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Systematic Literature Review

Equity in sustainable development: Community responses to environmental gentrification

Krings A., Schusler T. Equity in sustainable development: Community responses to environmental gentrification

Sustainable development aims to address economic, social, and environmental imperatives; yet, in practice, it often embodies a neoliberal market logic that reinforces inequalities. Thus, as the social work profession grapples with its role in advancing environmental sustainability, practice models must explicitly attend to social and economic justice. For example, environmental gentrification refers to situations in which the cleanup of contaminated land or the installation of environmental amenities intentionally or unintentionally catalyzes increased housing costs, thereby contributing to the displacement of vulnerable residents. With the goal of contributing to practice knowledge, we conducted a systematic review of peer-reviewed articles (1997–2017) to learn how community groups have responded to the threat of environmental gentrification. We found that community organizations employ a range of strategies, including blocking development, negotiating for protections, planning alternatives, and allying with gentrifiers. We conclude by exploring ethical implications and practice principles to help social workers engage in truly sustainable development.

Key Practitioner Message: • *The term environmental gentrification describes situations where improvements to environmental quality increase real estate prices, contributing to the displacement of vulnerable residents;* • *An environmental justice framework attending to procedural, distributional, and recognition-based claims provides a model for social work practice;* • *Opportunities exist for social workers to take an intersectional rather than siloed approach to integrate economic, social, and environmental concerns.*

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Key words: environmental gentrification, ecological gentrification, green gentrification, ecosocial work, equitable development, community organizing

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Sustainable development includes ecological, social, and economic imperatives: the ecological imperative to live within the global biophysical-carrying capacity while maintaining biodiversity; the social imperative to ensure the development of democratic systems of governance that sustain the values that people wish to live by; and the economic imperative to ensure that basic needs are met worldwide (Dale & Newman, 2009). This approach to development is embedded within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to fight climate change while concurrently developing and implementing actions that reduce poverty and economic inequality (United Nations, 2015).

Yet, despite the notion that sustainable development requires advancing social and economic justice, research suggests that, in practice, sustainability agendas reflect a neoliberal, pro-growth logic that, at once,

neglects social and economic equity while being advertised and justified as meeting sustainability standards (Swyngedouw, 2007). Neoliberalism refers to both a specific ideology as well as a set of policies and practices of governance that prioritize free market principles, the rollback of social welfare provisions and environmental or labor regulations, and the privileging of technical solutions that constrain democratic participation (Abramovitz, 2012; Harvey, 2007). For instance, across the Global North, city leaders and private investors approach urban sustainability as a mechanism for creating competitive advantage as they strive to attract investment capital, tourism, and skilled labor within the globalized economy (McKendry & Janos, 2015). In this way, sustainable development can reproduce existing consumption patterns rather than promote the transformative change needed to advance economic and social equity.

Sustainable development, like all development, can lead to gentrification. Environmental gentrification (and related phenomena of “green” or “ecological” gentrification) refers to situations in which the cleanup of brownfields and contaminated land or the installation of green amenities such as parks and gardens catalyzes rising real estate prices and contributes to the displacement or exclusion of poor residents and communities of color (Checker, 2011; Essoka, 2010). Similarly, Dooling (2008, p. 41) defined ecological gentrification as the displacement of vulnerable human inhabitants resulting from the implementation of an environmental agenda. Although projects branded sustainable can displace people who are poor and heighten inequalities, city leaders and developers temper local resistance by suggesting that it will result in an improved quality of life for all through green jobs and environmental amenities (Checker, 2011; McKendry & Janos, 2015). For this reason, critics (e.g., Krueger & Gibbs, 2007; Swyngedouw, 2007) have argued that the discourse of sustainability is used as a development strategy by neoliberal governance regimes to prevent genuine debate about the purpose and impacts of such projects. These critics argue that because nearly everyone is in favor of sustainability, sustainable developments are presented as neutral, rather than politicized, projects that can elude critical questions about racial inequalities, social hierarchies, or environmental privileges.

Questions about how to engage with sustainable development projects are central to the profession of social work. The *Agenda for Social Work and Social Development*, a collaborative project designed by the International Federation of Social Workers, the International Association of Schools of Social Work, and the International Council on Social Welfare, identified “working toward environmental sustainability” as one of the top four priorities for social workers internationally, along with “social and economic inequalities within countries and between regions,” “dignity and worth of the person,” and “importance of human relationships” (Jones & Truell, 2012, p. 457). Many countries have included linkages between environmentalism and social work in their codes of ethics (McKinnon, 2008) and the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare prioritized “social responses to a changing environment” as one of its 12 Grand Challenges (Kemp, Palinkas, & Mason, 2018). As the profession of social work grapples with its role in advancing environmental sustainability, practice models must attend explicitly to social and economic justice, lest they risk supporting projects branded as sustainable that inadvertently harm or displace marginalized groups.

Thus, with the goal of contributing to ecosocial work practice knowledge, we asked: How have community groups responded to threats associated with environmental gentrification? How do they manage

tensions between fighting for neighborhood environmental improvements and indirectly attracting wealthier and, often, whiter newcomers? These questions matter because although gentrification is driven by global political, economic, and social forces, its impacts – and opportunities for contestation and resistance – frequently manifest at the local level (Lees, Slater, & Wyly, 2013; Thurber, Krings, Martinez, & Ohmer, 2019).

To answer these questions, we present findings from a systematic review of peer-reviewed articles ($N = 10$) about local responses to environmental gentrification (1997–2017). Our findings reveal that community organizations employ a range of strategies to prevent or mitigate environmental gentrification, including blocking development, negotiating for local protections, planning alternatives, and even allying with gentrifiers. We conclude by discussing ethical and practical implications that can nuance the practice of environmental social work in a way that tends to economic, environmental, and social aspects of sustainable development.

Environmental justice organizing and social work

Environmental degradation is not experienced by all populations equally. Rather, it reflects racial and class oppression and contributes to health disparities because people who are poor and people of color more often live concentrated in areas proximate to environmental contamination, lack access to environmental amenities, and hold limited influence in environmental decision making (Bullard, Mohai, Saha, & Wright, 2008; Mohai, Pellow, & Roberts, 2009). These communities are often the same places in which social workers provide services at individual, family, and community levels (Kemp, 2011; Teixeira & Krings, 2015). Yet, although the social work profession is committed to a person-in-environment perspective, it has largely defined “environment” as a social one, despite knowledge that the built and natural environments are related to health and wellbeing (Kemp, 2011; Miller, Hayward, & Shaw, 2012). Thus, social workers have the unique opportunity to engage critically with sustainable development initiatives in a way that protects and promotes economic and social inclusion. To do this well, we argue that social work practitioners can learn from and contribute to the theory and practice of environmental justice.

At its core, environmental justice asserts that all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations (Bullard, 1996, p. 495). As defined by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (2019),

Environmental justice is the *fair treatment* and *meaningful involvement* of all people regardless of

race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies (<https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>, 2019, italics added).

Fair treatment means that no group of people should bear a disproportionate share of environmental burdens or benefits; there should be fairness in the distribution of access to clean air, water, and land. Meaningful involvement affirms that anyone who would be affected by decisions impacting their neighborhoods and quality of life should be given a meaningful voice with opportunity to influence those decisions. Thus, environmental justice attends to three different conceptions of justice: distributive, procedural, and recognition-based justice concerns (Schlosberg, 2007).

Anguelovski (2016) argued that there have been three waves of environmental justice organizing. The first wave, which established the modern-day environmental justice movement, focused on identifying and dismantling systemic environmental racism wherein racial and ethnic minorities were excluded in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws. Many campaigns that emerged during this first wave responded to the environmental health impacts that result from exposure to contamination, toxins, and other hazards in neighborhoods or workplaces (Pellow, 2004; Sze, 2006). In 1982, residents and activists in Warren County, North Carolina, organized a series of powerful protests to oppose the siting of a toxic waste facility in a predominately black and low-income community, a campaign often considered the birth of the environmental justice movement (McGurty, 2000; Teixeira, Mathias, & Krings, 2019). The water crisis in Flint, Michigan, is a contemporary example of this first wave. Flint residents, the majority of whom are Black and living within one of the most impoverished metropolitan areas in the USA, became sick as a result of lead contamination and bacteria in their drinking water. Yet, they did not enjoy the same degree of protection, nor political recourse, as other communities and, as a result, many became sick and the lead content in children's blood spiked (Agyeman, Schlosberg, Craven, & Matthews, 2016; Krings, Kornberg, & Lane, 2019; Krings, Kornberg, & Lee, 2019). Despite their politically and socially marginalized status, residents were able to organize grassroots groups that partnered with academic researchers whose evidence bolstered their claims, thus inspiring national media attention, philanthropic foundation support and, ultimately, the decision to change back to a safer, but more expensive source of water.

Anguelovski (2016) described a second wave of environmental justice organizing that took on issues of socioeconomic wellness. Relevant campaigns worked

to improve access to green space, public parks, food sovereignty, and safe affordable housing. A contemporary example of this second wave included efforts to create community gardens as a tool to promote health, financial security, and as a community building site (Draper & Freedman, 2010). Community agriculture and conservation initiatives have also been found to contribute to the revitalization of distressed areas (Ohmer, Meadowcroft, Freed, & Lewis, 2009).

Further, Anguelovski (2016) proposed that a third wave of environmental justice organizing has emerged to address issues related to self-determination, the defense of place and culture, and resistance to environmental gentrification. For example, in Chicago's predominately Mexican-American Little Village neighborhood, environmental justice organizers mobilize for the right to place in response to concerns about environmental gentrification as well as xenophobia and anti-immigrant practices (Kern & Kovesi, 2018; Thurber et al., 2019). Anguelovski (2016) suggested that the first and second waves of environmental justice organizing were grounded in an assumption that residents, particularly those who are poor or people of color, cannot move away from contaminated and divested neighborhoods; thus, community organizations worked to improve the quality of those places. In contrast, this third wave is about fighting displacement that results from a combination of free market forces, institutional and cultural racism, the rollback of social housing programs, and urban environmental policy wherein "greening" becomes a code for the "whitening" of urban areas (Gould & Lewis, 2012, p. 140). Therefore, this third wave is about broader questions of place, identity, and culture.

The study of community-based resistance to environmental gentrification sheds light on core dilemmas within social work community practice – how do social workers, community organizations, and residents improve amenities within underserved neighborhoods without inadvertently displacing through gentrification the very people intended to benefit from these improvements? As demonstrated, marginalized and vulnerable communities are overburdened by environmentally hazardous land uses and have limited access to environmental amenities – injustices that deserve redress and prevention. Yet, as suggested by Checker (2011, p. 211), many impacted communities face a "pernicious paradox – must they reject environmental amenities in their neighborhoods in order to resist the gentrification that tends to follow such amenities?" How can low-income residents challenge contradictory and selective sustainable development that threatens their displacement?

Scholarship relating to environmental social work is growing (Krings, Victor, Mathias, & Perron, 2018; Mason, Shires, Arwood, & Borst, 2017), and social

work researchers have made important contributions to the first and second waves of environmental justice organizing. This innovative work has examined important issues relating to the application of environmental justice principles to social work practice (Dominelli, 2013; Hawkins, 2010; Hoff & Rogge, 1996) and education (Miller et al., 2012; Philip & Reisch, 2015; Teixeira & Krings, 2015); procedural justice concerns relating to environmental decision making (Rambaree, 2013); distributional justice issues, such as reducing exposure to toxins and contamination (Rogge & Combs-Orme, 2003) and equitably providing environmental goods and services relating to food justice (Besthorn, 2013), and clean water (Akdin, El Harchaoui, Laouan, & Soydan, 2012; Case, 2017; Mitchell, 2018; Singh & Singh, 2015; Willett, 2015). However, despite clear social work practice implications, there is a paucity of research pertaining to the third wave of environmental justice organizing and the potential to resist gentrification and displacement. To address this knowledge gap, we ask How have community groups resisted threats associated with environmental gentrification?

Research methodology

Because our research goal was to develop a holistic sense of community responses to environmental gentrification, we conducted a systematic review of multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed articles in the English language. Literature reviews contribute to the development of knowledge by helping scholars to build upon extant scholarship and research and improving the search for knowledge in new directions (Rozas & Klein, 2010).

The literature review focused on peer-reviewed articles published in academic journals during the 20-year period from January 1, 1997 to December 31, 2017, although most search results yielded papers that were published within the past decade. We did not include books, book reviews, technical reports, working papers, or editorial commentaries in our sample. We searched an aggregate of 14 journal databases¹ using the terms “environmental gentrification” or “eco gentrification” or “eco-gentrification” or “ecological gentrification” or “green gentrification.” This approach allowed us to search journals including and beyond social work.

This initial search yielded 108 results, eight of which were not research articles, for an initial sample

of 100 articles. The research team reviewed the abstract, keywords, and literature review of each of these to determine if the focus of the paper related to any aspect of environmental gentrification, such as its precursors, scope, impacts, or community resistance. This produced a second sample with 38 articles.

For our final sample, we reviewed these 38 articles and included only those that focused on community contestation, resistance, or organizing in relation to environmental gentrification. Ten articles met these criteria, which we then reviewed using an analytic framework of five categories. These categories, listed below, emerged from our scholarly and practical experience in community organizing, including the Midwest Academy Strategy Chart (Bobo, Kendall, & Max, 2001). These analytic categories included:

1. Location: If the article utilized a place-based case study or comparative case study, we documented the location(s) by neighborhood, city, state or province, and country.
2. Proposed development: We summarized the environmental improvement(s) or sustainability plans that were contributing to gentrification, as well as the key actors.
3. Community responses: We documented the purpose of contestation – block the development, negotiate, build coalitions, adapt, etc.).
4. Tactics: We identified methods that the community residents or organizations used to reach their goal in response to environmental gentrification (broadly) and/or the proposed development.
5. Outcomes: Lastly, we documented what came of the community’s work and/or the proposed development.

Lastly, by comparing and contrasting the 10 papers, we identified community resources, strategies, and tactics that successfully influenced local development. While these findings are necessarily tentative, we sought to explicate practice principles that social workers, in partnership with community residents, might use to prevent and resist the phenomenon of environmental gentrification.

This research approach entailed some limitations. Most obviously, scholars might have written about resistance to environmental gentrification without using our search terms. This could be the case because we used only the English language or perhaps because our selected terms are colloquial among scholars in the USA. For this reason, our findings may reflect a geographic bias.

Results

We sought to understand how the cases presented in each paper relate to residents’ and community organizations’ responses to threats associated with

¹ Social Sciences Citation Index (Web of Science), Environment Abstracts, ABI/INFORM Global, ScienceDirect Journals (Elsevier), SAGE Journals, Sociological Abstracts, Taylor & Francis Online – Journals, Science Citation Index Expanded (Web of Science), MEDLINE/PubMed (NLM), JSTOR Current Journals, SpringerLink, PMC (PubMed Central), JSTOR Archival Journals, Wiley Online Library, and GenderWatch.

environmental gentrification. Appendix Table A1 provides an overview of the 10 papers in our sample as they relate to geographic location, proposed development, community responses, tactics, and outcomes. Additionally, we teased out important themes by comparing and contrasting key examples below.

Location

The majority of the papers used qualitative methods to examine single case studies ($n = 5$) or comparative case studies ($n = 3$). Two were conceptual in nature, rather than place-based, and surveyed responses to environmental gentrification globally. Of the eight place-based studies, six took place in New York City neighborhoods. The remaining two occurred in Chicago, one of which compared cases in Chicago and Seattle.

As described above, before we analyzed papers about environmental gentrification and local resistance ($n = 10$), we examined papers about any aspect of environmental gentrification ($n = 38$), including its predictors, scope, consequences, and local resistance. It is noteworthy that place-based studies in this broader sample were located in Canada, China, France, Germany, Poland, Sweden, and the USA. Additionally, the broader sample included cases in mid-sized cities whereas the smaller sample included only megacities.

Why might there be a lack of representation relating to the study of community resistance to environmental gentrification outside of megacities in the USA? It is possible that other countries that experience environmental gentrification might not require local resistance because they have policies that protect affordable housing and local decision making. Alternatively, other countries might be more repressive when it comes to citizen organizing. Further, it is possible that scholars are researching citizen resistance but in languages other than English or with different terminology. The lack of geographic diversity in our sample suggests an important need for research exploring citizen responses, or barriers to collective responses, in places outside of US megacities.

Proposed development

We were curious to learn if the extant literature included developments that were intended to remediate contamination (removing environmental “bads”) or to build improved environmental amenities (creating environmental “goods”). Additionally, we wanted to understand why residents interpreted the environmental improvement in their case to be undesirable. We present key examples below as well as a description of each case in Table A1.

Four papers in the sample focused on proposed projects that aimed to remediate contamination.

Notably, all of these related to formerly industrial waterways. For example, citizen organizing in the Curran and Hamilton (2012), Hamilton and Curran (2013), and Miller (2016) papers described how long-term residents worried that the remediation would catalyze or bolster new development along the waterways, such as luxury housing that would push out working class residents. In part, residents’ concerns were driven because gentrification was already underway in or nearby their neighborhood. Consequently, even if proponents of revitalization framed development as beneficial to everyone, long-term residents viewed it as potentially threatening to the culture, identity, and affordability of the neighborhood.

Three papers focused on plans to provide new environmental amenities within cities. Two of these documented citizens’ resistance to plans to repurpose land for community parks in Harlem, New York (Checker, 2011) and to install new bike lanes in Chicago, Illinois (Lubitow, Zinschlag, & Rochester, 2016). In both cases, residents believed that these “improvements” were designed for the use of gentrifiers or affluent outsiders because their design did not fit with the character and culture of the neighborhood nor were residents engaged in the planning and design processes. In the Harlem case, there was fear that existing residents would actually be policed out of the new parks through rules that prohibited activities such as drumming circles or grilling outside. In the Chicago case, the bike lanes were proposed to go through a Puerto Rican enclave and residents believed that they were designed for people to bike through their neighborhood, rather than for local access.

Community responses and tactics

When analyzing each community’s goal and use of tactics, we assessed if residents responded to undesirable development with a NIMBY-style “not in my backyard” oppositional approach, if they were apathetic and unorganized, or something in between. Additionally, we sought to understand if groups used conflict or consensual approaches when it came to tactics.

The Checker (2011) case described conflicting goals within the Harlem community. Residents responded with strong opposition and skepticism to a proposal by the Harlem Community Development Corporation to repurpose area parks; they viewed the plan as part of an ongoing neighborhood redevelopment strategy intended to push out existing residents who are poor and people of color. The West Harlem Environmental Action Coalition sought to broker a compromise between the two sides; they supported parks but also wanted to protect local parking spaces and community inclusion.

In contrast, McKendry and Janos (2015) documented the case of a Southeast Chicago community and its lack of engagement with a plan to create a nature reserve with wetlands and bike trails. The authors explained that, although residents wanted and appreciated environmental amenities, they were skeptical that their involvement would be worthwhile. Their apathy and frustration stemmed from years of city unresponsiveness to their concerns about contamination and divestment. McKendry and Janos contrasted this case with the Seattle-based Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition, a group established to ensure that redevelopment plans incorporated community concerns. The Seattle group politicized the Duwamish River cleanup process and hired their own experts to independently review technical reports. They also presented an alternative redevelopment plan, created through a participatory planning process, that prioritized protection of the area's diverse residents rather than economic development.

In their conceptual analysis, Anguelovski and Alier (2014) offered illustrative examples of groups resisting environmental gentrification by making political claims for recognition and inclusion in land-use decision making. Specifically, they highlighted efforts by Indigenous groups who push for political rights and cultural preservation, as well as environmental justice organizations that include attention to affordable housing. Anguelovski's examination (2016) of the history of the environmental justice movement provided examples of environmental groups resisting environmental gentrification by protesting smart growth strategies, bike lanes, and corporate health food stores.

The Curran and Hamilton (2012) and Hamilton and Curran (2013) papers documented a case in Brooklyn, New York, in which existing residents organized for decades to have an oil plume in their community remediated. However, their claims finally received attention only after gentrification began to happen. The authors suggested this came about through a coalition between long-term residents and gentrifiers. Long-term residents, who held moral authority and institutional knowledge, educated the new ones about the community and their desire to protect the character of the neighborhood. The new residents utilized their technological skills and social capital to influence political leaders to finally address concerns related to the oil spill. The authors pointed out that many new residents, including some working in nonprofits, public health, and government, were eager to take on social justice issues in the neighborhood. Additionally, the authors argued that this case included a "just green enough" approach, meaning that residents worked to maximize health benefits associated with remediation in

a way that did not attract speculative redevelopment. In this way, residents sought to keep the gritty feel of the community by maintaining its industrial base while removing contamination.

Outcomes

Graham, Debucquoy, and Anguelovski (2016) conducted a comparative study of the Lower East Side neighborhood of New York City with the Rockaways neighborhood in Queens. Both neighborhoods received investments to rebuild after damage caused by storm surges from superstorm Sandy. The authors found, however, that only the Lower East Side, an economically diverse neighborhood home to many community-based organizations, succeeded in efforts to secure new infrastructure projects that benefit existing residents. For example, they ensured the use of vacant land for stormwater catchment rather than luxury redevelopment. In contrast, residents of the highly segregated Rockaways, which is home to concentrated public housing and lacks a strong civic infrastructure, were not able to successfully influence the long-term vision for the investments. The authors concluded that neighborhoods with a strong history of community activism around gentrification are better able to mobilize to resist new forms of environmental gentrification and direct benefits toward long-term residents.

Similarly, the McKendry and Janos (2015) paper, which compares community responses in Chicago and Seattle, found that combating environmental gentrification requires a democratic decision-making process that engages the entire community, as well as access to legal reports and technical experts who are accountable to residents. These were essential to incorporate community concerns into future plans for the area. Without these ingredients, communities with a long history of hosting environmental burdens while being excluded from decision-making processes are more likely to respond with skepticism and apathy when threatened with new development.

In the tenth and last paper in our study, Pearsall (2012) examined how residents in three New York City neighborhoods coped in the midst of environmental gentrification. The author described how resilience predominately took individual, rather than collective, forms. Unsurprisingly, Pearsall found that homeowners were better able to adapt to environmental gentrification than were renters. Also, perhaps unsatisfyingly, "resilience" manifested in adaptive behaviors such as finding roommates to share housing costs or seeking rent-stabilized units or other forms of rent assistance. Consequently, rather than challenging systems, such as the lack of affordable

housing units, residents tried to obtain affordable housing despite a limited supply.

Discussion and implications

Although sustainable development aims to address economic, social, and environmental imperatives, in practice projects branded as sustainable often embody a neoliberal market logic that can reinforce racial and class inequalities. Thus, as international social work organizations call upon practitioners and educators to engage with sustainable development and other environmental topics, there is a need to develop practice models and principles that explicitly attend to social and economic justice.

This study has contributed to practice knowledge by examining how residents and organizations seek to hold developers accountable to local communities such that environmental improvements do not threaten their displacement. To understand how community groups respond to threats associated with environmental gentrification, we conducted a systematic review of literature published over a 20-year period (1997–2017) that used the terms “environmental gentrification” or “eco gentrification” or “eco-gentrification” or “ecological gentrification” or “green gentrification.” We then focused specifically on 10 articles that dealt with community resistance, organizing, and mobilization. These included cases that explored reasons for a lack of collective response.

Notably, none of the articles identified in our systematic review were published in social work journals. Rather, they demonstrate the potential for social workers to contribute to interdisciplinary knowledge through collaborations with scholars and practitioners from urban studies, urban planning, environmental science, urban forestry, and economics. Likewise, none of the studies referenced social workers as participants or allies in the local organizing – although it could be the case that they did not identify as such or this detail was not germane to the authors’ research question. Nonetheless, although social workers’ skillsets can contribute to community development, planning, organizing, and policy practice, it appears that there are unmet opportunities for stronger engagement. Therefore, we provide practice principles for social workers who aim to support environmental justice without inadvertently contributing to gentrification.

First, it is important for social work practitioners to recognize that development branded as green or sustainable might not benefit everyone. Truly sustainable development includes ecological, social, and economic imperatives and requires the advancement of social and economic justice (Dale & Newman, 2009). Yet, in practice, sustainability agendas often reflect a neoliberal market logic that gives a central role to

the interests of urban growth regimes and forecloses the possibilities of a real politics of the environment (Swyngedouw, 2007). Consequently, to some residents, sustainable development can represent commodification, gentrification, cultural change, the loss of social networks, amenity changes, and possible displacement (Dale & Newman, 2009). Thus, the first practice principle is that social workers – particularly those who live or work in gentrifying neighborhoods – must not romanticize sustainability planning nor the process of bringing nature back to the city. Rather, in efforts to equitably distribute environmental burdens and benefits, social workers should ask critical questions that politicize development projects about both the planning process (Who participates? Who decides? Who is considered an expert?) as well as its outcomes (Who is burdened? Who benefits?). Clearly assessing power dynamics embedded within planning efforts may assist in identifying and preventing tradeoffs counter to equity.

Second, cases of green gentrification demonstrate why an environmental justice lens – one that attends to procedural, distributional, and recognition-based concerns – provides an appropriate model for social workers to engage within environmental topics. Social workers who aim to protect the environment, but neglect economic and social injustices, risk inadvertently increasing segregation and inequality. If, for example, social workers successfully advocate to remediate contamination or secure environmental amenities without also tending to affordable housing, the protection of small businesses, and the distribution of green jobs to residents, they risk displacing the very people intended to benefit from their efforts, paradoxically reproducing environmental injustices (Dale & Newman, 2009). Thus, a role exists for community and policy practitioners, including those who work in planning agencies, social action organizations, or community development corporations, to take an intersectional rather than a siloed approach to environmental topics that integrate economic, social, and environmental concerns.

A third practice principle, also consistent with an environmental justice approach, is that the people most impacted by land-use decisions – particularly people of color and people who are poor – merit a role in deciding their outcomes (Schlosberg, 2007). To amplify local voices, social workers can join a local organization to support residents in developing collective efficacy and local power. This type of intervention matters because low-resourced residents are less likely to participate in environmental decision making than more privileged residents due to social-psychological and structural barriers (Naiman, Schusler, & Schuldt, 2019). Social workers who are trained in community organization can help residents

collectively overcome these barriers, including skepticism about the value of participation due to a history of marginalization. For example, they can identify resources that facilitate participation, such as child care and transportation. Additionally, in a neoliberal context that privileges scientific knowledge and technocratic solutions, social workers might facilitate citizen-based scientific research while building reciprocal alliances with academics, as was the case in Flint, Michigan (Krings et al., 2019; Teixeira et al., 2019). In sum, social workers have many potential roles to play in supporting true participation that go beyond informing residents after land-use decisions have been made and, rather, redistribute power to those who historically have been marginalized in decision-making processes (Arnstein, 1969).

A fourth practice principle that merits additional research is what Curran and Hamilton (2012) described as a “just green enough” approach to development. They contend that it is possible to support greening in a way that maximizes health benefits but is not so drastic as to raise real estate prices. They found that projects that fit the existing character of a neighborhood are less likely to lead to gentrification and that maintaining working-class jobs, including industrial employment, can act as a gentrification buffer. Curran and Hamilton described this as a delicate balance: remove as much of the environmental hazard as possible to assure community health while allowing industrial uses for the explicit purpose of maintaining the area’s working-class population. Wolch, Byrne, and Newell (2014) argued that in addition to a “just green enough” strategy, interventions should include the commitment of public officials and planners to control real estate developments that catalyze gentrification and residential segregation. Additionally, Hamilton and Curran (2013) pointed out that the new residents (some of whom worked in nonprofits) were also motivated by social justice concerns and that they were not always oppositional to long-term residents or their concerns.

The fifth practice principle is that, while local interventions may help to prevent or mitigate local injustices, it is necessary to bear in mind that climate change and local problems often arise from global systems that create constraints at the local level. Community-based and pro-poor policies are needed to transform the dominant logic of economic growth and address underlying drivers of climate change, inequality, poverty, insufficient affordable housing, and inadequate access to social welfare services (Boetto, 2017; Peeters, 2012). Similarly, there is a need to better understand policies, such as community benefit agreements, that ensure job opportunities and local investments in conjunction with environmental improvements. Social workers trained in

political change and policy practice can support these structural transformations.

While these five practice principles are necessarily tentative, they suggest initial directions for social work practitioners to engage in sustainable development, and they identify lines of inquiry for research that assesses how to maximize the social and economic benefits associated with environmental remediation and urban greening. They provide tangible ways in which social work practitioners and scholars can rethink sustainable development in a manner that addresses environmental gentrification, affordability, cultural change, the loss of social networks, and possible displacement, and thus assure economic and social equity alongside environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to contribute to social work practice knowledge in a way that promotes truly sustainable development. In particular, we introduced the concept of environmental gentrification (Checker, 2011; Dooling, 2008) as a cautionary example of how projects that reduce contamination or increase environmental amenities can raise real estate prices and, intentionally or unintentionally, displace vulnerable groups. Yet, at the same time, the values and principles of both social work and environmental justice demand equitable access in resources, decision-making authority, and representation. This presents an ethical and practical dilemma: How can social workers support community groups and policies that aim to equitably distribute environmental benefits in a way that does not unintentionally harm marginalized groups?

To help resolve this dilemma, we conducted a systematic literature review to understand how communities respond to environmental gentrification. Although our search produced only 10 articles, each was rich in detail. These cases demonstrated how power dynamics influence residents’ responses, including their goals and strategies. They also revealed practice principles that merit future examination. These include recognizing that sustainable development can contribute to inequitable social outcomes; drawing on environmental justice as a lens for engaging with environmental issues; supporting vulnerable residents in developing their collective efficacy; attending to housing affordability, small business viability, and employment opportunities for existing residents within environmentally focused development projects; and connecting local interventions with structural transformation on larger scales to address the root causes of environmental degradation and social inequalities. Applying these principles, social workers can contribute to efforts to make

sustainable development practice consistent with theory in a way that honors economic, social, and environmental justice.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Appendix

Table A1. Article summaries, presented by year of publication.

Citation	Location	Proposed development	Community goal	Tactics	Outcomes
Checker (2011)	Harlem neighborhood of New York City, New York, United States	The Harlem Community Development Corporation (HCDC) proposed to re-purpose land to create new parks. Residents interpreted the plan as consistent with redevelopment that accelerates gentrification and prioritizes the needs of new residents over current ones. The article situates this conflict within the history of environmental justice organizing in Harlem	Long-term residents who attended a public meeting opposed the proposal entirely. An organizer with the West Harlem Environmental Action Coalition (WE ACT) suggested a potential compromise in which HCDC reduced the park's size, thus protecting local parking spaces, in exchange for community support	WE ACT's mission is to use community-based, participatory planning to increase environmentally and socially responsible development. Their tactics included protests, lawsuits, lobbying, research, and engaging in coalition work	The author suggests that WE ACT has moderated its approach, in part because of its involvement in an advisory committee for the mayor's Office of Sustainability and Long Range Planning. She suggests that this role led the city to adopt some of WE ACT's initiatives, yet also limited the organization's ability to take a critical stance. She suggests that this led to a more consensual form of politics and, ultimately, cooptation of WE ACT
Pearsall (2012)	Three neighborhoods in New York City, New York, United States: (i) Greenpoint in Brooklyn, (ii) Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn, (iii) Stuyvesant Town on the Lower East Side of Manhattan	New York City's sustainability plan, PlaNYC 2030, promoted efforts to remediate or revitalize former industrial urban waterfronts, ultimately amplifying gentrification This study employs a resilience framework to explore what enables residents to resist displacement and play more active roles in neighborhood planning	Long-term residents in the study opposed gentrification because it disrupts their community network and threatens the character of the neighborhood, including the loss of small businesses. Yet, within their gentrifying neighborhood, they were trying to adapt	The author identified social, economic, and political methods that residents used to remain resilient to gentrification. Some, especially young people, found roommates to share the cost of apartments. Others bought homes when prices were low. Those who could not afford a home attempted to find rent-stabilized units, public housing, or housing assistance. Politically, long-term residents and homeowners were involved in community boards and coalitions. They spoke out against development projects at community meetings and worked to designate a historical area so that buildings could not exceed six stories	The neighborhoods were already gentrified and rents were increasing. The author found that "resilience at this time and place manifest most strongly at the individual and household (rather than community) level" (p. 1023). Predictably, homeowners also adapted more easily than renters due, in part, to many rent-controlled units being transformed to market rate The three case studies indicate that gentrification has reduced city- and community-level resilience and that displacement has changed the social fabric of the communities. However, some individuals and families used coping strategies to stay in their homes
Curran and Hamilton (2012)	Greenpoint neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York City, New York, United States	There was a proposal to clean a massive, underground oil plume near Newtown Creek – one of the most polluted industrial waterways in the United States	The goal of a community coalition – which included long-term residents as well as gentrifiers – was to force the cleanup of the Creek. Yet, they also wanted the community to be "just green enough," meaning that it would maintain its industrial base. This strategy aimed to improve the health and quality of life of residents without attracting speculative development or gentrification	Long-term residents conducted decades of environmental activism related to the Creek and the pollution caused by nearby oil refineries. Long-term residents educated new ones who moved into the neighborhood without knowledge of the contamination. The new residents contributed skills like "graphic design, multimedia, and communications" (p. 1033) and leveraged their position as part of the "desirable" creative class	In 2004, an environmental organization filed a lawsuit against Exxon Mobil, followed by a lawsuit from the State Attorney General. In 2010, following a settlement, the Creek was designated as a Superfund site and Exxon paid \$19.5 million for community-based Environmental Benefits Projects. The authors conclude that urban sustainability can open new spaces for democracy within the neoliberal city – including potential for collaborations between long-term residents and gentrifiers – and that gentrification is not an inevitable consequence of green-ing, at least in the near term

Table A1. (Continued)

Citation	Location	Proposed development	Community goal	Tactics	Outcomes
Hamilton and Curran (2013)	Greenpoint in Brooklyn, New York City, New York, United States	See above – Curran and Hamilton (2012) draw upon the same case	Similar to Curran and Hamilton (2012), the goal was to clean the Newtown Creek without contributing to environmental gentrification. This study, however, focused on how long-term residents strategically allied with gentrifiers who brought new resources and political capital	Long-term residents educated the gentrifiers about the community's history of contamination and activism, and the "just green enough" approach. The long-term residents held moral authority and institutional knowledge while the gentrifiers organized events, created websites, and engaged media who had previously viewed the contamination as status quo. Additionally, the environmental organization Riverkeepers conducted independent soil tests that expanded the potential scope of contamination beyond what was reported by Exxon Mobil and the State. These findings led residents of affluent neighboring areas to push for remediation. Riverkeepers also took stakeholders and journalists on boat tours to view the contamination	Although residents had advocated for a cleanup since the 1970s, national media attention and additional enforcement by the State followed the neighborhood's gentrification. The settlement included funds to ensure that the terms of the cleanup are followed through. The authors suggest that this case demonstrates how long-term residents can inform the understanding of new ones rather than being overtaken by new voices and priorities. In this way, there can be a more socially just view of environmentalism and sustainability
Anguelovski and Alier (2014)	This conceptual analysis (rather than place-based study) includes examples of international environmental movements	This article lays out a framework for understanding the environmentalism of the poor and its relationship to environmental justice organizing. It includes campaigns relating to environmental gentrification	The authors describe three types of environmentalism: (i) the Cult of Wilderness, (ii) the Gospel of Eco-Efficiency and (iii) the Environmentalism of the Poor. They argue that the poor in urban areas have fought against inequitable exposure to contamination and access to environmental goods. More recently, they contest land speculation and gentrification	The authors illustrate how environmental groups in marginalized urban neighborhoods resist environmental gentrification. Tactics include claims for recognition and inclusion in decision making, such as those advanced by Indigenous groups for political rights and cultural preservation. Additionally, environmental justice groups, such as those one in the Dudley neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts attend to affordable housing	The authors suggest that the ideas that undergird the Environmental Justice Movement and the Environmentalism of the Poor are similar in thought and practice. They provide examples of local and regional organizations coming together globally to press for policies that defend poor and Indigenous communities. However, no coordinating structure exists to unite these groups
McKendry and Janos (2015)	Duwamish River Valley of South Seattle, Washington, United States Calumet region of Southeast Chicago, Illinois, United States	The Calumet region in Southeast Chicago is home to more than a hundred acres of Superfund sites, plus steel mills and heavy industry. In 2000, the City of Chicago announced plans to create a Calumet Open Space Reserve, which would include wetlands and bike trails The Duwamish River Valley is the heart of industry in Seattle. There is conflict over how to clean its industrial contamination.	Both cleanups were framed (by the City of Chicago and a public-private Seattle partnership, respectively) as important for producing economic benefits. In Chicago, residents were doubtful that they would share in economic benefits, but they had not advanced an alternative vision for green development. In Seattle, the Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition (DRCC) suggested that the cleanup should protect local communities, support small businesses, and use participatory planning methods	Chicago – While individuals expressed distrust of the City's plan, they responded with "skepticism and apathy." Seattle – Also skeptical, the DRCC utilized a provision in the Superfund law that allows for the formation of a Community Advisory Group to influence the plan for cleaning and redevelopment. The DRCC politicized the cleanup process and hired their own experts to review technical reports. They presented a long-term vision that "puts the Duwamish River and its diverse inhabitants, rather than economic development, at its center" (p. 52). This vision was developed following a participatory visioning project with representative stakeholders	Chicago – Because of the region's high unemployment, many city leaders and residents welcomed any potential jobs. Even as the city emphasized the natural restoration of the area, it offered incentives for heavy industries to locate there including a cement plant and open site for oil refining by-products Seattle – The DRCC vision included concerns about gentrification within their planning process, and they called for a cleanup that preserves community character, strengthens community connectedness, allows for subsistence (rather than solely recreational) fishing, and develops affordable housing and cultural centers. Still, the implementation of their vision was not guaranteed

Citation	Location	Proposed development	Community goal	Tactics	Outcomes
Miller (2016)	Gowanus neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York City, New York, United States	There were plans to remedy contamination in the Gowanus canal, one of the most polluted waterways in the United States. As these plans had developed, the area was gentrifying	This study assessed the degree to which residents' voices were taken into account, or not, and why. In this way, this study was not only examining tactics of resistance but also barriers to participation. Specifically, the author examined a Community Advisory Group sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency	A behavior characterized as resistance was that some landlords chose not to raise the rent	Homeowners were more likely to participate in the open meetings than renters. People living in public housing stated that they did not attend because they perceived that their voices did not matter to the process or that the cleaning was not important to them Some respondents stated that they stopped attending meetings because they were turned off by conflict, repetition, or inefficiencies in the process
Angelovski (2016)	Conceptual rather than place-based analysis that includes examples of international environmental movements	This paper presents a historical analysis rather than a place-based case	The author examines the history and evolving frames of the urban environmental justice movement – from fighting contamination to mobilizing for environmental goods and resisting environmental gentrification. She argues that environmental justice groups are now confronted with a strategic paradox in which support for green amenities can trigger gentrification	Recent environmental justice tactics include protests relating to smart growth policies, tree planting, bike lanes, street closures, and corporate health food stores	Environmental justice organizations connect their demands with affordable homes and place identity. However, "perhaps the greatest challenge today for EJ groups is to witness longtime demands for urban sustainability backfiring at them" because of gentrification (p. 30). As a result, they struggle to articulate a clear vision for environmental justice
Graham et al. (2016)	Two neighborhoods in New York City, New York, United States: 1. The Lower East Side of Manhattan 2. The Rockaways neighborhood of Queens	Lower East Side – The neighborhood had a wealth of community organizations serving racially and ethnically diverse low-income populations, yet it was rapidly gentrifying The Rockaways – The area had high racial and economic diversity, but was highly segregated with predominantly white homeowners on the west side and multiracial residents in multi-family buildings or public housing on the east side Both neighborhoods were hit by storm surges from superstorm Sandy and receiving investments to rebuild	The Lower East Side community organizations were working to (i) develop a coordinated system to provide immediate relief following any future disasters and (ii) advocate for government investment in infrastructure including affordable housing and locally owned businesses The community organizations in the Rockaways were focused on present needs including unaffordable rents, unemployment, drug abuse, and at-risk youth rather than long-term perspectives	Community-based organizations in both neighborhoods provided direct services for residents following the superstorm. In the long term, Lower East Side organizations were connecting recovery and disaster preparedness plans to the notion that residents deserve to stay in their community. They advocated for infrastructure projects that benefit existing residents such as using vacant land as a stormwater catchment rather than a place for new development. In the Rockaways, community groups were not united with a long-term vision. Although they were pursuing a Community Benefits Agreement that included some resilience concerns, the bulk of their demands related to economic issues that existed before, but were exacerbated by, Sandy	The authors suggest that neighborhoods with a history of community activism and experience with gentrification's impacts are better able to mobilize around resilience, while socio-spatially isolated neighborhoods lack the civic capacity to pursue resilience efforts

Table A1. (Continued)

Citation	Location	Proposed development	Community goal	Tactics	Outcomes
Lubitow et al. (2016)	Humboldt Park neighborhood in Chicago, Illinois, United States	In 2003, the Chicago Department of Transportation proposed the development of bike lanes in the center of this predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood. The proposal was part of the mayor's citywide strategy to attract young, affluent residents to Chicago. The residents of Humboldt Park worried about associated gentrification and the loss of cultural identity	The community goal was to oppose the bike paths. However, the article juxtaposes the lack of engagement by city planners with the strategy and tactics of a local bicycle shop that took efforts to successfully engage within the community's culture, suggesting that a different approach might have been received better	Residents participated in online blogs, contacted their local Alderman, and spoke out at public meetings. Ultimately, however, the choice was the Alderman's, who framed his opposition as a matter of safety, a rhetorical strategy that he deemed to be more effective than opposing potential gentrification	The proposal to build the bike lanes was met with community resistance and a veto from the local Alderman. The authors suggest that this resistance was grounded in tensions associated with gentrification and neighborhood identity that might have been mediated by engaging the community in planning