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JOINING THE CALL TO INCORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY INTO THE CANADIAN SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION

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Article abstract

A global concern about how unsustainable use of global natural resources engenders environmental, social, and economic injustices for the world's most vulnerable population has been well established in the literature. Although the profession of social work has a long-standing tradition of advocating for social and economic justice, issues of environmental sustainability have yet to be fully incorporated into social work education and practice. While the connection between the natural environment and social work education is robustly emerging in Australian and American literature, the Canadian social work literature is also paying attention to issues of environmental sustainability. In response to the 2018 call by the Canadian Association for Social Work Education – Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS) (2018) to revitalize efforts towards environmental sustainability in Canadian social work education, this article joins other Canadian social work educators to advocate for the profession to incorporate a novel global paradigm—sustainability—into social work practice. Drawing on relevant literature and other empirical studies, this article aims to increase our understanding of the critical impact of a lack of sustainability on Canada's poorest, most vulnerable, and oppressed people (such as Indigenous Peoples), who often live in the most degraded environments and have no control over their own natural resources. I argue that incorporating sustainability into Canadian social work education and practice is achievable only if the professional bodies, namely the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) and CASWE-ACFTS, provide institutional support by setting accreditation standards and ethical guidelines to reinforce sustainability in Canadian social work practice.

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Abstract: A global concern about how unsustainable use of global natural resources engenders environmental, social, and economic injustices for the world's most vulnerable population has been well established in the literature. Although the profession of social work has a long-standing tradition of advocating for social and economic justice, issues of environmental sustainability have yet to be fully incorporated into social work education and practice. While the connection between the natural environment and social work education is robustly emerging in Australian and American literature, the Canadian social work literature is also paying attention to issues of environmental sustainability. In response to the 2018 call by the Canadian Association for Social Work Education – Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS) (2018) to revitalize efforts towards environmental sustainability in Canadian social work education, this article joins other Canadian social work educators to advocate for the profession to incorporate a novel global paradigm—sustainability—into social work practice. Drawing on relevant literature and other empirical studies, this article aims to increase our understanding of the critical impact of a lack of sustainability on Canada's poorest, most vulnerable, and oppressed people (such as Indigenous Peoples), who often live in the most degraded environments and have no control over their own natural resources. I argue that incorporating sustainability into Canadian social work education and practice is achievable only if the professional bodies, namely the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) and CASWE-ACFTS, provide institutional support by setting accreditation standards and ethical guidelines to reinforce sustainability in Canadian social work practice.

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Abrégé : Une préoccupation mondiale sur la façon dont l'utilisation non-viable des ressources naturelles engendre des injustices environnementales, sociales et économiques pour les populations les plus vulnérables est bien établie dans les écrits scientifiques. Bien que le travail social ait une longue tradition en matière de promotion de la justice sociale et économique, les questions de viabilité environnementale ne sont pas encore pleinement intégrées dans la formation et la pratique du travail social. Alors que le lien entre l'environnement naturel et la formation en travail social est bien présent dans les écrits australiens et américains, la littérature canadienne en travail social porte également attention à ces questions. En réponse à l'appel lancé par la Canadian Association for Social Work Education-Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS) (2018) pour revitaliser les efforts en faveur de la viabilité environnementale dans la formation en travail social au Canada, cet article se joint à d'autres éducateurs en travail social canadiens afin de plaider en faveur de l'intégration par la profession d'un nouveau paradigme mondial — la viabilité — dans la pratique du travail social. S'appuyant sur les écrits pertinents et d'autres études empiriques, l'article vise à mieux comprendre l'impact critique de l'absence de viabilité environnementale sur les personnes les plus pauvres, les plus vulnérables et les plus opprimées du Canada (comme les Autochtones), qui vivent souvent dans les environnements les plus dégradés et n'ont aucun contrôle sur leurs propres ressources naturelles. L'auteur soutient que l'intégration de la viabilité de l'environnement dans la formation et la pratique du travail social au Canada n'est possible que si les organismes professionnels, à savoir l'Association canadienne des travailleuses sociales et travailleurs sociaux (ACTS) et la CASWE-ACFTS, offrent un soutien institutionnel en établissant des normes d'agrément et des directives éthiques pour renforcer la viabilité de l'environnement dans la pratique du travail social au Canada.

Mots-clés : viabilité de l'environnement, travail social, Canada

FROM ITS BEGINNING AS A PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE, social work has traditionally adopted the person-in-environment perspective to explain how the social environment influences people's behaviours and wellbeing (Akesson et al., 2017; Dominelli, 2012). For a long time, the effect of the physical or natural environment on human wellbeing has been largely ignored in social work practice. As some scholars have noted, social work—when addressing issues of human needs and behaviours—has focused more on the social environment than on the natural environment (Akesson et al., 2017; Cornell, 2006; Dominelli, 2012; Hawkins, 2010;

Zapf, 2010). As some scholars have alluded to, the centrality of human rights and social justice rooted in the social work profession requires an examination of the connections between the natural environment and human wellbeing (Besthorn, 2003; Dominelli, 2012; Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015). In the era of rising global environmental crisis, social work practitioners must endeavour to enhance environmental sustainability awareness to achieve social and environmental justice for all individuals (Dominelli, 2012).

Recently, international social work organizations—namely the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)—have made public statements for the social work profession to actively advocate for the sustainability of the natural environment (IASSW, ICSW and IFSW, 2010, 2014, 2016). Ever since these international bodies stimulated thinking about environmental sustainability among social workers, the interconnected but distinct concepts of sustainable development, environmental justice, greening social work, and ecological work have emerged in social work education worldwide, especially in South Asia, Australia, America, and Europe. The connection between the natural environment and social work education is also emerging in the Canadian social work literature (Drolet et al., 2015; Mulvale, 2017). Nevertheless, social work in the various English-speaking developed countries is still at an early stage of connecting social work theory and practice with the natural environment.

During its 2018 national conference, the Canadian Association for Social Work Education – Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS), the professional body mandated to promote excellence in social work education and practice, made a solemn plea to Canadian social work educators to revitalize efforts towards economic, social, and environmental justice. This article responds to CASWE-ACFTS's plea and argues that revitalizing efforts towards economic, social, and environmental justice in social work education requires that the profession incorporate sustainability into its practice. This paper also contends that incorporating sustainability into Canadian social work education and practice will be extremely difficult without the institutional support from CASWE-ACFTS and the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), who are authorized to respectively set accreditation standards and ethical guidelines for Canadian social work education and practice.

Following this introduction, the paper begins with a background discussion of the impact of environmental degradation on human needs, setting the context to understand the importance of incorporating sustainability into Canadian social work. Next, a historical review of the concept of sustainability is recounted to shed light on the significance of incorporating sustainability into social work practice. Subsequently, the

connection between social work and sustainability is highlighted. Drawing on environmental social work literature (Androff et al., 2017; Dominelli, 2012; Drolet et al., 2015; Mulvale, 2017), I propose sustainability as a social work practice framework to expand the person-in-environment perspective to include the physical environment. The sustainability social work practice framework recognizes the significance of Indigenous knowledge in achieving environmental social work practice in Canada. Finally, the article urges two Canadian professional bodies—namely, CASWE-ACFTS and CASW—to lend institutional support by reinforcing sustainability not only as an ethical guideline, but also as an accreditation standard for all accredited Canadian social work programs. In this article the terms 'sustainability' and 'environmental sustainability' are used interchangeably to imply the significance of slowing or degrowing the ecologically destructive aspects of the global economy (Daly & Farley, 2011; Faber, 2008).

The Issues: Environmental Degradation and its Impact on Meeting Human Needs

Rapid industrialization, urbanization, and consumerism are over-exploiting the earth's natural resources, polluting the physical environmental systems (water, air, and soil), aggravating the global climate crisis (droughts and floods), and degrading biodiversity (United Nations Environmental Programme [UNEP], 2017; Shajahan & Sharma, 2018). Catastrophic weather events such as storms, hurricanes, and droughts are increasing in frequency and intensity, signaling the impacts of climate change (United Nations [UN], 2015; UNEP, 2017). The situation not only endangers the global ecosystems and biodiversity, but also threatens humanity's ability to utilize natural environmental resources to meet our needs (Shajahan & Sharma, 2018; UNEP, 2017). While climate change and increasing environmental pollution are the major contributors to the catastrophic ecological crisis being witnessed today, neoliberal economic policies are also adding an enormous strain on natural environmental resources beyond their regenerative capacity (Dominelli, 2012; Shajahan & Sharma, 2018; UN, 2015; UNEP, 2017).

In Canada, we have seen a variety of adverse environmental impacts in recent times. Between 1995 and 2005, significant numbers of terrestrial bird and mammal species were listed as extinct, endangered, or vulnerable, while at the same time, the temperate forest ecosystems were degraded at an unprecedented rate (Government of Canada, 2012). Over-exploitation of the Canadian forests through clear-cutting logging—a technique used in the wood and pulp industries—has been a ruthless assault on the Canadian forests' ecosystems, leading to a decline in flora and fauna species (Government of Canada, 2012). Oil extraction techniques, including conventional well drilling, fracking, and bitumen

extraction practices in Alberta's oil sand fields, have also caused significant damage to natural forest and aquatic ecosystems upon which Indigenous communities depend for their livelihood. The Indigenous Peoples in the Athabasca basin have lamented about the negative impacts of oil sands development on water and air quality, which negatively affect the health of the Indigenous population (Cheng, 2009).

Oil extracted in rural and Indigenous communities in Alberta is shipped in its raw bitumen form through pipelines. Worries about environmental crises resulting from oil tanker (rail car) spills and pipeline leaks have sparked debates as to whether Canada must construct new pipelines (Smith, 2019). The Keystone XL pipeline proposal met criticism from different environmental groups, particularly Indigenous environmental activists, who raised concerns about the potential negative impacts of the pipeline project. Subsequently, President Obama rejected the Keystone pipeline system, which was planned to run from the Alberta oil fields to US refinery centres in Illinois and Texas. However, in 2017, President Trump approved the international oil pipeline system (Smith, 2019). The Canadian federal Liberal government, which claims to be a leader in climate change, supported the pipelines for the economic benefits they bring to the government and the oil industry. In a 2017 interview with the CBC, Prime Minister Trudeau stated that he is strongly in favour of President Trump's decision to green-light the Keystone XL pipeline project, a move the Prime Minister believed will be beneficial for government revenue, a boon for Canadian jobs, and a blessing for Alberta to recover from the sharp regression in oil prices (Tasker, 2017). The decision to support the pipeline project is an example of the federal Liberal government's hypocritical and feeble sustainability initiatives, rooted in Canada's colonial history of being a resource-based extraction economy. Undoubtedly, such a Canadian sustainability strategy, rooted in historically and economically resource-based extraction principles, favours strong economic growth at the expense of environmental protection and thus puts Indigenous Peoples at risk of serious health problems. The approval of the international oil pipeline system not only has implications for environmental crises but has also violated the rights of First Nations in Alberta. While most Indigenous Canadians are opposed to the Keystone XL project for various reasons—including possible damage to sacred sites, pollution, and water contamination—some First Nations communities support the Keystone pipeline and other resource development projects. For instance, the leaders of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation have signed agreements with Teck Resources' $20 billion oil sand project, while other First Nations leaders in Alberta and British Columbia are opposed to the project (Bench, 2020).

It is instructive to note that environmental crises are not experienced by all populations equally. It is estimated that less than one-third of the world's population, categorized as the rich and privileged, consume

more than two-thirds of the resources and produce significant ecological hazards and wastes. However, it is the 50% of the world's population who are classified as the very poor and under-privileged and who subsist on only 10% of the global natural resources who bear the brunt of environmental crises (Shajahan & Sharma, 2018; UN, 2015). In Canada, for instance, Mackenzie et al. (2005) and CBC (2005) reported that chemical plants located in the vicinity of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation in Sarnia, southwestern Ontario, are significantly impacting the natural population growth rate in the community. This Indigenous community has blamed the declining proportion of male babies among its newborn population on maternal and fetal exposure to the emissions of the nearby chemical plants in the community (Mackenzie et al., 2005). Similarly, Indigenous Peoples in northern Alberta, particularly those in the Athabasca oil basin, have attributed a high incidence of cancers in their communities to environmental contamination from a range of industries, including the oil sands development, uranium mining and pulp mills (Chen, 2009). These concerns are also supported by evidence-based research that reports daunting statistics about the health of Indigenous Peoples in Alberta: a 30% increase in cancers in the Fort Chipewyan community, a three-fold increase in leukemia and lymphoma diagnoses, and a seven-fold increase in bile duct cancers (Alberta Health Services, 2009).

Lamentably, these environmental crises are created by powerful corporations who control a significant proportion of Canada's natural resources. Indigenous Peoples and other equity-seeking community groups have unequal power over their natural resources and are the least responsible for the environmental crises; however, they are disproportionally affected by environmental degradation (environmental injustices), while also facing other social problems at the individual, family, group, community, and organizational levels. Nevertheless, they are fighting back against powerful opponents. The recent pipeline protests by Indigenous Nations are a model of resistance against powerful corporate and political opponents. At the time of completing this article (in early 2020), Indigenous Peoples throughout Canada have mounted protests in support of First Nations in western Canada in the fight against the proposed pipelines. The Wet'suwet'en's First Nation in Western Canada built a cabin in the path of at least three proposed pipelines in British Columbia (Sovereign Likhts'amisyu, 2019), although some Wet'sutwet'en People are divided on the issue of pipeline protest. Other First Nations across Canada mounted road and rail blockades in solidarity with their counterparts in western Canada (Brown and Bracken, 2020). These Indigenous Peoples believe that the pipelines not only pose environmental threats but also gravely threaten their sovereignty and right to retain control over the pristine wilderness they have inhabited since time immemorial. In response to the global and national environmental crises, the United Nations, national governments, and non-governmental

agencies have initiated and adopted a comprehensive strategy over the years to achieve sustainability—balance among economic development, human society, and physical environment.

The Concept of Sustainability

The notion of sustainability refers to the process whereby humanity can meet current needs while maintaining the ability of future generations to meet their needs (WCED, 1987). Due to its popularity and its importance for achieving a balance between social, economic, and natural environments, the concept of sustainability now goes by many names, such as conservation, environmental stewardship, sustainable development, environmental justice, eco-justice, and green environment, although there are subtle differences among these terms. The idea of sustainability has a long history, dating as far back to the 400 B.C.E., as Plato commented on the effects of the misuse of environmental resources (forests) on people (Plato in the Criatias, about 400 B.C, cited by World Bank, 1987). Reflecting on this historical idea, O'Riordan (1988) suggests that the notion of sustainability probably first appeared in the Greek vision of *Ge* or *Gias* (the goddess of the Earth), the mother of all replenishment. At the turn of the nineteenth century, public outcry against the *laissez-faire* attitude of resource exploitation in North America was a plea for the idea of sustainability. In the mid-twentieth century, books such as *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth* (Thomas, 1956) and *Only One Earth* (Ward & Dubos, 1972) were earlier scholarly arguments for the idea of sustainability.

The concept of sustainability in modern times was articulated for a broad popular audience during the first UN global conference on the Human Environment held in 1972 in Stockholm, Sweden. The Stockholm Conference led to the creation of the UN Environmental Program (UNEP), which encouraged all governments to declare in their national policies that humanity has the right to a healthy environment (UNEP, 1976). The Stockholm Conference was a significant step in creating linkages between social and economic environments, on the one hand, and the natural environment, on the other (UNEP, 1976). It created awareness that over-exploitation of Earth's natural environment would negatively impact human wellbeing and alerted people to recognize that social and economic justice is not possible if Earth's natural resources are destroyed (UNEP, 1981; Hawkins, 2010). The recent interest in sustainability originated from the report of the World Conservation Strategy (WCS) of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) in 1980. Realizing that escalating economic needs have driven people, private businesses, and governments to take a short-sighted approach when exploiting natural environmental resources, the IUCN endorsed the concept of sustainability as a tool to

achieve a balance between the natural environment and global economic growth (IUCN, 1980).

To operationalize the IUCN's report, the UN commissioned a working group called the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), which later became the Brundtland Commission, named after Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Chair of the Commission and the then Prime Minister of Norway. In 1987, the Commission published its report, entitled *Our Common Future*. It provided the most commonly used definition of sustainability expressed as sustainable development: "the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 43). The central idea of the WCED's report was that economic growth aiming at meeting human needs cannot occur if humankind is not able to maintain a balance between economic processes and environmental resource base. The report also emphasized that sustaining human needs and wellbeing requires that economic development efforts in all human societies should not damage the natural environment beyond its regenerative capacity (WCED, 1987). The concept of sustainability, as defined by the WCED, was further popularized following the UN Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED), which was held in Brazil in 1992 and was considered to be an unprecedented historical event, with the largest-ever gathering of global world leaders, academics, and non-governmental organizations to address environmental questions. Dubbed the Earth Summit, the UNCED implemented strategies to achieve a balance between the global economy, society, and the natural environment. The UNCED's strategic plans to achieve sustainability holistically encompassed environmental justice, social justice, and respect for human rights and cultural diversity (United Nations, 1992). Poverty reduction, changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, and protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic development were highlighted in the Earth Summit's strategic plan (UNCED, 1992).

In 2000, building on the gains from UNCED, the UN initiated a global sustainability agenda at New York's Earth Summit by launching what was referred to as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). New York's Earth Summit was a massive global human rights campaign to minimize poverty and to achieve social and environmental justice (United Nations, 2000). The MDGs laid out fundamental values that recognized the interdependence between economic growth, poverty, and sustainable development (United Nations, 2000). MDGs also targeted specific human needs and conditions for change by 2015. These targets included, but were not limited to: 1) eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, 2) achieving universal primary education, 3) promoting gender equality, 4) reducing child mortality, 5) improving maternal health, and 6) combating and eliminating diseases (especially HIV/AIDS and malaria) (United Nations, 2000). The United Nations (2000) attributed these human conditions

to the lack of environmental sustainability and over-exploitation of the earth's natural resources to achieve global economic growth. Recast in 2015 as the Sustainable Development Goals, the MDGs advocated for the need to ensure environmental sustainability through four specific targets: 1) integrating the principles of sustainability into governmental policies and programs, 2) reducing biodiversity loss, 3) reducing poverty, and 4) improving conditions to meet human needs (United Nations, 2015). It is worth noting that these deplorable human conditions are precisely what the social work profession seeks to address. The preceding UN reports and declarations have acted as catalysts for global sustainability awareness. Well-known public intellectuals and environmental activists, including Al Gore (former US Vice President), Naomi Klein, and David Suzuki have intensified the sustainability awareness by mounting global campaigns against neoliberal economic policies that cause global climate crisis and degrade the natural ecosystems (Gore, 2014; Klein, 2014; Suzuki, 2007). Despite the tremendous efforts of the UN and its global advocacy groups, and those of well-known public intellectuals, progress towards environmental sustainability has been slow, while environmental problems continue to worsen, with resource depletion continuing at an unsustainable rate.

Critiques of Sustainability

The various UN reports on sustainability tangentially address issues of environmental sustainability but, mainly, promote settler colonial and neoliberal policies that focus on deplorable human conditions, such as chronic hunger, malnutrition, and communicable and chronic diseases. These deplorable conditions are considered as creating severe threats to sustainable human development (United Nations, 2015). To eliminate or minimize these human conditions, the sustainability ideas conceived by Brundtland, the IUCN, the Earth Summits, and the MDGs all emphasize sustained economic growth at the expense of environmental justice.

The lack of progress towards sustainability can be explained by the IUCN's and the WCED's conceptualization of sustainability within the conservation paradigm, most specifically the way they frame the concept as maintaining a sense of "sustaining" relentless economic growth. Many critics, including ecofeminists (Plumwood, 2002; Shiva, 1988), environmental educators (Greenwood, 2014), and activists and Indigenous scholars (Theriault et al., 2019), argue that the concepts of sustainability as advanced by the IUCN, the WCED and other UN reports are optimistic and vague. The concept seems tethered to conservative discourses that highlight sustainable human development and resource conservation ideas, with less focus on actual environmental justice. Plumwood's (2002) *Environmental Cultures* and Shiva's (1988) *Staying Alive* have been very critical of the IUCN's and Brundtland's

conceptualization of sustainability. These ecofeminists argue that the IUCN's notion of sustainability is located in conservative discourses that perceive sustainable development as a sense of "sustaining" unending economic growth, while conceiving of the natural environment as a resource-base to be harvested "sustainably." Employing a gender-based analysis, Plumwood (2002, 2003) and Shiva (1988) view the IUCN's and the WCED's idea of sustainability as a projection of Western men's values of capitalism and the patriarchy, which perceive sustained exploitation of the natural environment to maintain the status quo (a steady human society) (Plumwood, 2002, 2003; Shiva, 1988). They argue that the natural environment, women, and marginalized people have all suffered similar fates under patriarchy and capitalism: domination, displacement, and exploitation. They also believe that women have a special connection to the natural environment through their daily interactions with it, making them experts in ecological knowledge of natural environmental processes (Plumwood, 2002, 2003; Shiva, 1988). Unfortunately, this ecological knowledge has been underestimated by Western patriarchal perceptions of conservation and resources development, which tend to label women, nature, and other groups as "not sustaining economic growth" (Shiva, 1988). Thus, ecofeminists see the connection between women and the natural environment as critical in the analysis and practice of sustainability.

In *Critical Place Based Education*, David Greenwood, an environmental educator, provides a similar critique of the IUCN's and Brundtland's conceptions of sustainability as conservation (Greenwood, 2014). He argues for what he refers to as "critical pedagogy of place" to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of conventional pedagogy, which do not educate students about how human actions severely impact the "ecological places" where people actually live (Greenwood, 2014, p. 137). Decolonization and reinhabitation are two goals of Greenwood's critical place-based education. Decolonizing a place implies educators can help students unlearn dominant discourses regarding natural resources and human exploitation, and instead learn about socially just and sustainable ways of living in the world. By reinhabitation, Greenwood contends that a critical place-based education must seek to teach students how to live in a place that has historically endured ecological exploitation to help them understand that the current, conventional human practices are ecologically and socially unstainable (Greenwood, 2014). Thus, social work educators and practitioners can learn from Greenwood's critical place-based perspective to reinvigorate traditional ways of living in harmony with the natural environment.

Indigenous-based critiques of the concept of sustainability, with respect to the questions of conservation and social justice, are offered by Theriault et al. (2019). By bringing feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous perspectives into their collaborative dialogue in *Living Protocols*, they thoughtfully demonstrate that the IUCN's conception of sustainability,

rooted in conservation discourses, remains largely complicit in the very structures that drive species extinction and other environmental degradations. Instead of confronting and dismantling those structures, Theriault et al. (2019) contend that the sustainability-conservation paradigm systematically manages and sustains the dominant social and economic structures that instrumentalize natural ecological systems as resources. Theriault et al. (2019)'s *Living Protocols* demonstrate how decolonial, feminist, and Indigenous perspectives can incite educators and practitioners—including social workers—to learn healing forms of collaboration for, and resistance against, environmental degradation such as biodiversity destruction and species extinctions. These *Living Protocols* can educate social workers to listen to, attend, and internalize Indigenous teachings so that they can care for the natural environment upon which humans depend for sustenance. These Indigenous perspectives are crucial in the sense that era of globalization, neoliberal ideology, and technological advances place limits on the natural environment's ability to sustain humanity's needs in the present and through the future. Mitigating the adverse effects of neoliberalism, globalization, and technological advances[1] on environmental degradation will require actively incorporating Indigenous knowledges into the sustainability agenda so that all people can live in a clean, safe, and healthy environment (Hawkins, 2010).

Social Work and Sustainability

From the preceding discussions, it is clear that sustainability represents one of the most revolutionary paradigm shifts of the twentieth century, with consequences for social work practice. As a profession rooted in human rights, social justice, and person-in-environment (PIE) frameworks, social work seems well equipped to make a substantial contribution to issues of sustainability. Unfortunately, in practice, this is not the case. As some studies (Dominelli, 2012; Shajahan & Sharma, 2018) argue, social work has for a long time neglected the physical environment and has primarily focused on the social environmental contexts in which people live (Besthorn, 2003). Other scholars (Dominelli, 2012; McKinnon, 2008) claim that promoting sustainability in social work practice is possible only if the profession expands the scope of the social context of its PIE framework to explicitly include the natural environment. Expanding the PIE framework to include the natural environment is crucial, in the sense that the physical environment is the critical source of livelihood for humanity. As is clear from our discussion, air and water pollution, as well as other environmental challenges such as climate change and species extinction, disproportionately affect the health and livelihoods of poor and vulnerable people, impacting them beyond their coping capacities (Dominelli, 2012; Shajahan & Sharma, 2018; United Nations, 2015).

Thus, social workers dealing with the needs of people cannot afford to ignore one of the significant sources of human needs—the natural environment in which people live and on which we depend.

Notwithstanding the criticism that social work has overlooked the inclusion of environmental sustainability, it is instructive to note that the research on social work and the natural environment began in the early twentieth century. In the early 1900s, pioneer social work educators like Jane Addams (1902, 1930) and Octavia Hill (1909) raised concerns about environmental crises on human wellbeing. These early educators also saw the physical environment as fundamental to the wellbeing of people living in poverty and, as a result, advocated for the restoration of the natural environment (Jones, 2018). However, their concerns were not recognized until in the 1990s when the UN discourses on sustainability urged social work scholars including Besthorn (1997), Hoff and Polack (1993), and Berger and Kelly (1993) to address the connection between environmental sustainability and social work. Recently, international social work bodies, - International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) -, have encouraged social work practitioners and educators to vigorously pursue the global agenda for social work and sustainability. This has led to the proliferation of social work writings on the connections between the physical environment and social work practice (IFSW, IASSW and ICSW, 2010). The sustainability framework, as advanced by these three international social work bodies, brings an understanding to future social workers to view environmental sustainability as a core component of social justice (Teixeira & Krings, 2015).

Social workers, especially those in the Global South, are already engaged in sustainable social work practice. As Närhi and Matthies (2018) demonstrate, social workers from Nigeria and India are directly involved with environmental issues on a daily basis. For instance, they demonstrate that "social workers in Nigeria have been supporting local communities to protest against multinational companies polluting oil fields in the River Niger delta basin; in India social workers have been organizing local communities in tree-planting projects to prevent landslides and floods" (Närhi & Matthies, 2018, p. 494). Unfortunately, in the Global North, environmental issues are often neglected in social work practice (Coates & Gray, 2012; Gray and Hetherington 2012; Zapf, 2010). In Australia, the US, the UK, and Canada, the social work profession, mostly structured along a PIE perspective, is influenced by a neoliberal model of service delivery, under the guise of neoconservative tactics to minimize public spending (Coates & Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Närhi & Matthies, 2018). In this service system, a social worker's job description is mainly restricted to frontline casework with individuals, and is usually a part of an interprofessional social service team in which daily social work practice

is characterized by strict documentation. The situation has weakened professional autonomy and created more bureaucracy (Coates & Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Närhi & Matthies, 2018). It is instructive to note that in the Global North, including Canada, the PIE perspective, which guides our social work practice, perpetuates the settler colonial approach of economic growth to social work practice. Therefore, a more recent exploration of social work and natural environment has been called for by social work scholars, including Canadian scholars.

Canadian Social Work and Environmental Sustainability

As social work educators in English-speaking developed countries such as Australia, the UK, and the US are calling for an expansion of the PIE perspective to include the natural environment, the idea of environmental sustainability is also emerging in the Canadian social work literature. A number of Canadian scholars have offered different theoretical approaches to understanding the environment and social work. For instance, John Coates (2003) proposes a new paradigm for eco-spiritual perspectives in social work. Julie Drolet et al.'s (2015) empirical study highlights the development of a new social work course, entitled "Social work and sustainable social development," to address issues of environmental sustainability. Jim Mulvale (2017) also outlines theoretical perspectives on the environment that are grounded in idealist and structural orientations, while Michael Zapf (2010) explores past and present neglect of the natural environment within mainstream social work. Other Canadian writers have suggested decolonizing and Indigenizing the social work profession, as ways to promote environmental sustainability (Absolon, 2016, 2019; Baskin, 2016).

Despite the rapidly emerging scholarly work on environmental sustainability, Canadian social work is still at an early stage of understanding and integrating social work theory and practice with the natural environment. Thus, conventional social work practice, which is complicit with Canadian governmental policies of neoliberalism, continues to dominate the Canadian social work profession. Conventional PIE practice has marginalized our sense of social ecologies to the human realm, as the natural environment was not considered a critical part of the PIE perspective. Indigenous social work scholars have questioned the conventional PIE framework of Canadian social work practice, noting it is historically embedded in the same Western discourses (Absolon, 2016, 2019; Baskin, 2016; Sinclair, 2016) that are struggling with the concept of sustainability in relation to human needs–resource conservation ideas. Indigenous holistic approaches to Canadian social work practice (Absolon, 2016, 2019; Baskin, 2016) highlight a very different and more comprehensive sense of human-ecology relations than the conventional PIE approach. Indigenous scholars are pushing for the idea of engaging

Indigenous voices and knowledges in social work practice to expand the PIE perspective (Absolon, 2016, 2019; Baskin, 2016; Tom et al., 2019).

Engaging Indigenous voices and knowledge reflects the idea that the concept of sustainability, as declared by various UN affirmations, barely engages Indigenous perspectives and knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is critical in understanding issues of sustainability in the sense that Indigenous Peoples have lived in harmony with the same natural ecosystems for centuries (Absolon, 2016, 2019; Baskin, 2016; Sinclair, 2016; Tom et. al., 2019). As such, they are experts in knowing the sacred connections between natural environmental cycles and flora and fauna regeneration. Indigenous knowledge has helped protect the richest biodiverse regions where Indigenous communities are located. Having built close relationships with the environment, and maintaining deeply spiritual, cultural, social, and economic connections with the natural environment, makes Indigenous Peoples uniquely positioned to respond to the impacts of climate change and other environmental degradations. Indigenous knowledge is therefore the key to building climate change resilience because it offers a deep understanding of the interrelationship between human societies and natural environments.

In addition to the academic literature, as reviewed above, engaging Indigenous voices, like the Inuit climate activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier, allows us to understand the significance of Indigenous knowledge on sustainability. The knowledge that Indigenous communities have accumulated through the past environmental and human disruptions is a powerful resource to aid communities cope with the climate change crisis (Watt-Cloutier, 2006). Some Indigenous communities (e.g., The T'Sou-ke Nation in Sooke, British Columbia), relying on localized knowledge, are addressing climate change while reconnecting to the land by utilizing solar power as a renewable energy for hot water and electricity. Hence, respecting Indigenous voices in environmental decision-making will promote environmental sustainability in Canadian society.

Towards Sustainability Social Work Practice

A number of approaches have recently emerged to guide the social work profession in incorporating natural and physical environmental issues into social work practice. Greening Social Work (Dominelli, 2012, 2014; Matthies and Närhi, 2014), the Ecosocial Approach (Närhi & Matthies, 2018), Environmental Social Work (Alston, 2013; McKinnon & Alston, 2016), and Ecological Social Work (Coates, 2003; Närhi & Matthies, 2018) are examples of approaches to incorporate sustainability into social work practice and education. Even though the emergence of these approaches signals a new paradigm in social work education—one of environmental sustainability—they tangentially highlight the relevance of Indigenous knowledge in achieving environmental sustainability. Understanding

Indigenous perspectives is critical in achieving environmental sustainability in social work practice (Absolon 2016, 2019; Baskin, 2016). Drawing on various sustainability studies, including that of Dominelli (2012, 2014), Närhi and Matthies (2018), Absolon (2016, 2019), McKinnon and Alston (2016), Baskin (2016), and Theriault et al, (2019), this article adopts sustainability social work as a framework to incorporate environmental sustainability into social work practice and education. By recognizing the importance of Indigenous knowledge, the sustainability social work framework seeks to capture the links between the natural environment, human society, and the economy. In its goal to challenge the mainstream paradigm of social work, this sustainability social work framework shares much in common with the critical, structural, and Indigenous approaches of the social work profession.

The utility of incorporating Indigenous knowledge and the structural social work approach to achieving sustainability in social work practice lies in its ability to deeply analyze the social, political, and economic structures that negatively impact the natural environment upon which people who use social work services depend for their needs (Närhi & Matthies, 2018; Besthorn, 2003; Dominelli, 2012). The framework extends the PIE perspective to include Indigenous knowledge and the significance of the natural environment on human needs. The sustainability social work practice approach, as argued in this paper, promotes an alternative paradigm in social work to understand human behaviour in both social and natural environments. It alerts social work practitioners, especially those engaged in community practice and social policy development, to advocate for sustainable development that takes into account the balance between human beings and ecosystems (Green & McDermott, 2010). This approach can be more effective if practitioners draw on Indigenous knowledge to understand the harmony that exists between the natural environment and human activities.

Recognizing the Indigenous experience in dealing with environmental degradation requires decolonizing current social work education (Absolon, 2016, 2019) to allow social workers to be trained to draw on Indigenous knowledge to address environmental issues. Acquiring training and skills in Indigenous knowledge would be complimented by the introduction of Indigenous and environmentally sustainable curricula in schools of social work. The curriculum could contain instruction from Indigenous perspectives on how to conduct biopsychosocial assessments, and how to prepare for and cope with environmental disaster (Absolon, 2016; Coates, 2003). Canadian schools of social work must also begin to consider environmental field placements as an essential means of expanding notions of PIE. We must help social work students to develop a holistic and ecological worldview by offering them the opportunity to learn about the links between economic consumption, exploitation of Indigenous and racialized people, gender and racial inequality, and

environmental damage (Coates, 2003). The sustainability social work practice framework, as posited in this paper, creates awareness among social workers to view sustainability as a core component of social justice.

In which Practice Domain do we Place Sustainability Social Work?

Sustainability social work can be practiced at all levels of the social work profession: the micro, mezzo, and macro. At the micro-level, social work service users are confronted constantly with issues of ecological injustices. As noted earlier, poor and marginalized populations are disproportionately impacted by environmental injustices (Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015). They generally face challenges in mitigating risks and dealing with the aftermath of ecological crises. Glaring examples are the environmental impacts of the catastrophic disasters that follow: 1) the Fort McMurray wildfire that swept through the communities of northern Alberta, forcing the largest wildfire evacuation in Canadian history; and, 2) Hurricane Katrina, which tragically destroyed low-income neighborhoods located in flood zones of New Orleans. When such tragedies occur, low-income individuals living in the disaster zones have few resources to evacuate and respond to the devastation (Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015). At the micro-level, social workers can play vital roles in helping people to deal with the trauma caused by such environmental catastrophes. Micro-level practitioners can conduct biopsychosocial and impact assessments as part of social work interventions with individuals affected by ecological disasters (Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015) to support them in coping with such environmental hazards.

Efforts by social workers to ensure sustainability social work practice at the mezzo-level include empowering community leaders to hold governments and corporations accountable in the use of the world's resources in an ecologically sustainable way, and developing and implementing policies to safeguard the use of the earth's natural resources. In communities, especially rural and Indigenous communities where resource extraction processes on community lands (such as mining, forestry, and oil and gas drilling) are detrimental to people's health, community needs assessments should include both environmental and social impact assessments, to determine the severity and extent of ecological degradation on people's lives. At the macro-level, sustainability social work practitioners can utilize most of the tools employed for indirect social work practice to address issues of environmental sustainability. As Hicks and Stokes (2017) have argued, this indirect practice can include the following roles:

- *Strategist.* As a strategist, the role of a sustainability social worker is to organize people in environmentally degraded communities to identify ecological problems and explore strategies to address these environmental problems.

- *Broker.* A broker connects people who need help with essential resources. In this role, the sustainability social worker needs to connect people affected by an ecological disaster, such as a wildfire or hurricane, to vital community resources and supports to address immediate needs.
- *Advocate.* In the role of advocacy, the sustainability social worker, on behalf of vulnerable and environmentally fragile communities, provides leadership to advocate for governments to hold corporations accountable for the non-sustainable use of environmental resources.
- *Activist.* The sustainability social worker as an activist seeks to change institutions and structures in society by challenging institutions' inability to transition our communities to a renewable resource-use paradigm.
- *Educator.* As an educator, the sustainability social worker provides information and resources to raise awareness of environmental problems.
- *Coordinator.* The sustainability social worker is frequently a coordinator, bringing all the pieces together in an organized manner to accomplish a task—such as lobbying governments and non-governmental agencies to pursue environmental justice actions against industrial polluters and economic actors causing environmental degradation or destruction. Social workers can also lobby policymakers to redefine their economic benchmarks to include environmental sustainability (Hicks & Stokes, 2017).

The Challenges of Incorporating Sustainability into Social Work Practice in Canada

Some scholars believe that incorporating sustainability into all domains of social work practice is complicated and unachievable (Närhi & Matthies, 2018). While such an argument is valid, I strongly believe that incorporating sustainability into social work is achievable only if the national and professional social work bodies who set standards reinforce sustainability as an ethical guideline for the profession. Issues of environmental sustainability are neglected in most national codes of ethics. For most schools and colleges across the globe, social work accreditation standards do not reinforce knowledge, values, and practice skills on environmental sustainability in social work curriculum. Bowles et al. (2016) found that most national codes, including those in the UK, the US, and Australia, do not take account of environmental sustainability as a core professional ethical principle.

In Canada, the difficulty of incorporating sustainability into social work practice lies in the fact that the professional bodies neglect issues of environmental sustainability in the code of ethics and accreditation standards. CASW's (2005) *Code of Ethics* sets out core social work values and principles that guide Canadian social work practice. In total, six

core values and eight ethical principles inform social work practice in Canada (CASW, 2005). These core values and ethical principles oblige Canadian social workers to be, among others, ethically responsible to individuals, colleagues, society, research, and the profession. However, a cursory look at the CASW's *Code of Ethics* reveals that the six core values do not discuss the natural environment as an ethical responsibility of the Canadian social work profession. Of all eight ethical principles outlined in the CASW's *Code of Ethics*, it is only section 8—*Ethical Responsibilities to Society*—that tangentially mentions the word environment. Section 8.5 vaguely states, "[s]ocial workers endeavour to advocate for a clean and healthy environment and advocate for the development of environmental strategies consistent with social work principles and practices" (CASW, 2005, p. 24). Unfortunately, the *Code of Ethics* does not provide any practice guidelines in section 8.5 to enforce a clean and healthy environment in our societies and communities in a way that is consistent with social work practices in Canada. Until the CASW's *Code of Ethics* sets guidelines to incorporate sustainability into social work practice, practitioners will be at a loss as to how to incorporate sustainability into their practice. Guidance and support from CASW and CASWE-ACFTS will not only help practitioners to reinforce environmental sustainability in their practice, but it will also enhance their environmental sustainability awareness.

Besides, accreditation standards that reinforce the teaching and learning of environmental sustainability in social work are lacking in the Canadian social work curriculum. CASWE-ACFTS (2014) establishes standards for accreditation for baccalaureate- and master-level social work programs. These standards promote excellence in social work education and practice by integrating social work theory, research, policy, and practice, as intended learning objectives and outcomes for students in all Canadian social work accredited programs. Unfortunately, environmental sustainability is not included as one of the required learning objectives or learning outcomes in all levels of social work education and practice in Canada. In all, four domains and 13 principles guide the accreditation standards of social work education in Canada. Lamentably, none of the four domains or 13 principles reinforce the theme *environmental sustainability* as a requirement towards accreditation for Canadian social work programs. At the time of completing this article, a proposed CASWE-ACFTS's *Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards* (still in draft, 2020) is recommending some vague, rhetorical support for an "environmentally just world" practice. At this stage, it is not clear what this vague allusion to an "environmentally just world" means in terms of the standards of Canadian social work practice.

CASW and CASWE-ACFTS can play the role of institutional supports to advance curricular change to allow social workers to respond to environmental crises and to promote sustainability social work. In the absence of environmental sustainability as a requirement in the

CASWE-ACFTS's *Standards for Accreditation* and CASW's *Code of Ethics*, the notion of sustainability in social work education and practice will be unachievable. Until CASW and CASWE-ACFTS enforce the idea of sustainability as practice guidelines and standards, incorporating sustainability in the Canadian social education and practice will be a difficult task. Thus, the call to revitalize efforts towards sustainability in Canadian social work education should begin by lobbying those two professional bodies to reinforce sustainability as an ethical standard and guideline. Following what was advanced by Bowles et al. (2016), this article strongly recommends that all national codes of ethics and all social work accreditation bodies should reinforce ethical principles and practice guidelines on environmental sustainability. Introducing environmentally sustainable curricula in schools of social work will provide students with the theoretical and practical knowledge necessary to assist communities to organize around particular ecological concerns.

Conclusion

In response to the call of the Canadian Association for Social Work Education – Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS) in 2018 to revitalize efforts towards environmental sustainability in Canadian social work education, this article has argued for the incorporation of sustainability into social work practice, particularly in Canada. This article has extended our understanding of the critical impact of a lack of sustainability on vulnerable and oppressed people, such as rural communities and Indigenous Peoples, who often live in the most degraded environments. The article also proposed the sustainability social work practice framework as a viable approach to achieve environmental sustainability. However, I contend that incorporating sustainability in Canadian social work education and practice requires institutional support. Professional social work bodies, CASW and CASWE-ACFTS, need to set accreditation standards and ethical guidelines to reinforce sustainability into the Canadian social work practice. In particular, establishing and strengthening environmental field placements as an essential means of expanding notions of person-in-environment will provide emerging social workers with the knowledge, values, and skills in sustainability social work practice. That way, sustainability social work can be practiced at all levels of the social work profession: the micro, mezzo, and macro. This paper also suggests implications for future research. As social work education embarks on required competency in environmental sustainability, it will be important to conduct research to evaluate the extent to which it can be integrated into the curriculum and on how to prepare social work graduates to address these concerns as they enter the field (Nesmith & Smyth, 2015). As environmental policies are changing both nationally and globally, Canadian social work education will need

to examine critically the current knowledge on environmental policies to be able to update the knowledge base and practice skills in the area of sustainability social work. Further, recognizing Indigenous experience in addressing issues of environmental sustainability requires more in-depth research on how to decolonize current social work education.

NOTES

1. It must be noted that technological advances are not always considered as problems as, some types of technology (e.g. better monitoring of pollution, renewable energy generation) may help us to address environmental issues to achieve environmental sustainability.

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