



CLIMATE EQUITY:

VINNIES NSW

SOCIAL JUSTICE STATEMENT

OUR VISION

Our natural world, and the beauty of our common home, should be protected for our children, grandchildren and future generations. If we act now, we can avoid the worst injustices of climate change and other ecological crises, and take hold of the opportunity to create more sustainable and equitable communities in which everyone can enjoy the quality of life many people today have been privileged to experience.

In moving towards a more sustainable future, focusing on a just transition will ensure more new jobs are created where they are needed most. Working together, advances in technology can make energy more affordable for everyone in our communities, and provide more people with access to safe and healthy homes.

As we navigate the next critical decade, centering the needs of those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change will see us emerge from crisis into a more equitable state, with stronger, more resilient communities. At the same time, action underscored by a commitment to the rights of our First Nations brothers and sisters will see us all benefit from the wisdom and knowledges that kept our country healthy for tens of thousands of years.

As Pope Francis reminded us in *Laudato Si*, we too have a duty to protect the earth and ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations: "...genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others."¹

THE CHALLENGE

Our climate is already changing dramatically. Temperatures have increased by 1.1 degrees Celsius globally since the pre-industrial period or the equivalent of four Hiroshima bomb detonations per second.^{2,3} There is now broad consensus that human activity is largely responsible for these changes.⁴

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, widening health inequities, and increased pressure on health and emergency services.

These changes will disproportionately affect people and communities already 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, are experiencing more extreme weather events, a loss of crops, and rising sea levels, all of which contribute to lost lives and livelihoods, and the displacement of people and communities.⁵ Already, people in countries such as Tuvalu and Kiribati have been forced to leave their homes. As the impacts of climate change become more widely felt, more communities will be displaced and we will see a growing number of climate refugees.

In Australia, too, it is people already on the margins who will bear the brunt of the negative impacts of climate change and who will be least able to adapt. As temperatures rise, so too will the cost of essentials such as energy and food. People who cannot invest in efficiency measures and renewable energy, and especially those who rent, will find it increasingly difficult to pay their bills and maintain their homes at healthy temperatures. And people who cannot afford the cost of insurance will struggle to recover following natural disasters such as floods, droughts and bushfires. The gap between those who have the least and those who have the most will continue to expand.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. As sea levels rise, connections to land and waterways that have existed for tens of thousands of years will be at risk. Yet First Nations people continue to be excluded from decision-making processes that impact their communities and country, as so sadly seen with the destruction of tens of thousands of years of culture at Juukan Gorge. It is clear that a commitment to the rights of First Nations peoples is still at the whim of those who happen to hold power.

OUR PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTION

With a presence in communities across New South Wales, the St Vincent de Paul Society has been deeply involved in responding to increasingly frequent natural disasters, and in walking beside people and communities as they rebuild their lives following droughts, bushfires and floods.

As the Black Summer bushfires unfolded, the St Vincent de Paul Society NSW raised over \$21.5 million and distributed this to impacted individuals, families and communities via our extensive network of members and volunteers. Amongst the first on the ground during and after the bushfires and other natural disasters, we provide emergency financial assistance, food, clothing, household items and crisis accommodation when homes have been damaged or destroyed. We remain alongside communities as they recover from these increasingly frequent crises – a process that can take months, years and even decades.

As Vincentians, The Rule reminds us that our vision should go “beyond the immediate future, looking towards sustainable development and protection of the environment for the benefit of future generations”. Our commitment to stewardship of the earth extends to our extensive network of shops, which divert thousands of tonnes of clothes and household goods from landfill, and our participation in the NSW “Return and Earn” container deposit scheme. As well as helping to recycle resources within our communities, these ventures channel vital funds towards the Society’s good works. As active supporters of a move to a circular economy, we want to see resources kept in use for as long as possible, to reduce our impact on the environment and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

We call on the NSW Government to:

- Ensure the needs of vulnerable groups are met during disaster responses, including by resourcing the community sector to continue to provide support during times of need, and by investing in community-based responses.
- Invest in initiatives to improve the efficiency of homes for people on low incomes (including social housing homes), such as energy audits and upgrades, appliance replacement schemes, and subsidised access to solar energy.
- Mandate energy efficiency standards for rental properties.
- Invest in energy efficient social and affordable housing to ensure a safety net for people and communities impacted by natural disasters.
- Set an ambitious 2030 emissions reduction target to support the NSW Government’s commitment to net zero emissions by 2050.

We call on the Federal Government to:

- Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in climate justice including by strengthening land rights⁶ and building genuine partnerships to support the wider application of Indigenous knowledges.
- Honour its commitment to a referendum to ensure a First Nations Voice to Parliament is protected by the Constitution.
- Establish a National Climate Disaster Fund, supported by a levy on fossil fuel production, to improve disaster readiness, response and recovery.
- Ensure a just transition towards clean energy by working with communities most impacted by a move away from fossil fuels to develop targeted plans to create new employment opportunities and build stronger, more diverse local economies.
- Improve our social welfare system so that it enables welfare recipients to cover basic living costs, including housing, regardless of the impacts of climate change, with a permanent increase to the JobSeeker Payment a priority.
- Review relevant migration policies and processes to prepare for and allow safe resettlement pathways for people displaced due to climate change.
- Set ambitious 2030 emission reduction targets that reflect Australia’s fair contribution to keeping global warming well below a catastrophic two degrees Celsius.



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 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.

*Not her real name.

¹ Francis, 2015. *Encyclical letter Laudato si' of the Holy Father Francis*. 1st ed. [Vatican City]: [Vatican Web Site].

² Watts, J (2019) 'No doubt left' about scientific consensus on global warming, say experts, *The Guardian*, 25 July 2019

³ Climate Council (2019) *What is climate change and what can we do about it?*

⁴ Watts, J (2019) 'No doubt left' about scientific consensus on global warming, say experts, *The Guardian*, 25 July 2019

⁵ ACOSS (2017) *ACOSS submission to the Review of Climate Change Policies*

⁶ This includes enforcing the concept of free, prior and informed consent for all projects impacting the lands or sacred sites of First Nations people.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The St Vincent de Paul Society NSW acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of this land, with deep respect. May Elders, past and present, be blessed and honoured. May we join together and build a future based on compassion, justice, hope, faith, and reconciliation.

**To join Vinnies NSW in building a more
just and compassionate society visit
socialjustice.vinnies.org.au
or call 0448 832 400.**