
research article

Climate change, disasters and social work practice in Greece

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In times of repeated crises, social work is more than ever linked with politics. In contemporary societies, neoliberal welfare, health policies (such as the case of COVID-19), climate change, poverty and wars have a direct impact on people and nature, as well as social services, professionals and users. Particularly in regard to climate change, we need to accentuate its implication for people's lives, animals and nature, as well as its connection with social work. In this direction, this article presents the findings of research that took place in 2019 in Greece regarding social work practice in disasters and suggests the reclaiming of community work by a radical perspective and in coalition with environmental justice movements.

Key words climate change • social work • disasters • Greece

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Introduction

In the summer of 2021, catastrophic wildfires across Greece burned approximately 1.2 million acres of forest. Unfortunately, both wildfires and floods are not new phenomena either in Southern Europe or in other parts of the world, such as California in the US, Germany, Siberia and the Amazon rainforest in South America. Undoubtedly, climate change is more severe and rapid. Yet, when combined with insufficient and/or late intervention by the state during disasters, climate change results in ecological catastrophes and the deaths of people.

Greek media and the Greek right-wing government used the 'climate crisis' as an alibi, abandoning Greece's second-largest island, Evia, to the flames in the summer of 2021. More than 500,000 acres were burned, including forests, animals and people's houses. Interestingly, the European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS) disclosed that the burned areas that summer were 'about 450% more than the corresponding average during the [past] years in the same period' (Kathimerini, 2021).

The term 'crisis' has been repeatedly used as a pretext in capitalism to either obscure the political causes of a phenomenon and/or promote neoliberalism, strict austerity measures and hostile policies (Teloni et al, 2020; 2021). This is particularly apparent

in the cases of the debt 'crisis' in Greece of 2010 and the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015 and onwards (Teloni et al, 2020; 2021).

According to the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, a natural disaster is 'a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society, which causes extensive human, economic and environmental losses and damages, which go beyond the capacity of the affected society to deal with them with its own resources' (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2022). However, the term 'disaster' also needs to be explored as a political and social issue in which human responsibility is carefully veiled (Chatzistefanou, 2017). To be more specific, the most common causes that lead to disasters are climate change, neoliberalism, privatisation, urbanisation and environmental degradation (Ito, 2014; Pyles, 2017).

Therefore, it is crucial to open our minds and hearts, and to examine more thoroughly the possible causes of the catastrophe of life on our planet. In this article, we seek to highlight the connection of climate change and crises with neoliberal capitalism, as is vividly described in Naomi Klein's (2015) book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*, where she posits:

Forget everything you think you know about global warming. It's not about carbon – it's about capitalism. The most profound threat to humanity is the war our economic model is waging against life on earth. Yet we can seize this existential crisis to transform our failed economic system into something radically better.

On the front line of this war, social workers have always been providing social services and dealing with the most disadvantaged parts of the population (Jones, 2001). Recently, the Global Standards for Social Work Education pointed out that 'the growing number of common issues and challenges affecting social work education and practice across the globe ... include growing inequalities produced by neoliberal globalization, climate change, human and natural disasters, economic and political corruption and conflicts' (Ioakimidis and Sookraj, 2021: 163).

It is well known that social workers' role has become harder during recent decades. This is not only due to climate change, disasters worldwide and the recent pandemic of COVID-19, but also due to political and socio-economic factors, such as poverty, the rise in inequality across the globe, cuts in welfare and services, neoliberalism in health and welfare, harsh working conditions, and managerialism and bureaucracy in our day-to-day practice (Lavalette, 2020).

Social work intervention is more than ever affected by politics. In contemporary societies, neoliberal welfare, health policies (such as the case of COVID-19), climate change, poverty and wars have a direct impact on social services, professionals and users. Particularly in regard to climate change, we need to accentuate its implications for people's lives and its connection with social work. Achstatter (2014) argues that if market-based capitalism continues to negatively affect the environment, social work practice has a wide range of areas for action. Hitherto, many studies have argued that social workers take part on environmental issues as members of the community, who suffer from the consequences of climate change as any other member, but this also has an impact on their profession (Cumby, 2016). By the same token, not many social workers acknowledge the direct connection between their profession and climate change, even though many admit that they can connect community work

with advocacy as regards protecting their clients from the effects of climate change (Tischler, 2011). Only recently, researchers highlighted the urgent need for social work to develop a new framework and practice models that consider climate change, and to promote an environmental-oriented agenda in social work education and practice (Sugirtha and Little Flower, 2015). Social workers have the tools to encourage efforts and mobilise communities to act against the negative implications of climate change on their own lives (Dominelli, 2011). Finally, as social workers must deal with issues like poverty, health, disability and child protection, to name but a few, they first need to prioritise vulnerable people within their communities (Shokane, 2016).

This research attempts to shed further light on social work practice in disasters in Greece and fill a significant gap in the field. More specifically, the current article presents and discusses the findings of research that took place in 2019 regarding the experience of social workers who worked on disasters in both the public sector and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The research was part of a thesis titled 'Environment, climate change and social work: social workers' interventions in disaster situations in contemporary Greece' for the master's programme in community social work at the Department of Social Work at the University of West Attica (previously known as the Technological Institute of Athens), Greece.

In the following sections, we first discuss the Greek welfare context and provide a literature review. We then present the methodology in the second section and the findings in the third. Finally, in the last section we make some final remarks and discussion of the findings.

Social work, disasters and climate change: context and literature

Brief historical record of welfare and social services in Greece

Historically, the welfare sector in Greece did not follow the trajectory of Western Europe, but rather remained underdeveloped. It was characterised by the low financing of welfare provision, the lack of planning in social policy (Gravaris, 2006) and inadequate expenditure for social protection, the health sector, pensions and benefits (Venieris and Papatheodorou, 2003). Therefore, even as social spending increased during the 1980s, social services remained underdeveloped (Petmesidou-Tsoulovi, 1992), while from the 1990s on, the intensification of neoliberal policies on welfare took place through the promotion of NGOs and systematic deterioration of public social services (Ioakimidis and Teloni, 2013). Thus, public social services were neglected prior to the financial crisis of 2008. The economic crisis that followed, along with the numerous strict austerity measures, led to cuts in welfare and the health sector, as well as in salaries and pensions, with tremendous consequences for the population. Unsurprisingly, over the last decade, social workers and users have been abandoned, as the former have faced precarity, hard working conditions, overwork and the lack of services and social provision, and the latter have faced poverty and deprivation, with minimum welfare provision by the state (Ioakimidis and Teloni, 2013).

Research has shown that social workers are often used 'for any difficult [situation] in the community' (Teloni, 2011) and, particularly, have to deal with people facing poverty. During the last decade, the financial crisis, as well as refugee crisis, posed several challenges for social workers and social services. Still, climate change and repeated disasters over recent years in Greece raise questions regarding social workers' role and practice.

Literature review

The correlation between social work and the environment was first pointed out by Jane Addams, who connected poverty with the conditions of the environment where people live. A further connection between social work and environmental movements is apparent in the 1920s in Germany, while later in the 1950s and 1960s, there was an increased impact on social work given the rise of natural science (Närhi and Matthies, 2016). The growth of environmental movements in the 1960s and 1970s significantly affected social work, as well as the development of environmental sociology in the 1980s (Molyneux, 2010; Närhi and Matthies, 2016). During the 1990s, various environmental approaches also affected social work; however, an increased interest was apparent during the first decades of the 21st century due to increasing environmental disasters and climate change (Närhi and Matthies, 2016; Ramsay and Boddy, 2017). This is not solely a matter of academic concern; instead, it is linked with the fact that social work often has the mandate to intervene in the field of environmental and natural disasters, as well as on the consequences of climate change (McKinnon, 2008). It is an open secret that most of the problems that social work deals with, such as health, housing, child protection, poverty and so on, have intensified due to the degradation of the environment in which people live (Ramsay and Boddy, 2017); nonetheless, as Naomi Klein (2015) describes in her book, climate change ‘changes everything’.

Social work is linked with disasters. Historically, social work during disasters could be found in the Second World War (Dominelli, 2014). We can find several terminologies, such as ‘disaster management’ (Rogge, 2004; Mathbor, 2007; Rowlands, 2013), ‘social work in disaster interventions’ (Cuadra, 2015) and ‘disaster social work’ (Shah, 1985; Sim et al, 2013; Pyles, 2017). The rapid increase in the interventions of social workers generated a large amount of research and literature, especially after the great earthquakes in India (in 2001) and in China (in 2008), Hurricanes Mitch (in 1998) and Katrina (in 2005), and the tsunami in the Indian Ocean (in 2004) (Cuadra, 2015), which were the largest disasters that have taken place in our contemporary history.

Therefore, there are several social work models and theoretical approaches that focus on environmental issues, for instance, ecological social work (Molyneux, 2010), environmental social work (Alston, 2013; Ramsay and Boddy, 2017) and green social work (Dominelli, 2012). According to Närhi and Matthies (2016), the ‘umbrella’ of ‘ecological social work’ includes several theoretical social work approaches, from the ecological social approach in social work, deep ecological social work and eco-spiritual social work, to green social work, social-ecological social work and environmental social work. More specifically, the term ‘ecological social work’ is linked with a more holistic perception of the environment, including the development of an ecological ethos and the interlinking of human beings with nature, animals and the place where they live (Molyneux, 2010). Environmental social work could be defined as a more community-based approach, where the individual is integrated in their natural environment, which affects health and well-being. At the same time, it promotes environmental justice (Alston, 2013; Ramsay and Boddy, 2017). Green social work is associated with political implications and highlights the issues of environmental degradation, natural disasters, poverty, climate change, inequality, human rights, neoliberalism

and, most importantly, the role of environmental justice in opposing social injustice for indigenous people in communities (Dominelli, 2012).

Research methodology, sampling strategy and research ethics

To the best of our knowledge, there is no previous field research of this sort in Greece. Therefore, the ambition of this research is to fill a gap within the scholarship. The basic aim of the research was to deepen our understanding of social workers' role and practice in disaster situations in Greece. Further, the research questions referred to:

- understanding the methods and interventions that social workers use to respond to people's needs;
- investigating the link between social work and environmental issues; and
- examining the role of the state in confronting disasters.

Based on the aim and objectives of the research, we opted for qualitative research (Mason, 2003; Robson, 2007; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017), which took the form of semi-structured interviews with 16 social workers. The research was conducted in Greece from 17 July 2019 to 12 August 2019 as part of a master's thesis at the Department of Social Work, University of West Attica, Greece. The procedure for finding a sample of the population was a challenging one due to several reasons. First, as other research in Greece had shown, during the period of the research, there were no official registration data of social workers (Teloni et al, 2021). Second, as mentioned earlier, there is a mosaic of social services in both the public and semi-public sectors, in which many professionals are working with short-term contracts. Consequently, finding social workers that worked in the specific field was challenging, as some of them had moved to other jobs or cities. Social workers' workload was another obstacle that we had to face, as many of them had no time to be interviewed, resulting in the delay of the research. Nevertheless, the sample was identified based on three specific criteria, which facilitated the procedure and, to some extent, guaranteed the participants' representation in the research. The criteria for participation in the research were social workers who: (1) had worked in disasters during the previous 15 years; (2) worked in public social services and/or NGOs given the welfare context and working conditions; and (3) were from specific geographical areas in the region of Attica, covering the centre of Athens and Eastern and Western Attica. The three aforementioned areas are quite far from each other and the university; thus, it required long drives to reach these areas and to conduct the research. Nonetheless, we considered these areas vital for the research, as most of the organisations that had intervened in disasters across Greece are based in Central Attica, while Eastern and Western Attica have been the main epicentres for wildfires and floods over recent years.

In total, 16 social workers participated in the research; most participants worked in more than one disaster:

- eight of the social workers had intervened after the wildfires in Mati and Neos Voutzas in Eastern Attica and in Kineta in Western Attica on 23 July 2018, which caused 102 deaths and burned houses and thousands of acres;
- five participants had worked with the community of West Attica after the floods on 15 November 2015, which caused 24 deaths;

- four social workers had covered the area of Ilia during the wildfires in 2007, which resulted in 84 deaths, as well as the earthquake at Zakynthos in 2018, which caused damage and left many citizens homeless; and
- one social worker had worked in Parnitha (Attica) after the earthquake of 1999, which caused the deaths of 143 people.

We used snowball sampling, where known participants are initially sampled and then identify other participants (Mason, 2003). We considered this the only possible sampling strategy given that there were no official registration data for social workers or for social services¹ – an important limiting factor already known by various researchers in Greece (see, for example, Papadaki, 2005; Teloni, 2011).

The professionals who participated in the research were informed both verbally and through the consent form of the aim of the research and fully guaranteed their anonymity, as well as the use of the findings for academic purposes. The participants also signed a consent form, which informed them of their rights during the interview (that is, the right to not respond to questions or to request to stop participation at any phase of the interview). Each participant consented and gave permission to use their data and to record the interview. Furthermore, anonymity was fully guaranteed throughout the research by avoiding any possible direct or indirect identification of the participants and/or the services. Finally, respect and discretion were applied whenever the participants requested the recording to stop, either because they became emotional or because they sought to disclose personal opinions off the record. Regarding the analysis of the findings, thematic coding was the preferred method (Nowell et al, 2017).

Findings

Profile and working conditions of social workers

The participants in the study were social workers from Greece between the ages of 26 to 59 years old. Younger professionals worked more in NGOs than older ones, who were working permanently in the public sector. This is mainly due to the fact that the public social services in Greece minimised human resources in 2010 after the financial crisis. Their work experience varied from six months to 33 years, with an average of about 13 years. It is noteworthy that the permanently employed had many years of work experience in the same particular social service, while the younger employees with limited contracts changed between many jobs in different social services, with intermittent contracts and parallel periods of unemployment in between. Numbers of female and male participants working in NGOs and the public sector, and the type of their contract.

However, some of the participants stated that they were not satisfied with either the salary or the working schedule, as they even had to work at nights without getting extra salary for these working hours. In general, social workers' working conditions seem to follow the general trends of neoliberalism labour relations given that workers in Greece are often hired with short-term contracts and flexible forms of work, not only in the private sector, but also in the public sector (Dedoussopoulos et al, 2013).

Nonetheless, social workers did not consider short-term contracts and flexible forms of work to be problematic issues. On the contrary, the participants in the research seemed to be satisfied with both their salary and working hours, with no particular

complaints about their working conditions, as will be further analysed in the discussion section. As a 32-year-old social worker working in an NGO says: “We had our salary and allowance, so it was ok.... We always followed the schedule.”

According to the participants, the issues of concern were infrastructure and protective equipment shortages, organisational failures, poor cooperation with colleagues, precarious working conditions, and the lack of education in the field of natural disasters. These conclusions are in line with the existing literature, which highlights social workers as confronted with the aforementioned difficulties, not having the proper support (Papadaki, 2005; Teloni, 2011; Pentaraki, 2019) and being loaded with disproportionate work. Moreover, we understand that all these challenges are a result of underfunding policies. In workplaces, the ambiguity of tasks, the lack of basic logistical infrastructure and a disproportionate workload prevail (Teloni et al, 2020: 473), which lead to professionals experiencing stress and frustration.

Another important finding of the research is the complete lack of supervision for employees, which is a basic prerequisite for the effective performance of their duties, especially in a crisis. Only six professionals had received supervision; two of which were paying for it. It is noteworthy to mention that those who were working in public schools were supervised by two academics from the Social Work Department of the University of West Attica. The academics offered supervision for approximately one academic year on a voluntary basis following the call by Minister of Education Costas Gavroglou in 2018–19 to provide support and supervision to social workers working in schools in the areas affected by the wildfires in the summer of 2018, in which 102 people died. This lack of supervision and in-service training is best described by a 38-year-old social worker working in an NGO: “In the beginning, I didn’t know how I had to work there, nobody gave me a task ... the lack of supervision was making the conditions worse for me, everybody around me was confused.”

Social work practice and the causes of the disasters

Needs identified in the community and the social work practice

The social workers who worked with these communities were asked to identify, record and assess people’s needs. They organised door-to-door needs-assessment procedures. They also recorded requests from people who either approached social services or were referred to them by other services. The needs that were identified in the communities affected by the disasters were unprecedented for the residents of these areas.

According to the social workers, the most important and immediate needs recorded were access to drinking water and food. One of the most frequent needs was for safe accommodation for those whose homes had been destroyed or were no longer habitable, as well as for clothing and footwear. A 59-year-old practitioner working in

Table 1: Working contract of participants

	Hired to work after the catastrophe in NGOs	Permanent employees in the public sector	Employees with fixed-term contract in the public sector
Female	4	2	4
Male	2	4	0

public social services mentioned that in the first hours after the fire, “we brought all the people at my working place, then we transported them to a nursing home that was not yet operational, but had all the necessary equipment, like beds, etc”.

Other important issues regarded healthcare needs, such as the medical care, mainly for the chronically ill, as well as access to medical services. As time passed, the repairing damage and replacing household equipment were necessary needs that would enable the communities to partially return to their daily functionality. In fact, the real need of people was the restoration of normality (Rowlands, 2004; 2013), and social workers played an important role in restoring normalcy and recovery within the community (Shah, 1985; Pyles, 2017). Nevertheless, many participants highlighted the fact that people could only go back to normal life according to their capability to cover the costs of the restorations. As a result, rich people could return to their lives easier than could poor people who could not respond to the tremendous costs.

One additional need linked with social workers' role was the fact that people asked to be informed about their rights and available services. Therefore, at the same time as social workers were investigating needs through the social assessment, they also provided information to people about their social welfare rights and allowances/benefits. Social work has always had the ‘privilege’ of working in the ‘front line’ with people suffering (Jones, 2001). Social workers intervene at multiple levels, not only by investigating, but also by providing social support, especially during times of despair. Undoubtedly, we are all aware of the importance of the provision of information concerning rights and services, and the support that it may provide during catastrophic events.

Social workers had multiple roles, from referring users to other services, to providing information about services and goods. This is in accordance with the literature in the field (Chou, 2003; Sim et al, 2013). As Maglaglic (2018) claims, professionals search for necessities, as after a disaster, they take care of providing people with access to the basic goods necessary for their survival. As a 42-year-old social worker working in the public sector argues: “People had to eat ... we had to create a community-based kitchen ... we didn't leave people hungry.”

In addition, social workers had to assist in the coordination of volunteers in the field, which is a particularly difficult task given that during these situations, tens of volunteers arrive in the affected areas bearing clothes, food and a willingness to assist. Indisputably, solidarity has been a key response to a number of crises in Greece. Evidence of such may be observed during the financial crisis and the refugee crisis, as tens of solidarity grass-roots welfare initiatives emerged, in some cases, constituting examples of progressive social work interventions (Teloni et al, 2020) and popular social work (Jones and Lavalette, 2013). However, the task of coordinating a large number of volunteers in extreme situations is an additional workload for social service professionals, who are already overworked and understaffed. Last but not least, social workers also identified needs concerning post-traumatic stress, in combination with fear, sadness, anger and feelings of loss and despair. As a result, social workers provided people with consultation and therapy sessions for a long period after the disasters.

The causes of disasters, the role of the state and the connection with social work

According to the research participants, the most common reason for disasters was the lack of organisation of the public services required for the state to intervene on time. As a 32-year-old social worker working in an NGO describes: “The Greek

state, traditionally, was always unprepared to manage the results of a natural disaster.” The next most common reason was “the extreme weather conditions”. Another social worker working in public social services describes her experience in the field: “The quantity of the water was terrifying. I was inside a bus, going to work, and I didn’t know if we could even move for a few meters.” Interestingly, social workers often used the terms ‘extreme weather conditions’ and ‘natural disasters’, rather than ‘climate change’. By the same token, politicians – at least during the last decade – often use similar terminology, such as ‘extreme weather conditions’, ‘natural disasters’ and ‘climate crisis’, as a pretence not only to palliate the inexistence of prevention, but also to mitigate the state’s responsibility regarding a crisis-intervention mechanism. Furthermore, when referring to the climate crisis, the dominant discourse tends to place high emphasis on the ‘crisis’ and, in turn, highlight the extreme nature of the situation, similarly to other crises, such as that of the financial ‘crisis’, refugee ‘crisis’ and pandemic ‘crisis’, so as to conceal the fact that these crises are essentially integral parts of the capitalistic system.

Furthermore, social workers stated that defects in public infrastructure, poor maintenance, class discrimination in communities and arbitrariness in construction also precipitate disasters. As another 42-year-old research participant working in an NGO argues: “The state doesn’t really exist. If you have money and power, you can do whatever you want ... it was the abuse of a whole area and the weakest and poorest are going to pay the cost.”

We were able to come to two main conclusions with regard to the state’s mechanisms and its response to the disasters. On the one hand, all the participants involved in the 2017 Western Attica and 2018 Eastern Attica disasters asserted that state services were inadequate and failed to manage both crises. Instead, it was individuals who were able to launch and manage initiatives. On the other hand, in the case of floods, professionals concluded that the state was more responsive and provided the basics.

Regarding the question of whether social work is connected to environmental issues, we were able to draw two main conclusions. First, social workers recognise the impact of environmental problems on people’s lives. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that they did not mention any connection between climate change and social work’s role per se. As a 30-year-old social worker mentions: “Humans are living inside the natural environment, so if we have a healthy environment, we have well-being... trees and oxygen and animals ... even animals must be taken into consideration.”

The second basic conclusion was that environmental issues are connected to class discrimination and poverty (Ramsay and Boddy, 2017). A 32-year-old social worker working in an NGO describes the situation: “Poor neighbourhoods face a bigger danger of being destroyed by a fire. On the contrary, rich neighbourhoods have better care and more measurements in case of a fire. So, poor people will suffer more to reduce the consequences of a disaster.” According to the participants, social workers have a wide field from which to offer professional help as regards environmental issues. They can teach and inform their communities on environmental issues, but as they stated, they need to be trained themselves first, for instance, seminars and undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at universities are important, as well as academic research. Research has highlighted the main parameters in disaster management for training and preparation to enter the field. Most researchers refer to the need not only to include courses in undergraduate curricula, but also to create postgraduate programmes that will address the issue as a whole (Mathbor, 2007; Tierney, 2007; Rowlands, 2013; Sim et al, 2013; Adamson, 2014).

Moreover, the participants claimed that they had proposed taking on the implementation of interventions to support communities that suffer after a disaster. In addition, they added that they may create new policies with the participation of environmental social workers in order to prepare for a possible next disaster. Finally, they suggested keeping a record of vulnerable minorities so as to facilitate their prioritisation during disasters. Social workers who adopt the aforementioned approaches attempt to reduce the consequences of climate change, while focusing on those that have been more affected (Booth, 2019). Additionally, social workers attempt to link environmental issues with the consequences for vulnerable people and to create multidisciplinary cooperation in order to gain knowledge on environmental issues (Coates and Gray, 2012).

In conclusion, disasters have a political dimension, as climate change is directly linked to the impact of neoliberal policies worldwide (Ito, 2014; Klein, 2015; Pyles, 2017). In Greece, social work has historically been influenced by religious, individualistic and conservative approaches (Ioakimidis, 2008; 2011). It is only in the last decade or so that the profession has taken a radicalisation and anti-oppressive attitude (Ioakimidis, 2008; Dedotsi et al, 2016). Lastly, social workers connected the causes of disasters mainly to the structural level by pointing out all those man-made and political factors that can lead to, or worsen, a catastrophe (Stamatiou and Psaltaki, 2013; Klein, 2015).

Conclusion and discussion

Social workers who intervene in various ‘disaster situations’ in Greece seem to face hard working conditions, such as a lack of protective equipment, support, education and supervision. Additionally, younger professionals face precarity given that they mainly have short-term contracts in either NGOs or the public sector – a finding that is in accordance with the dominance of the neoliberal welfare model in social services (Pentaraki, 2019; Teloni et al, 2020). Nevertheless, social workers do not complain or feel angry about their working conditions. Instead, they seem content with just having a job, as opposed to being unemployed, given the high percentages of unemployment and poverty in Greece.

The continuity of crises in Greece, which started with the financial crisis in 2010 and the refugee ‘crisis’ in 2015, has worsened the workload of social services. Nevertheless, the research findings reveal that social workers in the already-abandoned public services are working in ‘crisis management’ situations with limited or even no training. The younger social workers with short-term contracts (for example, three or six months) are also used for intervening in catastrophic situations. Whether they are young professionals or have many years of experience, social workers need to apply fast-track services for a short period in communities where people experience serious material, social and psychological damage through fires and floods that have destroyed the environment, forests and animals. Social workers need to intervene fast, do social assessments quickly, cover the basic needs and then either proceed to other duties or, if their contracts expire, find another job. Especially in the areas where the research was conducted, social services had never been organised properly and people had needs that long pre-dated the disasters and were never met.

Although it is well known that climate change and disasters affect mainly poor communities, which need longer-term interventions to recover, this has not been taken into account by neoliberalism, as the neoliberal agenda seeks to ‘get the job done’ quickly

and with minimal cost. The social workers in the research explicitly stated that in the majority of the disasters, the state's intervention was insufficient, disorganised and usually came too late for the people, animals and nature. This should not come as a surprise in the Greek case. The dominant discourse negates any connection between prevention and climate change or disasters, and fails to protect the environment and people in general. This also includes the public social services, which have never been developed in communities and neighbourhoods. Therefore, after the short-term intervention of social services during disaster situations, the poor become poorer, inequality increases and the natural environment is threatened by private business companies.

It is noteworthy to mention that social workers in the research rarely associated 'disasters' with climate change and environmental justice – a finding that might demonstrate the lack of social work education in Greece. Disasters have a political dimension, as they relate to climate change, which is directly linked to the impact of neoliberal policies worldwide (Ito, 2014; Klein, 2015; Pyles, 2017). However, some of the social workers in the research connected the causes of the disasters mainly to the structural level by pointing out all those man-made and political factors that can lead to, or worsen, a catastrophe (Stamatiou and Psaltaki, 2013; Klein, 2015).

People's needs varied from uncovered basic needs, such as housing, food, fresh water, safe accommodation and healthcare, to identified needs concerning access to health services for trauma and post-traumatic stress. In many cases, the latter consequences of disasters also concerned the social workers themselves, as they lived in the destroyed communities and shared common needs with their users.

Social work practice includes the door-to-door assessment of the needs of people, the provision of information and support, advocacy, referrals to other services, the coordination of tens of volunteers, psychosocial support and so on. Certainly, social workers are the key persons in these cases at least, providing a kind of 'social first aid' to people experiencing loss, grief, basic uncovered needs and trauma. Nonetheless, these professionals are expected to multitask with minimum staff and equipment, and to work as a 'social ambulance' with no continuity in their intervention in traumatised communities, which will sooner or later manifest in stress (for example, in schools) and mental health problems, in combination with poverty and deprivation.

The repeated crises have highlighted the absence of public and well-organised social and health services, which has negative implications for community centres, leading to the absence of community social work. Yet, community social work is vital and needs to be reclaimed by national and international social work bodies and schools, not only in times of repeated 'crises' (whether financial or of refugees as a result of environmental disasters or wars), but also to confront the rise of poverty, mental health problems, the abuse of women and children, and climate change.

In order to empower communities, radical community development (Ledwith, 2020) is key to fighting for a better future, improving the organisation of services, establishing prevention schedules and providing special care for the most vulnerable, who according to the participants, are the first who need support both during and after a disaster. Radical community work and radical social work, including such casework as the liberation health model (Belkin-Martinez, 2014), can also contribute to linking day-to-day social work with environmental justice movements.

Another important issue is the connection of social work and social services, on the one hand, with local activist movements, on the other. In the Greek case, since the early 1950s, groups of people have organised with the purpose of nature protection. Yet, it

was not until the 1970s that these groups morphed into an environmental movement, which organised protests and interventions against state policies that were harming the environment. In recent years, the environmental movement has become more political. It has enhanced its struggle and resistance against environmental disasters, and it is gradually spreading across the country. For example, the movement in Keratea and Lavrio, called Epitropi Agona Kerateas Lavriou, is dedicated to such social struggles as against the illegal landfills in their area, among other things. Similarly, the Chalkidiki SOS movement has been protesting for years against Eldorado Gold, a company that is harming the natural environment in the area of Skouries in Northern Greece. In recent years, a movement in Tinos, a Greek island, has been fighting against the air generators that affect the local ecosystem and cause tremendous disaster to the flora and fauna of the island.

These are only some of the movements in which people are self-organised and not only struggle to save the environmental resources, but also stand against the capitalism of disaster. We argue that social work needs to turn to its roots of social and community action by keeping pace with the self-organised and grass-roots initiatives of environmental movements.

Note

¹ Social workers in Greece currently need to register with the Greek Professional Association of Social Workers (SKLE) (Law 4488/2017) to practise. However, at the time of the research, this legal framework had just been introduced, and the period offered for this registration ended long after this research.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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