



Climate Change Exchange

Climate Justice on the Frontline:

The role of community service organisations in adapting to climate change

Exchange Brief: Sector Perspectives

Community Services

Dec 2020

This Exchange Brief provides a background on the intersection between climate justice and frontline community service organisations (CSOs). It is designed as a short introduction for practitioners seeking to better understand why they need to engage with adaptation, or to help guide those looking to develop a business case for climate change adaptation within their organisation.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Exchange brings together scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers who are thinking, working, and acting towards justice and sustainability in a warming world. We therefore acknowledge that we live, work, and learn on Aboriginal land and that sovereignty was never ceded. As such, we pay respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their Ancestors, and to all Traditional Owners and Custodians of all lands and waters with which we live, work, and learn. Through the Exchange, we invite conversations and work that seek to honour our reciprocal obligations to Country and each other.

Key Messages

- Climate change impacts health and well-being in many ways that are not always obvious
- Individuals and communities already experiencing forms of disadvantage and marginalisation are disproportionately impacted by climate change
- Vulnerability to climate change is complex and contextual. Understanding who is vulnerable, why they are vulnerable and what to do about it are key adaptation questions
- Frontline CSOs have insights, knowledge and connections into communities that are critical to understanding and addressing adaptation
- However, frontline CSOs are also at risk from climate change. If frontline CSOs fail to cope this will have compounding impacts on the communities in which they work.

Overview

When many people think about climate change they think of extreme events like bushfires and floods and the immediate aftermath. Although planning for emergencies is critical, climate change has detrimental impacts on health and wellbeing in many other diffuse ways, which impact on and compound erosion of social



Key concepts

Climate change adaptation The process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects. In human systems, adaptation seeks to moderate or avoid harm as well as exploit beneficial opportunities. In some natural systems, human intervention may facilitate adjustment to expected climate and its effects.⁸

Climate Justice The intersection between social justice and climate change. The climate justice perspective focuses on how the most marginalised communities are being disproportionately affected by climate change at all levels from the global down to the individual.

Place-based climate change adaptation The impacts of climate change can only be understood in relationship to a given context. The design of appropriate adaptation responses must be determined by the underlying circumstances of individuals and communities, and their capacities to adapt.⁹

Adaptive capacity This describes the ability of a system to adjust to climate change (including climate variability and extremes) to moderate potential damages, to take advantage of opportunities, or to cope with the consequences. Adaptive capacity is a key factor in understanding vulnerability as it is a measure of how well a community can respond to change.

structures, culture, community cohesion and mental health.¹ The increase in the number of Australians impacted by climate change, and rise in deaths attributable to a warming climate, rank as some of the highest in the developed world.² Impacts are occurring earlier and with greater intensity for those who are already experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

Community Service Organisations (CSOs) work at the frontlines of understanding and addressing this climate justice crisis; often while experiencing fiscal, time, and human resource constraints. CSOs must also address their own organisational adaptation challenges to ensure continuity of the services they provide.

“The life of every child born today will be profoundly affected by climate change. Without accelerated intervention, this new era will come to define the health of people at every stage of their lives.”³

Climate Justice

It is widely recognised that across all societies the impacts of climate change disproportionately affect those who are already experiencing disadvantage, which further compounds and exacerbates social and economic inequity. As global emissions continue to rise, so too will the range and intensity of climate impacts, putting more and more people and ecosystems at risk. The IPCC has warned that at approximately 1.5°C of global warming, climate change is expected to be a poverty multiplier, pushing more people into poverty, and making those already poor even worse off.⁴ Continuing current trajectories will result in fundamental changes to health and wellbeing that we are only now starting to glimpse.⁵

People experiencing poverty and disadvantage are suffering from the earliest and most detrimental impacts of harm from climate change. This is true at both the global level and within both developing and developed countries, including Australia. At the community level, the most marginalised groups are typically the most exposed and vulnerable due to many mutually reinforcing factors including low incomes, sub-standard living conditions, low levels of education, poor governance structures and processes, and already low health status. From a climate justice perspective, adaptation and mitigation must, at their core, be driven by equitable, fair, inclusive interventions. They must also address existing systemic issues and drivers that create and perpetuate inequity.

The Role of Frontline Community Service Organisations in Adapting to Climate Change

A key challenge in understanding how to plan for and respond to health and wellbeing in a changing climate is that vulnerabili-

“A failure to ensure that the community service sector is well adapted to climate change would likely worsen the impacts experienced by its clients with the projected increases in the severity and frequency of extreme weather events.”¹⁰

ties are predominantly context specific and place-based. The set of circumstances facing one location or community can differ substantially from another. The design of appropriate adaptation responses must be determined by the underlying circumstances of individuals and communities, and their capacities to adapt.

Community Service Organisations (CSOs) working at the frontline have deep local knowledge and networks that are critical for building adaptive capacity.⁶ Not only do frontline CSOs understand the risks and challenges facing local communities, they provide critical support services to those in need. However, the community service sector is currently underprepared for the challenges of climate change. In working with CSOs and our partners the Exchange has found that few Victorian CSOs have put plans in place to address climate change risks and vulnerabilities. Further, CSOs are themselves highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change through their exposure and lack of resources and capability.⁷ If the sector is not able to adapt with a changing climate there will be cascading and compounding impacts on already disadvantaged communities.

Case Studies: Building Adaptive Capacity in Frontline CSOs in Victoria

Through a Proactive Grant from the Lord Mayor’s Charitable Foundation the Exchange was supported to engage in a range of initiatives and projects with the community services sector that aimed to build adaptive capacity and support a fledgling community of practice emerging in Victoria. The intention was to identify gaps and needs of CSOs in responding to climate change; build literacy and capacity through co-designed training; and highlight key lessons for place-based approaches to working on the frontlines.



Case Study 1: Community Climate Change Adaptation (3CA Grants DELWP) for Social Care and Community Organisations in Greater Melbourne (2019-2020). Jesuit Social Services partnering with the Victorian Council of Social Services and the Exchange.

This project aimed to deliver training and peer learning workshops on building community resilience and adaptive capacity. The project was rooted in collaboration and co-design principles, with the aim of creating a stronger network of councils and community sector organisations across Greater Melbourne. Workshops were designed to learn, share, plan and prepare for the diverse, and increasingly complex compounding impacts of climate change. A combination of climate change literacy, scenario planning and group work enabled participants to ground climate change adaptation in their own organisational and place-based contexts. The inclusion of community voices from local organisations gave participants practical examples of implementation and an extended network of people to connect with. Participants reflected on their organisational practices and brainstormed areas for both immediate action and for longer-term organisational change. The project strengthened relationships between project partners and participants, developed and circulated a [Climate and Ecological Justice Resource Pack](#) for CSOs and helped to develop an evidence base for further work. The partners are continuing to extend this training and foster new place-placed collaborations.

Acknowledgement

This Exchange Brief is an output resulting from various collaborative projects with Community Service Organisations. Funding support was received through the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation Proactive Grants program and the Victorian Government's 3CA grants awarded to Jesuit Social Services for Social Care and Community Organisations in Greater Melbourne.

The Exchange is auspiced by the Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University.

Case Study 2: The Hotspots Initiative: Place-based, cross-sector collaborations responding to the health impacts of heatwaves (2018-2020 LMCF funded)

This initiative aimed to raise awareness around heat related risks and impacts among members of vulnerable communities and associated service delivery organisations with whom the different Hotspots organisations work. The initiative involved three pilot projects by community health organisation IPC Health (Brimbank), enliven Primary Care Partnership (PCP) (Dandenong), and co-Health (inner Melbourne). The projects focussed on cross-sector engagement with community members most vulnerable to extreme heat stress to understand the capacity building needs of relevant government services and community-based organisations. Hotspots identified actions to help address immediate and acute impacts of heatwaves, while also building a body of evidence that can inform wider advocacy actions targeted at addressing the more systemic drivers of vulnerabilities, such as sub-standard housing. The Exchange co-designed [the evaluation for this initiative](#).

Contact

ccexchange@rmit.edu.au

Website

<https://climatechangeexchange.org.au/>

Twitter

@The_CC_Exchange



The Climate Change Exchange helps organisations and individuals understand and address climate change challenges in the context of other complex societal and environmental issues. Committed to climate justice, our work aims to foster transformational change towards a sustainable, fair future.

This work requires a lot more than just communicating or translating science and research. It demands genuine collaboration and co-production through networked, respectful relationships. The Exchange therefore works to connect, support, and harness the collective skills, efforts, and knowledge of many organisations and individuals to more effectively address our shared climate change challenges and actively move toward that sustainable, fair future.

A not-for-profit, multi-sector network of practitioners and researchers, The Exchange enables the sharing of lessons and insights across different sectors, issues and places. It support partnership building among different groups and organisations. It provides a central accessible place for organisations, networks, and individuals to connect, learn, and share. The Exchange can help address specific questions, as well as provide guidance, advice, connections, and case studies.

Endnotes

- 1 Bowen, K., & Friel, S. (2015). Health and social impacts of climate change. In R. Walker, W. Mason & Ebooks Corporation (Eds.), *Climate change adaptation for health and social services* (pp. 3-13). Clayton South, Vic: CSIRO Publishing.
- 2 Paun, A., Acton, L., and Chan W. (2018). *Fragile Planet: scoring climate risks around the world*. HSBC Global Research.
- 3 Watts et al. (2019). *The 2019 report of The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: ensuring that the health of a child of a child born today is not defined by a changing climate*. The Lancet 394(10211) DOI:10.1016/S0140-6736(19)32596-6
- 4 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).(2018) *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty*. In press.
- 5 As above note 3, Watts et al. (2019).
- 6 Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS) (2017) *Building Resilient Communities: Working with the community service sector to enhance emergency management*.
- 7 Mallon, K., & Hamilton, E., (2015) Community-based health and social services: managing risks from climate change In R. Walker, W. Mason & Ebooks Corporation (Eds.), *Climate change adaptation for health and social services* (pp. 3-13). Clayton South, Vic: CSIRO Publishing; As above not 6, VCOSS (2017); Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS) (2019) *Climate change resilience of community organisations, data from VCOSS survey 2019*, unpublished.
- 8 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2014). *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability. Part A: global and sectoral aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the fifth assessment report of the intergovernmental panel on climate change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 9 Adger et al. (2013). Cultural dimensions of climate change impacts and adaptation *Nature Climate Change* 3(2): 112–117. DOI:10.1038/nclimate1666 ; Brunner, R. and Lynch, A. (2010). *Adaptive governance and climate change*. American Meteorological Society.
- 10 As above note 7, Mallon, K., & Hamilton, E., (2015).

Suggested citation:

Rubenstein, N., Moloney, S., Gooder, H. & Dunn, K. (2020). Climate Justice on the Frontline: The role of community service organisations in adapting to climate change. Climate Change Exchange Brief. RMIT University.