

A Theoretical Framework for Environmental Social Work in South Africa: Towards Transformative Eco-social Practice

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Abstract

The role and responsibilities of social workers over the years had to adjust to the specific needs and challenges brought by the rapid changes of the 21st century. These include global issues such as wars, poverty, human rights violations, mass migration, human trafficking, and climate change issues which contribute to environmental challenges such as floods, wildfires, droughts, famine, and many more. Climate change issues and the accompanying environmental challenges called for the expansion of social work skills and responsibilities to include the cultivation of environmental citizenship and sustainable development. They further called for a paradigm shift in social work training and practice from an anthropocentric world view to include an eco-social world view where non-human as well as human interests are considered. It is in this context that a theoretical framework for environmental social work is proposed. The framework incorporates core features for eco-social practice such as environmental justice, environmental education, environmental awareness, environmental citizenship, and environmental awareness and integrity. The framework also draws on aspects of the Transformative Eco-social Model by Boetto. The framework suggests a different attitude and understanding towards what social work and sustainable development entail.

Keywords: Eco-social practice; environmental social work; environmental justice; environmental citizenship; environmental education; environmental awareness and integrity; sustainable development



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Introduction

This paper proposes a theoretical framework for environmental social work (ESW) in South Africa, aimed at fostering transformative eco-social practice. The role and responsibilities of social workers over the years had to adjust to the specific needs and challenges brought by the rapid changes of the 21st century. Several authors therefore believe that the global environmental crisis has led the social work profession to a crossroads where it has to re-evaluate the paradigm it uses to explain human behaviour and the social environment (Arkert and Jacobs 2021, 2023; Boetto 2017; Besthorn 2002, 2014; Coates 2003, 2005; Gray and Coates 2015; Hoff and McNutt 1995; Jarvis 2013; Rambaree 2020; van der Westhuizen 2021). The serious threats that climate change poses to Earth's ecosystems have called for a focus on sustainability and sound environmental management (Coates 2003; Coates et al. 2006). This has led to several international policies on climate change, environmental management, and sustainable development (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2018, 2022; United Nations General Assembly 2015; World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) 1987), with successive global agendas for social work and social development indicating social work's response (International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Federation of Social Workers, and International Council on Social Welfare's (2012, 2020). The huge surge in the social work literature reflects the profession's attempt to respond to climate change and other environmental crises (Dominelli 2011, 2012, 2014; Gray et al. 2013; Keys 2023; Rambaree 2020; Shendell et al. 2023). Given social workers work with the most vulnerable groups in society and those most affected by climatic events and natural disasters are often poor and marginalised communities, these environmental challenges call for a strong social work response (Dearing 2023; Dominelli 2014; Jarvis 2013; Mlaba and Mhlungu 2022; Nazrul Islam and Winkel 2017; Philip and Reisch 2015).

The paper begins by outlining the key climate risks facing the country, such as water scarcity, food insecurity, and biodiversity loss, and their impacts on vulnerable populations. The paper advocates for a shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric social work practice, incorporating key features of ESW such as environmental justice, education, and citizenship. The framework presented integrates these elements, guiding social workers towards more sustainable and inclusive practices. Finally, the article explores the practical implications for social workers in addressing climate-related issues and fostering environmental citizenship (EC) and sustainable development.

Climate Risks for South Africa and Social Work's Response

The IPCC (2018) has identified South Africa as a climate change 'hot spot'. To this end, Scholes et al. (2023) identified five climate risks southern Africa will face in the 21st century. The first risk is food insecurity, due to the deterioration of the agricultural sector and the threat of famine, increased poverty, and job losses. De Lange (2019) noted that, due to droughts, millions of hectares of agricultural land has already been lost. The second risk is water scarcity, especially access to clean water for low-income

and urban populations in large cities (Brown 2022; Pascale et al. 2020). The third risk of poor management of transitions to low-carbon economies and energy systems is likely to lead to job losses, reduced export revenues, and an increase in immigrants, which would affect the provision of housing, healthcare, and public services (Huxham, et al. 2019). The emergence of killer heatwaves poses a fourth risk to human health and well-being, especially for marginalised children, women, and older people living in poverty (Phakela 2023). Finally, the disruption of ecosystems and loss of biodiversity compromises ecosystem stability which can affect food and clean water supplies, increase pests and various diseases, and disrupt climate regulation.

Although Scholes and colleagues have identified these risks, South Africa has already experienced disruptive environmental events such as food insecurity, scarcity of water, killer heatwaves, wildfires and floods (Coetzer 2022; Demsey 2023; Grab and Nash 2023; De Lange 2019). These disastrous events have necessitated a growing literature on social workers' attempts to respond to these environmental challenges (Heunis, Joubert and Ncube 2024, 2024; Masante et al. 2018; Matlakala, Nyahunda and Makhubele 2021, 2022; Ngcobo, Mzinyane and Zibane 2023) as it is marginalised communities and vulnerable populations who are mostly affected by these events.

The Necessity for a Paradigm Shift in Social Work in South Africa

In South Africa, post-apartheid social work training is mostly still guided by Western modernism, colonialism, and racist capitalism (Van Breda 2018), focusing primarily on neoliberalism, materialism, humanism (anthropocentric), individualism, and modernism (Coates 2003; Dominelli 2012; Gray and Coates 2013). One of the ultimate outcomes of this focus is the unsustainable use of the Earth's natural resources (Coates 2003; Coates, Gray and Hetherington 2006) which, as is now well-known, contributes to the unprecedented incidents related to climate change.

Thysell and Cuadra (2022, 14) argue that to adequately respond to environmental challenges requires a paradigm shift to "consider non-human as well as human interests" to overcome social work's anthropocentric focus. Arkert and Jacobs (2021, 161) are of the opinion that, if social workers in South Africa wish to stay relevant "in this new reality", they need a transformed value, ethical, and philosophical base which will adopt ecocentric values, integrate environmental ethics into practice, and embrace a holistic understanding of the interconnections between social justice and ecological sustainability (Jennings, Yun and Larson 2016; Rambaree 2020). To incorporate transformative practice in social work the following core features are suggested:

An Environmental Focus

Internationally, several authors have advanced a transformative eco-social model for social work with an ecocentric focus (Besthorn 2014; Boetto 2017; Coates 2003; Gray and Coates 2015). This differed from the prior ecological social work that integrated ideas from the field of ecology (Germain 1973, 1978; Germain and Gitterman 1980). It

is a model suited to ESW, also called green social work (Dominelli 2012, 2013). For Dominelli (2012, 25), green social work “respects and values the physical or ‘natural’ environment as an entity in its own [right and] ... builds on the insights and understandings of radical and anti-oppressive social work”. As such, it has a critical focus and sought to move beyond social work’s human-centered approach (Wang and Altanbulag 2022). Ramsay and Boddy (2017, 82) believe ESW should focus on helping humans create and maintain an inclusive “biodiverse planetary ecosystem” and a society that values ecological and social justice. They identified four key attributes of ESW, which are the ability to:

- Creatively apply social work skills to deal with environmental challenges
- Be open to different values and ways of being and doing that are inclusive of diverse ecosystems and in which humans live harmoniously with nature
- Adopt an ecocentric orientation towards social work theorising and practice
- Work in multidisciplinary teams and in different contexts, that is, outside conventional human service agencies (Ramsay and Boddy, 2017)

Environmental Justice

Ecological and environmental justice is central to eco-social theory and environmental practice (Besthorn and Meyer 2010; Dominelli 2012; Dylan and Coates 2012; Gray and Coates 2013). Dominelli (2013) notes that an environmental perspective challenges social workers’ conventional understanding of social and environmental justice. It requires a focus on sustainable development and environmentally friendly living. It is a call to action for social workers, asking them to engage in social action to promote a deep understanding and awareness of the environment and attitudes and behaviours befitting environmental citizens (Parsons 2016; Reis 2020). A transformative eco-social approach sees the promotion of environmental justice as a global responsibility.

Environmental Citizenship

Achieving environmental justice hinges on environmental (Jørgenson and Jørgensen 2021), green (Gabrielson 2008), ecological (Latta and Garside, 2005), or sustainable (Micheletti and Stolle 2012) citizenship. Conventional notions of citizenship, such as “liberal, civic republican and nonnational traditions ... [have led] to quite diverse theoretical elaborations” (Vihersalo 2017, 344). However, EC is a distinct concept centred on environmentally responsible attitudes and behaviours. According to the European Network for Environmental Citizenship (ENEC) (2018), EC rests crucially on pro-environmental behaviour and sees citizens as agents of change, who not only solve contemporary environmental problems, but also prevent the creation of new ones. Only then can society attain sustainability and humans have healthy relationships with nature.

Environmental Education

Environmental education (EE) involves the development of the skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, and beliefs needed for addressing environmental problems (Jagers and Matti 2010; Takahashi et al. 2017). Environmental education in other words challenges previous ontological, epistemological, and methodological or axiological understanding of social work training. Environmental education is central to environmental goals, such as sustainable growth and the preservation of the natural environments (Balundè et al. 2020; Shendell et al. 2023). It involves teaching environmental knowledge that focuses on understanding past and contemporary events in the world to inculcate a positive disposition towards EC (Smederevac-Lalic et al. 2020) and sustainable environments (Parra et al. 2020; Smederevac-Lalic et al. 2020).

Environmental education aims to develop universal values, such as social justice and equality, practical wisdom, harmonious co-existence with and connection to nature, and personal responsibility (Boetto and Bell 2015; Russ 2015). It teaches that sustainability, and environmental well-being is a “shared responsibility” that requires the active participation of citizens (Meeraha et al. 2010) as change agents (ENEC 2018) with the long-term goal to guide “lifestyle option[s] for future generations” (Smederevac-Lalic et al. 2020, 79). In short, EE teaches that sustainable development rests on a collective approach and shared responsibility (Peeters 2012).

Environmental Awareness and Integrity

Environmental education aims to establish environmental awareness (EA) (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002) and develop environmental integrity (EI) which, according to the Wilma Dykeman Legacy (2023), is when one’s actions towards the environment reflect the priorities and values one holds or expresses about the environment. Important aspects related to EI include the dedicated pursuit of environmental justice, conformity to energy policies, stakeholder participation in land-use planning, humane treatment of animals, species preservation, and the preservation of ecological imperatives (Wilma Dykeman Legacy, 2023). It arises when environmental citizens become activists through “a process of collective, democratic, research-informed and negotiated problem-solving action” (Reis 2020, 140) to address socio-environmental problems.

Proposed Theoretical Framework for ESW Perspective

In Figure 1, the author proposes a framework to cultivate eco-social practice in South Africa. The framework encompasses the above-mentioned core features of a transformative eco-social work perspective and draws on Boetto’s (2017) ontological, epistemological, and methodological circles. The framework can basically be seen as building blocks where the one circle builds on the next to the point where sustainable development is achieved. The first three circles involve Boetto’s (2017) ontological, epistemological and methodological circles. The author has deviated slightly from some of the information in the first three circles but has done so in accordance with her

understanding of some of the concepts. The fourth and fifth circles, which are seen as the outcome of the first three circles, represent the cultivation of EC and achievement of sustainable living and social development, which ultimately is what ESW is all about. Cultivating eco-social practice for the author cannot be achieved without EE and environmental experience (EEx). These two concepts therefore ‘hold’ the process of employing eco-social practice throughout.

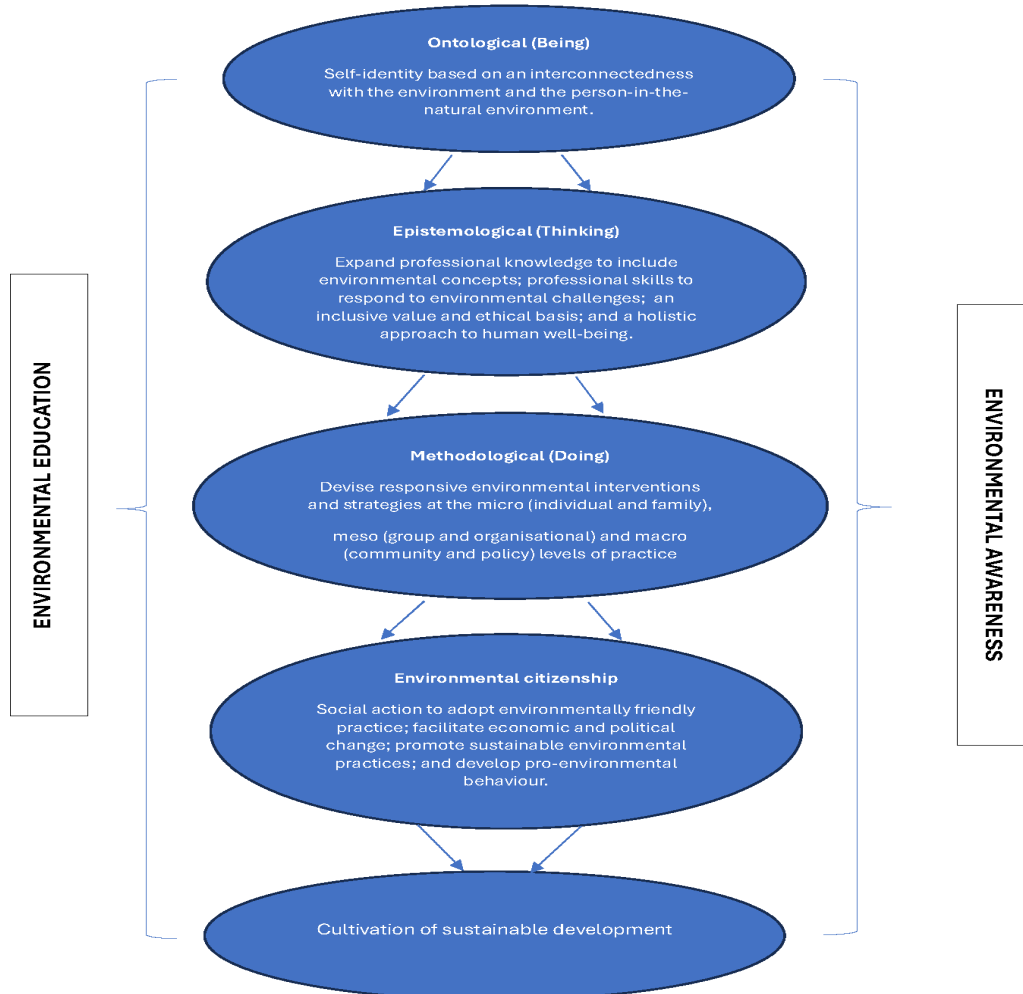


Figure 1: A framework for eco-social practice

Ontological (Being): Identity as Interconnectedness with the Environment

An environmental philosophy views ‘environmental being’ as involving a critically reflective stance (Ringø and Svensson 2023) to challenge belief systems damaging to

the environment, such as social work's largely anthropocentric focus (Rambaree 2020) and understanding of human well-being (Boetto 2017; Ramsay and Boddy 2017). An environmental philosophy further involves re-evaluating how and where contemporary social work theory fits with an ecocentric understanding of the natural world (Besthorn 2002; Coates 2003). *Being* a social worker from an ecological perspective would require a social worker to take responsibility to promote attitudes and behaviours that would foster environmental interests; to think critically about the vast and confusing information about climate change and environmental management; and to respond to natural disasters.

'Environmental being' within the South African context would embrace cultural understandings of humans' place in the world and traditional or Indigenous knowledge of humans' relationship with nature, including animistic beliefs within an Afrocentric worldview (Chigangaidze 2022). Traditional Indigenous cultures in South Africa have long-established knowledge about the land and environmentally sustainable practices (Kanene 2016; Magni 2017). It would expand cultural understandings of ubuntu beyond human relationships and interconnectedness and embrace spiritual understanding of human relationships with nature. The concept of *ukama* within the ubuntu philosophy refers to the "relatedness between humans and the environment" (Chigangaidze 2022, 2). Aidoo's (1998) feminist approach addresses the importance of acknowledging and respecting Indigenous practices and gender issues, putting the well-being of women at the core of the environmental discourse.

Epistemological (Thinking): Re-evaluate and Expand Professional Knowledge and Values

Eco-social work requires environmentally literate professional knowledge about climate change and environmental destruction (Drolet et al. 2015; Melekis and Woodhouse 2015). However, there are multiple perspectives on the science of climate change and complex politics surrounding its consequences and management. Thus theorising (or thinking about) sustainability, sound environmental management, and strategies to mitigate and prevent climate change disasters rests on social workers' ability to think critically about their personal perspectives and worldviews and the way in which that affects the knowledge they accept and its impact on their practice. The environmental perspective affirms social workers' roles and responsibilities in promoting environmental justice through *inter alia* and *vis-à-vis* interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary teams addressing climate change and disaster management issues (Zapf 2010). This stance sees justice as important for all living organisms and acknowledges that poor and marginalised people are disproportionately affected by environmental crises and natural disasters. Thus, Dominelli (2013) highlighted ESW's critical and anti-oppressive approach. For Dominelli (2011, 430), social workers who are knowledgeable about, and skilled in how to participate in climate change decisions, are "well placed to contribute to climate change policy" and find solutions to complex climate associated problems. To do this, they need to mobilise communities to become

environmental citizens by incorporating Indigenous knowledge within the South African context (Arkert and Jacobs 2021). For Arkert and Jacobs (ibid) South African social workers need to adopt a holistic approach to human well-being that includes spiritual, communal, collective, and environmental understanding that acknowledges the relationship between human and environmental well-being.

Methodological (Doing): Practice Strategies

The ‘doing’ base of transformative eco-social practice involves the implementation of strategies at the micro (individual and family), meso (group and organisations), and macro (community and policy) levels (Boetto et al. 2022). It involves the application of social work skills to the complexities and challenges of environmental issues, including empowerment, management, community development, advocacy, multilevel assessment, cultural competence, and relational practice (Coates 2005; Gray and Coates 2012; Hall 2008; Jarvis 2013; Kemp 2011; Zapf 2010). On whichever level of practice the intervention occurs, it needs to be conducted within the context of the ESW’s newly found assumptions, supported by EE and EA, and guided by the vision to cultivate EC.

Environmental Citizenship Driven by Environmental Education and Environmental Experience to Cultivate Sustainable Development

Environmental citizenship (EC) has become a vital component of science education, integrating the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values necessary to tackle environmental challenges (ENEC 2018; Van Harskamp et al. 2023; Jagers and Matti 2010; Takahashi et al. 2017). Developing EC is critical for achieving sustainability and requires a blend of environmental and citizenship education (Balundé et al. 2020; Smederevac-Lalic et al. 2020) and of environmental experience (EEx). Finger (1994) suggests that EE coupled with EEx and knowledge will not only foster but also promote environmental values, which are critical for sustainable development. Therefore, EE without real-life relevance is inadequate for fostering a sustainable environment, necessitating a focus on critical thinking, social and environmental justice, and equality (Parra et al. 2020; Boetto and Bell 2015; Russ 2015). In the South African context, ESW needs to understand the impacts of historical and current inequalities on vulnerable populations (Francis and Webster 2019) and how climate change affects these population groups.

For Dobson (2007), the core duty of EC is to live sustainably, ensuring others can also live well. Environmental citizenship, therefore, extends beyond national boundaries, recognising that individual ecological footprints affect the global community, thus making environmental rights and responsibilities international and intergenerational. Unlike traditional citizenship, which focuses on public actions, EC recognises that private actions have public environmental implications, which in the long run contribute to sustainable development.

Implications for Practice

Most social workers work in public or nongovernment welfare organisations and are concerned largely with individual and family problems relating to disabilities, mental health, ageing, addictions, or child protection. Few social workers work in organisations with a hard-core environmental focus in their practice and service delivery, though they might encounter clients affected by natural disasters. Given future predictions relating to the arrival of the global boiling era (Niranjan 2023) and the looming El Niño in South Africa that started in the second half of 2023 and was due to continue throughout 2024 (Council for Scientific Industrial Research (CSIR) (2023), social workers are increasingly likely to encounter clients and communities in the wake of climate and environmental events. Not only will they be helping clients deal with their consequences, but they will also be contributing to the promotion of EC and fostering a culture of shared responsibility in preparing communities to deal with anticipated environmental problems. Table 1 suggests directions for practice at various levels.

Table 1: Directions for practice at the micro, meso, and macro levels

Micro (Individuals and families)	Meso (Groups and organisations)	Macro (Communities and politics)
•Employ creative ways to educate all age groups about their environmental footprint, environmental conservation and sustainability •Challenge individuals and families' beliefs, thoughts and attitude about the environment and their place in the environment •Educate families about the impact of environmental degradation on their health and wellbeing •Educate families about the benefits of eco-friendly practices, such as recycling, reducing energy consumption, and conserving water. •Promote actions and set up achievable environmental goals that families can work towards •Mobilise families to participate in environmental advocacy groups and community initiatives •Encourage and mobilise families to advocate for environmental policies at local and provincial levels •Connect families with local conservation projects and volunteer opportunities •Identify and introduce pro-environmental rolemodels to families and children	•Organise workshops, seminars, or community events to educate and raise awareness about local environmental challenges •Partner with environmental justice organisations to promote equitable environmental policies •Collaborate with schools to integrate environmental education and environmental citizenship into the curriculum and to become pro-environmental institutions •Establish networks of like minded groups and organisations and create opportunities to share ideas on establishing EC across the board •Advocate for an environmental focused approach to social work	•Conduct community based action research •Mobilise communities to collectively engage in solving climate related problems. •Encourage communities to include Indigenous problem solving practices •Build supportive communities that share resources and knowledge about sustainability •Advocate for the involvement of local knowledge from different communities when addressing climate change issues . •Address environmental inequalities and advocate for fair access to clean resources for marginalised communities •Collaborate with different provincial and national departments and professionals in discussions to solution of climate change issues

Conclusion

In conclusion, the proposed theoretical framework for ESW in South Africa emphasises the need for transformative eco-social practice. This model advocates for a shift in social work's traditional paradigms towards an ecocentric approach that recognises the interdependence between human and ecological well-being. The framework integrates EE and experience, which are essential to cultivate EC and promote sustainable living. Social workers must develop critical, interdisciplinary skills and collaborate with communities, experts, and policymakers to address the profound challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation.

As South Africa faces increasing climate risks, such as food insecurity, water scarcity, and biodiversity loss, the role of social workers becomes even more vital. Social workers, particularly those working with marginalised and vulnerable populations, must

adapt their practice to include environmental justice and sustainability as core components. By adopting this framework, social work in South Africa can contribute significantly to mitigating the impacts of environmental crises, fostering resilience in communities, and promoting a just and sustainable future for all.

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