

Discussion paper: Climate Change

Date: 11 April 2020

Purpose

To seek the views of members of the Society of St Vincent de Paul (NSW) on whether and how the Society should engage in growing debate around climate justice and environmental responsibility.

The issue

Scientists have determined that our climate is changing dramatically and at a rate not seen in the last 2,000 years.ⁱ Data shows an increase of 1.1 degrees Celsius globally since the pre-industrial period, a heat increase equivalent to four Hiroshima bomb detonations per second.ⁱⁱ And there is now strong consensus within the scientific community that human activity has contributed significantly to this change.ⁱⁱⁱ Without strong action, the world will continue to see more frequent and more severe weather events such as floods and droughts, more intense bushfires, rising sea levels, health impacts, and increased pressure on health and emergency services.

These changes to our climate will disproportionately affect people and communities experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

Many low-income countries have been the first to feel the impacts of climate change. Our Asia Pacific neighbours, in particular, have experienced more frequent severe weather events, rising sea levels and loss of crops^{iv}. This has contributed to the loss of lives and livelihoods, and the displacement of people and communities. In Tuvalu, for example, storm surges caused by cyclones have forced people to leave three islands. Arrangements are underway to enable people impacted by climate change in both Kiribati and Tuvalu to resettle in Fiji. As the impacts of climate change become more widely felt, it has the potential to displace growing numbers of people.

In Australia, too, it is people already on the margins in our communities who will be the most adversely impacted, and have the least capacity to adapt. As temperatures rise, so too will the cost of essentials such as energy and food. People with limited resources, and especially those who rent their homes, have limited capacity to make investments to reduce their living costs. With more people affected by natural disasters such as bushfires, it is the people on low incomes, who are less able to afford insurance, who will find it harder to rebuild.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. As sea levels rise, and food and water accessibility diminishes, connections to land and waterways that have existed for tens of thousands of years may be at risk. People living in remote areas are also more likely to bear the brunt of weather events such as storms, floods and drought.

Pope Francis reminded us in the *Laudato Si* of our moral obligation to protect the earth, and the need for solidarity in the face of growing environmental instability^v. If we fail to work together to tackle the impacts of climate change the consequences will include greater poverty, greater mass migration, increased pollution, emerging health concerns and reduced access to basic resources like fresh drinking water. Ultimately this risks a breakdown in society and an increase in global inequality.

The Rule also states that “the Society’s vision goes beyond the immediate future, looking towards sustainable development and protection of the environment for the benefit of future generations”.^{vi}

Our current response

The St Vincent de Paul Society NSW has actively responded to people affected by climate change, assisting people to rebuild their lives following environmental disasters such as drought, bushfires and floods. In NSW, the impacts of recent disasters have been strongly felt by our members and by the people we assist. We are often asked to

comment on our role in responding to these events. Increasingly, this includes being asked to participate in public discussion about climate change, its impacts, and the responses required to protect the most vulnerable.

Claire Victory, National President of the Society of St Vincent de Paul stated that the bushfires were “a stark and tragic reminder of the importance of caring for our environment – and the disaster that awaits us if we don’t”. While environmental disasters do not discriminate, it is those experiencing poverty and disadvantage who feel the effects first, and most intensely.

Through Vinnies shops and our participation in the NSW container deposit scheme, the Society also plays an important role recycling resources within our communities. A move to a more circular economy, where resources are kept in use for as long as possible, will be critical to reducing our impact on the environment and mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Next steps

The Social Justice Committee is gathering views from the membership as to whether and how we should engage in debates around climate justice and policy responses to environmental issues.

Discussion Questions

- *Should the St Vincent de Paul Society NSW use its voice to call for action on climate change and environmental issues that impact the people we assist? Why/why not?*
- *If we advocate on environmental issues and climate change, what approach should we take? (E.g. should we establish and articulate a policy position, contribute to public debate through media commentary, support other organisation’s campaigns etc)*

For further information and resources relating to ecological dialogue within the Catholic Church go to

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

ⁱ Watts, J (2019) ‘No doubt left’ about scientific consensus on global warming, say experts, The Guardian, 25 July 2019

ⁱⁱ Climate Council (2019) What is climate change and what can we do about it?

ⁱⁱⁱ Watts, J (2019) ‘No doubt left’ about scientific consensus on global warming, say experts, The Guardian, 25 July 2019

^{iv} ACOSS (2017) ACOSS submission to the Review of Climate Change Policies

^v Pope Francis (2015) Laudato si: 14

^{vi} St Vincent de Paul Society, *The Rule*, 7th Edition 2012, Australia.

Margaret’s story

In November 2019, the Society was contacted by Margaret, an elderly woman residing in northern NSW, who requested assistance due to the drought. Margaret and her husband operated a farm 20 kilometres from a major town and had been enduring severe drought conditions for more than two years. Their dams were dry and they had reduced their sheep stock from 3200 head to just 600 head. Other members of their family had moved away to vocations that provided a more consistent income than farming, and the couple were struggling to cope with the heavy workload involved in maintaining stock health with daily feeding and importing water.

General enquiries revealed the property had also been heavily impacted by bushfires the previous month with 20 kilometres of fencing destroyed. This had significantly reduced the number of paddocks available for the sheep making normal pasture rotation difficult. Replacement fencing materials were estimated at \$160,000 and the loss was not covered by insurance. The couple were faced with doing this work themselves as they did not have the cash to hire labour to assist.

A follow up phone call in early December was greeted with the news that the property had just experienced a storm that dropped 50mm of rain within half an hour. The intense rain caused a flash flood that thankfully filled the dams but had unfortunately washed significant amount of topsoil and debris into dams reducing their capacity and also damaging more fencing along the way.

While Vinnies was able to provide some assistance to help meet immediate needs, this couple’s story illustrates the increasingly severe – and compounding – impacts climate change will have on families in our communities.