. 2012, 271). Ecological justice expands on social and environmental justice by considering the risks and needs of the physical environment and how humans relate to nature, considering the human social world as part of nature rather than as functioning independently from nature (Miller et al. 2012). From an environmental justice perspective, humans have the right to "a clean, healthy, and safe environment" (Hawkins 2010, 71), but from an ecological justice perspective, the physical environment should be protected because it too has a right to protection (Miller et al. 2012). In ecological social work, people and nature are thus equally important (Lombard 2022).

As the findings show, environmental risks have implications for the well-being of humans and the physical environment. Ecological social work should thus play a role across the micro, meso, and macro practice levels (Norton 2012). Social work must resist structural injustices and poverty through a structural approach, and this can be advanced through an ecological framework (Närhi and Matthies 2018). Structural social work includes critical and radical social work practices that focus on the larger socio-economic and political dimensions of society, and structural barriers that worsen the living conditions of social work service users (Närhi and Matthies 2018). Poverty and inequality are global issues; hence, an ecological agenda implies that social work must oppose social and environmental exploitation by defending the most disadvantaged groups and vulnerable communities, and their natural environments, locally and globally (Närhi and Matthies 2018). Ecological citizenship therefore "encompasses the rights and responsibilities to act at local and global scales" (Jørgensen and Jørgensen 2021, 1341).

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD 2021, 1) also regards the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* as "[constituting] a roadmap towards a new ecological and social contract for people and planet." Ecological social work confirms the profession's relevance in the context of a call for a new global eco-social contract, given that most 20th century social contracts had failed "to guarantee respect for planetary boundaries, biodiversity and the sustainable use of natural resources"; this failure is evident in unequal and deeply divided societies where "people

feel left out and left behind” (UNRISD 2021, 2). An ecological social contract fit for the 21st century must ensure human rights and the inclusion of all, must promote freedom for all, including security and protection to deal with the challenges of a fast-changing world, and must transform economies and societies to stop climate change and environmental destruction (UNRISD 2021).

A new eco-social contract that operationalises the vision of the 2030 Agenda will be better understood if it is “grounded in broad participation, dialogue and consensus building” (UNRISD 2021, 2), and includes clear structures for accountability. It has to reflect on the realities of people’s lives and requires co-building across sectors and concerns at the local national, regional, and global levels (UNRISD 2021). To contribute to a new eco-social contract, ecological social work must partner with different stakeholders around social, economic, and environmental issues, including the government, NGOs, business, and local communities (UNRISD 2021). The strategies proposed by the participants in this study include the involvement and collaboration of different stakeholders to curb environmental risks.

The participants were disturbed by community members’ careless attitude towards land degradation and pollution and their refusal to take responsibility for doing anything about it. Jørgensen and Jørgensen (2021) regard a change in attitude about caring for the environment as fundamental to ecological citizenship. Dobson et al. (2014, 139) consider an ecological citizenship view as a different kind of collective interest, which one only understands when one thinks about “what’s good for the community and not just about what’s good for [one] self.” They explain ecological citizenship as a longer-term approach to change people’s behaviour, and is based on the assumption that people can learn about respecting the other and to consider the collective interest. In that sense, environmental citizenship is a moral-ethical issue from which people draw their capacity for action, and not because of financial incentives or being pressurised to participate (Dobson et al. 2014). Furthermore, it is important to take people along in establishing long-term behaviour, for which both ecological and democratic participation are required (Dobson et al. 2014). As Närhi and Matthies (2018) point out, if citizens share in the use of goods and democratically govern them collectively, they are more likely to share responsibility for the use of the resources in their community. Participation in the collective is thus a key component of ecological citizenship, as it develops a sense of collaboration and communal responsibility for the environment (Jørgensen and Jørgensen 2021). It reinforces existing feelings of responsibility and care for nature and a willingness to act. Working together is thus more important than working alone for the “cultivation” of citizenship thinking (Jørgensen and Jørgensen 2021).

The findings highlight the relevance of ecological social work and show the role that children can play as responsible citizens in developing ecological citizenship to contribute to sustainable development. Children need opportunities to access their right to express themselves freely, as outlined in the Convention of the Rights of the Child

(UNICEF 2009). Alongside international legally binding agendas and agreements on climate change and sustainable development to which South Africa is a signatory, Article 24 of the Bill of Human Rights enshrined in the Constitution (RSA 1996) provides the interrelated justice and rights-based framework required for ecological social work to work across all intervention levels, globally and locally, to contribute to sustainable development.

Conclusion

UNRISD's (2021) call for a new eco-social world is also a call to action for social work. Ecological social work is a pathway to contribute to sustainable development and justice for all. As this study shows, children can accept the responsibility to act in promoting a sustainable environment. They can play an active role, but they need the freedom and space to participate (UNDP 2014). Ecological social work includes advocating for children's right to participate in matters that affect their lives (Save the Children 2015). However, to shape ecological social work and develop children's and the broader community's ecological citizenship, commitment is required to the "new ways of thinking and acting" needed to "act differently for the sake of the environment" (Jørgensen and Jørgensen 2021, 1341). Collective ecological citizenship is key in achieving sustainable development (Dobson et al. 2014), but ecological citizenship develops over time. Hence, civil society must be mobilised; no change is possible "unless civil society really gets up, acts together, and influences both the State and the market" (Dobson et al. 2014, 40). Ecological social work has to work with people at their pace to develop ecological citizenship. While the embedded structural and advocacy roles of social work must remain vigilant in ecological social work, a shift towards ecological citizenship for action is the "source of change" (Dobson et al. 2014, 40) that social work has to commit to and embark on to contribute to a sustainable and just world.

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