

COMPARATIVE SOCIAL WORK ETHICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

by

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Abstract

Author chose the topic of environmental justice for study for the purpose of increasing awareness to ignite conversations about the topic and provide linkage to social work social justice discussions. The research presented in this thesis highlights the inclusion of environmental justice in global social work codes of ethics. Furthermore, the research will serve to ignite a global conversation about social work and environmental justice. Social work is a profession that focuses on people and their environments. This is represented in ethical standards, where the common goal is to promote human well-being and social progress. This thesis emphasizes the need for environmental justice statements throughout social work foundational guidelines, through addressing gaps in current accreditation standards.

Introduction

The research problem that will be discussed is the absence of environmental justice in social work codes of ethics on an international level. Author surveyed the social work professional codes of ethics of 50 countries in order evaluate inclusion of environmental justice in the examined codes. Methodology includes an assessment of 50 social work code of ethics from countries in which a professional social work code of ethics is publicly available on the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) website, whether or not they include mention of environment justice, and if environmental justice is mentioned, to what extent it is mentioned. Background literature used in the thesis process includes surveyed countries' social work codes of ethics. Author also includes implications and recommendations for the field of social work.

Environmental Justice

Environmental justice is defined as, “the equitable treatment of all individuals and their meaningful involvement in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies, regardless of race, color, national origin, or level of income” (U.S Environmental Protection Agency, 2023, para. 1). Inclusion of environmental justice in social work codes of ethics is vital, because, from a social work perspective, environmental justice is an essential element of practice, as it is a part of the broader perspective (Hutchison, 2017). Promotion of the general welfare of society from local to global levels in communities and environments is one of the ethical responsibilities of social workers to the broader society (NASW, 2021). Thus, social work is inherently tied to environmental justice. Additionally, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2021) Code of Ethics, the United States professional social work professional organization document, states that, “Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the

resources, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully” (para. 1). Social workers should be conscious of the effect of politics on practice and should fight for policy and legislative changes to better social circumstances, to satisfy fundamental human requirements and support social justice.

Social Work Codes of Ethics

Professional ethics are central to social work, and the profession has an obligation to define its fundamental beliefs, ethical principles, and standards for practice (SLASOW, 2016). A social work code of ethics is a collection of guidelines for ethical social work activity. For example, in the United States, the National Association of Social Workers (2021) Code of Ethics establishes ideals, principles, and standards to direct the behavior of social workers, and applies to all social workers and social work students, independent of their job duties, work settings, or populations served. Social workers employ ethics toward achieving social, racial, economic, and environmental equity in their practice because they are aware that ethics is influenced by human rights principles (CSWE, 2022). Social work codes of ethics are a fundamental part of social work education and direct practice. With this in mind, the author chose to survey multiple countries’ social work codes of ethics to show accessibility or inaccessibility of guidelines for promotion of environmental justice.

Council on Social Work Education and Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is the official organization in the United States that accredits university-level schools of social work and social work departments. CSWE (2022) promotes high-quality social work education and offers chances for professional growth, empowering social workers to play a key part in achieving the profession's objectives of social and economic justice.

Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) are used by the CSWE to accredit baccalaureate and master's level social work schools, thereby promoting academic success by setting professional social work competence benchmarks. CSWE (2022) acknowledges the importance of environmental justice in EPAS Competency 2. Specifically, this competency states that, “social workers advocate for human rights at the individual, family, group, organizational, and community system levels; and engage in practices that advance human rights to promote social, racial, economic, and environmental justice” (p. 9). Additionally, CSWE EPAS Competency 3 mentions understanding of diversity and intersectionality and how it influences human experiences, as well as impacts equality and inclusion. It is imperative that at the very least, the NASW Code of Ethics and the CSWE EPAS competencies reflect the same ethical guidelines, thus imparting similar expectations of schools of social work, emerging professionals and those already in the field. This goal guides the research presented in this paper.

[International Federation of Social Workers](#)

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is the social work profession's worldwide professional organization. Through the promotion of best practices in social work and participation in international collaboration, the Federation and its national members aim for social equity, human rights, and inclusive, sustainable social development (IFSW, 2018).

The IFSW (2018) global definition of social work includes the core mandate that, “Social change initiatives recognize the place of human agency in advancing human rights and economic, environmental, and social justice” (para. 1). Furthermore, IFSW principles suggest that a major focus of social work is to advocate for people's rights at all levels, as well as to facilitate outcomes in which people take responsibility for each other's well-being and recognize and respect the interdependence of people and the environment (IFSW, 2018).

Literature Review

This is not a comprehensive literature review. The author chose to explore five professional social work journal articles, to examine professional social work research in the area of environmental justice, internationally. Patterns that come to light in the literature are scarcity of environmental justice in social work education, person-in-environment (PIE) perspective, and importance of environmental lens in all social work practice settings.

The literature implies that social work students can be encouraged to think about how ecological or environmental paradigms might influence daily practice, as well as the larger goal of social work as a social justice profession, just as they are asked to engage with fundamental social work theories, like strengths-based or anti-oppressive approaches (Boddy, 2018). One of the main goals of efforts to develop a more solid conceptual framework for an environmentally focused social work practice is the development of an ecological framework that emphasizes developing the person-environment relationship to address all aspects of social work intervention (Naranjo, 2020). Because of implemented frameworks of environmental focus, social work scholars now consider natural environments to be regions of worry, because they have broadened their conception of what the term "environment" implies (Higham, 2020).

The environment is subject to the same social disparities that affect society as a whole, with low-income areas, indigenous communities, and communities of color most affected by pollution, climate change, hazardous waste disposal, and resource loss (Gum, 2022). The iniquitous effect of environmental degradation on people, especially marginalized populations, is nothing short of social injustice (Shajahan, 2018). The global social work profession has not given environmental problems the necessary focus they need, leading to a lack of social justice.

Author of this research intends to add to previous literature by emphasizing gaps within social work education concerning environmental justice.

Methodology

At the start of the research process, author participated in an education abroad experience that included a Comparative Ethics course that compared the NASW Code of Ethics to the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) Code of Ethics, as well an independent study project which allowed author to examine the social work codes of ethics of twenty countries with regard to inclusion of environmental justice in the professional documents. The author used the education abroad courses as a model for thesis framework, by raising the comparison of the professional social work organization codes to fifty, with specific reference to the author's topic of environmental justice and its definition as deemed by the EPA. Author initially selected 20 countries participating in the IFSW at random for survey of their social work organizational codes, until discovering the dearth of accessibility in social work codes of ethics on the IFSW website. In discovering the availability of code literature available on the IFSW website, author chose to survey the remaining 30 social work codes of ethics from those available on the IFSW website. This thesis reflects a sample of countries' participating in the IFSW and their social work ethics codes found on the IFSW website.

IFSW Website

All surveyed countries' code of ethics were taken from the IFSW website. Countries participating in the IFSW are broken up into regions: Latin America and Caribbean, North America, Europe, Asia and Pacific, and Africa. Surveyed social work codes were taken from all regions of the IFSW. As author conducted research, notice was made towards the exclusivity of

social work codes in certain regions of the IFSW, specifically noting the Latin American & Caribbean regions, where only two social work codes were accessible.

Google Translate

As some social work codes of ethics were only available in their original language on the IFSW site, the author used Google Translate (2023) for the translation to English for assessment. Google Translate was the only translation program used for research. In noting its sole usage, the author states that language output from the Google Translate program has potential to not fully describe derived texts from codes with complete accuracy.

Findings

To track mention or no mention of environmental justice within social work codes surveyed, author created a spreadsheet to document findings (refer to Appendix A). The spreadsheet reflects derived text from each social work code surveyed with mention of environmental justice, in relation to the EPA definition. Columns reflect an abbreviation for each evaluated country and represent each country's inclusion or lack of inclusion of environmental justice in that country's code. Rows represent one environmental justice quote per row/per country or N/A for no mention of environmental justice in the code.

To provide a visual of surveyed countries and findings, author created a color-coded world map of surveyed countries reflecting mention or no mention of environmental justice in said social work code. This map portrays the author's assessment of social work codes regarding mention or no mention of environmental justice in selected countries' social work codes. The legend refers to green color-coded countries as having mention of environmental justice in that country's social work ethics code and red as no mention of environmental justice in that

country's social work code. Countries that were not surveyed are color coded as grey. The map was created through the program mapchart.net.

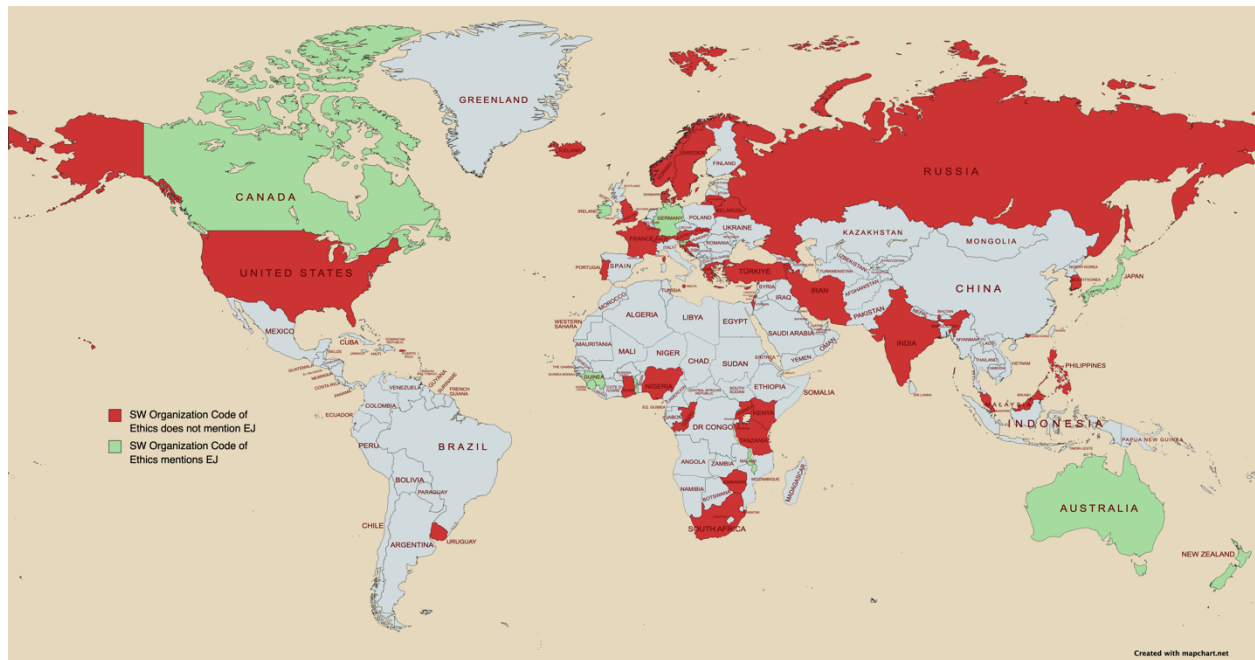


Figure 1.1- Environmental Justice Code of Ethics World Map

To provide an overview of findings, author created a pie chart supplying percentages of mention or no mention of environmental justice in surveyed countries' social work codes. The legend uses green to refer to surveyed countries' social work code that have mention of environmental justice and red to surveyed codes that have no mention of environmental justice. Chart was created using Excel.

Additionally, author provides an Excel-generated bar graph which reflects regional differences of codes available through the IFSW website, to provide a visual of IFSW regional breakup and the dearth of code information on the IFSW website. Author includes Figure 1.3 to provide visual of IFSW regional breakup and solidify the statement of lack of code literature for some regions, available on the IFSW website.

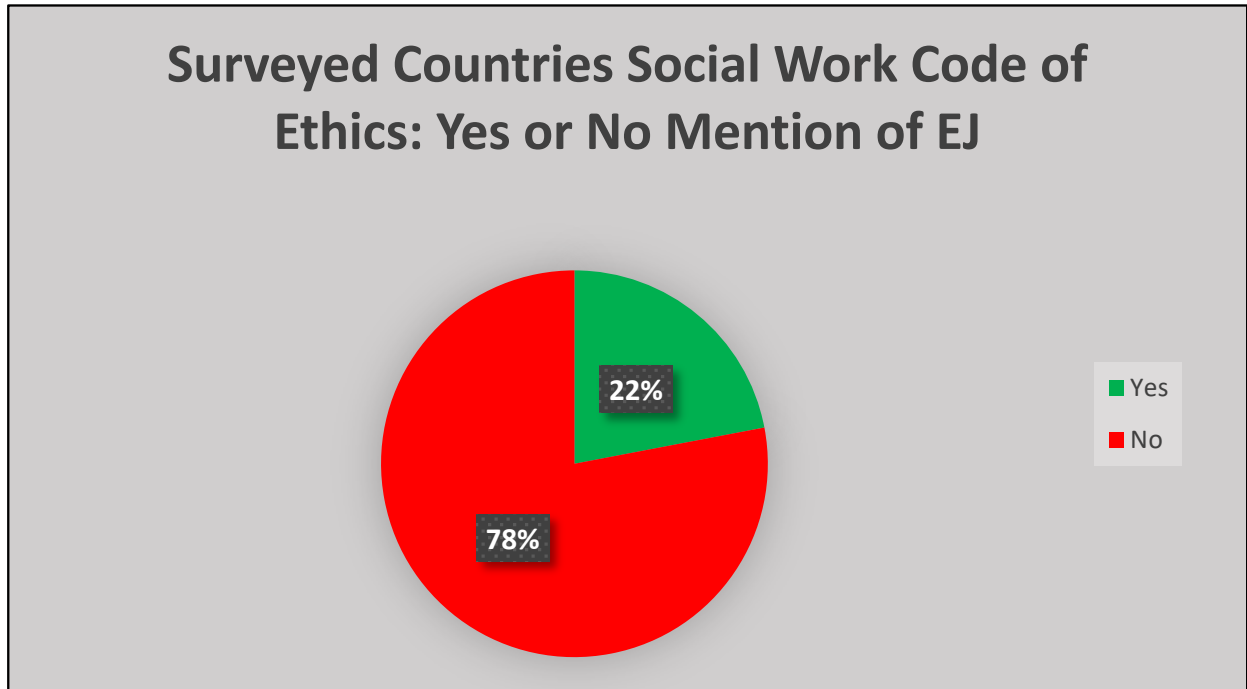


Figure 1.2 – Percentage of Findings

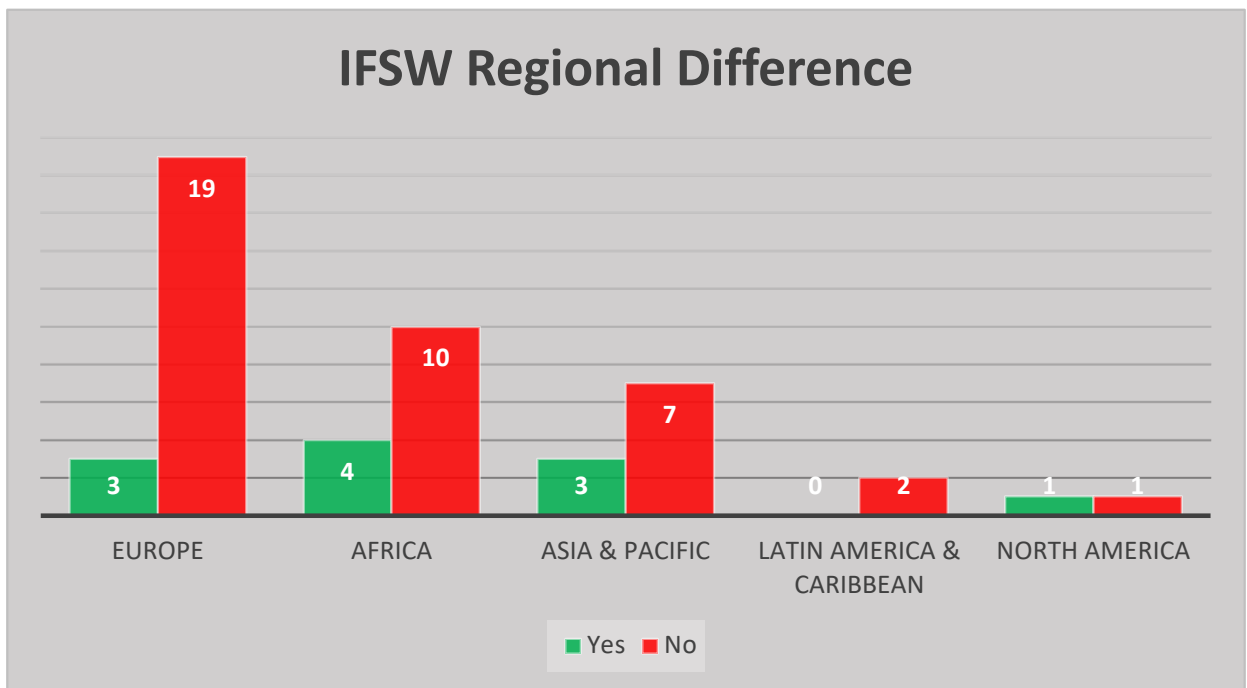


Figure 1.3 - IFSW Regional Findings

Of all the surveyed countries' social work codes, only 11 out of the 50 countries had mention of environmental justice in relation to the Environmental Protection Agency definition.

In other words, 22% of surveyed codes had mention of environmental justice fully, while 78% did not (refer to Figure 1.2). Of those that mentioned environmental justice, care and protection of the natural environment as well as intersectionality of individuals and their living environment was a common pattern seen throughout. In assessing findings, author discovered an interesting finding of two social work codes in the IFSW Africa region having the same derived text for their environmental justice statement in their codes, leading author to believe that collaboration has already been made in the IFSW Africa region regarding environmental justice. In reviewing findings, author encourages readers to pay particular focus to how environmental justice statements supplied demonstrate social workers' obligation to ensure environmental justice.

Limitations - Regional Difference

As stated earlier, this survey is limited to fifty countries and does not represent all countries with a professional social work presence, nor does it reflect all countries with a professional social work code of ethics. Author recognizes the limitations of this study and notes that the countries represented in the spreadsheet in Appendix A are taken from a sample of available social work codes of ethics from the IFSW website and are not intended to be used as a measure for which regions have made strides towards promotion of environmental justice or not. The fact that environmental justice is included in the Codes surveyed does not imply that social workers in other nations are not having environmental justice discussions. It might simply reflect that professional social work groups have not yet formalized these debates and decided to revise guidelines to specifically incorporate environmental justice.

Recommendations

Because environmental justice is a crucial component of practice from a social work viewpoint, it is essential that it be included in social work codes of ethics. EPAS (2022)

Competency 2 states, “Social workers critically evaluate the distribution of power and privilege in society in order to promote social, racial, economic, and environmental justice by reducing inequities and ensuring dignity and respect for all.” (p. 9). The Environmental Protection Agency’s (2023) definition of environmental justice shows relation to Competency 2 being defined as, “the equitable treatment of all individuals and their meaningful involvement in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies, regardless of race, color, national origin, or level of income” (para. 1). Including mention of environmental justice in social work codes of ethics gives future and current social work practitioners the opportunity to professionally mature in an ever-growing field.

Environmental justice is inextricably linked to social justice and the ethical responsibilities of social workers to promote the welfare of society at all levels. By not including environmental justice in professional social work codes, attention is taken away from populations experiencing environmental injustice through missed intervention. Author suggests continued research in this area to include not just surveys of countries’ code of ethics found on the IFSW website, but an extensive search for codes of countries that do not belong to the IFSW.

[Environmental Justice Statement](#)

The author recommends that every country’s professional social work codes of ethics, as well as that of the IFSW, should include an environmental justice statement, specifically tailored to their environment. Author provides examples of environmental justice statements, taken from assessment, that they feel are most relevant to the topic of environmental justice and ensuring social justice below.

“A social worker develops responsibility towards the natural environment, because he is aware of the diverse importance of nature for man, so he does not abandon the contribution he makes to the goals social work can contribute to ensuring a quality living space for everyone.”

- Taken from Slovenia Social Work Code of Ethics

(SDDS, 2021)

Author chose to include the Slovenia social work code as a model, because of its emphasis on the obligation of the social work practitioner. However, this quote relies on a gender binary and the author suggests the quote be expanded to include all peoples and all genders within the profession and within the global environment.

“Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice.”

- Taken from Malawi, Africa, and Sierra Leone West Africa

Social Work Code of Ethics

(ASWIM, 2019; SLASOW, 2016)

Author chose to include Malawi, Africa and Sierra Leone, West Africa social work codes as a model, because the exact quotes from these two codes leads the author to believe these two

countries have already begun collaboration around this topic; a practice the author recommends for greater global cohesion surrounding the topic of environmental justice.

“MATATOA – We promote social development, environmental well-being, sustainability and justice, and care and protection of the natural world.”

- Taken from New Zealand Social Work Code of Ethics

(ANZASW, 2019)

The New Zealand social work ethics code includes model language for environment justice, because of its specific use of indigenous language, thus recognizing the contributions and importance of first nations when addressing environmental justice.

Cultural Competence

Considering cultural competency, author acknowledges that proposed quote(s) are not the only applicable environmental justice statements and that statements must be modified to take into account cultural, social, ethical, gender, spiritual, diversity, tribal, and other unique elements of individuals’ lives, as well as community history and experiences. Author also recognizes suggestions may not work for every group, but rather supply a stepping stone, so that organizations may tailor these statements to their own environments.

In relation to cultural competence, it is crucial that countries highlight the fact that Indigenous populations have fought against instances of environmental injustice for many years and thus promoted environmental justice from a cultural and often spiritual perspective. Uniquely, the New Zealand Association of Social Work’s Code of Ethics includes mention of Environmental Justice in relation to the indigenous population of their land. The New Zealand

social work code includes the indigenous language of the Māori people, the indigenous population of mainland New Zealand, to describe their values and ethical principles.

Conclusion

A social work code of ethics is a fundamental guide used for the education and implementation of social work practice. Social workers have to follow their code of ethics to demonstrate ethical practice with clients. Leaving out mention of environmental justice in codes, creates a constraint in professional guidelines of the social work profession. In order to ensure fair treatment and meaningful participation of all people in the development and implementation of environmental law, regulations, and policies, environmental justice is essential to the practice of social work. Social work codes of ethics must include environmental justice, because promoting social welfare, from individual to global levels, is the responsibility of social workers (NASW, 2021).

The author's survey of comparative social work ethics in this thesis displays a deficit of environmental justice in foundational social work literature. Without guidelines set for ethical social work intervention concerning environmental equity, practitioners are left without direction in serving client populations experiencing environmental injustices. As a global profession with obligation to serve the broader society, the social work must bring higher standards in acknowledging the importance of environmental justice.

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Appendix A

Social Work Codes of Ethics Surveyed with Derived Text of Environmental Justice or N/A

US	CAN	GB	AUS	IND	IRE	NZ	CH	GH	DK
N/A	“8.5 Advocate for the Environment 8.5.1 Social workers endeavor to advocate for a clean and healthy environment and advocate for the development of environmental strategies consistent with social work principles and practices”.	N/A	“1.2 social work action embraces advocacy and policy reform...access to social, economic, environmental and political resources... 2.2 promotes the protection of the natural environment as inherent to social wellbeing 4.2 recognises the impact of the environment on the physical and mental health and wellbeing of people and its fundamental importance to the future of human society.”	N/A	“That the climate emergency on the world is significant and urgent, and particularly its impact on the lives of social work service users. The social environment is part of the wider natural environment where the relationship between humans and all other species and the planet are mutually interdependent. IASW supports and stands in solidarity with its social work colleagues and service users in Ireland and around the world in their efforts to work to address the devastating effects of climate change.”	“MATATOA - Ethical Principle - We promote social development, environmental well-being, sustainability and justice, and care and protection of the natural world.”	N/A	N/A	N/A

KR	PH	SA	NORW	SE	DE	BYS	RU	SK	TUR
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	<p>“49. At the same time, new economic and ecological concerns became increasingly apparent in a growing...in which the problem of environmental and sustainability perspective as well as fair justice in a globalized world between generations...</p> <p>63. Funding opportunities in the systems and environmental conditions...</p> <p>3.69 on the basic needs or funding opportunities in the facilities and environmental conditions.”</p>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

NG	CG	IS	MY	FR	SI	KE	IL	MWI	SL
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	24. A social worker develops responsibility towards the natural environment, because he is aware of the diverse importance of nature for man, so he does not abandon the contribution he makes to the goals social work can contribute to ensuring a quality living space for everyone.	N/A	N/A	9.1 Social Welfare Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice.	6.01 Social welfare - Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their committees, and their environments, social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice.

UG	TO	UY	BI	ZI	HR	PT	ARM	LT	CY
N/A	<p>8. Ethical Responsibilities to Society The social worker advocates for change in the best interest of his clients and in the interest of society, the environment and the global community.</p> <p>8.5.1 The social worker strives to advocate for a clean and healthy environment, and for the development environmental strategies consistent with social work principles and practices.</p>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

PR	GN	IR	JP	AT	GR	HK	TZA	MT	SG
N/A	8.0 Ethical Responsibilities to Society The social worker advocates for change in the best interest of his clients and in the general interest of society, the environment and the global community. -8.5 Action in favor of the environment -8.5.1 The social worker endeavors to advocate for a clean and healthy environment, and for the development of environmental strategies corresponding to the principles and practices of the service social.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

(NASW, 2021; CASW, 2005; BASW, 2021; AASW, 2020; NAPSWI, 2015; IASW, 2020; ANZASW, 2019; APSTS, 2010; GASOW, N.D.; DK, 2006; KASW, 2012; PASWI, 2022; NASWSA, 2017; OF, 2015; SSR, 2015; DBSH, 2014; BASW, 2019; USESW, 2003; SCSW, 2015; TASW, 2004; NASoW, 1982; ANTS-RC, N.D.; ISW, 2023; MASW, 2014; ANAS, 2019; SDDS, 2021; KISD, 2023; USW, 2007; ASWiM, 2019; SLASOW, 2016; NASWU, 2012; PDS, 2004; ADASU, 2001; NASWA-BURUNDI, 2015; ZSW, 2012; HUSR, 2014; APSS, 2019; AASW, 2015; LSDA, 2017; CASW, 2004; CPTSPR, 2017; AGTS, 2004; IASW, 1978; JFSW, 2020; OBDS, 2015; HASW, 2017; HKSWA, 2013; MASW, 2018; SASW, 2017)