



THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE AND BUILDING RESILIENCE IN SRI LANKA

Mitchel.H.¹

¹ School of Social Work, National Institute of Social Development, Liyanagemulla, Seeduwa, Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

This article examines the pressing issue of climate change for social work in Sri Lanka. Climate threats like floods, droughts, and rising sea levels are disrupting lives and livelihoods, particularly for vulnerable communities. The paper discusses how social workers in Sri Lanka can contribute on macro, mezzo, and micro levels to efforts to address climate change, considering both adaptation and mitigation strategies. It argues for an integrated approach and emphasizes social work's role in promoting environmental justice. By extending the concept of "person-in-environment" to include the physical environment, social workers can incorporate a responsibility for the environment into their practice, aligning with existing social work theories.

KEYWORDS: Climate change, social work, social justice, Sri Lanka, person-in-environment

INTRODUCTION

Climate change presents a pressing challenge for social work in Sri Lanka, given the profession's commitment to promoting social justice and well-being. Climate change disrupts these very aspects, posing significant risks to Sri Lankan communities (Mearns & Norton, 2009; Alston, 2015; Levy & Patz, 2015). The island nation faces a multitude of climate threats, including floods, droughts, rising sea levels, and salinization, all of which disproportionately impact vulnerable populations already grappling with poverty, social inequalities, and limited resources (Environmental Migration Portal, 2023).

Social work, drawing on ecological theories, is uniquely positioned to address climate change across macro, mezzo, and micro levels. At the macro level, Sri Lankan social workers can advocate for climate-resilient policies. Their expertise in understanding social vulnerability allows them to inject a crucial social perspective into national debates and policies, facilitating discussions about future actions to build community resilience (UNDP, 2016).

The mezzo level presents opportunities for social workers to mobilize communities. They can empower communities to take action that enhances their well-being while ensuring the preservation of resources for future generations. This could involve promoting sustainable livelihoods practices or advocating for disaster preparedness initiatives.

At the micro level, social workers can integrate "environmental social work" practices. This might involve raising awareness about the connections between people and the environment in Sri Lanka, or supporting individuals and families affected by climate disruptions, such as displacement or loss of income. This explores how Sri Lankan social workers can utilize these multi-level approaches to address climate change, promote social justice, and ensure the well-being of vulnerable communities in the face of a changing environment.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ITS IMPACTS IN SRI LANKA

Human-induced climate change presents significant challenges for Sri Lanka. Since the industrial revolution, the global average temperature has increased by 1.1°C (Climate Council, n.d.). This rise, caused by greenhouse gases trapping heat from the sun, disrupts Earth's climate (Climate Council, n.d.). Activities like burning fossil fuels and land clearing contribute to these emissions (Climate Council, n.d.).

Climate change intensifies extreme weather events in Sri Lanka, leading to more frequent and severe climate-related hazards (Gaspar, Bolm & Ruth, 2011). This includes stronger cyclones, violent storms, and extreme rainfall causing floods (McMichael, 2014, p. 10). Rising temperatures also melt polar ice caps, causing sea level rise that threatens Sri Lanka's coastlines (May & Caron, 2014). Warming sea temperatures harm coral reefs and krill, impacting marine life that depend on them (May & Caron, 2014). Additionally, changing climates threaten Sri Lanka's diverse plant and animal life (May & Caron, 2014).

Climate change poses a significant risk to Sri Lankans due to biodiversity loss. Healthy ecosystems are vital for human needs such as moderating weather, regulating water cycles,

providing clean water, maintaining soil fertility, pollinating crops, and offering recreational opportunities (Tercek and Adams, as cited in CUMACCI et al., 2014, p. 127). Disruptions to these ecosystems in Sri Lanka can lead to issues like reduced agricultural yields, water scarcity, destruction of settlements and infrastructure, and damage to natural spaces (CUMACCI et al., 2014).

Beyond direct physical hazards from climate-related disasters (McMichael, 2014), these disruptions have indirect impacts on human health. For example, ecosystem changes can lead to infectious diseases, food and water insecurity, economic disruption, and conflict related to resource scarcity, all of which impact mental and physical health (McMichael, 2014). This can exacerbate social issues like poverty, mass displacement, political instability, and social disruption.

The poorest and most vulnerable communities in Sri Lanka are disproportionately threatened (Mearns & Norton, 2009; Levy & Patz, 2015). Existing inequalities worsen their ability to respond to climate change (Alston, 2015). Those most at risk include people living in poverty, people of color, Indigenous communities (Mearns & Norton, 2009), those with chronic illnesses or disabilities, and women (Levy & Patz, 2015).

While Sri Lanka contributes minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions, it bears a significant burden of the consequences (Mearns & Norton, 2009; Levy & Patz, 2015). This highlights the need for equity and social justice in climate change responses (Mearns & Norton, 2009). Current approaches often focus on scientific and technical aspects, neglecting the uneven impacts on vulnerable populations (Alston, 2015). Social work can play a crucial role in addressing these disparities and ensuring the well-being of vulnerable communities in Sri Lanka as they face a changing climate.

APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE IN SRI LANKA

A crucial approach for Sri Lanka is to build its capacity to adapt to the inevitable impacts of climate change (Shalizi & Lecocq, 2010). As Sri Lanka is already experiencing the effects of climate change (e.g., floods, droughts, rising sea levels), adaptation is essential (Mearns & Norton, 2009).

Adaptation strategies in Sri Lanka should prioritize improving resilience, particularly for vulnerable communities (Mearns & Norton, 2009). Many Sri Lankans lack robust government and market-based protection, highlighting the need for social policies that enhance their ability to cope with climate-related hazards (Mearns & Norton, 2009). This could involve establishing early warning systems, promoting climate-smart agriculture practices, or providing social safety nets for those displaced by climate events. Sri Lanka can leverage the strengths of community-led adaptation initiatives. Local communities often have unique knowledge of their ecosystems and the challenges they face (Mearns & Norton, 2009). However, these initiatives frequently lack necessary external support (Mearns & Norton, 2009). The government can support these initiatives by providing resources, technical assistance, and capacity building programs. Additionally, involving local communities in national adaptation planning can ensure strategies utilize their knowledge and address specific vulnerabilities.

Adaptation strategies have limitations due to the uncertainty surrounding the location and severity of future climate impacts (Shalizi & Lecocq, 2010). Additionally, some climate change effects may be irreversible.

Therefore, Sri Lanka also needs to focus on mitigation strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and prevent further warming (Shalizi & Lecocq, 2010; Levy & Patz, 2015). Mitigating climate change is crucial for protecting public health (Levy & Patz, 2015) and potentially avoiding catastrophic consequences. Studies suggest mitigation can be more cost-effective than relying solely on adaptation (Shalizi & Lecocq, 2010; Haines et al., 2007).

IMPLEMENTING MITIGATION STRATEGIES IN SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka can implement mitigation strategies across various sectors (Levy & Patz, 2015). Examples include:

- Promoting renewable energy sources like solar and wind power.
- Encouraging sustainable transportation options like public transport, cycling, and electric vehicles.
- Implementing policies that incentivize sustainable agriculture practices and reduce reliance on chemical fertilizers.
- Protecting and restoring natural ecosystems like forests, which absorb carbon dioxide.

While Sri Lanka can take significant steps toward mitigation, the global nature of climate change necessitates international cooperation (Shalizi & Lecocq, 2010). Sri Lanka should advocate for global agreements and initiatives that promote clean energy technologies and sustainable practices. International support, particularly from developed nations, is crucial for Sri Lanka's transition to a low-carbon economy.

Given the urgency of both reducing emissions and adapting to existing impacts, Sri Lanka needs an integrated approach that combines mitigation and adaptation efforts (Haines et al., 2007). This strategy will minimize the risk of catastrophic damage while ensuring preparedness for unavoidable consequences.

SOCIAL WORK THEORIES AND APPROACHES IN THE SRI LANKAN CONTEXT

Climate change presents a social justice and human rights challenge demanding social work intervention. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) emphasizes the interconnectedness of human rights and the environment, highlighting that a safe and healthy environment is essential for human rights (UNEP, n.d.). While over 150 countries recognize the right to a healthy environment (Environmental Defenders Office, 2020), its practical application remains limited.

Given social work's core principles of advocating for human rights (IFSW, n.d.) and protecting vulnerable populations (AASW, 2020), climate change demands attention as it

disproportionately impacts these groups (Levy & Patz, 2015). Social workers can contribute a crucial social justice perspective to climate debates, ensuring the effects on vulnerable communities are prioritized (Dominelli, 2011).

Green Social Work in Sri Lanka

"Green social work," a term coined by Dominelli (2012), refers to practices that protect the environment and enhance well-being. This approach is vital in Sri Lanka, where individuals may experience climate-related grief and loss. Social workers can enhance micro-practice by raising awareness and educating clients about the impacts of climate change.

Extending the Person-in-Environment Concept

Ecological systems theory already positions social work with a focus on the "person-in-environment." Traditionally, this environment referred primarily to the social aspects. However, due to climate change, the concept is expanding to encompass the physical environment (Alston, 2015; Norton, 2012; McKinnon, 2008). Sri Lankan social workers must recognize the influence of the physical environment on the social environment and integrate environmental responsibility into their practice (IFSW, as cited in Alston, 2015).

Social Sustainability: A Framework for Action

The concept of social sustainability can help Sri Lankan social workers integrate environmental concerns into their practice. Social sustainability occurs when processes, systems, and relationships support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy communities (WACOSS, as cited in McKinnon, 2008). Socially sustainable communities are equitable, diverse, connected, and democratic, offering a good quality of life. Research establishes a direct link between societal and environmental health, highlighting the necessity for social work to address ecological justice and social sustainability (McKinnon, 2008). Existing social work skills can be highly effective in responding to climate change and promoting environmental sustainability.

Beyond Anthropocentrism

Approaches focusing solely on climate change's human impact have been criticized for being anthropocentric (Norton, 2012). Social work has often embraced a shallow ecological view, prioritizing human needs (Coates & Gray, 2011). Deep ecology and ecofeminism offer alternative perspectives.

- **Deep Ecology:** This theory argues for the intrinsic value of all living beings and their interconnectedness. It can help Sri Lankan social workers understand the relationship between people and the natural world, fostering deeper empathy.
- **Ecofeminism:** This theory suggests the exploitation of the earth stems from human perceived superiority. It can encourage social workers to challenge this perspective and advocate for environmental protection.

Norton (2012) proposes that social workers can utilize both perspectives to promote understanding between people and the natural world, developing a deep ecological consciousness. This "ecosocial" approach aligns with social work ethics and values by advocating for an anti-oppressive model that challenges human dominance over nature.

Learning from Indigenous Worldviews

Developing a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things fosters global consciousness, a connection to the earth, and a valuing of planetary well-being (Norton, 2012). These concepts resonate with Indigenous worldviews, emphasizing a "symbiotic relationship to the earth" and acknowledging the delicate balance between all things (Morissette et al., as cited in Coates & Gray, 2011). Sri Lankan social work can gain valuable insights from Indigenous ways of knowing and doing that promote harmony between humans and the environment.

MACRO, MEZZO, AND MICRO ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN SRI LANKA

Ecological social work theories offer a valuable framework for environmental social work practice in Sri Lanka. This section explores how social workers can contribute at the macro, mezzo, and micro levels within the Sri Lankan context.

Macro Social Work Practice

- **Policy Advocacy**

Social workers in Sri Lanka can advocate for climate-conscious policies and influence national debates on climate change (Alston, 2015). They can bring a social justice perspective, highlighting the unequal impacts on vulnerable communities and advocating for equitable resource sharing and increased aid (Alston, 2015).

- **Social Science Expertise**

Social workers can contribute their social science expertise by exploring how different Sri Lankan communities might respond to climate challenges and facilitating collective action (Victor, 2015). Their skills in mediating between groups can help bridge divides and promote understanding of diverse values related to climate action (Dominelli, 2011).

Mezzo Social Work Practice

- **Community Mobilization and Awareness Raising**

Social workers can play a crucial role in mobilizing communities, particularly those highly vulnerable to climate change (Dominelli, 2011). This may involve raising awareness about climate change impacts, dispelling denial or skepticism, and contextualizing global concerns within Sri Lankan realities (Dominelli, 2011).

- **Supporting Community Action**

Social workers can support communities taking action on climate change. This might involve facilitating access to resources, technologies, or training programs related to mitigation and adaptation strategies (Dominelli, 2011). Advocacy for local action and support for existing community initiatives are also crucial.

- **Disaster Response and Social Sustainability**

Social workers are well-positioned to support communities after climate-related disasters. This includes advocating for resource allocation and humanitarian aid, providing therapeutic support, and assisting communities in rebuilding (Dominelli, 2012). A social sustainability approach, focused on preserving resources for future generations, aligns well with these efforts (McKinnon, 2008).

- **The Transition Town Movement**

Sri Lanka can learn from the Transition Town Movement, which promotes community resilience through a strengths-based and solution-focused approach (Bay, 2016). Social workers can support this approach by encouraging community self-sufficiency and exploring initiatives like community gardens, resource exchange programs, and reskilling for a low-carbon lifestyle (Bay, 2016).

Micro Social Work Practice

- **Environmental Impact on Clients**

Social workers should be aware of how the natural environment impacts their clients (Erikson, 2016). This includes considering how environmental changes caused by climate change might influence client functioning and well-being during assessments and interventions.

- **Nature-based Interventions**

Strengths-based practice can explore how clients use contact with nature as a coping mechanism (Norton, 2012). Social workers can utilize this by incorporating nature walks or recommending spending time outdoors as part of therapy, especially considering potential mental health benefits (Berman et al., 2008).

- **Working with Indigenous Communities**

Social workers supporting Indigenous communities in Sri Lanka must acknowledge their unique connection to the land and history of environmental injustice (Billiot &

Mitchell, 2019). This necessitates a practice framework that considers vulnerability, adaptation, and resilience within an Indigenous context (Billiot & Mitchell, 2019).

Social workers in Sri Lanka should be particularly mindful of the needs of Indigenous communities who are disproportionately affected by environmental changes due to their deep connection to the land and history of environmental injustice (Billiot & Mitchell, 2019). Billiot and Mitchell (2019) suggest that working with Indigenous communities requires a framework that considers vulnerability, adaptation, and resilience within an Indigenous context.

CONCLUSION

Climate change presents a significant social justice challenge in Sri Lanka, demanding a more prominent role for social workers. The unequal impact on vulnerable communities necessitates social work intervention to advocate for equitable resource distribution. This paper demonstrates the substantial alignment between existing ecological social work theories and effective responses to climate change in Sri Lanka.

Social workers in Sri Lanka can contribute by expanding the "person-in-environment" concept to encompass the physical environment's intrinsic value and the interconnectedness of all living things. This necessitates moving beyond solely understanding environmental impacts on people. By fostering a deep empathy for the environment, social work can learn valuable lessons from Sri Lanka's Indigenous worldviews.

Social workers are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to address climate change at macro, mezzo, and micro levels within the Sri Lankan context. This includes advocacy for equitable policies at the national level, community engagement and support for vulnerable populations, and client-centered interventions that acknowledge the environment's influence on individual well-being.

Further research opportunities include exploring how social work education in Sri Lanka can be strengthened to equip future practitioners with the necessary knowledge and skills to address climate change effectively. Additionally, investigating and documenting best practices for social work interventions related to climate change within the Sri Lankan context can provide valuable guidance for the profession.

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