

# Green Social Work Practice in Rural Community

Subjects: Social Work

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Social work interventions in rural communities feature a spectrum of interventions, from supporting residents' health and well-being to advancing rural community social development and advocating for policy improvement. In the current global context of climate change, these efforts have been conducted through three major social work practice fields (practice with clients, research, and policymaking), addressing environmental justice and sustainability in rural community development; however, there is a paucity of nuanced understanding of current rural community-driven social work interventions pertaining to climate change and its social consequences. Generally, the foundation of social work interventions associated with climate change, disasters, and other crises is understood as green social work (GSW), namely, social work practitioners are integral to enhancing local adaptation and promoting sustainability practices in the face of increasing climate-related extreme events. GSW, which forms a theoretical framework, supports the understanding of the urgent need for social work interventions to address environmental justice and sustainability in rural communities, contributing to climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction, eventually promoting building resilient and sustainable rural communities.

Keywords: rural community ; climate change adaptation ; disaster risk reduction ; agricultural-based livelihood ; social work ; sustainable development

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## 1. Social Work Research

Social work as a profession focuses on equity and inclusion; this naturally extends to green social work (GSW) interventions through addressing environmental injustice ([Drolet et al. 2015](#)). The disparity of toxin exposure, the increased impact of disasters on marginalized groups, and the need for sustainable practices all call for social work interventions. Social work practitioners are often embedded in vulnerable groups impacted by catastrophes and ecological oppression ([Drolet and Sampson 2017](#)). Consequently, social work practitioners are best-suited to respond by providing support for clients' and communities' immediate and long-term development needs and advocating against the oppressive structures subjugating these marginalized groups.

Many toxins negatively impact farmworkers' livelihood and health, influence co-inhabitants (animals), and damage the environment ([Pfeifer 2016](#)); this evidence generates new opportunities for social workers to address the interplay among humans, co-inhabitants, and ecological systems, contributing to human-animal-environment sustainability. Furthermore, many individuals in rural settings are aware and alarmed regarding the impact of climate change on their livelihood and disasters resulting from the changing climate ([Bondy and Cole 2019](#)). The knowledge of the influences has not effectively translated into actions ([Arbuckle et al. 2015](#)); this represents a knowledge-action deficit resulting from inadequate funding or governmental support ([Bondy and Cole 2019](#)). Despite the rural knowledge of climate change and its impact on livestock, crop, and the planet, much of the literature speaks to the agriculture sector as reactive responders rather than predictive ([Botane Horvath et al. 2015](#); [Heenan 2000](#)).

Social workers' community-based expertise would promote the knowledge translation and mobilization. With unique community organizing strategies, social workers can be instrumental actors in rural community settings to advocate for local voices to be heard and rally groups together to partner in sustainability practices. Social workers benefit from the shared experience and knowledge of rural individuals concerning disasters, toxin exposure, and occupational health. Future research could strengthen social workers' capacity to act as more powerful allies to individuals seeking health and social care support and participate in multi-level disaster resilience mitigation and preparedness for communities.

## 2. Social Work Practice with Clients

Farming communities have been underrepresented in social work research and practice, primarily associated with climate change and disaster ([Heenan 2000](#)). A lack of literature illustrates rural social workers' contributions toward environmental justice and social justice, intending to assist the rural farming community in achieving climate change adaptation and

disaster risk reduction. Social workers in rural communities are well established in the community network ([Landsman 2002](#); [Humble et al. 2013](#)). Social work practitioners can leverage their community-based partnership, engagement in community education, and relationship with community members to promote sustainable solutions, including agricultural interventions ([Pfeifer 2016](#)), and contribute to disaster mitigation ([Scherch 2015](#)). "Becoming an advocate and ally with both farmworker organizing groups and environmental justice groups engaged with farmworkers is consistent with an ecological model of social work, as they promote an 'indigenous' helping model" ([Pfeifer 2016, p. 185](#)). Given the distinctive economic experience, barriers to health and social services, and disparity of support for women, BIPOC groups, and children and youth, the profession of social work have tremendous opportunities to grow in effectiveness, cultural competence, disaster preparedness, and sustainable practices, which need to be further developed.

Social workers are uniquely positioned to rally people together to combat the impact of climate-related disasters in rural settings via health and social support ([Purcell and McGirr 2014](#)). [Turje \(2012\)](#) implores social workers to ensure that their clients in the rural sect have the background knowledge to make their own choices; this is what leads to fighting against the root of neoliberalism. "While social work has its roots in educating classed individuals on 'moral' choices, such education is pertinent towards neoliberalism because it creates a commodity, impregnates it with ethicality, and invites individuals into consumption patterns as a 'solution'" ([Turje 2012, p. 129](#)). [Drolet and Sampson \(2017\)](#) emphasize that, as a community, members are passionate about participating in climate change adaptation, it is the responsibility of social workers to embrace a community-driven approach to partner with community members to advocate and change oppressive structures, develop partnerships between stakeholders, government officials, and residents, propose sustainable solutions and mobilize community members. Social workers can pay heed to the way climate change messages are portrayed. Often, the language used to make people aware of the dire need can exacerbate eco-anxiety and feelings of helplessness ([Kosec and Mo 2017](#); [Rivera-Arriaga et al. 2021](#)). Innovative social work interventions could be developed to utilize social workers' community-based roles to ensure that people inundated with lousy news participate in solution-finding, including sustainable farming practices and community partnership.

The literature highlights effective interventions in existing structures within the community, including churches, schools, and other community resources ([Heflinger and Christens 2006](#)). Social work practitioners could engage within these structures to mitigate the stigma of accessing resources and reduce barriers to related health and social care (e.g., mental health services). Furthermore, social workers can embrace these community participatory interventions to build resilience and sustainability by contributing social work knowledge and approaches to supporting people and contributing to disaster preparedness ([Lindberg et al. 2017](#)). Engaging rural residents, and utilizing their networks to connect individuals to services, distribute information in the face of climate change, and develop community-based pre-disaster preparedness plans could be further developed in social work research and practice. For social workers to mitigate the impact of disasters, social work practitioners need to recognize their inherent value and potential in their community work ([Wu 2021](#)). Social workers in rural settings often find themselves in generalist roles as they work in various locations with a diverse age range ([Waltman 2011](#)). As noted earlier, community members experience rural life distinctly, including women, children and youth, and black, Indigenous, and people of Colorado (BIPOC) groups. Social work practitioners should strengthen their capacity of integrating service users' demographic factors to develop customer-driven services in rural communities. Engaging diverse rural residents in the development of community-oriented service programs should be further developed in rural areas.

### **3. Policymaking**

Social work is heavily impacted by social policy, in turn, informing social policy decisions. Social policy adapts to the evolution of society, and in recent years, these adaptations have integrated environmental justice and sustainability, particularly with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Policy targets disaster mitigation and climate change adaptation strategies and should consider the social vulnerabilities of impacted populations to build resilience in rural communities, especially for the demographic variables of these populations ([Askew and Sherval 2012](#); [Rhubart and Sun 2021](#); [Saxby et al. 2018](#)). "Social work practice has a vital role in promoting, advocating, and implementing sustainable and adaptive strategies in social development, ultimately balancing people's needs with environmental concerns" ([Drolet and Sampson 2017, p. 64](#)). More social policies worldwide promoting risk communication, disaster mitigation, and support for vulnerable and marginalized populations ([Wu and Mackenzie 2021](#)) and more social work pedagogical innovations and involvement in supporting sustainable development in their practice are needed ([Wu and Greig 2022](#)). Social work policy has long embraced a person-in-environment theoretical foundation; however, in practice, this largely ignores the natural environment and its' interconnections with service users ([Doll et al. 2022](#)). Though national and international federations of social work are integrating an environmental focus, the action of social worker involvement is limited as there remains a research–practice deficit.

Rural residents' voices are often excluded from policy discussions regarding agriculture and environmentalism (Riebschleger 2007). There is a need for policy to support these individuals as they have no power when forced to leave their land and livelihood (Lindberg et al. 2017) and increase vulnerability for previously marginalized populations (Sam et al. 2017). Social workers' role in the policy realm includes "advocating for policies that are responsive, rights-based, and transformative; they also hold governments accountable for public policies and their implementation" (Lombard and Viviers 2020, p. 2268). There is a need for a holistic approach to communicating and engaging residents' needs (Wu 2022). Social workers can embrace an eco-social framework that acknowledges the importance of the Indigenous worldview's recognition of the interconnectedness of people and the earth and understands overall health and well-being (Powers et al. 2021).

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