Article

Re-Configuring Social Work, Indigenous Strategies and Sustainability in Remote Communities: Is Eco-Social Work a Workable Paradigm?

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Abstract

Adverse climate events are increasingly challenging the health and wellbeing of communities. The intersections of indigenous knowledge and sustainable development, through an eco-social work perspective, are least developed0 in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The challenging socio-ecological environment is compounded by limited infrastructure, which hinders the delivery of social services in remote communities. Drawing on cumulative research evidence and regional case studies across Africa, this conceptual article examines the key elements of an eco-social work paradigm and the potential challenges of its implementation. Drawing on intersectional approaches, this paper proposes practical strategies for integrating eco-social work dimensions into problem-solving to address the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 1 (No Poverty) and Goal 13 (Climate Action). Social work practice should be anchored in an indigenous epistemology and research governance, informed by insights from higher education institutions, local communities, the context of practice, and partnerships with the state, to ensure regulatory oversight and interprofessional collaboration. Contextualised outcomes to build community-level resilience, and development practitioners who are up-skilled and able to conduct needs-led ecological assessments are essential. Such co-created interventions and collaborative strategies would effectively address poverty and climate change in vulnerable, remote communities. Further empirical research on the interpretation of indigenous knowledge and the role of eco-social workers within interprofessional collaboration is essential for formulating an indigenous epistemology and ecological wellbeing policy, thereby strengthening community-level resilience and sustainability.

Keywords: ecological; eco-social work; ecosystem; paradigm; indigenous epistemology; intersectionality; sustainability; remote

1. Introduction

Adverse climate events are increasingly undermining the health and wellbeing of communities. It is acknowledged that eco-social work is a unique paradigm that seeks to obtain a holistic view of human health, social justice, and environmental sustainability [1]. Although most of the population in the African region lives in rural areas where poverty and deprivation persist, rural social work remains a neglected field of practice [2]. Whilst there are propositions regarding the trajectory of social work education in Africa [2–6], most of the arguments have centred upon the gaps in formulating an Afro-centric social work education and practice context [2,5,7,8]. Regional specificities have been highlighted

across SSA in relation to the Ubuntu philosophy [6]. Social work in Africa is engaged in finding pathways to respond to complex, multidimensional social issues. The genesis of these contemporary challenges has its roots in colonialism and its legacy [3]. There is a need to re-configure the curriculum amid adverse climate events and environmental challenges that impact the ecology and wellbeing of people. Alongside a philosophical and advocated rethinking of social work education, green social work is advocated as a pathway for fostering sustainable practices within communities [9,10]. This conceptual paper departs from these esteemed positions to lay the groundwork for how eco-social work can be effectively implemented in SSA regions, alongside the full integration of indigenous knowledge into the practical context, to ensure sustainability.

A critical lens is required for the knowledge base that informs, shapes, and guides social work education and practice. Equally relevant are the indigenisation and diversification of perspectives on knowledge and other culturally relevant responses that are valued and centred within academia, education, and practice [11]. Social work practitioners and academics, in their roles as advocates for the marginalised and the poor, are therefore duty-bound to act to ensure a sustainable environment for both people and the planet [12–14]. Through a robust appraisal of the current literature and coverage of regional case studies across the SSA, this conceptual paper explores how indigenous approaches inform an eco-social work paradigm and how rural social work can be modelled to promote sustainability in remote communities of the global South. Key research and case studies on social work education have encompassed the differences in indigenous knowledge across various regions of SSA [3–7,15]. Focusing on the proposed eco-social work paradigm, this paper examines the merits, gaps, and challenges of its implementation, along with the strategies envisioned to address SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), which impact livelihoods in remote communities where services are in short supply.

In their review of the social work curriculum, Tadesse and Obeng [7] noted that the curriculum was lacking regarding concepts such as an eco-social approach, the natural environment, and ecology. They observe that the eco-social approach is an emerging paradigm that recognises the interconnectivity of ecological, economic, and social drivers of (un)sustainability. This approach requires a holistic worldview, redirecting attention from an anthropocentric-centred worldview to an ecologically positioned one. It is asserted that adopting an environmental–ecological social work (ESW) approach is crucial for improving the social and ecological wellbeing of rural communities [13], particularly in the Global South, where poverty, livelihood challenges, and diminished state support for service provision are compounded [16]. Furthermore, interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches to promoting sustainable development are critical for navigating social–ecological issues caused by the global environmental crisis [13,14,17].

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an overarching framework for protecting the natural environment, reducing poverty and inequality, and promoting health, prosperity, and justice [18]. Sustainable development activities aim to reconcile the goal of environmental sustainability with the continued impact on humans and their social, economic, and cultural wellbeing [19]. Additionally, remote communities are affected by a range of factors, including social and ecological stressors, which disrupt local engagement and community-mindeness. Some communities are traumatised by conflict [2], necessitating a social justice ecosystem approach [16]. This profound shift in current social work practice recognises the relevance of a culturally responsive social work curricula, moving from individual, collective, and community perspectives, and embracing new approaches to ecological wellbeing [20]. This notion aligns with the IFSW, which advocates for the role of social workers in advancing a new eco-social world [21].

Strengthening the relationship between people and the natural environment is crucial for promoting eco-social work [22].

This paper sheds light on an intersecting eco-social work approach, centred on key elements such as curriculum upgrades, future-proofing the curriculum through an indigenous epistemology, the training and deployment of eco-social workers, implementing climate change policies and action at the local and state levels, and involving higher education institutions and research centres/institutes. Fundamentally, the paper provides a conceptual analysis and reflection on the key intersecting elements of an eco-social work paradigm, whilst exploring indigenous strategies and their impact on sustainability. A workable eco-social work paradigm requires full consideration of contextual realities, ecosystem challenges, specific cultural and ecological needs, and the options for sustainability.

1.1. Eco-Social Work and Intersectional Perspectives

As a concept, eco-social work (ESW) is a combination of holistic, community-based, indigenous, and global perspectives; it elucidates the interconnected nature of social, environmental, and economic issues [20]. As an evolving concept, ESW is an area of knowledge and social work practice that emphasises the nexus between human and ecological wellbeing [13,22,23]. It is distinct from the typical approaches in social work, which primarily focus on the socio-cultural and institutional aspects of human wellbeing. The ESW broadens the conceptualisation of wellbeing to include the ecological environment [14]. Human wellbeing is affected by environmental climate change, and human activities inevitably impact the ecological environment.

Thus, ESW involves working with people to create and maintain a healthy, sustainable, and biodiverse ecosystem for all living organisms [23]. Intersectionality theory sheds light on the pathways, levels, and power dynamics of social and ecological perspectives, specifically how social, economic, and political forces make individuals and communities vulnerable to social–ecological change, which limits their access to resources for adaptation and their ability to participate in institutions [9,24,25]. Strong links have been established between bio-social research and the eco-social perspective, and how contextual factors shape human development and health [26]. Within this paper, intersectionality is conceptualised as the interconnecting parameters/pillars that are necessary for effective eco-social work practice, as envisioned in the intersectional eco-social work paradigm (Figure 1).

In alignment with the SDGs, ESW is underpinned by inequalities caused by the unfair distribution of environmental resources and risks [27], adopting an ecologically centred understanding of fairness and equity [10]. From a political ecology lens, a structural approach to ESW recognises the interplay between individuals and the broader social and political systems that cause disadvantages and unequal power relationships [22,28]. Whilst ESW represents a paradigm shift in concurrently nurturing human and ecological wellbeing, it has been criticised for its lack of practical realisation [29] and for continually prioritising human needs over ecological needs [17]. An ecological social work approach emphasises the importance of considering the relationship between social work and the natural environment [28,30]. Therefore, social work skills and methods can be applied to formulate a response to environmental changes, enabling social work to actively promote general societal change toward sustainability [23,30]. The eco-social perspective offers a much broader view, conveying the interconnections and relationships between health and wellbeing, which are linked to contextual realities and necessitate an indigenous practice approach.
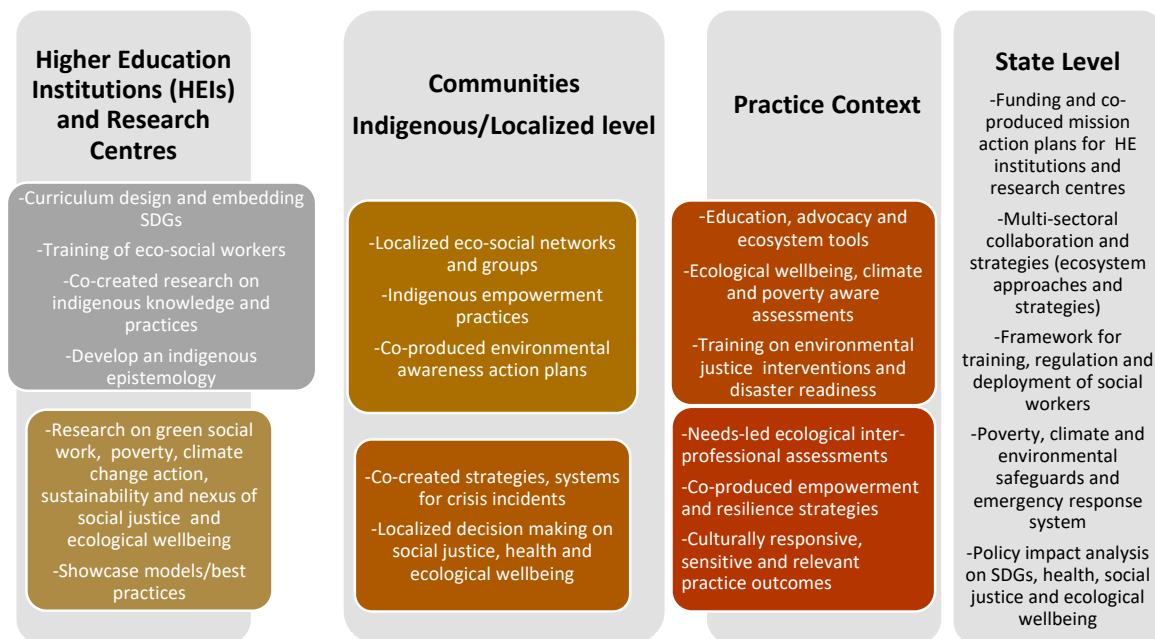
Figure 1. An intersectional eco-social work paradigm. Source: Author's conception assembled from research evidence.

1.2. Towards an Indigenous Eco-Social Work Practice Approach

The eco-social perspective emphasises the critical importance of strengthening connections between humans and nature. It serves as a potent reminder to social workers of their essential duty to understand the larger ecosystems that encompass their work [31]. Coates [32] compellingly advocates for a transformative paradigm in social work practice, one that is firmly anchored in a global consciousness that recognises and values the interconnectedness of all things. He asserts that social work must actively "nurture the development of a personal and collective global consciousness by supporting people in their transformation and providing opportunities for individuals to critique and understand their personal stories and relationships in light of their understanding of wholeness and creativity" [32]. This paper advances this perspective by clearly outlining pathways for an eco-social work approach, rooted in indigenous knowledge and an ecosystem policy. It highlights indigenous perspectives in the delivery of social services and underscores the vital role of social workers in remote communities.

Besthorn and Canda [31] argued that the person/environment construct is central to both the professional identity of social work and its ability to contribute to human wellbeing. Therefore, it is important to revisit this connection in the context of contemporary ecological changes. Proponents of the transformative eco-social work practice approach [29] advocate for a collaborative model. The model involves researchers and social workers from various practice specialities and contexts working together as co-inquirers to plan, implement, and evaluate eco-social work interventions. Boetto's [13] study highlighted the importance of practitioner involvement in interventions at the personal, individual, group, and organisational levels, being mindful of community specificities, and their broader social and political systems.

Given the growing number of service users facing environmental injustices, the social work profession must remain committed to tackling social and ecological injustices [13,21]. There are two distinct streams of thought: one views the 'ecological' and 'environment' as mere extensions of traditional socio-cultural perspectives; the other seeks a deeper, transformative approach to ecological change [9]. Within this paper, the term 'eco-social work' is used to describe a transformative strategy that prioritises both human needs and

their interactions with ecological systems. This perspective fosters an understanding of the earth as a holistic entity [9,14,29,30], warranting a more nuanced and contextualised approach to ecological and social perspectives, informed by indigenous knowledge. The potential of indigenous approaches and the practical dilemmas of framing an eco-social work strategy require unpicking.

1.3. Framing Eco-Social Work Through Indigenous Approaches

The connections between social work and environmental issues are clearly articulated by Alston [33]. Humans are considered the epicentre of all ecosystems, a perspective known as anthropocentrism. These ecosystem challenges prevent people from achieving spiritual, psychological, and social fulfilment, which leads to feelings of disconnection and isolation [33]. It is evident that environmental issues challenge social work's understanding of society and hinder the recognition that social and ecological justice are closely inter-connected [12]. Environmental social work in Africa, as conceptualised by Mushunje and Matsika [4], encompasses a range of strategies and methods employed by social workers to address social issues and promote sustainable development. While the environment can provide a solution to social problems through enhanced livelihoods, this exploitation must occur in a sustainable manner. However, they argue that the environment can also pose social challenges through the over-exploitation of natural resources such as trees, plants, fossils, and animals, which can lead to disrupted livelihoods. When livelihoods are disrupted, social workers face even greater difficulties in providing the necessary support, which is often in short supply.

Indigenous approaches and knowledge are essential for integrating the eco-social work paradigm. The core principles of the Ubuntu philosophy [6], which emphasise the concept of "I am because we are," [34], alongside notions of intersectionality, align closely with the rationale of this paper. Indigenous approaches are rooted in traditional knowledge, passed down through generations, and shaped by experiences and interactions with the environment. This approach is grounded in the Ubuntu philosophy, which promotes the interconnectedness of human relationships with nature, emphasising the importance of food security, climate change mitigation, and sustainable development, all of which are connected to eco-spiritual social work [6,11].

The foundational premise of Ubuntu—respect for indigenous knowledge systems—has been emphasised in the Global Social Work and Social Development Agendas for 2020–2030 [6]. It underscores the need to indigenise the social work profession by in-corporating Ubuntu principles—a prerequisite for promoting social and community development. A fundamental principle requires social workers to be culturally sensitive, competent and responsive to understanding ecological wellbeing and how individuals inter-act with their environment. Environmental social work, viewed through the lens of Ubuntu, connects health and wellbeing from an intersecting perspective. As Chigangaidze [11] suggests, this connection involves behavioural studies, such as how food injustice can lead to maladaptive behaviours, environmental sciences, clinical social work (including the therapeutic role of animals and nature), and disaster management. The principles of Ubuntu philosophy are broadly applicable within the African region and beyond. A comprehensive review and robust appraisal of the compatibility of Ubuntu philosophy and its relevance in social work education in Africa have been undertaken by Mugumbate et al. (2024) [6]. There are differences in indigenous knowledge and contextual realities across various regions of sub-Saharan Africa. This paper argues that the unique perspectives in every area should be factored into ecological social work strategies, as envisioned within the intersectional paradigm.

The intersectional paradigm lays the foundation for the progressive consideration and integration of environmental and social perspectives. For effective eco-social work strategies, understanding parallels and differences in approaches can lead to issues of regional collaboration and adaptation. This conceptual paper is not without its limitations; one major limitation is the lack of empirical data, which could add fresher insights to inform future research and policy directions across sub-Saharan Africa. However, this paper offers a foundational praxis and much broader view, envisaged within the pillars and parameters of intersectionality. Consequently, there is scope for each region to adapt this paradigm to its own eco-social perspectives, thereby avoiding a 'homogenised' interpretation of what constitutes an indigenous epistemology. It is therefore necessary to unpick the constituents of a workable paradigm.

2. Is Eco-Social Work a Workable Paradigm?

From a conceptual perspective, it is evident that eco-social work provides a valuable framework for social workers to promote sustainability in remote communities [13,14]. The relevance of integrating eco-social work in Africa aligns with views espoused by Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai [35], who notes that, in sub-Saharan Africa, approximately 100 million people are food-insecure. In such conditions, development is likely to stagnate, leading to a vicious cycle of poverty, poor health, and chronic hunger, which hampers productivity and progress. Unfortunately, farmers receive little compensation for their crops, and payments are often delayed, resulting in many families experiencing hunger and malnutrition. Most of the food produced in Africa comes from women and children, who perform the labour-intensive work on small farms focused on cash crops. Despite this, women's contributions to food production are undervalued, and female farmers are not adequately compensated for their efforts. Additionally, governments tend to overlook the importance of food production for household consumption [35].

The African Union (AU) Agenda 2063 outlines seven aspirations, one of which emphasises the establishment of environmentally sustainable, climate-resilient economies and communities [36]. For the AU, this environmental approach is not simply an alternative to development; rather, it aims to integrate economic growth with ecological sustainability, human wellbeing, and socially inclusive progress. This integration is essential for mitigating the risks associated with environmental degradation [36]. A proposed framework for implementing an eco-social work paradigm is provided below. The framework is designed to be progressive, grounded in theoretical deduction and an emergent literature review.

The proposed paradigm (Figure 1) considers the main pillars and parameters encompassing the social and ecological perspectives in a progressive manner. The main pillars are higher education institutions, communities, practice contexts, and the state. This paradigm provides pathways and foundational ideas for understanding the interconnections between social and ecological perspectives, which are critical in enhancing the health and wellbeing of populations in remote and marginalised communities. There is a dynamic interplay between social and environmental factors, and multi-stakeholder collaborations are vital in locating the factors that sustain or impede social service delivery. The formulation of policies and workable ecological social work strategies should be informed by an indigenous epistemology that is contextualised and adaptable to regional specificities. In addition, the paradigm incorporates the complexities, challenges, and expected outcomes of multi-stakeholders. References [5,7] has noted fundamental challenges, centred around the absence of an eco-social work curriculum and the lack of regulation of professional practice. Most HEIs in the Global South do not offer social work degree courses and programmes as an autonomous, single course unit. Universities have a duty to be socio-

ecologically minded when curating indigenous knowledge and practices for sustainable development [37].

As indicated in the framework, the collaboration expected from the state in providing this constitutes a significant impediment. Without a functioning social work course, it is not very easy to contemplate a paradigm shift through curriculum development. In addition, the regulation of social work as a profession is lacking, which makes it difficult for the profession to fulfil its practice-based mandate, as stipulated by the IFSW [21].

Moreover, there are significant gaps in inter-professional collaboration, which is particularly relevant in terms of needs-led assessments, planning interventions, and linkages with various government agencies. This collaboration is critical for an implementable ecosystem approach and requires streamlining. Interprofessional collaboration with allied health professionals and other development practitioners is often in short supply. Veta and McLaughlin [5] identified the key challenges: gaps in practical social work education and practice across Africa, including remedial or curative orientation a lack of regulation, the need for a proper coordinating body, the involvement of non-social work graduates in social work tasks, and dependency on extrapolated curricula and Western methods and theories that do not fit the local context. In their study in Ghana, with a more established social work curriculum, Ref. [8] note that for social work education in Africa to flourish, there is a need to embrace indigenous African practices and values of spirituality, collectivity, interconnectedness, and reciprocity.

Greater attention is required to unravel the nexus between social work and social and community development, which would enable social work practices to better address sustainable development concerns. Within the expected collaboration between social workers and other professionals, there is a dearth of inter-professional collaboration. Research elsewhere [1,3,9–11] has shown that social workers, particularly in remote communities, struggle to provide tailored support for the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, battling with poverty and other forms of inequality.

It is arduous for social workers to address the SDGs, specifically SDGs 1 and 13, without streamlined and effective collaboration with other professionals. Even in countries like Ghana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Kenya, and Uganda, with a well-established curriculum, there are concerns regarding the regulation of social work practice; Schiller [38] observed that social workers in South Africa faced diverse challenges, including a lack of facilities and social work practices being obstructed by complex bureaucratic processes. Similarly, institutional barriers are reported by Veta [39] in their study of medical social workers in Ilorin, Nigeria. Social workers must be trained and knowledgeable on the practicalities of an eco-social work paradigm. The case has been clearly made that including environmental social work education within social work curricula could promote sustainable development through social work practice [14,24]. Through curriculum redesign and training, social workers would have the necessary tools for community engagement and consciousness-raising to devise and deliver workable solutions fashioned out of an indigenous epistemology (Figure 1). To avoid the pitfalls of a homogenised interpretation of indigenous knowledge, which indigenous principles and epistemologies are appropriate for each country and region, informed by its contextual realities, should be determined, and a streamlined role should be established for multi-stakeholders, which can pose challenges. As detailed in the proposed intersectional eco-social work paradigm, there are practical dilemmas when implementing indigenous approaches to ensure sustainability.

3. Challenges of Implementation and Sustainability

The research indicates that embedding an eco-social work curriculum in the Global South faces several challenges. These challenges are closely linked to an inconsistent

ontology, epistemology, and methodology [7]. Other scholars argue that there an ecosystem approach is lacking, primarily due to inadequate governance concerning environmental awareness and funding deficits in social work education and service delivery, which significantly contribute to unsustainability [4,16].

Adopting an eco-social work approach and embracing a paradigm shift to an indigenous perspective is essential for sustainable development in SSA. This paradigm shift could further promote the decolonization of professional knowledge, support the indigenization of social work education, and enhance Africa's commitment to sustainable development [11]. As Levy and Okoye [3] suggest, there is a pressing need to re-imagine social work education in Africa, foster innovative thinking, and provide empirical research to guide and shape new directions. This re-imagining requires shifts in social work education and the need to co-create an indigenous, culturally relevant social work curricula, generated from indigenous knowledges and independent of Western theorization and models [15,40,41].

Despite the strong support for social service delivery found in African communal values, particularly through the concepts of Ubuntu [6,34], and the social solidarity orchestrated through community organisations and village self-help initiatives [42], there is a pressing need to integrate these values and ethics into a redesigned curriculum. This integration aims to promote the eco-social work agenda and facilitate a paradigm shift in addressing the fallout of environmental degradation and its impact on health and wellbeing. The foundational philosophy and norms that emphasise environmental responsibilities, rooted in a symbiotic relationship with nature, must align with the evolving field of eco-social work and its relevance to African social work [3,11]. Furthermore, the language used in inquiry, instruction, and dissemination should be ethically aware, validating indigenous and traditional practices [40] in environmental education and anchored in indigenous climate change action at local levels.

Social workers need to collaborate closely with communities to address climate change and devise strategies for poverty alleviation. This collaboration may involve family-based and informal arrangements, empowering communities to take ownership of problem-solving initiatives. As previously mentioned, the Ubuntu philosophy, deeply embedded in African culture, among other cultures [6], offers a framework for profound interconnectedness [43]. It represents "humanness" [44] and embodies the belief in a universal bond of sharing that unites all people, which should be embedded in the curriculum to ensure ecological sustainability.

Ecological social work emphasises the importance of acknowledging indigenous wisdom, with Ubuntu offering valuable insights that can help reshape our worldview [6,45]. Social workers must be aware of the challenges posed by climate change and other adverse events, as these significantly impact individual livelihoods and sustainability. Social workers need to recognise the interconnectedness of humanity and the natural environment. This perspective is featured in Boetto's [20] transformative eco-social model for social work, which advocates for a fundamental shift within social work, moving from an anthropocentric viewpoint to an ecologically centred approach. This approach emphasises conservation, degrowth, diversity, sustainability, spirituality, and restoration. Additionally, the model incorporates elements of ecological literacy, ecological justice, indigenous perspectives, ecofeminism, power relations, and environmental justice, while also encouraging a rethinking of the concept of wellbeing.

4. Conclusions and the Way Forward

This conceptual paper has laid the foundational praxis for a progressive consideration of ecological and social perspectives, and their integration into social work education and

practice in SSA. The conclusion section summarises the theoretical contributions, policy implications, and research limitations.

1. The proposed intersectional paradigm offers a 'scaffolded approach' to embedding eco-social work. One of its major responsibilities is the creation of social work programmes and ability to offer greater credence for their professionalisation. Social workers and other practitioners play a critical role in unpacking the interconnections between social and ecological perspectives, with ramifications for the health and wellbeing of communities. As highlighted throughout, the effects of poverty, exacerbated by climate change and environmental degradation, are increasingly evident. An eco-social work curriculum and revamped practice contexts have implications for the livelihoods of the most vulnerable, marginalised, and impoverished communities.

2. Even in regions with well-established social work programmes, social workers are increasingly challenged by the lack of continuing professional development opportunities and regulatory oversight. The state, being a major pillar, has a paramount responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of service users through the provision of relevant infrastructure. This concern is particularly acute, aggravated by the lack of an indigenously driven and engaging curricula on environmental education. As highlighted in the proposed intersectional paradigm, there is a pressing need for collaborative relationships among the state, higher education institutions, communities, social workers, allied health professionals and development practitioners in re-designing the curriculum and in the evolving practice contexts.

3. This paper advocates for reconfiguration, grounded in an explicit eco-social work paradigm that considers individual wellbeing alongside ecological sustainability. The evidence suggests that climate change and environmental degradation pose an existential threat not only to community cohesion, but also to livelihoods in remote communities. Alongside the state and other practitioners, social workers have the obligatory duty, as advocates, to respond to these crises. To do this effectively, an indigenous epistemology is imperative, as envisioned in the intersectional paradigm.

4. This praxis would provide a deeper understanding of indigenous knowledge, and how this can shape sustainability. Social workers are expected to be knowledgeable of the economic, political, and institutional power structures that create disparities and inequalities.

5. The practice contexts are a central pillar of this, and an eco-social work paradigm shift offers a clear mandate for rural social work practice to effectively address poverty and climate change. This is essential for developing more just and sustainable futures, especially in remote communities of the global South. This conceptual paper argues that a paradigm shift is necessary to enable communities to be effectively supported in addressing their health and wellbeing challenges.

6. Although valuable insights are provided, this paper is not without limitations. Further empirical research evidence and data are required to test the applicability and impact of the main pillars of the paradigm in terms of their regional representativeness and replicability. Additional research is needed for each region in SSA to determine which indigenous epistemology can be deployed based on the contextual realities and underlying principles, value base, and ethics. It would be beneficial to conduct further research on the practice context and the role of eco-social workers to better understand their role within the context of interprofessional collaboration. Globally, there is an urgent need to confront the adverse effects of ecological challenges. This intersectional paradigm offers an opportunity to formulate an ecological wellbeing policy to strengthen community-level resilience and sustainability.

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