

# Eco-social Justice: Issues, Challenges and Ways Forward

*Voices from De Novo '11*



Edited by: Peter Jones, Debra Miles, Abraham Francis and Rajeev SP

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Abraham Francis & Rajeev S P



De Paul Institute of Science & Technology  
Kerala



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## PREFACE

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Around the globe, people are now acutely aware of the negative impacts that human activity has had on the natural environment. Increasingly, we are also becoming aware of the consequences of such environmental damage for human well-being. This growing awareness reflects the recognition of human's interdependence and interrelationship with the natural world. We live in the environment and we are of the environment. Such focus on the importance of relationship takes us into the realm of ecology. In a narrow scientific sense ecology refers to the study of the relationships that exist between organisms and their environment. Human and social ecologists have expanded this concept to apply it more particularly to the relationships between humans and their environments, both social and natural. This way we can think of ecology as referring to the holistic, complex set of interdependencies and interrelationships that exist between all organisms, human and non-human, and their total environment.

Many professional disciplines, and particularly those whose primary concerns have always been understood as relating to people and social well-being, have been slow to engage with issues of environment and ecology. This is certainly the case with the profession of social work, where traditional concern with people's social environments and with issues of social justice are only beginning to expand, allowing more attention to be paid to issues of environment, ecology and their implications for individuals, families and communities.

In part, this expanding interest has come from recognition of the impacts of environmental injustice. In both the Global North and South, it is the most disadvantaged groups in society who tend to suffer the worst consequences of anthropogenic environmental devastation, whether from exposure to toxic chemicals, the impacts of deforestation or the broader repercussions of global climate change. Environmental justice, representing a concern for the equitable distribution of environmental goods and costs, has therefore entered the consciousness of people and professions whose interests have traditionally been grounded in notions of social justice.



Yet, increasingly we are recognising that both social and environmental justice remain stubbornly anthropocentric concepts, maintaining the fiction that humans are somehow set apart from, and above, the rest of nature. We have now reached a point where we must begin to think about justice for the environment as well as for the humans who are a part of it. This is the idea of ecological justice. Indeed, we have seen some exciting developments in this area in recent times, with countries such as Bolivia and Ecuador moving to enshrine the rights of Mother Nature in their legislative frameworks.

It is against this background that the theme of 'Eco-social justice: issues, challenges and ways forward' emerged as the focus for the De Novo '11 Conference.

In 2010 a relationship was initiated between the De Paul Institute of Science & Technology (DIST) in Kerala, India and the Department of Social Work and Human Services at James Cook University (JCU) in Australia. During the year, staff from JCU travelled to Kerala and a dialogue began, exploring opportunities for the two institutions to develop a range of mutually beneficial, collaborative endeavours. One of the suggestions that emerged from this dialogue was the idea of collaborating to facilitate an international conference. A framework for the conference organisation already existed through the De Paul Institute of Science and Technology's annual 'De Novo' gathering, and with enthusiastic engagement from both groups, work on the conference was begun.

Discussions about a theme or focus for the conference revolved around finding issues that were of concern both in the Indian and Australian contexts. While there are many differences between these two countries, discussions also uncovered many similar concerns. One that emerged with some clarity was the fact that both countries are facing enormous challenges relating to environmental problems and the ways in which these impact on humans. The global environmental crisis does not respect national boundaries or acknowledge cultural differences but around the world it is becoming increasingly obvious that the impacts of this crisis are experienced most dramatically by those already suffering disadvantage and marginalisation. In both Kerala and Queensland, and more broadly in India and Australia, the impacts of issues such as climate change are becoming increasingly apparent and social justice implications startlingly clear. Despite this realisation, eco-social approaches to social work and welfare practice are still in

their infancy and a great deal remains to be done if professions such as social work are to contribute in a meaningful way to address these issues. A decision was therefore made to use the De Novo '11 conference to focus attention on issues of eco-social justice.

Eco-social, as we are using it here, is a conflation of 'ecological' and 'social', a shorthand way of indicating issues or approaches where the traditional human-nature dichotomy is rejected and explicit recognition is given to the interrelatedness and interdependence that exist between humans and the non-human world. Pollution, for example, may be thought of as a purely environmental issue where we are concerned with its impact on an ecosystem. Alternatively, it may be seen as a social issue due to its impact on human well-being. An eco-social orientation however, argues that both of these perspectives are inextricably related and cannot be considered in isolation from each other.

In November 2011 the conference proceeded with papers from all over India and a selection from Australia. Academics, practitioners, activists and students of social work and related disciplines came together at this conference to critically think, reflect, discuss and explore appropriate methods for working with communities and people in the face of the environmental crisis. This book is a selection of some of those papers from India and Australia, where authors attempt to provide some key points for discussion and further dialogue on the issues. This selection was gathered prior to the conference and their inclusion in this publication does not of course limit the authors' right to add further commentary during the conference presentation. However, the papers in this volume give some representation to the diversity of the conference discussions.

As befits a conference focus of such breadth, the papers offer a wide-ranging consideration of issues where the interests of humans and the environment intersect, written from both Indian and Australian perspectives. They include papers with an orientation towards traditional social work concerns such as mental health, social capital and cross-cultural communication through to papers considering issues of ethical consumption, the management of natural resources, consequences of environmental disasters and case studies exploring the human impacts of environmentally damaging development activities. The authors of these papers represent a range of disciplines and include academics, practitioners, students and activists in their fields.

The conference call for papers was met with an enthusiastic response. Over 55 individual papers were submitted for presentation at the conference. Reviewing and selecting a small portion of these papers for inclusion in this volume was a challenging and difficult process, resulting in the final 21 papers included here.

Our hope is that the conference and this edited selection of papers will serve to initiate a dialogue amongst social workers, academics, activists, students and others concerned about eco-social justice. There is enormous scope for change and development in the field of social work and related disciplines as we begin to grapple with the implications of an eco-social approach. From educational curricula and social policy analysis through to the transformation of traditional practice methods, there are few areas where recognition of the need for an eco-social justice orientation will not result in a dramatic rethinking of existing paradigms. Our intent is that this dialogue, and the important work that flows from it will continue long after the conference itself has been drawn to a close.

We also hope that the De Novo '11 conference will be the first in a number of significant collaborative activities involving the De Paul Institute of Science and Technology and James Cook University, and furthermore that it may serve as an exemplar for the types of cross-national, cross-institutional initiatives that will be required, if we are to adequately address global issues such as climate change and its impacts on human well-being. In the face of both the overwhelming challenges presented by the global environmental crisis and the optimism, commitment and enthusiasm displayed by the authors of the papers in this volume, it seems fitting to end this preface with quotes from two inspirational Indian figures:

***You are not Atlas carrying the world on your shoulder.***

***It is good to remember that the planet is carrying you***

– Vandhana Shiva

***A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable  
faith in their mission can alter the course of history***

– Mohandas Gandhi