

# **Environmental Social Work: Mitigating the Impact of Environmental Crises on Older People Living in Disaster Prone Areas in Nepal**

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## **Abstract**

Older people themselves have a key role in adapting to the impact of environmental disasters rather than being a vulnerable group. They have useful knowledge, skills, and experience which can help them to be resilient in times of disaster preparedness and responses. In such context, this paper highlights the concern for the well-being of older people in Nepal against environmental threats. It further draws attention to how inequalities shape the impact of environmental crises showing stronger connections between the concept of eco-social work and empirical discussions from several kinds of literature. The article provides some recommendations for social work practice in the context of Nepal about environmental crises on older people.

**Keywords:** Eco-Social-Work, Vulnerable, Climate Change, Disasters, Older People, Mitigation, Advocating, Resilient

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## **Introduction**

Climate change and environmental calamities have a significant impact on many communities around the world (Alston, 2015). Climate change is due

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to natural disasters and human activities; but mostly it is because of the human-induced activities which are causing major climate change impact which affects the global south and vulnerable communities more compared to North (Dominelli, 2014). In the case of Nepal, flood is one of the natural disasters with severe impact on the livelihoods of people who are living on the riverbank or the ones who have settlements in riverside areas (Deshar, 2013). Every year flood from the river swallows their settlements, endangering lives and people's sources of income. Just this year 13 houses and schools from the settlements were swept away by the flood (Bhatta, 2020).

The intensifying impact of disasters such as floods, landslides, and erosion worsen the socio-economic situation of the people and creates inequalities (Dominelli, 2014). For example, older people are not as mobile as youth and children, so it is difficult for them to escape these disasters to save themselves (Deshar, 2013; Adhikari, 2017). This paper argues for the protection of vulnerable people and inclusiveness in environmental justice in contemporary social work practice in Nepal to resolve the challenges caused by climate change and environmental disasters (Dominelli, 2014). It does so by giving the conceptual definition of Eco-social Work and presenting the lived implications of environmental degradation.

Environmental disasters are not a new thing in Nepal. Most especially, in the Terai region, where flood and erosion are a year-round problem; and many settlements are swept away and lives severely impacted (Sanderson & Bruce, 2020). In such times, older people are more vulnerable to diseases from contamination of drinking water, and not enough warmth for the body (clothes to wear and protect the body from cold), not enough food to eat to name a few (Adhikari, 2017). Environmental social work can play a significant role in protecting older people from these environmental calamities (Rambaree et al., 2019; Sanderson & Bruce, 2020).

### **Theoretical Assumption of Eco-social work**

There has been a transformative change to challenge the modernist assumptions regarding the social work practice and its foundations in order to have some ethical responsibility towards resolving social problems which had been raised due to environmental factors. The profession itself which originated in Europe around the nineteenth century tilts more towards the concept of ‘individualism’, ‘industrial capitalism’ that can be seen still now in social work practice. But more research and development have brought the concepts of ‘rationality’, ‘logic’, and ‘positivism’.

The approach in social work practice has been associated with two major aspects connecting it with eco-social work where one being ‘ecological’ and the other being ‘environment’. These aspects of eco-social work present how it views the world, the relationship of humans with the environment. Eco-social work believes there is a subtle balance in the earth’s ecosystem that enables the survivability of human beings and all living organisms. If the ecosystem is affected then it can pose a grave danger for all living beings (Boetto, 2019).

### **Eco-social Work**

Eco-social work or environmental social work is a discipline that is currently advocating for the safety of vulnerable populations around the disaster-prone environment. It focuses on the problems, issues, and concerns with the lens of green social work or the Eco-social work paradigm (Rambaree et al., 2019; Dominelli, 2014; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Eco-social work is defined by different scholars using different terms such as ‘green social work’ or ‘environmental social work’ but the principle being the same, creating a better environment for people (Dominelli, 2014).

Moreover, eco-social work in practice gives focus on the policies, practices, and challenges that have come from environment-related issues; be it climate change, environmental disasters (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Rambaree (2020)

argues that social workers have been falling behind in terms of addressing the issues that are related to the environment. The main priority of the government in Nepal lies in social problems such as poverty, education, and health. The environment has never been the utmost concern but its impact has been severe for quite some time. It has been neglected but the relation of people with their society (environment) impacts a lot on their well-being.

Rambaree, Smith, and Powers (2019) argue that it is important to recognize the relation of all living things with the ecosystem and should make these relationships strong for the well-being of both. Thus, social work should be eco-social work while considering the practice. Whereas Dominelli (2014) mentions that social work has fallen behind in responding to the impact of environmental crises and advocating for environmental justice. She presents her analysis in regards to the practice approach of social work being insufficient to create better socio-economic and cultural equalities in difficult times of environmental disasters.

In the case of Nepal, environmental injustice can be seen to some people where society has failed to distribute post-disaster relief (foods, clothes, shelters, medical assistance) more equitably. The people who are living on riverbank and riverside settlements are mostly squatter residents who do not have any place to live. They could be sometimes seen as homeless people who do not have anywhere to live so they try to make their settlements near the place where there is access to water because that is where they could fish and have access to water (Deshar, 2013; Sharma, 2017). This is not only the issue of one country. Every country around the world is affected by environmental disasters (Alston, 2015; Sanderson & Bruce, 2020).

Climate change, drought, flood, global warming, and earthquakes have started weakening communities across the world where the impact is more on African belts, Asian countries, lower-income countries, and lower-middle-income countries (Alston, 2015). Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia, New

Zealand have been able to adapt to these environmental disasters and climate change issues in more appropriate methods of technological innovation, providing safety for people and better prevention and protection plans for vulnerable people (Alston, 2015).

Nepal is a strongly patriarchal society in the Terai region where women are expected to carry out most household activities. It is common to see that even older women work in the kitchen, carrying water from the river, working on the farm, and washing clothes. Older people, especially women who have less mobility capacity, are physically weak because of their rigorous work both in the household and in the farming or fishing industry. Some of the families also have a history of violence and fighting where women are beaten severely. All these things impact the overall well-being of older people and older women especially. The effects of these indifferences to these vulnerable groups are amplified during disasters as we have seen in the context of Nepal (Deshar, 2013).

### **Older People**

Due to the progress in medical science and increase in life span the older population around the world is increasing significantly. The study from the United Nations suggests that the population of older people will surpass the population of children as the life expectancy will increase and the fertility rate will decline (UN, 2017). The United Nations (UN, 2017) defines an older person “as a person over 60 years of age”. The age is defined also from the socio-cultural reference, families and communities acceptance. Likewise in Nepal also older people are defined as the population that is above 60 years of age according to the Senior Citizen Act (2006). In Nepal, the commonly used term is elderly for older people.

To address loads of issues and challenges in the future, it is essential to solve the existing issues and problems associated with older people. Older people are considered one of the vulnerable groups whose overall well-being is

oftentimes affected due to different social problems. Around the globe, many countries are prioritizing the needs of older people but Nepal is way behind in addressing the needs of older people. There are limited services and assistance for elderly people. They are believed to be taken care of by their family members but due to modernization and urbanization, the situation has changed. There are a substantial number of older people living alone where their families have migrated to foreign countries, migrated to urban areas within the same countries. Likewise, preference for the nuclear family has also played some role in pushing older people towards isolation (Aryal, 2019).

### **Identifying the Vulnerable**

In the case of Nepal, significant impacts of climate change have been drought, flood, and landslides which happen every year during the rainy season (Adhikari, 2017). The settlements in the riverbank encroached land, and slums areas are usually the ones that are severely affected by these impacts. Often they do not have access to pure drinking water. Their living condition is also precarious where they usually share the small hut/house among 7 or 8 people (Deshar, 2013). Likewise, people living in squatter settlements are oftentimes socially excluded from society (Sharma, 2017). They are considered illegal squatters/settlers who are misusing public property and making society look bad. In some places, these people living in such settlements are not even allowed to fetch drinking water from the public water tap (Deshar, 2013).

Social workers can help these people in identifying who are the most vulnerable. They can assess and monitor the less mobile people, who have weaker immunities and health problems. In this way, the older people who are most prone to be affected by disaster could be identified and help could be provided on a priority basis. They could be resettled in a safer place such as settlements areas away from riverside settlements and flood-prone areas before the actual heavy rain hits their community. There are permanent and

temporary shelters in these kinds of settlements. Similarly, some of the people who are living in hill areas could be more prone to environmental disasters such as landslides and soil erosion (Deshar, 2013). Thus, if they are not willing to change permanent settlements, they need to be preventively evacuated.

In some of the places and settlements, the discharge of toilets could be seen directly going to the river. There is a practice of open defecation. About that, people could be using drinking water from the river where there could be contaminations that could cause waterborne diseases. Older people due to their weaker immunity could be more susceptible to waterborne diseases, communicable diseases, and hazardous diseases in times of disasters (Adhikari, 2017). So older people and small children must be given more priority in keeping them in safe places and providing them safe food, drinking water, and sanitation facilities.

In this type of scenario, a social worker can shed light and awareness on the people living in settlements regarding the health issues that they could have. Social workers can encourage them to use different sources of drinking water, guide them in resettlement plans linking to resettlement NGOs working in Nepal (Bowles et al., 2018).

Furthermore, climate change affects the food ecosystem and creates a great challenge for food security. This affects those who are engaged in food production and supply such as farmers, fisherfolks, and those involved in agricultural businesses. The impact of climate change can be already seen in a lot of countries. It reduces the productivity of the land reducing the amount of food and quantity of production (Deshar, 2013; Bowles et al., 2018). So, if the social worker and the necessary group of individuals could map out and identify the risk area and risk group, the government, respective NGOs and community-based organizations can work together in helping the older people fight the problems created by environmental disasters.

### **Advocating and Making Resilient Livelihoods**

Environmental risk because of climate change brings catastrophes that are difficult for people to recover from. Sea level rise affecting the coastal area of many countries poses severity in tsunami, typhoons, and cyclones. In these kinds of situations, older people are not able to escape these kinds of situations as quickly as the youth or young adult might be able to (Pyles, 2017). Social workers have seen advocating and working with the government to implement programs and training for better livelihoods (Pyles, 2017; Schmitz et al., 2012).

Social workers in Nepal can replicate the same strategies. They can help to shed light on the issues of environmental disasters and their impact on older people to the state, government offices, local authorities, municipalities, local groups, and CBOs (community-based organizations). Social Worker can advocate awareness of people in safe drinking water, hygiene, and safe sanitation. A social worker can give a session where they inform the people through pre-disaster training, educating people to be ready during times of disaster. Singh and Singh (2015) sheds light on some examples of how some older people should be given more priority because in countries like Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka some of them are living alone and don't have anyone who can help them or assist them in times of disasters. Similarly, there are already issues of food security, economic crisis, political instability, and conflict present in Nepal affecting the daily livelihood of the older people and when there are environmental disasters on top of that, the difficulties of these people are amplified (Adhikari, 2017; Deshar, 2013; Alston, 2015).

Older people who don't have any other source of income and only have agriculture for survival would face challenges when floods, change in the pattern of weather, precipitation patterns, hail storms, extreme weather events, and soil erosion affects their agriculture and animal husbandry (Deshar, 2013; Adhikari, 2017; Bhatta, 2020; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Poverty in these situations adds a significant amount of problems as many



people are also living in poverty which is the reason they are living in temporary shelters. The issues of food and water insecurities will affect a lot for people who don't have access to drinking water (Alston, 2015).

Sometimes the issues are bigger when there is no support group within the communities. The social worker can help in forming the help group among these kinds of settlements and risk groups. The help group could be inclusive of local authorities, community-based organizations, and activists from the community (Sharma, 2017). The social worker can help by telling the stories of these people and bringing them to the mainstream in the eyes of private institutions, corporates, media, and government officers. This will surely add some help to the people affected by environmental disasters (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017; Dominelli, 2014; Alston, 2015).

### **Reshaping the Policies and Practices**

Social Worker has a strong position and role in reshaping policies and practice in favor of service users. Dominelli (2014) explains well how the practices and policies can be changed in terms of creating cultural equalities and environmental justice. Similarly (Rambaree et al., 2019) highlights the importance and possibilities of Local and Global Linkages in helping the communities to fight the challenges of environmental disaster. So social workers in Nepal can play an important role at the local level as well as the global and national levels in reshaping the policies.

For example, in Nepal, People who don't have any entitlements to land are deprived of many human rights because of their inability to present identity. The government sector and local authorities do not allocate funding for these communities. In most cases, these are the communities that are prone to this disaster impact. In a situation where people don't have any land, it creates the situation of exclusion from the rest of the community increasing inequalities within that community. So social workers can help in raising the issues of Human Rights Violations of these people (Sanderson & Bruce, 2020). They

should be given the recognition, and other basic facilities of food, clothes, and shelter which they are not getting right now (Alston, 2015). They don't have access to drinking water, electricity, proper drainage to the sewage system. Some of the children are not even allowed to enroll in education facilities (especially in the Terai and hilly region of Nepal where discrimination still prevails in terms of higher caste and lower caste).

Even in this scenario, older people specifically those who are living in slums, who are refugees or asylum seekers, who don't have any ownership to land and are part of squatter settlements are the one who is most affected (Sanderson & Bruce, 2020; Campanini & Lombard, 2018). The social worker can amplify their voice as part of the mainstream activist in the frontline areas. These are the issues of human rights violations and should be investigated very seriously and social work can advocate these situations and difficulties of older people. Certainly, social workers have some responsibility in this part of their practice and contribute to changing the policies. (Dominelli, 2014; Schmitz et al., 2012). Social workers have an important role to play in helping older people concerning environmental disasters (Levy et al., 2017; Boetto & Bell, 2015).

The practice of social work would be better if it is more connected to the local level in these kinds of problems (Nikku, 2011) The social worker can work with local authorities, local activists, youth groups, and CBOs to shed some light on them and be aware of them rather than being centralized in the organization in the capital and headquarters of the country, which is more in case of Nepal.

### **Recommendations**

Everyone should have access to environmental justice where one can enjoy the quality of life with safe living, environment, sanitation, and hygiene. But there are thousands of people living in disaster-prone areas. These show the

loophole in environmental justice in the practice for social workers (Schmitz et al., 2012).

There are settlements in disaster-prone areas which accommodate several numbers of older people. These settlements are oftentimes neglected by the government in regards to providing services and necessary survival support. Therefore, social work practice should provide the necessary support for the people living in areas that are prone to environmental impact. This support could be awareness, disaster preparedness materials distribution, resettlement in safe areas, and lobbying to the government.

There needs to be proper planning for mitigating the impact of environmental crises on older people living in disaster-prone areas in Nepal. Participation and service user involvement are critical parts in addressing the social problem. Many times the user is not involved in the planning phase which fails to identify the vulnerable group and assess the needs in the society. Participation and co-production in social work help to make the context assessment clearer, cultural context, and socio-political context. Designing is one of the major parts which has a high chance of making strong mitigating processes and plans (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017) suggest that it is necessary to understand and develop the concept of environmental social work practice depending upon the global-local context as culture and locality are different.

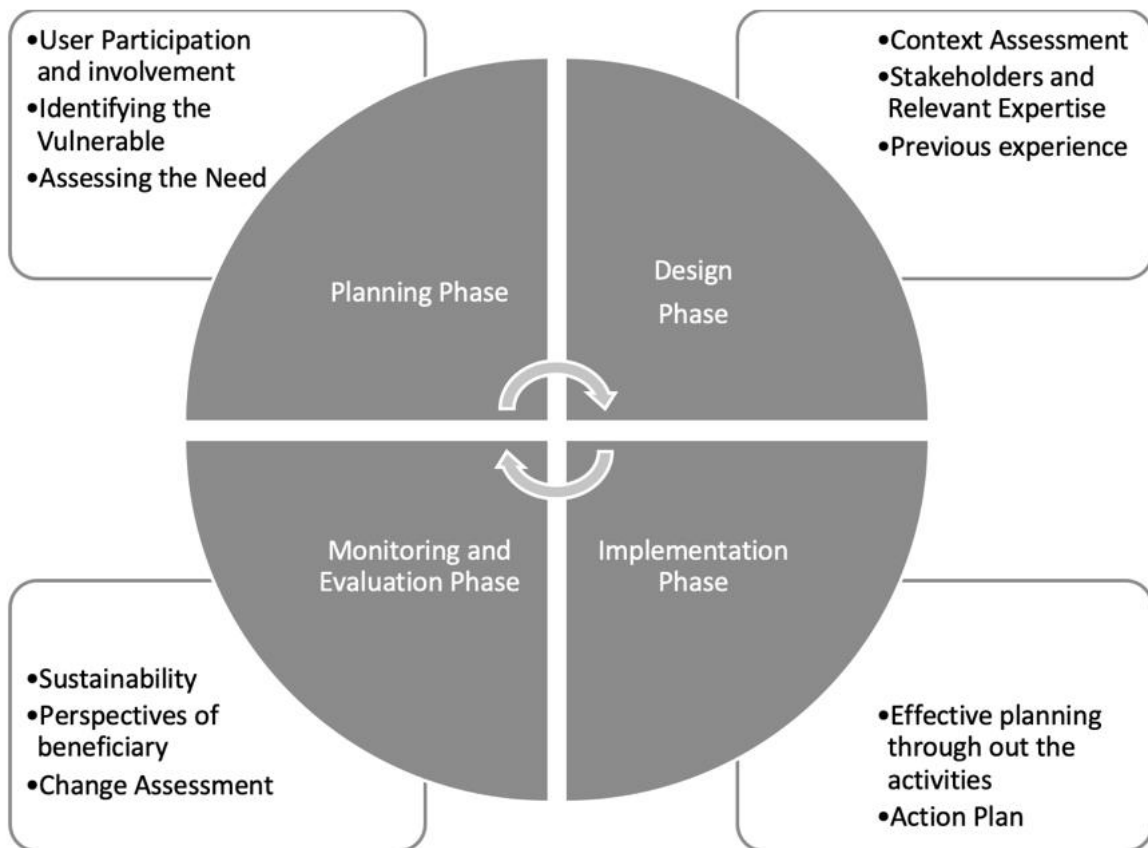


Figure 1: *Recommended Model for Mitigating Practice and Project for Environmental crises*

It is necessary to create resilient and equal societies where everyone has access to resources and basic human rights. Therefore, effective planning throughout the mitigating process should be clearly defined with an Action Plan. This will help to make the project more efficient, effective, and budget-friendly. Monitoring and evaluation will play a significant role in highlighting the relevance and sustainability of the project. Change assessment is necessary for any practice of mitigation as social work stands on the principles of social justice and one needs to identify the change, assess if the justice has been done and if the older people are adopting, mitigating well (Rambaree, 2020).

The social worker can contribute a lot and provide significant help to government and respected NGOs by identifying the most vulnerable older

people who are at higher risk. The proper planning, designing, and implementation will create a sustainable project, plan, and resiliency among the community. This co-production can also play a significant role in helping the vulnerable group, as a whole, such as older people, children, and youth in raising awareness, communicating necessary information regarding environmental disasters, and linking them with the society (creating inclusive collaboration and unity in the community).

Similarly, in-country such as Nepal where the profession of social work itself is not licensed or professionally recognized, not regulated by the government, the social worker can still add a lot to reshape/ influence the policies, advocate for human rights, or help in amplifying the needy and vulnerable voices to reach the human rights agencies and improve in contemporary social work practice in Nepal.

### **Conclusions**

This paper has tried to highlight the relation of environmental disasters, climate change, and their effects on vulnerable people, particularly older people living in disaster-prone areas. It also presented how social work can work to make people resilient and help older people who are more vulnerable (Zelenev, 2016). Climate change has already shown the evidence of calamities happening worldwide both in the global south and global north affecting older people and children more with the extreme weather events such as drought, bushfires, flash floods, storms, and alteration of precipitation (Schmitz et al., 2012; Bowles et al., 2018).

In this kind of situation, Eco-Social Work/Environmental Social work acknowledges and recognizes the connections of living beings and their connection to the ecosystem. Eco-social work/Green Social Work share the common concepts in one of the aspects of people's values, beliefs, acts, and ways of life that are always correlated to the societal and environmental impact. These situations being worse or better are very much determined by

socio-economic and political structures and the dynamic of both community and society. Social work has a significant role in helping service users for fighting these impacts from environmental crises.

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