

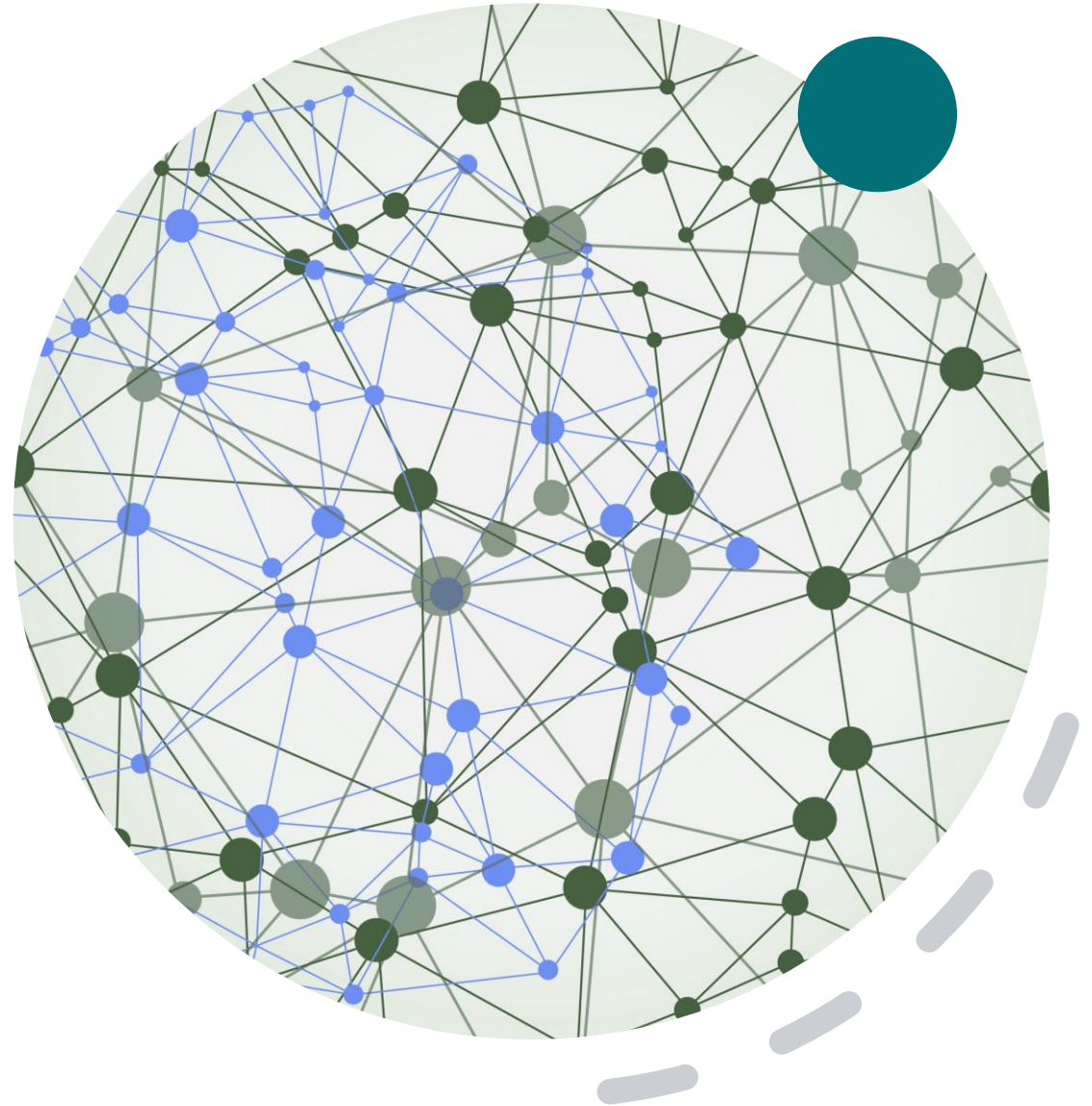


# Environmental Responsiveness in Social Work Education: **Advancing Sustainable Water and Safe Sanitation to Achieve Agenda 2063 Goals**

Issie Jacobs

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**The African Union 2026  
theme:  
Assuring sustainable water  
availability and safe  
sanitation systems to  
achieve the goals of Agenda  
2063**


On 14 February 2026 the AUC Chairperson, Mr Mahmoud Ali Youssouf made the following resolution: From Resolution to Reality: Delivering Water and Sanitation for “The Africa We Want.”

With this resolution water as the most fundamental, life-sustaining and strategic resource of the Africa continent, **was placed at the centre of the agenda.**

Inadequate water and sanitation access costs the African continent billions of dollars annually in lost productivity and healthcare expenses.

To achieve Agenda 2063 Goals, solutions must go beyond infrastructure engineering. Sustainable progress requires local ownership and community participation to plan and maintain water systems.

Social work education should equip practitioners with the micro and macro skills necessary to advocate for equitable water governance, ensure community buy-in, and translate continental policies into localised realities.



Women and girls globally, and in Africa specifically bear the brunt of the water and sanitation crisis

- Globally 1.8 billion people live in households without water supplies on the premises.
- An estimate of 1.2 billion people in sub-Saharan Africa live without water supplies on the premises.
- More than half a billion people share sanitation facilities with other households – compromising privacy, dignity and safety of especially women and girls.

# What are the consequences?

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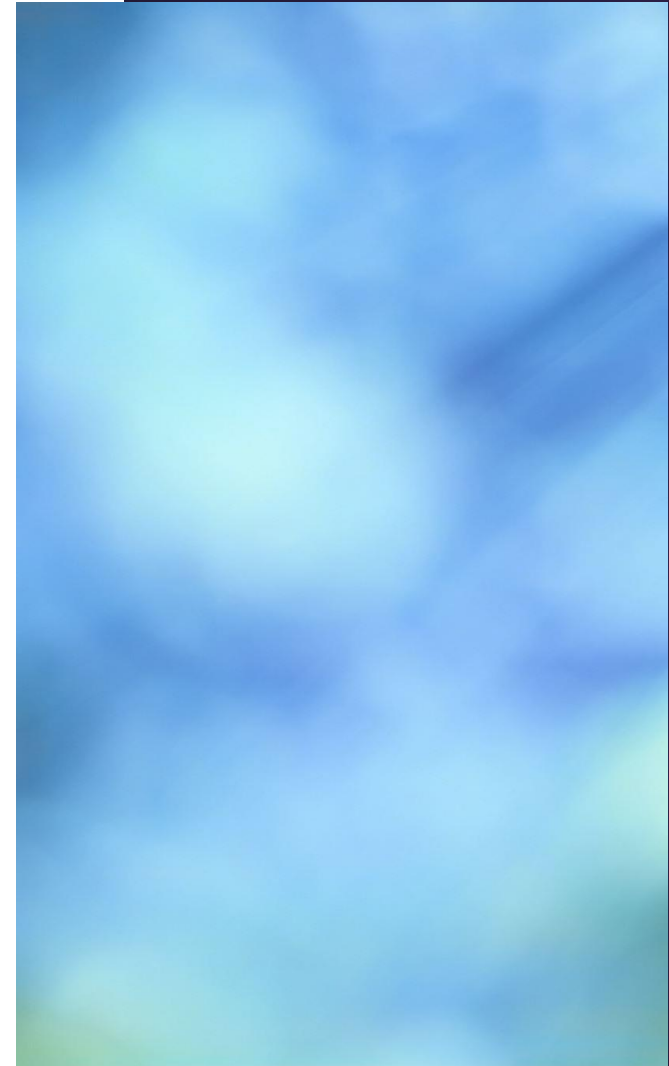
Inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services increase health risks for women and girls and limit their ability to safely and privately manage their periods.

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Women and girls not only face WASH-related infectious diseases, like diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections, they face additional health risks because they are vulnerable to harassment, violence, and injury when they must go outside the home to haul water or just to use the toilet.

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1.4 million lives are lost each year due to inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene.





# Assuring sustainable water and safe sanitation systems align across global and African frameworks

Agenda 2063 (African Union)	Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	Global Social Work Agenda (2010–2030)
<p><b>Goal 1: Quality of life, well-being and human dignity</b></p> <p><b>Goal 7: Climate-resilient &amp; environmentally sustainable communities</b></p> <p><b>Cross-cutting: Health, equity, water resource governance</b></p>	<p>SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation (core anchor)</p> <p>Strong links to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>SDG 3: Health</li><li>SDG 1: Poverty reduction</li><li>SDG 5: Gender equality</li><li>SDG 10: Inequality reduction</li><li>SDG 13: Climate action</li></ul>	<p>Social and economic equality - addressing service exclusion</p> <p>Dignity and human rights - water as a basic human right</p> <p>Environmental sustainability - climate justice and resilience</p> <p>Community participation - inclusive governance of resources</p>



The critical question however is:



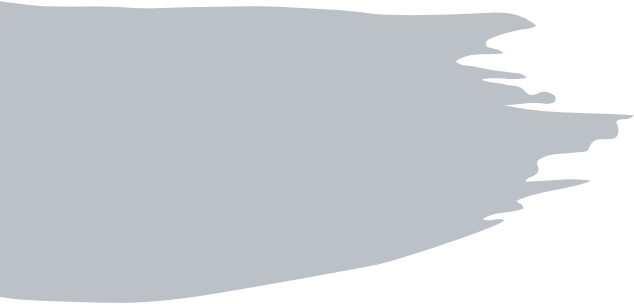
If social work is informed by the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, why has undergraduate social work education not yet evolved to become environmentally responsive?

THE CLIMATE IS  
CHANGING.

WHY AREN'T WE?

# The urgency for a paradigm shift in social work education

African environmental and decolonial social work scholars increasingly contend that conventional Western-oriented social work paradigms are insufficient for addressing contemporary ecological crises, thereby supporting broader arguments for environmentally responsive and contextually relevant social work education and practice. The paradigm shift necessitates a shift toward environmentally responsive and indigenous African frameworks grounded in Ubuntu, Indigenous knowledge systems, sustainability, and ecological justice.



Martinez, (2021) does not refer to a paradigm shift but that social work needs to **reinvent** itself. This would entail that social work would recognise the meaning and value of politics for social work. Politics is a matter of power and participation to decide the collective affairs of a society. And social work form part of this society.

“Promoting the worth and dignity of people implies the need to incorporate a political dimension in global debates of social work. It means the inclusion of political dimensions in meetings, debates and dialogues, and in publications, and in the field of social work training so that we can include it in practice” (Martinez 2021). It is only then that social work and our role in addressing climate change issues and the accompanying social and environmental injustices will be acknowledged and taken seriously.

Conley et al. (2025): “Unlike other helping professions, social work was founded to be political, with an explicit call to engage in political action for a more socially just society. However, despite sustained inequitable policy outcomes, most social workers are not politically active, as social work education fails to prepare students to meaningfully engage in politics. Political social work is an approach that builds political engagement into all social work practice with goals of empowering students, practitioners, and clients to participate politically.”

How then should  
social work  
education become  
environmentally  
responsive?



# Definition of environmental responsiveness

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It refers to the *recognition of the importance of the natural environment by business organisations and its integration into strategic decision-making*. It includes both compliance-based environmental responsiveness as well as voluntary initiatives (e.g., investing in environment management systems, product stewardship and a commitment to sustainable development) (Sandhu, et al., 2014).

Accordingly, organisations that are environmentally responsive will comply with the environmental regulations and will also exhibit some or all of the following criteria such as:

- Having a written environmental plan,
- Communicating this plan to stakeholders,
- Rewarding environmental performance,
- Conducting regular environmental audits,
- Having top management support for environmental issues, and
- Encouraging employee environmental training (Sandhu et al., 2014).

# A few suggestions

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- Integrate environmental social work in the undergraduate curriculum.
  - Integrate African-centred environmental ethics such as Ubuntu, *Ubudlelane* and *Harambee*, and promote culturally relevant approaches to sustainability. This aligns with decolonial educational approaches, and the aspirations of Agenda 2063 for African-led solutions.
  - Be guided by existing Indigenous knowledge systems.
  - Expand students' advocacy and policy engagement skills.
  - Incorporate behavioural change and environmental citizenship theories and approaches in the curriculum.
  - Promote interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration such as environmental scientists, engineers, public health professionals, urban planners, disaster management practitioners.
  - Enhance field education and practice exposure to environmental NGOs, community sustainability projects, water and sanitation initiatives, and disaster management programmes.
  - Develop and strengthen research capacity in environmental social work.

Guided by the African concept of *Harambee*, academics across Africa are encouraged to come together in collective action to develop a shared and coherent approach to environmental responsiveness in social work education, practice, research, and curriculum development.

# Final thoughts

We should stop talking and start doing

Let us as academics not be held accountable for failing to operationalise environmental responsiveness



The image features a white background with decorative curved lines in the corners. In the top right and bottom left, there are thick, multi-layered curved lines in shades of light purple and grey. The text "THANK YOU" is centered in a bold, teal font.

**THANK YOU**

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