The Routledge Handbook of Green Social Work

Lena Dominelli, Bala Raju Nikku, Hok Bun Ku

Historical trends in calls to action

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315183213-34

Erin Kennedy
Published online on: 06 Apr 2018

https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315183213-34

Please scroll down for document

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Introduction

Social workers’ relationship with the environment and the role of social workers in addressing environmental issues under climate change are usually neglected in mainstream practice. I begin this chapter by discussing the importance of social work as a field of research and practice that needs to actively carve out a position of expertise and engagement with emerging environmental issues at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of society and government. I consider the profession’s past, taking a historical account of social work’s relationship with the environment and the roles that social work has held in addressing environmental concerns by referring to one of its founders in the US, Jane Addams, and her work as ‘Garbage Inspector’ at Hull House. I then map and discuss three main environmental frameworks that have emerged within social work: ecological, eco-social and green social work. I identify three parallel themes that run through social work in addressing environmental issues: a technical approach, philosophical idealism and political economy. In considering the role of social work in engaging with environmental issues I discuss the need to understand political economy as an example of what is currently missing in social work research, education and practice. I conclude this chapter with a discussion on how social work can ensure its relevance to the future.

As a social work researcher I am engaged at the local community level because I have observed an untapped source of knowledge, understanding and interaction with one’s social network, physical and natural environments that are necessary in the transformation towards sustainability. As a social worker who is engaged with environmental issues I actively work in research and practice to develop the framework of green social work and to identify the role of social workers in addressing environmental issues such as climate change. One key role that social workers need to fill, both in practice and research is to act as the bridge between the community (i.e. local residents) and the local or upper levels of government, special interest groups and outside sources of knowledge, technology, influence and power. As the bridge, between often disparate groups, social work research and practice need to work across disciplines and collaborate with members who are working within environmental research, technology innovation, policy implementation, social welfare and economic development. The emerging field of green social work requires social workers to be the links and advocates that connect the interest
and needs of the population with the many bodies of power that influence development. Within
my research on environmental issues, I encounter two main questions from social workers and
academics in other fields of research:

- How does your research relate to social work?
- What is the role of social work in addressing environmental issues?

These questions present the opportunity and interested audience for social work to claim its
role as an expert and contributor to global and local level discussions on environmental issues. In
order for social work to maintain relevance as a practice and area of research, it is time for social
work to stretch its ‘traditional’ boundaries and become an important contributor to interdisci-
plinary collaborations that address environmental issues such as climate change.

Climate change and social work

Social work has arrived late to discussions on today’s environmental crises (Dominelli, 2011) and
is slow, sometimes even resistant, to becoming engaged in actions to address environmental issues
such as climate change. Climate change is a global problem that brings to light structural weak-
nesses within the political, social and economic systems and emphasises inequalities in income,
class and access to resources. Populations that live within disparate circumstances – those living
in or on the border of poverty, humanitarian crisis, conflict, limits in food security, access to
clean water, and who live in regions that are vulnerable to the environmental changes brought
on by climate change – are more at risk of suffering environmental inequalities and environ-
mental injustice. The people who are most vulnerable to climate change are the populations
that social work, both in practice and research, work with most closely. ‘The human impacts of
environmental challenges fall most heavily on those to whom social workers are most account-
able’ (Kemp, 2011: 1205). Social work’s involvement in environmental issues is time-sensitive
for two main reasons: dragging its feet, and losing future relevance. Kemp (2011: 1205) suggests
that ‘while social work drags its feet, its constituents face increasingly devastating environmental
realities’. The longer social workers take to become an active voice within discussions sur-
rounding environmental issues, the numbers experiencing the impact of environmental disasters
increase, alongside a disaster’s magnitude and long-term impact on human lives. Lena Dominelli
(2012) takes up these concerns in her book, Green Social Work: From Environmental Crises to Envi-
ronmental Justice. Dominelli (2012) points out that if social work remains on the periphery of
discussions surrounding issues such as climate change and their long-term human impact, then
opportunities for prevention will be missed. Discussing the need for social workers’ voices to be
heard in the media, at higher levels of government and within policy development and imple-
mentation, Dominelli (2012: 2) states that the voice of social workers ‘is absent from many of
the decision-making structures formulating policy for preventing large-scale devastation in the
future, and addressing needs during calamitous events and afterwards’. The second time-sensitive
issue is that social work needs to be aware of is its future relevance. It is absolutely necessary
for social work to add its expertise and carve out its role within discussions on climate change
and environmental issues. Social workers’ expertise needs to develop beyond the micro- or local
level – often working with the ‘aftermath of environmental disaster’ (Dominelli, 2012: 2), and
extend into the meso- and macro-levels of social policy and global environmental discussions
and international agreements. As Dominelli (2012: 3) states, ‘practice has to engage with both
local and global contexts to develop those that are locality-specific and culturally-relevant and
that engage with global interdependencies within and between countries’. Social work is at a
risk of losing its voice and relevance as a practice and body of research within today’s emerging social issues:

social work has a vested interest in attending to environmental issues as an integral part of its daily remit if it is to retain its currency in contemporary societies, emphasise its relevance to the social issues that peoples have to resolve in the twenty-first century and widen its scope if it is to prevent the haemorrhaging of its activities to related professions including health, geography, psychology and psychiatry.

(Dominelli, 2012: 3)

If social work does not carve out its importance within climate change and environmental crises research and policy, then the access and contact it has with human well-being can be easily lost to other professions. This would be a disservice to the populations social workers serve. Kemp (2011: 1205–1206) sees this as an ethical concern claiming that,

when the profession remains on the margins of environmental efforts, it both neglects its ethical responsibilities to vulnerable populations and loses vital opportunities to participate in shaping contemporary responses to environmental challenges, particularly around interconnections between environmental and social issues.

Maintaining relevance is not a new concern for social work. Meyer (1989: 151–152) expressed similar concerns when she examined the maturing of social work as a profession, stating:

Social Workers, wanting to salvage social services and themselves, are all trying to find ways to do that. . . . There is no doubt that there will always be a system of social services, and some kind of personnel to staff it. The concern is about whether or not professional social workers will remain at the core of social services.

Social work needs to move beyond insular traditions dominated by national agendas and closed off towards emerging global social processes. Social workers have to engage with policy-making, operate within multiple societal structural levels, actively engage and support populations in transformations towards sustainability in the face of climate change. To understand more clearly social work’s present-day role in addressing environmental issues, I reflect on the work of a social work environmental pioneer, Jane Addams.

Social work environmental pioneer: Jane Addams

Engagement with the environment to take care of the environment and understand the interconnected relationship between the environment, health and development of human life and populations, has a long history within the profession. Jane Addams (1860–1935) challenged urban and industrial development practices that left many wards in Chicago living in squalid slum conditions. Following a trip to Toynbee Hall, the showpiece of such work within the Settlement Movement in London, Addams founded Hull House in Chicago in 1889. Addams (1961) worked to address housing issues, and social inequalities that developed from unregulated and corrupt city planning and infrastructure practices that took advantage of poor people and placed poor and lower- to middle-class people at risk of disease and death due to poor working conditions, industrial pollution, overcrowded housing, poor sanitation and inadequate waste removal. Addams identified a high mortality rate in Hull House ward due to excessive garbage
that attracted insects, vermin and other animals that spread disease to its residents (Addams, 1961:188). In response to the high death rate and environmental contaminants surrounding Hull House and other wards in Chicago, Addams (1961) took action. She followed the garbage collection process, and noted that the system was ineffective, incomplete and corrupt. Addams (1961) acknowledged the extreme filth and squalor of the houses and surrounding neighbourhoods and assumed the role of Garbage Inspector. She enrolled women from Hull House to observe and enforce proper waste management by neighbours and garbage collectors. Addams (1961) engaged children in the collection of recyclable items including tin cans that had monetary value if deposited for recycling. Addams (1961) engaged the community of the ward – she operated on multiple societal levels, including the residents, landlords, garbage collectors, the ward alderman and mayor – in the process of creating cleanliness in the ward and improving residents’ health and well-being. This process held people accountable to fulfil their roles in the maintenance of the ward. Addams (1961: 190) wrote about the experience of the garbage inspection and noted the importance of enforcing an equality of justice:

> even-handed justice to all citizens irrespective of ‘pull,’ the dividing of responsibility between landlord and tenant, and the readiness to enforce obedience to law from both, was, perhaps, one of the most valuable demonstrations which could have been made.

From this experience, Addams demonstrated that the process of identifying an issue at ground level and developing actions and interventions from experienced knowledge was more valuable in initiating change than discussions with civic officers in faraway offices: ‘Such daily living on the part of the office holder is of infinitely more value than many talks on civics for, after all, we credit most easily that which we see’ (Addams, 1961: 190). The outcomes of Addams’s (1961) garbage inspection interventions were improved sanitation and cleanliness that reduced mortality rates within the ward. Besides the improved quality of health, an increased sense of community developed from participation in the garbage inspection project:

> The careful inspection, combined with other causes, brought about a great improvement in the cleanliness and comfort of the neighborhood and one happy day, when the death rate of our ward was found to have dropped from third to seventh in a list of city wards and was reported to our Women’s Club, the applause which followed recorded the genuine sense of participation in the result, and a public spirit which had ‘made good’.

*(Addams, 1961: 190)*

Jane Addams’ work demonstrates the role of social work in identifying and addressing environmental issues and the importance of fostering the interconnected relationship that exists between people, communities and their environments. Addams worked at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of society to bring about sustained change, and more importantly, developed connections and opportunities for knowledge sharing and intervention among different societal levels. By engaging with the women of the Hull House ward, Addams was able to educate and demonstrate how to demand that individual rights and justice be afforded to all individuals and enforced. Addams expanded on the previous knowledge of sanitation and cleanliness, and identified the importance of caring for one’s home alongside that of the environment that exists past one’s doorstep. It is important to note that there is a gender critique to be made regarding Addams’s work. The underlying theme of ‘cleanliness is next to godliness’ identifies the responsibility of caring for the home – home economics – to be a woman’s role as outlined and re-enforced by society – consider here Mary Douglas’s work on Purity and Danger and
the gendered understanding of cleanliness (Douglas, 1966). The woman’s role of ‘cleaning up the mess’, regardless of who is responsible for making the mess, extended beyond the home to impact the positions available to women in the public health sector. Although Addams did challenge power structures, she also contributed to the discourses on the gender-based roles for women.

Jane Addams’s lasting impact within social work today is the practice to ‘educate and mobilise local communities in finding their own solutions to problems’ (Dominelli, 2012: 22) a practice that is regarded as ‘empowering and anti-oppressive’ (Dominelli, 2012: 22). Although, protection of the environment for the sake of sustainability and environmental justice may not have been at the forefront of her discussions and interventions, the importance of interacting with and caring for the surrounding environment was evident in Addams’s work. From her, social work can capture examples of what it means to ‘do’ social work through action, intervention and research. This is just one example from the work of a pioneer social worker that was at the forefront of environmental awareness and activism. However, this illustrates social work’s historical roots in addressing environmental issues and working to develop a more sustainable relationship between local communities, governing bodies and the natural environment. I will leave Addams and move on to explore the more recent trajectories of social work’s engagement with environmental issues.

During the 1990s, some social workers were developing conceptual frameworks to identify social work’s relationship with the environment and the role of social work in responding to environmental changes. Kemp (2011) provided a summary of these efforts and identified three conceptual camps that engage with environmental issues from different points of departure: ecological, eco-social and ‘beyond’. Lena Dominelli’s (2012) Green Social Work is introduced with regards to Kemp’s (2011) ‘beyond’ concept. These environmental frameworks are paralleled by three main themes that run through social work and environment: a technical approach, philosophical idealism and political economy. These themes will be brought into the discussions on the individual frameworks.

Ecological framework

The ecological framework focuses on ‘developing person-environment frameworks for direct practice’ (Kemp, 2011: 1201). Practice includes work with ‘individuals, families, groups, and neighborhoods’ (Kemp et al., 1997: xii). Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) contributed to the development of the ecological framework with his research on human development, wherein he analysed the social ecology of the family. Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceived the ecological environment as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls. At the innermost level is the immediate setting containing the developing person. This can be the home, the classroom, or as often happens for research purposes – the laboratory or the testing room (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 3). Bronfenbrenner (1979) was interested in the development of the person in connection to the environment and the evolving relationship between different levels. Focused on the analysis of the social ecology of the family, Bronfenbrenner (1979) viewed the social support networks, welfare system, access to childcare, parent’s work schedules and level of safety of the neighbourhood as interrelated pieces that interacted with each other to create the ecological environment that impacted upon a child’s development. This is a scientific and technocratic way of making sense of the world from the level of human behaviour to the larger scale social systems.

The person-environment framework develops a client’s environmental competence through active participation in engaging and assessing the environment and developing an awareness of the surrounding environment. This includes recognising the symbiotic relationship between the
client/service user and the environment and then broadening this identified relationship with the environment to move from the local and familiar experience to ‘distal and foreign’ conceptual experiences (Kemp et al., 1997: 3).

The person-environment framework creates a connection between the individual’s concerns, resources, capabilities, and shared or collective actions (Kemp et al., 1997: 3). The overall goal of the person-environment framework is to assist the development of ‘an informed client able to act effectively in the many contexts of his or her life’ (Kemp et al., 1997: 3). This involves being aware of one’s surroundings, resources and networks that may be called upon in times of need, but that also have to be cultivated for the benefit of the individual, the local and global community alongside the environment that supports life. Intervention within the ecological framework is environmental intervention, defined as ‘both action in the environment and the process of transforming individual and collective perspectives through critical analysis of the impact of environmental conditions’ (Kemp et al., 1997: xi). The concepts of place – physical, spatial, social, time – and life course (see Gitterman and Germain, 2008) are identified as key points for intervention (Saleebey, 2004; Kemp, 2010, 2011). The main critique of the person-environment framework as social work practice is that despite the intention to focus on both the person and environment, the lens remains focused on the person. As Kemp et al. (1997:21) stated:

> there has been a persistent tendency to elevate person-centered knowledge and interventions . . . environmental practice languishes on the margins of direct practice, routinely invoked but accorded relatively little meaningful attention. This lack of balance has been troublesome at least since the 1920’s, when social casework adopted psychodynamic theory as its primary knowledge base.

The adoption of this technical approach as a method to understand the relationships between the individual and social systems limits social work’s ability as a practice and profession to stretch beyond its traditional boundaries and adopt roles that respond to environmental issues. Referencing remarks by social work theorist Carol Meyer (1989), Kemp (1997) reiterates Meyer’s (1989) sentiments, ‘the vexed issue of environmental practices is the ‘historical gnat’ of the American social profession’ (Kemp, 1997: 21).

If considering the ecological framework’s point of intervention within society, it appears that this framework operates at the micro/personal/local level with the goal of extrapolating the knowledge and experiential gains out towards the macro-level or ‘bigger picture’ understanding, experience and lived connection. In reality, within the field of social work this has proven to be difficult. The intervention focus remains on the person and the natural environment is not considered an equal part of the relationship.

**Eco-social framework**

The eco-social framework opposes the ecological model for its failure to see humans as a part of nature rather than above nature:

> The innate tendencies of nature, when seen as a foundation for human behaviour, can be translated into values which act as both a sense of vision and guidance for humanity. Such an ecocentric world view places the human community within nature, unlike modernity, which operates as if humans are outside and above nature.

(Coates, 2003: 78)
Historical trends in calls to action

Within the ecological framework the natural environment, if considered at all, is limited to the ‘social’ aspect of the environment. The eco-social framework, which Coates (2003) details in his book, *Ecology and Social Work: Toward a New Paradigm*, makes the necessary connection between nature and human life and the importance of the interconnectedness of this relationship. Drawing from Coates (2003:2) the eco-social framework is described as ‘holistic’, focused on a ‘mutually enriching and sustainable human/Earth relationship’ (Kemp, 2011: 1201). The main theme of the eco-social framework is philosophical idealism – it focuses on thinking, spirituality and our relationships with nature and with each other. The eco-social framework emphasises the ‘spiritual connection of people with the Earth, the fundamental interdependence of living and physical systems, and the values of indigenous ecological knowledges’ (Kemp, 2011: 1201). Focused on human attitudes, key concepts include values, respect, communication and action. These concepts and the spiritual connection between humans and nature are values shared with green social work and will be explored later in this chapter.

The eco-social model calls into question unbridled ambition for development – consumption and the convenience of the ‘modern life’, at the expense of the environment. The modern life runs on the unsustainable economic model most societies run on – one that does not consider the use of natural resources as a cost, only as a free and unlimited resource to be exploited.

The eco-social framework places the focus (possibly onus) on the individual as the source of change. Individual change, such as incorporating responsibility into daily life habits, may take on the form of some of the following examples: becoming an informed consumer; questioning the consumption of ‘stuff’ as a source of identity and value; using purchasing power as a communication tool; buying locally; and avoiding products that use harmful chemicals.

Networks or communities of people who share the same values support change at the individual level, thereby creating opportunities for larger endemic change. The role of social workers is to identify the inherent structural inequalities that hinder individual change (Coates 2003). The main critique of the eco-social framework is that it overlooks the structures (social, political, cultural, technological) that lock individuals and entire nations into high carbon-emission lifestyles. For example, there is resistance from large energy corporations to shift to renewable energy sources. Maintaining ‘business as usual’, although catastrophic for the earth and human population, brings monetary profits to a small population who are not willing to cede this short-term gain for the long-term survival and well-being of the human population.

Another example is to shift to using public transportation or commuting more by bicycle. If this responsibility is borne only by the individual, then people are locked into the limited alternatives available to them. The quality of the public transportation, access to safe bicycle paths that do not force cyclists to ride alongside busy and dangerous roadways impact an individual’s ability to make a pro-environmental behaviour change. Inequalities in access to job opportunities within close proximity of where an individual lives impact an individual’s quality of life and his/her carbon footprint. If jobs are not available in areas of affordable housing, then placing the responsibility on the individual to make changes towards a more sustainable lifestyle is ineffective. The responsibility is shifted away from governments and industries towards the individual, without addressing the larger systemic practices that must change to allow individuals to choose feasible alternatives.

Culture, values and identity can also limit an individual’s capability to change. For instance, the choice to reduce meat consumption is an option that is often met with contention and hostility in some countries or populations. As I discovered while conducting field research, in urban China, vegetarianism, is for many, an inconceivable solution to the reduction of carbon emissions and pressures against the burgeoning concepts that indicate success, wealth and development.
As one Chinese student interviewee stated, ‘No vegetarian! That’s just a stupid lifestyle’ (World Café participant, 23 November 2014).

The eco-social framework overlooks the practicality and accessibility of some of these individual changes. This brings up the issue of social injustices and inequalities that are not accounted for within the eco-social framework. People are busy, they have kids to raise, mortgages to pay, multiple jobs, and responsibilities – life is hectic. To implement changes at the individual level requires large-scale lifestyle shifts towards a degrowth model, something that is not equally accessible or possible for everyone. Trying to change at the individual level when social, political, economic, and technological structures do not facilitate change can cause feelings of anguish and the desire to look for an exit from the conversation or call to action. Unsupported requests for individual change often result in disengagement. The individual person may have the feeling that their singular action, regardless of whether it is ‘good or bad’ for the environment, does not have any impact at the end of the day. It is necessary for social work to understand the structure in which implementations are introduced. If you do not understand the social, political, economic, cultural and technological structures then implementations will fail – people will feel defeated and give up.

... and beyond

Kemp (2011) introduces concepts that move beyond the ecological and eco-social frameworks, stating that future frameworks need to focus on the right to a healthy environment. Within this third wave of environmental social work, attention is given to ‘global ecological threats, with a particular emphasis on environmental justice, or the disproportional impact of environmental hazards and degradation on the health and well-being of people of colour and poor’ (Kemp, 2011: 1201–1202). The concept green social work, developed by Dominelli (2012), works with the elements of the ecological and eco-social frameworks and adds to them the realities of social injustices and environmental injustices that are tightly intertwined with today’s environmental crises. In the book Green Social Work, Dominelli (2012) identifies the need for social work to participate in the discussions on climate change at all levels and urges social workers to become active participants in the co-production of solutions. Dominelli’s (2012) definition of green social work calls upon the profession to take responsibility and action in developing theories and practices that work with the multidimensional, local and global realities of today. The framework captures the interrelated workings of the social, political, economic and environmental. She highlights the importance of both practice and education to be not only interdisciplinary but to operate within transdisciplinarity, where disciplines develop common frameworks and coproduce solutions with residents (Dominelli, 2012). The framework gives social workers permission to move forward with confidence into the realm of environmental crises, to advocate for action and intervention and to embed this work in ‘education and practice’ (Dominelli, 2012: 25). Green social work turns the abstraction of climate change into a real complex problem for social workers to be engaged with and committed to. Keeping up with real problems is in line with Meyer (1989: 158), who advocated against complicity within social work, and to maintain its relevance by continuing to do more: ‘today the real world from which we draw [the] context of practice is so complex . . . and so public . . . we know more, and responsibly, we see more. Thus, we feel obliged to do more’. Green social work asks social workers to operate at the local community level, within the daily lives of people, and build networks that connect the local to the national and global levels so that social workers’ voices and advocacies of the people and their environment can have a pathway to travel to the ears of upper levels of government and policymakers.
Green social work involves:

social workers working closely with people in their communities through everyday life practices to: respect all living things alongside their socio-cultural and physical environments; embed economic activities, including those aimed at alleviating poverty, in the ‘social’; and promote social justice and environmental justice.

(Dominelli, 2012: 18)

Dominelli (2012: 18) describes how social workers are to fulfil this responsibility:

This will require social workers to engage in action at the local, national, regional and international levels and to use the organisations that they have formed to advocate for changes that favour the equal distribution of power and social resources, and protection of the Earth’s physical bounty, including its flora and fauna.

By including the environment as an entity in its own right, Dominelli (2012) illustrates the interdependent relationship between humans and nature. In doing so, Dominelli (2012) has brought nature and the environment to the discussion table as entities to be considered with equal value when policies are being created, social programmes are being developed, and when interventions are being implemented.

The role of social work in engaging with environmental issues: what is missing?

Social work practice and research has struggled to locate itself among the theoretical philosophies that are used to address environmental issues. Efforts to understand what is going on and what actions should be taken up by social work in response to environmental issues has produced the ecological framework, the eco-social framework and now green social work. Among the discussed frameworks, green social work calls for action from multiple societal levels to apply the necessary pressure and to develop relationships with institutions that hold power in order to move from the theoretical to effective practice.

Social work can endure criticism from other fields of research. Social works’ adaptability makes it difficult to pin down the theoretical lineages to which social work adheres. This topic is often discussed within academia where there are courses and conferences titled: *What is social work theory?* A common critique for social work that extends into the discussion of addressing environmental issues is a lack of theoretical specificity and inability to develop:

mid-level theoretical frameworks that identify the mechanisms or pathways connecting environmental factors and human outcomes and can thus inform the design and implementation of environmental interventions.

(Kemp, 2011: 1202)

One area that needs to be strengthened in social work research, education and practice is a working understanding of political economy. This requires delving into socio, political and economic understandings of capitalism and examining existing biases. Political economy connects our environmental crises to the structural frameworks that support the continued expansion of modern and post-modern capitalism. Coates (2003) is cognisant of these concepts; however a deeper examination is required. Harvey (1996) takes a contemporary umbrella view of major
Kennedy

philosophies and modernises them to fit with current realities, for example, materialism, culture and class. It is important for social work research, education and practice to be comfortable working with concepts such as political economy – it ‘firmly ties our environmental crises to the machinations of modern and post-modern capitalist expansion and the logic and power relations within the social, political and cultural framework within which we are currently living’ (Dominelli, 2012; Tester, 2017). This broader knowledge is necessary in order for social work to effectively engage with environmental issues.

Discussion

If social work wants to salvage itself as a profession and field of research, then social work needs to adapt to the realities of the contemporary world – beginning with the causes and impacts of climate change (Dominelli, 2011). Social workers’ ability to be flexible and adaptable is both a strength and weakness. It is a strength because adaptation keeps social work relevant. With a strong connection to society, social work has the ability to ‘see the world as it is’ (Meyer, 1989: 159) and develop interventions based on knowledge. Social workers have opportunities to listen and observe reality without moulding a reality to suit their comforts:

> reality will send out its own messages to us, to not distort what we see so as to suit our personal treatment interests, to search for the knowledge that will help us to manage our work and to develop the flexibility to suit intervention to case problems, even when both are new to us.

(Meyer 1989: 159)

As a weakness, social work’s flexibility and adaptability can cause resistance within the field. Continuously pushing both the profession and research forward to keep step with changing realities, and because the field of social work is so broad, there can be tensions when deciding whose reality should be pursued.

The purpose of social work is to develop a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon or trend and form knowledge-based interventions. The strength of social work is that it is both academic and field-based. Social work maintains a close connection with the realities of the communities. It works with and is sensitive to a spectrum of changes that occur from the micro- to macro-levels. When practitioners work in the ‘field’, social work makes the ‘abstractions real’ (Meyer, 1989: 154). A strength of social work is the ability to stay engaged, have a strong knowledge-base rooted in experience and theoretical frameworks, while simultaneously adapting to constant change. This is difficult to do, whether as an individual practitioner or a researcher in the field. Taking experiences from the micro-level of society and translating observations and interventions up the hierarchal ladder to macro-level bodies of government and vice versa is challenging. My perception of social work is that it is the bridge that connects the realities of different populations with sources of power that can support and facilitate sustainable interventions. To be an effective connection the bridge needs to be informed in socio, political and economic understandings of capitalism with knowledge of the local, national and international implications. Environmental issues, such as the causes and impacts of climate change, are realities social work needs to inform and be informed about. Social work has to be active in developing awareness and sustainable interventions towards the impacts of climate change, and widen its role from crises intervention and disaster relief to prevention (Dominelli, 2012). Prevention means identifying emerging local level issues, maintaining active lines of communication and
networks where information can be relayed to bodies of power that can assist in prevention and a shift towards sustainable transformation, a key goal for green social work.

References


World Café participant, 23 November 2014. From collected research notes.