

Policy Recommendations for Meeting the Grand Challenge to Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment

The year 2015 brought about three ambitious and innovative global frameworks shaping policy and implementation in the areas of sustainable development, environmental sustainability, and social-ecological justice: the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals, and the Paris agreement on the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change.¹ These frameworks are conceived as interconnected bodies setting agendas across continents, cultures, and sociopolitical realities. Together, they can become powerful tools for informing and inspiring efforts at the interface of social justice and environmental sustainability. Social work is uniquely positioned to catalyze, facilitate, and propel social innovation at the human–environment nexus, promoting justice, equity, and human and social development through person-in-environment oriented policies and practices. We recommend that relevant policy-making entities and actors take inspiration from these global frameworks to rethink and reshape three critical areas of social-ecological concern that exemplify the grand challenges of the Anthropocene.

Recommendation 1:

Adopt and Implement Evidence-Based Approaches to Disaster Risk Reduction

One of the most drastic consequences of anthropogenic global climate change has been the increased frequency and severity of extreme weather events. More than 375 million people per year are affected by climate-related disasters, a 50% increase over the past decade.² Such events disrupt physical, social, and environmental resources; compromise communications and infrastructures; diminish coping capacities; overwhelm social support networks; deplete household assets; and pose threats to human well-being and safety. They also exacerbate existing physical and mental health problems and create new problems that interfere with service provision and recovery. Children, the poor, older adults, members of minority groups, and people with a history of mental health problems are especially vulnerable to such events and their consequences.

Adequate preparation for and response to extreme weather events and other natural hazards will require policies that support and sustain initiatives in five key areas. First, an evidence-based approach to disaster risk reduction should be implemented, targeting three tiers of disaster impact: (a) biopsychosocial, (b) interpersonal, and (c) intrapersonal or behavioral health.³ Second, evidence-based and evidence-informed interventions should become the standard in preparing for and responding to disaster impacts in all three tiers. Priority should be given to developing, evaluating, and scaling up interventions designed to build community resilience,⁴ address human insecurity, and manage social conflict before and after disasters. Third, social workers should be trained in the use of these evidence-based interventions. For instance, funding should be made available to create and deliver trauma-informed programs for training disaster-relief and recovery personnel in such interventions as Psychological First Aid and Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools.⁵ Fourth, all masters-level social

work curricula in the United States should include courses in disaster preparedness and response as well as in evidence-based interventions targeting post-traumatic stress. Fifth, specifically trained social workers should be added to interdisciplinary teams and programs for disaster-management and response at local, state, and national levels.

Recommendation 2:

Develop Policies Targeting Environmentally Induced Migration and Population Displacement

Environmentally forced migration—both cross-border movement and internal displacement—is on the rise.⁶ Many refugees currently fleeing Northern African and Arab countries report that large-scale environmental devastation, in addition to or as a result of oppression and violence, has forced them to abandon their communities; in 2011, the U.N. Security Council concluded that the war in Darfur, Sudan, was triggered by climate change and its socioecological effects;⁷ rising sea levels have prompted Pacific Islanders to seek asylum in New Zealand; and encroaching waters from the Gulf of Mexico have claimed the ancestral lands of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe in Louisiana.⁸ The United Nations estimates that some 25 million people are on the move due to environmental push factors; this number may increase to up to 250 million by 2050.⁹ Yet this rapidly growing group is denied the protections of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees,¹⁰ protections afforded to people fleeing from war or “natural” disasters. This lack of protection poses enormous problems for human security, rights, and social justice, potentially leaving millions of victims of environmental change without care, legal status, shelter, dignity, or the capacity to plan for the future.¹¹

We recommend that social workers mobilize efforts to (a) raise awareness of the profession, communities, policy makers, and decision makers concerning the challenges posed by global environmental migration; (b) advocate at all governance levels for policies to protect environmental refugees, providing legal, political, and material resources as well as human and social services; (c) push policy makers to negotiate an amendment to the 1951 Geneva Convention, granting refugee status to environmental migrants, and push federal and state legislators to grant adequate legal status in the meantime; (d) reduce vulnerability to displacement, decrease unplanned displacement, and strengthen community resilience (e.g., through investments to reduce dependence on climate-dependent livelihoods); (e) develop strategies for planned, long-term relocation of environmental migrants: “migration with dignity”;¹² and (f) engage affected communities in planning and decision making.

Recommendation 3:

Strengthen Equity-Oriented Urban Resilience Policies and Proactively Engage Marginalized Communities in Adaptation Planning

Increasingly, cities and counties are recognized as important scales for equity-oriented adaptation planning and intervention.¹³ Urbaniza-

tion compounds environmental risks associated with climate change and adds additional concerns: increasing density; new security threats; rising social and economic inequality; and strains on infrastructure, service systems, and urban ecologies, including informal settlements in environmentally marginal locations lacking basic services. Marginalized communities are disproportionately harmed by urban and regional environmental inequities. In cities that have suffered significant economic and social disinvestment, low income communities of color are particularly vulnerable to new environmental threats because of deteriorated infrastructures, severely reduced social and safety services, and preexisting environmental inequities. Because 66% of the world's population will live in cities by 2050,¹⁴ there is a critical need for policies addressing the linked challenges of climate change and urbanization—policies that are equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive.

We recommend social work advocacy around and involvement in the following efforts:

1. Ensure that policies and interventions aimed at fostering urban resilience routinely focus on the social equity and environmental justice implications of adaptation efforts (e.g., equitable land use; safe, secure, and affordable housing; nontoxic built and natural environments; and equitable access to services, resources, and jobs).¹⁵
2. Broaden the participation of marginalized and vulnerable communities in resilience and adaptation planning. To ensure that plans are tailored, meaningful, and appropriate, community residents and grassroots coalitions should be involved from the outset in planning efforts. City and county officials should create adaptation advisory councils with diverse representation, proactively engage communities by using participatory methods, and rigorously measure inclusion in adaptation planning.¹⁶
3. Strengthen policy and planning attention to the social dimensions of climate change adaptation. Social agencies, social workers, and community development practitioners should, for example, be included in adaptation planning teams: These professionals have deep social-ecological expertise; are highly skilled in participatory community engagement; can serve as bridges among communities, disciplines, and sectors; and espouse values of participation, social justice, and self-determination.

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End Notes

1. Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (March 18, 2015), http://www.unisdr.org/files/43291_sendaiframeworkfordrren.pdf; G.A. Res. 70/1, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (September 25, 2015), http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E; Paris agreement on the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (December 12, 2015), <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/MTDSG/Volume%20II/Chapter%20XXVII/XXVII-7-d.en.pdf>.
2. Schuemer-Cross and Taylor (2009).
3. Palinkas (2015).
4. *Community resilience* is defined here as a community's collective ability to sustain, reorganize, and renew itself through adaptive and transformative responses to stressors and shocks. It is integral to social sustainability.
5. For Psychological First Aid, see Forbes et al. (2011). For Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools, see Jaycox (2004).

6. Science for Environment Policy (2015).
7. United Nations Security Council (2011).
8. D'Angelo (2016); Science for Environment Policy (2015).
9. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2009).
10. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, July 28, 1951, 189 U.N.T.S. 137.
11. Reckemmer (2009).
12. This principle is derived from the 2011 Dhaka Principles for Migration with Dignity, <http://www.dhaka-principles.org/>.
13. *Adaptation* refers here to actions taken to anticipate, prepare for, and reduce the adverse consequences of climate change and urbanization, as well as to take advantage of any opportunities such changes generate.
14. United Nations (2014).
15. Friend and Moench (2015).
16. Shi et al. (2016).

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