

Developmental Approaches to Eco-social justice

Janette McLaughlin

Social Work student

James Cook University, Townsville

This paper contends that two occurrences provide a watershed opportunity for societal change and an opportunity for those advocating alternative approaches to social welfare policy and practice to be heard. The first of these events is the world-wide increase in momentum in concerns about climate change, with commentary on this issue in Australia culminating in the recent publication of *The Garnaut Climate Review*. The second seminal event is the current global economic crisis. The realisation that many of the assumptions about society, the economy and its resource base are no longer viable has been gathering momentum for many years. There is now a more broad understanding that human living space and the habitat of all species are at stake if current global production processes continue (Low & Gleeson, 1999). This paper puts forward the case that these growing understandings, and the current crisis, provide an opportunity to 'seize the day' and take advantage of a rare dynamism created by these occurrences. This paper also examines and affirms the foundational principles upon which an enhanced approach to social welfare should be based and underscores that social workers can play a significant role in social transformation (Coates, 2003). Three new core values or principles which underpin an expanded ecological perspective in social welfare policy, theory and practice are derived from a synthesis of principles and ideas advocated by Coates and others. These new principles are couched in universal language and are suggested as a framework to engage in a more meaningful and transformative way with the wider political and economic domain.

While the necessity for action has become urgent and we are currently presented with a unique set of events from which to springboard change, Kenny (1999) reminds us that disquiet about the destruction of the environment, overpopulation and the ways in which industrialisation affects nature is not new. She speaks of this concern being expressed in the 19th century, deepening during the 20th century and escalating with the green movement being one of the most active social movements since the 1970's. In the midst of the current economic crisis and in the context of a broader recognition of a looming environmental crisis, an opportunity for those concerned with ecological and social justice to galvanize and put forward a clear vision of the kind of society that can and should evolve, has presented itself. We have been bombarded in the media with news of the environmental crisis, particularly issues around the threat of climate change and proposed responses and, more recently, the economic crisis and its implications. Among many recent headlines eschewing the 'greed is good' philosophy, was one offering '12 ways the world has changed'. Dusevic (2008) included among his list of a dozen ways he believes the world has changed a return to austerity, a rebuilding of trust and co-operation between nations and an end to conspicuous consumption, giving way to thrift. These descriptors reflect a groundswell of questioning that

challenges the taken-for-granted modernity from which the current crisis grew.

More than at anytime previously, there is an opportunity to put forward and hear guiding principles to steer a transition out of modernity, with its unquestioning acceptance of market-dominated growth and development (Coates, 2003). According to Chenoweth (2005), social policy is driven largely by economic and political agendas that often override the needs of the most disadvantaged. She describes social and human service workers as being in a good position to elevate the human face of disadvantage to a position of priority in economic rationalist calculations about service provision. Likewise, McNutt (1994) insists that the social professions take a proactive stance towards the environmental crisis and create models of social policy that encourage the move toward sustainable social development. He says that in order to do this we must have social policy theory that considers the state of the resource base and the impact of environmental destruction on the social welfare system. Brown (cited in McNutt, 1994) says that this means reduced consumption, reduced destruction of the environment, more appropriate ways of planning the future and an economic and political order that is in harmony with the biological base of society.

Coates (2003), like Chenoweth (2005) and McNutt (1994), believes that social work, with its systems orientation and structural and feminist critiques, is situated well to play a significant role in the movement leading toward sustainable human activities and ecological and social justice. Coates makes it clear that social work can bring to public attention the problems inherent in ecologically destructive, market-dominated capitalism and encourage people to develop a different set of values, relationships and structures. Both Coates and McNutt have set out guidelines or assumptions that they believe can provide the roots of new directions in identity, lifestyles, economics and politics. Coates five principles or integrative guidelines have a stronger ecological emphasis and highlight human integration with nature. The first of Coates' principles, 'Wisdom in Nature,' focuses on earth's innate tendencies; that is the earth's natural drives toward wholeness and healing where change and adaptation are constant. A powerful reference to healing and adaptation of the kind portrayed by Coates is contained in Alexandra de Blas' review (2008) of Paul Hawken's most recent book, *Blessed Unrest*. She refers to Hawken's likening of human social evolution to the 'immune system rising up and fighting back'. Principle two, 'Becoming', is about human beings rejoining the rest of nature in order to bring about a global community with a global consciousness. Coates (2003) speaks of a kind of self actualisation, involving a conscious participation in personal and communal struggles to live our lives connected to all life. Coates calls on us to reject self-centred dualism and

the competitiveness of modernity and to identify our own well-being with that of all people and nature.

Principle three, 'Diversity', calls on human societies to celebrate difference rather than view the local and familiar as superior to the distant and different; Coates says diversity recognises that everything in nature is interdependent and this leads to co-existence, balance, cooperation and accommodation. The fourth of Coates' principles, 'Relationship to Community,' sees the community as primary, where our identity and sense of wellbeing shift from being an isolated concern for personal wealth and welfare, to a personal fulfilment, sought in community along with the fulfilment of all people and things. Coates advocates for a more holistic view, where there is a greater degree of interdependence as people

increasingly realise that their own wellbeing is dependent on the wellbeing of others and that of the natural world. McNutt (1994), in advocating for a social welfare system for a new society, holds similar views regarding community and speaks of participation, whereby people share ownership and alienation is reduced. McNutt's grassroots focus, where grassroots strategy is seen as a starting point with links to regional, national and global levels, also aligns with Coates' fifth principle, 'Change'. Coates acknowledges the ways life on earth has sought to survive evolutionary crises and credits the diversity of species with enabling some to adapt and thrive in new and challenging conditions. He suggests that very small changes which start at an individual level can have local impact, spread to other communities and ultimately provide a catalyst for new structures.

Figure 1 Practical application and benefits of new universal ecological principles

Principles	Practice Area	Practice Implications	Benefits
Grassroots Approach	<i>Social Policy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • emphasis on valuing local initiatives • feedback loops are developed between local initiatives, government and global entities • initiatives tested/evaluated against wellbeing criteria including indicators from non-human world • 'care' has greater legitimacy • non-human world is integral to discussion regarding human well-being • finite nature of resource base is entrenched in policy • social justice and human rights perspectives are integrated with environmental policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy that works because it has evolved from and informed by grassroots activities and modelled in a number of communities. • Non-human world becomes central in policy discussion
	<i>Clinical practice or individual case work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitation of reconnection with non-human world • Education regarding the interrelationships between the personal, social, environmental and spiritual spheres • Confidence in healing processes in all of nature • Lifestyles reflect reduced consumption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical and emotional benefits of integration with nature • Less alienation, people will see themselves as part of a whole which includes the natural environment • Less lifestyle diseases e.g. less obesity, less personal consumption
	<i>Community Work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community organizations incorporate well being of human and non-human environment in their operations • Community bodies model an interrelationships between the personal, social, environmental and spiritual in their activities • Funds are directed to small participative local projects • Evaluation includes measures relating to contribution to and integration with the natural world. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community bodies are seen as integral to and connected with the wider human and non-human environment • Greater consciousness of finite nature of resource base • People are more involved in communities • Community and community work • Is held in high regard
Wellbeing			
Reduced Consumption			

Along with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have these new ways of thinking adopted into policy and welfare practice comes an imperative to couch these principles in language that can be understood and 'sold' to economists, politicians and the makers of social welfare policy in the current crisis-driven climate. The following principles are a fusion of Coates' principles with the ideas of McNutt and others in an attempt to develop underpinning values meaningful and useful to, but not exclusive to, the social welfare arena.

Principle 1. Grass Roots Approach

- Processes replicate nature's organic process and adaptation is constant within a finite resource base (Coates, 2003)
- Diversity is valued and approaches respect and reflect unique environments
- Lessons learned from local projects are applied to other communities
- Community and local knowledge and resources are valued

Principle 2. Well-being

- Understanding of the term is expanded to reflect the symbiotic nature of the relationship between the human and non-human world
- Greater emphasis is placed on the nexus between the health and wellbeing of the natural environment and the health and wellbeing of people.
- Learnings from the spiritual understandings of Indigenous peoples and their relationships with the earth is incorporated in our understanding of wellbeing
- Personal and communal struggles to connect to all life and to attain justice, peace, community and harmony will lead to self-actualisation and fulfilment (Coates, 2003).
- Sensitivity to and engagement with diversity is essential to wellbeing

Principle 3. Reduced Consumption

- Decisions about all human activity in all spheres are made on the basis of the understanding that the resource base is finite (Hamilton, 1997).
- Consciousness raising and education is undertaken at all levels regarding alternatives to consumerism

The expanded ecological perspective advocated here is not at odds with current systems and ecological theories including *person-in-environment perspectives*. Payne (2005) acknowledges that systems theory does not yet adequately reflect broader ecological concerns, though he notes a shift toward their inclusion in social action and individual practice. Concepts, such as that of the life model (Payne 2005), are based on the metaphor of ecology, this model and general systems theory, therefore, providing a legitimate scaffolding on which to build an eco-social justice approach. Chenoweth (2005) describes systems and ecological approaches as holistic and interactive, providing further support for an approach which

sees these perspectives as a strong foundation. Both Payne and Chenoweth have expressed reservations regarding systems approaches, with Chenoweth arguing that the approaches are so generalised that they are difficult to apply and Payne (2005) criticising the emphasis on working with individuals to help them to fit in to the current social order, rather than effecting social change. Notwithstanding these criticisms, there is a strong case (Healy 2005) that systems theories can provide a unifying conceptual foundation for social work as a profession, focused on understanding and responding to people in their environment.

The immediate challenge for social welfare practitioners currently working from a person-in-environment perspective is to find ways of embedding an expanded ecological perspective into theory and practice. The circular concept of 'praxis' (Payne 2005:230), where theories are implemented through practice and practice, in turn, is reflected on to alter theory, is an ideal vehicle for 'bottom-up' transformation facilitated by social workers. Praxis can be used to link and infuse ideas that form part of an eco-social justice perspective with traditional social work theory and practice. For example, the *biophilia* hypothesis asserts that much of the human search for a fulfilling existence is dependent on our relationship with nature (Kellert, 2005). Kellert (2005 p. 143) speaks of '*biophilia values*' and cites advantages arising from basic experiences of nature, such as greater awareness, opportunities for emotional gratification and improved knowledge and cognitive capacities. Likewise, Gladys and Jill Millroy (2008) tell us that Aboriginal people have always known that trees look after our health and promote wellbeing; they cite Western studies showing that patients heal more quickly and that workers are more productive when they have a view of trees. Facilitation of this greater connectedness with nature by social workers will accrue these practical benefits and, in line with praxis, theory will evolve to include these enhanced learnings, in turn informing practice.

The new principles put forward (Figure1) are especially relevant to community development; everyday language or common words were used to develop a basis for common understanding and as a '*way in*' or as a conduit between individuals, communities, policy makers, politicians and economists. This adoption of common language to establish common meaning and value acknowledges Ife and Tesoriero's (2006) view that one of the main reasons for the failure of many community development programs is that change from below threatens powerful interests. The argument presented here is that now more than at any time previously an opportunity for change has arisen because many of these powerful interests are questioning the current industrial paradigm. There is an opportunity to be heard and simplicity and choice of language as the medium for dialogue is critical. Diesendorf and Hamilton (1997) speak of the rigid conceptual distinction between the economy and the environment and put forward the idea of ecological economics which recognises the importance of the interdependence of the economic and ecological systems. It is these kinds of concepts and ideas that can serve to underpin an expanded ecological perspective in relation to community work, because, like it or not, community work and social welfare do not exist in isolation from the broader socio-economic environment. The expanded ecological

perspective proposed here would mean a greater emphasis on and support for local grassroots projects. Local knowledge, culture, resources, skills and processes would be valued and bottom-up approaches would mean that communities would be able to determine their own needs and how they should be met (Ife and Tesoriero 2005). In deference to systems perspectives on which this expanded approach would be built, feedback loops would be incorporated to recognise and share learning at every level (community, local, national and global). Inherent in any community work incorporating this enhanced approach would be a deep understanding of *cosmogogenesis* as a starting point; that is that all life-forms have intrinsic value and that human wellbeing is dependent on the wellbeing of all things (Coates 2003).

McNutt & Hoff (1994) maintain that the social work profession has always been about the future. They say that the common thread which unites practice is the belief that the future can be better than the present and insist that social welfare theory and policy will have to change in order to adapt to a threatened global environment. The case presented here is that the world has come to a unique juncture due to recent economic events and the heightened awareness that human survival is threatened. Should social workers take up a role in societal transformation, as suggested by Coates, McNutt and others, they will need a very clear way forward with tools and language that they understand and own and which has meaning in economic and political spheres. A rare and real opportunity for change on a global level is with us.

References

- Chenoweth, L. & McAuliffe, D. (2005). *The Road To Social Work & Human Service Practice: An Introductory Text*. South Melbourne: Thomson.
- Coates, J. (2003). *Ecology and Social Work: Toward a new paradigm*. Fernwood Publishing.
- de Blas, A. (2008, Oct-Nov). Healing by the community spirit. *Ecos*, 145, 8-9.
- Dusevic, T. (2008) (October 18-19). 12 Ways The World Has Changed. *The Weekend Australian Financial Review*, p.30.
- Hamilton, C. (1997). Foundations of ecological economics In Diesendorf, M. & Hamilton, C. (Eds.), *Human Ecology, Human Economy*. St Leonards: Allen and Unwin.
- Healy, K. (2005). *Social Work Theories in Context: Creating frameworks for practice*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Hoff, M.D. & McNutt, J. (Eds.). (1994). *The Global Environmental Crisis: Implications for social welfare and social work*. Vermont: Avebury.
- Idjirrimoonya Milroy, G. & Milroy, J. (2008). Different ways of knowing: Trees are our families too. In S. Morgan, M. Tjalamini & B. Kwaymullina (Eds) *Heartsick for country: stories of love, spirit and creation* (pp.21-42). Freemantle Press: Freemantle WA.
- Ife, J., & Tesoriero, F. (2006). *Community Development*. Frenchs Forrest, NSW: Pearson Education Australia.
- Kellert, S. (2005). The biological basis for human values of nature. In L. Kalof & T. Satterfield (Eds.), *The earthscan reader in environmental values* (pp.131-150). London: Earthscan.
- Kenny, S. (1999). *Developing Communities for the Future*. Southbank Vic, :Nelson Thomson Learning.
- Low, N. & Gleeson, B (1999). One Earth: Social and Environment Justice. *TELA:environment, economy and society*, Issue 2, November,1999, 1-29
- McNutt, J. (1994). Social welfare policy and the environmental crisis: It's time to rethink our traditional models. In Hoff, M. & McNutt, J. G. (Eds.), *The Global Environmental Crisis: Implications for social welfare and social work*. Vermont: Avesbury.
- Payne, M. (2005). *Modern Social Work Theory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.