The Routledge Handbook of Green Social Work

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Green social work requires a green politics

Publication details
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Published online on: 06 Apr 2018

How to cite: Carolyn Noble. 06 Apr 2018, Green social work requires a green politics from: The Routledge Handbook of Green Social Work Routledge
Accessed on: 26 Jul 2023

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Introduction

This article explores the more critical ‘discontents’ of capitalism and global neoliberalism (Stiglitz, 2002) by highlighting the ecological damages, natural disasters and social problems that have resulted from its rapid growth with less and less government sanctions and political and social control to check its domination and impact. Neoliberalism relies almost exclusively on unfettered economic growth from extracting the Earth’s limited natural and non-renewable resources to fuel energy and manufacturing products for mass consumption while squirreling millions of dollars for a select few individuals and corporations in charge and/or owners of manufacturing sites and resource extraction projects (Giroux 2001, 2015; Klein, 2015). I do this to develop further the emerging green social work discourse by strengthening its political voice in addressing current environmental and socio-political impacts. I argue that social workers need to re-focus their practice on grassroots activism, alternative economic models and sustain criticism of capitalism to redress its massive industrial consumerism to protect human and non-human species and show a clear platform for action. Green social work has undertaken this challenge, but this is only the beginning.

The capitalist question: the impact of economic neoliberalism

The cry from UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s was that ‘there is no alternative’ (TINA) to the neoliberal vision of a free economy and minimalist government intervention into private and public activities of the nation-state has become the common-sense economic activity of modern times (Roelvink, 2016). Although the growth of neo-economic politics and its implementation across the Western world has been uneven, most if not all Western countries have embraced a free market monetarism and minimalist government approach to managing their economies and citizens’ fortunes, and the remaining developing countries are encouraged to join the club. The impact on social work and human services more generally has been dramatic. The privatisation of public services and goods and widespread increase in surveillance, accountability, risk aversion and fiscal restraint policies of the new public management (NPM) has created a crisis in confidence in professional knowledge and practice to act independently
and creatively with people accessing services and social care (Dominelli, 2012; Noble et al., 2016). NPM and privatisation have resulted in government-supported services and their funding being cut, while private providers taking up the slack have flourished. Advocates and commentators supportive of neoliberal policies criticise the welfare state as costly, supporting an unwieldy bureaucracy which is largely ineffective because it interferes with the natural order based on self-interest, merit, competition, efficiency and profit (Ozanne and Rose, 2013). These advocates of neoliberal policies argue that the welfare state produces passive, dependent citizens who lack the incentive to work and require a large bureaucracy to support their non-productive labour, creates a cycle of dependency among the poorer classes while failing to eliminate poverty and inequality (Mullaly, 2007; Jamrozik, 2009; Dominelli, 2009). Interference in economic activity by nation-states is regarded as impeding free market action and hindering the inevitable economic growth needed to increase productivity, profit and living standards. Corporations, these proponents posit, should determine economic policies and markets for consumption and delivery (Jamrozik, 2009). These, not the government, are best placed to manage the costs and profits for future growth and make decisions about prices, fees and market production. Distribution should be left to market demand and unregulated competition within this market. Utilities such as electricity, transport, health services, energy, banking, postal services, prisons, education and communications among others should be delivered by this ‘apolitical’ market of independent (privately owned) suppliers, motivated to provide a competitive low price and value for their product (Mullay, 2007; Gray and Webb, 2013). This political-economic activity gives corporations a great deal of power and influence over nation-states, communities and individuals while simultaneously reducing governmental interventions and societal control over their enterprises and retaining profits in private hands while government coffers are depleted (Jamrozik, 2009). The domination of the neo-economic agenda makes the pursuit of social justice and human rights-informed social work practice an almost daunting task (Ife, 2010).

Leonard (1997: 113) foreshadowed this in 1997 when he wrote:

> the old ideas which ruled the modern welfare state – universality, full employment, increasing equality – are proclaimed to be a hindrance to survival. They are castigated as ideas which have outlived their usefulness; they are no longer appropriate to the conditions of a global economy.

Much of the world’s global economy is linked to the resource extraction industries of mainly non-renewable resources such as gas, coal, oil and uranium mining and to a lesser extent renewable resources (if not over extracted) such as ocean fishing, rainforest harvesting and logging of old growth forests. Limiting global capital’s exploitation of the Earth’s renewable and non-renewable resources is a huge task given the world’s embeddedness in neoliberal discourses of profit-seeking and investing heavily in unlimited economic growth activities because corporations have much to lose if a ‘no growth’ path is followed. The challenge is to convince the world’s citizens that: the remaining non-renewable resources should be left in the ground, eco-friendly alternatives are developed in all resource extraction industries and money for socio-economic development is invested in sustainable energy and product production to ensure a healthy future for us all (Dominelli, 2012; Ibrahim, 2012; Giroux, 2015; Brand, 2014; Klein, 2015).

**How did we get here?**

The global domination by capital and pervasiveness of neoliberalism was accomplished by a series of economic and social policy and workplace compromises (Jamrozik, 2009). Australia was
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one key Western government to experiment with a tripartite agreement (known as The Accord) in the 1980s between previous adversaries, the government, the unions and industry to guarantee productivity, economic growth, technological investment, production efficiencies, product standardisation and a stable workforce (Marston and McDonald, 2014). Initially, it was assumed that the nation-state’s concern for people’s welfare could coexist with these economic arrangements and that, despite the rise of neoliberalism, the state would still continue to ensure that measures of social protection for the most vulnerable, mainly women, children, elders, unemployed people, disabled people, sick people, asylum seekers and new immigrants would be a priority. On this premise, most human service organisations and agencies went along with these reforms and enacted many economic, social and political compromises that fostered the new public management ethos (Dominelli, 2004; Gray and Webb, 2013; Ozanne and Rose, 2013).

What was not factored into this arrangement was the stagnation of capital growth that faced the world in the late 1980s after a period of relative prosperity. In response, capital undertook to reorganise itself by investing in technological change, automation, downsizing, mergers with smaller competitors, acceleration of capital turnover and outsourcing labour costs off-shore, along with their profits, administration and headquarters. Pressure was placed on nation-states to reduce labour and environmental regulations and maximise tax benefits to free up market competition. These changes averted a short-term economic crisis but at a cost. Most nation-states lost their role as key players in directing their country’s economy. This was now in the hands of large multinational global corporations that, paradoxically, created the serious fiscal issues (deficits) that nation-states now faced. While nation-states lost their economic hold, these global corporations’ profits had risen dramatically (Jamrozik, 2009).

Many states have never recovered financially from the 2007–2008 crisis and cost-cutting exercises became one way of addressing deficits, current and future. For human service agencies these developments heralded the gradual demise of the welfare state’s social contract with its citizens and the dominance of the enterprise culture in delivering social welfare services and programmes. A change of ideology towards more punitive approaches to individual and social problems and privatisation of services and resources occurred across the sector without much resistance from the human service workforce and professional associations (Dominelli, 2004; Gray and Webb, 2013). Market-based capitalism was pitted in opposition to social investment and its inevitability as a modern economic activity. Welfare gradually became a business enterprise with business rules, logos, plans and a company ethos at the centre of organisational culture (Ozanne and Rose, 2013) and individuals became consumers of services from which they had little control in determining. This ethos was gradually accepted across most Western countries, changing the face of welfare significantly.

What environmental and social challenges are linked to neoliberalism?

On one level, there is no limit to economic growth until we reach the actual depletion of all natural resources fuelling it. But, the question is whether society wishes to stop this unchecked growth before its end is reached to protect the species and the Earth from current and future disasters. McKibben (2007: 184) argues that it is physically impossible for the whole world to live the same current high-energy lifestyles of the Western countries. ‘[W]e’d need extra planets, several of them’ to sustain current levels of economic growth. Bob Brown (2004) says that the ecological footprint from 1900s to present day is 150 per cent larger than the planet’s ability to regenerate. The world’s population has tripled in the last 60 years. These issues are placing a huge burden on the Earth’s ability to feed and support this growth.
The challenge seems to be ‘save the planet and ditch capitalism or save capitalism and ditch the planet’ (Ibrahim 2012: 310). It appears that the decision to protect capitalism has been the preferred response as evidenced by most Western governments’ neoliberal responses following the 2007 financial crisis (Harvey, 2005) and, since 1997, the decades-long failure of the UN Conferences on Climate Change to establish binding commitments to reduce greenhouse gases (CO₂) in the atmosphere (Dominelli, 2012; Alston, 2013; Ibrahim, 2012). Jettisoning capitalism will put large segments of the economy out of business and fundamentally change the way of life, significantly reducing current standards of living in Western societies (Urry, 2010). However, extracting and converting natural resources such as rivers, forests, oceans, fertile lands into a material utility for the abstract financial concept of money and profit has left huge environmental disasters across the world in its wake (Featherstone, 2013; Klein, 2015).

The increasing incidences of major disasters such as earthquakes, floods, droughts, bush fires, global warming, rising sea levels, mass migration and human pollution add to the looming potential of large-scale ecological catastrophes. Human activities such as sonic mining, overfishing, land and forest clearing, and crop burning have resulted in increasing levels of air, water and soil pollution; 40 to 50 per cent loss of bio-diversity; ocean warming; and the build-up of greenhouse gases (Garnaut, 2008; Dominelli, 2009; Klein, 2015; Dimdam, 2013). The massive extraction of non-renewable resources creates waste products which are stored or buried on what was pristine land or emptied into what were uncontaminated water reserves, thus adding further to ongoing ecological damage (see Alberta tar-sand mining or the palm oil industry’s destruction of rainforests in South East Asia). Man-made industrial ‘accidents’ such as nuclear exposure, deforestation, mud and tailing landslides, and toxic waste spills – for example, Three Mile Island’s nuclear meltdown (USA, 1979); Union Carbide’s gas leak in Bhopal, India 1984; the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska in 1989; the Jilin chemical plant explosion in China, 2005; and the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan are further examples of damages to the already expanding list.

This catalogue of environmental changes and resulting damages paints a grim future for environmental sustainability and places the Earth’s ecosystem under huge threats for current and future generations (Garnaut, 2008; Dimdam, 2013; Klein, 2015). Not jettisoning capitalism means almost certain environmental disaster for the Earth and its people this century (Brand, 2014; Giroux, 2015; Klein, 2015). Brand (2014) and Giroux (2015) link the acceleration of global capital to the ‘western global juggernaut’ and rampant consumerism and wastefulness linked to this activity as the biggest obstacle to any real societal and economic change. Overcoming this obstacle requires acceptance that natural things have intrinsic value and ecological wholes, such as species (human and non-human), communities and ecosystems, not just their individual constituents, have certain moral responsibilities (Singer, 2011). This position challenges the traditional notion of social-work-in-the-environment to re-position itself within and of the environment, an important consideration for green social work to explore.

Only concentrating on the environmental losses and crises associated with climate change ignores the very real problem of capitalism and its uneven distribution of wealth and growth and the uneven impacts of climate change on people’s well-being as well as the social structures of democracy (Dominelli, 2012; Giroux, 2015). Democracy is undermined by corporations operating outside the nation-state’s control and free trade treaties giving more power to global corporations at the expense of national trade, manufacturing and environmental protection. The pursuit of ‘profit no matter what the costs’ makes poverty and inequality the first casualties, despite promises of the trickle-down effect (Keller, 2015).

The divide between rich people and poor people makes poor people more vulnerable to natural disasters like flooding, drought and fires, as well as exposed to pollutants and other
environmental hazards and industrial accidents. Cutting corners to maximise profits can result in toxic waste pollution, unsafe working practices, increased work hours, social isolation and time poverty (Dominelli, 2012, 2013; McKinnon and Alston, 2016). To isolate the impact of CO₂ and all the other environmental disasters from the unequal social, political and environmental relations from which neoliberalism depends is to obscure the deep politics that informs not only the inaction and, in some cases, the denial of climate change politics but is the root cause of such environmental impacts. Coates (2005) argues that the pressures to exploit the Earth for profit are the same pressures that result in social injustice. For social workers, extreme economic inequality is primarily a violation of social justice with devastating impact on social works’ clientele (Dominelli, 2013). In Australia, a rich country, the wealthiest 20 per cent have 70 times more assets than the poorest 20 per cent (Oxfam Australia, 2016). Even the IMF admits that, in recent decades, nearly one-fifth of the world population has economically regressed. A fact not to be missed here is that the richest 0.1 per cent continue to commandeer profits and riches as their fortunes are linked to industries that create much of the damaging climate changes and environmental vandalism (Oxfam, 2015).

**Global and national responses**

If the growing complexities of socio-environmental dilemmas are the most pressing challenge facing the 21st century (Rudd, 2007), then the question is what are the responses so far? Kytherotis (2012) argues (and what is most evident) is that current responses to climate change are a paradox. On the one hand, society acknowledges there is a problem while on the other hand, society continues to feed its growth fetish and deny the science of climate change and its damaging impact on both the social fabric and the environment. While Australia is a signature to both the Kyoto (1997) and more recently the Paris Agreement (2015) where world leaders revisited their commitment to addressing climate change by agreeing to keep CO₂ emissions at below 2°C pre-industrial levels, current national policies and actions undermine this commitment by continuing to support a politics which prefers to protect coal, oil, gas and uranium mining as the primary economic sources to power and fuel the country’s growth to maintain the high standard of living many Australians enjoy. It is easier to have neoliberal business as usual rather than look to the environmental concerns and looming social problems linked to climate change.

Since the current neoconservative (Neo-con) Liberal National Coalition federal government came back into power in 2013 the Climate Change Commission has been abolished, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Environment Ministers’ Forum has been disbanded and the carbon pricing legislation was repealed in 2014 (Appleby et al., 2015). Many other initiatives such as COAG’s National Strategy for Disaster Resilience, established in 2011, was placed on hold and severe funding cuts were directed towards reducing Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation’s (CSIRO) current and future climate change research activities. And, its initiatives have been curtailed and all public information of their activities and facts and figures about the severity of the problem have been deleted from their website (Appleby et al., 2015).

Ibrahim (2012) argues that even if governments try and address climate change the internal logic of the capitalist system and the lobbying and influence of global corporations trading in non-renewable resources and desire to protect their huge profits will defeat them every time. As this reality sinks in, there is a gradual awareness that a new way of thinking about economics and politics is needed especially as environmental destruction linked to capitalism continues to damage the Earth and impoverish the many (Dominelli, 2009). Foregrounding the contested character of neoliberalism is necessary for shaping economic and political green alternatives. As
Che Guevara (1965: 2) aptly said, ‘Living in a capitalist system is a contest among wolves. One can win only at the cost of the failure of others’. There are many challenges. As corporations operate outside nation-states, citizens are deprived of political power and effective decision-making, and just as disturbingly, a low capacity for local organising and what Gray and Coates (2011) and others call environmental illnesses, sensitivities and loss of personal and societal resilience (Dominelli, 2012; Jones et al., 2012). While the immediate impact of climate change is experienced by workers, poor people, women, indigenous peoples, older peoples, minority race groups and inevitably everyone will be affected as the limit to growth, the overuse of non-renewable resources and environmental degradation is a global problem which has important policy and practice implications for social work (Mullaly, 2007; Dominelli, 2012).

What’s the next step?

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead (n.d.)

Having defined the issues, identified the problem and suggested the causes, the question is: What next for social work? Is the dominant neoliberal order fracturing enough for progressive social work practice incursions to take hold (Gray and Webb, 2013)? Does social work have the required courage to become more overtly political? Does it have community support to surrender the battle for full professional recognition, registration, and ideological and professional autonomy, as well as the social care framework to work politically to imagine a better future in which resources are shared; equality, social justice and human rights are paramount; and the Earth’s finite bounty is protected (Dominelli, 2009, 2012; Ife, 2010; Gray and Webb, 2013)? Although the ecological debate is not new, social work has been slow to act (Dominelli, 2011). Social work’s emancipatory politics has, according to Mullaly (2007) and Gray and Webb (2013) (among others), always been contaminated and immobilised by its ongoing role in maintaining social control, human order and the safety of vulnerable people through its legislated social care policies and responsibilities. However, the recent concerns of social work professional associations are far removed from the very real environmental and social issues raised in this chapter. All is not lost, though, as a significant response has emerged as innovative and progressive scholars have begun to identify a need for a green or ecologically informed social work practice (Dominelli, 2012, 2013; Besthorn, 2011; MacKinnon and Alston, 2016). A green social work response, it is argued, needs to re-link with progressive politics and re-imagine a new world beyond capitalism and its neoliberal economic rationality, politics and practices, and its promotion of austerity, managerialism, punitive welfare cuts, self-interest and boundless consumerism in the interest of maintaining global profits for the few (Dominelli, 2012; Noble, 2016).

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Despite international efforts from natural and social scientists, environmentalists, philosophers and political scientists about the imminent human, social and environmental impact of (hu)man-made climate change and the resultant destruction of natural resources that are likely to follow, social work has continued to promote its social work-in-environment approach by paying scant attention to the looming ecological disasters in the natural world. However, it is heartening to see that social work is now developing a green response to climate change and taking the scale
of environmental disasters seriously (Dominelli, 2012; Gray, Coates and Hetherington, 2013; Alston, 2013; McKinnon and Alston, 2016; Noble, 2016). For Dominelli (2013: 247), the aim of green social work is to:

work for the reform of the socio-political and economic forces that have a deleterious impact upon the quality of life for poor and marginalized populations, secure the policy changes and social transformation necessary for enhancing the well-being of people and the planet today and into the future and advance the duty of care for others and the right to be cared by others. . . . Its interventions are holistic and tackle structural forms of oppression, environmental degradation and injustice to empower people.

Gray et al. (2013: 6–10) list many aspects for an environmentally conscious social work practice such as: respect for ecological limits; sustainable practices including the real cost of consummative products and foods; globally just practices linked to political philosophies and environmental social movements that advocate for reduction in growth at all cost; direct challenges to unfettered consumerism and exploitation of the world’s natural resources; and more sustainable environmental practices. The myth of unending economic growth needs challenging and its link to using up the natural resources quicker than it can regenerate needs constant reminding. Dominelli’s (2012, 2013) environmentally just social work practice demands a re-thinking of neoliberalism’s push for growth and disposable consumerism and use of non-renewable sources of energy to fuel this growth as major factors in environmental degradation and subsequent physical, social, cultural and health problems. McKinnon and Alston (2016: 7) argue for a professional response committed to ecological social work, to social and environmental justice, and a new consciousness of the ‘indivisible links between the two’, while Noble (2016) argues that green social work is the next frontier for social action for progressive social workers.

An ecologically focused social work practice needs to include the non-human with the human in its radar of concern and action. It needs to develop a real connection with the Earth and people’s relationship and interdependence with its health and prosperity. It requires social workers to recognise relevant environmental issues in all practice situations and to advocate for environmental awareness and improvements, locally, nationally and internationally (Dominelli, 2012; McKinnon and Alston, 2016). It also requires an ontological shift to recognise the inherent value of the environment for its own sake. It means that social work practice, values and ethics, policy and research need to place environmental ecosystems above economic and social goals as the only long-term and sustainable solution to current pressing environmental issues. It challenges social work’s historical anthropocentric position with a new, eco-centric view of social work, as we all need reminding that we are not separate from the Earth but of the Earth (Klein, 2015). This presents a new challenge for social work to move beyond seeing the individual and the social systems in which s/he lives as the primary concern with an overarching view of environmentally just practices at all levels of intervention (Dominelli, 2012; McKinnon and Alston, 2016). It demands that social work returns to its radical political roots, a space eroded by the new management practices of neoliberalist economics and anti-welfare rhetoric (Dominelli, 2004; Lavalette, 2011; Gray and Webb, 2013). As Lavalette (2011: 204) says, social workers are here ‘to make the social [and the ecological] work, not the markets work’.

The politics of collective action: green politics

Gray and Webb (2013) ask whether there are any exemplars and attempts to build a politics of action focusing on new kinds of economic reality for a changed future that social workers can
link up with. Finding examples requires social workers to look at the collective activism aimed against these failed neoliberal policies as potential sites for international solidarity: beginning with the Anti-IMF riots of the 1980s, and followed by Occupy Wall Street, Democracy Now!, The Other 99 Percent, World Social Forum (WSF), Films for Action, Truthout, GetUp, WikiLeaks, Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, Counterpunch, Adbusters and more targeted resistances such as the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, anti-war and peace movements, Free West Papua campaign, and many other forms of local and global resistance to wage exploitation, modern slavery, austerity measures, poverty, inequality, unfair trade policies and gender justice. Destroy the Joint and Women for Justice provide current examples of international solidarity and neoliberal resistance. Harvey (2005: 179–180) posits that post-modern social movements have rightly become the main focus of anti-globalisation struggles and that:

(with the core of the political problem so clearly recognised, it should be possible to build outwards into a broader politics of creative destruction mobilized against the dominant regime of neoliberal imperialism foisted upon the world by the hegemonic capitalist powers.

More potent examples of sites of resistance are coming from indigenous colleagues and communities. In particular, indigenous activism to save traditional lands and protect the environment through indigenous sovereignty. Indigenous people’s protests currently include the: Oglala Lakota Sioux tribe in North Dakota (US) objecting to the gas pipeline; Caribou and Beaver Lake Cree First Nation’s (Canada) opposition to Alberta tar-sand mining; Lenca-Honduras (Central America) indigenous peoples’ opposition to government grabbing their traditional lands; and Australia’s Wangan and Jagalingou peoples’ opposition to the Adani coal extraction in the Galilee basin. Indigenous land-based activism focuses on indigenous peoples fighting to protect their land, culture and cosmo-vision from capitalist exploitation and destruction, and represent some of the most robust current acts to prevent ecological crises that social workers must support. The Tangata Whenua Social Workers Association of Aotearoa New Zealand support for the North Dakota Sioux (US) stand against the Bakken pipeline being built across their traditional lands is an example of cross-nations support. Klein (2015) and Muller (2014) see indigenous communities still practicing and defending their cultural lands as the last frontier of defence for Earth. Many non-indigenous peoples including green social work activists also see the inherent value of relating to the land in ways that are not purely extractive and support indigenous colleagues in their efforts (Dominelli, 2012). Other examples include eco-feminism which sees the repression of women by patriarchy and the offensive against nature by capitalism as interconnected (Sulleh, 2009). Deep ecology, along with green and indigenous social work, argues for a reconnection of human beings with nature and seeing all life forms as interconnected and in a delicate balance (Dominelli, 2004; McKibben, 2007; Besthorn, 2011). Each approach suggests an environmental practice that is more sustainable and life-affirming. A healthy environment is essential to human and the planet’s well-being (Dominelli, 2012). A return to indigenous communities and their traditional way of life, women’s connection with nature, and a spiritual connection with the land once resisted as essentialist and apolitical, or patronised and/or marginalised by the dominant Western economic system and ideologies, are now more likely to be looked upon as exemplars of sustainable livelihoods (McKibben, 2007; Klein, 2015; Baard, 2015). While green social work explores its place in environmental politics, a hybrid activism has been developed in the citizenry outside professional social work discourses as a sustainable and equitable way of fighting neoliberalism’s individualistic mentality and widespread economic inequality. This hybrid citizen activism is gaining momentum. For example, citizens are creating
and protecting green spaces (e.g. community gardens, parks, play areas and sporting grounds); recreating a sense of the commons both environmental (e.g. open-source ecology, open-source seed initiatives, common housing, community land trusts) and digital (e.g. free and open software, wikis, open-source hardware). They are using social media such as Facebook and other social media activities (e.g. Getup to undertake activist work such as protecting old growth forests, anti-coal seam gas extraction, and anti-mining and dam construction). Local action is also evident as citizens become involved in building ecological health and environmental justice movements to help transition to sustainable societies and link with other local citizens working for social recovery after natural disasters including social recovery activities following the 2008 Wenchuan and 2015 Nepal earthquakes by national and international networks (Roelvink, 2016). By building alliances with these communities of practice, strengthening networks with citizen groups already working to resist the ‘business as usual growth society’ and learning from their successes and failures, social workers can further guide their green activism to support a healthy environment.

Further examples of alternative livelihoods can be seen in the growth of localism and re-emergence of cooperatives and social economies. Localism represents an attempt to foster a local democracy and local ownership of the economy such as ‘buy local’ campaigns, setting up alternative media outlets, and introducing local currencies, urban agriculture, local organic farms, local transportation, local ownership of electricity designed to give local people greater sovereignty over their future and take direct action against the global juggernaut (Brand, 2014). Cooperatives and social economies promote people over profit, solidarity over individualism, democratic member control, cooperation and concern for community (Brand, 2014), as well as occupy the third space between the public and the private. An excellent example of a successful contemporary co-operative is small town in Marinaleda in the Andalusian region of Spain. It calls itself a social-democratic and co-operative municipality and its 30-year history represents a successful attempt to struggle against capitalism, neoliberalism and TINA by showing that small communities can survive, thrive even, with no desire for profits. This small municipality boasts full employment, affordable housing, provision of community services, and low crime without interference from a centralised power (Hancox, 2014).

These multiple or hybrid movements are the tip of the iceberg as many resistances go unreported, ignored or actively suppressed by a conservative press. Moreover, activism is inhibited and activists gaoled as the people most affected by the economic policies and environmental destruction look to protect themselves and build new institutions for social justice and a new positive green economic paradigm (Serres, 2016).

Conclusion

My argument is that unless social workers who work with the most vulnerable people know how social, political, cultural and economic structures inform power relations and join the dots to capitalism and its destructive practices and environmental disasters, then a green response will be inadequate for the challenges ahead. Social workers know that the Earth’s absorptive capacity is limited and that severe climate change is already evident due to past inaction, with more disasters to follow. Many vulnerable people and communities suffer at the uneven hand of capitalism and the environmental disasters linked to its economic activity. Scientific advances and technological tools for developing alternative energy sources are currently being developed, but many are a long way off for large-scale use in the transition to sustainability (Lysack, 2011). Sooner or later, everyone will be caught up in the environmental impact from climate change regardless of wealth or poverty, gender, and indigeneity.
Green social workers need to embrace a politics that garnishes the collective will of the people to work towards changes in consumption, turn away from the need for unending growth and introduce sustainable green technologies, local community greening and alternative economic models as a way of linking green social work with a green politics. Replacing capitalism and neoliberal economics, embracing the many economic hybrid economic models, joining collective activism, and linking up with indigenous land and cultural protection complete the political arc.

References


