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**The social dimension of the environmental crisis: A perspective change for  
Environmental Social Work**

**La dimensión social de la crisis ambiental: Un cambio de perspectiva para el  
Trabajo Social Ambiental**

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**Title:** The social dimension of the environmental crisis: A perspective change for Environmental Social Work.

**Título:** La dimensión social de la crisis ambiental: Un cambio de perspectiva para el Trabajo Social Ambiental.

**Abstract:** The initiatives proposed by environmental social work so far do not dig deep enough into the roots of the environmental and social crisis we face. The problem lies in the influence of neoliberal values on our practice, ideas and our ways of living as society. Those intervention proposals that are defined within this ideological framework turn out to be helpless to confront a crisis furthered by the same market ideas. In this regard, the great challenge of our times is to promote intervention alternatives that do not reproduce the ideology that the market fosters. For there to be an ecological transformation, social transformation must first be encouraged. Society must seek a change of the values that guide our actions and our lives.

**Resumen:** Las iniciativas propuestas por el trabajo social ambiental hasta el momento no profundizan lo suficiente en las raíces de esta gran crisis. El problema se encuentra en la influencia de los valores neoliberales en nuestra práctica, ideas y modos de vida. Aquellas propuestas de intervención que funcionan dentro de ese marco ideológico resultan ser incapaces de enfrentar una crisis provocada por la profunda penetración de esos mismos valores del mercado. Por tanto, el gran desafío de nuestros tiempos es promover alternativas de intervención que no reproduzcan la ideología que el mercado promueve. Para que exista una transformación ecológica, debe fomentarse primero una gran transformación social enfocada a un cambio de los valores que guían nuestras acciones y nuestras vidas.

**Keywords:** Environmental social work, neoliberal values, ecological crisis, efficiency, development.

**Palabras clave:** Trabajo social ambiental, valores neoliberales, trabajo social, crisis ecológica, eficiencia, desarrollo.

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## 1. Introduction and justification

Recently, students in Madrid's Complutense University have started to be called to take action in several projects, seminars and surveys that seek to bring the faculty closer to a deeper ecological awareness. One example is the international course I took part in on *Resilience and Global Transformation: Surfing the Waves of Change*, already including the importance of the profession's commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and thus to the environmental perspective. The current urge to include the ecological lens and specifically sustainable development as a goal within the Social Work profession guided me to start researching the ways these are being considered and implemented.

Environmental social work is an approach that has not long ago started to be considered and implemented to answer the demands of a world that suffers an important ecological and social crisis. We talk about a crisis that gains ever-increasing momentum as it speeds to limits each time harder to reach. Therefore, it is essential to constantly review the foundations and guiding practice objectives on which this new approach is built. In this regard, I have experienced that sometimes, even with the best will, the professional practice dismisses the actual problems as it embraces the strong ideas embedded in the neoliberal context that society lives in. It happens to be a great paradox that the ideas and values that fostered this dangerous scenario are the same ones that impregnate the solutions proposed.

Along with this research, I have analyzed four guiding objectives for environmental social work practice -empowerment, resilience, social capital promotion and sustainable development- in order to prove the influence of neoliberal values that misleads the action with solutions that don't challenge our way of life or thinking and thus, don't dig enough into the problems. After explaining the most dangerous ideas of the neoliberal ideological axis, the final purpose and most important statement is that the ecological crisis will only be possibly addressed after a transformation in our ways to understand the world and the values and beliefs that guide our interactions with it. Moreover, when the ecological crisis is at a time understood as a social crisis

of values, Social Work develops a priority role and its need to take action is more than justified.

## **2. Methodological framework**

In order to critically analyze the current framework for social work and the guiding practice goals in environmental social work intervention, I used the literature review method. I backed up my hypothesis with documentary and statistical sources that helped to contextualize the subject of the study and to learn about the background described in the literature (Valles, 2009).

The sources of information consulted were obtained from the different electronic resources offered by the Complutense University of Madrid such as Catálogo Cisne, as well as its physical libraries; different bibliographic servers like Dialnet, Trobes or Ebrary; different journals like Cuadernos de Trabajo Social or Trabajo Social Global; materials produced in intensive programs coordinated by Universidad Complutense such as The Sustainable Wellbeing Intensive Programme; international agendas such as the IASSW Global Agenda or the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development from the UN; conference and congress proceedings; as well as statistical data produced by the World Bank and the UN. In addition, important sources have also been obtained thanks to references from previously read articles and books. The analysis of the exploitation of these secondary sources has allowed the interpretation of the data collected.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

#### 3.1. Social Work and the environment.

##### 3.1.1. Environmental crisis as a social justice crisis.

The post-industrial era recognized by an unrestrained thirst for unstoppable development is leaving a scenery of environmental threats that already shows its consequences both in the environment and the common welfare through a “drastic effect on social cohesiveness and the Earth’s ecological carrying capacity” (Besthorn 2013:1). Nowadays, water pollution, forest destruction, extinct and endangered species, toxic emissions, global warming, desertification, famine, and the forced migration of peoples known as environmental refugees are reported almost daily (Coates, 2005). Previous worries like poverty are being aggravated, while new concerns appear in the setting. For instance, Bullard (2000) identified new kinds of racism in the twenty-first century: “environmental racism”. This refers to the processes through which more vulnerable minority communities bore a disproportionate share of the effects of environmental pollution.

Since we begin to notice the impacts of environmental problems, the extent of the global environmental crisis is increasingly understood as a matter that needs urgent action. In addition, the uneven distribution of the repercussions over those in more vulnerable circumstances brings to the fore an issue of social justice. The impacts are especially severe for the poor and minority groups, who take the unbalanced strain of health and economic burdens related to living in toxic areas -dump sites, and nuclear radiation or polluted air/water/soil conditions-. Keefe (2003) acknowledges that “environmental justice is social justice with a time perspective” since, over time, environmental contingencies profoundly affect the traditionally recognized components of social justice. To this extent, it has become very clear that the environmental crisis is also a crisis for social justice (Dominelli, 2012) and thus, for Social Work.

### 3.1.2. Environmental Social Work.

The introduction of environmental issues into Social Work widely starting in the 21st century has been differently labeled by the authors: Green Social Work (Dominelli, 2012), Ecosocial work (Lysack, 2012), Environmental Social Work (Gray, Coates & Hetherington, 2012). For my analysis, I will refer to the term Environmental Social Work after Coates' (2005) label, regarding his strong influence on this research. Dominelli (2012) describes it as a practice rooted in improving the wellbeing of people, in which the environment becomes relevant to the realization of social and environmental justice. It aims for holistic intervention and addresses structural forms of oppression, environmental degradation and injustice to empower communities. The focus is set on the "interdependencies amongst people, the social organization of relationships between people and the flora and fauna in their natural habitats; and the interactions between socio-economic and physical environmental crises and interpersonal behaviors that undermine the well-being of human beings and planet earth" (Dominelli, 2012:25).

Besides, the trends that exist are diverse. Coates (2003) and Besthorn (2012) stand for a "deep ecology" that looks after nature care and the need for people to develop a community sense. Another wave has been rooted in "spirituality" which calls for the need to move away from materialism and individualism (Zapf, 2009) and relates to indigenous ways of how indigenous face their problems (Bay, 2015). Ecofeminism configures another trend that highlights a strong link between exploitative relations towards natural resources and women (Mies & Shiva, 2014). Despite the different moves, respect for nature and the link between social and environmental justice is the main shared topic among these three trends. Besides, these trends do not oppose each other. Instead, Social Work benefits from their values and knowledge for its practice (Bay, 2015).

A growing environmental justice movement is developing with the social worker's commitment to achieving equity and understanding of the meaning of people and the environment's interactions. Many experts in the field try to open up our practice's boundaries to assimilate the demands from the current crisis.

Nonetheless, the reflexivity and mobilization of social workers can remain on the surface of the problems. These new approaches do not lead to a careful reflection on crucial issues related to how the social worker's role could be supporting the reproduction of the social order (Rendueles y García, 2017). We are witnessing a Social Work that far from transformative, is instead submissive to the power of the structures that govern us in a neoliberal contextual frame.

### 3.2. Neoliberalism Embedded in Environmental Social Work

#### 3.2.1. Neoliberal logic and its impact in modern societies: Most dangerous values of Neoliberalism.

The changing initiatives occur in a context of ideological dominance called neoliberalism, in which the different capitalist models converge towards hegemonic practices and discourses (Coates, 2000). Therefore, neoliberalism and the processes of neoliberalization have become a basic term for understanding the trends of action in the 21st century, not only in the political-economic sphere. For the analysis to be developed, it is interesting to understand neoliberalism as a prevailing ideology in society, as Harvey (2007) describes it: The market exchange is an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all of human actions and replacing all previously held ethical beliefs.

In general terms, we are facing a global context defined by the devastating consequences of a life model based on neoliberal utilitarianism and economic capitalism. They range from the destruction of natural ecosystems and serious damage to the planet as a whole to the increase of economic inequality and social injustice (Escorihuela Domínguez, 2009). The deep establishment of neoliberal ideas into society is particularly of great concern. Economics now rules not just public and social structures, but also human thoughts and lives. the following ideas are carried as guidelines for our interactions and purposes:

Table N° 1.

Neoliberal values that define the actual societies

·Homo economicus:	Economic well-being is primary and will bring about well-being in all other areas of life, ·Individual interests take priority over communal well-being, ·Competition for individual benefit.
·Consumerism:	Well-being is achieved through abundance and consumption.
·Industrialism:	Mass-production is the best way to achieve the abundance needed for human well-being.
·Progressivism:	Human condition gradually improves through abundance; Salvational sense of progress primarily through economic growth and technological innovation.

Adapted from Spretnak,1997 by Coates, 2005.

In addition, one of the most dangerous features of neoliberal logic is its adaptive and integrative capacity, which makes it possible to assimilate even the most revolutionary ideas. Neoliberalism has become hegemonic as a form of discourse that has pervasive effects on the modes of thought, to the point that it has been incorporated into the natural way that many individuals live and understand the world (Harvey, 2007). Bauman (2005) calls “creativity destruction” to this proceeding way of neoliberalism that silently destroys other ways of life and thus indirectly the human beings who practice them as well.

The neoliberal hegemony at the discursive level determines "what" can be debated and "how" (Carrier, 1997, as cited in March 2013). The sphere of debate is reduced to technocratic concepts and ideological confrontation is replaced by the co-optation of dissenting discourses (March 2013).

### 3.2.2. Neoliberalism thoughts into Social Work.

Therefore, a Social Work framed in a Neoliberal context learns from its own critiques and can integrate them into its performance -once redefined and recontextualized- in a way that they don't call into question capitalist, colonial and patriarchal power structures (Rendueles & García, 2017). The Neoliberal government's reason guided

the use of those concepts towards adaptation to the market and governance of the unequal social order boosted by competence. (Rendueles & García, 2017). Although policies are highly influenced by the impact of the neoliberal intervention, the interesting focus for this paper remains on neoliberalism as an ideology so deeply rooted in society that it configures itself as a reproduction mechanism. An ideology that shapes a society accomplice to its own problems.

The liberal ideology of the capitalist system configures an ultra-conservative setting (Ortí, as cited in Rodriguez, 2003) based on “the market, the revaluation of the individual and the loss of prestige of the collective that have defeated the central nuclei of social practice” (Rogriguez, 2003:91). Santos (2004:22) refers to a “societal fascism” that instead of political, emerges as a social regime and a regime of civilization. It differs from the previous in a way that it doesn’t need to suppress formal representative democracy to embrace the demands of the expansion of capitalism. Instead, "It encourages it to the point that it is no longer necessary, or even convenient, to sacrifice it to promote capitalism." It is a way of fascism that emerges from society itself, although supported by power structures. Horkheimer (as cited in Santos, 2003) reacted to the scenery pointing out that the irrationality of modern society lies in being the product of a particular will: capitalism, and not of a general will, "a united and self-conscious will":

*"The critical acceptance of the categories that govern social life simultaneously contains its condemnation" (Horkheimer, as cited in Santos, 2003).*

### 3.3. Environmental Social Work: Practice overview

Regarding the distress caused by issues of ecological and environmental justice, many professionals have ventured into the search of a proper way to integrate the ecological lens within Social Work (Peeters, 2012; Truell & Jones, 2015; Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Dominelli, 2012; Besthorn, 2015; Coates & Gray, 2012).

The focus has expanded beyond industrial pollution and toxic exposure to incorporate attention to the overall relationship of people to the physical environment (Coates & Gray, 2012). Some initiatives already being developed consider for instance alternative energy, urban design, or community gardens. It is important to

set the focus on the main practice approaches and practice objectives shaping the ways social work practitioners commit to environmental justice:

### 3.3.1. Empowerment

Empowerment is defined by Solomon (1976:19) as:

*“A process whereby the social worker engages in a set of activities with the client . . . that aims to reduce the powerlessness that has been created by negative valuations based on membership in a stigmatized group”.*

According to Lee (2001), empowerment has three dimensions interrelated:

developing a “more positive and potent sense of self”; constructing knowledge and the “capacity for a more critical comprehension of the web of social and political realities of one’s environment”; and cultivating “resources and strategies, or more functional competence, for the attainment of personal and collective goals”. This author refers to empowerment as “the keystone of social work”. This practice has been rooted in the social work profession since Paulo Freire’s work starting in the 70s decade with *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1973) through which self-advancement started to be understood as a way to advance within the community. Nowadays, empowerment is still included by several authors (Robert, 1998; Peeters, 2012; Norton, 2009; Dominelli, 2012; Gitterman & Carolyn, 2016) as a central practice for developing community capacity to preserve and develop local resources regarding environmental matters. Social work activities oriented toward ecological action have become increasingly oriented toward developing trusteeship and enabling communities and individuals to protect and maintain local resources. Community empowerment strategies are considered to have a key role for environmental justice as it addresses the important root-causes: economic and political powerlessness (Robert, 1998). Through education and building a movement, empowerment strategies for environmental justice “seek to enable those who face the consequences of environmental decisions be the ones making the decisions” (Robert, 1998:257). For instance, Belchior (2018) considers promoting empowerment as a proactive and goal-directed process for Social Work Intervention in Eco-Neighborhoods. She seeks empowerment as an opportunity for “recognition, creation and use of resources and instruments by individuals, groups and

communities, in themselves and the environment, leading to an increase in power that allows these subjects to increase the effectiveness of exercising their citizenship” (Belchior, 2018:7).

### 3.3.2. Resilience building

Lately, social work researchers have prominently included a practice approach based on resilience theory and the strengths approach (Ungar, 2012; Ungar 2008; Fraser, M. W., Galinsky, M.J., Richman, J.M., 1999; Van Breda, 2018; Dominelli, 2011). Prof. Van Breda (2018:4) defines it as: “The multilevel processes that systems engage in to obtain better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity”. Resilience is therefore understood as a process well placed to create new alternatives for Social Workers to contribute to human flourishing and achieve positive changes. Prof. Van Breda (2018) finds the relevance of resilience theory for Social Work in three main arguments: First, he highlights a more holistic approach to the person. Instead of focusing just on vulnerability or risk itself, resilience theory proposes a new focus on “ the clients’ ” coping resources, strengths and attempts to deal with their challenges. For instance, regarding climate refugees, resilience theory poses that better outcomes regarding integration could be achieved if part of Social Work research was directed towards an understanding of the processes that helped them through a successful integration in the arrival country. In the second place, resilience theory is mostly based on qualitative research, which according to Prof Van Breda (2018) “allows the voice and experience of participants to come to the fore”. This should facilitate acquiring knowledge about what makes people successfully face adversities. Lastly, resilience theory seeks to bring together the micro-macro levels, which according to Patel (2015) can lead to important contributions to deepening social development theory.

Moreover, resilience is considered an important approach to overcome ecological disasters as it relates to two other features: (i) adaptability, “the capacity of actors in a system to influence resilience”, and (ii) transformability, “the capacity to create a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic, or social (including political) conditions make the existing system untenable” (Walker et al., 2004).

### 3.3.3. Promoting social capital

Social capital formation is poised as a cooperative process that enables exchange and access to resources with more advantageous conditions, reduces individualism and increases investments in public goods. It is defined by Loeffler et al. (2004: 24) as: “the process of building trusting relationships, mutual understanding and shared actions that bring together individuals, communities and institutions. This process enables cooperative action that generates opportunity and/or resources realized through networks, shared norms and social agency”. Peeters (2012b:14) states that social capital relates to social solidarity and social inclusion, while it differs from “the competition and social exclusion that characterizes the economic growth model”. Improving social capital is therefore considered by social workers an important power source for social change, and thus a relevant step for the greening transition. To build social capital, many authors recognize a need for a shift towards economies that look after the carrying capacity of the earth and can empower citizens (VV.AA., 2014). The report made by Complutense University of Madrid (2014:40) frames these needs as a shift “from quantitative growth towards equitable and qualitative development”. In the pursuit of implementing an equity-oriented economic contraction, several economic projects emerged intending to develop new social-economic relations (circular economy, local economy, service economy, participatory economy, shared economy, true-costs economy...).

For instance, a *service economy* is becoming a big trend nowadays. It consists of substituting the concept of sale of the good for that of sale of the use of the good. The consumer will no longer purchase a vehicle, but a mobility service through a provider. As claimed by Pretty (2013), non-material consumptions produce high affiliation that improves life satisfaction.

The role of Social Workers in the implementation of more socially-ecologically conscious economies has been mainly framed towards negotiation, facilitation and mediation within policy dialogues (VV.AA., 2014).

### 3.3.4. Sustainable Development

The years 1960s and 1970s gave rise to growing awareness about environmental problems and skeptical thinking about the conventional growth strategies (Baker et al. 1997). However, these concerns were properly addressed by the Brundtland Report that introduced sustainable development as the “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. (World Commission on Environment and Development, WCED, 1987, p. 43). The report was meant to be a framework for the integration of environmental policies and development strategies. Thus, the debate was not anymore considering the impossibility to match environment and development, but how to achieve environmentally sustainable forms of development (Baker et al. 1997). In short, “sustainable development was linked to questions of growth, power and the removal of the disparities in economic and political relationships, especially between North and South” (WCED as cited in Baker et al. 1997:4).

Although the three approaches mentioned before have been recurrent for developing a more ecological-oriented practice, sustainable development has by far reached a wider scope. While the others are mostly understood as guiding approaches to reach an outcome, sustainable development is mostly furthered as a goal. Evidence is found for example after 2015 when the UN agreed with the three global organizations -the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW)- for the post-2015 sustainable development goals (SDGs) that assemble a global strategy for action (Truell & Jones, 2015).

Due to the lack of clarity as a result of diverse approaches embracing it, Peeters (2012b:8) clarifies that sustainable development is for Social Work “most commonly understood as an interaction among three dimensions: the social, ecological and economic or “triple P: people, planet and prosperity”. Social Work understands the model as a non-hierarchical model that is essential for active participation and focuses mainly on its social dimension, sustainable development of communities through participative practices (Peeters, 2012a).

Social workers assumed their important role to facilitate the development of sustainable plans through several initiatives. For instance, Besthorn (2013) brings out a sustainable agricultural initiative called vertical farming as a way to confront global food insecurity. The idea enables the farmer to farm deeper, to go down to an increased area and to secure large crops (Bailey, as cited in Besthorn, 2013). However, they are sustainable farms because they use less water, are less susceptible to diseases and pestilence, and would need much less agro-mechanization to sustain the operation (Besthorn, 2013). Therefore, vertical farms can produce crops that are environmentally safe, nutritiously valuable, affordable, and produced fairly (Walsh, 2009, as cited in Besthorn, 2013). Within this framework, Besthorn (2013) identifies social workers as skillful members for sustainable production projects due to their cultural competencies; their ability to provide comprehensive assessment of community needs, resources, and strengths; skills for social integration and investigation; and their advocacy and policy skills to develop similar relationships with municipal governments and policymakers. Consequently, the author states an important request for the profession to recognize the importance of urban sustainable agriculture to address 'the link between the production of and access to healthy and sustainable food sources and deeper structures of inequality (Besthorn, 2013).

#### **4. Discussion: The market environmentalism.**

The impact of these initiatives has been measured and achievements in the population's wellbeing can't be denied. By reviewing the data and reports written about the past 20 years in terms of global development, we can appreciate progress in terms of lower undernourishment and hunger, child and infant mortality, global extreme poverty, and improvements in issues such as sanitation access, water access, or electricity access (World Bank, 2010; World Bank, n.d.a; World Bank, n.d.b; Bradshaw, J., & Mayhew, E., 2011; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2020; UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation, 2020). Nonetheless, regress for the planet continues and the environmental crisis becomes every day a bigger threat. This leads to questioning whether policies, objectives and

professionals are addressing this environmental crisis and the sustainability goal. Dominelli (2012) already called for some critical thinking by pointing out the long-standing association between community development initiatives and economic development. The author understands that promoting initiatives like community empowerment or social capital building are initiatives well-received within a capitalist frame in a way that fosters acceptance, and a decrease of demands to the government (Putnam, as cited in Dominelli 2012). However, other central matters such as the lack of wellbeing among poor people in the West and Global South, or the significance of the market values remain under-addressed as they can disturb the market's priorities.

#### 4.1. The link between environmental action and the neoliberal project

Some authors refer to this nexus as “*the neoliberalization of the environment*” or “enviro-capitalism” (March, 2013; Heynen et al., 2007a; Anderson, T.L. Y Leal T.L., 1997). The aim is to raise awareness on how the neoliberal project proposes solutions to environmental problems that are based on deepening the hegemony of the market and individual responsibility in environmental management (March, 2013). An example is the domain of paradigms in environmental management that promises the linkage between environmental protection and economic development such as sustainable development or the market environmentalism. These are dismissed by March (2013:146) as technocratic solutions, pointing out the management of the situation based on “efficiency, technical and scientific criteria, technological innovation and integrated production”. To clarify, initiatives like resilience building or community empowerment easily converge with neoliberalism thinking since those concepts themselves keep the societal and political contexts down. Although these practices seek for improvements in individuals well being, in the end individuals are seen as responsible for their challenges. Meanwhile, the lack of support from the state and collective structures is legitimized, allowing the dismantling of the welfare state (Van Breda, 2018). When people have to face alone the difficulties they might find, public structures are free to dismiss adverse social systems and dynamics, such as poverty, education, or the environmental crisis (Van

Breda, 2018). In the end, resilience and empowerment initiatives, as much as social capital promotion, or the sustainable development framework disregard the cornerstone problems embedded in the system. These practices do not address the consumer-oriented and market-dominated, growth and development beliefs and practices that each time more define people and structures' worldview (Coates, 2005). As far as everything is justified by the need for development and growth, and consumption keeps reaching unsustainable limits, solutions based on concrete action will always perish. In this sense, the social work profession would be failing by focussing attention just on environment-friendly activities or the empowerment of communities so that they develop their own ecological practices. With a focus on concrete environmental-friendly activities, the profession remains on the surface of the problems and aligned with those who think that development and endless growth are still the solutions for the environmental crisis.

#### 4.2. The other side of development

The road to development -or Westernization- has entailed the loss of diversity and of anything differing from the drawn guidelines, which are the only valid ones. Fierce competition for development has furthered segmentation between developed and underdeveloped countries, while legitimizing unequal power relations based on "generosity, bribery and oppression" (Sachs, 2021). In this context, everything that deviates from the stipulated has been classified as underdeveloped. For these reasons, Wolfgang Sachs (2021) designates "the idea of development as a misconception and reveals that its success should be feared more than its failure". The 1987 Brundtland Report's conciliation between the neoliberal system's desire for development and concern for the environment was the key occurrence. With this establishment we distanced ourselves from the reality we had to face and, therefore, from the possibility of adapting our responses to the current urgencies of the climate crisis we are facing. The mistake was the association of growth with poverty reduction. As the Brundtland Report asserts: "Poverty reduces the ability of people to use resources sustainably; it intensifies pressure on the environment (...) A necessary condition for the elimination of absolute poverty is a relatively rapid rise in

per capita incomes in the Third World." This opened the way to the union between "environment" and "development", which also legitimizes the new postulate "There is no development without sustainability; there is no sustainability without development" (Sachs, 2021). In this association, the philosopher identifies the influence of the aforementioned context. One that absorbs every attempt of transformation to accommodate it to the neoliberal bases that govern politics and social institutions. In this way, the idea of "development" is reconceived as a solution to the problems the concept itself has been causing for so long. Through the Brundtland Report, those environmental concerns starting to be urgent were taken up and included in the promotion of development. Then "Sustainable development" was created as the conceptual ceiling for the violation and healing of the environment (Sachs, 2021). "This is nothing less than a repetition of a well-known ruse: every time in the last 30 years the destructive effects of development were recognized, the concept was stretched so that it could include harm and therapy together at the same time" (Sachs, 2021:89). Given the above insight, we could reconsider whether the current way of addressing the environmental crisis and therefore social injustices, is the right one. In this regard, the author warns that any discourse that appeals to the link between environment and development will be denying the impact of neoliberal competitive productivism. Since that is an essential part of the root cause of the ecological crisis, it reduces ecology to a set of administrative strategies oriented to resource efficiency and risk management. The author refers to this discourse as "ecocracy", and accuses it of distancing the problem from reality: While the ecocracy discourse focuses the problem on its technical aspect, it disregards all knowledge that escapes the Westworld borders, hiding alternative ways of understanding production, consumption, and forms to live in society.

### 4.3. Beyond an environmental issue

The dominance of economic efficiency and personal freedom that replace social commitment (Clark, 1989) has led to a resulting widespread lack of care. Detachment and relevance of personal profit have important implications for people's engagement and attitudes towards others or the environment. These ways of life in our societies lead straight to a loss of community and life purpose, usually linked to self-centered personal growth, violence and a sense of disillusionment (Coates, 2005).

Thus, the environmental crisis reveals the limits of the so-called "dominant social paradigm" (Milbrath, 1989) based on neoliberal values and beliefs. When people and nature are seen as a resource of commodities, their interactions are also seen as commodity relations rather than a strong supporting community (Polanyi, 1957). The modern assumptions that bear environmental destruction are also upholding people's misery. Thus, the environmental crisis is not just having an impact on our lives. It is our way of life. It is the advancement of the industrial enterprise through the consumption of nature and the exploitation of people (Coates, 2005). As a result, ecological problems can not be addressed without a shift in the relationships from the predominance of economic values to more caring relations. According to Naomi Klein (2015), the root of the problem is that effective action in the context of the climate crisis requires a fundamental conflict with deregulated capitalism. A transformation in our ways to understand the world and the values and beliefs that guide our interactions with it is crucial to address the ecological problems that the world faces today. More specifically, the author intends to demonstrate that the shift towards a profound transformation of our economy to a less resource-intensive model is entirely feasible at a technical level. "The problem however is that this scale of planning and management is completely outside the bounds of today's prevailing ideology" (Klein, 2015:39). The challenge is then not in convincing us of the need to take costly actions for our comfortable lives or changing our policies. Rather, the challenge is in convincing us that we have to think radically differently for all these changes to be even remotely possible. The ideas of development or progressivism, competition, individual profit, consumerism and industrialism are misleading the search for actual solutions, as they keep impregnating the objectives nowadays set

to integrate the environmental concerns. Only by breaking free from the neoliberal ideological axis to modify the cultural context, will there be some scope for reformist policies that are closer to the objective: to stop, or at least lessen, the social impact that the ecological crisis is fostering.

## **5. Proposals**

Even though some inconsistencies' evidence starts to show up, there is still a long way to go and the green movement has yet to find the strength and the most appropriate ways to cope with change. Certainly, there are solid and numerous economic arguments based on efficiency and profitability that would be valid, for example, to abandon the use of non-renewable energies. However, Noemi Klein (2015) points out that we must change the focus of the discussion to an alternative argument based on morality and the fatal environmental consequences to which we will be exposed if we continue to promote limitless growth. To this end, the author refers to a "mutual reinvention project" that only envisions collaborative partners and replaces rivalry (Klein, 2015). It is a matter of collective thinking that must leave behind the idea of savage competition that guides our actions. Although the proposal of political alternatives remains important for this project to succeed, the ideas of interdependence, collaboration and cooperation must permeate our way of life.

Social workers, deeply committed to social justice and through their understanding of the connectedness and interdependence of the factors conditioning people's lives, are in a special position towards the needed collective movement. Professionals in the discipline should be well trained and poised for identifying the modes of instrumentalization and cooptation of discourses that serve today to govern inequality. Thus, they should also be able to establish strategies to step back from them. Some writers have been already considering certain practices that aim to stand free from the market principles' influence (Coates, 2005; Klein, 2015). These insist on the need to differ from the practices that pursue just a change in the matter's technical dimension like the ones exposed. They recognize a greater value on actions towards a shift in values and our lifestyle. For instance, we could come

much closer to our goal if, instead of pushing for laws that advocate the reduction of gas emissions (e.g. a carbon tax), we would push for effective implementation of a minimum income. “These kinds of measures not only make it possible for workers to quit jobs in polluting energy sectors, but it also fosters a social safety net that enables public debate about values, a shared human condition, and what we collectively value more than economic growth and corporate profitability” (Klein, 2015:740). Following the aim of this great change, Coates (2005) exposes the possible social workers’ role as guides in the understanding of current realities, the severity of the environmental crisis, and alternative values.

However, It is important to realize that it is not only values and beliefs, but also substantial corporate, national and international power dynamics, that support inequality and exploitation (Coates, 2005). Therefore, other valued practices would be helping affected communities organize to challenge industries and governments, or support organizations that provide alternatives to dependence on government and corporations.

In brief, the proposal does not entail leaving completely aside the practices that are being carried out in the new field of Environmental Social Work, considering their positive impact on communities backed up by statistical data. Indeed, Alonso González & Alonso Puelles (2017) point out that innovation in social work has more to do with readjusting already existing models, and changing the process, the strategy of the intervention, the context where the problem appears or the agents that initiate the transformation process, rather than introducing completely new technology. Therefore, the purpose is rather to expose the need to include a critical lens to any practice performed. It consists of creating awareness about the acting ways of the economist discourse to prevent it from penetrating and deviating the transforming capacity of Social Work. In effect, we are talking about learning to cope with the scenario we have, though not from an accepting standpoint, rather from the striving for change. Concerning environmental social work, innovation can be attained when proposals introduce a wider focus in addition to the ecological aspect. Environmental practices that additionally develop a positioning far from the ideological core of stifling market fundamentalism will be able to achieve more

effective results in terms of a long-standing and less resource-intensive economy that also fosters social welfare.

## **6. Conclusion**

Despite a global scenario in crisis that requires urgent and effective responses, it stands out the inability of the proposed solutions to develop options that truly address the problems from their foundations. Environmental Social Work comes to the fore in this context that claims a renewed discipline and thus, it recognizes the social worker's compromise to build a much stronger transforming power. However, the framework of neoliberal ideals that guides our actions is so strongly influencing the proposals to the extent that they lose their capacity to comprehend the world and their revolutionary ideas. Analyzing the deployment of intervention targets such as resilience, empowerment, promotion of social capital or sustainable development helps understanding how they are influenced by and reproduce the same values that triggered the current situation of inequality, risks and ecological crisis. The proposed targets do not challenge the ideas of unrestrained development, competition, individualism, or consumerism that set the path for this crisis and still now shape our lives. Instead, they are co-opted as the neoliberal project proposes solutions to environmental problems based on deepening the hegemony of the market and individual responsibility for environmental management. These are a series of palliative measures unable to propose an actual changing scenario. Therefore, they do not address the root of the problems and they are ineffective solutions in the long term.

In this regard, the ecological crisis has an additional burden, which is its social factor. Therefore, the proposal for action consists more in reinforcing efforts aimed at a change of values in society, where social workers have the capacity to play an essential role. In short, the greater task of these times goes beyond climate change and the environmental crisis. We must open ourselves and look further. The scenario is actually requesting a whole transformation of everything related to the way we live on this planet.

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