

### Introduction

#### The Background

The world is facing an environmental crisis caused by human activity, and its consequences disproportionately impact vulnerable populations in which social work professionals serve (Schibli, 2020; IFSW, 2021). Global action and awareness have been steadily increasing, and in 1979 the first *World Climate Conference* took place (UNFCCC, 2021). The *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* was introduced in 1988, followed by the *United Nations Framework on Climate Change* in 1994 then the *Kyoto Protocol* in 1997 (UNFCCC, 2021), and in 2015 the *United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* were adopted. In 2018, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) introduced their Climate Justice Program, which aims to “educate”, “advocate”, and “be the change we wish to see in the world” through climate justice projects in several countries (IFSW, 2021). In 2020 the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) released a statement emphasizing the severity of the issue, stating that “Climate change is one of the most significant problems facing the world today” (Schibli, 2020, p. 3).

#### The study

The school of social work at MacEwan University (Canada) has a mandatory course titled Social Work and Sustainability that is part of their Bachelor of Social Work program launched on Fall 2016. Based on the assumption that these social work students once they graduated, they were exposed to readings, lectures, assignments, and discussions about sustainability which we assume contributed to develop a knowledge about topics related to environment and climate change. Therefore, this study is interested about how these social workers are incorporating sustainability related ideas into their social work daily practices. Moreover, are there social work practice fields they found more favorable to sustainability related ideas than others? Do they encounter some encouragement, barriers, or challenges?

#### The main objectives

- to identify the development and utilization of environmental sustainability into social work practice
- to fill a gap of knowledge production that exists between sustainability knowledge and its impact in social work everyday practice
- to highlight social work practice fields favorable to sustainability knowledge

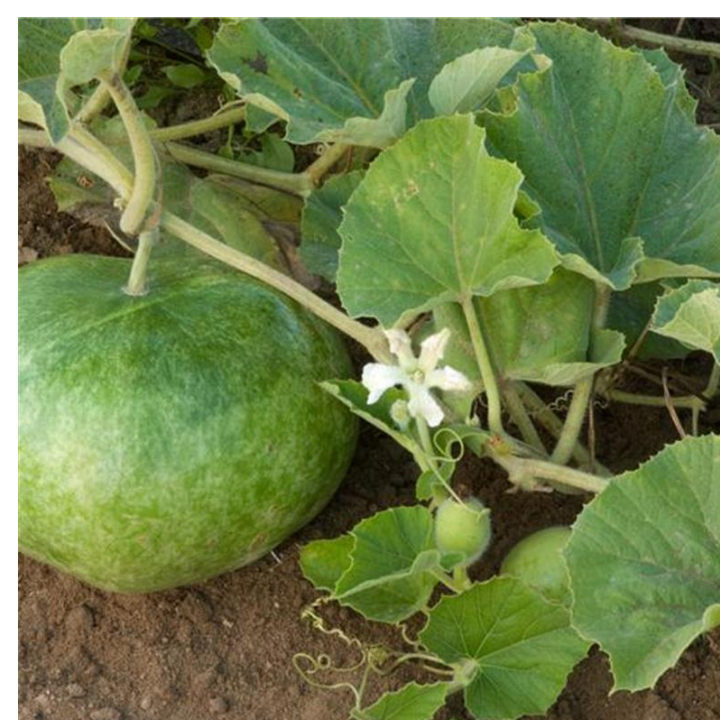
#### The research questions

- In what ways social workers who were exposed to knowledge of sustainability during their academic curriculum are implementing it into their social work practice?
- Does this exposure to sustainability knowledge contribute to emphasis Environmental sustainability into their everyday practice?

#### The participants

Our participants were MacEwan School of Social Work bachelor's degree program alumni cohort of 2016 to 2019 who took the mandatory course titled 'Social Work and Sustainability' during their social work curriculum. They responded to the following three inclusion criteria:

- from the cohorts of Fall 2016-2019
- professionally active in the social work field as part or full time
- looking for a job in the social work field



Photograph 1. Calabash fruit.  
<https://www.burkinatourism.com/La-calebasse.html>

### Methods

#### The theoretical background

Ecosocial theory (Norton, 2012):

- Explains the interrelationship between sustainability and social work theories and practices.
- Defines ecosocial approach as an anti-oppressive model of social work that views environmental sustainability as the core of sustainability topics
- Aligns with *critical theory* which provides both philosophy and methods for approaching our study as explicit manifestation of connecting theory and actions (Patton, 2015)

#### The methodology

- Overall study followed a qualitative research approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018)
- Data collection occurred via two methodologies: an open-ended questionnaire (Flick, 2011) using Google Form and online focus group discussions (Edmunds, 1999) using WebEX.
- Data analysis: textual data, questionnaires and transcribed focus group, are analysed using Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and content analysis (Birks & Mills, 2011; Mayring, 2000)

### Results

#### Participants

- Number: 15 participants
- Professionally active: 11 active in social work fields and 4 were looking for a job in social work fields
- Age ranged: 20 to 40 years old
- Gender/Sex: 8 participants identified with she/her, 3 participants identified as male, and 4 participants didn't provide any information

#### Definitions of Environmental Sustainability

- Environmental Sustainability is associated with Nature, Earth, and Resources
- The relationship of Environmental Sustainability to Social Work Education and Practice with Social Work's Helping function to heal harm, to promote equilibrium, to prioritize thinking opportunity of environments in connection with micro and macro levels of social work practice.

**“For me, environmental sustainability is related to social work in that we are trying to help heal harm and leave with the least amount of damage possible. This can be applied to both our work with people and our role within the environments we belong” (Participant 9).**

#### Barriers to implement sustainability in social work daily practice

##### Participants overall viewed

- Eurocentric, Capitalist Neoliberal and Neoconservative ideals as challenges. These ideals that cause difficulties to implement sustainable framework according to participants are also influencing Social Work Education and Practice
- Focus on basic needs and safety in daily practice as the sources of real roadblocks

**“We are so focused on basic needs and safety that the ability to think and work from a sustainable framework seems incredibly unreachable” (Participant 3)**

##### Following are other barriers:

- Low awareness
- Resistance from co-workers
- Agencies' resistance
- Lack of confidence
- Shortage of research about sustainability
- Limited visual and theoretical materials at workplaces



Photograph 2. Calabash bowls.  
<https://www.burkinatourism.com/La-calebasse.html>

#### Social Work practice fields favorable to incorporate sustainability

Participants identified the work with

- Individuals, children, and families are favorable
- Community work (planning, development, participation) as the most favorable field
- Policy and political lobby work as the core fields to enact environmental sustainability

**“While individuals reconnecting with the natural environment is undoubtedly important, those who work at a policy level and can lobby politicians into making massive regulatory changes in favour of environmental sustainability can then influence great change overall” (Participant 11).**

### Conclusions

**“That is a newer concept and consulting about it with managers and supervisors isn't as easy as other theories and values because it isn't as widespread of a concept. Sometimes when you are so focused on the person, you can forget about their environment and so I have to work on actively reminding myself. Hopefully this can be something that comes naturally with time” (Participant 10).**

Environmental Sustainability in Social Work is about a true professional readiness to transform the field, reframe academia, and integrate sustainability concepts, policy work, and assessments in daily practice until it becomes natural.



Photograph 3. Carved elephant using calabash.  
<https://www.burkinatourism.com/La-calebasse.html>

#### References

- Birks, M. & Mills, J. (2011). *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage Publications
- Creswell, J.W., & Poth, C. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Dewane, C.J. (2011). Environmentalism and Social Work: The Ultimate Social Justice Issue. *Social Work Today*, 11(5), 20-23
- Edmunds, H. (1999). *The Focus Group Research Handbook*. NTC Contemporary Publishing Group, Inc.
- Flick, U. (2011). *Introducing Research Methodology. A Beginner's Guide to Doing a Research Project*. SAGE.
- International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). (2021). IFSW *Climate justice program*.  
<https://www.ifsw.org/social-work-action/climate-justice-program/>
- Kuhlman, T., Farrington, J. (2010). What is Sustainability? *Sustainability*, 2(11), 3436-3448
- Mayring, Philipp (2000). Qualitative Content Analysis [28 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(2), Art. 20, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0002204>.
- Norton, C. L. (2012). Social work and the environment: An ecosocial approach. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 21(3), 299-308.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. SAGE.
- Schibli, K. (2020). *Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Climate Change and Social Work*.  
[https://www.casw-acts.ca/files/documents/SW\\_and\\_Climate\\_Change\\_Final\\_PDF.pdf](https://www.casw-acts.ca/files/documents/SW_and_Climate_Change_Final_PDF.pdf)
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Sage Publications.
- Tourisme au Burkina Faso [Tourism in Burkina Faso] (n.d.). Calabash fruit [photograph 1].  
<https://www.burkinatourism.com/La-calebasse.html>
- Tourisme au Burkina Faso [Tourism in Burkina Faso] (n.d.). Calabash bowls [photograph 2].  
<https://www.burkinatourism.com/La-calebasse.html>
- Tourisme au Burkina Faso [Tourism in Burkina Faso] (n.d.). Carved elephant using calabash [photograph 3].  
<https://www.burkinatourism.com/La-calebasse.html>
- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). (2021). *History of the convention*.  
<https://unfccc.int/process/the-convention/history-of-the-convention#eq-1>

#### Acknowledgements

This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the MacEwan University Research Ethics Board on June 22, 2020; renewed June 11, 2021. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the Board at 780-633-3274 or [REB@macewan.ca](mailto:REB@macewan.ca). Any questions regarding the study may be addressed to Primary Investigator Dr. Somnoma Valerie Ouedraogo ([ouedraogov@macewan.ca](mailto:ouedraogov@macewan.ca)).

This study has been funded by MacEwan University Internal Project Grant 2020-2021

Three undergraduate MacEwan University Students have been involved in and mentored as Research Assistants through all the phases of this research