



Jesuit Social Services

**Submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural
Disaster Arrangements**

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**Jesuit
Social Services**
Building a Just Society

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Introduction

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. In providing this submission, we acknowledge and extend our deepest sympathy to the families, friends and communities of the 33 people who lost their lives in the 2019-20 bushfires¹. We acknowledge the millions of animals and plants that perished, and thousands of homes destroyed, across more than 10 million hectares of land that was burnt. We acknowledge the suffering caused to all those connected to that land, in particular, traditional owners.

The bushfires of 2019-20 were unprecedented and tragic. They caused untold loss, grief and trauma across communities and ecosystems, the impacts of which were felt across sectors and geographies and will continue to be felt for many years to come. The Royal Commission is an opportunity to understand the causes of these fires, and what actions are needed to restore and regenerate our communities and ecosystems, build our collective resilience, and mitigate the risk of destruction on this scale occurring again.

Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation, working to build a just society where everyone can live to their full potential. For over 40 years, we have been working in solidarity with people on the margins and working to change the policies, practices, ideas and values that perpetuate inequality, prejudice and exclusion. We have a presence in Victoria, Western Sydney and the Northern Territory.

Jesuit Social Services' understanding of justice rests on the principle that everything is interconnected. Over the last decade, we have sought to bring an ecological perspective to all our operations, recognising that environmental and social justice are inextricably linked. Our commitment to ecological justice has influenced our practice, policy, advocacy and organisational identity, and shaped our strategy to ensure we are equipped to address justice issues of the future. This journey is outlined in our 2018 paper, *Ecological Justice: Expanding the Conversation*.²

The bushfire crisis and the current overlapping health and economic crises of the COVID-19 pandemic find common roots in our broken relationship with our environment and our failure to recognise that healthy societies and economies depend on the preservation, not exploitation, of our natural resources.

Our continued reliance on a fossil fuel economy threatens the very survival of our species, let alone our economy, if we continue on the current emissions trajectory. Leading scientists have pointed out that recent pandemics, including COVID-19, are a direct consequence of human activity, with the rampant environmental destruction bringing us into closer contact with wildlife, and increasing the risk of animal-borne disease transmission.^{3,4}

¹ See <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disaster/2019-australian-wildfires/>.

² Jesuit Social Services (2018) *Ecological Justice: Expanding the Conversation* ([online](#))

³ Armstrong, F., Capon, A., & McFarlane, R. (2020). 'Coronavirus is a wake-up call: our war with the environment is leading to pandemics', *The Conversation*, 31 March 2020 ([online](#)).

⁴ Carrington, D. (2020). 'Halt destruction of nature or suffer even worse pandemics, say world's top scientists', *The Guardian*, 27 April 2020 ([online](#)).

The failures of government and business to act on climate change and environmental degradation are accelerating these threats. The summer of 2019-20 brought home to Australians that climate change is no longer a distant threat: more frequent and severe extreme weather events, including bushfires, heatwaves and floods, are here to stay and the impacts will be felt widely and deeply – even as far as Canberra. The existential threat of climate change is something our First Nations communities and other Australians living on the land have known for a long time.

Jesuit Social Services works with people on the margins, and we recognise that our work to address the root drivers of vulnerability and marginalisation is even more important now in the face of accelerating climate threats. As we saw in through the bushfire crisis and are seeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, these disasters and emergencies starkly reveal the existing fissures and inequalities in our society, and those who are already marginalised suffer the most. This unequal distribution of the burdens is felt in the short-term – in the immediate frontline impacts and secondary impacts – and over the long-term, as pre-existing vulnerabilities are exacerbated, leading to deepening poverty and widening inequality. Our preparation for and response to the future disasters and crises to come must therefore be grounded in principles of justice and equity.

Alongside acute natural disasters that rightly capture national attention, a slower story of suffering is unfolding. Aboriginal people in our most remote regions are subject to the slow lethality of climate impacts: extreme heat, water scarcity, food insecurity, health impacts, service disruptions, and the livelihood and cultural impacts of species loss and ecosystem damage, compounded by structural inequalities – including inappropriate housing, energy poverty, lack of service infrastructure, and exclusion from economic opportunities and decision-making that would facilitate effective mitigation and adaptation responses for local communities. This is happening at the same time as Aboriginal people are leading care for country and applying traditional knowledge alongside Western science for climate solutions, including fire management practices.

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, socially and economically, and to ensure that future responses and recovery are grounded in principles of justice and equity.

This brief submission:

- Calls for urgent action by the Federal Government to reduce emissions and invest in clean energy – climate action is our strongest preventative measure against a future of perennial disasters and emergencies.
- Foregrounds the impacts of climate-related disasters and crises on the most marginalised, highlighting the need for our national approach to preparedness and response to:
 - include strategies to address the root drivers of vulnerability that are exacerbated in times of crisis;
 - engage and resource local communities and community sector organisations to ensure the needs of the most vulnerable are met in response, relief and recovery efforts; and
 - support local communities to build community resilience over the long-term.
- Alongside the acute and devastating impacts of extreme weather events such as the bushfires, highlights the slow-lethality of climate impacts affecting particularly Aboriginal communities in remote parts of Australia, and the need for Federal, State and Territory resourcing to mitigate these risks to communities and support local adaptation.

Urgent action to reduce emissions and pathway to a clean energy future

The single most important outcome of this Royal Commission would be for the Federal Government to commit Australia to rapid and deep cut to fossil fuel emissions, in line with the science-based targets of the Paris Agreement: cutting emissions by approximately 45 percent from 2010 levels by 2030, and reaching net zero by at least 2050.⁵

With an abundance of solar, wind and hydro energy, there is no reason why Australia cannot meet or exceed these targets, and create a more resilient, equitable and thriving society and economy in the process.⁶ Failure to do so will see climate impacts further accelerate, with the compounding impacts of destruction on the scale of the 2019-20 bushfires eroding our capacity to rebuild and regenerate, and continue to cause untold harm to our communities, environment and economy.⁷

Facing an economic recession, now is the time for the Federal, State and Territory Governments to commit to a renewables-led recovery and economic stimulus that creates good jobs in clean energy, land care and management, and other regenerative and sustainable industries: activities that reduce our climate risk and start to build the economy of the future.

Recommendation 1: That the Federal Government commit Australia (including all levels of government and business) to rapid and deep emissions reduction, and a just transition to a zero-carbon economy.

Recommendation 2: That the Federal, State and Territory Governments commit now to a renewables-led recovery and economic stimulus that creates jobs in clean energy, land management, and other regenerative and sustainable industries that can start to build the economy of the future.

Building long-term community resilience

Jesuit Social Services works with the most marginalised in our society. Disasters and emergencies, such as the bushfires and the current COVID-19 crisis, exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities and marginalisation, and create new classes of vulnerable people, placing strain on already stretched community sector and volunteer resources.

⁵ The Paris Agreement, ratified by 197 countries, including Australia, sought to limit global warming to less than 2 degrees Celsius and pursue efforts to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. This target was selected as, within this threshold, the climate system is *likely* to remain in a habitable and stable state. It must be remembered, however, that warming at 1.5 degree Celsius is not considered 'safe' for most nations, communities, ecosystems and sectors, and poses significant risks to natural and human systems, compared to current warming of 1 degree Celsius. (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2018) *IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 degree Celsius*, [online](#)).

⁶ For principles of a just transition to a zero carbon economy, see Jesuit Social Services' 2019 discussion paper on *Expanding the Conversation: Just Transitions* as part of the ecological justice series ([online](#)).

⁷ Rubinsztein-Dunlop, S., & Taylor, K. (2020). 'Think of coronavirus as a test run: Australian military leaders warn we must prepare for worse', *ABC News*, 29 April 2020 ([online](#)).

For people living in poverty, disaster preparedness can be too expensive, and they may not have easy access to transport to get out or have the networks to rely on to find safe shelter elsewhere. When it comes time to find a new home or rebuild, they do not have the financial resources to do so. Spikes in food and petrol prices hit those on low incomes hardest. People on higher incomes may be able to afford to insulate themselves from the secondary impacts – staying indoors with the air-conditioner and air purifier on or escaping to holiday in an area that is not smoke-affected, while those on low incomes may not. People with pre-existing mental health conditions will suffer, compounded by the stress and trauma of disaster; addictions can rise and so, can domestic violence.

These inequalities are felt on the frontline and need to also be considered in the context of secondary impacts. Extreme heat and smoke impacted heavily on Jesuit Social Services’ participants living in urban and peri-urban areas, particularly the homeless and those living in substandard housing. The longer-term impacts are being evidenced in increased health vulnerability due to smoke and extreme heat impacts, energy insecurity, increased livelihood costs, internally displaced population movement, family violence, as well as significant mental health impacts. Our staff have seen a rise in secondary stressors 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 on service delivery. The increasingly frequent disasters and emergencies that Australia is likely to face will continue to disproportionately affect people who are already vulnerable due to poverty, housing insecurity, mental illness, disability, age and discrimination. Again, as was seen during the Black Summer bushfires and now during COVID-19 pandemic, they will also throw many more Australians into positions of vulnerability, precarity and poverty.

Recommendation 3: That a national approach to preparedness and response to climate threats, disasters and emergencies:

- include strategies to address the root drivers of vulnerability that are exacerbated in times of crisis;
- engage and resource local communities and community sector organisations to ensure the needs of the most vulnerable are met in response, relief and recovery efforts; and
- support local communities to build community resilience over the long-term, enabling communities to withstand and recover from disasters and emergencies when they do occur, and thrive in the interim.

Appendix I outlines key concepts of community resilience, just recovery and just transition that should inform our national approach to preparedness for, and response to, climate threats and future disasters and emergencies.

Addressing the slow-lethality of climate impacts

Alongside the increase in extreme weather events that Australia is facing, other ecological disasters are unfolding with dire consequences for lives and livelihoods. Jesuit Social Services has worked with communities in the Northern Territory for more than a decade, and the impacts of climate change are an increasingly present and significant threat in the lives of the people with whom we work.

Northern Australia faces some of Australia’s most extreme climate changes. Sea levels are rising twice as fast in the Top End than on Australia’s southern coasts and the global average, and extreme heat

days are rising exponentially, faster than CSIRO predictions.^{8,9} Many Central Australian communities are already experiencing water stress, with Yuendumu reported this year to be facing ‘severe risk’ of running out of water’.¹⁰ Climate change poses a direct and substantial threat to the biodiversity of the Territory, with species loss risking ecosystem collapse and deep loss to livelihoods and the spiritual and cultural life of Aboriginal people. Climate impacts on First Nations communities, particularly those in remote regions, are exacerbated by government failure to provide basic citizenship entitlements like appropriate housing, basic services, energy security and water security. Without urgent adaptation measures, Territory communities face dislocation as life gets hotter and harder across the region.

These issues of climate justice are increasingly being brought into focus through important work happening in the Northern Territory, across sectors and between organisations and grassroots communities, to progress a just response to climate change and a more sustainable, equitable and resilient community.

On 5 and 6 March 2020, more than 100 people gathered in Mparntwe/Alice Springs for the second Northern Territory Climate Justice Forum, hosted by Jesuit Social services in a coalition of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations. Participants included traditional owners, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (including land councils, housing organisations and health services), community sector organisations, health practitioners, renewable energy experts, researchers, all levels of government, environmental organisations, and grassroots community organisations and advocates. It followed the [inaugural forum](#) in Darwin in September 2019.

A key priority identified by participants at the first forum was the urgent need for detailed regional adaptation planning, particularly for people living in remote communities and outstations, with presentations and discussion painting a stark picture of the impacts that climate change is already having on people’s lives and livelihoods in remote communities. These impacts were spoken to again at the Alice Springs forum, alongside clear articulations of the solutions across the areas of caring for country, emissions reduction, clean energy transition, water security, housing and health.

We commend to the Commissioners the following short recordings of speakers from the Alice Springs and Darwin NT Climate Justice Forums, talking about the issues facing their communities and the solutions needed.

CAAMA coverage of Alice Springs forum featuring First Nations panellists [here](#) (5:34)

⁸ Darwin can expect to experience up to 132 days per year over 35°C by 2030 and 275 days by 2070, compared to current average of 22.2 days [CSIRO (2014). Climate change in Australia’s Top End: An information booklet on climate change for Aboriginal people living in Top End communities ([online](#))].

⁹ In the year to July 2019, Alice Springs had 129 days over 35 degrees Celsius, and 55 days over 40 degrees Celsius – temperatures that the CSIRO did not predict to arrive until 2030 (Allam, L., & Evershed, N. (2019). ‘Too hot for humans? First Nations people fear becoming Australia’s first climate refugees’, *The Guardian*, 18 December 2019 ([online](#)).

¹⁰ Beavan, K. (2019). ‘Yuendumu in Central Australia facing ‘severe risk’ of running out of water’, *ABC News*, 13 August 2019 ([online](#)).

Dianne Stokes, Warumungu Traditional Owner, speaking at the Darwin forum about climate change impacts in the Barkly region [here](#) (use password 'rc') (5:33)

Gadrian Hoosan, Garrwa and Yanyula Traditional Owner, speaking about the Ngardara (Sun) Project in Borroloola [here](#) (1:50)

Norman Frank, Warumungu Traditional Owners Tennant Creek – the need for community-owned solar to address climate impacts and benefit communities in the Barkly region [here](#) (2:39)

Kirsty Howey, Housing For Health Incubator, PhD Candidate University of Sydney – water rights of remote Aboriginal communities [here](#) (1:59)

Across the two days, working groups developed priorities across six areas of caring for country, emissions reduction, clean energy transition, water security, housing and health (see below).

Priorities identified at the NT Climate Justice Forum, Alice Springs, March 2020

The following priorities reflect a developing shared vision across sectors and communities for climate action in the Northern Territory.

Caring for country

Support and invest in Aboriginal knowledge and practices about caring for country, sacred sites, understanding climate change, the use of bush medicines and more (for example, native bee ecology), enable young people to be on-country, learn about foods and medicine from Elders, maintain and expand the Ranger program including to urban and town landscapes, resource the diversification of Ranger work in response to climate change, develop a regional system to report observed local changes to land national systems, develop alternative economies based on land and its resources, invest in land care, land restoration, people and land connections; and support people to live sustainably in homelands and communities.

Emissions reduction

Legislated emissions reduction through a Climate Change Act that commits the Territory to net zero emissions by 2050 with interim 5-year reduction targets, requires the Northern Territory Government to establish a whole of government climate justice and transition plan that addresses health, housing, water, energy and other relevant sectors, and bans new, or expansion of existing, development of fossil fuel basins, fields and infrastructure in the Northern Territory.

Water security

Legislated guarantee to safe and reliable drinking water supply for every community through the introduction of a Safe Drinking Water Act and amending existing laws to prioritise drinking/environmental and cultural use of water, establish clear accountability for water uniformly across the Northern Territory, and access data that enables monitoring of water use to improve decision-making and allocation for ecosystems and people.

Housing

Systemic reform of how housing is funded and delivered to enable community control of high-quality new housing and refurbishment that meets current and anticipates future housing needs, is climate safe, is embedded in whole of community design including homelands, meets the Housing for Health principles, assures access to clean affordable and reliable energy, assures access to water

that is safe and attractive to drink (potable and palatable), and maximises local Indigenous employment and training in every stage of the housing lifecycle.

Clean energy transition

Rapidly transition diesel reliant communities and homelands to renewable energy, with projects designed to facilitate local capacity building, jobs and ownership; require renewable energy developers to deliver sustainable regional and local community benefits and engagement in cost-effective renewable energy projects; government to deliver customer-focused grids capable of greater uptake of renewable energy (including large-scale batteries, demand-side management and central dispatch of ancillary services) and removing barriers to entry of new renewable energy generators; and government to enact a renewable energy strategy to underpin climate responsibility and just economic development in the Northern Territory (both exports and local development).

Health

Support community control, essential for both health and to respond to climate change; ensure health and wellbeing is prioritised in decisions around developments that carry climate change implications; adopt an ecological and culturally determined model for public health that considers direct health impacts (e.g. heatwaves) and indirect (e.g. food and water security); and equip health services to address social, emotional and mental health impacts (including adopting an Aboriginal definition and model of health).

See also the [joint statement](#) signed by 18 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations and community groups calling for a just transition to a safe climate future in the Northern Territory.

Conclusion

Jesuit Social Services appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the considerations of the Royal Commission. To discuss this submission further, please contact:

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Appendix I: A just approach to preparedness and recovery

This appendix outlines frameworks that should inform a just approach to Australia's preparedness for and recovery from future climate disasters and emergencies.

Community Resilience

Healthy relationships within communities and between communities and their environment are essential to our future resilience. 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.

However, community resilience is deeper and broader. It encompasses individual preparedness, as well as creating, over the long-term, the enabling conditions for supportive and collaborative communities that can equitably adapt and recover from stressors or emergency events when they occur and thrive in the interim.

In resilient communities, principles of equity and social justice are central to preparedness, planning and responses. Building community resilience requires long-term reflection, engagement both at the grassroots and with systems, and long-term commitment.

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 to and post emergency.

Just Recovery

The concept of a just recovery initially emerged from lessons learnt from Hurricane Katrina in the United States, 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. Just recovery views policy and implementation through a lens that prioritises supporting healthy relationships that respect the interdependence of all systems, environmental, social and economic. A just recovery requires a commitment to just transition (energy and employment), community resilience, place-based approaches, ecological justice and inter-sectoral collaboration.

"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.”¹¹

Just Transitions

In the context of the broader imperative to move Australia to a clean energy economy to mitigate the risk of future climate-induced disasters, the concept of just transitions provides a framework to ensure this is a fair, equitable and inclusive process.

‘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 this 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.”¹²

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. It requires a prioritisation of the most vulnerable and those on the margins and listening carefully to communities and supporting locally-driven solutions.

¹¹ A Critical Framework for a Just Recovery ([online](#)).

¹² See <https://climatejusticealliance.org/>.