



Submission to the *Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities*

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Jesuit Social Services: Who we are and what we do

Jesuit Social Services has been working for more than 40 years delivering support services and advocating for improved policies, legislation and resources to achieve strong, cohesive and vibrant communities where every individual can play their role and flourish.

We are a social change organisation working with some of the most marginalised individuals and communities, often experiencing multiple and complex challenges. Jesuit Social Services works where the need is greatest and where we have the capacity, experience and skills to make the most difference.

Our services span Victoria, New South Wales and the Northern Territory where we support more than 57,000 individuals and families annually.

Our service delivery and advocacy focuses on the following key areas:

- **Justice and crime prevention** – people involved with the justice system
- **Mental health and wellbeing** – people with multiple and complex needs including mental illness, trauma, homelessness and complex bereavement
- **Settlement and community building** – recently arrived immigrants and refugees, and disadvantaged communities
- **Education, training and employment** – people with barriers to sustainable employment
- **Gender Justice** – providing leadership on the reduction of violence and other harmful behaviours prevalent among boys and men, and building new approaches to improve their wellbeing and keep families and communities safe.
- **Ecological justice.**

Research, advocacy and policy are coordinated across all program and major interest areas of Jesuit Social Services. Our advocacy is grounded in the knowledge, expertise and experiences of program staff and participants, as well as academic research and evidence. We seek to influence policies, practices, legislation and budget investment to positively influence people's lives and improve approaches to address long term social challenges. We do this by working collaboratively with governments, business and the community sector to build coalitions and alliances around key issues, and building strong relationships with key decision-makers and the community.

Our Learning and Practice Development Unit builds the capacity of our services through staff development, training and evaluation, as well as articulating and disseminating information on best practice approaches to working with participants and communities across our programs.

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of all the lands on which Jesuit Social Services operates and pay respect to their Elders past and present. We express our gratitude for their love and care of people, community, land and all life.

Introduction

Jesuit Social Services' incorporation of ecological justice into its organizational culture, program delivery and advocacy emerged from a commitment to building a just society, its Jesuit heritage emphasizing reconciliation with creation, and working with the most marginalized in the community who are likely to be most affected by environmental degradation and climate change. Our 2017 paper *Ecological Justice – expanding the conversation* outlines this journey and the commitment to building a just society that includes both social and environmental justice. The full paper is available at:

<https://jss.org.au/ecological-justice-expanding-the-conversation/>

Jesuit Social Services works with and advocates for people and communities with multiple and complex needs. These are some of the most disadvantaged Australians. They can face a range of co-occurring and interrelated issues, such as homelessness, disability, substance misuse, health problems, and involvement in the child protection and criminal justice systems. Too often these complexities are seen as being only 'social'. In reality, the distribution of environmental risks and benefits has a clear impact on social exclusion and intergenerational disadvantage. For organisations concerned with social justice, there is growing recognition that the consequences of harm to the natural environment are felt more acutely by disadvantaged people and communities – for example, those who cannot, through poverty or other causes, access shelter when required, or who are most penalised by rising energy prices or are financially unable to cope with the destruction of property through natural disasters.

A 'climate impasse' has typified climate policy in Australia. There has been a lack of bold and strategic action and policies that address the need to transform our society, economy and mechanisms for producing energy at the scale and speed necessary to address the existential risk posed by climate change.

In this context, Jesuit Social Services welcomes the *Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities*, which offers a timely consideration of how the Victorian Government can support communities in addressing climate change.

Community in action: Examples of the work of Jesuit Social Services

Jesuit Social Services is responding to the challenges of climate change. Our commitment to holistic ecological justice has resulted in organisational, program delivery and advocacy changes. Increasingly, our employment, education and training programs include skills needed in transitioning economies, and create models of sustainable and ecologically just living. Our research and advocacy continues to reflect growing awareness of ecological justice as a lens through which to discuss and analyse the complex and interrelated climate change and social justice issues facing our communities.

While our program delivery and community engagement in relation to climate change and ecological justice is varied, we wish to highlight three areas of our activities that would benefit the wider community if applied more broadly.

1. Ecological Justice Hub

Jesuit Social Services' Ecological Justice Hub in Brunswick is a permaculture garden and community centre dedicated to building ecological awareness, restoring our regenerative relationship with nature, and working collaboratively with others towards a sustainable society that includes both social and environmental justice. The Ecological Justice Hub is a garden, workshop and gathering place which:

- Builds ecological awareness and understanding for community members and community, government and businesses through advocacy and community education.
- Provides skills, training and employment support into green economy jobs for people experiencing barriers to employment.
- Creates 'green living' demonstration projects which support climate change reduction and environmental recovery.

Through the Hub we have developed an ecological literacy curriculum that engages people to show the impact climate change has on our food, water and energy systems, and on the symbiotic relationship between our behaviour and the impact on the natural environment. Not only does the Hub offer a deeper understanding of the unprecedented changes we are seeing in our climate, it also equips communities with the skills and tools to cope in an uncertain climate, such as how to:

- Secure employment in green industries
- Reduce energy consumption
- Retrofit a home
- Conserve water
- Implement zero-waste cooking skills
- Compost
- Create more resilient communities.

The programs are aimed at supporting individuals who have disengaged from the education system, people who are unemployed or underemployed, recent retirees, low-income families and single parents.

The Ecological Justice Hub has successfully tested a model of community advocacy, education and training, jobs pathways and green living demonstration projects through the development of a range of education and skills training programs, including:

- *Just Habitat* – constructing small eco-friendly homes that creates employment opportunities and develops people's skills.
- *Just Energy* – solar power systems for redistribution to people on low incomes.
- *Just Nourishment* – building permaculture gardens and growing healthy food.
- *Just Hammertime* – workshops to provide skills in carpentry and construction for young women.
- *Just Mushrooms* – workshops to demonstrate the benefits of growing mushrooms.
- *Just Honey* – promoting local bee keeping.
- *Just Compost* – turning Brunswick and city waste resources into garden compost.

Recommendations for support: Skills, training and community capacity building

Further funding for the Ecological Justice Hub and centres like it will increase equity of access to ecological literacy and skills. It would also enable an up scaling of skills training and community participation.

Increased education and future scenario planning for those working in education, employment and training would strengthen future prospects for participants.

Additional support and appropriate Government regulation on demonstrable sustainable living projects would assist in the up-scaling of activities that contribute to community capacity building.

2. Organisational transformation

Jesuit Social Services fosters an ecological culture where transformation starts with the personal. Acknowledging the interconnection between environmental and social issues has influenced our practice, policy, and organisational identity, and shaped our strategy.

Jesuit Social Services' approach, for staff, volunteers, and participants in our programs, is to:

- Encourage shared values of personal relationships with ecology.
- Integrate an ecological justice perspective into all programs and advocacy.

Jesuit Social Services has used a guiding framework that we call 'Our Way of Proceeding' as the basis to develop our ecological awareness and action. This Way of Proceeding recognises three interconnected domains that must be considered in all aspects of the organisation's operations.

1. **Human Spirit** – Focusing upon essential anthropological and spiritual questions about what it means to be human and enquires into the conditions within which humans thrive and have healthy relationships. This involves an informed and discerning process of understanding ourselves, our fellow humans and the context of our relationships, to people, place and planet.
2. **Practice Framework** – Developing a relational way of being and acting that reflects and lives ecological justice. This promotes environmental awareness and ecological justice across our practice areas and our advocacy including justice and crime prevention, settlement and community building, mental health support and wellbeing, and education, training, and employment, and gender justice.
3. **Business Processes** – Adopting environmentally sustainable business practices and processes using a process of discernment about how to use our financial and other resources so they

respect and contribute to, rather than harm, efforts to build a just society. This includes embedding climate change adaptation, mitigation and transformation into our business practices.

Examples of ways that we have embedded ecological justice within the organisation include:

- reducing organisational emissions
- minimising waste output
- supporting ethical procurement
- installing gardens to provide food security
- expanding advocacy and research to include environmental factors
- encouraging new ecological social work practices, including increasing ecological literacy amongst staff and participants
- introducing education and training programs in green skills.

Recommendations for support: Policy, research and enhancing sector capacity

Like other organisations in the community sector, Jesuit Social Services is fiscally constrained and operates within a competitive funding environment. Early adopter organisations who wish to implement ecological justice programs may require extra financial support, however climate change adaptation, mitigation and transformation are not always identified as a sector priority and often do not attract dedicated funding. Further funding sources for these early adopters would enable more organisations, and the community services sector itself, to be better prepared for climate change impacts.

The process of institutional transformation requires access to resources, such as research and examples of evidence-based practice in order to learn about, understand and implement the most appropriate organisational changes. These might include, for example: the impact of extreme heat on the health of vulnerable people, or the compounding disadvantage of low-cost rental housing (limiting access to energy-saving insulation or solar energy systems). In commencing this journey, Jesuit Social Services found it very hard to access appropriate training materials on how a social change organisation working with the most marginalised in the community could adapt to and mitigate climate change. The lens of ecological justice assisted greatly in guiding our way through the many internal workshops and organisational changes we implemented and we believe this principle would be advantageous for many in the community services sector and beyond.

It is important to share learnings and experiences of adapting to and attempting to mitigate climate change from an organisational perspective. We are currently developing training materials on organisational transformation towards ecological justice that will address many of the challenges and barriers organisations and communities face as they seek to ameliorate the impacts of climate change. Support in developing training materials, case studies and workshops or other platforms for shared learnings is essential in order to enable already vulnerable communities to build resilience and capacity in the face of climate change threats.

3. Activating for a Just Transition

To minimise the disproportionate negative impacts of climate change and environmental degradation on people from disadvantaged communities, increasing attention has been given to the idea of a 'just

'transition'. A just transition is a process of moving from current untenable economic and social systems to a world that achieves zero greenhouse gas emissions, that ensures those least able to cope with climate change receive the help they need to successfully adapt, and that enables healthy relationship between human communities and the eco-systems within which they live, and on which they depend. Jesuit Social Services is committed to the realisation of a just transition and see it as essential in order to face the challenges of the climate crisis and ensure ecological justice.

The community services sector has a particular and unique role in contributing to just transitions and taking climate change actions due to the following:

- It has inherent skills, networks and capacity to contribute to climate change adaptation, mitigation and transformation, as well as the realisation of ecological justice.
- It is close to communities and is therefore well-placed to educate, contact, mobilise and amplify marginalised voices, identify neglected areas and increase the resilience and agency of those most at risk.
- Through communities of justice, and mobilisation of cohorts most affected by ecological injustice, the community services sector has the capacity to prevent worst harms *and* activate contributions to transformative economies and ecologies in order to be climate change resilient.

Jesuit Social Services identified the need for a whole-of-sector approach to climate change, and in response has initiated regular Ecological Justice Symposia that bring together organisations and stakeholders across the community, Government, energy and education sectors to share ideas and facilitate cross-sectoral action and partnerships (both in policy and practice) towards ecological justice and just transitions. From our experience and community engagement, Jesuit Social Services sees three areas that the community services sector could engage with in order to better face the challenges of climate change:

- Ecological literacy
- Advocating and supporting just transitions
- Implementing policies and practices of climate change adaptation, mitigation and transformation.

The expanded demands placed on community service organizations by climate change – and their ability to meet them – was considered in the extensive National Climate Change Adaption Research Facility (NCCARF) project *Adapting the Community Sector for Climate Extremes*¹. Key findings included:

- Community sector organisations are highly vulnerable and not well prepared to respond to climate change or extreme weather events, with many small and medium-sized organisations at risk of permanent closure as a result of major damage to physical infrastructure and disruptions to critical services.
- The detailed consequences of major disruptions to social service provision for people experiencing poverty and inequality – for whom community sector organisations are the shock absorbers for everyday adversity as well as crises – are very serious as they impact the basic needs for human survival: homelessness, deprivation, hunger, isolation and death;
- To date the community sector has been overlooked in the climate change adaptation policy settings.
- Community sector organisations perceive a range of barriers to action. Key amongst these is a lack of financial resources and skills and the concern that adaptation is 'beyond the scope' of the sector's core business.

¹ Paper available at:

https://www.nccarf.edu.au/sites/default/files/attached_files_publications/Mallon_2013_Adapting_community_sector.pdf

Jesuit Social Services' engagement with ecological justice over the past eight years has identified a similar range of challenges in relation to climate change:

- Scarcity of resources and time pressures.
- Competitive funding environment works against a collaborative approach.
- The main cohort – vulnerable and precarious communities facing social and economic barriers – is particularly exposed to the negative effects of climate change and adaptation.
- Climate change and economic transition is a ‘wicked’ and political problem that is overwhelming.

Jesuit Social Services has been prepared to make the necessary changes and preparations for climate change impacts, as well as reduce our emissions and mitigate against further climate harm. However, in the process of taking action in these areas we experienced and observed barriers that are shared by the community services sector which reflect the NCCARF report findings. All of these challenges can compound, limiting full engagement of the sector on climate change and just transitions issues. This indicates a need for more opportunities for the sector to focus on the specific challenges, responsibilities and capacity of the sector to contribute.

Recommendations for support: Cross-sector coordination

The establishment of a coordinating body that would:

- Set up formal structures to facilitate inter-sectoral collaboration towards a just transition
- Increase the involvement of community sector organisations
- Support and recognise community engagement and ‘on the ground’ actions
- Design and monitor policies and programs that ensure equity and that the most marginalised are not excluded in the path to just transitions.

Responding to the challenges of climate change will require knowledge exchanges and closer relationships between the community services sector and others including local councils, government departments, industry, climate change researchers and environmental organisations. The community services sector requires more support and training in order to face the challenges and understand the most effective and restorative actions that can be taken to reduce further acceleration of already complex cycles of disadvantage.

Key recommendations

- Increase funding and resources for organisations and communities seeking to trial, test and implement climate change adaptation, mitigation and transformation activities.
- Increase access to and translation of latest research and evidence-based practice relevant to the community services sector.
- Support actions to increase awareness within the community services sector of ecological justice and how to minimise environmental injustice and inequity, with a focus on organisational culture and program delivery.

Jesuit Social Services appreciates the Environment and Planning Committee taking our views into account. We would like to invite members to visit our programs to demonstrate positive outcomes that can be achieved with the right resources and support, and would also appreciate any opportunity to present at public hearings, pending their scheduling.