



**A just response to disasters and emergencies**  
**Jesuit Social Services' submission to the**  
**Inquiry into the 2019-20 Victorian Fire Season**  
April 2020



**Jesuit**  
**Social Services**  
Building a Just Society

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## Summary

Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation. Our mission is to build a just society where all people can live to their full potential. We have over 40 years' experience working at the hard end of social justice, working in solidarity with people experiencing disadvantage and working to change policies, practices, ideas and values that perpetuate inequality, prejudice and exclusion.

The unprecedented and tragic bushfires across Australia during the summer of 2019-2020 are having short and long-term impacts on all sectors, ecologies and communities across the country.

As we have seen through the bushfire crisis, and in the current overlapping health and economic crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, those who are already marginalised suffer the most.

The community services sector is increasingly recognising the impact the changing climate is having on the people with whom we work: people who are more vulnerable to the current and predicted impacts because of where they live, their income, their age, health conditions, disabilities, or where they work. The work we have done in addressing the root drivers of vulnerability and marginalisation is even more important now in the face of accelerating climate threats, as disasters and emergencies starkly reveal the existing fissures and inequalities in our society.

Climate injustice is evident globally, where the effects of rising temperatures, more severe droughts, bushfires and extreme weather events are disproportionately impacting the lives of those already facing marginalisation. Disasters, smoke exposure, infrastructure stress, service disruption, public health stress, the impacts of species loss and the long-term need for a just recovery to build communities of resilience demand a discerning and long-term vision for Victoria.

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Victorian Inquiry, as the bushfire season of 2019-2020 has ramifications for the communities we work with. We commend the ongoing response of the Victorian Government and wish to highlight that a just response to Victoria's preparedness, response, relief and recovery is vital in order that this work contributes to long-term equitable and resilient communities across the state. The impacts of climate change and ecological injustice are rising and, as we attempt to address these impacts, this time of multiple crises is also opportune to address the root drivers of marginalisation and vulnerability environmentally, economically and socially.

We look forward to further engagement with a recovery grounded in principles of justice and equity. For more information about this submission, please contact:

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## Introduction

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to comment on the *Inquiry into the 2019-2020 Victorian Fire Season*.

Our submission acknowledges that the bushfires of 2019-2020 were followed by COVID-19 and both emergencies illustrate that the burdens of these events will not be borne equally. We commend the Victorian Government and its emergency response agencies for their response to the 2019-2020 bushfires. Without their mature planning and leadership, it is likely more lives and properties would have been lost.

As the Victorian Government recognises, the 2009 and 2019-2020 bushfires are linked to decades of unrestricted global warming and climate change. This was acknowledged in the 2009 Royal Commission into the Black Saturday fires and, subsequently, has been followed up with the *Climate Change Act 2017*, and a concerted effort to invest in climate change mitigation and adaptation in Victoria. The unprecedented and destructive impacts of climate change across Australia, inclusive of the extreme heat and bushfires which fuel unprecedented bushfires and smoke haze, sit alongside and compound other sources of environmental degradation and ecological injustice from which people and planet are suffering.

The foundation of ecological justice is care of our common home. Ecological justice understands that healthy relationships between human communities and the eco-systems and built environments they live with is central to justice.

The impacts of past refusal to mitigate against climate change impacts and an unbalanced relationship with our environment means that there are changes and feedback loops already built into our present and immediate futures. For Victorians it means that longer, and more intense, bushfires are the new normal – with short, medium and long-term effects on all our Victorian communities that are yet to be fully realised.

That is why our collective response to our new bushfire-vulnerable Victoria should encompass four phases:

1. Immediate emergency responses in the event of a bushfire to save lives, property, and flora and fauna.
2. Short, medium and long-term community and environmental restoration after bushfire.
3. Building community resilience and a just recovery response to help prevent future bushfires while also preparing communities for when they do come.
4. Policies that reduce or mitigate against impacts of climate change and associated disasters.

This new normal will create, and is already creating, new classes of vulnerable people. But it will also disproportionately affect people who are already vulnerable due to poverty, housing insecurity, mental illness, disability, or age, as well as marginalised people who already face discrimination.

Our submission emphasises the need for a just response that acknowledges and addresses the fact that the burdens of bushfires, climate change and other compounding emergencies will not be borne equally. Without specific action by Government, it is already disadvantaged people and communities

who will bear the brunt of climate impacts and other emergencies.<sup>1</sup> It is also the same communities that went through the 2019-2020 bushfires that remain at risk of further fires into the future. We call for an equitable, just and holistic response to protect our common home.

## Recommendations

### Recommendation 1

That the Victorian Government further engage the role of community services sector and social change organisations with long-term planning for vulnerable populations that address the root causes of their vulnerabilities to climate change impacts and natural disasters.

### Recommendation 2

That the Victorian Government build on and support the implementation of Victoria's Climate Change Framework by:

- increasing funding and resources for organisations and communities seeking to trial, test and implement climate change adaptation, mitigation and transformation activities;
- increasing access to and translation of latest research and evidence-based practice relevant to the community services sector; and
- supporting 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.

### Recommendation 3

That, to stay on track, the Victorian Government continue to develop **5-yearly action plans** under the *Climate Change Act 2017* towards the interim targets and **expand these obligations to all sectors and statutory authorities including Bushfire Recovery Victoria.**

### Recommendation 4:

That Community Recovery Committees and Community Hubs established under the auspices of Bushfire Recovery Victoria include measures to ensure equitable access and participation in the creation of localised recovery solutions.

### Recommendation 5

That social change organisations and place-based approaches to recovery and restoration are available to, or engaged with, both the wider government policy development and the Community Recovery Committees and Community Hubs.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jesuit Social Services (2018). *Climate Change Discussion Paper: Submission to the Northern Territory Government, November 2018* ([online](#)).

### Recommendation 6

That the Victorian Government commit to an **equitable clean energy and low-carbon economic development strategy within the recovery plan for bushfire affected regions and communities**.

The strategy should:

- focus on public investment in renewable energy supply and low-carbon economic development opportunities;
- support community-controlled energy projects;
- ensure jobs and income from new large-scale renewables projects flow to local communities;
- outline a plan for a just transition for workers and communities away from gas and diesel power generation to jobs and economic development opportunities in clean energy and other ecologically sustainable industries; and
- invest in training and education in just transition and emerging economies for communities impacted by the bushfires, as well as those who can assist in the transition.

## Jesuit Social Services and ecological justice

For more than forty years, Jesuit Social Services has been committed to building a just society. In an increasingly complex era of climate crisis, public health emergencies, environmental degradation, economic pressures and rising social inequity, new challenges towards building a just society are appearing. Jesuit Social Services works with the most marginalised and vulnerable. These populations are often the least responsible for ecological and economic risks and threats but are the most affected by their emergence.

Recognising that environmental challenges pose particular risks to the communities with whom we work, since 2012, Jesuit Social Services has sought to bring an ecological perspective to all our operations. The interconnection between environmental and social justice has influenced our practice, policy, advocacy and organisational identity. It has shaped our strategy to ensure we are equipped to address justice issues of the future, and to lead peer organisations around issues of ecological justice. With VCOSS and RMIT, we are now engaged in sector trainings on issues of ecological justice and responding to community sector concerns about climate change impacts, which is part of ecological justice.

Our 2017 paper, [\*Ecological Justice – Expanding the Conversation\*](#), outlines this journey and the commitment to building a just society inclusive of both social and environmental justice. As Pope Francis put it in *Laudato Si*:

*Today we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*

Our commitment to ecological justice is now embedded and integrated across each of our key priority areas:

- **Justice and crime prevention** – people involved with the justice system.
- **Mental health and wellbeing** – people with complex and multiple 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 and culture** – 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.

Our pioneering program and advocacy actions include:

- the integration of ecological considerations into *Our Way of Proceeding* across the three domains of human spirit, our practice framework and business processes.
- the establishment of the Ecological Justice Hub in Brunswick, Victoria, that provides a range of community education and advocacy activities; skills, training and employment support into green economy jobs for people experiencing barriers to employment; and green living demonstration projects for the wider community that support climate change reduction and environmental recovery.

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- an ongoing series of cross-sector symposia focused on climate justice, including the NT Climate Justice Symposium hosted in Darwin and Alice Springs, in partnership with NTCOSS and the Environment Centre NT; and Just Transitions and Ecological Justice forums conducted in Victoria with VCOSS, DWELP, RMIT University, Victorian Trades Hall, plus other contributors.
- delivering a suite of training for the community services sector, designed in collaboration with VCOSS and RMIT Climate Change Exchange, on climate change adaptation and ecological justice, with a focus upon organisational change and sector responses to the most marginalised in the community.
- the incorporation of indicators of environmental risks and threats into our nation-wide research and work on place-based disadvantage, *Dropping of the Edge (DOTE)*.
- increasing our focus on how to minimise the unfairness inherent in ecological injustice, climate change and associated disasters by exploring the concept of a 'just transition' – that is, how to move from current untenable economic and social systems to an ecologically sustainable, zero greenhouse gas emissions world in a way that ensures those least able to cope with climate change receive the help they need to successfully adapt.

For more detail, see our most recent discussion paper in our ecological justice series on [just transitions](#).



## 1. Impacts on the most marginalised

### Emergencies and disasters

Jesuit Social Services works with the most marginalised in our society. As disasters and emergencies accelerate, new populations of marginalisation appear and the risks of exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities and marginalisation rise. Emergencies and disasters can also expose social fissures and inequalities. As with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic upon Victorian communities and economies, the responses to emergencies raise concerns for the long-term impact on criminal justice, family violence and the rule of law, as well as future economic livelihoods. It is an extraordinary challenge for all governments at this time.

While this has implications for Jesuit Social Services' core work and service delivery, our focus also extends to the wider question of social change and building a just society. A considered and long-term approach accepts that the age we now live in is one of increasing disasters, disruption, emergencies and threats. This extends from climate change impacts, ecological disasters, pandemics, economic and livelihood deprivation through to social unrest.

However, within this new paradigm there are also many opportunities for just recoveries and building long-term community resilience. As often observed, emergencies can increase social cooperation and governance systems can prove to compassionately adjust to the increasing demands of the social contract.

### Ecological justice and climate change

The Victorian Government has been working in the area of climate change mitigation and adaptation since 2010. The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (Black Saturday) recognised climate change as a significant contributor to fire risk via rising temperatures, dry conditions and increased extreme weather. Jesuit Social Services has been working with vulnerable and marginalised people for more than 40 years. In that time, we have learned that these people are often the least responsible for ecological risks and threats but are the most affected by their emergence, including climate change and natural disasters.

The establishment of a connection between climate change and bushfire management in the Victorian 2009 Royal Commission did not lead to direct recommendations to address climate change in the recovery. In the reconstruction recommendations, there is no mention of community services or place-based community resilience recovery. The main emphasis of the recommendations was upon localised and government responses to infrastructure rebuilds, emergency services and fire management. However, recommendations 3 and 5 included the need to account for vulnerable individuals and populations in all bushfire preparedness and evacuation policies. This practice was enacted during the recent fires and it is hoped that, with the latest fires, awareness of the particular needs of marginalised populations be extended to address the root causes before and after extreme weather events and emergencies.

Moving beyond knee-jerk responses to a longer-term approach is critical and, in this regard, we welcome the establishment of a permanent authority, Bushfire Recovery Victoria, to work closely with local residents to ensure recovery projects are locally driven and locally delivered. Jesuit Social Services also commends the Victorian Government for its strong leadership in recognising and acting on the need to address both climate change and its impacts, not just in its bushfire response but more

broadly through its Climate Change Framework. This planning and leadership is enshrined in the *Climate Change Act 2017*, which emphasises that Victoria must “take strong action to build resilience to, and reduce the risks posed by, climate change and protect those most vulnerable”, and “support vulnerable communities and promote social justice and intergenerational equity”.

### Recommendation 1

That the Victorian Government further engage the role of community services sector and social change organisations with long-term planning for vulnerable populations that address the root causes of their vulnerabilities to climate change impacts and natural disasters.

**This should include, as advocated in Recommendation 2 below, increasing funding and resources for organisations and communities seeking to trial, test and implement climate change adaptation, mitigation and transformation activities specifically designed to enable and strengthen the resilience of marginalised and vulnerable communities.**

### Recommendation 2

That the Victorian Government build on and support the implementation of Victoria’s Climate Change Framework by:

- increasing funding and resources for organisations and communities seeking to trial, test and implement climate change adaptation, mitigation and transformation activities;
- increasing access to and translation of latest research and evidence-based practice relevant to the community services sector; and
- supporting 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.

### Recommendation 3

That, to stay on track, the Victorian Government continue to develop **5-yearly action plans** under the *Climate Change Act 2017* towards the interim targets and **expand these obligations to all sectors and statutory authorities including Bushfire Recovery Victoria.**

## Impacts beyond the frontlines

The immediate impact sites of the bushfires were mainly in rural areas. However, the causes and secondary impacts (such as extreme heat and smoke) impacted very heavily upon our participants living in urban and peri-urban areas, particularly the homeless and those living in substandard housing.

The bushfires impacted on the delivery of community services beyond organisations working on the front line with emergency services, such as Red Cross and St Vincent’s. The longer-term impacts are being evidence in increased health vulnerability due to smoke and extreme heat impacts, energy insecurity, increased livelihood costs, internally displaced population movement, and family violence,

as well as significant mental health impacts. Our staff have seen a rise in secondary stresses with their participants, as well as stretching services they normally rely upon being diverted elsewhere. This has been exacerbated by the impacts of COVID-19 upon service delivery. These unprecedented and compounding challenges will create new classes of vulnerable people. But it will also disproportionately affect people who are already vulnerable due to poverty, housing insecurity, mental illness, disability, or age, as well as marginalised people who already face discrimination.

Climate change is a threat multiplier; the impacts are often unexpected and can collide with each other. The stressors of the fire events include extreme heat, low humidity, built environment and biodiversity loss and devastation, health and life threats, telecommunications fragility, energy shortages, food and medicine shortages, and widespread smoke haze. The secondary impacts are systemic, inclusive of economic, infrastructure, defence and emergency management resources, monetary systems, unpredictable population movements, food security, energy fragility, mental health, occupational health and safety concerns, family violence and biosecurity risks.

These lists are not exhaustive and are being compounded by COVID-19 impacts. It is currently overwhelming for policy makers and research experts to quantify the impacts. In light of such uncertainty, it is difficult to predict what the impacts upon our participants will be.

That is why our collective response to a bushfire-vulnerable Victoria should encompass four phases:

1. Immediate emergency responses in the event of a bushfire to save lives, property, and flora and fauna.
2. Short, medium and long-term community and environmental restoration after bushfire.
3. Building community resilience and response capacity to help prevent future bushfires while also preparing communities for when they do come.
4. Policies that reduce or mitigate against the effects of climate change and their intersection with other emergencies and disaster risks, i.e. pandemics, systemic economic fragility.

## 2. A Just response to Victoria's preparedness, response, relief and recovery

Victoria's planning for the 2019-2020 bushfires helped keep people and communities safe during the height of the fires. We also need bold leadership and courageous and collective action to address the very real and complex issues in prevention and recovery. It is understood that the newly formed statutory body Bushfire Recovery Victoria will be integral to that. Jesuit Social Services has significant experience and commitment to well researched place-based responses to entrenched and locational disadvantage, as evidenced by our *Dropping Off the Edge (DOTE)* body of work.

The inclusion within Bushfire Recovery Victoria of the Community Recovery Committees (CRCs), Community Hubs and Community Facilitators indicates a commitment to recovery policies being driven by localised voices and solutions.

Often local practical solutions in some areas outpace regulatory, policy and legislative settings and reform processes. In a policy and market environment subject to marked disruption and volatility, it is critical that emerging innovative and community-led projects are supported and funded alongside the development of longer-term structural changes. Place-based and community-led solutions seem to be structurally supported by the establishment of CRCs. However, in order to ensure an inclusive and just response, the appointment of marginalised voices or consultation with local community groups and specialised community services organisations adds to the realisation of holistic solutions for recovery.

### Recommendation 4

That Community Recovery Committees and Community Hubs established under the auspices of Bushfire Recovery Victoria include measures to ensure equitable access and participation in the creation of localised recovery solutions.

### Recommendation 5

That social change organisations and place-based approaches to recovery and restoration are available to, or engaged with, both the wider government policy development and the Community Recovery Committees and Community Hubs.

## A just recovery

A just recovery includes approaches committed to a just transition (energy and employment), community resilience, place-based approaches, ecological justice and intersectoral collaboration.

The model of a Just Recovery initially emerged from lessons learnt from Hurricane Katrina in the US, and subsequent disasters and emergencies. It is influencing the development of policies of the United Nations Development Programme, as well as other development agencies. A just recovery can be described as holding the following principles: addressing root cause remedies, supporting localised self-governance, asserting community-based organising, negotiating appropriate reparations and public infrastructure support, and advancing ecological restoration for resilience. Like ecological

justice, Just Recovery emphasises the interdependence of the whole web of life and our interdependence within it. It also views policy and implementation through a lens that prioritises supporting healthy relationships that respect this interdependence.

*If Just Recovery efforts deploy root cause remedies that set us up for a regenerative, more resilient future, then that demands a sense of ecological wisdom at the forefront. We cannot replicate the human development patterns that have historically stripped communities of their resilience, that have bulldozed our historical, ancestral connections to the lands we depend on. Instead, rebuilding home offers an opportunity to integrate and honour traditional ecological knowledge, regenerative design, and to build infrastructures with the goal of restoring balance for seven generations to come by relying on the wisdom of the seven generations before.<sup>2</sup>*

Jesuit Social Services highlights and advocate approaches that can support a just recovery and can be imbedded into both localised and state responses.

### Community resilience

Jesuit Social Services' commitment to ecological justice, the interconnected social and environmental justice, sees land care and social responses as inextricably linked. The bushfires illustrate the need for building community disaster resilience. The threat of climate change and the need for healthy relationships with our environment are integral to the long-term concerns of Bushfire Recovery Victoria and the projects it supports. In these times of compounding disasters, hazards and threats, we need to ensure that our institutions and social, justice, environmental management and economic systems are resilient for all in our communities.

The new body Resilience NSW was announced on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2020 to be headed by Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons. While the terms of reference for this new agency have not yet been announced, the intent of the agency is to ensure that the state of New South Wales is prepared to respond to major crises from COVID-19, climate change, floods and storms through to cybersecurity.

The resilience approach is well-established and embedded in many local councils, climate change adaptation bodies, aid agencies and infrastructure entities. Resilience can be interpreted as individualised with a focus on the capacity of individuals to 'bounce back' and survive threats. Community resilience is a more systemic and localised approach. It is both a response to disaster, public health emergencies and climate change adaptation and to long-term issues and threats. It encompasses individual preparedness in unison with enabling the conditions for a supportive and collaborative context so that communities can withstand and recover from disasters and thrive in the interim. Core to community resilience is the incorporation of equity and social justice principles and considerations in preparedness, planning and responses.

Community resilience is not 'disaster' focused as its primary consideration. It requires long-term reflection and implementation of the pre-conditions that allow resilience to grow and be maintained

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://commonslibrary.org/a-critical-framework-for-just-recovery/>.

within communities so that they both thrive and equitably adapt when stressors or emergency events occur.

Elements of Community Resilience:

- Supportive social and ecological context prior to adverse event.
- Public trust and sustainable engagement with communities, community sector and neighbourhood level organisations assist in building a just recovery.
- Focus on vulnerabilities WITH an assessment and support of a strengths-based approach.
- Localised economies and supply chain resilience prior and post emergency.

## Just Transitions

Climate change adaptation planning, place-based solutions and just recovery for bushfires must be done through the lens of a just transition, prioritising actions to mitigate the risks for communities most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, directly engaging and listening carefully to communities and supporting locally-driven solutions.

### **Just transitions: a fair, inclusive and transformative process**

The concept of ‘just transition’ has been commonly understood to focus on ensuring that workers’ rights and livelihoods are secured in the transition to ecologically sustainable economies. However, climate justice coalitions internationally and locally have articulated a wider vision of what is needed for a just transition that extends beyond labour practices and industry transitions.

In its wider sense, a just transition can be understood as the process by which we move from current untenable economic and social systems to an ecologically sustainable, zero greenhouse gas emissions world in a way that ensures those least able to cope with climate change receive the help they need to successfully adapt.

*Just Transition is a vision-led, unifying and place-based set of principles, processes, and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy. This means approaching production and consumption cycles holistically and waste-free. The transition itself must be just and equitable, redressing past harms and creating new relationships of power for the future through reparations. If the process of transition is not just, the outcome will never be.<sup>3</sup>*

This wider vision speaks clearly to the transformational potential of a just transition, and the need to ensure that the transition to a clean energy and low-carbon future does not replicate existing power structures that are harmful or exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities.

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://climatejusticealliance.org/>.

### Recommendation 6

That the Victorian Government commit to an **equitable clean energy and low-carbon economic development strategy** within the recovery plan for bushfire affected regions and communities. The strategy should:

- focus on public investment in renewable energy supply and low-carbon economic development opportunities;
- support community-controlled energy projects;
- ensure jobs and income from new large-scale renewables projects flow to local communities;
- outline a plan for a just transition for workers and communities away from gas and diesel power generation to jobs and economic development opportunities in clean energy and other ecologically sustainable industries; and
- invest in training and education in just transition and emerging economies for communities impacted by the bushfires, as well as those who can assist in the transition.