An Introduction to Ecosocial Work in Ireland

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This document was created by social work practitioners, researchers and educators in Ireland for the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW). The aim is to support Irish social workers in understanding the interconnectedness between the natural world and social work. One way to consider the role of social work in this context is through ecosocial work theory and practice.

What is ecosocial work?

With the concept of leaving no-one behind, the ecosocial approach in social work offers a transformative way for social work to tackle environmental threats to human and non-human well-being. The main principles of ecosocial work are holism, maintaining an ecocritical perspective, valuing Indigenous knowledges, and incorporating environmental and ecological justice with social justice.

Ecosocial work emphasises a holistic and interdependent view of humans and more-than-humans embedded in the natural world and recognises that our well-being is interconnected and interdependent. Shifting our perspective from anthropocentric (human-focused) to ecocentric (human and environment-focused) is vital for a more just, sustainable and fair world for current and future generations.

Ecosocial work aims to cause less harm to people and the planet than the mainstream practice that is entrenched in the injustices that social workers aim to eliminate. It relies on ecological arguments and justifications in making demands for social justice. To remain a relevant, useful profession in this changing world and to fulfil our mission, we must understand the

Case Study

On 17th and 18th of October 2023, Storm Babet brought record levels of rainfall in Southern Ireland. The town of Midleton, Co. Cork was severely affected with 100mm of rainfall equivalent to a month's worth of rain in two days. Nearly 700 hundred homes and businesses flooded with the damage estimated to be almost €200 million. Elderly residents of the Midleton Hospital and the Owencurra Centre had to be moved from their homes to safety. Social workers were involved in the aftermath helping to respond to the crisis completing assessments of need, sourcing emergency accommodation, obtaining transport for stranded persons, and doing welfare checks on vulnerable service users.

relationship between ecosystems and humanity, and the interdependence between human well-being and a healthy non-human environment.

Why does it matter?

Research on the natural environment and social work has shown a clear connection between climate change and other ecological crises, environmental degradation and marginalised communities. For example, climate change disproportionally affects those in marginalised, precarious, or poor situations with whom the social work profession most often works, such as children and young people, older people, women, LGBTQI+, people living in rural areas, etc. Social workers are well placed and mandated to advocate for people and the environment and to support communities to build resilience and hopefulness in the face of multiple crises. It is critical for social workers to stay informed about these ecosocial crises and their effects on the people and communities they serve, to incorporate knowledge of the natural environment into our work, education and research, and to play a major role in the sustainability transition.

How is climate change relevant in Ireland?

A recent report commissioned by the Environmental Protection Agency, Met Éireann and the Marine Institute suggests more extreme weather and hotter temperatures in Ireland over the next 80 years. Heat stress affects elderly people and those in homes that are not constructed for cooling. The Community Law and Mediation website has infographics. They highlight how environmental issues affect people and nature in Ireland today.

What are some examples of how ecosocial work is practised in Ireland and globally?

- Increasing our knowledge about environmental and ecological injustices and their impact on vulnerable groups.
- Fostering a greater connection to the natural world by engaging in green or blue spaces, for example, meeting service users outdoors instead of in a clinical setting.
- Nature-based interventions (NBI) in youth and other human service agencies.
- Emphasising taking active transport, which is walking, cycling or using public transport for appointments.

Social work research

- Conducting research and publishing papers on relevant topics, e.g. ecosocial innovations, disaster preparedness, community resilience strategies, NBIs, ecosocial work in action
- Practice research
- Influencing policy analysis and development by writing submissions to the government.

Social work education

- Integrating environmental and ecological principles and concepts into mainstream social work education
- Arranging ecosocial work placements for students
- Emphasising an ecocentric view to approaching and analysing social issues

Want to learn more about social work and the environment in Ireland?

Contact the IASW office to connect with other social work initiatives or request CPD training on this topic.