Introduction

‘Green social work’ is a new theoretical concern for the social work profession and specifically for social work with people crossing borders. Social work, while addressing environmental factors, whether in the family, housing or poverty, that form the backdrop to service users’ lives, pays little attention to the natural environment (Dominelli, 2012). However, the theoretical bridge between environmental degradation, and mass movement of people is well-forged in the social and environmental sciences (Gemenne, 2011; Bettini et al., 2016; UNICEF, 2017; Gemenne and Blocher, 2017; Climate and Migration Coalition, 2017).

This chapter, written by four authors, each of whom contributes a specific part to it, will focus on the social and the environmental dimension of Dominelli’s (2012) Green Social Work. It starts by problematising the link between environmental justice and the global mass movement of people to introduce the work and goals of Social Workers Without Borders (SWWB), a grassroots organisation of social workers formed for the purpose of advancing social justice in respect of refugees, migrants and those left vulnerable by borders. It then explores our organisations’ experience of practicing a new model of working – social justice work across borders, before considering the challenges posed when applying traditional social work models to new, unchartered terrains.

Environmental justice, an issue for refugees and asylum seekers

First, the authors consider why environmental issues and/or refugees and asylum seekers are a concern for social workers? It is apparent there are huge safeguarding issues presented by the political (lack of) response to refugees. Increasing numbers of women, families and separated
children have crossed borders to Europe recently (UNHCR, 2014). This presents a host of additional safeguarding issues for first responders across the European Union (EU) migration route. The Women Refugee Commission highlighted this concern, stating that protection risks for women and girls are present at every stage of the EU migration route and that opportunities to mitigate potential risks are missed (Women Refugee Commission, 2016). Having arrived in Europe, the mass exclusion of people and their families from welfare, health and work requires a trans-nationalist, person-centred and social justice social work approach to ensure that people’s needs are met and they fulfil their goal of finding safety.

Second, environmental degradation as well as political instability and poverty, and positive factors such as health, work prospects and family ties are factors in why people choose, or are forced to move. UNICEF’s Report (2017) claims ‘climate-related events’ are increasingly behind the forced ‘up-rooting’ of children. It notes that one in 45 children around the world have been forced to leave their homes in search of safety in their own or in other countries. Climate change and environmental justice, alongside social justice are issues for social workers to consider when working with displaced populations, including children.

Climate-related events can be a precursor to forced migration and can alert social workers to safeguarding issues. This requires social workers to scrutinise and understand discourses of climate migration and their assumptions. The term climate refugee, and the causality implied by this naming, first featured in environmental and academic literature in the 1980s (Gemenne, 2011) and has not gone unchallenged. One problematic narrative concerning green issues and displacements of people is: environmental damage, with an increasing focus on climate change, displaces, and will increasingly displace, populations of people who will be forced to migrate to find new, habitable environments. This migration will typically happen from South to North and is pathologised as impacting negatively on those fleeing, and the environmental stability of the receiving communities (Bettini, 2013; Bettini et al., 2016). Such migration causes political, environmental and financial instability, and population growth in receiving countries. The poverty, instability and conflict brought about by mass migration can cause further environmental damage.

This understanding is problematic for a profession whose values are embedded in notions of internationalism and social justice (IFSW, 2012). The narrative draws on a reductionist logic that does not address or challenge the structural causes of climate change or forced migration. A current example of this foreshortened understanding of these issues is the continued political conflict in Syria. Syria is one of the most complex wars in modern history and accounts for a large proportion of refugees entering Europe since 2011 (UNHCR, 2015). Before the civil uprising, which political scientists and historians thought highly improbable for Syria (Quinn and Roche, 2014), the country was plagued by severe drought lasting from 2006 to 2011 and led over 1 million farmers to flee rural areas for cities such as Daraa. This climatic event fuelled the desperation and unrest regarding the Assad regime which ultimately sparked the rebellions from which the current conflict grew (Quinn and Roche, 2014). The drought was not a purely environmental or climatic issue. Poor governance under Assad coupled with irresponsible, government-led agricultural policies for stimulating production, have been identified as key factors predicting the drought (Kelley et al., 2014). Globalised capitalism, that intensifies competition and embeds poverty into communities, undermines poor populations’ capacity to respond to environmental crises and may directly contribute to them (Dominelli, 2012; Global Justice Now ‘This is Not a Migrant Crisis’ Briefing, 2016). Most families crossing the borders to the EU in March 2016 were Syrian. They could be labelled climate or political refugees, or both.

Social workers, as advocates, know that ordinary Syrians (and other people crossing borders) are not to blame for the violence inflicted on the natural environment or in the countries that
they are fleeing from or to. Over the past year, migrants and refugees have been scapegoated by politicians, far-right groups and mass media not only for further environmental crises (e.g. subsequent droughts in receiving Syrian cities), but also for bringing violence, disorder and unrest to Europe. To understand environmental concerns and ‘climate refugees’ from a social justice perspective, social workers have to examine the structural sources of environmental and human exploitation. For green social workers, this includes a concern with the built infrastructures within which people, regardless of their status live. Social justice considerations turn the lens towards the political and economic regimes that facilitate climate-related events and forced migration. This reframing of the debate undermines and de-politicised narratives that peddle security solutions that further limit the movement of people and their freedoms, such as restrictive migration policies, population management, or humanitarian solutions that rely on alarmist rhetoric concerning ‘waves’ of helpless victims that erase refugees’ political histories and stories (Nyers, 2006; Wroe, 2012, Bettini, 2013; Bettini et al., 2016).

Green social work is a straightforward issue for Social Work Without Borders (SWWB). As social workers committed to environmental and social justice, alongside the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees, we have to unpick and challenge dominant political narratives that attempt to solve the problem of refugees, rather than those that force people to become refugees. This perspective produced Social Workers Without Borders (SWWB). Working in the camps in France and Greece in March 2016, Social Workers Without Borders proposed that the ‘refugee crisis’ was not one of people crossing borders, but of the political responses to refugees. At World Social Work Day in Manchester, March 2016, SWWB proposed that the ‘refugee crisis’ was a safeguarding crisis because nation-states and those responsible for meeting the needs of vulnerable adults and children had failed to safeguard new arrivals from further harm and risk.

Social work without borders and transnational support

SWWB was formed in March 2016 to: offer direct, skilled interventions to promote the rights and dignity of children and adults in refugee camps; educate social workers on the specific needs and stories of people crossing borders; campaign for adequate political and professional responses to migrants and asylum seekers; and ensure that people are protected from further risk or harm and had their needs met. As an organisation, SWWB promotes transnationalism in social work practice and advocates for the just treatment of those who cross borders, through choice or force. This requires a re-politicising of our understanding of refugees and social work.

For the first year, SWWB focused on developing a model of social work practice that embodied these values. Prior to the destruction of the Calais refugee camp in France, it had a weekly presence there. At first it worked alongside NGOs and volunteers offering direct work sessions and art classes with children and young people. As the situation escalated to the ‘demolition’ of the camp, SWWB conducted Best Interest Assessments with separated children seeking asylum in the UK. Thus, SWWB is practicing a form of state social work outside the state, and in direct opposition to it. The campaigning element of SWWB’s work had focused on the legislation that underpinned safe passage options for these children and young people. The Dubs Amendment to the Immigration Act 2016, which allowed a legal route to the UK for asylum-seeking children in Europe, was scrapped in February 2017, and asylum applications put forward on behalf of these young people were largely refused. SWWB raised funds to re-assess these children which, at the time of writing, will form the basis of a High Court legal challenge to the Home Office of their refusal of these applications. We are developing a model of social work in and against the state (Mitchell et al., 1979) in both literal and ideological terms.
Additionally, SWWB delivered training and workshops to social workers and students based on our experiences of working in the camps and stories that young people have shared with us. This narrative approach brings to the fore the personal and political aspects of people’s histories, informing an understanding of refugees as ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances (Wroe, 2012) and allows social workers, to consider the care and support needs of people crossing borders from a person-centred perspective. Social work without borders consists not only of people crossing borders, or practicing social work outside the state, but is also an activity of everyday social work. Social work without borders is practised by ensuring that assessments and care plans reflect need, regardless of age, nationality or immigration status, and are not resource led or overruled by immigration policy. Social workers are not immigration officers.

Practising social work across borders

The next part of this chapter explores the experiences of social workers practicing this model of social work in Calais over the past year. Then, it considers the crucial issue of burnout in volunteers specifically engaged in social work across borders, addressing social and environmental injustice in unfamiliar and transient terrains.

Social work as a profession has been involved in disaster relief for a very long time. Social workers have intervened in the microenvironments of people to improve their health status, residential living environment, workplace conditions, and social and psychological functioning (Zakour, 1996a). Its involvement dates to the 19th century and was closely related to the Settlement Movement which began at Toynbee Hall in East London, in the 1880s. Toynbee Hall aimed to improve the impoverished conditions of those living in East London, through volunteerism. This model grew in other parts of the UK and later in America, promoting social change and community action (see Gilchrist and Jeffs (2001) on Settlement Movements in the UK). These responses are similar to those currently seen across Europe in support of asylum seekers and refugees arriving from war and poverty torn countries in Africa, Syria and Afghanistan.

British social workers’ responses to the plight of migrants in Calais seemed slow. Camps began emerging around Calais for those seeking asylum in the UK in 1999. We note that numbers of people, including women and children, slept on the streets of Calais and surrounding towns, leading to the opening of the Sangatte in 1999. The Sangatte Centre aimed to support 600 people, but numbers rose to 2000, with people living in squalid conditions. Sangatte was closed in 2002 and replaced by various camps of which the ‘Jungle’ was the latest iteration. When closed in 2016, over 7000 people lived there. The French government moved asylum seekers from the ‘Jungle’ to government centres to process them (Calais Migrant Solidarity, 2016).

The migrant situation became a crisis in 2014/2015, when unprecedented numbers of people crossed into Europe. Many died enroute. Turkey, Greece and Italy were the primary receiving nations for new arrivals. This coincided with the rapid expansion of grassroots and NGO-led responses to asylum seekers in Europe. In Calais, predominantly French and British non-governmental organisations raised the profile of the activism and volunteering that had been occurring for the previous decade. Grassroots organisations of volunteers such as the Refugee Youth Service, Women’s and Children’s Service, and Jungle Books Kids Cafe filled the gaps left by the absence of UNHCR and government provisions. The Social Work Action Network (SWAN) in 2016 had taken aid to Calais to demonstrate social work solidarity and collect narratives of refugees and successfully raised the profile of the camp and its inhabitants within the UK social work profession.

SWWB’s involvement in March 2016 was the first British attempt at developing a co-ordinated social work response to the plight of young people in the camp with a consistent presence.
The need to challenge the government's (lack of) response to this disaster was becoming increasingly urgent. Throughout 2016, as governments hesitated in responding to the disaster unfolding in Europe, social workers including the authors, began to step ‘into the vacuum’, supporting migrants and refugees at a time when political opinion was strongly against immigration. The role of social workers was beginning to receive attention in the media, not only in the UK, but in Germany, Austria and Greece, where increasing numbers of people were arriving. Attention was placed on the role of social work support for the unaccompanied children in different camps across Europe (Hardy, 2016).

For UK social workers, the emphasis was on the children and young people living in the Calais camp. SWWB sought to involve social workers in the UK to participate actively in its volunteer scheme, and experience the day-to-day lives of these children and young people to inform its interventions and stand up for justice and human rights. Social workers provided their time by travelling to Calais and volunteering their services in the camp. The authors went equipped with safeguarding knowledge and skills, direct work, and undertaking Best Interest Assessments (BIA) with young people, but needed to adopt a more flexible approach to social work practice, especially the entrenched form of managerialism prevailing in the UK (Banks, 2014; Payne, 2014). One of SWWB’s members, Lauren Wroe, described this as ‘lay social work’, unhampered by the bureaucracy that restricts practice in the UK (Hardy, 2016). SWWB provided the necessary flexible social work approach that challenged the dominant political rhetoric against refugees and migrants.

Questions about the safety of vulnerable children were being asked, highlighting the need for a clear response from social work. Fagerholm and Verheul (2016), in the Taskforce Children on the Move, reported on the high risks that children experienced trying to cross different borders to get to their destinations. This concern was shared by social workers volunteering in the Calais Camp. A flexible approach was required when undertaking Best Interest Assessments (BIA) with young people. Initially, SWWB adapted the British Department of Health’s Assessment Framework for Children and Families, and as the work grew, the tool was adjusted to incorporate articles within the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights. This was to ensure that its practice demonstrated an international approach (Dominelli, 2010; Cox and Power, 2013). In all, 62 assessments were completed, identifying the needs of children and young people, and the urgency of moving them to a place of safety.

The opportunity to meet young people and hear their stories was both emotionally challenging and humbling. The opportunity to share the lived experience of children in the camp with practitioners in the UK, many of whom work in Local Authorities that will have received children from Calais, further enhanced understanding of the desperation they were facing and how the profession should respond to their needs. The direct work not only assessed the needs and best interests of children and young people, but also brought humanity to these interactions, with art, smiles and without judgement. This allowed young people to be children, if only for a moment.

For many social workers and students, both internationally and in the UK, defining what social work is and practitioners’ role within the profession will be subjective, and reflective of each individual’s own personal and professional experiences of social work practice. The questions ‘What is social work?’ and ‘What do social workers do?’ are important to reflect upon as they re-centre each individual’s own understanding of what is expected from oneself as student and social worker, and what society expects from the social work profession as a whole.

The definition of social work jointly owned by the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Work considers the profession’s primary role to be to promote social justice, uphold human rights and enhance the well-being and
agency of individuals (IFSW, 2012). This overarching definition of social work serves as a scaffold for the development of more specific definitions and models of practice such as green social work considered in this book. At a fundamental level, social work has a strong connection to the advancement and safeguarding of adults’ and children’s rights (Reichert, 2011).

A key objective of this ethics-based social work is to uphold human and children’s rights, alongside the responsibility to safeguard children from harm (Dominelli, 2009), and challenge oppression (Mullaly, 2010). Motivated by these principles, the authors joined a number of other UK-based social workers and social work students to respond to the developing humanitarian crisis unfolding within Calais and the wider European region. For many, like us, the evocative media coverage of vulnerable children in Calais trapped in a vacuum perpetuated by social stigma, intolerance, and political apathy could not be ignored. The lack of resources, safe passage options and political co-ordination to meet the most basic needs of people in Calais presented real concerns for the welfare and safety of children in the camp. Alongside our colleagues, we felt that there was an increasing need for social workers to work directly with children and young people in the camp, to promote social justice, and safeguard the rights and autonomy of the children there.

By responding to the developing disaster on Britain’s doorstep, the authors came across new challenges and dilemmas that defied our practice as social work students and professionals. For example, conducting child-focused assessments within chaotic and unknown settings required us to familiarise ourselves with the people and places in the camp and to spend time with children and young people, creating art and chatting, as part of our assessment work. We also had to develop an awareness of the evolving risks to children, from fire hazards to people traffickers, and advocate for their right to legal representation.

Working within the complex environment of the camp was also fraught with dynamic and fluid obstacles. Trying to establish and develop trust and partnership with multiple voluntary and statutory organisations with varying organisational cultures, approaches and agendas was particularly challenging. This was closely tied to the need to develop a relevant model of working, and role for social workers that was communicable across professional, cultural and language barriers in a space where traditional UK methods of safeguarding children were not being enacted. The children in Calais came from a myriad of communities with individual faiths, cultures and heritages, and many had witnessed traumatic events and were processing emotions incomprehensible to most individuals from the UK.

Despite these challenges, SWWB could implement successfully, a model of social work that responded to these complex needs in a flexible and creative manner. This work was particularly rewarding when it contributed to the successful reunification of several young people with family members in the UK. This reflective approach enabled the authors to work together to find creative solutions. An example of this was the creative use of social media and mobile applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Google Translate. Usually no-go areas for social workers, these systems were used to assist volunteers to reflect and share experiences, disseminate best practice knowledge, coordinate assessments, and respond to those in crisis by communicating with multiple communities and individuals irrespective of geographical location. This has been particularly useful for our ongoing communication with vulnerable children.

Reflective practice in the camp also involved the development of self-awareness. This also covered Western cultural influences and societal privilege (Welbourne, 2012). Such awareness enabled SWWB members to become accountable for their worldviews and acknowledge the impact that Western organisational social work perspectives had on their practice. By recognising Western influences and narratives within core social work knowledge and models, social work assessments for child refugees are less likely to be culturally relative (Metcalfe, 1992 cited
in Healy 2007) and reflect the wishes and interests of the child. For example, considering the resilience that young people had developed along their journeys and the responsibilities young people may have had at home, could facilitate resistance to paternalistic models of child social care.

**Volunteering in Calais**

Volunteering in Calais was not only an exercise of reflective social work but also of applying social work theory to practice. From child development theory (Meggitt, 2012) and radical social work (Turbett, 2014) to systems theory (Stein, 1974) as students and long-qualified professionals, we (authors) worked together to share and access new and traditional social work knowledge. In summary, the work that SWWB is carrying out in Calais presents crucial learning points not just for us personally, but for social workers’ responses to future international crises. We encourage those within the profession across the globe to reflect on what their role and commitment is as qualified or aspiring social workers to children and adults irrespective of culture, ‘race’ or border.

There has been a surge in volunteers across the world responding to disaster situations, and a terminology has been created which defines them as ‘spontaneous volunteers’ (SVs), ‘convergent’ or ‘unaffiliated’ volunteers. These are volunteers who have arrived to assist during emergencies and in disaster situations (Whittaker et al., 2015). Harris et al. (2016) explored the involvement and management of such volunteers in relation to the winter floods in England. They studied the paradoxical relationship between the SVs and official responders (ORs). SVs offer additional support, but this includes an element of risk, as many volunteers will be untrained, unaffiliated to any organisation, and be unaware of established processes. Therefore, tensions may arise. While ORs can benefit from the resource gap that the SVs fill, they may need to surmount their fears and manage the positive risks that SVs can offer, such as the innovative and spontaneity, however, tempered by a lack of tried-and-tested interventions.

In the Calais refugee camp, there was an absence of ORs. The French authorities were largely unrepresented in the camp and the main charitable organisations were neither overtly apparent nor vocal. This meant that ‘spontaneous volunteers’ had to coordinate the response to the refugees, including women, children and unaccompanied children, in surroundings fraught with environmental danger, internal risks from traffickers and child abusers, and the external risks associated with the aggressive behaviour of the police and sections of the local community.

The wider context of the refugee ‘crisis’ (or the lack of an ethical response) reflects a polarisation of opinion throughout Europe. Public sympathy for refugees, aligned with many people’s experiences of economic strain and concerns for a coherent social and cultural environment, creates uncomfortable dissonance in many people’s minds. People may not want to see refugees subject to the appalling circumstances revealed by TV and social media. However, their fears for their own socioeconomic conditions, and those of their children, also need to be addressed. To resolve these contradictory views, and the uncomfortable feelings they induce, the dominant political narrative in Europe has provided a convenient escape route. This narrative blames refugees for the economic strains and community conflict, labels refugees as the perpetrators of their own victimisation (King and Grant, 2016). Against this backdrop, and the lack of action from governments and mainstream charities, ‘spontaneous volunteers’ from across the globe have stepped into the breach. This has often exposed them to criticism and even hostility from large sections of society in their own countries, which, as relayed to the authors in our dialogue with volunteers, can include their families and friends.
Evidence-informed practice (EIP) encompasses research, expertise of the professional, and the experiences of those involved in practice interventions (Nevo and Slonim–Nevo 2011). Using the parameters of EIP, the authors describe experiences of volunteerism, burnout and professionalism in the Calais refugee camp using relevant research, our professional observations and experiences of other volunteers in the camp.

Self-care, an issue of concern

The phenomenon of volunteer burnout, often incorporated into studies pertaining to secondary traumatic stress and/or vicarious trauma, has been recognised as a hazard within the helping professions for many years and is well documented in the literature (Figley, 1995; Jenkins and Baird, 2002). Both secondary trauma and vicarious trauma can arise as a result of a single event exposure or an accumulation of exposure to the distress and anguish of others (Conrad and Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Bride, 2007). SWWB’s work in Calais throughout 2016 revealed that the effects of burnout are prevalent among the volunteering community, and that these effects appear to manifest themselves within the emotional responses and behaviours of the volunteers. Numerous studies exist regarding vicarious stress, secondary stress, burnout and compassion fatigue in the professional sector, but there appears to be limited studies on volunteering within current refugee crises. Understanding and supporting vicarious trauma in volunteers working in this field will have an impact on the future practice of social work in supporting refugees, as the volunteering community is a pivotal factor in establishing and overseeing existing support structures. In lieu of this research, the authors reflect on our experience of burnout in the Calais camp alongside the barriers imposed by the professional/volunteer dichotomy and how social justice informed social work can overcome this problem. Social justice is also a cornerstone of green social work.

When SWWB started to recruit social work volunteer activists to offer direct support to refugees in the Calais camp, it expected to be able to integrate with existing established organisations there. However, the authors discovered that there were many barriers to our involvement, including suspicion, hostility, territorialism, lack of communication and engagement, all arising from many in the established volunteering community. Many of the ‘spontaneous volunteers’ had grouped together to establish small, voluntary NGOs. SWWB’s offers of support, ranging from one-to-one reflective support for volunteers, training, and respite support, were often ignored or met with no response. After a period spent scratching our head and nursing professional egos, the authors managed to develop a relationship with several organisations in the camp by joining in with existing activities. This simple approach had been overlooked given the authors’ pre-determined ideas of what ‘social work’ looks like. SWWB began to offer regular ‘hands-on’ support and solidarity which allowed SWWB to understand that the volunteer’s responses were often due to the effects of the sustained trauma they were experiencing and lack of support from established organisations and government.

According to the American Counselling Association (2017), burnout is defined as having the following symptoms which can include: (1) behavioural: sleep disturbance, nightmares, appetite change, hypervigilance, jumpiness, losing things and negative coping strategies; (2) cognitive symptoms: minimising vicarious trauma, i.e. not practicing self-care, keeping going, working harder, lowered self-esteem and increased self-doubt, trouble concentrating, confusion/disorientation and repetitive images of the trauma.

The authors posed the following questions to several refugee support organisations operational in Calais:

1. Is there a problem with volunteer burnout?
2. Is there support available?
3. What support would be beneficial?
SWWB received responses from two organisations, both stating that burnout is a problem. Respondent 1 stated that symptoms generally appear around the second week, fourth week and fourth month period while Respondent 2 stated that ‘burnout’ appears as a rapid turnaround in volunteers, volunteers leave without giving much notice and additionally it manifests as inability to sleep, mood swings, tearfulness, even breakdown of relationships. Respondent 1 stated that there is counselling available for them on return to the UK, while Respondent 2 said that there was no support. Both Respondents stated that additional support could be provided and included ground support counselling and pre-volunteer information packs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a social justice model of social work, operating in the unknown terrain of the Calais refugee camp required the crossing of geographical borders, especially those imposed by immigration controls, alongside those imposed by the ‘professional-volunteer’ dichotomy and rigid forms of practice that are not responsive to need and changing socio-political landscapes. To support and work with refugees, and all those displaced by borders, poverty or environmental crises, the authors had to challenge the negative and damaging political narrative which dehumanises volunteers as well as those they attempt to support. Social workers, along with established charities and NGOs, must work together to respond to the rise in xenophobia, hate crime and racism and promote the dignity and rights of refugees and migrants, and those who stand shoulder to shoulder in supporting them. This support should encompass an understanding of vicarious trauma and burnout, alongside strategies which can prevent and ameliorate its effects and a flexible professionalism that is open to working in non-traditional ways.

During times of massive geopolitical and ecological change, social workers need to develop a transnational approach embedded in social justice (Dominelli, 2012). In doing this, practitioners will need to continue to explore a model of green social work practice, focusing on interlocking social and environmental justice, the beginnings of which we developed in the Calais camp. This will liberate professionals from the managerialist forms of social work that is imposed to promote a neoliberal agenda within the welfare state in the UK and elsewhere. SWWB proposes a more radical version of social work practice (Turbett, 2014) that is led by need and does not blame structural inequality or scarcity on those most brutalised by various political systems. A social justice model of social work, which can serve the interests of substantial numbers of ‘disenfranchised and marginalized people’ (Dominelli, 1996) is achieved by working alongside them to effect both personal and societal change as advocated by green social work.

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Part VIII

Health disasters