

Episode: Green Social Work and Environmental Justice.

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Prof. Peter Sobota [00:00:04] From the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Welcome back to the inSocialWork Podcast. Hi everybody. I'm Peter Sobota. Good as always to have you along. For a long time, social work has positioned itself as the person and environment empowerment profession, characterized by an ecological perspective. That said, it seems like social work practitioners feel comfortable and competent, helping people cope with the consequences and the impacts of environmental stressors, but not so much comfort and competence with working in practice spheres that work to put a stop to these impacts at their source. Our guest today is Alisa Chirico. Alisa is a social worker, landscape architect, and a student of comparative literature who does not appear to have this struggle. The societal values related to power and wealth, competition for resources, and exploitation of natural resources and environments that shape our culture often offer progress for some, but often at the expense and oppression of the most vulnerable members of our society. If social workers are going to work for change and the empowerment of vulnerable populations, it would be wise for us to lead the fight for environmental justice and social change against the forces that leave our clients out in the cold. Miss Chirico will discuss all things related to environmental social work and guide us through the connections. They can help us develop more comprehensive conceptualizations and assessments and be more articulate and effective. Players fighting for social, economic and racial justice in our roles as practitioners, leaders, and educators. Alisa Chirico, MLA, is a student in the master of social work program at UB School of Social Work. She also has a master's degree in landscape architecture from Cornell University. Hi Alisa, welcome to inSocialWork.

Alisa Chirico [00:02:17] Hi, Peter. How are you?

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:02:18] I'm really well. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

Alisa Chirico [00:02:22] Yeah. Me too.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:02:23] All right. So I've already told you that I think you have a really interesting and unique path to not only the social work profession, but also your specialty. So I would invite you to just tell us all what I know a little bit about. And could you, could you just do that to just get us going and understand how you got here?

Alisa Chirico [00:02:47] Well, it all started in 1993. And Mrs. Wilbur's.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:02:53] This is a one hour podcast. At least.

Alisa Chirico [00:02:54] I know. So I started, being aware of environmental issues in her class. So I think I mentioned that because it goes back to my awareness of how as a society and as a culture, we knew some of the things that we had done poorly in the past. And I had this assumption that, oh, now we know what we need to do to to better. And so we're going to. Then I decided that I wanted to be a therapist, and I kind of took a circuitous route through college. I wound up basically following a path to landscape architecture.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:03:31] Yes. And so clinical therapist to landscape architecture. Yeah.

Alisa Chirico [00:03:36] Yeah.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:03:37] Well, I told the listeners that this was going to be unique, so.

Alisa Chirico [00:03:39] Okay. Yes, yes. So, so yeah. So I decided that I wanted to be a therapist. That didn't go very well for me in my undergraduate experience. And so it was a very heavy testing environment there. So I switched majors to comparative literature at a certain point when I realized that grades matter on just what I was learning. Oh, those. So. So I had this, like, cultural awareness. The comp lit degree was everything that I was already doing as electives and was everything that was going really well for me. So I was I was very happy and very successful in that. And then. You know, I graduated with a comparative literature degree into the recession of 2009. Yeah, and that wasn't quite viable career path. So I took some time off and decided that, you know, I, I still really felt passionately about helping the world doing something meaningful and helpful in the world. And so I went into landscape design and pursued a degree in landscape architecture. I really loved that work that I did. I really loved the discipline, loved everything that I learned. I went on to work in residential design. I did a little bit of work stewarding post-industrial Meadowlands and really rounded that out eventually with working in edible gardens and food systems and farming. Then I just thought, you know, I always knew that I wanted to bring. Some of my knowledge full circle and kind of democratize the information that I had in these really, really specialized areas. And, and so, you know. Along the way, I decided that I wanted to come full circle back into social work, to be able to be heard about the things that I know about the environment and about people and how they interact, how they benefit from mutual care, and stewardship. And so that's how I'm here today.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:05:50] Yeah. And thanks. First blush, it sounds. Securities, maybe. But like most of these things in hindsight. It makes pretty good sense, actually.

Alisa Chirico [00:06:05] Yeah.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:06:05] You know, I had my own bout through psychology a long time ago. And what kind of drew me, to social work rather than psychology was the whole, like, macro environment and that perspective that, you know, this place where we live and places, you know, have a lot to do with. Yeah. Kind of it's the things that happen to individual people. So thank you. And the fit actually between all of this makes perfect sense.

Alisa Chirico [00:06:37] And it does. Yeah. The thing that landscape architecture gave me was this sort of overarching systemic background. So landscape architecture happens at different scales. So with with social work you have micro, macro, mezzo in landscape you have site scale, you have going all the way up to regional scale and these systemic changes. And we understand within landscape architecture how, certain social practices like redlining have really.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:07:05] The.

Alisa Chirico [00:07:06] Tangible outcomes for people in their lives.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:07:10] Yeah. All right. Thanks. So before we get into, I think what I would call the the nuts and bolts of our discussion, what I wanted to start with, if it's okay with you, was just laying out some, I think, important definitions that'll kind of frame the rest of our conversation. I just want to make sure we're all talking about the same thing. This would be almost like a quiz here, so bear with me. How would you define and I understand this is probably going to be your take on it. How would you define environmental? Social?

Alisa Chirico [00:07:43] So I think that environmental social work kind of adds the environmental, the larger environmental piece to what we call in social work, the biopsychosocial model. Yeah. So the bio psychosocial model is a model of social work in my definition, that acknowledges that the well-being of the individual is interaction between their their social environment, their mental health, which would be their psycho and their physical safety and well-being. And that's the bio. And then the environmental piece just takes into account the, the ways that our physical environments. So our access to green space are great. Our access to healthy, clean air, water, food. Healthy soils, even the way that our political landscape impacts our wellbeing. That's that environmental piece that that comes into the environmental social work.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:08:38] Yeah, thanks. And that's actually one of the reasons why we wanted to talk with you is because I think a lot of social workers, me included, you know, the environment piece is hopefully the part of how we think about everything. But you could have taken it one step further, I think, and put, I think, a primary focus. I mean, literally the environment and, and and really making that the target and the, the main focus of your thinking in your interventions. So how about, you know, in the definition part of our show here, how about environmental justice?

Alisa Chirico [00:09:18] Yeah. So environmental justice is a huge part of environmental social work as I perceive it. Environmental justice is basically a movement working towards equitable access to healthy social environmental systems. So everybody so it's it's just it's just and it's right for everybody to have a stable home, if that's what they choose to have access to that, to have to not have that compromised by a political. System or. Basically all abilities, all genders, all races, all ethnicities, all sexualities, all ages. Everybody has access to the physiological benefits of stability and safety in their environment.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:10:05] Yeah. And also the right not to have an expressway built in the middle of your neighborhood. So it's actually suburbs can get to downtown quicker, which is exactly what we've kind of done here, unfortunately, in Buffalo.

Alisa Chirico [00:10:21] And also the right to live in a space where, you know, there is an industry carelessly spewing and pollutants into the air or into the water. You know, the Cuyahoga River is currently being threatened right now. Again.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:10:34] Again. Yeah. And yeah, after we got better.

Alisa Chirico [00:10:37] Yeah, we made it better. We were like, yes, good for us at ourselves on the back. And and now with the included again. So yeah.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:10:46] And just to kind of I mean, I think you're by far I have more expertise on this than I, but. I think it's probably fair to say. That. Whenever. The environment is compromised or altered in ways that cause impacts on people's lives. It unfortunately almost seems to fall hardest. I'm the people who are most vulnerable, which I think is.

Alisa Chirico [00:11:16] Exactly.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:11:17] For social work. And what you're talking about.

Alisa Chirico [00:11:19] Yeah, absolutely. No, I mean, we have fast fashion, right? So those of us who, you know, it's everything is intertwined in this in like a capitalist exploitative system. So, the choices that we make to, to clothe ourselves in specific ways have a very negative impact on people who are also being exploited. So the suppression of fair wages here causes us to make choices that aren't maybe the choices that are most ethical, that we would choose if we had. That financial power. And then there's that fall out of other people far away also being exploited, their wages suppressed, their lifestyles being damaged when really, truly awful ways. And we see that with clothing. We see that with our telephones. We see it in so many ways. Furniture. We see that in farming. So it's the people who are doing the most labor and who are the most impoverished, and the people who are those wind up being the people who are most impacted. By a lack of safety in their environments and also by climate change.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:12:30] Yeah, thanks. Well, I actually think you have led in perfectly to my last and final definition, but I'll ask it anyway and let you elaborate if you'd like to. How about defining environmental intersectionality?

Alisa Chirico [00:12:46] Oh, I love environmental intersectionality. So. To me, that is the way that we all do better. When the environment is protected, stewarded properly. We all do better. When women do better, when women do better, the environment does better. We all do better. When we pay attention to indigenous wisdom. We all do better when we care for people who are minorities. So all these things are intertwined and intersecting. And so we can't just think about my environmental impact happens here today on my lawn. My environmental wellness impacts your environmental wellness and your environmental and overall wellness impacts mine as well, because everything is interconnected and intersecting.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:13:37] Yeah. Great. Thank you. And those ideas I think are going to form the container for everything else we end up talking about today. So thanks for doing that. So you know we kind of alluded to this a little bit, but for a long time. You know, our profession has been a kind of. Known for our person in environment, focus and and value. While at the same time, interestingly enough, environmentalism has been really. It's been slow to the table. Is that fair in terms of, social work, education and and and practice? Let alone a dedicated interest. You know, for social workers. And you know, that's why we have you. What's your thought there? Do you? I mean, how do you make sense of that? You know, why did that happen and how? Especially for us of all people.

Alisa Chirico [00:14:41] Yeah. No, I think that's a great question because. You think you would think that we would see that. Implicitly when we start to think about macro issues as social workers. But I think that. Part of the issue is that it feels like it's not our problem. It feels like it doesn't fall within our purview because we're taking care of the social aspect of people's lives, right? And moving outside of that to look at environmentalism or environmental concerns just feels like. Too much. It feels too big. It feels too big for climate scientists. It feels too big for landscape architects. It feels too big once you once you know more, you just know too much in some ways. And it just feels too big. And as social workers, we're dealing with really granular issues, like whether or not a mother. Who is a client of ours, is able to take her child to their doctor's appointments. And what? Why she

can't. Is it because of X, Y or Z thing? And so we we're really we're really trying to take care of like, the nitty gritty of people's daily lives. And then we come home and we just, we just can't cope with this global awareness in this way. But I think that, you know, I heard a professor of mine say last year that social work has a marketing issue. So the way the society sees social workers isn't the way that social workers see social workers. So, you know, the this idea that CPS, you know, threatens your ability to to keep your child rather than being a source for assistance and wraparound services that make it easier for you to be the best parent you want to be and that your child needs. That's the shift that social workers now know that we've taken. But not everybody knows that. Also, you know, social workers, we don't we don't receive, you know, the financial compensation that really we deserve for doing the kinds of work that we're doing because we're we're seeing this as being a very specific kind of discipline. But I think that, you know, environmentalism, more and more people are becoming aware culturally, societally of the importance of our climate of, of of maintaining forests, of taking care of the the earth around us, the soil, eating organic food, when we can, having access to good healthy food. And I think that environmental socialism might actually be the answer to our, our marketing issue, to our image problems, because we can incorporate rather than this hyper professionalism, this, these goals to be, you know, hyper professionalized, trying to be psychologists, trying to prescribe medication, which I don't argue that really, but, but professionalizing ourselves and other way where we're taking into account these, these, these broader issues of our, of the landscapes that we live in as a society and, and as individuals. And I think that environmental socialism can really could really like zhuzh up our image as social workers.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:18:14] I what I would add to that. Is that we're often our own worst enemies to, because we, you know, we limit ourselves to traditional paths and articulations of our work. And to go back to my original question. Sort of is that, you know, we began. You know, the social workers who worked in their early settlement houses, they got this really good. They were they knew what you were talking about. But our profession, to me at least, seems to have we've kind of hitched our wagon onto. And you were alluding to this to like, clinical social work and psychiatric social work. And, you know, whether we did that for status or for better salaries or even because it was needed. You know, that's a whole nother podcast. But I'm going to give you a chance now to get yourself in some trouble. So you ready?

Alisa Chirico [00:19:13] Oh. I'm excited.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:19:14] Yeah. Well. All right. So given all that and you're around students as well, you're you're still in the formal part of your education. You know that a lot of students and even people who who are beyond that in the practice world are interested primarily in clinical work and, you know, largely micro practice. So here's your chance to get yourself in trouble, Lisa. Our clinical social work and environmental. Social work. Mutually exclusive?

Alisa Chirico [00:19:49] Absolutely not. Absolutely not. Why would they be mutually exclusive? No, because I know. No, because as a as a person, as an individual, as a human, I can live in the world with an environmental consciousness of how to behave. I can bring that into my clinical practice, just the way that I could bring my feminism into my clinical practice in a in a way that's safe for me and for my clients, just in the way that I am just in the just in my very being. Right. And I can do that with environmentalism as well. I can I can have a consciousness about how to be in the world, and I can bring that to my sessions with my clients, because not only will I have clients who who are all of my clients will be impacted by environmental issues. I may have a client walk in who I never really

had breathing problems before, but last summer they did when we had wildfires. You know, the smoke from Canadian wildfires coming down? That's that's an environmental impact that's happening to a person who is then going to have to deal with the choice of, you know, their awareness of their health insurance. Right? And whether or not they should go to a doctor and how they should behave in their life. And those people, that person is going to need support around that, possibly around coming to terms with all the things that that might bring in. I might have a client who's facing food insecurity because they live in a part of town where there isn't a decent grocery store, and they maybe they do. Maybe they don't know how to or have access to land or resources to grow their own food. But I can I as a social worker, I can connect them with community organizations like here in Buffalo. We have grassroots gardens. I can connect them with a community garden, place where they can, you know, learn how to workshop, how to take care of things on their own property if they may, or they can have access to a community garden plot. As a social worker, there's so many things that I can do to give people the tools and the access to be better actors in their own lives and empower them to do so.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:22:06] Yeah, okay. I've got I've got two thoughts now that I'm listening to. I mean, the first one that, you know, came to my mind is that, you know, rather than having a client who has asthma. Through your lens. You have a client who has asthma who needs something. But what you also have literally is a public health concern.

Alisa Chirico [00:22:31] Exactly.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:22:32] And an opportunity to partner and to problem solve at that level with our colleagues in 100%.

Alisa Chirico [00:22:41] Yeah, absolutely.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:22:42] So the other.

Alisa Chirico [00:22:43] Thing too is like, if, you know, we have a large refugee population here in Buffalo now, I'm not personally familiar with our refugee population, but climate diaspora is a real thing. People leave places because of climate disasters. There's trauma in that and there's there's displacement in that. And so Buffalo is a place that does have a large refugee population. Being aware of the kinds of trauma and the kinds of experiences people might have been through being displaced or, or, or whatever. That's also really important for us to be aware of when we're working with agencies that are working with, with, immigrant or refugee populations.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:23:21] Yeah. And we would also be, I think, well-served to not only frame it the way you did, but also, you know, talk about this in terms of human rights.

Alisa Chirico [00:23:30] Absolutely. 100%.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:23:34] I don't know. It's we seem to have gotten a lot better about the trauma lens, but we we really do need to get better at articulating our concerns, not only from that. I mean, especially, you know, most trauma and human rights violations are intertwined anyway. So why are we using that language as much as we could? So here is the other thought that I had. And and this will be another chance, maybe, for you to get yourself in some trouble. But you got it in absolutely no trouble with the first one. We'll see what happens. So here's my thought. It seems to me. And I'm just looking for you to react honestly. It seems to me that social workers. Feel comfortable and capable and have

some familiarity, at least, with helping people cope with treating and addressing the kind of the consequences or the symptoms of environmental. Issues or changes that fair. We kind of is that.

Alisa Chirico [00:24:40] But yeah. Yeah. Whether we're whether we're conscious of it or not, that's that's what we're. That's what we do. I mean.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:24:45] Like, like you said, if we see a person who is living in a, in a community where the air's bad and they're having symptomology, we link them to services that will help improve that.

Alisa Chirico [00:24:58] Of course. Yeah.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:24:59] But and here's what I'm wondering if you have some thoughts on but. We don't seem, at least to me. To be so comfortable and familiar with working to outright stop it at the source. Like we don't go into. Grassroots organizing or advocacy. To like, for example, go after the people who might be dumping stuff into our water and to our and into our air. So if you buy that, no, that's that's my premise. If you buy that characterization. Why do you think that is? Why do we we seem to be okay with helping people deal with the symptoms, but we often seem to stop there and we don't. At least in my the way that I move around in the social work world. I don't hear a lot of us who are going after the source in the world. Right?

Alisa Chirico [00:26:06] So. A helpful conceptualization that I came across in a class that I took last year in infant mental health was, you know, this idea of babies coming down a river and needing help and, oh, well, we can pick all these babies up out of the river, right? And give them what they need, scoop them up, take care of them. But why? You know, the question is why? Why are there babies in the river? Like, how did they get there? Put them there. Why are they there? We need to go upriver and we need to look at who's putting babies in this river. And I think that that we need to do that as well within environmental social work. So we need to look at why, why a paint company is dumping, you know, waste into rivers. And we can do that as social workers. You know, we work like, you know, I think you're correct. In saying that, we'll, you know, we'll go to Albany to take care of issues as they come up. But we don't necessarily go to Albany to join forces, at least in my knowledge, my experience, what I've seen, what I hear around me to go to Albany to join forces with, environmentalists, to, to to prevent those things. You know, those are environmental activists who are like, hey, could you could you do x, y thing?

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:27:29] Yes.

Alisa Chirico [00:27:29] And I that's that's specifically what I want to do. That's why I came back to the school so that I could be I could bring that part of myself into the macro and advocacy and maybe policy work that I do in the future. And I am and there are, some people. So, I know one other social worker. Her name is Nicole. CAFOs. Ella.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:27:55] I know, Nicole, and you're pronouncing it better than I am, so.

Alisa Chirico [00:27:58] Okay. Wonderful person. So, so she's working with, she's a leader within Grassroots Gardens, which is the, the organization that I, that I mentioned before, but she works, she's a social worker. She's a PhD student, and, her work is in mental health and gardens. So that's her focus. Her focus. She's also focusing now on, the

lack of tree cover or tree canopy cover, which has multiple environmental, social, benefits, emotional benefits. On the east side of Buffalo, which has the lowest level of tree canopy cover in our city. So there's at least two of us, at least two of us who are doing this.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:28:46] And I shouldn't be laughing. Yeah, yeah.

Alisa Chirico [00:28:49] And I've also brought in, the leader of the University of Buffalo Association of Black Social Workers, the president of that organization, Vanity Withrow. So, she and I and Nicole, and another organization, Western New York Trash Mob. We're working on a couple of different, initiatives that blend social work with environmental projects that are happening this summer. So, so, you know, if, if, if social workers as a whole aren't doing this work, that's okay, because social workers as a whole aren't doing eldercare, right. Social workers as a whole aren't all in child care, you know? So we all have our niche. And I can fold in my awareness of the needs of elders into my environmental work, just as they can fold in their awareness of what a healthy environment looks like for an elder into their work that they're doing.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:29:47] Nicely said, Alyssa. Nicely said. Yeah, and? I think to just take that a little bit of a step further. I know I occasionally find myself encouraging students to not necessarily follow what I kind of call the traditional ladder path, where, you know, you get an MSW, for example, and you go and work at a human service agency of some kind or a clinical setting, and, you know, you grind out a lot of work. And and really to think of your MSW as almost like a skill set that prepares you for work in not human service agencies per se, but things like politics, journalism. Even working in school administrations where you have these terrific opportunities to use your skill set in ways that can affect all of the things that you're talking about. Really be the person in the room, you know, and at the table where these decisions about where to put a dump, you know.

Alisa Chirico [00:30:57] Yeah.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:30:58] And because that's and we can we should be doing that anyway. All right. This is this is not my I guess this is.

Alisa Chirico [00:31:06] I got so sorry. I don't disagree with you, Peter. So. Well, yeah.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:31:10] And and the opportunities that you've spoken to this, I mean, there's opportunities in research and in advocacy and education, social action, community organization. That's where the action happens. And certainly for for what you're talking about in terms of environmental impacts. So all right, let me change gears slightly here. When I hear social workers speaking amongst themselves. Academics or practitioners and students, it really doesn't matter. It's it's actually fairly common to hear that most environmental justice issues are, you know, a straight path to social and economic justice issues. And I know you have some thoughts about that. So I'm giving you an opening. You want to try and make some of those connections.

Alisa Chirico [00:32:09] Oh, goodness. Let's see. So. To me, this comes down to like a basic framework of knowledge being power, money being power and land and land being sovereignty.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:32:27] Here comes capitalism.

Alisa Chirico [00:32:28] There it is. I have this wonderful sweatshirt. It's adorable. That a friend gave me. It's. It says, capitalism caused climate change. You know, it's because we we have this capitalist system that's based on eternal growth, right? Endless growth. The sky's the limit. And, and that that then necessitates exploitation. It absolutely does. Because, you know, if you think about the natural world and natural systems of things, they're cyclical. Right. We have an AB and a flow. We have a summer, fall or winter, a spring. You know, we have death. We have rebirth. It's supposed to be cyclical, but capitalism demands an endless proliferation, and that requires an input, right? That requires something to feed the engine. And who does that? What does that? It's our environment. It's our natural resources and it's ourselves. And that's why we have. That's why so much of our cultural quote unquote, successes are put on the backs of people who have been historically, systematically disenfranchized. So economic justice is environmental justice. And kind of goes back to what I said very briefly before about. You know, when you have suppressed wages, you you know, money is a power, right? So if you have a populace of people who don't have a lot of this one way, we have a voice, then you have a populace who can't make even if they want to make ethical choices around the ways that they consume things, because we all have to consume things in some ways, we don't have access to, to the most ethical decision making that we might choose. And so we become part of this engine, we become part of what feeds it. And, and, you know, that's why we have to that's why it's so important to fight it. But it's also why it becomes so important to be aware of it. Because if you're not aware of the ways in which, you know, the proliferation of cars and vehicles that cause America to to be so sprawling, so stretched out in the ways that we build our cities, people can't access a city center to protest. You know, it really, it impacts and hinders active democracy, the ways that we're meant to be able to use our voices as, as, you know, part of a democratic, supposedly democratic institution. So, you know, when people have so little that they have to go to work, we have these systems that, necessitate no vacations, no time off, got to be at work, even if it's just to sit and stare in an office at a computer, without actually doing anything meaningful. And by meaningful, I mean work that feels meaningful to us as individuals. You know, we can't we don't have that ability. You know, when you do protests, you have people driving by saying, get a job. Now if you want to have a job, you know. And it really it really hinders us. Yeah. And and I think that you could, you could ask most black Americans and they would have a really great answer for you as well about how environmental justice, racial justice, and, economic justice are intimately interwoven.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:35:58] And I think we could ask some indigenous folks that as well. Yeah.

Alisa Chirico [00:36:03] Absolutely.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:36:04] Similar discouraging answers. Thanks. We just see if I can move us in like. Our best attempt to get really practical for anybody who is, you know, listening to this and being inspired or having light bulbs going off while you're speaking. Again, buying some of the things that I think I said more than you did in the beginning. From where you said, how do you think that we can get social workers? And really people in general to to feel the urgency that you clearly feel and to make these connections as readily as you do, because this is not something where, for example, of climate change, this is not something we're talking about now. It's here. And to go to what you just said, you know, to ask, they're going to tell you they've been dealing with it for a while. So I wonder if you've thought about, like, how do we get social workers? And then, of course, the broader population to feel, what you do, the way you do and really to be to be called

urgently into action, do you have any kind of bright ideas other than revolution? Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Alisa Chirico [00:37:28] Other than revolution? Gosh. Well that's it. There we go. You took my answer, Peter. Sorry.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:37:35] I'm all right. Let's back that up. Yeah. Okay.

Alisa Chirico [00:37:37] Radical acceptance. So one of the things that I think that we can do. So there's a couple of things. One. One of them would be the starting point of understanding the ways in which the work that we're actively doing. So if we're. As social workers if we're helping our clients to access reproductive justice, for instance. Right. We're we're connecting, young clients with, with abortion services or with, information care around, you know, their reproductive rights. We can understand how giving our clients that agency results in a better world, economically for that individual, and then also equips that person with that, the tools that they need to move into their world to give that same agency to their friends and their peers. Right. So if we, if we're if we can understand the ways in which the work that we're already doing is helpful on some level, then that equips us as social workers to feel empowered and to feel like we're taking part in something, right. We're not separate from this work. Really. Not really. If we are advocating, you know, because. You know, our clients have issues with transportation and we start advocating for public transportation. That makes all things more accessible to, to our clients and to the people in our towns and cities. That is that is an environmental justice issue. Accessibility is always an environmental justice issue. So just reframing the ways that we understand our work and then expanding on the ways in which we understand that. The other thing is just being intentional about it. About unfolding this in about educating ourselves about expanding our toolbox. Right. So when we when we are working, with policy using using tools like mapping, is is a really interesting and really informative tool that we have access to, as social workers. And I think that that, that would give us a little bit more confidence. And then the other thing is just really expanding our conception of what social work is. As individuals. So I did this project, within my field placement recently. So we're working on so I my clinic placement is at a hemophilia clinic. And so people who menstruate, who have hemophilia, their experience of menstruation is is. Is different, right? It's happening on a different scale. It impacts them much more than maybe people who don't have that issue. And so we, you know, and then that has an impact on what we call period poverty, which is the financial impact, administration. So I put together, under the leadership of my supervisor, I put together, a proposal for positive period packs. So providing education and providing material support for our menstruating patients. And one of the things that I did was, in a sense of expanding what these people have access to in terms of taking care of themselves, incorporating reusable products. So period cups and period underwear, reusable products that can be used for years at a time. So and then also applicator free tampons so that there's a little bit less waste being produced. Right. And so we folded that in we incorporated that in. We had a good economic financial basis in our proposal for incorporating those products. And then that provides a long term solution for these patients and also expands their awareness of what's actually available. And so these patients will be able, if they come back to us and they say, I really loved that period underwear, but I need more pairs. I need more than just one. Then we can then we have the ability to provide them with more of those so that then that that one person has a eliminating their reliance on, disposable products. So and that then combats their period, their experience of period poverty. I think it all fits in together and I and that's because I am who I am. Not everybody would have done that, but I did that because I'm always bringing this in into my awareness of the ways that I'm working. And we actually wound up getting, more money,

more funding than we originally asked for. So it was a really well supported, initiative that we undertook. So that's just one of the ways in which we as social workers can provide for our clients, and our patients, if they're patients, in a multitude of settings.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:42:41] Yeah. You've done a number of really nifty things here. First of all, you've kind of answered the question about why are all, you know, why are all the babies always in the river?

Alisa Chirico [00:42:51] You never go back, right?

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:42:52] Yeah. You gotta go back to, and the other thing that you've done, I think what I loved about your answer to my question about, you know, how can we get people to feel this urgency? I think what you just did is the answer. You have the language. You're able to connect the levels, and you take the time to make the links. You're connecting the dots for people. And I think that's something we could all get better at. You know, I was going to ask you. I'm sorry. Go ahead. No. Good.

Alisa Chirico [00:43:22] And one other thing. So the urgency piece. So thank you for reminding me of that, is that, we can we can fight all of these battles so we can choose our battle. Right? We can choose our cause. The thing that we love, the thing that we care about, you know, we we're really passionate about x, y, z aspect of social work. Those, those causes will be ongoing for a really long time. They'll they're never going to end. You know hopefully they will I mean it'd be really great if we took care of reproductive justice in this country and it was never a problem again. Right. That would be so cool. I would be so happy if children always had access to, like, all the information that they needed about understanding our cultural history, but issues of climate and issues of our environment, they all have their own deadlines. We can't necessarily anticipate when that deadline is. But you know, we live in our sixth mass extinction of the history of this planet. Right now. It's actively happening. Once. Once certain animals are gone, once certain key pieces of different ecosystems are gone, they're never coming back. And even if we, like, reanimate them through science. That requires so much input. So much engineering. And it's really it's truly, really never the same. And so there isn't there isn't urgency that's very real to these things because we can't we can't we can't we can't undo what's been done. So. So I think that that's really an important awareness.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:44:55] Absolutely. You know, and I was also going to ask you about the practical ways in which, you know, for example, even, a social work, especially practitioners who are working largely at the smaller system level, can, can do and what can they incorporate into their practice. But you you basically answered that question. It is wonderful examples. So. Yeah, I'm thinking about. This feels like a place where we could, maybe wrap up the conversation least. But I'm wondering if there's something you would like to get to that I haven't raised. Because we do have. We do have, like, a couple minutes to go here. If you'd like to maybe sneak something in here.

Alisa Chirico [00:45:38] Yeah, I think there's two things that I would like to sneak in. Okay. One of those things is that is is our what? I, you know, our universal right to, the physiological, the true physiological benefits of access to green space. That's very real to, to, you know, the appropriate esthetics of the landscapes that we grew up in. We all have the right to see the night sky, right? We all have the right I, in my belief, to be able to engage with and have access to the natural environment in a way that is, restorative for us as individuals. Right. Like I realized yesterday, trees don't cause trauma. No tree has ever hurt anybody's safety or well-being. And if it has, it's been because of some other force

that wasn't the tree itself, right? The other thing is that, you know, as social workers, we're interested in in issues of diversity and equity and inclusion. We're also interested in becoming more aware of indigenous knowledge of, having more voices, having access to more voices, and having more voices be present in the ways that we, function as a society. We all, you know, many of us are interested in in having access to ancestral ways of growing things, for instance, and I believe very strongly that diversity of our approaches to everything, that works on an environmental basis as well as a social basis, any time you benefit the environment, you benefit people. And and that's. And that's it.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:47:29] Now that is. The place to end right there. I think, in Maryland. Alisa, thanks so much for joining us. You are a live wire and you're you're smart and articulate and and thanks again for taking the time to, you know, to talk with us.

Alisa Chirico [00:47:48] I'm so happy to be here. Thank you so much for having me.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:47:52] Oh, gosh.

Alisa Chirico [00:47:52] This is this is what I came here for. So I'm really appreciative. And I'm so excited. Thank you.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:47:58] Pleasure's ours. Thanks again. Thanks again to our very own Alisa Chirico for joining us today. The residents of Planet Earth who comprise the In Social Work podcast team, our our tech and web guru, Steve Sterman, our production assistant, guest coordinator and digital editor. Nic, DeSmet. Say hi. Nic.

Nic DeSmet [00:48:19] Hey, everybody.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:48:21] And I'm Peter Sobotka. Thanks again for listening. And we'll see you next time, everybody.