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Food insecurity
Where social injustice meets environmental exploitation
Cheryl Molle

Introduction

Social justice refers to the equitable distribution of wealth, resources, and opportunity to promote the welfare of society, and is based on the premise that freedom and equality are fundamental human rights. An ideology valuing racial, gender, and economic equality; the fair treatment of vulnerable and oppressed populations; and the elimination of intolerance and discrimination, social justice is appealing to a variety of progressive socio-political movements. It is a key theme in the civil rights, women’s rights, and LGBTQIA rights movements, as well as those linked to anti-war, animal rights, and environmental protection causes. Social justice is also a core principle of the social work profession (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2012). The social work profession aims to ‘promote social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being’ (IFSW, 2012). Internationally, ‘principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work’ (IFSW, 2012). To achieve human rights and social justice, and to ‘intervene at the points where people interact with their environments’ (IFSW, 2012), the social work profession must advocate for environmental justice.

Environmental justice refers to protecting the natural environment via the creation of laws and policies to prevent or reduce human practices that exploit the environment alongside the implementation of ecologically sustainable procedures. Similarly, green social work seeks ‘reform of the socio-political and economic forces that have a deleterious impact upon the quality of life of poor and marginalised populations, to secure the policy changes and social transformations necessary for enhancing the well-being of people and the planet today and in the future’ (Dominelli, 2012: 25). Advocates of green social work recognise that ‘the logical consequence of the exploitation of natural resources is the exploitation of people’ and that intervention is necessary (Dewane, 2011: 20). Because environmental exploitation directly affects entire communities, the social work profession has grown increasingly concerned with environmental issues such as deforestation, air and water pollution, and the use of toxic chemicals and pesticides (NASW, 2008). Despite the social work profession’s shift toward observing environmental justice as an international social justice issue, evidenced by the incorporation of environmental justice into the International Federation of Social Workers’ Core Mandates (IFSW, 2012) and...
the emergence of ecological social work literature, certain environmental justice issues require more of the profession’s global attention, particularly food insecurity.

Food insecurity is an issue at the intersection of social and environmental justice, occurring where social injustice meets environmental exploitation. Globally, safe and nutritious foods are distributed unequally, even in societies with adequate or plentiful food resources, which places substantial obstacles in the path of vulnerable and oppressed communities as they attempt to procure nutritious, wholesome food. Food insecurity is a state in which individuals, households, and communities lack ‘sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life’ (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 1996, World Food Summit Plan of Action section, para. 1). Food insecurity rarely occurs in cases of social injustice that are not accompanied by environmental exploitation, nor does it tend to occur in cases of environmental exploitation that are not accompanied by social injustice. Green social work must, therefore, address food insecurity as an international socio-environmental issue.

To understand food insecurity as a global green social work issue, the recognition of food insecurity as an intersectional issue, occurring where social injustice meets environmental exploitation, must first be established. Developing this understanding requires examining the interrelated causes of food insecurity, including policy, environmental, and social factors; analysing the characteristics of food insecurity in a society with bountiful food resources to examine its social and environmental causes; and considering the role of green social work to intervene in and prevent cases of food insecurity through current direct-practice interventions and emerging community and policy practice interventions. To effectively intervene in situations of food insecurity, green social workers must constantly develop their knowledge and understanding of not only the complex factors contributing to food insecurity but also the communities affected by it.

### Causes of food insecurity

Intersecting policy, environmental, and social factors contribute to food insecurity and hunger. According to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (UN), ‘Poverty . . . conflict, terrorism, corruption, and environmental degradation’ each contribute to food insecurity (FAO, 1996, Rome Declaration on World Food Insecurity section, para. 5). Current economic policies allow the food industry to degrade the environment and exploit workers. Environmental degradation then decreases food production and reduces the availability of healthy food. Limited food production and the reduced availability of healthy food then raise the cost of food, and working-class individuals and families encounter difficulty obtaining nutritious food.

### Policy factors

Neoliberalism – economic theories and policies favouring free-market capitalism – has caused significant harm to the environment and the suppression of wages, which has resulted in the limited production and availability of healthy food and increased poverty, the two primary causes of food insecurity (Robinson, 2004; Turje, 2012; Deepak, 2014). Neoliberal philosophy has guided economic policy since the 1980s, resulting in free trade, privatisation of the public sector, deregulation, and reductions in government spending. By privatising the instruments of food production (including land, water, and seeds) and through the expansion of agencies like the World Trade Organization, these policies have resulted in injurious food production practices that contribute to rapid ecological deterioration (Turje, 2012). With little to no government
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regulation and even less input from the public, a few select industrialised farms now produce a significant portion of all available food, and are able to do so using toxic herbicides and pesticides that deplete soil and are harmful to ingest (Tansey, 2002; Turje, 2012; Besthorn, 2013). In addition to harming the environment and the quality of available food, these policies are also credited with weakening the power of workers’ unions, cutting funds for social services, and lowering wages (Robinson, 2004; Deepak, 2014). Although extremely beneficial to the food industry, the natural environment and working-class communities have suffered from these policies for more than three decades. Understanding the impact of neoliberalism is critical to green social workers engaging in policy practice.

Environmental factors

Environmental issues contributing to food insecurity include climate change, soil depletion, water shortages, and the use of toxic chemicals in pesticides and herbicides in the agricultural sector. Climate change, soil depletion, and water shortage are each associated with higher food production costs, resulting in sharp increases in the price of food products, which many low-income persons cannot afford (Deepak, 2014). Greenhouse gas emissions have caused global average temperatures to rise and resulted in extreme weather, seasonal shifts, and changed patterns of precipitation, thus impacting food production (Deepak, 2014). The global food cost increases in 2008, 2010, and 2012 are a result of the effects of climate change on food production systems, and further price increases are expected as climate change continues to impact crop and livestock production, and ultimately the availability of food (Deepak, 2014). Ploughing, overgrazing, and the use of fertilizers and pesticides have caused rapid soil erosion and the loss of approximately 40 percent of agricultural land globally (Paul and Wahlberg, 2008). Water shortages resulting from heavy pumping and dam-based irrigation have made it extremely difficult to farm the agricultural land that remains, as food production requires ample fresh water (Paul and Wahlberg, 2008). Environmental exploitation by humans has made it increasingly difficult to produce enough food, thus raising the cost of food for all (Paul and Wahlberg, 2008). Furthermore, the use of toxic chemical products such as pesticides and herbicides, a common practice in the agricultural sector, renders much of the food that is produced, and particularly food which costs less, to be unhealthy (Besthorn, 2013). Resisting destructive food production practices, green social work practitioners in community settings, including many in Europe and the United States (US), are often directly involved in the development of community gardens and organic farming.

Social factors

Income inequality and modern-day segregation are the dominant social contributors to food insecurity. Poverty is one of the leading causes of food insecurity. In developed and underdeveloped nations alike, the wealthy enjoy relatively stable access to food while the impoverished have minimal purchasing power and are significantly more likely to experience chronic hunger (Rosen and Shapouri, 2001). Modern segregation has contributed to food insecurity in the US since the 1950s, when affluent and predominantly Caucasian families fled to the suburbs from urban areas, and brought their resources, including food markets, with them (Bell et al., 2013). Today, barriers to accessing food resources are common in urban areas, resulting in food deserts in which supermarkets tend to be too far from low-income urban neighborhoods for residents to walk or take public transportation to (Freeman, 2007). When grocery markets offering healthy food options are located in or near low-income urban communities, prices are
often inflated in comparison to suburban markets (Kaufman et al., 1997). However, insufficient purchasing power prevents low-income families from acquiring the high-priced, healthy food products that nearby food markets may offer. Green social workers should be cognisant of the social factors contributing to food insecurity, connect food-insecure individuals and families to food assistance services, work with affected communities to expose unjust food distribution procedures, and advocate for the equal distribution of food.

An intersectional analysis: food insecurity in the US

Food insecurity is generally associated with the developing world, due largely to depictions of developing nations as impoverished, overpopulated, and lacking in resources. This misconception, that food insecurity exists almost exclusively in developing nations, may impede progress toward understanding food insecurity as a human rights issue stemming from continued environmental exploitation and the systemic oppression of vulnerable social classes. Although many developing countries are indeed struggling with high rates of hunger and malnutrition (FAO, 1996), food insecurity also occurs in wealthier nations. Examining food insecurity among low-income and minority populations in a prosperous and powerful nation, the US, highlights the policy, environmental, and social factors associated with food insecurity and facilitates a deeper understanding of food insecurity as an intersectional social justice issue. Food insecurity’s presence in a wealthy nation with plentiful food resources exposes the phenomenon as a socio-environmental injustice rather than a consequence of extreme poverty in developing countries, as it is commonly portrayed.

Approximately 10.7 million households in the US are experiencing low levels of food security and an additional 6.8 million households are experiencing what is considered very low levels of food security (Coleman-Jensen and Gregory, 2015). The majority of households experiencing low or very low food security in the US have been identified as African American and Latino households living below the poverty line (Ashiabi, 2005; Coleman-Jensen and Gregory, 2015). Furthermore, single mothers and their children are at greater risk of food insecurity than single fathers and their children (Garasky et al., 2014). Each of these groups – the low-income, ethnic and racial minorities, women, and children – is considered vulnerable, and each population has its own historical experiences of social, political, and economic hardship. Ethnic and racial minorities, specifically African Americans and Latinos, are more likely to be in poverty than other ethnic groups, and women, specifically lone mothers, are more likely to be in poverty than men (Macias, 2008; Brisson, 2012). Poverty is also associated with anxiety, depression, suicide, physical illness, crime, domestic violence, and substance use, alongside premature death at disproportionate rates among the same populations at risk of experiencing food insecurity (Robinson, 2004). The relationship between food insecurity and ‘deeper structures of inequality . . . along lines of race, gender, and socio-economic status’ is, therefore, indisputable (Macias, 2008: 1089).

Historically vulnerable and oppressed populations in the US are at a substantially greater risk of living in adverse environmental conditions and, in comparison to more privileged groups, are far more likely to experience waste dumping, pollution, and deforestation in their communities (Dewane, 2011). These careless and dangerous practices pose not only ecological risks but also severe physical health risks, and occur most frequently in communities of colour, embodying environmental racism (Bullard, 1993). Environmental racism may be understood as the ‘targeting of minority communities or the exclusion of minority groups from public and private boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies’ and the development and implementation ‘of any policy, practice, or regulation that negatively affects the environment of low-income and/or racially
homogeneous communities disproportionately in comparison to Caucasian or affluent communities’ (Dewane, 2011: 22). Both race and class are linked to environmental inequity, with low-income communities of colour being most likely to live in contaminated areas (Bullard, 1993). As a result, the land on which these communities live may lack the natural resources necessary for food production or be too badly polluted to farm, particularly in urban areas. Therefore, the same populations targeted by environmental racism are also most likely to experience food insecurity.

Food insecurity is associated with a plethora of adverse physical and mental health conditions, obstacles to social and occupational development, and barriers to upward socioeconomic mobility. Food insecurity leads to medical conditions such as malnutrition, obesity, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, infant mortality, several types of cancer, an increased likelihood of hospitalisation, and higher rates of infectious disease (Breaux et al., 2007; Offer et al., 2010; Gundersen et al., 2011; Besthorn, 2013). It is also linked to mental illness, placing persons experiencing food insecurity at a greater risk of developing anxiety and depressive disorders than their food secure counterparts (Ashiabi and O’Neal, 2007). Prolonged interruption to children’s nutrition could result in lasting damage to their cognitive and socioemotional maturation (Breaux et al., 2007). Children and adolescents experiencing food insecurity are likely to have difficulty forging and enriching interpersonal relationships, developing language and motor skills, paying attention, and performing well in school (Breaux et al., 2007). The negative effects of food insecurity on physical and mental health may contribute to low socioeconomic status by limiting food-insecure individuals’ ability to complete a post-secondary education or work full-time. Such barriers to upward socioeconomic mobility are likely to perpetuate poverty in low-income communities and thus increase the likelihood that subsequent generations will experience food insecurity (Breaux et al., 2007).

The role of green social work

Food insecurity contributes to negative outcomes in the areas of physical and mental health and social and economic development among traditionally vulnerable and oppressed populations, including low-income individuals and families, people of colour, women, and children. Social workers are responsible for preventing the exploitation of persons and communities, empowering vulnerable and oppressed populations, meeting basic human needs, and advocating for the well-being of society and individuals. These responsibilities represent the unique values and ethics of the social work community. International ethical principles in social work practice relate specifically to food inequality, observing the issue as a global injustice and illustrating the need for social workers to intervene at the points where people engage with the environment, compelling social workers around the globe to critically analyse the effects of neoliberalism on international social welfare and the global food system, and to promote economic and environmental sustainability (Hayward et al., 2015).

Ethical responsibilities to clients, the profession, society, and the environment require social workers to address the intersecting policy, environmental, and social issues contributing to food insecurity. The social work profession and green social workers, in particular, must first work toward understanding the complex ways in which neoliberal economic policies, income inequality, modern-day segregation, climate change, and harmful agricultural practices have created the global food insecurity crisis. Green social workers are obligated to not only recognise food insecurity as a social and environmental injustice but also to intervene and should seek to resolve the social and environmental injustices and the policies, or lack thereof, contributing to food insecurity. The role of social work in responding to food insecurity is to continue current direct
practice interventions with individuals and families and increase the profession’s involvement in emerging community and policy practice interventions.

**Current direct practice interventions**

Social workers in case management and similar direct service roles frequently intervene in situations of food insecurity by conducting a food insecurity and hunger assessment with low-income clients. Two questionnaires commonly used to assess food insecurity include the comprehensive Food Security Questionnaire, used in the US, and the more concise Household Food Insecurity Access Scale, used worldwide by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). These questionnaires and similar assessment measures may be adapted for use in other nations and by other global hunger relief agencies. The ability to categorise food insecurity by level of severity can help direct practice social workers determine appropriate, personalised interventions for food-insecure clients.

The Food Security Questionnaire, developed by the Food Security Research Team of the Food and Consumer Service in the 1990s and used by the United States Bureau of the Census to derive data on national food insecurity, is one example of an assessment tool that may be used to determine whether a client is experiencing food insecurity or hunger (Klein, 1996). The comprehensive Food Security Questionnaire contains 58 questions regarding clients’ grocery shopping patterns and expenditures, participation in food assistance programmes, the amount of food eaten in their households, reasons why household members may not have enough to eat, and perceptions of their food circumstances (Klein, 1996). The questionnaire also asks clients how they cope with having less food, if they skip meals or do not eat for an entire day, and if they go hungry because they cannot afford food, and allows them to submit a report of their household food supply (Klein, 1996). Using this measure, social workers can group clients into four distinct classifications of food insecurity and hunger: (1) ‘experience no hunger or food insecurity’, (2) ‘food insecurity without hunger’, (3) ‘food insecurity with evidence of adult hunger’, and (4) ‘food insecurity with evidence of child hunger and severe adult hunger’ (Klein, 1996: 36).

A more concise food insecurity assessment tool, the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) used by USAID is an 18-question survey that focuses primarily on clients’ perceptions of their food circumstances. It solicits descriptions of their uncertainty or anxiety regarding their food situation, resources, or supply; perceptions that their household’s quality and quantity of food is insufficient; instances of reduced food intake for adults and children; consequences of reduced food intake for adults and children; and feelings of shame related to socially unacceptable means of food acquisition (Coates et al., 2007). This brief food insecurity questionnaire asks whether respondents worry that their household does not have enough food and whether household members’ food preferences could not be met. The succinct HFIAS survey is presumably easy to use in fast-paced social service settings, and allows social workers to group clients into four different categories of food insecurity: (1) ‘food secure’, (2) ‘mildly food insecure’, (3) ‘moderately food insecure’, and (4) ‘severely food insecure’ (Coates et al., 2007: 20).

Social workers in direct service roles intervene in situations of food insecurity by facilitating clients’ access to hunger relief and nutrition assistance programmes. Social workers around the globe refer food-insecure clients to a variety of food assistance programmes. Food assistance programmes for individuals and families commonly include food voucher and cash assistance programmes, through which clients are given funds that they may use to purchase food. As of early 2016, cash assistance, food vouchers, and electronic funds transfers made up more than 25 per
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constant all food assistance provided by the United Nations’ World Food Programme (World Food Programme, 2016). Food-insecure persons are also generally eligible to receive assistance from food banks, which are charitable organisations that distribute food to individuals experiencing hunger, and are often located in low-income urban areas (Kim, 2015). Though food voucher programmes and food banks tend to serve both adults and children, hunger relief programmes specifically for children experiencing food insecurity are fairly common. Nutrition assistance programmes for children may operate within charitable organisations or within a larger social welfare system. In many nations, like South Korea, hundreds of thousands of children are eligible to receive government-funded meal aid services (Kim, 2015). Social workers in direct service roles are generally knowledgeable of nutrition assistance programmes and corresponding eligibility requirements and restrictions, and work to connect food-insecure clients with the programmes that are best suited to address their specific needs.

Emerging community and policy practice interventions

Although a considerable majority of today’s social workers hold direct service roles, the profession was founded on the macro-level values of social justice and human rights activism. Social work’s highly political origins may be partially responsible for the profession’s emerging involvement in community and policy practice, more commonly known as macro-social work or macro-practice. Returning to social work’s roots in social and political advocacy is quickly becoming one of the profession’s favoured responses to food insecurity and a myriad of related social and environmental justice issues, particularly among green social workers. Social workers around the globe are beginning to engage in community and policy practice by working to empower entire communities and to ensure that the profession’s values are upheld in public policy. Much like their predecessors, modern social workers, and specifically those with a focus on green social work, are advocating for radical social and environmental change through community organising, community building, and policy advocacy, and must continue to do so in order to alleviate food insecurity.

Recognising the magnitude of food insecurity, social workers engage in community organising and community building and work directly with communities to combat food insecurity. A growing area of community organising and community building in social work practice is the food sovereignty movement (Turje, 2012). The term food sovereignty refers to nutritional and culturally appropriate food produced using environmentally friendly and sustainable methods, and power over one’s own food and agricultural systems as a human right (Declaration of Nyeleni, 2007, in Deepak, 2014). In community organising and community building roles, macro-level social workers ensure that the community itself is the most important focus by encouraging affected persons to assume responsibility for building their community (Hyde and Walter, 2012), a skill required of green social workers. Similarly, the food sovereignty movement prioritises local production, distribution, and consumption of food and the rights of consumers to control their food intake and nutrition, and seeks to encourage social relationships, established around food, that are free from inequality and oppression (Declaration of Nyeleni, 2007, in Deepak, 2014). To resist industrialised farming methods and the use of toxic chemicals in food production, the food sovereignty movement involves consumers, regardless of their background, in local agricultural projects such as community gardens (Purifoy, 2012; Deepak, 2014), much like green social workers throughout Europe and the US. These projects include community gardening programmes and other alternative food initiatives such as food cooperatives, which are organisations emphasising consumer decision-making in food production methods and the support of local farmers’ markets (Turje, 2012).
Policy advocacy is an equally important function of macro-level social work practice and green social work. Macro-level social workers honour the profession’s values by demonstrating an awareness of the impact of policy on practice, advocating for social justice to protect the vulnerable and oppressed, and acting to eliminate the exploitation of persons and the environment. Macro-level social workers are beginning to challenge the policies contributing to food insecurity and are working to develop just social and environmental legislation. Green social workers engaging in policy advocacy around these issues generally have knowledge of and practice with lobbying. Successful lobbying campaigns in the not-for-profit sector often follow a linear process similar to the following: (1) identifying the issue, (2) conducting research on the issue, (3) creating a fact sheet to highlight research findings on the issue, (4) developing a slogan or framework to brand the issue, (5) listing possible supporters and opponents of the cause, (6) building a coalition of stakeholders and supporters, (7) developing educational materials, (8) launching a media campaign to raise awareness about a cause, (9) approaching policymakers and elected officials, and (10) monitoring the progress of people or organisations pledged to advance the cause (Libby, 2012, p. 103). Green social workers engaging in legislative advocacy to alleviate food insecurity may use this model and similar methods to advocate for policy change or new legislation aimed at addressing any of the social, environmental, or policy determinants of food insecurity, ranging from income inequality to climate change to the privatisation of agriculture.

**Lessons for effective interventions**

Prior to engaging in food insecurity interventions at any level of practice, social workers should conduct a self-evaluation to critically examine both their knowledge of food insecurity and their level of cultural competence, and to acquire relevant knowledge and skills in these areas to ensure effective interventions. For many social workers, self-evaluation is an ongoing process through which continued learning and growth occur. The food justice pedagogical framework (Hayward et al., 2015) and the liberation education model (Freire, 1998) are useful tools for facilitating continued learning and growth and developing a deeper understanding of food insecurity. Together, these tools can help green social workers develop effective food insecurity interventions.

Direct service, community-based, and policy-related interventions require green social workers to develop a general knowledge of food insecurity. It is unlikely that social workers at any level of practice will be able to intervene effectively in situations of food insecurity without an understanding of the complex factors contributing to it. An important step toward increasing knowledge of food insecurity is to insert the food justice pedagogical framework into social work practice (Hayward et al., 2015). The food justice pedagogical framework asserts that the food system is connected to both the social and natural environment and that social and ecological injustices often result in food insecurity (Hayward et al., 2015). Service learning is a useful strategy for incorporating the food justice pedagogical framework into social work practice, and allows professional learners to connect their experience with social work concepts (Hayward et al., 2015). This educational method provides social workers with the opportunity to observe food insecurity, and thus enhances their knowledge and allows them to draw connections, based on their experiences, to the values and ethical standards of the profession. In direct service, community, and policy settings alike, considering the food justice pedagogical framework in social work practice is a useful way for social workers to begin examining intersecting social and environmental issues and exploring green social work interventions.

To honour the profession’s values in direct service and community and policy practice, green social workers should be culturally competent, embrace social diversity, and promote
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Social workers. Without these essential qualities, social workers will experience little success in their efforts to address food insecurity. Social workers should have a basic understanding of a community’s culture, recognise that individuals they are working with or advocating for have likely experienced oppression and discrimination, and begin considering cultural conventions and strengths that may be used as assets to the affected community. This can be accomplished by employing the key principles and strategies of the liberation education model, which aims to understand and fight oppression by encouraging dialogue about a community’s struggles, critically analysing the social and historical foundations of those struggles, and conceiving and implementing collective action methods for change (Freire, 1998). In community organising and community building, in particular, it is extremely important that social workers collaborate with affected community members, view themselves as guides rather than experts, and allow the community to make decisions regarding which actions it will take to alleviate food insecurity.

Conclusion

At the intersection of social and environmental justice, occurring where social injustice meets environmental exploitation, food insecurity requires more of the international social work profession’s attention. Because food insecurity disproportionately impacts traditionally vulnerable populations and is associated with negative physical, mental, and socioeconomic outcomes, the profession is bound by its values and ethical standards to address food insecurity. Historically rooted in advocating for social justice and human rights, and more recently observing environmental justice as a social justice issue, the social work profession must begin to address food insecurity at all levels of social work practice, but particularly in the emerging areas of community and policy practice. First and foremost, the profession must work toward understanding how neoliberal economic policies, income inequality, climate change, and deleterious agricultural practices have contributed to worldwide food insecurity.

Green social workers must be cognisant of food insecurity at all times, across practice specialties, and in micro-, mezzo-, and macro-settings alike. The role of green social work in responding to food insecurity is multifaceted and involves ensuring the continued utilisation of current direct practice interventions such as food insecurity questionnaires and food assistance programmes, as well as participation in emerging macro-level social work interventions including community organising, community building, and policy advocacy alongside affected populations. Green social workers can effectively intervene in cases of food insecurity if they are willing to conduct honest self-evaluations of their knowledge and cultural competency, participate in continuing education, and, more importantly, if the global profession is willing to fully incorporate green social work theory and macro-level interventions into generalist social work practice.

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