Article

International Social Work
2014, Vol. 57(4) 338–345

DOI: 10.1177/0020872814524968
isw.sagepub.com

Promoting environmental justice through green social work practice: A key challenge for practitioners and educators

Lena Dominelli
University of Durham, UK

Abstract
Environmental crises associated with disasters exacerbate existing socio-economic and cultural inequalities. This article argues for the inclusion of environmental justice in contemporary social work practice as one way of promoting inclusionary social work that meets some of the challenges of the 21st century. It does so by exploring the implications of environmental degradation and its reinforcement of structural inequalities in Sri Lanka following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and draws on a three-year research project funded by the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council in the UK that led to the development of a multidisciplinary approach to disasters that is described in the author's recent book *Green Social Work*.

Keywords
Culture, disasters, environmental (in)justice, gender relations, green social work, social inequalities, tsunami

Introduction

Environmental crisis abound in our 21st-century world. They stem from natural disasters such as earthquakes and (hu)man-made disasters rooted in industrialization processes that take nature for granted. Consequently, the exploitation of its largesse has polluted the planet's air, soil and water and endangered biological species including plants, animals and people. Social work has been slow to respond to the challenges posed by environmental crises and deemed the ensuing environmental injustices these perpetrate, as concerns for the physical sciences. In this article, I argue that this approach is inadequate because environmental crises generate socio-economic and cultural inequalities rooted in environmental injustices that exacerbate those already existing in socio-economic, political and cultural structures. I also suggest that social work educators and practitioners have an important role to play in developing and sustaining an environmental justice that

Corresponding author:
Lena Dominelli, Durham University, Elvet Riverside 2, Durham DH1 3JT, UK.
Email: lena.dominelli@durham.ac.uk

upholds human and citizenship-based rights and in ensuring that such concerns are covered in social work's curricula. I suggest that the environmental model proposed in *Green Social Work* (Dominelli, 2012a) promises a constructive and sustainable way forward.

Environmental injustice

Bullard (2000 [1990]) was amongst the first sociologists to highlight the unequal impact of environmental degradation on poor people and its role in promoting injustice because industrial waste was dumped on poor communities. Focusing on the US, he coined the term 'environmental racism' to expose the disproportionate burden borne by African-American communities and the price they paid for a degraded environment that jeopardized their health and well-being while locking them in low paid jobs associated with industrialization processes. Ungar (2002) introduced the concept of environmental justice as a matter of protecting the environment into social work.

I define environmental injustice as society's failure to ensure the equitable distribution of the Earth's resources in meeting human needs, simultaneously providing for the well-being of people and planet Earth today and in the future. Through this definition, I suggest that the current model of industrial development is 'not fit for purpose' and that social workers have a role to play in formulating alternative models of socio-economic development by promoting environmental justice and organizing and mobilizing communities in meeting human need 'without costing the earth' (Dominelli, 2012a, 2013). This concern is a central aspect of the Global Agenda for social workers because it aims to tackle socio-economic inequalities that are particularly severe for marginalized people throughout the world.

Crucial to developing this Agenda, is that people acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to hold accountable multinational companies that exacerbate socio-economic inequalities by exploiting land, labour and resources at least economic cost, thereby maximizing profits from investments while claiming to meet human needs. This approach to industrial development has resulted in working people living on low incomes; producing quality goods accessed mainly by wealthier, super-rich groups, while these workers survive in degraded environments that risk their health and capacity to enjoy life with decent standards of living. Flexible, 'zero-hour contracts' and low wages are symbolic of the expendable view of labour that contemporary business corporations utilize to cut costs while nation-states, especially Western ones, underpin low wages by providing low levels of welfare benefits and/or subsidising low wages that contravene their obligations to ensure that all citizens enjoy equal opportunities which encompass having a historically acceptable standard of living that covers food, clothing, shelter, health care, education and social services as articulated in Articles 22–27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) that all members of the United Nations (UN) have ratified.

Understanding the dynamics that sustain this way of organizing socio-economic relations through a neoliberal global economic system is central to progressing the Global Agenda's aims of eradicating poverty, promoting social justice and protecting the physical environment for the use of current and future generations of the Earth's peoples, flora and fauna. The right to be cared for by others and the planet is accompanied by the responsibility of politicians and companies that make decisions about the use of the world's resources to do so in ecologically sustainable ways that engage residents affected by their decisions in making them and residents holding business leaders accountable for how they run their firms. This approach is indicative of the need to 'green the profession' and provides a 21st-century challenge to social work practitioners and academics (Dominelli, 2012a, 2013). The involvement of communities and service users in undertaking research and co-producing the knowledge, skills and understandings that will provide innovative, alternative solutions for today's environmental crises are included in *Green Social Work* (Dominelli, 2012a).

Method

This article draws upon research undertaken into the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami in southwestern Sri Lanka, Internationalising Institutional and Professional Practices (IIPP), funded by the UK's Economic and Social Sciences Research Council (ESRC) between 2009 and 2012. This research sought to examine disaster survivors' experiences of humanitarian aid and the reconstruction processes that attempted to deal with the environmental and livelihood devastation caused originally by the tsunami and subsequently by responses to the disaster itself.

The project utilized an interpretive ethnographic methodology to examine the contested nature of international interventions (Hancock, 1991) and acknowledge the social construction of reality as described by Berger and Luckman (1967). This was achieved by collecting data to access the social worlds of the research subjects to unearth the richness, complexity and particularities of their experiences. Within this, the overall project examined villagers' perceptions about the extent to which they had participated in empowering partnerships with donors. Thus, the project sought not to establish the 'truth' in the work done through donor-recipient relationships in humanitarian aid, but to convey the voices of the research participants while acknowledging that the researchers' own epistemological assumptions and values and the specific contexts in which research is undertaken impact on the findings (Klein and Myers, 1999). The project team sought to reflect diverse epistemological and value systems by including people from the UK and Sri Lanka as equal partners in the research as well as engaging directly with villagers, district officials, civil society organizations and others involved in humanitarian aid activities to ensure that a cross-section of village interests were included amongst respondents. Snowballing techniques were utilized to ensure that the categories of respondents encompassed all groups with an interest in delivering and receiving aid.

The data include transcripts of 368 interviews, 12 focus groups, 45 online questionnaires and 35 sets of field notes. Interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded wherever possible and transcribed. Data were coded through Nvivo software to identify key themes. The wealth of data collected is being written about in various publications. For this article, the villagers' transcripts were re-examined through the key words of environmental (in)justice, social (in)justice, poverty, loss of livelihood, ownership of land, housing, fishing boats, business corporations, aid distribution, impact and sustainable development.

This approach to the data is exploratory, but it has enabled me to focus on particular experiences of environmental (in)justice. I urge caution in readers' extrapolations from and interpretations of the data. I structure my analysis of the findings around the traditional socio-economic and cultural structures shaping the villagers' lives; and the (lack of) changes to these following the tsunami, and identify areas for future research. In presenting the findings, I maintain anonymity in the responses by removing all identifiers and referring only to the category of respondent.

Context, findings and discussion

Context

The 26 December 2004 tsunami destroyed people, livelihoods and physical environment in 12 countries bordering the Indian Ocean, causing 300,000 deaths, 40,000 of these in Sri Lanka (http://www.lankalibrary.com/news.htm). An outpouring of goodwill and desire to assist the survivors followed. Aid giving has been accused of benefiting donors more than recipients (Hancock, 1991; Hoogvelt, 2007) because lack of consultation can render it inappropriate for local conditions and residents. Nonetheless, the generosity released by this calamity was unprecedented and donations reached levels not seen in subsequent disasters. In many areas, the devastation was total – housing,

transportation, communications, water supplies, schools and health and social services systems were gone. A further complication in Sri Lanka was the continuing armed struggle between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil Tigers (LTTE) which restricted access to tsunami devastated rebel-held areas for safety reasons. Although raised initially by Enarson and Morrow (1998) and Pittaway et al. (2007), this work also revealed that women's concerns and need for aid assistance continued to be poorly addressed in responses to this tsunami.

Socio-economic and cultural traditions

Southwestern Sri Lanka is a predominantly Buddhist Singhalese area in which cultural traditions revolve around fishing and tourism as key economic drivers assuring people's incomes. Relationships between men and women were patriarchal. Men's breadwinning roles were configured around their capacities as economic providers and decision-makers within families while women were cast as carers of children and the wider family. Women were prohibited from accessing fishing boats and their entitlement to aid were accessed through the male hierarchy. One respondent expressed this thus:

> In fishing villages women are in a lower position because men are very dominant. . . In the south, there have been these traditional beliefs where women are not supposed to be on a fishing boat. It will get polluted. They are not supposed to touch anything, so women were completely excluded. . . the domination that was built among men created many difficulties for women because alcoholism was very high. Men coming home from fishing in the morning. They drink and sleep. That's all they do. Wife battering is very common.

The context of an environment degraded by natural disaster intensified existing inequalities between men and women, but also exposed men who lost their livelihoods to the prospects of unemployment. Social workers have an important role to play in reducing the tensions between men and women, assisting them to obtain their aid entitlements, and working to provide income generation opportunities that are consistent with sustainable development for men and women. Some practitioners used civil society organizations to engage in the latter; few undertook work with men as men with specific needs. Eradicating socio-economic-based inequalities would necessitate working with both men and women.

Gender relations

Women's powerlessness in decision-making included the lack of women in managerial ranks overseeing aid distribution as well as their absence from receiving their aid entitlements (Dominelli, 2012b). Additionally, the shame which their behaviour could bring about even during the tsunami compelled some women to act with honour even when their lives were at stake:

> Women. . . were killed for social cultural reasons. . . women were almost saved and. . . a mother who was telling me that this girl was drowning and somebody gave her a hand to reach her. She was almost lifted and when she realized that she didn't have any clothes on her body. . . she let the hand go and she let herself drown. . . Her feeling of shame was much stronger than the feeling [fear] of death.

Women were also expected to be strong and assume responsibility for the family's well-being if the man's economic provider role became unrealizable:

> She didn't want to get married. She didn't want. . . a job in a garment factory which she has to because her husband drinks too much. . . she's got a small child. . . and she's always working in this garment factory and she wanted to get an education, she wanted to teach.

Some NGOs including local ones encouraged women into income-generation activities that usually drew upon women's traditional skills. In one case, local women came together to create and sell their goods. As their confidence and capacities grew, they organized a visit to the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, despite never having gone out of the village before. Moreover, they arranged this trip without help from their husbands or other men. This demonstrated women's capacity to act as agents in their own right and change their situation without transforming patriarchal relations.

The loss of livelihoods presented problems for men. Having lost their breadwinner role which lay at the core of their masculine identity, a number of men and boys became addicted to drugs and drink, which made them even less capable of assuming a positive male role within the family. One respondent put it thus:

> Our boys were very good, they helped others who came to clear the dirt, bury the bodies, and clean the houses. Some of the young people had lost their boats and fishing things and they were sad. Some bad things also happened. Some of the boys got to drink arrack and began to fight. Some boys became lazy.

The failure of NGO or other organizations to address the livelihood issues as these pertained to men and boys contributed to the undermining of their futures including their capacity to form families, have children and provide for them. Men had little help in developing alternative employment opportunities. Their position indicates how environmental devastation intensifies social inequalities, especially for those who were self-employed when different forms of employment fail to materialize. The loss of men's role and identity within local social structures was reflected in increased levels of domestic violence – beating women and children, and fighting each other. In turn, this reality aggravated social inequalities related to gender and age. Social workers can help men resume a valuable role in society by supporting their endeavours to acquire employment so that they can keep poverty at bay and engage as contributors to their families' and society's well-being.

Land use and ownership issues

The land, its ownership and use became an issue during the clearing of debris, the rebuilding of homes, the development of businesses and the re-establishment of livelihoods.

Debris clearance. Clearing the debris left by environmental disasters is an additional headache that bears down on poorer people more heavily. They have to rely on their social networks and external assistance to clear their land of the considerable waste left behind in a devastated landscape while those with funds can purchase other people's labour to do it for them. Additionally, there is the collective issue of how to dispose of the colossal amount of debris that is generated and where it can be safely placed so as not to damage water supplies or further contaminate land to the detriment of the well-being of people, plants and animals.

Debris clearance activities raise interesting questions about what constitutes social work practice. Amongst those practising social work in Sri Lanka in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami was one young person who asked what clearing debris had to do with professional social work. After doing this for some time, this individual was able to appreciate the importance of getting

alongside people to assist them in doing practical tasks and using such engagements to develop social relationships that would go beyond debris clearing by laying foundations for subsequent social work practice, including responding to survivors' psychosocial needs. At the same time, helping residents to acquire the knowledge and skills for disposing of debris in an environmentally sustainable manner can become an important new source of social work practice. It can also be linked to protecting the environment by helping residents determine what debris can be reclaimed and recycled, thereby easing pressure on both landfill sites and the use of fresh materials. These concerns can be incorporated into engaging local people with the green environmental agenda and also provide the basis for employment opportunities.

Housing development. Respondents did not wish to leave the land where the tsunami had destroyed their homes and livelihoods. For some, temporary housing was located a long way from the coast including in the interior of the country. Initially, the government, concerned about people's safety refused to give people permission to rebuild their houses within 300 metres of the sea. Although this was eventually reduced to 100 metres, a significant number of businesses and families ignored this injunction. Furthermore, some survivors had still not received permanent replacement housing by 2012. In the meantime, a number of international firms had established hotels with beachside amenities which they exploited for profit-making purposes. Doing this reflected the exploitation of disasters for the benefit of people from outside an area (Klein, 2008). These developments aroused local sensitivities and exacerbated contested claims over land ownership, with local people often the losers. This issue became particularly contentious where local people, especially marginalized ones were unable to prove land ownership. Moreover, new early-warning systems which had been put in place were not always well-sited to be usefully heard by villagers. And there is little tsunami and earthquake awareness activity being conducted in the schools with either children or the wider population. Social workers could encourage the development of such schemes.

Those individuals who wished to build new houses found that limited funds prevented them from constructing disaster-proof buildings that could withstand future tsunamis, floods and/or earthquakes. Others found that poorly inspected building regulations meant that newly constructed houses that they purchased were unable to withstand flooding in normal downpours, and became particularly problematic during monsoon weather. One villager reported how the lack of drains on the replacement property they acquired flooded during heavy rainfall because the developer had failed to build drains to carry away storm water.

Health concerns. Others expressed concerns about the impact of housing that was poorly ventilated and/or heated because these quickly developed mould on walls and endangered people's health, especially that of children and older people with already compromised immune systems and respiratory ailments. Flooding itself can create other forms of health risks, especially those associated with water-borne diseases and when the formation of stagnant pools provides breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Dengue fever has risen substantially in Sri Lanka in recent years, and much of this can be attributed to the creation of environments favourable for mosquitoes and other insects to breed in. Social workers can mobilize people around housing issues and the creation of environments that promote health and well-being. Information that crosses disciplinary divides can become crucial in such situations, for example, asking biologists to explore water-borne disease risks with local communities and acting as bridges between scientific experts and lay people.

Pressures to develop the land meant that the planting of mangroves and other vegetal materials that can reduce inundations by flooding could not be implemented, thereby increasing the likelihood of more devastation should a tsunami reoccur or if flooding – frequent in the interior of Sri Lanka, extended to coastal areas. The tendency to continue with urbanized growth, especially

relevant in the tourist trade also contributes to the degradation of the environment and reduced resilience in the event of extreme weather events such as flooding. The pressures of building appropriate infrastructures to maintain tourism based on neoliberal approaches to exploiting the land and opportunities it offers have meant that the development of eco-friendly forms of tourism have been constrained. The benefits for local people are limited to the jobs provided by building developments associated with hotels housing guests and workers. However, these jobs are often low-paid and the ability for poor people to rise out of poverty are restricted while the owners are cushioned from negative impacts by the profits they make from an economy heavily reliant on tourism. Urbanized and urbanising tourism is unsustainable in delicate ecosystems and undermine an area's capacity to develop sustainably in the short and long terms.

Livelihood development. Another issue linked to land use is that of the loss of likelihoods, especially in fishing areas where the lack of funds to purchase new boats to replace those destroyed by the tsunami. In one village, the 30 residents attending focus group discussions in 2012 revealed that 11 families still had received neither funding for nor replacement fishing nets. As each net produced jobs for eight people, 88 jobs had been lost to the village and meant that people had to remain unemployed in their village or migrate to Colombo or elsewhere for work. This had serious implications for local social structures in the village and contributed to the pressures of overcrowding in poor quality housing in Colombo, often with friends or relatives already located there. Other families relied on remittances sent to them by family members who worked elsewhere in the country, or even overseas. These remittances were used to promote local consumption rather than structural developments in the area. Social workers could help people to understand better the connection between consumption, production and reproduction and the extent to which sustainable development can promote more enduring investments in their society.

Conclusions

Environmental disasters of the scale and extent of the 2004 tsunami can exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities, affirm traditional cultural mores and norms, and reinforce unequal gender relations. Responding to the issues raised requires critical reflections on what exists and imaginative interventions based on alternative views of acting and being in the world. Social work organizations pursuing the Global Agenda can actively promote more sustainable forms of socio-economic development in environmentally devastated low-income areas by mobilizing people and resources to create new forms of employment that give them greater resilience in withstanding future environmental shocks, but also to develop models of development that are less destructive of the environment by seeking to work in tandem with nature rather than exploit it for the purpose of filling the pockets of the few with money. The development of wind, wave and solar energies can provide a way of providing employment for people while protecting the environment and further developing the sustainable socio-economic and environmental approach identified in *Green Social Work* (Dominelli, 2012a).

Acknowledgments

Thanks are given to the Co-Investigator, the Research Associates and Local Researchers who worked with me in collecting the data for this project. The end of funding and their moving on has meant they could not be involved in writing this article.

Funding

This project was funded by the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council of the UK from 2009 to 2012.

References

Berger, P.L. and T. Luckmann (1967) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin.

Bullard, R. (2000 [1990]) *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, 3rd edn. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Dominelli, L. (2012a) *Green Social Work*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Dominelli, L. (2012b) 'Gendering Climate Change: Debates, Policies and Action', in M. Alston and K. Whittenbury (eds) *Research, Action and Policy: Addressing the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change*, pp. 77–94. Sydney, Australia: Springer.

Dominelli, L. (2013) 'Environmental Justice at the Heart of Social Work Practice: Greening the Profession', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, DOI: 10.1111/ijsw.12024.

Enarson, E. and B. Morrow (1998) *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: through Women's Eyes*. Miami: Florida International University.

Hancock, G. (1991) *Lords of Poverty: The Power, Prestige, and Corruption of the International Aid Business*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

Hoogvelt, A. (2007) 'Globalisation and Imperialism: Wars and Humanitarian Intervention', in L. Dominelli (ed.) *Revitalising Communities in a Globalising World*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Klein, H.K. and M.D. Myers (1999) 'A Set of Principles for Conducting and Evaluating Interpretive Field Studies in Information Systems', *MIS Quarterly* 23(1): 67–93.

Klein, N. (2008) *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. London: Penguin.

Pittaway, E., L. Bartolomei and S. Rees (2007) 'Gendered Dimensions of the 2004 Tsunami and a Potential Social Work Response in Post-Disaster Situations', *International Social Work* 50(3): 307–19.

Ungar, M. (2002) 'A Deeper, More Social Ecological Social Work Practice', *Social Services Review* 76: 480–97.

Author biography

Lena Dominelli is Co-Director of the Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience and Professor of Applied Social Sciences at Durham University, an Academician in the Academy of the Learned Societies for Social Sciences and co-editor of *International Social Work*.