Invited Commentary

A comment on ‘Climate change: social workers’ roles and contributions to policy debates and interventions’

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Running head: Debate

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In this debate article, I present several critical remarks about Lena Dominelli’s contribution to the issue of climate change and its implications for social work. In my view, her article lacks three important considerations. First, I argue that the issue of climate change should be addressed as part of a broader, fundamental challenge: the transition of the growth-based economic system upon which our society is built. Second, within a context of social and ecological injustice, dealing with climate change inevitably requires a dimension of social struggle. Third and lastly, I emphasise social work’s role in challenging the social, political and economic structures and processes that bring about climate change.

I welcome Lena Dominelli’s (2011) contribution concerning what is indeed ‘one of the most important challenges facing contemporary societies’ (Dominelli, 2011, p. 430): climate change. Since ‘the world’s climate is changing as a result of greenhouse gas or carbon emissions caused by human activities’ (p. 430), the challenge is to change these problematic activities. These are brought about by the way in which societies use non-renewable energy and as such touch many aspects of daily life. I fully agree with Dominelli’s point of view that addressing the issue has become also a challenge for ‘mainstream social work’. Yet, although the article highlights the importance of ‘seeing the whole picture’, an analysis of the larger context of climate change is missing. It remains unclear what has to be done and what may be the position and contribution of social work in it.

As a problem, climate change is not an isolated phenomenon but rather is inextricably part of a set of interrelated problems (Rockström et al., 2009) induced by the dominance of an economic system that is based on continuous growth (Jackson, 2009). To produce this growth, the system depends on increasing consumption and, thus, on growing amounts of energy and


2 A more elaborated argumentation on social work and ecological challenges will be published in a special issue for the International Journal of Social Welfare on environmental social work (Peeters, July, 2012).
raw materials. This has led to an excessive use of natural resources, called ecological ‘overshoot’. According to the 2010 Living Planet Report (WWF, 2010), the global ecological footprint in 2007 was about 50 per cent larger than planet Earth can support in a sustainable way. So the economy of growth has caused a crisis of the global environment, and climate change is part of that crisis.

The dominant answer today is ‘greening’ the economy, that is, the development of technologies and consumer products and services based on renewable energy and materials. This is indeed very important for a sustainable economy, yet scholars have raised considerable doubts about whether this will be enough to reduce the global ecological footprint (Jackson, 2009; Jones & De Meyere, 2009). Without abandoning the growth mechanism of the economy, they argue, greening of the production is no solution in the longer term. As long as higher efficiency in using resources is not accompanied by a fundamental change in the driving mechanisms of economic growth, it will only lead to a ‘rebound effect’ through growing consumption. Addressing this issue, in my view, is the core of a sustainability transition of society. Dominelli relies too much on the development and sharing of green technologies instead of referring to this more fundamental challenge that implies a change of consumer society and related social, political and economic structures in the industrialised countries.

The question is even more acute once we recognise that the dominant economic system not only produces ecological problems, but also causes continuously growing social inequality (UNDP, 2010). Social-ecologically, this inequality is reflected in great differences in access to resources, in distribution of environmental burdens – including the effects of climate change –, in ecological footprint and so forth. As a society, we are confronted with a situation of ‘ecological injustice’. A context of ecological constraints, and even more of an ecological ‘overshoot’, radicalises the (re-)distribution issue because using more resources implies decreasing the potentialities of others. The traditional idea that we need more growth as a basis for fair distribution is rather a part of the problem than a solution for it. We face the challenge of redistributing access to resources while, at the same time, reducing the overshoot. This implies a reduction in the overall consumption pattern, first and foremost of the ‘transnational consumer class’, and this includes not only the wealthy in industrialised societies (Sachs & Santarius, 2007). One may wonder, then, if it is realistic to rely on ‘collective solutions, achieved by consensus at all levels in all societies [to] solve global problems’ (Dominelli, 2011, p. 437). Is a pragmatic ‘problem-solving approach that supports all nations in a common purpose’ (p. 431) possible? Can social workers avoid ‘the polluter–victim analogy’? I strongly doubt that ‘addressing climate change for the benefit of all peoples and their environments’ (431) will be possible without social struggle.

In any case, because people always compare their potentialities with those of others, it is necessary to recognise that social inequalities are a driving force behind growing expectations of consumption. On the other hand, social equality is a crucial prerequisite for social quality in many respects (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Presenting the average energy consumption per country as a reference to judge energy use from the perspective of equity, as Dominelli does, is misleading. It may provoke a reversal of the blaming – as in the case of China and the USA – and put negotiations in an unfair perspective. From the standpoint of social justice, consumption per capita is a more relevant criterion. In addition, GDP as a measure does not include social or environmental criteria. Such ‘indicators’ are not neutral, and social workers should be aware of their effects. A correct representation of the challenges at stake is a basic condition for negotiations to apply the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ (Baker, 2006, p. 36) between countries. For example, ‘rapid population growth, highest in the Global South’ will indeed ‘intensify pressures on resources available to meet ever growing needs’ (Dominelli, 2011, p. 432). But this can be put in
another perspective in light of the unequal distribution of ecological footprints: ‘[...] the future stream of carbon emissions following a decision by an American couple to have an extra child is 130 times greater than that of a decision by a Bangladeshi couple’ (Hamilton, 2010, p. 43).

Furthermore, ‘the developing countries’ as such, also characterised by great internal inequalities, have not the same position as ‘the world’s poor’. In light of this reality, the proposed Equitable Carbon Sharing System (ECSS) seems to be very optimistic about the social outcomes of technology sharing. Dominelli (2011, p. 435) states:

People can seek equitable solutions, using and sharing green technologies and limiting the amount of greenhouse gases that enter the air, water and soils of the planet. Clean technologies make good business sense. They create jobs, can alleviate poverty and help people realise their human rights and claims for social justice.

Essentially, this is a new ‘green’ version of the old development model (Sachs, 1992). Although clean technologies play an important part in the reduction of carbon emissions, they can hardly be considered a means for reducing the justice gap. There are few or no indications that 60 years of development policies within a system of free markets and economic growth has succeeded in simultaneously defending the interests of ‘good business’ and those of ‘the poor’. There is no obvious link between efficiency and justice, no golden trick to escape active politics of redistribution of wealth, both within countries and on a global scale. But since the 2008 financial crisis, it is all too clear that the wealthy oppose such politics. So, without the pressure of social movements, I see no future for ‘climate justice’ or ‘environmental justice’.

This leads me to the position and practice of social work. Dominelli (2011, pp. 430-431) argues that:

social workers must engage effectively [in questions of climate change] by learning about the science behind climate change; speaking about policies; developing resilience amongst individuals and communities; mitigating losses caused by climate change; helping to resolve conflicts over scarce resources; and responding to devastation caused by extreme weather events including floods and droughts.

The first question is whether social work should be limited to the role of ‘fire brigade’, making impacts more bearable through ‘end-of-pipe’ solutions. Although important, I want to emphasise that social work has a role to play in challenging the social, political and economic structures and processes that cause climate change. Following my argumentation above, this means that social work practices have to contribute to a great social transition, a systemic change. For instance, building resilience can go beyond ‘preventing and/or adapting to [the] consequences’ (Dominelli, 2011, 431) of climate change if it is understood as an important contribution to capacity building for action and social change (Peeters, 2010, 2011ab).

Social workers in the field must also realise that people’s decisions about energy use are indeed ‘made privately’, but are always framed by a structural context of, for example, income, regulations and taxes. Therefore, efforts for consciousness-raising should be accompanied by structural measures from government; for example, financial resources to enhance the energetic quality of the houses of poor people. Social work interventions aimed at influencing the environmental behaviour of (poor) people lack legitimacy if they are not part of a context of social action that makes a difference on a broader scale.

Thus, an important question is how social work can build up power to help counter the situation of huge ‘ecological injustice’ through structural interventions. The most important strategy is to build social movements that rely on the strengths of people and their communities, networking with other social movements, and so becoming part of a worldwide
movement for ‘ecological justice’. An indication of the possibilities of such a movement can be found in the example of India’s National Domestic Worker’s Movement. It has been built up from local community building and social struggle, through influencing politics and legislation at state level and national level, and through networking with social movements on the international level. Recently, this resulted in the adaptation by the 100th International Labour Conference (ILC) of a Convention supplemented by a ‘Recommendation on Decent Work for Domestic Workers’ (NWDM, 2011).

To conclude, I question the role social work can play in climate negotiations when it takes the challenge of the struggle for ecological justice seriously. In first instance, social work’s mission with respect to human rights and social justice entails influencing the agenda in the direction of posing the right questions and using the relevant references. Therefore, cooperation with social movements is indispensable. But then, we may wonder to what extent social work is still well positioned to play a ‘mediating’ role in those negotiations.

References


