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An equitable decade of climate change action in Victoria

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy. In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide input to Sustainability Victoria's (SV's) organisational strategy for 2021 to 2030.

Victoria's transition to a circular, climate resilient clean economy is an opportunity to improve the wellbeing of people experiencing disadvantage and assist the communities most affected by the phasing out of coal-fired power generation. The community sector can also be supported to reduce emissions and help address food insecurity.

Recommendations

Include a section about equity and outline how SV's decade of action will improve the wellbeing of people experiencing disadvantage.

Boost the energy efficiency of rental properties, public housing and low-income owner-occupied homes.

Target investment in the Latrobe Valley to help the community transition to the state's first circular, climate resilient clean economy.

Work with the Latrobe Valley Authority to create pathways for young people into employment in emerging industries.

Re-establish the TAKE2 program for community organisations with additional grants and guidance.

Help address food insecurity by establishing a grants program for community gardens.

Embed equity throughout the strategic plan

Equity is one of the six guiding principles of Victoria's Climate Change Act 2017. This is important because people experiencing disadvantage are the most affected by the impacts of climate change yet are less likely to experience the benefits of transitioning to a clean economy.

Equity should be further embedded in the organisational strategy via a standalone section that outlines how SV's decade of action will improve the wellbeing of people experiencing disadvantage. The vision could use Victoria's response to climate change as an opportunity to address entrenched inequality and improve the health outcomes of households doing it tough.

Improving the energy efficiency of Victoria's housing stock is a prime example of how this can be accomplished.

Lift residential energy efficiency

Research by SV found that the average energy efficiency of homes built in Victoria before 2005 was 1.81 Stars, compared to the 6-Star minimum standard for homes built now.ⁱ The strategy envisions our state being "on track to retrofit one million underperforming homes" (p3) and achieving this would reduce low-income household's energy bills and help them keep cool in summer and warm in winter.

Figure 7 (p12) labels 16 per cent of Victoria's population as 'late adopters' and explains that activities targeted at this cohort "have low direct impact and are designed to minimise harm". 'Late adopters' are generally people experiencing disadvantage, who are most impacted by climate change but face barriers to changing their behaviour or environment. For example, low-income households are less able to afford energy efficiency upgrades and renters may not have permission to modify their home.

VCOSS is concerned that focusing activities on the 'early majority' and 'late majority' cohorts in figure 7 lacks an equity lens and could exacerbate inequality by not matching investment with need. Subsidies may shift to new technologies as uptake for old programs slows down, helping wealthier households purchase a 7-star energy efficient home, solar panels, a battery, an electric car and more while low-income households are left behind. For example, the Victorian Energy Upgrades program mostly benefits households who can afford deep retrofits that result in high bill savings but require a significant upfront financial contribution.ⁱⁱ

VCOSS recommends that SV accords renters, public housing tenants and low-income owner-occupiers highest priority for energy efficiency upgrades.ⁱⁱⁱ The three focus areas outlined in the strategy can all be leveraged to improve the thermal comfort of these dwellings:

- 'Behaviour change and education' could involve awareness campaigns targeted at landlords about the benefits of upgrading the NATHERS rating of their rental property;
- 'Investment and innovation' could involve an expansion of the 35,000 social housing retrofits announced in the 2020-21 State Budget to cover the entire stock; and
- 'Community action' could involve collaboration with local councils to deliver energy efficiency upgrades to low-income owner-occupied properties through Environmental Upgrade Finance.

Continue supporting the Latrobe Valley to transition

The strategy envisions a “just and equitable transition for all Victorians” (p5) but should include a greater focus on the impact of coal-fired power station closures on communities in the Latrobe Valley. The Hazelwood power station shut in 2017 and Energy Australia announced that Yallourn will close in 2028 but the transition is a chance to address disadvantage and establish new industries in the region.

According to the most recent Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage in 2016, the Latrobe Valley Local Government Area had the fourth lowest score in Victoria.^{iv} As of June 2021, the unemployment rate in the areas surrounding the power stations are much higher than the Victorian average of 6.2 per cent including 14.8 per cent in Morwell and 10.3 per cent in Moe-Newborough.^v

The local community service organisations consulted by VCOSS expressed a desire for long-term plans that instill the region with hope and generate stable employment in new industries that improve the community’s health and wellbeing. SV’s strategy aligns perfectly with this vision for the Latrobe Valley and opens the potential for SV to play a greater role in the region.

For example, the investment in a circular economy outlined in figure 2 (p5) could be targeted at the Latrobe Valley to “foster innovation and productivity that invigorates existing businesses and creates new ones, delivering more jobs and more growth”. (p4) A portion of the “175 clean energy jobs”, “60 local projects funded” and “\$120 million of private investment mobilised” (p7) is much needed in the region and could establish a circular, climate resilient clean economy to act as a blueprint for the rest of the state.

The local community sector also reflected that the State Government has focused on shifting retrenched workers to temporary jobs including construction projects or other coal-fired power stations. There is a role for SV to “be more inclusive in engaging with young people” (p6) by working with with the Latrobe Valley Authority and the Baw Baw Latrobe Local Learning Employment Network to create pathways for young people into the new industries required for a waste-free, net zero carbon future.

Help the community sector benefit from net zero

The TAKE2 program included voluntary pledges by community organisations to take specific actions to reduce emissions.^{vi} This includes community service organisations and members of VCOSS such as Consumer Action Law Centre, Good Shepherd, Jesuit Social Services, Maldon Neighbourhood Centre, Morwell Neighbourhood House and Southern Grampians Glenelg Primary Care Partnership.

The Victorian community sector is increasingly interested in reducing its emissions to mitigate climate change and lower costs. Vinnies Victoria was certified carbon neutral under the Federal Government's Climate Active initiative in July 2020.^{vii} But many community service organisations lack resources to develop plans, capacity to dedicate staff time to sustainability initiatives, funding to pay for upgrades, and ownership over their premises to make modifications.

The TAKE2 program ended in January 2021 but SV's strategy should re-establish it for organisations that need support to benefit from the state's transition to a clean economy. For example, community service organisations would require tailored guidance on cost-effective initiatives, grants to pay for upgrades, collaboration with local councils on the premises leased to community organisations, and opportunities for staff members to learn from experienced organisations such as a buddy program.

Boost access to fresh and affordable food

The strategy envisions a Victoria where "food security has improved for many vulnerable people" and "shared community gardens have multiplied across Victoria". (p3) The community sector is concerned about the impact of climate change on people's access to nutritious and affordable food. For example, extreme weather events can destroy crops and cause a spike in food prices and heatwaves can prevent people from travelling to a market or grocery store for their weekly shop.

Many community organisations are investing in community gardens and other local initiatives to combat escalating food insecurity and educate residents about healthy eating and growing their own produce. For example, the Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre established a community garden Braeside that provides older culturally and linguistically diverse people with education sessions run by a dietician and cooking classes to learn about healthy cultural meals.^{viii} Community health organisation enliven launched the Food From Home campaign in Cardinia, Casey and Dandenong and provided free seed packs at local libraries.^{ix}

The strategy could expand on its commitment to improving food security by establishing a grant program for community gardens. The funding could include a budget to maintain the garden and lead education sessions and the program should also involve negotiation with local councils to help organisations repurpose land and obtain planning approval.

SV may also be interested that VCOSS has been engaged by the Victorian Food Relief Taskforce and Department of Families, Fairness and Housing to coordinate the development of a Victorian Food Stress Index. The Index will draw together food affordability and socio-

economic data to generate an indicator predicting the proportion of households in an area that are likely to be suffering food insecurity. The index will help identify areas where relief efforts can be targeted to improve food security for people experiencing disadvantage.

This submission was prepared by Ben Latham and authorised by CEO Emma King.

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A fully accessible version is available online: vcoss.org.au/policy

ⁱ Sustainability Victoria, *Energy Efficiency Upgrade Potential of Existing Victorian Houses*, December 2015.

ⁱⁱ N Willand, T Moore, R Horne and S Robertson, *Retrofit Poverty: Socioeconomic Spatial Disparities in Retrofit Subsidies Uptake*, Buildings and Cities, 1(1): 14-35, April 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ VCOSS, *Feeling the Heat*, May 2021.

^{iv} Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Socio-Economic Indexes for Australia (SEIFA) 2016*, March 2018.

^v National Skills Commission, *Small Area Labour Markets: June quarter 2021*, September 2021.

^{vi} Department of Environment Land, Water and Planning, *TAKE2 Victoria's climate change pledge: Acting now on climate change*, 2016.

^{vii} Vinnies Victoria, *Vinnies Victoria becomes first major Australian social welfare charity to be certified carbon neutral*, 28 July 2020.

^{viii} Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre, *Buzz around to Braeside Park and check out our wonderful cultural community garden, The HIVE*, accessed on 7 November 2021: smrc.org.au/the-hive

^{ix} D Kutchel, *Sowing seeds of growth*, Star News, 25 November 2020:

berwicknews.starcommunity.com.au/news/2020-11-25/sowing-seeds-of-growth