

Ecological Social Work and Environmental Citizenship in Southern Africa

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Humans have used and depleted natural resources and failed to preserve nature, resulting in a global challenge to manage climate change and ecological degradation and to sustain livelihoods. The neglect to preserve natural resources exacerbates environmental challenges and human vulnerabilities (World Bank 2019). Attenborough (2020) refers to the interdependence between humans and the natural environment and asserts that while humans are dependent on nature, their actions have resulted in an ecological crisis, which in turn has become a crisis for humanity. As such, human beings are faced with the long-term consequences of the degradation and increasing destruction of our natural world (cf. Dunlap and Jorgenson 2012), which requires urgent and new strategies for sustainable development through a focus on ecological concerns that threaten human well-being (Valavanidis 2019).

As a profession with a long-standing declared focus on the person-in-environment (PiE) approach, social work should play a major role in promoting a just and sustainable world. However, with the focus on PiE, the profession has primarily targeted the *social* environment (Norton 2012). Besthorn (2012) reports that the profession started to include the *natural* environment only in the 21st century. Besthorn, however, notes that while a focus on the natural environment includes social justice, where persons exposed to ecological degradation and natural disasters require support, this will not be enough to ensure sustainable development to protect the planet on which humans are dependent (cf. Attenborough, 2020). For this reason, social work should search for a broader justice



Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development
Volume 37 | Supp | 2025 | #18975 | 7 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2708-9355/18975>

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

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framework where humans and nature are viewed as interdependent, and a focus is placed on climate, environmental and social justice. This requires a sustainability framework that places the natural environment at the centre (Lombard 2022).

In the African context, a broader justice framework takes cognisance of the close relationship between environmental risks and the social and economic exclusion of vulnerable people. While poor and marginalised populations contribute the least to environmental degradation, they experience more environmental risks, while at the same time contributing to environmental degradation because of limited resources (Islam and Winkel, 2017). As such, human harm to the environment requires an understanding of the construction of injustices through the lens of environmental justice.

This special issue is, among others, based on Besthorn's (2012) argument that the social work profession must rethink how sustainability and environmental justice are included as a central part of the profession's conceptualisation of its identity and role in the present world. This is in line with Lombard's (2022, 47) stance that sustainable social work practices embrace the "interconnectedness between people, the planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships as a foundational approach for social work". Acknowledging human-nature interconnectedness, Van der Westhuizen (2021) suggests an interdisciplinary approach through collaborative interventions that are based on a change orientation to respond to ecological concerns that affect human well-being through, among others, practices of environmental citizenship. Within the Southern African context, Lockhart (2011) drew a link between nature, spirituality and sustainable development, emphasising a need for a focus on indigenous social work practices.

Globally, and in particular, in Southern Africa, social work has too long been in a state of reticence concerning ecological social work (ESW) and environmental citizenship (EC). ESW is aimed at sustainable development with a focus on addressing the depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation and climate change (United Nations 2015) that aims to promote both human well-being (Rocha 2018) and the natural environment (Lombard 2022). Ramsay and Boddy (2016) explain that ESW practices assist humanity in creating and sustaining a biodiverse planetary ecosystem through social change. This definition places the responsibility of taking care of the planet on both the individual and society to ensure the well-being of the persons living in those environments. This is elaborated by Scott and Wolfe (2015), who link the individual in the natural environment with policies and relationships in and between communities and institutions. This entails active citizenship in social work practice by promoting environmental sustainability and improving human well-being.

EC has to do with concepts of environmental responsibility, attitude, knowledge and concerns (Janmaimool and Chudech 2020). It includes the practice of environmental rights and duties. These rights and duties have to do with the way we relate to the planet and natural resources. The focus is on the identification of the underlying structural

causes of ecological degradation and risks, as well as the development of willingness and competencies for critical and active engagement and civic participation to address these causes. These engagements take place through individual and collective actions while considering inter- and intra-generational justice (Hadjichambis, Reis, Paraskeva-Hadjichambi, Cincera, Pauw, Gericke, and Knippels 2020). Inter- and intra-generational justice necessitates a focus on both addressing environmental damage that has already been caused and preventing further damage (Klarin 2018). The recent floods experienced in KwaZulu-Natal in April/May 2022 have once more called upon the social work profession to become active in ecological issues and EC, as vulnerable populations continue to bear the brunt of ecological factors, including climate change and associated injustices.

ESW and EC are growing areas of interest in social work globally. The region faces a critical need to address its environmental challenges and should prioritise ecological sustainability and environmental citizenship. To grow the literature in Southern Africa, this themed issue is dedicated to disseminating regional research, practices and discussions on ESW and EC.

The papers in this themed issue present a comprehensive and coherent exploration of ESW and environmental citizenship within the African and South African contexts. They discuss both theoretical and community development frameworks for social work practice aimed at addressing the pressing environmental challenges and their impact on both human and ecological systems. The diverse range of perspectives—spanning African-centric frameworks to transformative eco-social practices—offers an inclusive and multifaceted approach to social work in the face of climate change and sustainability. Through theoretical developments, community development frameworks, and child-centred perspectives, the papers highlight the potential of social work to contribute to a more sustainable and just world.

Gray's paper, *Key Themes in the African Environmental Social Work Literature*, discusses the theoretical development of environmental social work that has influenced its development in Africa. The author explores the development of social work in Africa and South Africa, highlighting African values and cultural traditions and how these both enrich and challenge pressing social issues that impact both human and environmental well-being. A focus is placed on how these values and traditions impact social and environmental interventions in the search to address problems such as poverty, social development, climate change and pollution. The paper presents a typology of intervention strategies that social workers might use to respond to socio-environmental problems.

In the paper, *A Theoretical Framework for Environmental Social Work in South Africa: Towards Transformative Eco-social Practice*, Jacobs proposes a theoretical framework for environmental social work, advocating for a shift from an anthropocentric to an eco-social worldview. It calls for social work to embrace environmental justice,

environmental education, ecological citizenship and sustainability, integrating these concepts into social work practice to address the growing environmental challenges exacerbated by climate change. The author proposes that with the integration of this framework in environmental social work, the impact of environmental crises may be mitigated through the fostering of resilience in vulnerable communities that promote social justice and sustainable development.

Hart and Smith expand on the importance of sustainability for social work in their paper titled *A Sustainable Community Development Framework for Environmental Citizenship Empowerment*. They draw on the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals, arguing that they are grounded in sustainability interdependent with a holistic view of well-being dimensions. The paper discusses how sustainable community development can be achieved through environmental citizenship empowerment using the socio-ecological systems theory. Referencing dimensions of health, income, education, housing, energy, sanitation, environment, transport, security, food, recreation and communication, socio-ecological systems theory highlights the importance of social work in creating a balance between environmental, social, and economic well-being, proposing a framework that supports environmental citizenship to address sustainability challenges at the community level.

Mzinyane and Makhanya's paper, *The People's Charter for an Eco-Social World: A Framework for Afrocentric Social Work in the Wake of Climate Change*, advocates for a holistic and Afrocentric approach to climate change. It calls for a holistic and inclusive approach toward eco-social work, an approach that acknowledges African values, to curb climate change disasters. It proposes the People's Charter for an Eco-Social World as a framework for integrating African values, such as *Ubuntu* and solidarity, into environmental citizenship to contribute to an inclusive, sustainable response to climate change through social work. The authors conclude with a recommendation that mechanisms should be established for sharing best practices across global communities, especially from African epistemologies, to the world.

In the paper, *Children's Views on Poverty and Environmental Risks: Lessons for Ecological Social Work and Ecological Citizenship*, Lombard and Lipholo focus on children's understanding of poverty and environmental risks. They explore how children's perspectives can inform ESW and environmental citizenship. It highlights the importance of children's agency in promoting sustainable solutions and how their involvement can contribute to developing ecological citizenship as part of social work practice for a sustainable and just future. The findings of the study show that children have an understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, its interrelatedness with environmental risks, and what it means to be responsible citizens by having an environmental-oriented attitude. Children are also able to propose strategies they can engage in to contribute to sustainable development.

Possibilities for Unemployed Youth in the Green Economy: An Ecological Social Work Perspective, presents Dykes, Carelse, Davids and Human-Hendricks's exploration of how South African youth could be empowered to participate in the green economy, addressing both socio-economic challenges and environmental vulnerability. By linking social and environmental justice, they advocate for greater emphasis on participatory environmental initiatives, where youth can act as change agents in sustainable development. The paper offers recommendations for developing social work practice and education to support youth involvement in environmental initiatives and skills development in the green economy for a sustainable future.

Masinga, Chiwara, Fleischmann and Dlamini's paper, *Fostering Environmental Citizenship to Address Ecological Challenges in South Africa: Lessons from the Circular Economy*, emphasises the importance of environmental citizenship and circular economy principles for all sectors to address ecological challenges while drawing from the circular economy. The authors argue that a focus on ecological citizenship in social work education will increase the collaboration between social workers, businesses and communities to promote and tackle the interconnected issues of poverty, unemployment and environmental degradation through a social, economic and ecological justice framework.

A focus on livelihoods is emphasised in Matsea's paper, *Promoting Ecological Citizenship: Social Work Approach to Save the Environment for Sustainable Livelihood*. It explores social work's role in mitigating the impacts of climate change through a focus on vulnerable populations affected by environmental degradation and sustainable livelihoods. The author concludes that interventions that promote environmental justice, green behaviour and ecological citizenship are vital for fostering not only a sense of responsibility and commitment to environmental preservation, but also support the development of sustainable livelihoods. The paper presents a pragmatic approach for social workers to integrate ecological citizenship into their practice to achieve sustainable livelihoods.

The papers presented in this edition provide a conceptualisation of ESW and EC and also present frameworks and some guidelines from which social workers can approach interventions that integrate human and environmental well-being. Acknowledging human-nature interconnectedness, Van der Westhuizen (2021) suggests an interdisciplinary approach through collaborative interventions that are based on a change orientation to respond to ecological concerns that affect human well-being through, among others, practices of environmental citizenship. Within the Southern African context, Lockhart (2011) drew a link between nature, spirituality and sustainable development, emphasising a need for a focus on indigenous social work practices—some of the papers in this issue present practice frameworks for social work practice. The editors want to thank the Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development for this special edition and hope that these articles will stimulate the discourse on ESW and EC, and it will lead to the dissemination of best practices

that could contribute to the social impact of ESW not only in South Africa and Africa, but also globally.

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