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SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTIONS AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR GREEN SOCIAL WORK IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Abstract Nigeria is facing an unprecedented environmental crisis characterized by the unprecedented spread of deforestation, rapid loss of biodiversity, widespread oil and chemical pollution, increased frequency and intensity of floods and droughts, coastal erosion, and high levels of urban environmental degradation. These environmental challenges are not only ecological crises but also social justice issues, as they are most costly for the poorest and most marginalized people in our society. However, the country has no clear policy framework that systematically embeds social work competencies in the country's governance of the environment. This article aims to fill that gap by developing a comprehensive policy framework for green social work in Nigeria, based on an analysis of the country's environmental crisis, an assessment of the current policy landscape, and the synthesis of international and domestic evidence on the effective contributions of social work in Nigeria to environmental sustainability. The proposed Nigerian Green Social Work Policy Framework (NGSWPF) pinpoints five strategic pillars: social work integration into environmental governance institutions; social work education with integration of environmental competencies; environmental social work practice standards in the community; inter-professional and inter-sectoral collaboration mechanisms; and evidence building through research and monitoring. The paper contends that deliberate and systematic integration of social work into environmental governance at every level, with sufficient resources, is necessary for Nigeria to achieve environmental sustainability goals as set out in the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement, and national policy frameworks.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is in a unique situation in the global environmental landscape. It is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of biodiversity, having substantial biodiversity of the West African rainforest belt, the Niger Delta, one of the world's largest and most ecologically complex wetland systems, and also diverse savannah, montane, and coastal ecosystems in which higher concentrations of plant and animal life exist (Nwilo & Badejo, 2006; Lawal & Oyebade, 2016). At the same time, Nigeria is experiencing environmental degradation at an accelerating and alarming rate: the country has one of the highest deforestation rates in the world; the Niger Delta of Nigeria is globally recognised as one of the most polluted environments on earth; its cities are beset by atmospheric pollution, inadequate waste management, and deteriorating environmental health conditions; and its coastal and inland water systems face mounting pressures from industrial contamination, over-extraction, and climate-induced change (Awojobi, 2014; UNEP, 2011; World Bank, 2020).

The effects of this degradation on the environment are producing public health crises, economic crises, and social justice catastrophes at the same time. The communities that bear the heaviest burdens of environmental degradation in Nigeria are oil-rich communities in the Niger Delta, peri-urban settlements without access to safe, usable water and sanitation; rural farming communities facing land degradation and erratic rainfall; and coastal communities confronting rising sea levels and intensifying storm surges, which are overwhelming communities that are already marginalised by poverty, ethnicity, inadequate governance, and historical neglect (Obi, 2010; Idemudia, 2012; Fentiman & Zabbey, 2015). In this regard, Nigeria's environmental crisis is really tied to its social justice crisis.

However, Nigeria's policy response to its environmental problems has been largely technical, focusing on regulatory enforcement, physical remediation and engineering infrastructure, overlooking the social nature of environmental vulnerability, community agency and the demand for change in the power relations that create environmental injustice. Social work is a profession whose core values are human wellbeing, social justice, community empowerment and structural change, which have been largely absent in the landscape of environmental governance in Nigeria and this article seeks to address this gap.

Theoretical underpinnings for the possible contribution of social work to environmental sustainability are provided by green social work, as theorised by Dominelli (2012) and further developed by scholars such as Boetto (2017), Alston (2015), and Lysack (2012). This paradigm places environmental crises within the context of structural social inequality and political economy, recognises the interdependency of humans and environment, and calls for practice that serves both human and ecological needs while considering the structural conditions that create environmental vulnerability. International policy and practice development has been undertaken in relation to the green social work concept in the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, Canada, and some parts of Asia, but not in Nigeria.

This article provides three seemingly interconnected contributions. First, it offers a critical analysis of the environmental sustainability issues in Nigeria from a social work perspective, contextualising the social aspects of environmental degradation, and the structural conditions that create environmental injustice. Second, it examines the current policy framework of environmental governance and social work in Nigeria and draws out gaps and opportunities. Third, it recommends the Nigerian Green Social Work Policy Framework (NGSWPF), a comprehensive and evidence-based policy framework for the integration of social work into Nigeria's environmental sustainability agenda.

The article is based on the interdisciplinary review of empirical studies, theoretical analysis in the field of green social work and environmental policy, and

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comparative analysis of international green social work policy frameworks.

2. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Green Social Work: Theory and Principles

On the theoretical level, green social work aims to weaken human-centred presumptions that have historically dominated the practice of social work and to promote an ecological approach that emphasises the deep relationality between human and natural systems and where environmental issues are not only crucial issues in social work, but as central professional concerns rather than peripheral issues (Dominelli, 2012; Boetto, 2017). The central thesis of green social work is simple yet profound: that environmental crises are driven by and within social inequalities and that environmental crises disproportionately impact already marginalised populations and social workers, meaning that social work, a profession dedicated to social justice and the wellbeing of vulnerable populations, cannot remain indifferent in the face of environmental destruction.

The four core commitments of green social work practice are: (1) a commitment to recognizing and understanding environmental crises as social crises that have been caused by the same structures of power and inequality that social workers encounter on a daily basis; (2) a commitment to community empowerment; (3) a commitment to inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral collaboration; and (4) a commitment to structural advocacy.

Building on the green social work paradigm, Boetto (2017) seeks to make it more concretely linked with transformative social work theory, advocating for a form of social work that not only reacts to environmental crises but also challenges the capitalist growth and related cycles of ecological exploitation and social inequity. This shift in orientation has special significance in Nigeria, where the political economy of oil production has created remarkable wealth and remarkable environmental and social devastation, as well as where environmental sustainability must not only be achieved through technical solutions, but through changes in the dynamics between state power, corporate capital and communities.

Competency domains that have been identified in the green social work literature and that are relevant to environmental sustainability policy include: community-based environmental needs assessment and participatory action research; psychosocial support of communities under environmental stress, environmental displacement, and ecological grief; community, national and international advocacy for environmental justice; indigenous and local ecological knowledge mobilisation; inter-professional collaboration with engineers, ecologists, public health professionals and planners; and social policy analysis and reform advocacy (Gray et al., 2013; Alston, 2015; Lysack, 2012). This article suggests that the NGSWPF be structured along these competency domains, adapted to the institutional and governance dynamics of Nigeria.

2.2 Environmental Justice as a Policy Principle

Environmental justice, which is the principle that everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, or country of origin, deserves a healthy and safe environment, and that environmental costs and benefits are equally distributed, offers social work a normative basis for policy involvement with environmental sustainability (Bullard, 1990; Schlosberg, 2007). From environmental justice analysis, it is observed that there are systematic patterns of inequity in environmental governance in Nigeria: the communities that contribute least to environmental degradation bear the heaviest burden, the communities that have the greatest need for environmental remediation receive the least services from the institutions; and decisions about environmental management are made by technocrats and corporate actors with minimal participation and interaction from and with the affected communities (Obi, 2010; Idemudia, 2012).

In line with the multi-dimensional nature of environmental justice, elaborated by Schlosberg (2007) as including distributive justice, procedural justice, recognition justice and capabilities justice, Nigeria's

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environmental governance is assessed using this framework. According to this framework, the current state of environmental governance in Nigeria is characterised by four types of injustice: distributive injustice, seen in the disproportionate allocation of environmental costs to poor communities; procedural injustice, which is the exclusion of communities from environmental decision-making; recognition injustice, which is represented in the disregard of indigenous environmental knowledge and community concerns; and capabilities injustice, manifested in the destruction of environmental assets that underpin the health, livelihood and dignity of communities.

A social work policy framework for environmental sustainability must, therefore, explicitly articulate a commitment to environmental justice in all four dimensions of environmental justice, with policies aimed at dealing with not only the symptoms of environmental degradation, but the underlying structural conditions that can create environmental injustice. This is in line with the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (IFSW, 2018) and the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (IASSW/IFSW/ICSW, 2020), which articulate environmental justice as a core professional value.

2.3 Sustainable Development and Social Work

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer an internationally agreed plan for environmental sustainability, which is relevant for social work policy (UN, 2015). A number of SDGs are directly relevant to the green social work agenda in Nigeria: SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) relate to structural vulnerability that increases environmental risk; SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) relates to the health aspects of environmental degradation; SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) relates to environmental health infrastructure; SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 15 (Life on Land) directly address environmental sustainability and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) relates to governance aspects of environmental justice.

Social work's contribution to the SDG agenda in Nigeria extends across multiple goals: addressing the social vulnerability that makes communities susceptible to environmental harm (SDGs 1, 10); facilitating community participation in environmental governance (SDG 16); supporting psychosocial recovery from climate and environmental disasters (SDG 3); and advocating for the policy and institutional changes necessary to achieve environmental sustainability (SDGs 13, 14, 15). Finally, the development of a policy framework for green social work in Nigeria needs to be explicitly tied to and support Nigeria's policies and commitments to SDGs, as this will act as a link between the international sustainability norms and the practice at community level (Dominelli, 2012; Alston, 2015).

3. Nigeria's Environmental Sustainability Landscape: Challenges and Social Dimensions

3.1 Deforestation and Biodiversity Loss

Nigeria has experienced devastating forest loss over the past century. Nigeria has experienced tremendous deforestation, with an estimated loss of 96 per cent of its original forest cover, and current deforestation rates around 3.7 per cent annually (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020; Lawal & Oyebade, 2016). Factors that contribute to deforestation include: expansion of farming land, logging, collection of fuelwood, and more recently the development of the oil industry in forested areas of the Niger Delta. As deforestation proceeds, loss of biodiversity is inevitable; Nigeria has more than 4,700 species of plants, 889 species of birds, and 274 species of mammals, many of them endemic, and the rate of habitat destruction is increasing, leading many species to extinction (Nigerian Conservation Foundation, 2018).

The social aspects of deforestation and biodiversity loss are significant and under-reported. Forest-dependent communities, including indigenous groups in Cross

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River, Ondo and Edo States, are being threatened with extinction because their cultural identities, spiritual practices and livelihoods are tied to forest ecosystems (Fabricius et al., 2007). The immediate impacts of forest degradation tend to be borne by women, who are generally the most vulnerable group in rural communities due to the combined effects of increased distances to collect fuelwood and harvest forest products, higher workloads, and reduced food and energy security as forests are degraded (Alston, 2015; Fordham, 2004). Social workers working with forest-affected communities need to be aware of these gendered aspects of environmental degradation and to plan responses to environmental destruction that explicitly address them.

3.2 Oil Pollution and Industrial Contamination

The oil spillage in the Niger Delta is one of the most well documented, least remediated environmental disasters in the world. Approximately 30 million persons live in a region that has experienced thousands of oil spill incidents, resulting in contamination of soil, surface water, ground water and coastal ecosystems over the past 60 years of commercial production of petroleum (UNEP, 2011; Nwilo & Badejo, 2006). UNEP (2011) conducted an assessment of Ogoniland and found that the drinking water is contaminated with hydrocarbons exceeding the WHO limits by over 900 times and that it would take 25 to 30 years to restore the environment. The effect of pipeline vandalism, which is also a reflection of the governance challenges and social grievances created by oil industry development, has compounded the impact of pollution incidents in recent years in this region (Idemudia, 2012).

In addition to the oil sector, other industrial activities, such as cement factories, refineries, agro-industrial complexes, and urban factories, generate pollution and other environmental health challenges in communities in Nigeria. Soil and water contamination with heavy metals has created serious public health issues in the mining communities of Zamfara, Plateau and Niger States, such as the outbreak of lead poisoning with devastating effects on child neurological development (Dooyema et al., 2012). In such situations, social workers must respond to the short-term health and livelihood consequences and also push for corporate responsibility, government cleanup, and community empowerment for the affected community.

3.3 Climate Change Impacts and Vulnerability

Climate change effects are very high in Nigeria, with various regions of the country experiencing different but equally critical effects. The decline in rainfall and the encroachment of the Sahara desert are leading to desertification and severe land degradation in Northern Nigeria, which is fueling pastoralist-farmer conflicts, livelihood collapse and migration, creating high social tensions and humanitarian needs (Adesina, 2018). Southern Nigeria is experiencing heightened rainfall variability, flooding with higher frequency and severity, sea-level rise affecting coastal communities, and exacerbation of current oil pollution impacts caused by flooding spreading contaminated material over larger areas (Egbinola et al., 2017).

The social exposure to climate change in Nigeria is the classic combination of intersecting inequalities, with poor communities, the rural populations, the elderly, women and persons with disabilities being most exposed and least adaptive (Wisner et al., 2004; Blaikie et al., 1994). Existing environmental stressors such as oil pollution, deforestation and lack of adequate water and sanitation infrastructure inevitably add to the vulnerabilities compounded by climate change. These vulnerabilities are not easily met by a simple technical solution. Social workers, who are trained to assess the multi-dimensional vulnerability and provide holistic community support are placed in a position where they are able to recognize and address these compound vulnerabilities.

3.4 Urban Environmental Challenges

Rapid urbanisation in Nigeria, especially Lagos, Abuja, Kano, Port Harcourt, Ibadan, and Enugu, is beset with serious issues of environmental sustainability due to poor urban planning, infrastructure and governance. Lagos, with a population exceeding 15 million and a

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growth rate that generates approximately 500,000 new residents annually, is a perfect example of these challenges: approximately 60% of its population lives in informal settlements without access to piped water, proper sewerage infrastructure, or regular waste collection; its waterways are severely clogged and polluted by industrial and domestic effluent; and its impervious surface cover has dramatically reduced infiltration capacity, making flooding a chronic and intensifying hazard (Ajibade & McBean, 2014; Nkwocha & Pat-Mbano, 2012).

Urban informal settlement dwellers bear the heaviest burdens of urban environmental degradation: living in the lowest-lying, most flood-prone locations; consuming water from contaminated sources; breathing air heavily polluted by traffic emissions, industrial activity, and waste burning; and lacking the financial resources and political power to demand better environmental conditions from their governments. Social work in the urban context needs to respond to these environmental aspects of urban poverty and champion the spatial and environmental justice that is still not available to urban poor in Nigeria (Schlosberg, 2007; Dominelli, 2012).

4. Nigeria's Existing Environmental and Social Work Policy Landscape

4.1 Environmental Governance Framework

Nigeria's environmental governance includes constitutional measures, primary legislation, regulatory bodies and international treaty obligations. The Constitution of 1999 (as amended) in Section 20 states that the State shall protect and improve the environment and guarantee the quality of water, air and land, forest and wildlife of Nigeria. NESREA was created by the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency Act, 2007, as the main environmental regulatory institution mandated to implement the environmental standards and regulations at the federal level (Atsegbua et al., 2010). The Petroleum Industry Act 2021 introduced new environmental standards for petroleum activities, which included provisions for environmental remediation and host community development.

There are sectoral environmental laws, namely the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Act 1992 which requires environmental assessment of development projects, the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) Act 2006 which sets up the agency for oil spill response coordination and a number of laws on industrial emissions, waste management and pesticide use. Nigeria has signed and ratified important international environmental conventions such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the Paris Agreement (FME, 2021).

This relatively extensive legislative structure has been consistently under-implemented and under-enforced. NESREA and NOSDRA remain severely underfunded and understaffed compared to their mandates, the EIA process has been faulted on its procedural shortcomings and entrapment by project proponents, and the NDCs of Nigeria, under the Paris Agreement, have been ambitious in terms of the goals they set, but they do not allow for commensurate domestic resource mobilisation and planning for implementation (Atsegbua et al., 2010; FME, 2021). Most importantly, none of the current environmental governance frameworks explicitly incorporate social work skills and explicitly require community involvement beyond the procedural requirements of the EIA process.

4.2 Social Work Policy and Professional Framework

The Nigerian Social Work Council (NSWC) is established by the Social Work Council (Establishment) Act of 2011 with responsibilities for professionals' registration, education standards and regulation of the practice of social work in Nigeria (Okoye & Onyije, 2012). The profession has been found in various workplaces such as government social welfare ministries, NGOs, hospitals, schools, correctional centres and community development organisations, and

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has been established in Nigeria's universities with undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes. Despite this, the institutional standing of the profession is relatively low in comparison with similar anglophone African nations, as social workers are often confused with welfare officers and community development workers, there is a lack of consistency in professional registration and it remains unclear what social workers are specifically responsible for in relation to environmental practice.

Until very recently, social work education in Nigeria has largely ignored the environmental aspect of social work. The training of social workers is mainly focused on social case work, group work, community development, social policy and research methods, rather than on the green social work theory, environmental justice and disaster risk reduction (DRR) (Boetto, 2017; Gray et al., 2013). A review of social work programmes in top universities in Nigeria would find almost no courses or modules on climate change, environmental sustainability, ecological systems, or environmental advocacy, even as environmental hazards have become the lived experiences of Nigerian communities. This educational gap is a basic problem in developing successful green social work practice in Nigeria.

4.3 Gaps and Opportunities

The study of Nigeria's environmental and social work policy environment shows that there is an institutional void, no institutional arrangement, no statutory provision or professional competent standard that links the skills of social workers with governance in the context of the environment. There are no social workers in environmental agencies, no environmental work in social welfare departments and social work education does not equip social workers to engage in environmental work. This institutional disconnect translates into systematic under-servicing of the social aspects of Nigeria's vulnerability to environmental crises, its sense of loss, its displacement, its livelihood loss, and its loss of culture.

However, there are some enabling conditions or opportunities for the development of a green social work policy framework in Nigeria. The SDG commitments in Nigeria provide a policy space for the argument that social interventions are needed as well as technical interventions to achieve the environmental sustainability goals. The international movement towards the recognition of green social work, such as the practice by International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) gives social work a professional legitimacy. The UNEP Ogoniland clean-up programme was initiated in 2019, which provides an institutional framework for social work interaction with environmental cleanup. Nigeria has a robust civil society, including many environmental advocacy groups operating in the Niger Delta, which can serve as potential partners for social work advocacy coalitions (Idemudia, 2012; Fentiman & Zabbey, 2015).

5. INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORKS FOR GREEN SOCIAL WORK POLICY

5.1 Australia

The profession's involvement with the social impacts of climate change, drought and environmental hazard in rural and indigenous communities has led to one of the most advanced green social work policy and practice frameworks in the world (Alston, 2015; Boetto & McKinnon, 2013). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) has incorporated environmental sustainability into its professional competency framework, and has helped to shape the curricula of universities in green social work. State-level social services departments in Queensland, NSW and Victoria have integrated climate change into their disaster response plans and use social workers to work on the psychosocial aspects of disasters. The Australian experience demonstrates the relevance of enabling conditions such as leadership of professional associations, support from academic research and state government involvement in the process of green social work institutionalisation.

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5.2 United Kingdom

Social work in the United Kingdom has become increasingly focused on the integration of environmental issues into social work practice and education, both through Dominelli's theoretical work at Durham University and because of the profession's experience of repeated flooding catastrophes in vulnerable communities in England, Scotland and Wales (Dominelli, 2012; Carey et al., 2017). Social Work England, the professional regulatory body, has indicated that it is becoming more aware of environmental sustainability in its CPD framework. There are a number of dedicated modules in green social work in some British universities and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) has issued policy statements that explicitly make environmental sustainability a professional concern. The UK context shows how effective leadership by the regulatory body can be and how academic scholarship can help fuel innovation in practice.

5.3 United States

In the United States, the impacts of environmental hazards, racial inequality and poverty have led to significant literature on environmental justice social work, as communities of colour and low-income communities disproportionately shoulder environmental burdens (Bullard, 1990; Rogge, 2012). Environmental sustainability is now a national professional priority, as part of the Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative which challenges social workers to produce social responses to an ever-changing environment. Several schools of social work including those at Tulane University, University of Southern California, and University of Michigan have developed specialised environmental social work programmes.

The U.S. experience demonstrates the need to connect environmental social work to existing civil rights and social justice movement frameworks that have a broad professional and public appeal.

5.4 Lessons for Nigeria

The following lessons emerge from the comparative analysis of the international green social work frameworks for the development of the Nigerian policy framework. First, leadership and advocacy from the professional association are essential. The professional social work association has been a key voice in legitimising and advocating for environmental practice in Australia, the UK, and the US. The Nigerian Social Work Council and the professional associations should have a similar role. Second, academic research and curriculum development should follow policy development otherwise human resources to implement policy will not be in place. Third, participation in environmental governance institutions is required: social work needs to be located in agencies with environmental responsibilities, not in social welfare agencies. Fourth, community based practice must be privileged: All successful models make communities agents of environmental change, rather than the recipients of experts. Fifth, to respond to the structural cause of environmental injustice needs a practice that incorporates an intersectional analysis, bringing together issues of race, gender, class, and disability (Dominelli, 2012; Alston, 2015; Gray et al., 2013).

6. The Nigerian Green Social Work Policy Framework (NGSWPF)

6.1 Framework Vision, Objectives, and Principles

The vision of the Nigerian Green Social Work Policy Framework (NGSWPF) is to see a Nigeria where social work practice is systematically integrated into the environmental governance and environmental sustainability programming, in which the social aspects of vulnerability to environmental degradation, environmental grief, environmental injustice, environmental displacement and environmental disorganisation of communities are fully-engaged with alongside the ecological and technical aspects of environmental degradation, and in which affected communities are empowered as actors, agents of, and

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agents for environmental transformation rather than passive receivers of environmental remediation interventions.

The Framework has four strategic objectives, which are to integrate social work competencies into Nigeria's environmental governance framework; reform social work education to build the capacity of social workers for environmentally responsive practice; establish evidence-based practice standards for green social work in the Nigerian context; and develop the inter-professional and inter-sectoral collaboration mechanisms that will provide social work with the opportunities to effectively contribute to Nigeria's environmental sustainability goals. The Framework is structured along five Strategic Pillars, each of which includes policy actions, institutional mechanisms, as well as performance indicators.

The Framework is based on five main principles. The Principle of Environmental Justice points to the need to seriously consider inequitable distribution of environmental costs and benefits as an integral issue of the Framework itself. The Principle of Community Agency shifts the role of communities from being passive recipients of the expert services away from them, and places them on the other side of the equation with knowledge and capacities to be mobilised. The Principle of Ecological Interdependence acknowledges that the health of people and the health of the environment are interdependent. The Principle of Epistemic Pluralism is an affirmation of the Framework to recognize indigenous and local ecological knowledge as legitimate and valuable in addition to scientific knowledge. The Principle of Structural Transformation is about more than just addressing symptoms of environmental injustice, it is about addressing the root causes (Dominelli, 2012; Schlosberg, 2007; Nakashima et al., 2012).

6.2 Pillar 1: Embedding Social Work in Environmental Governance Institutions

6.2.1 Rationale

The most basic transformation that is needed in Nigeria for the practice of green social work is the formalisation of social work practitioners within the agencies and institutions that have environmental governance authority. At present, there is no social work capacity in bodies such as NESREA, NOSDRA, NDDC, National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and state level environment ministries and emergency management agencies. The lack of this creates vulnerability to environmental crises, lack of psychosocial support, lack of community involvement, and lack of advocacy for justice, which are not systematically covered in the governance process of environmental crises.

6.2.2 Policy Actions

This pillar encompasses the five interrelated policy actions. First, amendments to the NESREA Act, the NOSDRA Act, and other relevant state environmental laws to mandate the presence of qualified social workers in these offices with clearly defined roles for community engagement, social impact assessment, and advocacy for environmental justice. Secondly, the promulgation of social work-related regulations under the EIA Act requiring Social Impact Assessment (SIA)-led community needs assessments as a mandatory step in the EIA process of large-scale developmental projects. Thirdly, the creation of Social Work Units in Federal and State Ministries of Environment, tasked to create programmes on environmental sustainability at the community level, coordinate social responses by various government agencies at community level in the event of environmental hazards, and track the social equity aspects of environmental policy implementation. Fourth, the integration of social workers into the UNEP Ogoniland Remediation Programme and other bigger environmental remediation projects with specific roles in community engagement, livelihoods recovery, psychosocial support and documentation of indigenous knowledge. Fifth, the establishment of dedicated social work roles within NEMA and State Emergency Management Agencies (SEMAs) for disaster affected communities with specific responsibilities to provide trauma-informed community support, psychosocial

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recovery programming and community resilience building after environmental disaster events (Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2013; Hardcastle et al., 2011).

6.3 Pillar 2: Reforming Social Work Education for Environmental Practice

6.3.1 Rationale

The most critical enabling condition for effective green social work in Nigeria is the generation of social work practitioners with the knowledge, values and skills for environmental practice. It means the need for a more thorough reform of social work education both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, from curricula in which environmental concerns are peripheral to curricula which include environmental sustainability as an important professional concern. The National Universities Commission (NUC) and the Nigerian Social Work Council should be the ones to spearhead this reform through minimum curriculum and accreditation standards (Boetto, 2017; Gray et al., 2013).

6.3.2 Policy Actions

There are five policy actions that make up this pillar. First, revision of the NUC benchmark minimum academic standards for social work degree programmes, which includes the integration of compulsory components of theory on green social work, theory on environmental justice, theory on climate change and social vulnerability, disaster risk reduction, indigenous knowledge systems and inter-professional environmental practice. Second, the development of a postgraduate specialisation in Environmental Social Work in existing master's and doctoral programmes at Nigerian universities, to equip professionals with advanced preparation for work in environmental governance, disaster management, or community-based environmental development. Thirdly, the creation of a national network of green social work research centres in selected universities to produce Nigerian contextualised evidence on social work interventions for environmental sustainability and formulate locally relevant practice models, tools, and curricula. Fourth, development of field education partnerships between schools of social work and environmental NGOs, government environmental agencies, community-based environmental organisations, with opportunities for students to have structured field education experiences in a green social work context.

Fifth, a national continuing professional development programme for practising social workers should be developed and delivered in response to competency gaps identified through a national workforce assessment (Boetto, 2017; Dominelli, 2012; Alston, 2015).

6.4 Pillar 3: Community-Based Environmental Social Work Practice Standards

6.4.1 Rationale

Any green social work that is to be effective in Nigeria should be rooted in community-based practice in which communities are seen as agents of change and their knowledge, networks and capacities are mobilised for environmental sustainability objectives. To enable social work practice within environmental contexts to be evidence-based, ethically sound and culturally responsive, it is important that practice standards are developed for community-based social work in relation to assessment methods, engagement strategies, psychosocial support mechanisms, incorporation of indigenous knowledge and community governance processes (Hardcastle et al., 2011; Nakashima et al., 2012).

6.4.2 Policy Actions

This pillar contains five policy actions that are based on practices. First, the Nigerian Social Work Council in consultation with practitioners, communities, academics and partner disciplines should establish National Practice Standards for Environmental Social Work which should indicate competencies, ethical duties, practice approaches, and good quality indicators for social work in an environmental sustainability context. These standards should make a clear reference

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to the context of Nigeria: oil pollution, flooding, deforestation, and climate change, and should be reviewed as environmental evidence evolves. Second, a national Community Environmental Assessment Protocol should be created and shared with social workers and other practitioners to offer a standardised participatory approach for community environmental hazard vulnerability assessment, community assets, indigenous knowledge and psychosocial needs of affected communities. The protocol should be designed to be applicable to the various ecological and cultural settings in Nigeria and should contain culturally adapted versions of the protocol for specific settings. Third, a Nigerian context-specific trauma-informed support framework for Environmental Hazard Contexts should be developed, inspired by existing international frameworks, and tailored to the specificities of Nigeria, such as ecological grief and collective psychological responses to chronic environmental degradation (Albrecht et al., 2007; Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018; Harris & Fallot, 2001). Fourth, there should be a protocol for Indigenous and Local Ecological Knowledge to be respectfully documented, validated, and incorporated into environmental management and remediation, which would guide social workers in the process (Nakashima et al., 2012; Fabricius et al., 2007). Fifth, national guidance on Livelihoods Recovery Social Work, which is grounded in the sustainable livelihoods framework and incorporates gender-responsive approaches to economic recovery support (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998) should be developed in response to economic impacts of environmental degradation and disaster.

6.5 Pillar 4: Inter-Professional and Inter-Sectoral Collaboration Mechanisms

6.5.1 Rationale

Environmental sustainability crises are multi-dimensional, and must combine ecological, social, economic, engineering, public health and governance knowledge and action. Strategically, social work is not able to solve these problems on its own, but will need structured agreements with other disciplines and sectors. A key policy priority is the development of inter-professional collaboration frameworks which define roles, responsibilities and modes of interaction between social workers, engineers, ecologists, public health practitioners, lawyers, planners and community health workers in environmental sustainability contexts (Reed, 2008; Dominelli, 2012).

6.5.2 Policy Actions

There are four policy actions in this pillar. First is the creation of National Multi-Stakeholder Environmental Sustainability Platforms at the federal and state level which involve various government departments, professional associations, civil society organisations, academic institutions, community groups and the private sector in shared environmental sustainability governance. These platforms should include social workers and should have dedicated responsibility to ensuring community voice and social equity perspectives are at the heart of platform deliberations. Second, the development of Inter-Professional Education (IPE) modules for the joint delivery of social work, engineering, environmental science, urban planning, and public health programmes at Nigerian universities; developing inter-professional awareness and collaboration in order to facilitate the effective delivery of inter-professional environmental practice (Frenk et al., 2010). Third, the establishment of Social Work and Civil Society Coalitions for Environmental Advocacy at the state and national levels, comprising social work practitioners and environmental non-governmental organisations, civil society groups, legal aid providers, investigative journalists and academic researchers to undertake coordinated, evidence-based advocacy for environmental justice and environmental policy reform. Fourth, establishment of formal relationships between the Nigerian Social Work Council and other environmental governance institutions such as NESREA, NOSDRA, NEMA and NDDC for professional collaboration, joint training and common research and monitoring (Hardcastle et al., 2011; Dominelli, 2012).

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6.6 Pillar 5: Research, Evidence, and Monitoring

6.6.1 Rationale

For the credibility, refinement and continued political support of green social work policy in Nigeria, a strong, contextually relevant evidence base is essential. Environmental social work research is virtually absent and Nigerian social work has a relatively thin research infrastructure. The development of this research capacity needs to be supported with investments in academic research programmes, community-based participatory research partnerships and monitoring and evaluation systems, which produce evidence about the scale and nature of social work needs in environmental contexts, and the effectiveness of social work interventions in addressing those needs (Gray et al., 2013; Boetto, 2017).

6.6.2 Policy Actions

This pillar consists of four research and monitoring (RM) policy actions. The Nigerian Social Work Council, in collaboration with the National Universities Commission and the Tertiary Education Trust Fund, should create a special Green Social Work Research Programme that will support investigator-driven research on the social aspects of Nigeria's environmental crisis, effectiveness of social work in environmental sustainability contexts, and policy and institutional factors that facilitate or impede the practice of green social work in Nigeria. Second, a National Environmental Social Work Monitoring and Evaluation Framework should be developed with indicators and data collection systems to help monitor progress in integrating social work into environmental governance, the extent of environmental social work services and the quality of those services, and the social equity aspects of environmental sustainability programmes. Third, community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) should be adopted as the preferred method for green social work research in Nigeria, such that the research is co-designed and co-conducted with community partners rather than on the communities, and results of the research are directly applied to communities' benefit (Chambers, 1994; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Fourth, a national forum for the exchange of research findings, practice innovations, and policy developments, the Nigerian Green Social Work biennial Conference and Research Symposium should be established as a crucial platform for the development of the academic and practice community of social work in Nigeria.

7. IMPLEMENTATION ARCHITECTURE AND ENABLING CONDITIONS

7.1 Institutional leadership and coordination

NGSWPF requires clear institutional leadership and coordination at the federal and state level. At the federal level, the Framework suggests the creation of a National Green Social Work Coordination Committee (NGSCC) co-chaired by the Federal Ministry of Environment and the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development, and composed of members from the Nigerian Social Work Council, NESREA, NOSDRA, NEMA, NDDC, academic institutions, civil society organisations and community representatives. This committee will oversee implementation of the Framework, coordinate inter-ministerial action, mobilise resources, monitor progress, and report to the Federal Executive Council and the National Assembly.

State Green Social Work Coordination Committees should be created at the state level, with the same structure as the federal committees and subject to contextual adaptation of the Framework to the environmental and social conditions of each state. The urgency of the environmental social work needs of Rivers State, Bayelsa, Delta and other Niger Delta states with acute environmental hazard challenges should not be lost on consideration of the need for early state-level implementation. A state-level structure ensures the Framework is not limited to federal institutions but is truly driving change in the communities most impacted by environmental hazards.

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7.2 Resource Mobilisation

The scale at which NGSWPF has to be implemented to make a meaningful contribution to the environmental social work needs of Nigeria requires diversified and long-term financing. The mobilisation of domestic resources should be the first approach to financing: there should be dedicated budget lines in the relevant ministries and agencies for capacity building of Green Social Workers; social work capacity building should be funded in states' environment and emergency management agencies; and the Tertiary Education Trust Fund should provide funding for the proposed Green Social Work Research Programme. International climate finance, such as the Green Climate Fund, the Adaptation Fund, and bilateral climate finance from donor governments, also holds great promise, particularly for the community-based and adaptation aspects of the Framework (UNFCCC, 2015).

The private sector, especially the multinationals operating in Nigeria, has both a legal responsibility (under Nigerian law) and a moral responsibility to invest in social work capacity for communities impacted by their operations. The NGSWPF calls for the imposition of a mandatory Petroleum Companies Environmental Social Work Levy based on the level of environmental damage caused by their operations for the purpose of providing environmental social work services in affected communities. There is no doubt that this recommendation may face significant corporate resistance but it is worth noting that it is based on sound principles of corporate environmental liability and the polluter-pays principle (Atsegbua et al., 2010; Obi, 2010).

7.3 Phased Implementation

Considering the level of institutional transformation needed and the very few institutions with green social work capacity in Nigeria, the NGSWPF suggests implementing the changes over a period of 10 years. Phase 1 (Years 1-3) will concentrate on capacity building at the basic level: updating social work education curricula; creating the National Multi-Stakeholder Environmental Sustainability Platform; creating practice standards and assessment protocols; and pilot testing community-based models of environmental social work in three to five high priority States. In Phase 2 (Years 4–7), systematic scaling will build on, embed social workers in environmental governance agencies, operationalise frameworks for inter-professional collaboration, establish the national research programme and scale up community-based services to more states. Phase 3 (Years 8–10) is about consolidation and sustained impact, which includes institutionalising the norms of green social work practice, building and disseminating the evidence base, and advocating for legislative/constitutional changes that would enshrine the environmental social work mandate into Nigerian law.

8. DISCUSSION

The NGSWPF is a major and ambitious step from the current environmental governance system in Nigeria, which has approached environmental sustainability as a technical and regulatory issue without paying sufficient attention to its profound social dimensions. The ambition of the Framework rests on a diagnosis of systemic failure. The failure of technical and regulatory measures to adequately address Nigeria's environmental crises is less about the lack of scientific knowledge or regulatory capacity (although both are lacking) and more about the systematic neglect of the human and social dimensions of environmental sustainability which encompasses the vulnerability, agency, knowledge, grief, and justice claims of communities at the frontlines of environmental destruction.

The integration of community agency and indigenous knowledge in the Framework is an intentional epistemological and political stance. The dominant environmental governance approaches in Nigeria which are marked by expert-driven top-down governance, disregard and exclusion of community voices and a neglect of indigenous knowledge have not only failed to create environmental sustainability but have produced patterns of procedural and recognition injustice that reduce the social legitimacy of environmental governance institutions (Schlosberg,

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2007; Nakashima et al., 2012). The NGSWPF does not simply discuss these epistemological and political failures as moral ideals, but as conditions for achieving environmental governance effectiveness. The structural advocacy pillar is the most politically difficult and challenging part of the Framework. Structural advocacy that challenges policies, institutions and power relations that create environmental injustice is sure to face opposition from entrenched actors with vested interests in the existing order. The oil companies that are able to profit from lax oversight; the political elites who pocket environmental remediation funds; the bureaucracies that object to accountability demands.

Additionally, Nigerian social workers who engage in structural environmental advocacy are subject to actual threats of marginalisation, co-optation, and even physical insecurity (Idemudia, 2012; Obi, 2010). The Framework focuses on coalition-based advocacy because social workers need to pursue structural change in partnership with civil society organisations, journalists, legal practitioners, academic researchers and international advocacy networks that offer each other protection and amplification.

It is important to note that there are some constraints to the proposed Framework. The NGSWPF is not an empirical co-design with the Nigerian communities and practitioners; rather, it is a policy framework developed through literature review, theoretical synthesis, and comparative analysis. Extensive stakeholder consultation processes would be required for genuine participatory development, which is beyond the scope of this article. The Framework's implementation recommendations are based on levels of political will, institutional capacity and financial resource that are not currently available in Nigeria, and will only be realised over time through sustained advocacy and institutional investments. Finally, the Framework places an emphasis on the social worker as a unique professional contribution, but not in the degree to which the skills and abilities of green social workers may be shared by other professionals, such as community development workers, public health practitioners, environmental lawyers, and community health workers, in contexts where there is a shortage of registered social workers.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Technical remediation and regulatory enforcement will not solve Nigeria's environmental sustainability crisis. The social aspects of environmental degradation, the vulnerability of inequality, the grief resulting from ecological loss, the inequity of differential burden, inadequate remedy, the community knowledge, and the agency of people to shape their own environmental futures, require responses grounded in social understanding, justice commitments, and community empowerment. Green social work is a theoretically informed, internationally recognised and practically executable contribution to Nigeria's environmental sustainability agenda which has been systematically underdeveloped and underutilised.

The principles and recommendations for developing that contribution contained in the Nigerian Green Social Work Policy Framework outlined in this article are comprehensive in nature: embedding social workers in environmental governance institutions; reforming social work education for environmental practice; establishing community based practice standards; building inter-professional collaboration; and generating the required evidence base to maintain and strengthen green social work policy and practice. The Framework's realisation hinges on the political will, institutional leadership, financial investment and professional commitment that are not yet fully realised and that the Framework itself is intended to stimulate.

The following action-oriented recommendations are made for the various stakeholders involved in the realisation of the NGSWPF. The Federal Government of Nigeria through the Federal Executive Council and the National Assembly, should bring about legislation to include social work practitioners in NESREA, NOSDRA, NEMA and the NDDC and provision of dedicated budget for the National Green Social Work Coordination Committee. The National Universities

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Commission should update the social work benchmark standards to incorporate environmental sustainability aspects and have a funding mechanism for green social work research centres in universities. The Nigerian Social Work Council is to develop the national practice standards for environmental social work, promote legislative reforms to incorporate social work in environmental governance and establish international partnerships between the Council, IFSW, IASSW and the global green social work community. State Governments, especially Niger Delta States, should set up Social Work Units in their environment ministries and emergency management agencies with emphasis on the recruitment of practitioners who have environmental practice competencies. Civil society organisations need to strengthen their capacity in social work in their environmental advocacy programmes and forge strategic alliances with social workers and academia. Academic institutions must take the initiative in creating green social work curricula, field education programmes and research collaborations as a priority in their social work programmes. International development partners, such as UN agencies, bilateral donors and international NGOs should provide technical assistance, capacity building and mobilisation of climate finance for the NGSWPF's implementation.

Nigeria is at a pivotal point in its environmental sustainability journey. The scale and speed of environmental degradation require immediate, all-encompassing and transformative responses. The NGSWPF, as a green social work concept, provides one important aspect of this transformation: inclusion of social justice in the environmental sustainability agenda; a community-centred approach to ecological sustainability; and a structurally transformative approach to green social work. Social work is not a luxury or an afterthought for integration into Nigeria's environmental governance, but rather a necessity to ensure the environmental sustainability to which Nigeria has pledged and which her communities so urgently deserve.

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