



Lena Dominelli

# GREEN SOCIAL WORK

From Environmental Crises to Environmental Justice

# **Table of Contents**

**Cover**

**Title page**

**Copyright page**

**Dedication**

**Acknowledgements**

**1 Introduction**

**Setting the Scene**

**The Structure of the Book**

**2 A Professional Crisis within Social and Environmental Calamities**

**Introduction**

**A Profession in Turmoil**

**The New Challenges Facing the Profession**

**Fiscal, Social and Environmental Crises**

**Urbanization and Slum Clearances**

**Conclusions**

**3 Reclaiming Industrialization and Urbanization for People**

**Introduction**

**Urbanization, a Defining Feature of Industrial Capitalism**

**Developing Alternatives to and within Centralized Urbanization**

**Conclusions**

## **4 Industrial Pollution, Environmental Degradation and People's Resilience**

**Introduction**

**Reconceptualizing Resilience**

**Industrial Pollution and Accidents**

**Chemical Pollutants and Radioactive Gas Escapes**

**Caring for the Carers in Disaster Situations**

**Guidelines for a Virtual Helpline Support**

**Network in Disaster Situations: The**

**Christchurch Example**

**Social Worker Involvement in Industrial Pollution and Environmental Degradation**

**Issues**

**Conclusions**

## **5 Climate Change, Renewable Energy and Solving Social Problems**

**Introduction**

**Climate Change**

**The Polluter-Victim Binary**

**Climate Change Endeavours Led by the United Nations**



**Environmental Justice**  
**Social Work Action on Climate Change**  
**Risk Reduction**  
**Conclusions**

## **6 Environmental Crises, Social Conflict and Mass Migrations**

**Introduction**  
**The Impact of Environmental Crises on People's Movements**  
**Migration as a Response to Social, Economic and Environmental Crises**  
**Environmental Degradation and Food Production**  
**Conclusions**

## **7 Environmental Degradation, Natural Disasters and Marginalization**

**Introduction**  
**Exploring Marginalization and Social Exclusion**  
**Sustainable Development**  
**Coping with the Demands of a Growing World Population**  
**'Natural' Disasters are Aggravated by Human Actions**  
**Conclusions**

## **8 Scarce Natural Resources and Inter-Country Conflict Resolution**

**Introduction**

**Scarce Resources and the Dynamics of Place and Space**

**Social Workers' Involvement in Situations of Resource Scarcity**

**Conclusions**

## **9 Interrogating Worldviews: From Unsustainable to Sustainable Ways of Reframing Peoples' Relationships to Living Environments**

**Introduction**

**Indigenous Worldviews**

**Indigenous Peoples' Struggles for Land and Self-Determination**

**A First Nations Environmental Assessment Framework**

**Conclusions**

## **10 Conclusions: Green Social Work**

**Introduction**

**Developing Holistic, Sustainable Practices Working for a Sustainable, Interdependent and Healthy Planet that Nurtures All Peoples and Their Environments**

**Building Capacity in Communities**

**Conclusions**

***Bibliography***

***Author index***

***Subject index***

# **Green Social Work**

From Environmental Crises  
to Environmental Justice

Lena Dominelli

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*Dedicated to my mother, Maria G Dominelli and to my great  
friend, Katherine A Kendall*

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physical and natural scientists to show that the world can become a better place if the disciplinary divide in the sciences can be overcome and we work together.

Lena Dominelli

# ***1***

## ***Introduction***

### **Setting the Scene**

Environmental crises and their impact on diverse populations across the globe have challenged social work practice at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century not only by the frequency of their occurrence, but also by their complexity and the substantial damage caused to the Earth's physical environment and well-being of the countless numbers of people, animals and plants living in it. Those linked to natural hazards such as the 2010 earthquakes that occurred in Haiti, Chile and Christchurch and the 2011 earthquakes in Christchurch and Japan, the latter of which also encompassed multiple hazards caused by a tsunami and radioactive leakages, have overwhelmed the helping services by the magnitude of the damage caused. They have also highlighted the linkages between human behaviours, economic imperatives and social policies and the extent of suffering experienced by victim-survivors. For example, corruption among the elites of Haiti, the inability to observe building regulations in Chile, and corporate secrecy in Japan meant that the damage was more extensive than it need have been and that emergency responses were hampered by the lack of information, infrastructures and resources vital for dealing with these catastrophes. Poor women, children and men bear the brunt of these failures. Victim-survivors' experiences demand transformations in the conceptualization of and responses to disasters, as does caring for the environment. Social



workers, as the professionals responsible for safeguarding human well-being must rise to the challenges posed by this state of affairs.

While social workers have provided humanitarian assistance and counselling services to those on the ground, their voice has scarcely been heard in the media. Additionally, it is absent from many of the decision-making structures formulating policy for preventing large-scale devastation in the future, and addressing needs during calamitous events and afterwards. Social workers' lack of involvement is not unexpected. Their tasks involve supporting those requiring assistance. But they rarely have time to engage with the wider issues of practice, including the development of social policies that draw lessons from micro-level practice and affirmation of their expertise when other professionals extending their roles seek to appropriate it. The profession has a wide-ranging remit, but social workers have played a minor role in deliberations about the deleterious impact of environmental disasters on people's well-being, in local communities and globally.

Except for community workers, those intervening in deprived localities with poor housing stock have seldom taken action to raise consciousness about the appalling physical surroundings in which service users or clients live. Social workers might advocate for a family needing a new home to protect children suffering from respiratory ailments caused by damp, mouldy housing, but, unless they are community workers, they would not engage in collective action to repair or replace decrepit properties in an entire estate. Their voice has been virtually absent from climate change discussions. Yet, they work in different communities in the aftermath of environmental disasters, whether these are caused by climate change, nature, or industrial accidents like the one that occurred in Bhopal, India, or conflicts between populations like those happening in the

slums of Nairobi in Kenya. In the latter, refugees escaping the loss of grazing lands through droughts that had destroyed traditional lifestyles became embroiled in tense confrontations with existing slum dwellers.

This book contributes to filling the gap in the literature caused by the shortage of publications that specifically address environmental issues from a social work perspective, advocating for and strengthening the voice of social workers who support people during disasters at policy-making and practice levels, however and wherever these take place. There are a limited number of texts that address what has been termed environmental social work and ecological social work. I focus on what I call *green social work* because I want to produce a book that transcends the concerns of ecological social work, which is a systems-based approach to the mainstream social work preoccupation with the person in their environment, usually defined as their social environment (Van Wormer and Besthorn, 2011), e.g., Gill and Jack (2003). Such writings tend to ignore power relations based on geo-political social structures that have a deleterious impact upon the quality of life of poor and marginalized populations and the Earth's flora and fauna. They also fail to endorse action that could secure the changes necessary for enhancing the well-being of both human beings and the planet, I argue that green social work focuses on how responses to environmental crises must both challenge and address poverty, structural inequalities, socio-economic disparities, industrialization processes, consumption patterns, diverse contexts, global interdependencies and limited natural resources.

Given the profession's embeddedness in life-enhancing micro-practice in everyday routines, I argue that contemporary social work has a vested interest in attending to environmental issues as an integral part of its daily remit if it is to retain its currency in contemporary societies,

emphasize its relevance to the social issues that peoples have to resolve in the twenty-first century and widen its scope if it is to prevent the haemorrhaging of its activities to related professions including health, geography, psychology and psychiatry. Additionally, practice has to engage with both local and global contexts to develop those that are locality-specific and culturally relevant and that engage with global interdependencies within and between countries. This goal configures the environment as a socially constructed meaningful discursive space that encompasses physical and material realities, socio-economic, political and cultural structures, and spiritual and emotional places that come together in one whole as the space in which individuals breathe their lives symbolically, in real and imaginary time.

I suggest that poverty is a constant, on-going disaster in its own right and not simply an additional factor to be considered in determining individual vulnerability to disasters. This sense of it is not adequately conceptualized in the existing literature. I connect this wider, structural notion of poverty to social justice claims that contemporary citizenship is denied to low-income people who cannot overcome poverty or participate in market-based solutions to social problems, including climate change. Nor can these groups afford to purchase new, renewable 'green' technologies that will enable individuals to procure energy-saving devices. In exploring these issues, I examine the interests of multinational corporations, material consumerism, the unequal distribution of resources, and population movements that are undermining attempts to conserve energy and reduce the exhaustion of natural resources, ranging from land to fuels, from minerals to air. And I link the resolution of these matters to community initiatives that social workers can engage in to ensure that the quality of life of poor people can be enhanced today and tomorrow without costing the Earth.

This strategy critiques the lack of resources associated with the cutbacks in public expenditures that are occurring throughout Western Europe, Canada and the USA as their rulers' search for solutions in the community, which they create as a responsible discursive space that assumes unlimited goodwill and regenerative self-help activities to cover the gap between what people need throughout the life course and what they can secure without state support or employment in well-paid, life-affirming jobs. The state attempts to wash its hands of its caring responsibilities. Now described as burdens, these are epitomised in the 'Big Society' ideas promoted by David Cameron in the UK. I focus on this particular example because it is instructive in exposing the sophisticated structure of the fig-leaf it represents by drawing upon society's potential to bring people together in self-help initiatives that might be useful in creating self-sufficient communities but hide the state's role in creating poverty, its indifference to people's personal suffering and its failure to control industrial barons and the financial sector and to create life-affirming and sustainable environments for people, plants and animals. The failure of states to govern for the entirety of their population, the planet's flora and fauna, and the material worlds that fall within their boundaries, exposes elite governmentality and loss of good governance that extends beyond the 'failed' states identified a few years ago by George W. Bush as President of the USA, and reveals a democratic deficit of the highest order that leaves citizens feeling disenfranchised, alienated and isolated from their rulers.

Moreover, I examine the formation of energy-sufficient communities that utilize self-help to access the new renewable technologies and reduce reliance on fossil fuels. In implementing such initiatives, community social workers can draw lessons from the skills of mobilization that middle-class communities display in creating more humane urban

environments for transferral where relevant in mobilizing working-class endeavours. Such skills can be acquired without condoning deficit models of poor communities or suggesting that they eschew their own identities and adopt middle-class lifestyles as often occurs in mainstream social work (Callahan et al., 2000). Additionally, I argue that social services must become an inclusive, universal service, not a residual and stigmatized one. High-quality social services for all, readily available and accessible at the point of need, are a human right and integral to realizing social justice claims to resources. In this book, I utilize case studies to integrate theory and practice around these concerns and indicate the importance of thinking holistically about these issues.

## **Locating a new discursive space**

Social work educators have written under the rubric of ecological or environmental social work. Their works include Van Wormer and Besthorn's (2011) *Human Behaviour and the Social Environment*; John Coates' (2003) *Ecology and Social Work*; and Gill and Jack's *Children and Families in Context*. These primarily reflect a systems approach to the social environment and an individual's place within it. They are less concerned with structural analyses of the social and economic developments that have destroyed both physical and human socio-cultural environments. They are not embedded in the social and physical elements of life for the purposes of changing existing socio-economic relations. There is a Global Alliance for Deep Ecological Social Work that includes authors such as Besthorn and Coates which has sought to enhance social workers' interest in the physical environment. Its impact has been limited, but it has organized several conferences to discuss these issues. Michael Ungar's (2002) article on environmental rights for marginalized groups and the formation of sustainable communities brings a deeper dimension into these debates

by highlighting the importance of human rights. Although he addresses social work issues, his work lacks the sweep of this particular book. Nor does Ungar utilize case studies that could encourage practitioners to work outside their usual boxes in bringing about a more sustainable, and socially and environmentally just, world.

My arguments also go beyond relevant works like Cahill and Fitzpatrick's (2002) edited book, *Environmental Issues and Social Welfare* which is not about social work practice as such. None of the authors in their edited collection is engaged in mainstream social work; nor do they cover practice. Another one, *Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy*, written by Brown and Garver (2009), helpfully critiques capitalist economic development particularly that of neoliberal economics, for destroying human well-being. But it has little to say about practice issues, including those of organizing residents to resist neoliberalism's destructive tenets and argue for more collective and interdependent approaches to the economy, as social workers do when supporting people in rebuilding their lives through alternative economic community models, many of which draw upon micro-finance and credit union initiatives that pool resources collectively. Kati Närhi (2004) considers structural inequalities in what she terms the 'eco-social approach in social work', but concentrates on a narrow range of ecological issues and a small area in Finland. The objectives in Nancy Mary's (2008) book are closer to mine, but these do not cover practice in a sustainable world, nor a critique of industrialization and consumerism as these influence practice interventions, and so has gaps that I consider. McKinnon (2008) highlights the relevance of the value base of social work in addressing ecological issues, while having a limited engagement with environmental matters. Given its scope and range, *Green Social Work* aims to break new ground.



This book engages with environmental and social justice issues in the contexts of eradicating structural inequalities by critiquing an industrialization model that caters for the needs of the few, in order to enhance humanity's and the planet's well-being. It is also embedded in a collective duty to care for, and be cared by, others. Being green in social work encapsulates a holistic approach that addresses both personal behaviour and the structural facets of social organization and marginality to argue for mutuality and solidarity in solving social problems that are rooted in an unequal distribution of: the Earth's resources; its technological innovations; and social provisions that can be employed to enhance human well-being. These have to be spread equitably across the globe while at the same time acknowledging interdependencies between peoples and other living things, and showing respect for the Earth's limited physical resources, its flora and fauna. The challenge for green social workers is that of working to enhance the quality of life for marginalized peoples today while also preserving the Earth's largesse for future generations. Embedding this in looking after the well-being of all individuals, animals and plants is crucial in developing alternatives to existing unequal social relations. Enhancing planetary well-being requires a diminution of consumerist lifestyles as typified by Western societies and burgeoning middle classes in emerging economies like India, China and Brazil; the development of new economic paradigms that take account of the needs of all stakeholders, not just those who want to make a profit from their investments; greater planning for projected growth in human populations; and the protection of a diverse biosphere and physical landscape.

*Green Social Work* also seeks to create a specific subject of study in an area that has been largely neglected in social work by focusing on the interaction between equality,

securing the well-being of people, animals and plants, and protecting their physical environments including the built environment that covers housing stock, power grids, transportation and communications infrastructures and the natural environment, including land, air, water, mineral resources and primary products within the context of environmental rights and social justice. The social and environmental justice dimensions of this topic bring marginalization, structural inequalities, human rights and active citizenship into the heart of the green social work agenda and call for the creation of new models of intervention within a framework of preserving Planet Earth. To achieve this, rethinking neoliberal capitalist relationships between peoples and their environments becomes unavoidable.

## **The rationale for green social work**

Social work as a profession has engaged in environmental issues and continues to do so, albeit in a limited rather than comprehensive manner. The intermediate treatment programmes extremely popular in the 1980s in the UK, which involved outdoor activities for diverting young offenders from prison, exemplify this. They encouraged personal growth in young people, and taught them skills in relating to other people and the physical environment. These endeavours declined in popularity when the tabloid press attacked them for being 'jollies' at the taxpayers' expense and the state responded by refusing to fund alternatives to prison like these. For example, in England, Mark Hook, who had a string of offences to his name, was dubbed 'Safari Boy' by the media after going on an 88-day character-building trip to Africa at the cost of £7,000. Soon after his return, he was imprisoned for nine months by a Gloucestershire County Court for burgling a house, stealing several items and driving a car without insurance after

absconding from the Bryn Melyn Centre in North Wales (Waterhouse, 1994). The media hysteria around 'Safari Boy' provided a crucial 'tipping point' in the discourses about intermediate treatment because young offenders like him committed further crimes after completing such programmes. Their reoffending undermined the programme's claim to change individual behaviour by building character and facilitating personal growth. By focusing on the young person's failures, the media and state conveniently ignored state failure in changing the lack of opportunities and conditions of deprivation prevailing in the communities to which young offenders were returned. Personal and structural changes have to occur together to support successful interventions in people's lives. This is a more constructive lesson to be drawn from this affair.

Green social work, as I define it, has holistic understandings about the various environments and their impact upon people's behaviour. Although utilized for therapeutic purposes, the environment is a socially constructed entity in and of itself, not a means to an end and should be respected as such, even when people use it to meet their own goals. I suggest that the failure in probation officers' involvement with 'Safari Boy' was in expecting a short outdoor experience in unknown territory to achieve their objectives of controlling and disciplining a young man rather than inculcating a sense of valuing himself and the environments that he already knew on a day-to-day basis, and understanding how these blocked his ability to realize his full potential and what needed to be changed in these, as well as in his behaviour, to secure enduring changes that would facilitate his becoming an active, valued member of society. Had they done so, this might have produced the self-confidence and trust in himself, others and the environment needed for real behavioural change to occur. People need a sense of place

and stake in society to respect and value the environment and others. Otherwise, alienation and a distancing of themselves from others will illicit further offending behaviour or social disorder. This lesson has relevance for what should happen to those sentenced for their participation in the 2011 summer riots in England or imprisoned for opposing the cuts in Greece.

I define 'green' social work as that part of practice that intervenes to protect the environment and enhance people's well-being by integrating the interdependencies between people and their socio-cultural, economic and physical environments, and among peoples within an egalitarian framework that addresses prevailing structural inequalities and unequal distribution of power and resources. Paying attention to these requires social workers to address the politics of identity and redistribution and not to treat the environment as a means to be exploited for people's ends. By being concerned with the politics of identity and the politics of redistribution, this book goes beyond the issues raised by the 'deep ecological approach' to social work, which focuses largely on the interaction between people and social and physical environments while viewing the latter as objects on which human beings act. I suggest that this continues to privilege people as separate objects and does not integrate all environments - physical, social, economic, political and cultural - within which people are embedded into a holistic social work practice that engages with and aims to change existing inegalitarian social relationships, power relations and resource distribution systems. In this sense, the social and physical environments are inter-related and interact with and impact upon each other. As I consider these elements, I examine the roles that social workers have played and can play in the key environmental issues of our time - environmental degradation; industrial pollution; over-consumption by the

few; climate change; migrations caused by natural disasters; and conflicts that will increasingly accompany peoples' competition for scarce natural resources like water, land and clean air. This includes exploring social workers' capacity to act as: advocates; mobilizers and organizers of people, communities and resources; lobbyists who can influence policy-makers; and therapeutic workers who can respond to individual distress. I then consider how social work practice can be transformed by encompassing a holistic 'green' agenda rooted in the interdependency of all peoples and their socio-cultural, economic and physical environments. I conduct my arguments as indicated in the chapter outlines below.

## **The Structure of the Book**

In chapter 2, I consider how poverty, a key social disaster, is accompanied by the lack of environmental rights, with poor people living in the most degraded social and physical environments and disproportionately subjected to industrial pollution and natural disasters. Poor people lack the financial wherewithal to strengthen their capacity to cope with environmental crises or to purchase expensive fuel, high-quality food and decent housing. The current global fiscal crisis is decreasing public welfare provisions, particularly those upon which poor people rely as demand for them is rising. Undermining a nation's capacity to repay debts by letting the markets decide whether a sovereign state can be considered credit-worthy enough to do so, whilst compelling its peoples to endure ever tighter austerity measures, can result in public funds lining the pockets of hedge fund holders, as is anticipated to occur over Greek bonds, an example of predatory capitalism that is likely to incur taxpayers' wrath when they contrast speculators' enormous profits with their own penury

(Landon, 2011). In other Western countries, the 'age of austerity' prevails, but imperils Western economies because they cannot produce the growth that is needed to promote prosperity and take people into paid employment. President Barack Obama is struggling to address entrenched unemployment in the USA as the economy slides into deeper recession. In the UK, Prime Minister David Cameron proposes grandiose ideas like the 'Big Society' to get people through hard times. This scheme exacerbates poor people's plight by combining savage public expenditure cuts and reduced publicly funded welfare resources with pathologizing people, blaming them for their predicament, and emphasizing their lack of skills, initiative and will-power to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Contextualized, holistically embedded, innovative strengths-based solutions will be necessary for people to respond effectively to such onslaughts. Social workers can assist them in finding new paths forward. I examine such initiatives in chapter 2 in light of social workers' roles within both social and physical environments.

I also consider the crisis in the profession itself as it endeavours to prevent the haemorrhaging of its borders to other professions, particularly psychology, psychiatry, human geography and criminology. At the same time, social workers have opportunities to expand into new arenas by addressing environmental issues and practising green social work within a redistributive framework that operates locally and globally. Social workers have the skills to deal with new challenges, as they have done when community workers have mobilized communities to protect them from the predations of the market. These are instanced by resistance to the ghetto cleansing that occurs when poor people in the West resist being removed from their homes to make way for a major road, or poor people living in urban slums in Mumbai, India, refuse to cede their homes to prestige



developments for wealthy people. Social workers help poor people mobilize as groups to challenge such developments. Some of these struggles have been won, others have been lost. An important point, however, is that social workers continue to support poor people who seek to defend their communities and interests, even when powerful decision-makers and resource-holders defy their requests for better-quality living conditions.

The central theme of chapter 3 is industrialization and urbanization, in the context of a critique of its current forms. Industrialization has centralized activities in urban environments while built-infrastructures have opened up opportunities for business to make profits and encourage peoples' mobility in search of jobs and improved standards of living. This approach has led to hyper-urbanization and enormous damaging consequences for peoples' well-being and the physical environment. Although poor people bear the direct costs of living in degraded physical environments, they seldom have a say in how development initiatives are executed and what impact these will have on them and their communities. This has been evidenced historically during the Enclosures that left rural people landless in the Scottish and English countryside and subjected countless inhabitants to destitution in the big cities of Victorian England, e.g., London. It is currently evident in shanty-towns in megacities of the Global South. The outcome in both scenarios has been the same: a drop in the quality of life for once self-sufficient rural peoples in the short term, and a dependency on their ability to sell their labour in the long term. The lack of sustainable, healthy environments and well-paid employment opportunities in rural areas must be addressed to limit the pressures and problems of hyper-urbanization.

Social relations also became more hierarchical and differentiated, within the home where men began to dominate, and in the workplace where employers called the

tune that those fortunate enough to have paid work were expected to obey. Under this form of social organization, it has been difficult to hold those with wealth accountable for their behaviour and the decisions they make, despite their negative impact on other peoples' livelihoods and existence. Lack of accountability among the owners and managers of contemporary multinational corporations remains a problem that social workers can highlight. Issues have to be identified and named before they can be addressed. Practitioners can help communities organize to hold such firms accountable for the consequences of their decisions on the lives of usually voiceless people.

In chapter 3, I use case studies to consider how social workers can operate at the local level to develop more sustainable and life enhancing forms of urban living and demand accountability for actions taken by all stakeholders involved in local areas. I explore how local schemes can have an impact at national and international levels and provide insights for improving situations through collective action. I draw on examples from both the Global North and the Global South to examine these issues. These include: the formation of micro-credit ventures; locally accountable financial institutions such as credit unions; creation of local area networks such as local exchange schemes, to avoid monetary transactions while providing people with access to services outside the market-place; and formation of social enterprises. I adopt a critical reflective stance towards such initiatives, because social workers have much to learn about intervening in these activities holistically.

Industrialization continues as a key topic for chapter 4. This time I focus on how pollution, as a by-product of industrialization, has had deleterious outcomes for people's health, e.g., increasing respiratory ailments and a range of disabilities that can be traced back to the lack of controls on the pollutants that industrial processes discharge into the

atmosphere. The banning of lead as an ingredient in petrol-driven cars in the West illustrates how changes in daily routines can alter everyday behaviours, like driving, to improve significantly the health of people living near major roads. Serious accidents have resulted from human control over scientific products going awry. The nuclear explosion in reactor 4 in Chernobyl in 1986 exemplifies such a problem. It entailed wide-ranging and long-term consequences that continue to be addressed. Other examples have been the leakage of dioxins or radioactive materials in many spots throughout the world, including the discharge of dioxins into the atmosphere in Seveso, Italy, in 1976, and the more recent nuclear explosion following an earthquake and subsequent tsunami in Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in 2011. Such accidents have gravely undermined people's well-being, defined as their right to enjoy the products of the Earth and develop their skills and talents to the fullest extent as articulated under Articles 22 to 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

I examine the huge industrial accidents at Three Mile Island in the USA, Chernobyl in the Ukraine, and Bhopal in India from a social work perspective in chapter 4. Poor health and higher morbidity arising from increased rates of cancer, higher levels of congenital disabilities, loss of livelihoods, social isolation and stigma are concerns that social workers have addressed. I also highlight the importance of utilizing existing social resources and legal instruments to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions, while exploring social workers' roles in developing local resilience in response to industrial disasters like these.

Climate change is the major theme of chapter 5. Climate change is the by-product of industrialization models promoted by Western entrepreneurs exploiting natural resources to produce goods that make a profit, while discharging greenhouse gases and other pollutants into the

atmosphere and water because this was the cheapest method of waste disposal. These activities subsequently caused air temperatures to rise to levels that threaten all forms of life on Earth. Climate change portrays recent environmental crises that embody global interdependencies whereby what one country does can have severe and damaging impacts upon other nations and their environments. The benefits that the West has gained arose through industrialization processes that have increased greenhouse gas emissions to the detriment of people living less industrialized lifestyles, such as poor people living in rural areas of the Global South. These outcomes are especially worrying in small island nations that are in danger of sinking into the ocean, e.g., the Maldives, Tuvalu. Although unintended, these consequences have resulted in claims for the 'polluters to pay' for cleaning up the environment and developing renewable green energy sources that will limit temperature increases to less than 2 °C in perpetuity.

Regardless of where they live, people without incomes or on low ones cannot access the expensive technologies that would enable them to protect, maintain or enhance their quality of life without state intervention and support. I argue for states to play an important role in this because: (a) the nation-state, as the embodiment of the collective will of the people and guarantor of their rights to be cared by, and care for, others, has to be held accountable for its failure to deliver these for all its residents; (b) the market as currently constituted cannot fulfil this function for all; and (c) charitable giving is insufficient for the enormity of the tasks to be addressed. Moreover, the state has to engage corporations as philanthropic players in solving these problems. Politicians can express their choices by subsidizing private firms and individuals; building public infrastructures that will sustain renewable energy sources;