



# Community Climate Action Stories



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## Why climate action matters for First Nations communities

**Pat Turner, CEO National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations**

### **1. How does climate change impact the communities your organisation works with and what do you see as the main challenges going forward with the prospect of more climate impacts locked in, including the impact on our ability to address poverty and inequality?**

First Nations people across the world are already feeling the very real impacts of the climate crisis. Aboriginal peoples are being significantly impacted by the frequency and intensity of extreme events, including bushfires, cyclones and drought. But we also face significant cultural displacement and destruction.

In the recent bushfires in NSW, we saw many Aboriginal peoples displaced, as well as the loss of cultural sites and artefacts. Torres Strait Islanders are battling community impacts, changes to ocean acidity, loss of food sources, and loss of cultural economies.

NACCHO and many Aboriginal-led community health are working to address health and wellbeing issues of our people which are being amplified by the climate crisis. The climate crisis means more respiratory and cardiovascular disease, injuries and premature deaths related to extreme weather events, changes in the prevalence and geographic distribution of food and water-borne diseases, changes in the prevalence of infectious diseases, and increased incidences of mental health issues.

The climate crisis is and will have an increasing impact on the social determinants of health for Indigenous communities. That goes to housing, economic stability, access to good quality food and water and the built environment. Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people are already behind when it comes to social determinants of health and more of our people live in overcrowded housing, are less likely to be able to access good quality food at reasonable prices, and the water supplies that many of our people rely on are already under threat and we are less likely to have reliable incomes. Our people are starting from a place of less resilience than many other Australians to be able to respond to the effects of the climate crisis.

We also have less resources and less control of the resources we do have to be able to respond. We are too often structurally excluded from conversations with government and larger organisations about climate, land management and protection and social policy. NACCHO and other First Nations community organisations are also chronically underfunded meaning they have less capacity to develop and drive responses to climate change that align with community cultural requirements and obligations.

## **2. What initiatives has your organisation undertaken to address climate change and why; and what impacts are you seeing as a result of the initiatives?**

NACCHO is working hard to address the social determinants and health impacts of climate crisis on our peoples.

With our community-controlled health organisations, we are championing many environmental health programs to strengthen our peoples' local responses to changes in their living environments.

We are also educating our communities about changing health threats – changing infectious diseases and greater risks of dust and water associated illnesses.

Our organisations are also actively involved in local disaster mitigation planning and responses, working with local authorities and other organisations on the ground.

Together with the Coalition of Peaks, NACCHO is also working to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled representatives are at the table with governments when policy decisions that have a significant impact on our peoples are made.

The Coalition of Peaks successfully negotiated with all governments the Partnership and National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The Agreements commit governments to shared decision making with our representatives on policies and programs that have a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

These are significant Agreements that have historic potential. We have a way to go on bringing these commitments to life, however.

Governments are also yet to see climate policy as Indigenous policy.

This is where we need to get to before we can start to see climate justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## **3. Urgent action is needed from government, business and society in general. ACROSS is calling on the federal Government to rapidly reduce emissions in line with our fair share of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees and to put in place a fair and just plan to get us there. What do you see as the top 3 priorities for Government?**

The first step to climate justice is having our Aboriginal community-controlled organisations at the decision-making table with governments. We need to stop being viewed as stakeholders by governments or as an external group that is an afterthought or as a beneficiary of decisions that others make. and policies are to take account of our specific needs and circumstances.

Our knowledge and expertise has to be fully recognised, having survived in this country for the thousands of years that we have. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' knowledge and expertise needs to be fully recognised. We have been managing this continent for thousands and thousands of years, protecting the environment and making sure it provides for our peoples – food, water, shelter.

Whilst the environment is changing at a pace not seen before, our people continue to hold the knowledge that is an important part of solutions for all Australians.

We need to be able to have full control over our own land and resources and have access to adequate resources to drive our own local responses in our communities, to build appropriate housing and infrastructure, to undertake our own environmental health programs and protect our waters and drive our own health initiatives.

## Why justice has to be at the heart of climate action

Susie Moloney, Jesuit Social Services

### **1. How does climate change impact the communities your organisation works with and what do you see as the main challenges going forward with the prospect of more climate impacts locked in, including the impact on our ability to address poverty and inequality?**

Jesuit Social Services has been working for over 40 years with a wide range of communities across the country. We have worked with the most marginalized communities, those who are intersecting with the justice system, First Nations communities, migrant communities and those seeking employment and good quality housing.

Centre for Just Places focuses on intersection of poverty and inequality and ecological justice. We provide community-based place-based approaches to addressing challenges. It is crucial for our work that systems and institutional practices need to be understood, revealed and changed in order to address injustice.

We have to put justice at the heart of climate change. JSS has an important role in supporting communities and giving voice to community issues. Recently, we've been working with organisations and communities in parts of Melbourne in the outer South-East and the West highlighted as hotspots according to recent heat vulnerability index measures. It's no accident that the more disadvantaged areas and communities are most exposed to climate change impacts. They have higher population density, poor quality housing, less green vegetation and green canopy cover, less resources, facilities and services to support the community's needs - all pre-existing underlying factors that worsen the impacts of climate change.

The Lord Mayor's Charitable is funding hotspots research focussed on some of these vulnerable communities. The project drew on lived experience research, highlighting strong and distressing voices from residents living in public housing during heatwave. They described the feeling of being trapped in public housing, air conditioning often being unaffordable and public housing being built from poor materials. There is a real sense that no-one cares and that when they reach out to seek support they are not heard.

One final point on how we are seeing CC impacts play out – a key focus for us is on the community services sector and that itself is at risk to CC – the capacity to deliver services and provide resources to marginalised communities is in turn significantly impacted. We see a real need to strengthen the CSO capacity as a sector and organisationally in terms of resources and climate literacy. Key to that is working in partnership with other organisations like state and local governments to build that capacity for action where it is needed.

## **2. What initiatives has your organisation undertaken to address climate change and why; and what impacts are you seeing as a result of the initiatives?**

The three areas that we're working on are research and advocacy, action and demonstration projects on the ground with communities and capacity building. One of our demonstration projects is an eco-justice hub that we're running in inner Melbourne and we're also supporting two other eco-justice hubs in Tennant Creek and Katherine. The hubs are built on the principle of integrating living in a holistic and ecological way into improved well-being. For example, the eco-justice hub in Brunswick has a permaculture garden, a whole lot of renewable energies technologies and workshops for communities. It brings a lot of volunteers in during COVID and became a food relief hub when a lot of other services shut down which generated a lot more connections with the Moreland community. EJ Hub is also doing energy audits of low income rental households, retrofitting with easy wins (e.g. draft proofing) to make their home more energy efficient while building energy literacy (support reading bills, understanding usage).

It is working towards piloting a community solar program which is a model to generate surplus solar energy at the Hub and, through an agreement with Power Shop, to off-set low income rental household energy bills in the local community who don't have access to solar.

We are also focused on building a suite of holistic ecological literacy programs for participants and CSO frontline workers. A course we developed last year is now running out of our training College and is being picked up by neighbourhood houses across Vic. In Western Sydney – we are embedding ecological justice in education programs and placements through the secondary schools there. (Claire Thomas) We also run community Hubs there like an a Food Store and orchard. In the Northern Territory – there is an emerging Ecological Justice Hub in Tenant Creek where we are using ecological justice and practical activities as a way to engage disengaged youths. There is also a partnership to support the recent Bushfoods garden in Katherine with elders.

More broadly in terms of advocacy in the Northern Territory – we have a committed team nurturing a coalition within and with other sectors running symposiums and workshops focusing on climate justice. Now has its own momentum with CCA trainings and environmental activists, govt, community sector orgs and ACCO's working together.

Our series of research reports, *Dropping off the Edge*, span twenty years and demonstrate that disadvantage is complex, persistent and entrenched in a small number of communities across Australia. Jesuit Social Services will shortly be releasing its fifth *Dropping off the Edge* report. For the first time, this will include environmental indicators alongside social, economic, education and health measurements. This exploratory research indicates that more policy attention needs to be paid to improving both social and environmental outcomes for those populations and communities already experiencing continual, overlapping and complex disadvantage. Understanding the relationship between social and

environmental disadvantage will help reveal the intersecting risks experienced in different communities and help inform more effective planning, infrastructure and services to support those communities into the future. This includes focusing on the needs of populations who are highly exposed to climate and ecological risks. Integrating climate risk into public health and wellbeing planning is an important step in this direction, as has been done in Victoria.

We also work with corporates like HP International and Australia to accompany them on their journey to becoming not only carbon neutral but transform their business practices towards greater engagement and contribution to climate justice in the communities they work in. While in its early days this includes addressing issues like digital equity plus circular economy. Slow steady work just launched in 2021.

More broadly across the organisation - this year Jesuit Social Services will be measuring the carbon footprint of the organisation to prioritise emissions reduction efforts in the years ahead. This is our first step on a roadmap to carbon neutrality.

Organisationally, climate literacy required to build understanding within community sector organisation. Key to that is working in partnership with other organisations like State and Local Government - this has to be a cross-sectoral effort. A key feature of this work is about making connections – or rather our way of working in this space is that we emphasise the relational dimensions of addressing climate justice issues. This means making links between organisations and communities and the work they are doing and how they can better support and learn from each other. It also means disseminating what we learn from these projects widely for example through organisations like the Climate Change Exchange. It also means creating the space for stronger collaborative efforts to address CC. Working in isolation or in siloed ways won't work. For example, the fact that CC is identified as one of the top four risks to health in Victoria's Health and Well-being Strategy now means all LGs must consider CC in their H&WB plans – this is so important as this reminds health teams that CC is not just something the sustainability dept needs to think about. CC is everyone's responsibility.

We need stronger national leadership on climate efforts. And as a sector, we need to make justice central to climate action conversations. We can't take for granted that while it's common-place for us to talk about this topic within the sector, that's not always the case in the wider climate change discussion. That's a really important role this sector plays - the constant emphasis on inequality and justice which points out the weaknesses in systems like housing and the ways we're planning cities and how we're dumping people in suburbs with no transport.

When we think about adaptation, adaptation focuses on communities and impacts on the ground and we need to better understand those stories on the ground, the lived experience, and bring the voices of that experience really to the fore. That's what captures people's attention, that's what really impacts people. Climate change has to be made something people understand as an



everyday lived experience, not something removed to do with targets. This is about how it's going to impact you now and that we can't avoid it.

**3. Urgent action is needed from government, business and society in general. ACOSS is calling on the federal Government to rapidly reduce emissions in line with our fair share of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees and to put in place a fair and just plan to get us there. What do you see as the top 3 priorities for Government?**

**Prioritise local leadership.** What works best for climate change is leadership from the local level. This means local government, community service organisations and local leaders (First Nations, CALD). Given that the poorest Australians are and will increasingly be the most vulnerable during climate change the frontline organisations who support them and are tasked with planning for their futures must be secure and well funded in an ongoing capacity. The CSOrgs themselves need funding, training and resources to understand their own climate adaptation needs.

**Take a Place-based and Systemic Approach:** For example research and evaluation that focusses on place-based approaches can help capture the complexity of voices and experiences of the community and put these at the heart of decision making about local places. This research needs to then inform community adaptation and government policy and academic thinking in a cycle of continuous reflection, innovation and experimentation. (Place-based research supports both 1 and 2 here).

**A holistic ecological justice approach:** This means having a coherent, consistent climate plan across all levels of government which prioritises working with First Nations leaders to holistically address how we think about country, addressing housing needs (especially insecure rental accommodation and homelessness), increasing urban cooling methods such as greening and reducing surfaces which absorb heat, being prepared for storm damage, cutting green house gas emissions etc.

There must be cross-departmental collaboration. **Communication and relationships** here are key. This has been shown in the pandemic to be of vital importance. Not only was health information not always translated correctly but levels of trust meant some communities don't believe government information or do not see themselves represented in the government's communication (see what is presently happening in Sydney).

To communicate on climate change govt needs to listen and be responsive to the perspectives and experience of community voices and findings of place-based research and be coherent and inclusive in their overall messaging and admit when they have made mistakes. We need leaders from all parts of the community to be involved in delivering the messaging so that people feel some form of belonging/ownership within climate change plans.

Finally, Justice and sovereignty for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be at the heart of any commitment to ecological justice in Australia. Jesuit

Social Services acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' strong connection to Country and their care of the land for thousands of years.

## Why climate justice matters for addressing poverty and inequality

**Lyn Morgain, CEO Oxfam Australia**

### **1. How does climate change impact the communities your organisation works with and what do you see as the main challenges going forward with the prospect of more climate impacts locked in, including the impact on our ability to address poverty and inequality?**

The climate crisis is on right now. This is a reality everyone needs to catch up with - the response must come now.

Not all of us will be affected equally by the climate crisis. That's the essence of Oxfam's concerns - climate change is driving the continued expansion of global inequality – where the reckless inaction of wealthy countries and influence of the fossil fuel industry is upholding a system that benefits only them and keeps people in poverty.

Particularly severe impacts are being felt by First Nations communities, and First Nations communities are often on the frontline of trying to keep coal in the ground and keep gas where it belongs. From Oxfam's perspective, recognising the leadership and advocacy of First Nations in this space and supporting First Nations to defend land and country is a key priority. Indigenous-led solutions are key to addressing the climate crisis in a just way.

For our neighbours in the Pacific, in just the last six years, they have been hit by 5 severe tropical cyclones (Pam, Winston, Hola, Yasa, Harold) - more than any similar period beforehand. This demonstrates we're already seeing some of the impacts of climate change now, with stronger, more severe, and more frequent tropical cyclones. Tropical Cyclone Pam affected 80% of the population of Vanuatu and wiped 60% off its GDP. Tropical Cyclone Yasa hit Fiji just last year, severely damaging over 8,000 homes. With humanitarian disasters like this, many people, especially women and people already experiencing inequality are further plunged into poverty. Some communities are still recovering from Tropical Cyclone Pam, six years later; dozens of communities are still reeling from the impacts of Tropical Cyclone Yasa last year, on top of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Humanitarian disasters like this mean that many people, and especially women are already experiencing the massive inequality that's brought about by climate change and plunged further into poverty. These are the communities where people are losing access to housing, access to clean water, sanitation and food and every time we have another event these impacts are further compounded.

Climate change is dramatically impacting our capacity to deliver humanitarian support. It's increasingly both the cause of humanitarian events but equally we need climate-based responses if we want to address those.

From an Oxfam perspective, climate change frames and drives every aspect of our work. That is now inescapable - we know damage to climate will drive a

great deal of our work in the future. Oxfam recently reported<sup>1</sup> the massive impact that economic shocks, particularly worsened by the coronavirus pandemic, along with the worsening climate crisis, have had in pushing tens of millions more people into hunger – a figure which had been in steady decline for some time.

What is becoming clearer and clearer is that climate change represents the single most urgent priority and therefore we need to ensure we act on it now.

## **2. What initiatives has your organisation undertaken to address climate change and why; and what impacts are you seeing as a result of the initiatives?**

Oxfam's allyship with local organisations in the Pacific who through the Pacific Climate Change Collaboration, Influencing and Learning Program have helped us train activists and given us the tools to support transparent and accountable decision-making. This program was developed to help grassroots groups drive action in the Pacific and came about as a response to climate impacts in the Pacific. The program has had great impact and success in bringing community groups together to have a say in the decision-making on climate policy and adaptation that impacts them. These networks create and share common messages and evidence on the needs of Pacific communities to influence national and regional dialogue on when, how, and why we need to respond to extreme weather events. The networks also allow messages to be heard across scales – from a woman farmer on the Island of Mele in Vanuatu who is interested in sustainable farming to prevent erosion – to the government ministries and the UN Climate Change Conferences. We've seen the establishment of a lot of Pacific organisations like the Vanuatu Climate Action Network and the Solomon Islands Action Network so we know that communities are mobilised and ready to influence.

What we see in the South Pacific and Australia is that when we organise at the grassroots level it lets us scale voice in an incredible way, so that the voices of individual farmers, individual communities, individual fisher-folk can find their way to very high-level multilateral international conversations and this is key to the incredible transformation that is both required and which we are in now.

For us, the goal is to access climate finance - the critical issue is how do we both compensate and respond to the many both global and local communities who will be impacted most harshly and with least contribution to emissions. The climate crisis is severely impacting First Nations communities in remote Australia and we know what makes that impact more severe is that fossil fuel resources are located near communities who face risk to their water supplies, risk from shale gas extraction and other environmental and health risks. We believe that the right to free prior and informed consent remains key. That's enshrined in the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People and we think it needs to be extended in the NT to apply to the production phase, not only exploration and to be extended around Australia. Only when the voice of First People is central to these conversations and First People have the opportunity to make decisions

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<sup>1</sup> Citing 'The Hunger Virus Multiplies', <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/hunger-virus-multiplies-deadly-recipe-conflict-covid-19-and-climate-accelerate-world>

about the use of these resources will we really be able to mitigate emissions long-term but also create the communities that we want.

There is heaps of evidence that communities are mobilising, want to mobilise, want to create a new economy and community to tackle climate change. We want to be very clear - this is where the solutions lie.

A key priority is helping communities understand the form a just transition might take. It's vitally important for the community sector, but it's also vitally important for the communities of the globe. We have to see Australia make a much more significant contribution the Green Climate Fund because that is our primary mechanism for acknowledging that our emissions are causing the most terrible impacts globally. Helping Australians to see where we can plug in to being part of the positive change is the key. We are in a time of very significant change - for example, the fossil fuel market is just falling away, as a result of decades of activism.

**3. Urgent action is needed from government, business and society in general. ACOSS is calling on the federal Government to rapidly reduce emissions in line with our fair share of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees and to put in place a fair and just plan to get us there. What do you see as the top 3 priorities for Government?**

Recent successes such as the Federal Court ruling that found the Minister for Environment has a duty of care to protect young people from the climate crisis when approving fossil fuel extraction – show that now is the time to make systemic change and commit to radical and immediate action on climate change. Oxfam's top three priorities for Government are: We want to see the Australian Government adopt a national goal of zero emissions well before 2050, and as we move through the critical decade it is imperative that Australia halve its emissions by 2030.<sup>2</sup> We must see support for local organisations to adapt to climate change and recover from unavoidable loss and damage that result from the climate crisis. Ahead of COP26 in November – they must recommence financial contributions to the Green Climate Fund, as part of its overall contribution to international climate finance.

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<sup>2</sup> Oxfam Australia is reviewing its emissions reductions policy as we believe that Australia needs to significantly lift its ambition if we are to stay within 1.5 degrees of warming.

# How decarbonisation can help support social justice

Gavin Dufty, Vinnies Victoria

## **1. How does climate change impact the communities your organisation works with and what do you see as the main challenges going forward with the prospect of more climate impacts locked in, including the impact on our ability to address poverty and inequality?**

Over the last 12 months, Victoria has seen direct impacts of climate change on communities. We've seen it in the fires out in Mallacoota, we've seen it in floods in Latrobe Valley, we've seen it in the weather event that we saw up in the Dandenongs where people were without power for two weeks with a few sites not restored to full power yet, and we've also seen it in the assistance provided to farmers impacted by drought in the North-West.

On a day to day basis through our emergency relief and other support we see particularly impacts on older people and people with disabilities. Vinnies ends up paying bills because they need to manage their environment and get stung with high bills. Others don't have the appliances so Vinnies will end up purchasing appliances and putting them in so they do have a comfortable place to live.

It also impacts on our volunteer base. We have an older volunteer population which makes it difficult for them to do home visits during weather events as part of our outreach program, which is how we deliver a lot of our services.

Vinnies relies solely on its retail income as it does not receive government money. On the hot days Vinnies op shops make no sales because nobody goes out, which has an impact on the organisation financially as well. This creates a lot of challenges for the organisation moving forward around how we can continue what we do so there's a resilience capability question in here.

## **2. What initiatives has your organisation undertaken to address climate change and why; and what impacts are you seeing as a result of the initiatives?**

In January last year Vinnies was given the opportunity to go on a Climate Active Journey to become carbon neutral. We got accreditation for Climate Active for service, becoming the first community organisation to get that particular accreditation. We went through our whole supply chain - if you drop off clothes to a Vinnies bin or we come pick up your furniture from your house, from that point right through to the sale point all the emissions have been accounted for. We also got some offsets which were crafted to have a social justice outcome - we had some First Nations savannah burning in the NT and local community projects in the Philippines and India which were creating employment for impoverished communities.

For us, we try to link everything back to our social justice platform. We were careful about linking it back to the vision and mission of the organisation so it was not foreign.

After getting that accreditation we made a pledge to do more, which you can see on the Climate Active network. We've just got back to market for a power purchasing for 1.6-1.8 megawatts solar on our assets in Victoria with options for batteries and we're now moving into our vehicle fleet and sourcing electric hybrids.

The key in moving forward is that if an organisation like Vinnies can do it, anyone can do it so there's no excuse not to. The key to getting the whole of the organisation on side is to craft the conversation in a way that appeals to the key vision and mission.