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Social Work Practice with Climate-Displaced Populations: Ethical Frameworks and Intervention Strategies

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Abstract

The accelerating pace of climate change has produced unprecedented patterns of human displacement, presenting profound challenges for social work practice with affected individuals, families, and communities. This paper examines ethical frameworks and intervention strategies for practising with climate-displaced populations, including those uprooted by sudden-onset disasters, slow-onset environmental degradation, and planned relocation from uninhabitable zones. Through a comprehensive literature review and theoretical synthesis, this study explores the intersection of social work values, climate justice, and the lived realities of environmental migrants. Key findings indicate that climate displacement produces distinctive forms of compounded loss — including cultural bereavement, ancestral-place severance, and protracted legal precarity — that exceed the scope of conventional disaster-response and refugee-resettlement models. The paper proposes a six-step ethical decision-making framework that integrates climate-justice principles with established social work ethics, and identifies critical intervention strategies including trauma-informed disaster response, community resilience building, cultural preservation work, mental health support for climate grief, and advocacy-oriented practice. Implications for social work education, policy reform, and future research are discussed, with particular emphasis on the urgent need for green social work competencies, decolonial practice frameworks, and structural engagement with the political-economic drivers of the climate crisis.

Keywords:- Climate Displacement, Environmental Migration, Green Social Work, Climate Justice, Trauma-Informed Practice, Disaster Response.

Introduction

The intensifying impacts of anthropogenic climate change have produced patterns of human displacement on a scale unmatched since the mid-twentieth century. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates that weather-related hazards triggered more than thirty-two million new internal displacements in 2022 alone, with countries in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Pacific bearing a disproportionate share of the burden (IDMC 2023). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change projects that, on current trajectories, hundreds of millions of additional people will be forced to move from their homes by mid-century, whether through sudden-onset events such as floods and cyclones, slow-onset processes including sea-level rise, drought, and salinisation, or state-led planned relocation from uninhabitable zones (IPCC 2022).

Social work as a profession has been slow to engage substantively with the environmental drivers of human suffering, despite long-standing calls for an ecologically attuned practice (Coates 2003; Dominelli 2012).

The emergence of green social work defined by Dominelli (2012) as a holistic practice that addresses the interconnections between environmental crises and social inequalities has begun to reshape professional discourse, alongside parallel developments in disaster social work, ecospiritual practice, and climate-justice organising (Gray, Coates, and Hetherington 2013; Boetto 2017). Yet the specific needs of climate-displaced populations remain underdeveloped in mainstream social work curricula and practice guidelines, and existing frameworks for refugee or disaster work do not fully capture the protracted, multi-generational, and politically contested nature of climate-induced movement.

Climate-displaced people frequently fall between established legal and institutional categories. They are rarely recognised as refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention, often lack formal status in host jurisdictions, and may move repeatedly as conditions deteriorate (McAdam 2012). Their experiences are also marked by what scholars have termed solastalgia the distress produced by adverse environmental change in one's home place and by cultural bereavement when ancestral lands, sacred sites, and livelihood ecologies are rendered inaccessible (Albrecht et al. 2007; Eisenman et al. 2015). These distinctive features demand frameworks that go beyond conventional crisis response.

This paper addresses the critical question: How can social workers ethically and effectively practise with climate-displaced populations while upholding professional standards, advancing climate justice, and centring the agency of affected communities?

The research objectives are threefold:

- To synthesise existing literature on social work engagement with climate displacement, green practice, and disaster response;
- To develop an ethical framework specific to practice with climate-displaced populations; and
- To identify evidence-informed intervention strategies suitable for the distinctive challenges of climate-induced mobility.

This inquiry is particularly urgent given projections that climate displacement will become one of the defining humanitarian and human-rights challenges of the twenty-first century, with the World Bank estimating up to two hundred and sixteen million internal climate migrants across six world regions by 2050 in the absence of decisive mitigation and inclusive development (Clement et al. 2021).

Literature Review

Climate-Induced Displacement: Scope and Patterns

Climate-induced displacement encompasses a heterogeneous set of mobilities. Sudden-onset displacement follows extreme weather events cyclones, floods, wildfires, and landslides and typically produces short-distance, short-duration movements that are nonetheless devastating in their cumulative effect on the most affected communities (IDMC 2023). Slow-onset displacement, driven by drought, sea-level rise, soil salinisation, glacier retreat, and biodiversity collapse, unfolds over years or decades and tends to involve more permanent relocation, often along pre-existing rural-to-urban or transnational migration corridors (Black et al. 2011; Hugo 2008). A third category planned relocation involves state-coordinated movement of communities from territories deemed no longer habitable, a process that raises distinctive concerns about consent, compensation, and cultural continuity (McAdam 2012).

The geography of climate displacement reflects long-standing patterns of global inequality. Communities that have contributed least to cumulative greenhouse-gas emissions small island developing states, low-lying delta populations, Indigenous communities in the Arctic, and subsistence agriculturalists across the Global South bear the heaviest displacement burdens (IPCC 2022). Within affected countries, gender, caste, disability, and economic status further structure who moves, when, and on what terms; women and children are typically over-represented among the displaced, while those with the fewest resources are often least able to move at all, becoming what Black and colleagues (2011) term trapped populations.

Green Social Work and Environmental Justice

The framework of green social work, developed most fully by Dominelli (2012), positions environmental crises as social work concerns precisely because their burdens are unequally distributed and politically produced. Green social work integrates community development, structural analysis, and ecological awareness, situating the profession alongside movements for environmental and climate justice. Earlier ecological traditions including ecospiritual social work (Coates 2003), sustainable social work (Mary 2008), and environmental social work (Gray, Coates, and Hetherington 2013) converge on the view that the long-standing separation of person from

environment in professional discourse must be repaired if practice is to remain relevant under conditions of planetary crisis.

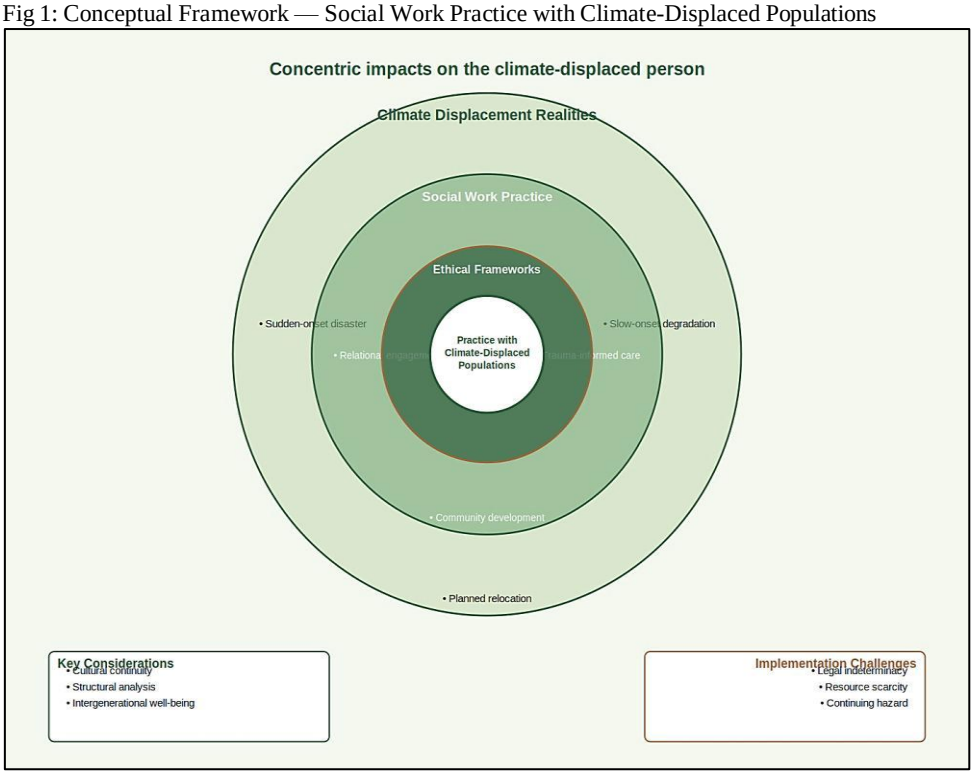
Climate justice scholarship complements this practice agenda by foregrounding the historical responsibilities of high-emitting states and corporations, the disproportionate exposure of marginalised communities, and the rights of affected peoples to participate meaningfully in adaptation, mitigation, and loss-and-damage decisions (Schlosberg and Collins 2014). For social work, the implication is that practice with climate-displaced populations cannot remain politically neutral; advocacy for systemic change is an ethical entailment of the profession's commitment to social justice (Powers and Rinkel 2019).

Trauma, Loss, and Cultural Bereavement

The psychological and social consequences of climate displacement extend well beyond the immediate trauma of disaster. Eisenman and colleagues (2015) documented elevated rates of post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety among populations displaced by extreme weather, with effects persisting years after the precipitating event. Albrecht and colleagues (2007) introduced the concept of solastalgia to describe the distress experienced when one's home environment is irrevocably altered a form of place-based grief that conventional bereavement frameworks fail to capture. Cunsolo and Ellis (2018) extended this work to articulate ecological grief, encompassing mourning for lost species, landscapes, and ways of life.

For Indigenous and place-based communities, displacement entails the rupture of relationships with ancestral lands, sacred sites, and ecologies on which cultural identity, livelihood, and ceremonial life depend (Whyte 2017). Cultural bereavement frameworks originally developed for refugee populations (Eisenbruch 1991) have been adapted to capture this dimension of climate displacement, with growing recognition that the loss is collective rather than merely individual and that healing requires culturally specific practices that conventional clinical models often cannot accommodate.

Fig 1: Conceptual Framework — Social Work Practice with Climate-Displaced Populations



Theoretical Framework

This analysis draws on three theoretical perspectives:

- Ecological systems theory;
- Structural and anti-oppressive social work; and
- Trauma-informed care integrated with cultural humility.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory situates human development within nested environmental contexts, from the immediate microsystem of family and community to the encompassing macrosystem of cultural, political, and now planetary forces (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Climate displacement compresses and disrupts every layer of this nested structure simultaneously: the microsystem of home is destroyed, the mesosystem of school, work, and worship is fragmented, the exosystem of policy and infrastructure is overwhelmed, and the macrosystem of cultural meaning and ecological belonging is profoundly altered. A genuinely ecological framework therefore requires social workers to engage with environmental conditions as constitutive of human well-being rather than as background context.

Structural and anti-oppressive social work extends this analysis by insisting that climate vulnerability is politically produced (Mullaly and Dupré 2019). The differential exposure of communities to climate harm reflects centuries of colonial extraction, racialised industrial siting, gendered land tenure, and global inequalities of carbon emission. Practice with climate-displaced populations that ignores these structural roots risks reproducing what Krings and colleagues (2020) describe as the depoliticisation of environmental suffering. An anti-oppressive lens reframes the practitioner's role from neutral case management toward solidarity, advocacy, and the support of affected communities' own political agency.

Trauma-informed care, when integrated with cultural humility, provides the proximate practice orientation. The trauma-informed framework articulated by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA 2014) emphasises safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and recognition of historical, cultural, and gender contexts. Tervalon and Murray-García's (1998) concept of cultural humility complements this by displacing the notion of cultural competence as a finite achievement in favour of a lifelong stance of self-reflection, accountability, and openness to communities' own definitions of healing a stance especially important when displacement severs the very cultural infrastructures that ordinarily sustain well-being.

Figure 1 illustrates the synthesised conceptual framework. Social work practice principles, the lived realities of climate displacement, and ethical frameworks intersect at the centre on practice with climate-displaced populations, which must continuously negotiate implementation challenges (legal indeterminacy, resource scarcity, ongoing exposure to hazard) and key practice considerations (cultural continuity, structural analysis, intergenerational well-being) unique to this domain.

Methodological Approach

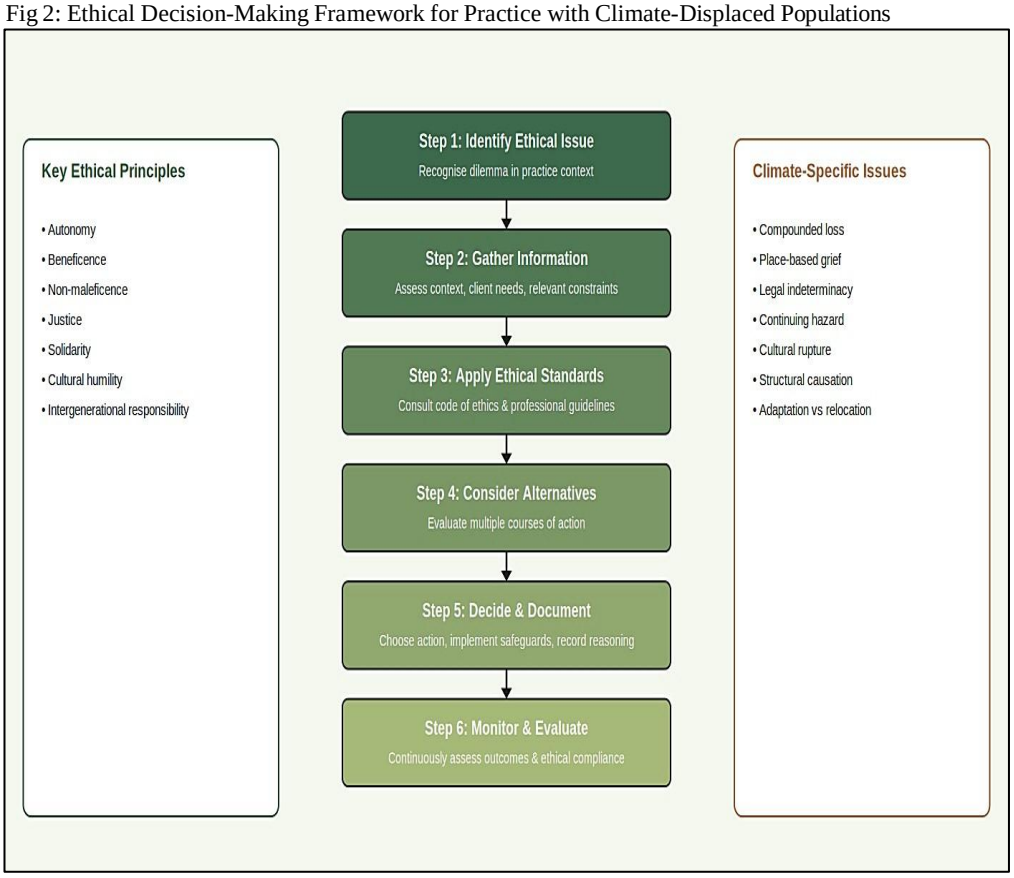
This study employs a theoretical synthesis methodology, integrating interdisciplinary literature from social work, environmental humanities, migration studies, public health, and Indigenous studies. A systematic literature search was conducted across Social Work Abstracts, PsycINFO, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, covering publications from 2010 to 2025. Search terms included combinations of: 'climate displacement,' 'environmental migration,' 'climate refugees,' 'green social work,' 'disaster social work,' 'climate justice,' 'ecological grief,' 'solastalgia,' and 'planned relocation.' Inclusion criteria required peer-reviewed empirical studies, theoretical analyses, authoritative grey literature from intergovernmental bodies, or community-authored testimony where formally archived.

The analysis followed a thematic synthesis approach, identifying recurring themes across the literature relating to ethical challenges, sources of distress, and practice strategies. Critical discourse analysis was applied to surface assumptions embedded in technical and policy texts regarding who counts as a climate migrant, what counts as adequate response, and whose knowledge informs adaptation. The proposed ethical decision-making framework and intervention strategies were developed through iterative refinement, ensuring alignment with established social work ethical codes while extending principles to accommodate the distinctive features of climate displacement.

Ethical Framework for Practice with Climate-Displaced Populations

Based on the literature synthesis and theoretical analysis, a six-step ethical decision-making framework is proposed (Figure 2). This framework extends established bioethical and social work decision-making models to incorporate climate-justice and displacement-specific considerations while maintaining consistency with the profession's ethical principles.

Fig 2: Ethical Decision-Making Framework for Practice with Climate-Displaced Populations



Key Ethical Principles Extended to Climate Displacement Practice

Self-Determination Under Conditions of Forced Mobility

Respect for self-determination is foundational to social work, yet climate displacement complicates its application. People who are uprooted by environmental collapse are rarely choosing in any conventional sense, and the alternatives presented by authorities remain in an uninhabitable place, relocate to an unfamiliar one, accept inadequate compensation, or move informally without support frequently fall short of any meaningful freedom. Ethical practice requires social workers to recognise the structural constraints on client agency, to support clients in identifying and pursuing the options most consistent with their own values, and to advocate for the expansion of those options where they have been unjustly foreclosed.

Climate Justice as a Social Work Mandate

Climate displacement is a justice issue before it is a humanitarian one. The communities most affected have contributed least to the underlying problem, and the disparities between affected and responsible parties shape every aspect of the response. Ethical practice cannot remain at the level of individual case management; it requires social workers to support affected communities' own advocacy, to bear witness publicly to the structural roots of displacement, and to contribute professional voice to policy debates on mitigation, adaptation, and loss-and-damage finance. Powers and Rinkel (2019) frame this as the duty of advocacy in the era of climate emergency.

Cultural Humility and the Care of Severed Place

Displacement frequently severs people from ancestral territories whose cultural, spiritual, and ecological significance cannot be substituted by relocation packages. Ethical practice begins with cultural humility the recognition that the practitioner's frameworks are partial, that affected communities are the authorities on their own losses, and that healing practices appropriate to one cultural context may be irrelevant or harmful in another. Social workers should be prepared to support culturally specific mourning and continuity practices, to advocate for the inclusion of cultural-heritage considerations in relocation planning, and to learn from Indigenous and place-based knowledges of resilience rather than imposing externally derived clinical templates.

Informed Consent in Crisis and Relocation Contexts

Informed consent in climate-displacement contexts is complicated by urgency, asymmetries of information and power, and the cumulative trauma of prior loss. People offered relocation packages in the aftermath of disaster, or asked to participate in planned community moves, may face profound time pressure and limited capacity to evaluate long-term consequences. Ethical practice requires accessible communication in clients' preferred languages, repeated opportunities for questions and reconsideration, attention to the conditions under which consent is sought, and a default presumption against decisions that foreclose future options for affected communities.

Practitioner Competence in Climate-Aware Practice

Ethical practice mandates competence across several emerging domains: basic climate literacy, familiarity with disaster-response systems and humanitarian-coordination architectures, working knowledge of the legal and institutional landscapes affecting climate-displaced people, capacity for trauma-informed and culturally humble engagement, and the political-economic analysis required for structural advocacy. Current social work curricula rarely cover this terrain comprehensively. Continuing professional development, partnerships with climate-affected communities, and supervision frameworks that include environmental dimensions are essential to building the competence the profession now requires.

Table 1. Ethical Challenges and Mitigation Strategies in Practice with Climate-Displaced Populations

Ethical Challenge	Climate-Specific Risks	Mitigation Strategy
Legal Indeterminacy	Climate-displaced people are rarely recognised as refugees; cross-border movers may lack status; internal migrants often fall outside formal protection systems.	Pursue rights-based advocacy at national and international levels; connect clients to legal aid; document harm to support recognition campaigns; partner with climate-justice coalitions.
Cultural Bereavement and Place Loss	Severance from ancestral lands, sacred sites, and livelihood ecologies produces grief that conventional clinical models do not capture.	Support culturally specific mourning practices; advocate for cultural-heritage inclusion in relocation planning; engage Indigenous and place-based knowledges; avoid pathologising collective grief.
Continuing Exposure to Hazard	Relocation sites may themselves be exposed to climate risk; secondary displacement is common; intergenerational uncertainty compounds distress.	Conduct ongoing hazard and adaptation assessment; build flexible long-term case plans; support community-led monitoring; advocate for genuinely safe siting of relocation.
Compounded Loss and Mental Health	Layered losses — material, relational, ecological, cultural — produce elevated rates of post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and ecological grief.	Apply trauma-informed practice with attention to ecological dimensions; integrate community healing alongside clinical support; train practitioners in solastalgia and climate-grief frameworks.
Resource Allocation Under Scarcity	Humanitarian and adaptation resources are routinely insufficient; allocation decisions can reproduce existing inequalities along gender, caste, ethnicity, and disability lines.	Use participatory needs-assessment; prioritise structurally disadvantaged groups; insist on transparent allocation criteria; advocate for adequate climate finance from high-emitting actors.
Practitioner Capacity and Self-Care	Practitioners face vicarious trauma, ecological grief of their own, and burnout in chronically under-resourced response systems.	Build peer-support and supervision structures; normalise practitioner climate-grief; embed self-care and collective care; advocate for adequate workforce investment.

Note. This table synthesises key ethical challenges identified in the literature review with proposed mitigation strategies aligned with green social work principles and international climate-justice frameworks.

Intervention Strategies for Practice with Climate-Displaced Populations

Drawing from the evidence base and the proposed ethical framework, several intervention strategies emerge as particularly suited to practice with climate-displaced populations. These strategies integrate individual, family, community, and policy levels, in keeping with green social work's commitment to holistic and structural engagement.

Trauma-Informed Disaster Response

Immediate response in the aftermath of sudden-onset climate events should adhere to the principles of trauma-informed care, prioritising physical and psychological safety, predictability, voice, and choice (SAMHSA 2014). Social workers can play distinctive roles in screening for acute distress, providing psychological first aid, identifying clients with heightened vulnerability including pregnant people, those with disabilities, older adults, and unaccompanied minors and ensuring warm referrals to longer-term services. Critical considerations include avoiding re-traumatisation through coercive procedures, attending to the cultural appropriateness of intervention modes, and preparing for the well-documented spike in family violence that often follows disaster (Parkinson 2019).

Community Resilience and Mutual Aid

Community-level interventions recognise that displaced populations are not merely recipients of aid but agents of their own recovery. Practice strategies include supporting the formation and strengthening of mutual-aid networks, facilitating community-led needs assessments, brokering connections between displaced communities and receiving-community institutions, and supporting culturally familiar mechanisms of mutual care. Such approaches resist the tendency of formal humanitarian systems to atomise displaced people into clients and to substitute external delivery for community capacity (Drolet et al. 2015).

Cultural Preservation and Identity Work

For communities whose displacement entails the loss of ancestral lands or sacred sites, cultural preservation work becomes a core therapeutic and political activity. Social workers can support intergenerational story-keeping, language maintenance, ceremonial continuity, and the documentation of place-based knowledge before it is dispersed. Where Indigenous and place-based communities are involved, practitioners must be especially careful to follow community protocols, to support rather than direct, and to facilitate connections between elders, youth, and cultural workers across the diaspora that displacement creates.

Mental Health Support for Climate Grief

Solastalgia, ecological grief, and climate-related anxiety require clinical frameworks that recognise the legitimacy of distress in the face of real ecological loss, rather than pathologising appropriate emotional response (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018; Albrecht et al. 2007). Effective interventions integrate validation, meaning-making, community support, and where possible engagement in restorative practice whether ecological restoration, advocacy, or cultural revitalisation that channels grief into agency. Group-based and community-based modalities are often more appropriate than purely individual clinical models for losses that are inherently collective.

Advocacy and Climate Justice Organising

Practice with climate-displaced populations cannot be confined to direct service. Advocacy-oriented strategies include supporting affected communities' participation in adaptation and relocation decision-making, contributing professional testimony in policy and legal proceedings, building coalitions across humanitarian, climate-justice, and Indigenous-rights movements, and pressing for adequate national and international climate finance directed to those least responsible for and most affected by the crisis. As Powers and Rinkel (2019) argue, advocacy is not a supplementary activity but a constitutive ethical dimension of climate-era practice.

Discussion

This analysis reveals both the urgency and the complexity of equipping social work to practise with climate-displaced populations. The distinctive features of climate displacement compounded loss, legal indeterminacy, continuing hazard, cultural rupture, structural causation call for frameworks that integrate trauma-informed care, climate-justice analysis, and culturally humble engageent, rather than relying on adaptations of refugee or disaster paradigms developed for other contexts.

The proposed ethical decision-making framework emphasises systematic engagement with the political-economic drivers of climate displacement while grounding practice in core social work values. Key implications include the need for enhanced practitioner climate literacy, robust structural-analysis capacity, partnership models

that centre affected communities as agents rather than objects of response, and advocacy commitments that extend from local case work to global climate governance.

Implementation of these frameworks must confront significant equity concerns within the profession itself. Climate-affected regions of the Global South typically have under-resourced social work workforces, while the bulk of disciplinary publishing and curricular development remains concentrated in higher-emitting countries (Dominelli 2012). A genuinely just response requires decolonial reform of social work education and research, sustained investment in workforce development in affected regions, and the elevation of practice innovations emerging from frontline communities.

Professional competence is again a critical pressure point. Few accredited curricula systematically address climate change, ecological frameworks, or disaster practice; supervision models rarely engage with practitioner ecological grief; and continuing-education infrastructure lags well behind the pace of displacement itself. Updated competency standards, accreditation requirements, and risk-management protocols that take seriously the realities of climate-era practice are urgently required.

Limitations and Future Directions

This theoretical analysis is limited by the rapidly evolving empirical state of climate displacement; documentation of intervention outcomes remains fragmented, and most published case material derives from a small number of high-visibility events. The proposed framework requires empirical validation through participatory case studies, longitudinal outcome research, and comparative work across different displacement contexts. The accelerating pace of climate change implies that recommendations will require regular revision as conditions evolve.

Future research should examine the comparative effectiveness of different intervention approaches across sudden-onset, slow-onset, and planned-relocation contexts; the long-term mental-health and intergenerational outcomes of displaced communities; optimal training and supervision models for developing practitioner competence; and the institutional conditions under which community-led adaptation flourishes. Participatory research grounded in the leadership of climate-affected communities particularly Indigenous, small-island, and frontline communities of the Global South is essential to refining both the theoretical and the practical foundations of climate-era social work.

Conclusion

Climate change is not an environmental issue with social consequences; it is a social issue produced by particular configurations of political economy, and its consequences are reshaping the conditions under which social work is practised. This paper has argued that practice with climate-displaced populations requires frameworks that integrate trauma-informed care, cultural humility, structural analysis, and climate-justice advocacy, and that the profession's ethical commitments require it to move beyond reactive humanitarianism toward sustained engagement with the structural drivers of displacement.

Core social work values service, social justice, dignity and worth of persons, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence remain foundational even as practice contexts evolve. The challenge lies in translating these values into engagement with planetary-scale crises that exceed the assumptions of mid-twentieth-century professional formation. The frameworks and strategies proposed here are a contribution to that translation, intended as an opening rather than a closing of professional discourse.

As social workers, educators, researchers, and policy makers take up these questions, the imperative is clear: the profession must be prepared to stand alongside the communities most affected by climate displacement, with competence, ethical integrity, and an unwavering commitment to the structural transformation that climate justice requires.

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