



The Benevolent Society Social Issues Paper 8

Environment and the impact of climate change

Climate change will have a profound effect in Australia and globally. Higher temperatures, rising sea levels and extreme storms will fundamentally change the way we live, as individuals and communities. Climate change is a human rights issue and will have a disproportionate impact on the most disadvantaged members of our community. Responding to climate change is an urgent priority for governments, business and communities so we leave the social and physical environment in a fit state for future generations. However, the steps we take must not further entrench disadvantage for those who can least afford to pay.

Why this is important

On the balance of probabilities, the failure of our generation on climate change mitigation would lead to consequences that would haunt humanity until the end of time.

Garnaut Climate Change Review, 2008

The impact of climate change

The world's climate scientists agree that human-made greenhouse gas emissions are causing significant changes in the global climate system¹. Much of the global impact of climate change will affect the Asia Pacific region. Australia is expected to have more heatwaves, prolonged droughts and heavy rain, more extreme and unstable weather events and greater risk of bushfires².

Traditionally climate change has been approached as an ecological and economic problem. It is essential that we also consider the social and human rights implications.

Climate change threatens our basic needs and our rights to health, housing, employment and access to food and water. While the effects of climate change will be felt by all, they threaten to fall hardest on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in our communities.

Prolonged exposure to high temperatures can cause heat exhaustion, heart attacks and stroke, with the elderly and the very young at greatest risk. Other potential health impacts of climate change include an increase in vector-borne diseases, such as dengue fever and malaria, water-borne diseases, food-borne diseases, respiratory diseases and skin cancer³.

Extreme heat, wind and rainfall put structural stress on houses and buildings, exacerbated by a growing number of wild storms, more intense cyclones and rising sea levels. An estimated 700,000 coastal homes in Australia will be directly threatened by climate change⁴, with low cost housing, such as caravan park dwellings, most vulnerable.

Some people will modify their houses and others will be able to move to areas less affected by extreme weather. However, these options may not be financially available to disadvantaged individuals or families, who will see the cost of their own housing rise through higher insurance premiums or increased rent⁵.

What climate change means for Australia

According to the CSIRO and other Australian research bodies, the effects on Australia of global temperatures rising by between 1 and 2 degrees would include:

- Murray-Darling river flows fall by 10-25%
- 10-100% increase in extreme heat days (above 35°C)
- 1,200-1,400 more heatwave deaths a year in major population centres
- Significant loss of coral reefs
- Significant species extinction in Australia's internationally significant environments in north Queensland and Western Australia¹⁴.

Green equity principles to guide our response to climate change

- Responsibility: those who created the problem of emissions have the primary responsibility for reducing its cause and ameliorating harm
- Capacity: those with the greater capacity to reduce emissions have greater responsibility
- Vulnerability: those most vulnerable need special protection and assistance on the grounds of equity and efficiency¹⁵.

As droughts become longer and more severe, Australia's agricultural industries will continue to face serious challenges. Some farming communities will face financial hardship and many families may be forced to leave rural and regional towns to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Indigenous communities in northern Australia are particularly vulnerable to changes in the environment, through rising sea levels and increased risk of infectious diseases. Coastal communities, such as those in the Torres Strait, may be forced to relocate, and culturally significant ecosystems, such as the Kakadu wetlands, could be lost, which would deprive Indigenous communities of an important source of income⁶.

Climate change can cause people to be displaced as a result of extreme weather events, rising sea levels and conflict over resources. It is likely that this will have the greatest impact in the Asia Pacific region and be a major human security issue for Australia. At present the international community does not have a coordinated response to protect the rights of climate change refugees⁷.

The impact of government responses to climate change

Scientists conclude that Australia and other rich countries need to reduce emissions by significantly more than 60% by 2050 to avoid dangerous climate change impacts⁸. The way in which governments respond to the challenge of climate change will, for disadvantaged communities, be just as critical as the impact of climate change itself.

With the proposed introduction of a carbon emissions trading system in 2010, the price of food, electricity, petrol and other goods will rise and this will have a disproportionate effect on low income households. Economic modelling has found the relative impact on low income households would be up to six times greater than on high income households. This is despite the fact that low income households typically consume 40% less carbon than high income households⁹.

The higher the price at which carbon is set, the greater the relative costs borne by disadvantaged Australians. Access to food and water, housing and health services are human rights which must be protected by governments as they respond to this global challenge.

What should be done?

The scientific evidence presents an overwhelming case for immediate action to minimise the social, economic and environmental impacts of climate change.

There are two strategies to address climate change. The first is mitigation, where actions are taken to reduce national and global greenhouse gas emissions. The second strategy is adaptation, which aims to prepare communities for the more immediate impacts of climate change.

The Benevolent Society believes the first priority should be a strong government response to mitigating climate change while ensuring that low-income households are not further disadvantaged in the process.

Australia should use a rights based approach to tackle climate change¹⁰. This means that plans, policies and processes must protect human rights and strengthen the capacity of communities to respond to climate change and reduce its impact on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

The international human rights framework and Australia's obligation to meet minimum standards provide a valuable guide to ensure we protect society's most vulnerable members.

The Benevolent Society supports the introduction and enforcement of a carbon emissions trading system. However the Federal Government's commitment to a 5–15% reduction in emissions from 2000 levels by 2020 does not go far enough, with scientists recommending strong targets that would result in a 25% reduction by 2020 and a 90% reduction by 2050.

Governments must also ensure that low-income households are not further burdened by increasing costs of living related to climate change mitigation. The Garnaut Report recommends that half the proceeds from the sale of carbon trading permits be allocated to low-income households through tax and social security systems, as well as green credits for energy efficiency schemes¹¹.

The Federal Government has indicated that 89% of low income households will receive assistance equal to 120% or more of their cost of living increase.

We urge all levels of government to develop policies that support people experiencing disadvantage to respond to these challenges,

as well as take advantage of new training and employment opportunities created by a low-carbon economy.

The Benevolent Society supports a rapid shift away from fossil fuels to clean energy and energy efficiency, rather than using "offsets". Where offsets are used they should support the shift away from carbon intensive energy production by investing in renewable energy production.

We also believe that it is important to develop targeted programs that support disadvantaged individuals and families, renters as well as home-owners, to make their households more energy and cost efficient.

Strategies could include programs to improve the water and energy efficiency of dwellings; partnerships with local Councils for service improvements; initiatives to improve food quality affordability and availability; community education workshops; and the development of local micro-businesses and community facilities such as community gardens and food cooperatives.

Urban planning initiatives that place low income housing close to public transport, as well as increasing the availability and quality of public transport services, would support disadvantaged

Australians to participate in social, economic and educational opportunities and at the same time reduce carbon emissions.

Many rural communities now have populations on the cusp of viability. Families, businesses and communities are uniquely connected in farming areas. Governments will need to assist farm families, rural businesses and communities to adapt to changes in climate with policies which focus on social wellbeing as well as agricultural productivity¹².

The Benevolent Society urges the Australian Government to keep its pre-election commitment¹³ and accept climate change refugees as part of its humanitarian program and continue to show leadership internationally to protect the rights of climate change refugees.

Effective communication with communities and key stakeholders will be central to positive, local responses to climate change mitigation.

While federal, state and local governments have a responsibility to lead these initiatives, non-profit organisations will be important partners in fostering community engagement, capacity and resilience.

To ensure people experiencing disadvantage receive the

What the Garnaut Climate Change Review found

Some of the key points in the Garnaut Climate Change Review (2008) include:

- Australia's per capita emissions are the highest in the OECD
- The high emissions intensity of energy use in Australia is mainly the result of our reliance on coal for electricity
- There is a path to Australia being a low-emissions economy by the middle of the 21st century, consistent with continuing strong growth in material living standards
- In the absence of deliberate policies aimed at equitable distribution of the costs of adjustment to a low-emissions economy, it is likely that the burden will be carried disproportionately by people on low incomes
- The maintenance of full employment and an effective social safety net are the most important requirements for equity¹⁶.



assistance and protection they require, it is critical that non-profit organisations develop the knowledge and capacity to respond to climate change issues and lobby for change.

Non-profit organisations are increasingly forming partnerships with each other and across sectors to share skills and expertise, undertake research and influence social policy.

These partnerships will be crucial in understanding and addressing the effects of climate change and promoting fair responses which ensure that disadvantaged communities do not bear a greater burden than others.

Endnotes

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3. Sherrard, J and Tate, A (Cambiar). *Equity in Response to Climate Change Roundtable – An Australian Snapshot*, 2007; p4
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5. Sherrard & Tate (Cambiar, 2007); p4
6. Stanley, J, *Climate change: Urgent and fair action is needed*, published on NewMatilda.com, 30 March 2007; p1
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16. Garnaut Climate Change Review, 2008

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Social Issues Papers

The Benevolent Society works with vulnerable individuals, families and communities who face a wide range of difficult issues which affect their wellbeing and their social and economic participation. Our Social Issues Agenda identifies 12 broad issues that are related to social and economic inclusion, and our series of issues papers explores these challenges and some potential solutions. To read the full series of social issues papers go to www.bensoc.org.au

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