

**SOCIAL WORK AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

by

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*“Inability to change the system is not necessarily one’s weakness; to do nothing, however, is a sign of intellectual cowardice”. (Mohan, 1999: 133)*

*“Joblessness is more fundamental than homelessness. Solve the former and automatically you’re on your way to solving the latter”. (Sunter, 1997: 82)*

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Sustainable development aims at improving human well-being, particularly by alleviating poverty, increasing gender equality, and improving health, human resources, and stewardship of the natural environment. Sustainable development is based on three pillars, namely, environmental protection and social progress and economic development.

This study intended to contribute to sustainable development in the area of developmental social work practice by addressing the issues of new conceptualisations of social work practice, and in particular of intervention strategies, within the paradigm of sustainable social work practice.

The purpose of this study was to explore and construct a foundation of general perceptions and tentative theories with regard to sustainable development and the position and value of the social work profession within the sustainable development paradigm. The goal of this research study was to explore current social work practice with regard to sustainable development and identify new

challenges and opportunities for sustainable social work practice in the changing South Africa.

The researcher utilised focus group discussions as a method of generating data and an exploratory research purpose as little is known about the topic of investigation and the utilization of focus groups are particularly useful in its ability to explore the topic.

This study was a process of discovery and not the testing of a hypothesis. The researcher entered the realm of the participants' everyday experience and through conversation extracted detailed descriptions of their perceptions, ideas and concerns. In this qualitative research the emphasis was on understanding the experiences, attitudes, assumptions and perspectives of the participants.

The instrumental case study was used to provide insight into sustainable development as a new paradigm within the social welfare field and to discover the issues and challenges faced by the social work profession as it pertained to sustainable development. The data was organised around emerging themes and subsequently examined in relation to the literature.

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn, the following recommendations were made:

- The social work profession needs an information-sharing platform.
- Collaboration and cooperation are crucial components in the process of sustainable development.
- Social work practitioners have to become self-directed and lifelong learners who will be able to adapt to the changing circumstances in society.
- Social work practitioners need to develop creative strategies within a multidisciplinary approach to address the issues of poverty, underdevelopment and unemployment in a sustainable manner.

- Social work practitioners need to actively contribute to processes and structures that support the delivery of adult literacy and skills training efforts.
- Social work practitioners need to explore ways and means of facilitating economic opportunities by addressing the obstacles and/or regulations that prevent people from accessing available markets.

### **Key Terms**

Sustainable development paradigm

Social work

Social development

Environmental protection

Economic growth and development

Social progress

Poverty

Underdevelopment

Unemployment

Human capital

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