



GLOBAL WARMING, CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE NEED FOR GREEN SOCIAL WORK

KEYWORDS

Climate Change, Social Work, Green Social Work

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ABSTRACT

Climate change refers to the rise in average surface temperatures on Earth as an impact of global warming attributed directly or indirectly to human activity. It is one of the greatest cross-cutting issues of the 21st century and also a significant social, cultural and economic threat facing humankind. Social work profession that claims to intervene to enhance people's well-being however has played a low-key role in environmental issues that increasingly impact on people's well-being, both locally and globally. Climate change is seldom a topic of mainstream social work. At present there exists a scientific consensus that our planet is almost in the tipping point where continued atmospheric concentration of green house gases will have devastating effects on our ecosystem which makes social work intervention the need of the hour. This paper recognizes the emergence of new international agendas for social work profession and argues that social work has a role to play in challenging the social, political and economic structures and processes that cause climate change.

Introduction

Climate change is the tip of the iceberg of a global ecological crisis relating to biodiversity and the availability of fertile land, sustainable food production, finite water and energy resources (Rockström et al., 2009). Climate change is the crucial challenge of our generation. It refers to the variation in the Earth's global climate or in regional climates over time. It describes changes in the variability or average state of the atmosphere over time scales ranging from decades to millions of years. These changes can be caused by processes internal to the Earth (e.g. variations in sunlight intensity) or external forces which are most recently attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere. Changes in the climate are not new. In fact, changes in climate are as old as our planet. However the current changes in climate cannot be regarded as ordinary because of its scale and rapidity. It can be described as extraordinary in the history of our planet.

Climate change is causing unprecedented, unpredictable and irreversible changes to the earth's ecosystem at an alarming rate. Rockström et al (2009) have rightly pointed out that "climate change is not an isolated phenomenon but rather is inextricably part of a set of interrelated problems" which include industrialization and urbanization; industrial pollution and environmental degradation; climate change, renewable energy and social problems, vulnerability and social injustice. This article argues that the profession needs to focus on the new international agendas and develop its own framework to deal with the complex issue of climate change.

Climate Change

The word climate comes from the Greek work 'Klima' meaning inclination referring to the major role of the inclination of the solar rays on the earth's surface. The etymology of the word reminds us that the average temperature of our planet is affected, at least partially, by the natural cycle of our king, the sun. However, the current rise in temperature is too great to be exclusively linked to solar activity.]

Causes of Climate Change:

There are numerous causes of climate change which can be classified into 'natural' and 'anthropogenic' (human induced). The

prominent natural causes of climate change include: continental drift, volcanoes, ocean currents, the earth's tilt, and comets and meteorites, sunspots etc. But these natural causes alone are not substantial to induce global warming. This change in climate, also known as global warming has occurred more rapidly when compared to the past and is due to human activities.

Ever-increasing carbon emissions and diminishing carbon sinks around the world highlight the 'anthropogenic' nature of climate change and reveal the ways human societies function and change over time. Tackling climate change thus requires a broadened understanding of how human societies and the activities that take place within them drive climate change in different ways. Natural resources are being used extensively for construction, industries, transport, and consumption. Consumerism (our increasing want for material things) has increased by leaps and bounds, creating mountains of waste. All these together with the tremendous increase in population have contributed to a rise in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The energy sector is responsible for about ¾ of the carbon dioxide emissions, 1/5 of the methane emissions and a large quantity of nitrous oxide. It also produces nitrogen oxides (NOx) and carbon monoxide (CO) which are not greenhouse gases but do have an influence on the chemical cycles in the atmosphere that produce or destroy greenhouse gases. Thus every human being has a share in triggering the conditions that cause climate change through their day to day activities.

Environmental implications of climate change:

The environmental consequences of climate change include events like storms, droughts and floods, cyclical changes in precipitation, or long-term changes in temperature and raising sea levels.

Social and economic implications of climate change:

Climate change cannot be deemed as critical to the environment alone it also leads to adverse social and economic consequences. These consequences include effects on "the operation of socio-economic systems or on human health and welfare" (UNFCCC). Much emphasis is laid on the environmental and infrastructural impacts of climate change but climate change potentially affects a wider range of sustainable devel-

opment issues – such as health, food security, employment, incomes and livelihoods, gender equality, education, housing, poverty and mobility – either directly or indirectly.

Climate change poses a risk of severe events like storms, droughts and floods, cyclical changes in precipitation, or long-term changes in temperature and raising sea levels. The impact of these events can lead to a downward spiral in human development. Further climate change also affects the human health systems as a result of emergencies like extreme heat, floods and droughts, tropical storms and changing patterns of infection, water shortages, malnutrition and psychosocial stress.

The effects of climate change are expected to be more severe for some segments of society than others because of factors like geographic location, the degree of association with climate-sensitive environments, and unique cultural, economic, or political characteristics of particular landscapes and human populations. Social vulnerability and equity in the context of climate change are important because climate change is likely have adverse effects on the indigenous people and socially vulnerable communities, poor and disadvantaged groups of the society especially those living in the developing nations.

According to Prof. Jim Ife 'It is now inevitable that climate change will impact economies and lifestyles, but the critical question is whose economies and whose lifestyles. Tragically, though unsurprisingly, national governments are reacting to the threat of global warming by placing national interests first, trying to ensure that it is someone else who has to suffer, and this means that, inescapably, the economies and lifestyles that suffer most will be the that of the world's poor and disadvantaged. The threat to disadvantaged people, communities, populations and nations is twofold'.

First, there is the threat from the impact of global warming itself, in that most of the world's poor live in areas that are thought to be most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. There are likely to be many millions of climate refugees, forced to seek refuge because their homelands are no longer habitable. This will be as a direct consequence of the ecologically disastrous activities of people in the developed countries.

The second threat to the disadvantaged is that they will suffer not just from climate change, but from the policies and practices implemented and imposed by the rich nations on the rest of the world, in response to global warming. Economic development, the most effective route out of poverty, may well be delayed in the world's poorest nations, if the rich impose stringent emission limits on others including those who cannot afford the new technologies of clean energy sources. Hence there are only two possible outcomes: either the rich countries themselves may choose to limit its massive over-consumption and lead the way in truly sustainable and simpler living (but this is highly unlikely), or the less developed nations must be prevented from enjoying the fruits of economic development (which is both highly inequitable and highly dangerous, from the perspective of global security). In short climate change will become another generator of social and economic inequality and injustice, and climate refugees will become a major social work concern

Thus global warming cannot be looked upon as a scientific problem but has to be regarded as a social problem. Social workers should identify how global warming affects different populations in different parts of the world and should engage themselves in fighting for social justice and human rights and also be in the forefront of designing policies to mitigate and adapt to global warming. Leaving global warming to the scientists is like leaving poverty to the economists, mental illness to the psychi-

atrists and crime to the police. All of these are social problems that require social solutions which can be articulated only by social workers.

Green Social Work: Concept and Need

Since the emergence social work as a profession there has been a persistent interest in the metaphor of 'person-in-environment'. But, despite the frequent use of the term 'environment', social work literature pays much attention to the social and economic environment and remains basically silent on ecological domains (nature) as being a fundamental aspect of 'environment'.

Abigail Tischler (2011) in her article has pointed out an explicit environmental protection policy statement of NASW, which states "Social workers have a professional obligation to become knowledgeable and educated about the precarious position of the natural environment, to speak out and take action on behalf of it, and to help their clients act in an environmentally responsible manner" (NASW, 2006, p. 141).

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2012) identifies a clear link between social work ethics in terms of our obligation to challenge unjust policies and practices, and to seek solutions based on solidarity. The 19th and early 20th century campaigns where the early social workers joined with others to advocate for improvements in public health and the built-environment, such as housing and public spaces is an example. They clearly saw a connection between social issues and ecology. Although social work previously considered participation in improving the natural world is the duty of environmentalists, this exclusion is no longer acceptable. If social workers recognize that environment is a prime determinant for quality of life, the deteriorating natural world must become a vital concern of social workers.

The fact that social workers have espoused or been involved in environmental causes and strived to ameliorate environmental degradation that negatively impacts on the poor and other vulnerable populations cannot be ignored. But this happens only as a response to extraordinary circumstances and based on their personal framework. Dr.Venkat Pulla (2014) calls these social workers as green social workers.

Dominelli (2012) defines Green Social Work as:

'a form of holistic professional social work practice that focuses on the: interdependencies amongst people; the social organization of relationships between people and the flora and fauna in their physical habitats; and the interactions between socio-economic and physical environmental crises and interpersonal behaviours that undermine the well-being of human beings and planet earth. It proposes to address these issues by arguing for a profound transformation in how people conceptualize the social basis of their society, their relationships with each other, living things and the inanimate world'

The aim of green social work is to reform the socio-political and economic forces that have a harmful impact upon the quality of life of poor and marginalized populations, secure the policy changes and social transformations indispensable for enhancing the well-being of people and the planet at present and in the future.

Roles of Green Social Workers

In order to curtail environmental degradation and tackle the problems associated with climate change social workers should engage themselves in prevention as well as remediation which include the following:

Education, awareness, and consciousness building among com-

munities regarding climate change and its effects;

- Conscientize people on conservation of natural resources and reduction of carbon emissions and achieve carbon neutrality
- Addressing social and structural inequalities that result from climate change.
- Affirming and protecting the rights of the indigenous people and the disadvantaged group who are at risk of suffering more from the effects of climate change.
- Develop effective mitigation and adaptation strategies and create an awareness of the same among people especially the disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.
- Advocating governments for policy initiatives that reward climate change mitigation, green technology and sustainable development;
- Curb the impact of environmental racism.
- Participating in post-disaster reconstruction and recovery efforts.
- Fighting the impact of climate change and help to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs)

Conclusion

To conclude climate change is one among the several environmental imperatives challenging the world at present. In order to combat climate change and to ensure the survival of the human civilization there is a need to bring changes in the existing social, economic and political order which is not possible without social work intervention. Social work has a key role in dealing with this global crisis by helping people to overcome the crisis and creating socially just alternatives. Social work profession can effectively advocate for the needs of clients and communities as they adapt to the challenges induced by our changing climate. It is essential for social work to develop new framework and practice models pertaining to climate change, incorporate them into social work education and bring changes that would adhere to the new agendas and challenges facing the profession.

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