

Is social work really greening? Exploring the place of sustainability in social work codes of ethics

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Issues of sustainability and the natural environment have recently emerged in social work. As these issues become core concerns for the profession, there is an expectation that they will also begin to appear in codes of ethics: the place where the purpose and scope of the profession is articulated. This paper examines the extent to which issues of the natural environment and sustainability are represented in three national codes - United Kingdom, United States and Australia.

Using International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) documents as a benchmark, we compare the three codes and draw conclusions about the degree to which issues of sustainability are emerging as priorities. The most striking finding is that despite the scale and nature of the global environmental crisis and its impact on human well-being, and despite the increasing calls for social work to engage in this area, the natural environment as a core concern for the social work profession remains relatively poorly recognised in codes of ethics.

We recommend that national professional associations address this issue as a matter of urgency. We also argue that because the IFSW definition of social work has been influential in guiding the development of these codes, and because climate change is a global crisis, the IFSW has a key leadership role in advocating for sustainability to become a core concern for ethical practice, in addition to its role leading the international social work response to climate change.