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Directions in constructing a body of knowledge in eco-social work education and practice in Uganda: Actions, channels, and implications

Venesio Bwambale BHANGYI

ABSTRACT

In recent times, Uganda has witnessed human suffering resulting from the occurrence of environmental disasters thereby placing social work professionals, particularly those in civic organizations at the forefront of responses. As such, this article argues that the country's largely agrarian welfare system and its pursuit of sustainable social development urgently necessitate reframing social work scholarship with an emphasis on eco-social theory for professionals to gain relevance and preparedness for actions and interventions that address environment linked problems. Through case analysis, the paper presents four recent cases of environmental natural disasters as a persuasion towards building an eco-social work body of knowledge. It then highlights the education and practice actions towards an eco-social work knowledge. The channels through which this action should take place are discussed and the implications of eco-social work thinking on professional social work education and practice are explored. It concludes by proposing a model for eco-social work education and practice that integrates formal public environmental safeguards and indigenous knowledge systems that champion protective and co-dependence approaches in people-environment interfaces.

KEY TERMS: eco-social work, environmental social work, social work theory, disaster actions, Uganda

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INTRODUCTION

More than ever before, Uganda's pursuit of social economic transformation to attain heightened wellness for its people requires deliberate harmonization with its natural environment. This is because the country has witnessed human suffering emanating from the incessant environmental disasters in recent years. Tellingly, for Ugandan social work professionals engaged in disaster action and humanitarian response at both frontline and policy levels, a key question has emerged: what kind of body of knowledge is required for Ugandan social workers to competently engage in such actions and interventions? This article therefore offers directions in constructing this body of knowledge in eco-social work education and practice to offer a social work theory to inform the attendant actions and channels of engagement. In addition, this knowledge should contribute to social work professionals gaining relevance, understanding, and capacity for environment case analysis to inform actions and interventions. The article discusses recent environmental cases as evidence to necessity environmental social work. It also articulates the actions, channels and implication for social work education and practice. Lastly, it offers recommendations that propose an eco-social work model of education and practice for Uganda and beyond.

METHODS

This article is based on qualitative secondary data and the author's personal lived experiences in a fragile community that has been inflicted by countless environmental disasters. It employs a qualitative inquiry and case study design to construct a body of knowledge for eco-social work practice and education in Uganda. First, the article identifies a collection of recent environmental disasters and events to build cases that illustrate environment linked social problems of concern to social work. The author infuses their lived experiences together with purposively selected literature from major national media platforms, national policies, environment related program documents and other similar literature to shape the discussion. These secondary materials were included because of their reference to environmental events, disasters, environment linked problems, and environmental responses. They were also included for referencing environmental disaster hotspots in the Ugandan case study context. These materials were then read, analysed, and compared against each other to develop and enrich the major themes that were developed using the authors lived experiences in the study context. These analyses and comparisons were then used to constitute the major arguments presented in this article.

THE NECESSITY OF ECO-SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE IN UGANDA

Eco-social work theory and environmental social work knowledge in Ugandan social work practice and education is long overdue. While disaster actions and humanitarian responses are part of the current professional practice and education, they are largely understood in the context of emergence relief. These relief actions have been devoid of a deeper understanding of its association with the natural environment and how this understanding can inform reconstruction, risk reduction, and the necessity of social-political action. Three interlinked arguments are presented here to support this necessity for eco-social thinking in Ugandan social work theory. First, the Ugandan welfare system is agrarian based, with the country's vast rural population deriving their welfare from rain fed agriculture and animal farming (Republic of Uganda, 2020). As the climate change crisis begins to bite, extreme weather events such as droughts due to failing rains, shorter but heavy rain seasons, changing seasons, hailstorms and locust invasions have impacted on agricultural productivity and its capacity to offer sustenance to these populations. Even in areas such as Kasese where food production is sufficient through irrigation, the use of polluted water for food production is offering new challenges to human longevity, health, and wellbeing (Kaguta, 2023).

Second, in the past three decades, Uganda has been in pursuit of transformational social-economic development. This was later inspired by the United Nations sustainable development goals [SDGs] that have been integrated into the country's national development plans [NDPs] (Republic of Uganda, 2020). It is these NDPs that guide national policies, programs, and interventions including in the social sectors where majority of the nation's social workers are employed. To achieve this transformational change, focus has shifted to sustainable social economic development. Social work practice and education must therefore understand and engage in the pursuit of this sustainable development agenda at the national, local and community levels. This will contribute to the design and delivery of social services that promote household incomes and improve the quality of life of Ugandans today and in the future. Social workers therefore need to build knowledge, theory, research, and practices that engage with climate change and other related disasters which are major threats to Uganda's sustainable development and efforts to ending poverty.

Third, there are incessant environmental disaster occurrences in Uganda that require new forms of social work thinking and knowledge. Diseases, famine, food crisis, flooding, landslides, droughts, water pollution, and the associated deaths, loss, displacements, or suffering resulting from such environment linked problems have been articulated in Ugandan mainstream media and dominated public discourses in the country (Emwamu, 2022; Kaguta, 2023; Kaguta and Ashaba, 2022; Taremwa, 2022; Monitor, 2020; 2021b). As such, its imperative for social work in Uganda to build and use a body of eco-social knowledge and theory for both practice and education. It is hoped that this article will stimulate more Ugandan social workers to begin to look deeply, differently, and analytically at the link between disaster actions, natural environments, and human wellbeing.

CASE STUDIES: EVIDENCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTERS IN UGANDA

To further articulate the necessity of eco-social work knowledge, theory, and practice in Uganda, four case studies are summarised here. These cases show that historically, problems addressed in disaster actions can better be understood through their association with the environment. This further justifies and builds an eco-social body of knowledge and environmental social work theory. First presented is the Kasese disaster hotspot case study. Kasese is in the Rwenzori region of western Uganda. With the Rwenzori Mountain ranges on its northern side, numerous rivers and streams traverse the hills and plains to flow into the lake George and Edward basins in the rift valley below to the south. However, these rivers are both a blessing and curse to the area's communities. River Nyamwamba which traverses the Kilembe mine valley and Kasese municipality busts its banks repeatedly causing floods and mudslides. The heavy mineral wastes irresponsibly dumped by the Kilembe mines since the 1950s have polluted its waters and soils in the area causing ill health to residents (Kaguta, 2023). River Nyamwamba floods have destroyed schools, roads, power lines and a power dam, food gardens, a historical hospital, homes, and bridges (Kaguta, 2023; Monitor, 2021a). In the absence of warning systems, it is difficult to predict when these rivers will flood, as this occurs in both wet seasons due to heavy rains and in very dry seasons due to snow melt. Elsewhere in Kasese, rushing waters lead to landslides and mudflows (Kaguta and Ashaba, 2022). The loss of life, human suffering, displacements, loss of property and loss of economy are enormous in each flood or landslide strike. Interventions are mostly emergency relief, with no visible sustainable post disaster action which leaves communities on their own until the next disaster strikes.

Second, there is the case of the Elgon disaster hot spot characterised by frequent landslides, mudslides, rivers flooding, and a growing land fault line threatening the existence of an entire community (Monitor, 2020; 2021b). The Elgon region is in eastern Uganda and occupies the volcanic uplands of mount Elgon. The area has soft and fertile volcanic soils that have attracted agricultural settlements. The region also experiences heavy annual mountain rainfall. These rains feed the numerous rivers most of which burst their banks during heavy rains leading to floods. The rains also repeatedly soak into the loose soils leading to numerous mudslides in the area. For over 10 years now, a fault line was discovered and has been growing thereby threatening the existence of an entire community as it may lead to a massive and destructive landslide any time. The agricultural community has cleared most of the trees and vegetation which has weakened the soil's capacity to hold and withstand the heavy rains. A government resettlement plan of the area communities has faced sluggish implementation, mismanagement, resource inadequacy, opposition politics, and community resistance (Wambede, 2022).

Third, there is the case of Karamoja's perpetual hunger, malnutrition, food insecurity and drought in Uganda. Karamoja is a semi-arid and dryland region located in north-eastern Uganda. It is inhabited by the indigenous nomadic cattle keeping Karimojong peoples. The communities in Karamoja experience continuous hunger due to dependence on cattle, and the inhospitable climate. The unreliable rainfall means that agriculture activity in the region is limited. As such, hunger, food shortages, malnutrition, food related illnesses, and death are rampant (Emwamu, 2022; Taremwa, 2022). To survive in the harsh climate, the communities practice nomadic pastoralism, but failing rains in recent years means that grass and water for cattle is limited. To offset cattle deaths during dry spells, the community has a traditional practice of cattle raiding, which also leads to insecurity, destruction of property, loss of life, imprisonment (part of government's response to curb armed cattle raids), and displacements. The resultant effect is that extreme poverty is widespread with 2/3 of the population living in absolute poverty (Barrantes, 2021) and a huge dependence on humanitarian and direct government supported interventions for food, education, health, water, and other community services.

A last environmental case study for reflection and analysis is the Lake Victoria floods. Located in East Africa's great lakes region, Lake Victoria is the largest freshwater lake in Africa, feeds Africa's mighty Nile (Blue Nile), and a transnational waterbody shared by three countries of Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. From 2018 to 2022, water levels in the lake rose steadily and peaked at 12.94 metres, levels last seen in 1964 when the lake last flooded to such extremes (Barigaba, 2021). This caused extreme flooding in the shoreline communities of Uganda's capital Kampala, Jinja city, and rural communities that stride the lakeshores. To control this flooding, the dam gates at Jinja were permitted to release extra water which caused flooding downstream along the river Nile and connected lakes Kyoga and Albert. Communities on the northern shores of lake Kyoga were greatly affected as they are in low lying plains. The flooding of the lakes exerted extreme pressure on transport infrastructure, power

generation, and fishing activities. There was biodiversity loss due to drifting of floating islands, floods, and rushing waters. In addition, it triggered localised displacements of people, loss of property, loss of agricultural production, loss of localized economic activities, closure of flooded schools and health centres, and immeasurable human suffering. These four cases offer an indication of the magnitude of human suffering due to environment linked problems. This compels the social work profession in Uganda to take appropriate action to uphold its mandate of promoting human wellbeing.

ACTIONS IN EDUCATION AND PRACTICE TOWARDS ECO-SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE

Due to these and other occurrences, evidence has grown in Ugandan national planning that action is required to deal with current and mitigate future disaster and humanitarian crises resulting from environmental stresses. An analysis by the country's third national development plan (NDP III) has anchored the country's growth and development path on sustainability principles. These principles recognize the interlinkages between social, cultural, political, economic, and natural environment sustainability (Republic of Uganda, 2020).

To this end, the first action will require Ugandan social workers to make strong connections between human wellbeing and the natural environment in both the present and the future. This action necessitates to go deep and beyond the current emergency relief actions of the profession. Each disaster occurrence should be interrogated, and the connections made to present and likely future human wellbeing. Social workers should engage in historical event analysis, evaluate current evidence, and forecast likely future impact of occurrences in the environment. The historical Kilembe mines pollution, which has been brought to the fore by the river Nyamwamba floods and the high cancer incidences in the area should be an illustration of such an analysis (Kaguta, 2023). Questions should be asked: is it the first time this disaster has occurred? How is it linked to the environment? How do we know that it could have been avoided? Who and how does it affect the population now and in the future? What can be done now and going forward? Who should do what, when and how? How can the damage be addressed through social interventions? These and other questions will support building connections between natural environment and the human wellness that Ugandan social work seeks to build.

In addition, a second action requires social workers to facilitate the inclusion of the vulnerable, marginalized, and powerless in the Ugandan community to have a voice in determining action to meet current and future environment linked disasters. While boardroom action is important, the foot soldiers are the men, women, children, and persons in the community, whose opinions may not reach the policy agenda. Social workers should leverage their abilities to reach the common persons, mobilize them to voice their wishes, and galvanize them to engage in corrective action. This should build on the local self-help spirit that drives community support systems of the Ugandan population. The Ugandan *omwavu tayogera* (the poor have no say) maxim should provoke social workers to give a voice to the poor. For it is these poor who are bearing the brunt of these environmental linked disasters and problems. It is also these poor people in the communities who hold the key for dealing with the impact disasters on their welfare.

Relatedly, a third action requires the social workers to give visibility to actions in preparedness, mitigation, and response to environmental linked disasters. This visibility can be through education or practice. In education, schools of social work will need to integrate eco-social learning in their teaching, deepening the analysis of environment and wellbeing in their classrooms. This will support the calls for the integration of climate change and environment education into education curricula (Kasumba, 2021). New modules could be introduced into social work programs, or the environmental theory could be integrated in existing module to demand and infuse sustainable principles across the curriculum. In practice, those currently engaged in disaster action and humanitarian interventions should be vocal at both community and policy levels. Social workers should insert themselves in efforts such as the environmental safeguards in major construction projects, environmental sensitivity in public social interventions, clean energy drives, resilient agricultural livelihood interventions, wetland protection appeals, and the grass/tree growing campaigns in communities.

Lastly, it is imperative for social work action in community mindset education and change on environmental issues. Mindset education has been promoted as a major vehicle for sustainable development in the current national development plan (Republic of Uganda, 2020). An analysis of the Kasese case study suggests that most communities are not aware of the environmental disaster risks (Kaguta, 2023). Social workers should act here, educating communities about environmental risks, environmental policies, environmental care, mitigation and reconstruction interventions, alternatives livelihoods, and possibilities of environmental actions at community levels. This education and mindset change will build environment champions, guardians, custodians, monitors, and promoters at local levels across the country.

CHANNELS FOR PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK ENGAGEMENT

Several channels are suggested here as possibilities and avenues for professional social work engagement. These include: the politics, policy, administration, advocacy, inter-professional collaboration, eco-social work research, and community channels of engagement. When these are activated, they could vigorously offer the social work profession visibility, relevance, and suitability in tackling environment linked disasters, crises, and problems that inflict Ugandan communities.

The politics channel

Through the political channel, social workers will need to be active in the politics of the environment, the politics of environmental safeguards, and the politics of environmental action. They will also need to be active in the politics of sustainable economic development, the politics of sustainable agriculture/food security, and the politics of community environment custodianship. Social workers could argue political appointees in ministries and local governments to develop disaster plans of action. They could also persuade or pressure leadership to provide budgetary allocations for actions that safeguard the environment, for actions that respond/repair environmental abuse, or for actions that directly respond to the wellbeing of communities impacted by disasters. The ministry of disaster, ministry of environment, ministry of agriculture, and national meteorological offices should be pushed to act (Taremwa, 2022). Social action to argue the revisiting of the politics of international humanitarian aid that has created dependence especially in Karamoja in another example. Arguing for the politics of participatory decision making and that which awakens the central government to support local governments in environmental action is another example (Monitor, 2021a; Saabwe, 2021).

The policy channel

Another channel for engagement is the policy channel. This focuses on identifying, formulating, revising, or promoting environment linked welfare policies. Examples could include legislation and policies that promote flash flood control, bush/tree growing, wetland restoration and safeguarding, sustainable food production and food security. Within this framework, social workers will have to champion bringing those affected by climate change and environment disasters to the policy negotiation tables (Saabwe, 2021). This is because many times, the local communities and those affected know the solutions that can be used to shape policy. In addition, this policy channel will require social workers to support the translation of all formulated environment linked policies into concrete actions. This translation from policy formulation to concrete implementation is essential for eco-social work practice. This is because some evidence has showed that while Uganda has several great policies and institutional frameworks, the bulk of these have remained on paper (Batte, 2021). Where the challenge remains on how to translate policy aspirations into actions on the ground, social work can contribute for example through translating these policies into interventions and programs at various levels. As noted in the politics channel above, social workers can hold politicians to account and to allocate resources for policy action. As noted in the community channel, they can activate community resourcefulness and voices to support policy action. In addition, social workers should ensure that the policies are inclusive, fair, and that they attend to the needs of the poor, marginalised, vulnerable and powerless members of society such as women, refugees, and older persons.

The administration channel

The administration channel offers a strategic avenue for social work engagement in eco-social work practice. This majorly focuses on social workers' engagement in environment related programming at national, district, and community levels. Establishing and collaborating with disaster offices and committees in affected areas is an important avenue for eco-social work practice in this regard. Active engagement in relocation and resettlement programs is also important (Wambede, 2022). Additionally, building neighbourhood networks for community support and advocacy in key. Engagement in environmental disaster action plan preparation, execution and evaluation at various levels is also required. Working in budgeting and resource mobilization for environmental action should be a key part of this engagement. Overall, social workers can engage in the administration of environmental action at all levels in both public and non-public organizations (NGOs). Since majority social workers in Uganda practice in NGOs, working organizations and programs with an ecological orientation will be key to building this eco-social work knowledge. In addition, social administrators at various levels will also need to include environmental considerations in most of their interventions.

The advocacy channel

The advocacy channel should be used for engagement by social workers in building eco-social work practice in Uganda. Advocating for proper use of nature in disaster areas, advocacy to promoting existing safeguards such as buffer zones, advocating for the restoration of eco-systems, and pushing for budgetary allocation for environmental action are illustrative examples. This advocacy could also include pushing for sustainable alternative energy sources that would relieve rural populations from dependence on natural woodlands and forests. This energy advocacy could also extend to weaning institutions such as hotels, schools, plantation farming, and prisons from using charcoal and firewood to other sources such as electricity. The advocacy action could also include conducting community dialogues and exchange forums in which communities are given the tools and skills to recognize environmental abuse and voice their concerns. The media will be an important ally in this advocacy and communication. The example of an investigative story about illegal tree cutting in Uganda's Mabira forest that has caught the attention of the nation and its leadership is an illustration of this potential (Edema, 2023). The net effect is the quest for an improved balance of human-environment wellbeing.

The interprofessional channel

Furthermore, the interprofessional collaboration channel is important for professional social work engagement in eco-social and environmental social work. It will require working in inter-profession, inter-discipline, and inter-sectoral formations. An analysis of Kasese and Karamoja environmental disasters for example reveal that agriculturalists, social workers, educationist, health scientists, engineers, chemical biologists, geologists, and others may have to work as a single team to address a given crisis (Kaguta, 2023; Taremwa, 2022). Developing skills, capacity, and aptitude for interprofessional work is therefore central to eco-social work theory.

The eco-social work research channel

Research is an important channel for social work engagement in all fields of practice. As such, social workers in Uganda can engage in environmental social work practice through the knowledge mobilization and research channel. This will require documentation through research, practice notes, and policy briefs, and evidence gathering. The details of this action channel are articulated in the implications section below.

The community channel

From my lived experiences, environmental disasters impact communities, some more directly than others. In areas where there is repeated occurrence and or potential for occurrence of environmental disasters and crises, a community channel for social work engagement is very essential. This should be applied in both rural and urban communities to accelerate the translation of environmental safeguards, policies, and programs into actions in communities. This channel should focus on making communities to understand the link between disasters and environmental actions in their localities to spur positive community action. This will require social workers to engage communities to think through their actions and how these actions impact the environment. It could also involve working with communities to understand the necessity or relocation and the mortal dangers in refusal to leave their settled locations. In addition, working with communities to processes their attachment to land and places is an important action in dealing with environment linked problems. It may also involve transfer of good practices of environment-human relations from one community to another. It may further include working with agrarian communities to integrate environmental sensitivity and smartness in their activities. Working with urban communities to address waste management challenges that exacerbate urban floods and pollution is also important. Therefore, social workers are required to integrate environmental considerations into their community mobilization, organizing, building and development practices.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK IN UGANDA

A conscious integration of eco-social work knowledge into practice and education in Uganda has high possibilities of success and is necessary. This implies the urgency to harvest and build eco-social work knowledge. This can be harvested from current frontline social workers engaged in disaster actions and humanitarian interventions. It can also be harvested from environment related agencies, interventions, and programs. The interventions in northern Uganda in grass/tree growing, the permanent relocation of Bududa landslide communities, and the sustainable livelihoods programming in Karamoja are examples (Taremwa, 2022; Wambede, 2022). Additionally,

this knowledge should also be harvested from environmental policy and safeguards at national and local levels. This knowledge will then begin to shape the debates on an eco-social work practice and education and how this informs the promotion of human wellbeing in the country.

Furthermore, the harvesting and mobilization of indigenous knowledge on environmental utilization, conservation, and safeguarding is essential. This will help to identify historical linkages between the environment and local people's wellbeing and problems. It will inform the evaluation of traditional environmental practices to learn which are protective, co-dependant, or exploitative. The practices of planting trees in backyards for shade, fruits, wind breaking and the planting of trees to mark boundaries, graveyards, and important cultural sites could be built upon. Indigenous environment myths that are protective of the environment if harvested can be used to show communities that the interfaces between the environment and human welfare are not new. With both contemporary and indigenous environmental knowledge, social workers can then begin to understand the possibilities of intervention.

For social work education, the integration of eco social theory into social work training is essential. As earlier noted in the required actions articulated above, independent modules can be designed or eco-social theory integration in existing modules. For example, many courses on disaster management could be enhanced to include humanitarian intervention, and the centrality of the natural environment in human functioning. Similarly, a rethinking of fieldwork education in disaster actions and linked humanitarian interventions is critical. Social work students should be urged and supported to do field education in disaster and humanitarian programs, and in environmental linked agencies. Students should visit or conduct field education in disaster zones during emergency relief, reconstruction, and development stages of responses. Students and teachers should also engage in research in similar areas. Then, social workers will start to make connections between the environment, social problems, and social interventions.

And lastly, developing disaster trauma management practice is essential. This is because, environment linked disasters cause sudden and massive trauma due to deaths, loss, grief, displacement, and emergent human suffering. Disaster relief may not adequately address the psychosocial, emotional, and mental damage associated with disaster. At this point, the use of collective and customary support services should be supported by professional social work interventions that address healing from trauma caused by environmental disasters.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have advanced the argument of building an eco-social work body of knowledge for social work practice and education in Uganda. I have argued that Uganda's largely agrarian livelihoods, the pursuit of sustainable development and the increasing occurrences of environmental disaster have necessitated this knowledge. This necessity has been consolidated by the presented case studies. These have also illustrated that social workers needs a deep analytical approach to link humanitarian crises, the environment, and human wellbeing. Social action by giving voice to the voiceless, integrating eco-social work knowledge in social work education, and community mindset change are suggested. Through political, policy, community, interprofessional and knowledge mobilization channels, eco-social work knowledge can be advanced and strengthened, with implications for social work practice and education. Consequently, I advocate for the rapid mobilization of eco-social work knowledge at both the frontline, policy, and political levels. Contextual knowledge from practice, policies, and programs should also integrate local and indigenous knowledge of environment-human co-dependencies.

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