

My Broadening Definition of “Person-in Environment” Theory & Practice  
Social Work & Environmental Justice Organizing  
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Guest Speaker at the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Social Work Day at the United Nations

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This year marked the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Social Work Day at the United Nations, encompassing the theme of Community and Environmental Sustainability. With peers of mine working at the United Nations for their field placements, I had heard about the upcoming event and was instantly intrigued. At the University of Connecticut’s School of Social Work, I was a macro-focused student who had declared community organizing as my field of study. Additionally, I had spent time throughout the year promoting the need for social workers to engage in environmental justice work, through collecting donations and spending time at camp and the front lines at Standing Rock, as well as educating my peers, friends and family on what could be done locally. I also attended local meetings, events and rallies, in addition to focusing on Environmental Justice and Indigenous rights in my schoolwork and planning events. The announcement of Social Work Day at the United Nations not only excited me, but lit a fire within me comparable to the one that compelled me to drive to Standing Rock.

A short time after, one of my peers placed at the United Nations invited me to not only attend, but to speak at the event as a student of Social Work. As one who not only studies social work and social justice, but someone who actively reminds everyone at school of the Water Protectors and their fight, I was asked to speak on my experience as a social worker, a student, an organizer and activist. A month earlier, I took a class field trip to the United Nations and remember stating, “It is my dream to one day speak here, about something I not only work on behalf of, but care about deeply”. I accepted the offer to be a guest speaker, almost instantly.

Throughout the process of gathering my thoughts of what I could possibly say to a room of fellow social work students and professionals from all over the world, I frequently encountered cases of advanced “writer’s block”. Not only was I trying to compact the ongoing fight at Standing Rock, but also a history of oppression and environmental racism against indigenous peoples and other communities. Additionally, every day I felt a different emotion regarding my experience and continued work; frustration, anger, compassion, love, fatigue and an ongoing critical analysis of my own involvement as a social worker. I am sure I am not alone when it comes to analyzing our work as either students in field placements or professionals, and how expansive of a process this turns out to be. “How do I go about this the best way?”, “What else can and should I be doing?”, “Am I misrepresenting an entire movement, a group of people, a community by discussing my perspective?”.

Developing an identity as an ally can be an intimidating task. I continue to evaluate my work and privilege when taking on this role and advocating for certain groups, communities and movements in which I do not fully self-identify. When planning events on campus, I made it clear that I did not want to be the “voice”, I was more than comfortable sharing my own perspective and experience, but I felt it was more important to bring indigenous water protectors and activists to campus. Goodman (2011) states, “Mostly important, people from dominant groups need to find ways for people, from marginalized groups to speak for themselves- by ensuring they are present or by including their voices in their own words.” (pg. 172) This aspect of allyship, organizing and advocacy is a crucial step in fighting for social justice. With this in mind, I did not essentially speak on my experience organizing around Environmental Justice, but rather reminded attendees of Social Work Day at the United Nations to not raise our own voices, but the voices of those of which we advocate on behalf of.

A quote from the speech:

*“I chose to spend Thanksgiving break at Standing Rock because I can write a paper on organizing... I can take an analytical look at different styles of organizing, but as a student of social work when would I **actually** do something about it? And be **that advocate** ...that ally, that literally and figuratively stands in solidarity on the front lines? .... ? Our profession allows us to work in a transitory manner, from micro to macro or macro to micro- Today, I invite all of you, and all my social worker friends, peers, professors and coworkers to join us on the front lines.”*

My privilege allowed me to decide to travel to Standing Rock, but my privilege was also the reason in which I left. Water protectors gave up their livelihoods, their homes and their safety to defend what is sacred because they did not have a choice, when I felt I had to return because I had commitments such as deadlines for school or work. You cannot be an effective ally and organizer without acknowledging what makes your experience and participation different than those you are advocating for. The relationship between social work and environmental justice is clear: when applying the person-in-environment theory into practice, one must also consider the natural environment. There is extensive proof that oppressed communities and marginalized populations live in conditions plagued with environmental degradation, as well as lack of control over natural resources. It is time to start recognizing the faces of friends, peers and colleagues on the front lines, as it is outlined in our Code of Ethics to act on behalf of justice.

Source (s):

Goodman, D. J. (2001). *Winter Roundtable Series: Promoting diversity and social justice: Educating people from privileged groups* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd. doi: 10.4135/9781452220468



Elizabeth Gustafson is a 2017 MSW graduate at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work, with a community organizing field of study. A lifelong civic and social responsibility advocate, Elizabeth continues to apply a human rights framework to previous coursework, field placements and individual advocacy involvement. As a recent graduate, Elizabeth hopes to work in the field of social and environmental justice at the macro level.

Elizabeth was drawn to the Standing Rock movement, as it raised undeniable human rights concerns as well as the need to address environmental sustainability and environmental racism. She began organizing in the UConn community, and utilized her professional and personal networks to obtain needed donations requested by Water Protectors at Standing Rock. During her Thanksgiving break from UConn, Elizabeth drove to North Dakota to deliver donations, and volunteer in any capacity that was needed. Upon return to Connecticut, Elizabeth has continued organizing and advocacy efforts on behalf of the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Environmental Justice.