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**Impact Of The Environment On The Human Condition:
An International Human Rights Problem**

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Background

The word “environment” does not appear at any point in the International Code of Ethics for the Professional Social Worker (IFSW Code of Ethics, authored by Chauncey Alexander, and adopted by the IFSW general meeting, San Juan, Puerto Rico, July 10, 1976).

The Code does state, however, that one of the standards by which ethical conduct can be demonstrated by professional social workers is that they “identify and interpret social needs, the basis and nature of individual, group, community, national and international social problems...” (IFSW1976: 2, Item 6). Surely, there can be no dispute that the state of the environment is an international social problem... Surely there can be no dispute that a social work perspective -- one that is concerned with the patterns of relationship among living things, and how those patterns may be changed to achieve social justice -- can and should be brought to bear on the fundamental task of saving our endangered planet.

Historian William Irwin Thompson, writing from his Canadian retreat of Toronto, in 1971, warned us that “the environment that sustained us for a time is now crushing down and pushing us out”.

“We will have to come right up to the edge to find out where we are, and who we are. At the edge of history, history can no longer help us, and only myth remains equal to reality.”

Thompson, At the Edge of history:
Speculations on the Transformation of Culture, 1971: 230

Looking “from one end of history to another”, as Thompson did, we see that as a species we have made increasingly closer approaches to eradicating ourselves and every other living thing from the face of this good planet.

Social workers around the world have in common the task of teaching people how to interpret their experience, how to make sense of their personal, inter-personal, familial, social, political, work, and economic environments. To these, we must now add an understanding of the environment, itself, for our interactions with it are largely unseen, and beyond our awareness, and largely beyond the awareness of those who have been, traditionally, the clients of social workers. And, just as we have been able to make explicit to direct-service clients those unseen political and economic forces that have shaped their lives, so must we now make explicit those unseen environmental factors which shape their lives. The difference is that such a stance removes the boundaries between social worker and client: neither is spectator in this enterprise. Each has equal need and equal capacity to affect our chances for survival.

Models help us to explain old things and they help us see new things. When social workers turn their minds to environmental matters more extensively than they, as a collectivity, have to date, which items will they include on their agenda? What they include is as important as what they exclude, for their interventions will be shaped by their perception of the range of inter-related environmental problems, by their appreciation of the connectedness between what they already know of the human condition, and by their being clear about which actions they can take in their role as professionals, and which actions they take in their role as citizens. For example, one could predict that the majority of social workers, world-wide, would list many of the same environmental concerns as does my own national government:

1. Soil... as “a life support system”, and one that is “impossible to manufacture”;
2. Water... without which “life is impossible”;
3. Air... recognizing that pollution problems like acid rain are local and “now regional and even global in scale”;
4. Climate... with its changes to “international trading patterns because of a shift in agricultural zones and food-producing capability”;
5. Wildlife... because of the threat to “twenty-five thousand plants and more than one thousand vertebrates threatened with extinction”; and
6. Toxic wastes... because of “their concentration in water systems and food chains” which will “affect the health of generations to come”.

Environment Canada, “World Commission on Environment and Development Canadian Visit”, May 1986

One suspects, however, that few social workers (at least in my own nation) would list two agenda items which are noted by our own government:

1. Heritage... That with “no new continents to develop” we face a substantial threat to our environmental heritage; and
2. Co-operation... That “the relationship between environment and development is mutually supportive” and that “a healthy environment is both a prerequisite for appropriate development and its end result”.

Environment Canada, May 1986

The Human Rights Aspect

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) has issued a volume entitled international policy papers (1988) which, in eleven subject areas, provides guidance for social workers and their professional associations, on “the broadest issues confronting society at large” (IFSW, 1988: 1). The very first of these policy papers, and the one which sets the foundation for the remainder, is our “international policy on human rights”. In it, we define human rights as “those fundamental entitlements that are considered to be necessary for developing each personality to the fullest” (Alexander for IFSW, 1988: 6). The document further delineates a somewhat expanded version of the original United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and talks of rights in the areas of governance, justice, the family, education, employment, and health, and closes with the responsibilities individuals must assume to advance the cause of human rights.

What we do not discuss in the document is a right that may now be considered as an over-arching one: the right to a safe, clean, non-toxic environment... and the right to have key natural resource issues and key human settlements issues solved, in such a fashion so as to promote the continuance of the planet earth (World Commission on Environment and Development, “Mandate for Change: Key Issues, Strategy and Workplan”, Switzerland, 1985).

As president of IFSW, I can tell you that it is my sense of our members in fifty nations that they would agree with such an addition to our existing human rights policy. I think that they believe, as does one of Canada’s leading human rights pioneers, Kalmen Kaplansky, that “anything which affects the dignity of

people and their standing as equal members of society is a human rights issue” (Canadian Human Rights Advocate, 1988). And nothing can affect each of us more than the fact that if we exploit the environment, we exploit each other. . . Even unto death. And in death, there can be neither social nor economic progress, nor development. The closure of our planet is the last “development”.

Implications for Social Work and Social Work Education

A “new” emphasis on the environment will not be “new”, in some senses, to the social workers of the world. We have already laid the foundation for this development in the evolution of the profession and in the training of its students for practice. We need only to expand our vision slightly to incorporate the new realities.

1. Many north American schools and faculties of social work have already adopted a generalist perspective for social work education, especially at the level of the first professional degree (BSW), teaching to students what the common base, or elements of all practice, are. We are fond of talking of clients “in their situation”, or the “person in context”... Surely, it cannot stretch us too far to include the environment as part of “Context”.
2. Many schools and faculties, likewise, have adopted general systems theory as a model for organizing social work practice, and while this is “borrowed” knowledge, systems theory does teach us a focus on “the inter-relationships of elements in nature...” (Barker, The Social Work Dictionary, 1987: 162). While those of us in academic circles have found this to be a useful (if not non-controversial) perspective, it is a perspective which allows us to incorporate into our knowledge base those facts about environment which enhance our understanding of the range of misery in the human condition... and to enhance the breadth of our opportunities for intervention. It may be that our assumptions about the importance of social and economic and cultural and organizational emphases have precluded observations concerning the primacy of the environmental issues.
3. Further, many North American schools and faculties have organized their approach to social work from an ecological perspective, i.e., a perspective borrowed from biology, that studies the relations between organisms and their environment. In its application to social work, the “organisms” are humans, and the “environment” is sometimes rather narrowly construed as being the social environment, solely. This need not be the case, and we could expand our definition of environment to incorporate its real meaning, which is much closer to the meaning ascribed to it by the United Nations and others. For example:

“An orientation in social work... that emphasizes the environmental contexts in which people function. Important concepts include the principles of adaptation, transaction, and goodness of fit between people and their environments, reciprocity, and mutuality.”

Barker, The Social Work Dictionary, 1987: 48

4. In addition to the commonalities between our North American social work education programmes, particularly with reference to our perspectives on the use of systems theory and an ecological perspective on practice, there is international agreement among IFSW member associations on the core subject areas that should be taught in any post-secondary program of social work education. One of these -- human growth and social environment - - offers a vehicle for expanding the knowledge base of future practitioners. [The other core subject areas are: social policy; social welfare administration; research methodology and design; supervised practice or field work experiences; and methods courses in the application and integration of the learned knowledge base.]

It is in this course(s) that we can teach students that human behaviour cannot be understood except in its environmental context. There is already an excellent but not well-known model for doing so, one developed by Mukerjee (The Dimensions of Human Evolution, 1963: 41) and brought to the attention of academics by Dr. Shanti Khinduka (Dean, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, St. Louis) at the 1976 Habitat Conference in Vancouver. In brief, Mukerjee organizes our world and, therefore, our knowledge about it, into four types of environments:

- The Internal Biological Environment
- The Social Environment
- The Ecological Environment of External Nature
- The Ideal or Metaphysical Environment

Coming from the perspective of environment, rather than the more traditional way of beginning with the individual and moving outward, is perhaps an antidote for those students and social workers who have confined their interests and, therefore, our profession to too narrow a view of the real world in which they are living. It is also a perspective which unites in common cause the social workers in developed and developing countries.

5. Finally, IFSW in a revised code of ethics might give guidance to its member associations in drafting their codes to reflect the duty of care that social workers owe to all client systems to practice as though the environment mattered. The code of ethics for the Canadian Association of Social Workers is explicit in this matter:

“3.6 The social worker will have adequate knowledge and abilities to meet standard of service requirements:

3.6.1. Knowledge and understanding of human development and functioning; cultural and environmental factors affecting human life and the patterns of social interactions contributing to the interdependence of human behaviour.”

Conclusion

These are but a few modest ways in which we can link our growing knowledge of environmental matters to what is already important to us in the profession as it is practiced in our world. Social workers have always believed at least two of the basic laws of nature/ecology: everything is connected to everything else... (and) there is no free lunch. And it is through days such as this, which allow us to know each other and to join our hands in a common effort, and through our representatives to this august world body, that we shall undertake uncommon decisions that may yet help all of us on planet earth stave-off the impending night... a night of our own creation.