Reference Resource: Social Workers for Climate Change Action

The WHY, WHAT & HOW for Social Work in the Climate Emergency

Andrew Nicholson
May 2020

CLIMATE AND HEALTH ALLIANCE

Contents

Scope and objectives of the reference resource

This resource was written as a reference component of the AASW CPD course: *Social Workers for Climate Change Action*. Via its text summaries and hyperlinked references, it offers an overview of some of the key issues connecting potential social work roles to the nexus of climate change impacts, human and other species health and wellbeing. It is hoped that, along with the relevant CPD presentations, panels, and learner discussions, it will stimulate learner curiosity to develop a deeper engagement with the topic of green social work practice and climate change.

Although provided as a resource for professional education purposes under the auspices of the Australian Association of Social Workers, this document is solely the work of its author, Andrew Nicholson. Any errors, omissions, opinions, or views put forward are his sole responsibility.

Rationale

The resource is intended to give a sense of the progress that Australian mainstream social work is making towards adopting green or eco-social work models of practice; and as such work relates to growing recognition of the catastrophic risks posed by uncontrolled climate change.

Much of the concern over present and predicted climate change problems to date has, understandably, focussed on public health and wellbeing impacts. This resource reflects that interest in its content linked to climate change implications for the health sector in Australia, and for some social work client interventions within public health services. Notwithstanding this health orientation, the core principles of social work for climate change action, and of wider green social work theory as outlined in this resource, may well be of interest to other sectors of the social work profession motivated to adopt ecological and transformative forms of practice.

A further objective of the CPD course presentations that align with the content of this reference resource is to seek feedback from practicing social workers in the learning groups. The idea is to incorporate an action research approach to the learning process and encourage and use feedback from the professional experience of learners themselves. Any informal data so received may, with permission, be incorporated into a future edition of this learning resource. It is hoped that in this way the reference resource will build an ongoing expression of Australian mainstream green social work practice as it may evolve in coming years.

Structure of the resource

The content of the resource is organised around the attempt to answer three key questions:

– What exactly **is** social work for climate action?

– Why should the social work profession be involved with the climate change threat?

– How can social workers actually respond to climate change in practical terms?

Each of the three answer sections begin with key learning points to aid comprehension.

Section 1

The resource explores why the problem of climate change is so significant and why is it so relevant to social work practice. It's proposed that the dual pursuit of social and environmental justice for clients provides the key answer to the latter question. This section also covers some of the key scientific and public concerns surrounding the climate change challenge and the risks posed to future life in Australia.

The question of how we arrived at an emergency level climate change risk then prompts a consideration of the problem of risk assessment failure, and the sidelining of climate science data. An overview of the basic science on climate is followed by an outline of the important regressive role that climate change self-delusion and denial has played in slowing down progress toward effective responses. The section ends on a more positive note, with a reflection on what needs to be done to counter climate change, and where effective action is taking place in 2020.

Section 2

This section considers the 'what' and 'how' of social work action for climate change, proposing that such work is a form of green or eco-social work practice which shares many of the knowledge, skills and values of mainstream social work. It follows from that proposition that social work for climate action represents an extension of existing practice approaches, rather than a new model of work. It covers the origins of green social work theory and describe its appearance on the international social work stage since 2010; with growing mainstream interest in Australia also noted for that period. It then sets out a brief review of current academic, training and AASW interest in climate oriented green practice. The section ends with a description of some climate change oriented social work practice happening in Australia in 2020.

Section 3

A lot of constructive institutional response to climate change problems has emanated from the public health sector in recent years. As a profession closely aligned to the social work field, climate change action by the health sector may offer some valuable lessons for social work practice. This covers the public health concern over human induced climate change, noting some similarities and differences between health and social work sector response to the climate challenge in the last 10 years or so. It then lists some significant NGO opinion leaders on climate change and health, describing some relevant hospital and nursing sector initiatives. A short description of federal and Queensland state government responses to the climate change and health nexus completes this section.

1 The WHY of social work involvement with climate change

"In the ecological parallel to the Titanic story, we have reached the stage in the narrative where we have received the iceberg warning, and have made the remarkable decision to double the engine speed to Full Speed Ahead and go below to get a good night's rest. A change of course might be bad for business, we might have to slow down, lose time. Nothing, not even the ultimate risk of the death of nature, can be allowed to hold back the triumphant progress of the ship of rational fools."

Val Plumwood, Environmental Culture:
The Ecological Crisis of Reason (2002) p.1

Key learning points in this section:

Uncontrolled climate change disruption, as delineated by contemporary climate science, is already causing major impacts on human and other species health and wellbeing around the globe. These impacts will only worsen unless greenhouse gas emissions are greatly reduced in coming decades. And even as we move to restore climate stability, we must also help communities adapt to predicted climate disruption 'locked into' planetary climate systems. There is much potential social work intervention to be done in these areas.

The contemporary Australian situation on climate change is a microcosm of many of these international factors, but the continent has unique vulnerabilities deriving from its already variable climate. Currently, it also has a very variable level of strategic response to the climate change challenge, ranging from the ambitious to the inadequate.

Many of the existing and potential client groups served by social work services will be affected disproportionately by the impacts of global heating and climate change. It is imperative therefore that the social work profession, along with others, does all it can to help control greenhouse gas emissions and help communities adapt to the future climate change impacts.

In this case, the pursuit of environmental justice for the planet will also serve the pursuit of social justice for clients.

Despite the extremely serious or even emergency level of present and anticipated future climate change impacts, some sectors of society, mainly national governments and nation states, are not reacting fast enough, or are even delaying action on greenhouse gas emission reduction and community climate adaptation planning.

The lack of effective action on climate change within some sectors of the global community can be considered a result of faulty assessment of the risks posed. These failed assessments are connected with a dismissal of robust scientific data on climate change trends, a pandering to vested financial interests, and a diverse set of psychological denial mechanisms, which permit individuals to distance themselves mentally from climate change problems and other inconvenient truths.

Majority public opinion in democratic nation states pursuing this sort of delaying agenda is critical of its own government institutions; and is calling for greater leadership and action to set realistic greenhouse gas reduction targets and develop effective national strategies and policy to help communities transition rapidly to a low carbon economy.

Fortunately, many other sectors of the global community are taking robust action to control climate change and restore climate stability. The local and city government sector worldwide has been particularly active in setting realistic emissions targets and developing climate change adaptation planning for their communities. The international public health sector has also ramped up its efforts in these areas of climate change action within the last 10 years.

1.1 Why is the problem so significant?

Recently, the decades long concern about human induced climate change, caused by our pollution of the atmosphere and oceans with greenhouse gases emitted from our present carbon-based economy, has reached a dramatic head. A seemingly small, 1.1-degree Celsius average global temperature rise caused by global heating has already caused major disruption to global weather patterns, with huge adverse implications for human and other species health and wellbeing. An example of this disruption is the intensification and prolonging of 'natural' weather events to catastrophic levels never seen before.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that on current global warming trends, from 2030 onward, climate change will to cause about 250 000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress. The WHO estimation of direct damage costs to health (i.e. excluding costs in health-determining sectors such as agriculture and water and sanitation), is put at between USD 2-4 billion/year by 2030.

Many scientists and other knowledgeable observers are concluding that the ever-increasing trend of global heating, with its destructive impacts on human and other species health and wellbeing should now be considered an emergency, and response. The main two challenges of this emergency involve the need to stabilise the global climate by means of steep reductions in greenhouse gas emissions;

and to put in place effective climate change adaptation planning and support for communities, which will continue to experience the inertia effects of global heating already locked into planetary systems for years to come.

The consequences of not adopting such a climate control plan, globally through to locally, hardly bears thinking about. Every sector of society is and will continue to be vulnerable to the effects of rising global temperatures. Some of these effects include: increasing extreme weather events from climate change amplified heatwaves, bushfires, storms, and floods. The associated damage to infrastructure, housing and loss of economic productivity. Loss of agricultural productivity, food and water security. The increase and spread of vector borne disease, civil unrest and mass migration; an increasing impost on national economies as a result of damage repair costs – annually. These various climate change related impacts also have the potential to impact public mental and physical health.

Thanks to climate science, we now know that on current GHG emission trends we are set for a very probable rise in average global temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2030, and a 2 degree Celsius rise by about 2050, with an additional rise to anywhere between 3.00 and 5.00 degrees Celsius or more later in the century – depending on how and when certain 'positive' feedback loops, or tipping points add to the heating trend. These tipping points include: increased melting of Arctic ocean sea ice, thawing of permafrost in high latitudes, and changes to ocean heat circulation and current patterns, for example, the Gulf Stream.

1.11 Some of the risks posed to Australia by uncontrolled climate change

If anyone tells you, "This is part of a normal cycle" or "We've had fires like this before" smile politely and walk away, because they don't know what they're talking about. Greg Mullins, Former NSW Fire and Rescue Commissioner, November 2019

Australia's climate change risk is a microcosm of the global picture in terms of the basic physics of planetary climate systems, but the continent has unique vulnerabilities deriving from its already variable climate. The 'land of droughts and flooding rains' is now experiencing rapid intensification of these previous variable weather patterns by climate change; bringing catastrophic level heatwaves, bushfires and flood events on a more frequent and prolonged basis. As with the global effects of climate change, the impacts experienced in this country, for example through extreme weather events, are mounting dramatically; with increasing loss of human life, physical and mental health, loss of economic productivity and infrastructure value, massive loss of other species life, and reductions in agricultural productivity and water security.

1.12 Impacts of intensified 'natural' weather events

THE 2019–2020 BUSHFIRE SEASON

The effects of this 'new abnormal' weather was evident in Australia during the 2019-2020 bushfire season. This same period also included extreme heatwaves, droughts, and storms. The bushfires of the 2019–2020 season alone are reported to have burnt out 10 million hectares of land, killed at least 28 people directly, and probably at least another 400 through inhalation of bushfire smoke and exacerbation of existing cardiovascular and respiratory medical conditions. One estimate of the economic costs of the bushfires was put at $100 billion in January 2020, making them Australia's costliest natural disaster to date.

Senior firefighting officials in Australia with many decades of experience described the 2019–2020 bushfire season with terms such as 'catastrophic' and 'unprecedented.' Despite attempts to warn the federal government earlier in 2019, that extra attempts should be made to better prepare bushfire prone communities and to increase firefighting infrastructure, their advice was rebuffed. This is another example of a faulty risk assessment on climate change impacts, being made by a government choosing to ignore scientific and professional advice, probably as a result of ideological driven determination not to link climate change to the fire risk.

THE 2010–2011 QUEENSLAND FLOODS

The Queensland floods which occurred between December

2010 and January 2011 are an earlier example of the exacerbating effect of climate change on a natural weather event and a demonstration of the extent of the costs borne by communities from infrastructure damage, loss of life, livelihoods and income, human productivity and increased mental stress. There were 35 direct fatalities from the floods and an estimated $6.7 billion dollars of so-called 'tangible' economic losses from fatalities, reduced human productivity and infrastructure damage. The 'intangible' costs, which put a monetary value on things like: decline of public mental health and the social cohesion of communities, and ecosystems damage, was put at $7.4 billion.

As with the more recent 2019-2020 Australian bushfires, we now know, through science research, that the Queensland floods were made more likely and more intense by the effect of global heating on the ocean around Australia. In turn that heating amplified the natural La Niña cycle. This research concluded that global warming trends have '*implications for more frequent and extreme La Niña; events likely to bring a stronger chance of damaging high rainfall to the north of Australia.*'

Survey research undertaken by Queensland University of Technology in 2017, six years after the floods, noted residual levels of physical and mental health effects directly linked to the event by residents who experienced it. The survey also revealed that dissatisfaction with recovery operations during the floods, and perceived injustices associated with insurance and compensation arrangements 'may aggravate health consequences.

So, a question for social workers here might be: could there be much longer-term, ongoing social work health support and advocacy roles to play in these events – that is, well after the event itself is over?

1.13 The effects of climate change on Australian agricultural productivity

A small selection of report data points to the serious long-term implications for this sector under current climate change trends.

A recent report by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES) stated that changes to the Australian climate since 2000, with an associated change of rainfall patterns across the country, had reduced average annual broadacre farm profits by 22%, or around $18,600 per farm. Based upon other sources of analysis, by 2050, climate change is projected to halve the irrigated agricultural output of the Murray-Darling Basin region, which currently accounts for 50% of Australia's irrigated agricultural output by value (about $7.2 billion per year). Equally, by 2090, wheat yields on over 4,000 family farms in WA that produce half of Australia's wheat are projected to fall by 41-49% on current greenhouse gas emission trends.

1.2 Why is climate change so significant for social work practice?

From a social work perspective many of climate change related impacts will, at least initially, have a disproportionate effect on potential client groups. Such groups are often already potentially marginalised in society or exhibit anti-social behaviour: the old and infirm, the long term unemployed, the poor and homeless and those exhibiting a tendency for violent behaviour or criminality. Future climate change has the capacity to further marginalise and increase the vulnerability of all of these groups. It follows therefore that social work efforts aimed at helping control climate change, or helping clients adapt to its effects, represent both a pursuit of environmental justice, for the planet, and of social justice for their clients. The relevance of social work action on climate change is covered more fully in Section 2 commencing on p.17.

There are many implications for social work practice in terms of current climate change trends in Australia. Social workers are certain to be involved in giving immediate response to 'natural' weather disasters, providing emergency relief resources and mental health first aid. In the longer term, they are likely to be involved with the mental health implications of traumatic shock from disaster events but also longer-term issues such as anxiety, depression. and suicidal ideation arising from declines in the public's perception of economic or physical security. In terms of physical health issues, the increasing incidence of heatwaves and concerns over water security may well have implications for social workers employed in the health sector as they assess the quality of life of vulnerable clients either at home or about to return there after periods of external health care and hospitalisation.

Social workers are also potentially well equipped to take climate change action in several ways. They possess skills and are versed in procedures which align with or can be adapted to meet the climate challenge. For example, they use:

Psychoeducation with their clients – a process which can be modified to provide climate change education for themselves and others.

Risk assessment within the client need assessment and intervention cycle – a skill which will allow them to better understand how climate change risk assessment has failed in some quarters, and how it could be improved.

Crisis intervention approaches which can allow innured client problems to be progressed - this skill might allow social workers to be sensitive to the opportunities to argue for climate change strategies that do not simply replicate regressive 'business as usual' approaches.

Advocacy skills to argue for structural reforms and better long-term provision to meet client needs – a skill which would comes to the fore in, for example, the process of political lobbying for more effective government action on climate control.

Social workers in their current roles can reflect actively on this list of professional capabilities. They can ask themselves how they might be adapted for use in acting on climate change in their own daily practice. For reference, some examples of contemporary Australian social work action are given in Section 2 on page 14.

1.3 How did we arrive at emergency level climate change problems?

Many of Australia's leaders are particularly culpable, having done everything possible over the last three decades to prevent the development of serious climate change policy, internationally and domestically, and to protect the fossil fuel industry. Notwithstanding the fact that Australia is the world's fourth largest carbon polluter, exports included, and one of the countries most exposed to climate change. The first duty of a government is to protect the people, their well-being and livelihoods. Instead, Australian governments have left the community largely unprepared for the disasters now unfolding, and for the extensive changes required to maintain a cohesive society as climate change impacts escalate."

Extract from the Safe Climate Declaration 2020

Given the extreme seriousness of current and predicted climate change impacts on human and other species wellbeing, the question of how we arrived in this predicament is a legitimate question to ask. The approach to answering used in this reference resource is to consider the increasingly dangerous impacts of global heating and climate change as, ultimately, the product of failed assessments of the risk posed by climate change, made at a number of levels of global society. Social workers are well acquainted with the procedure of risk assessment as part of the client planning and intervention cycle. As in social work intervention, so too in climate change control planning; effective outcomes are based on good quality risk assessments – and the converse is equally true.

In certain sectors of global society, now primarily at the level of national governments and nation states, the faulty assessments made about present and predicted climate change risk have been based on several factors. There has been a failure to take proper account of the scientific evidence on rising trends in global heating, and of the climate change intensification of natural weather events. The deliberate downplaying of scientific warnings on climate change threats to public health and prosperity has often been associated with government support for financial vested interests.

Additionally, a number of psychological and socio-cultural mechanisms are at play which have allowed certain individuals and groups to delude themselves, and others, over the scientific reality of worsening climate change trends.

Even the well made economic efficiency argument, for the huge overall monetary saving to be achieved by taking effective action to control climate change, as opposed to ignoring it, has been effectively neutered for 15 years. Instead, a 'business as usual' approach, using the so-called 'wisdom of the markets' to regulate the climate impacts of the carbon based economy, has been favoured by many governments and other key stakeholders.

It is a combination of these regressive factors that have held back effective progress on climate change control at the international level for years. Fortunately, we are now seeing much more assertive action on greenhouse gas emission reduction and climate adaptation planning being taken at city, state and regional level within countries and in the business and corporate sector. Nonetheless, it remains the case that lack of progress in international negotiations on climate change control, through the Conference of the Parties mechanism, has been a major disappointment in recent years.

1.31 Insufficient progress to control the problem at the international level

International climate science reporting, and many negotiated meetings based upon that science, have been held since the early 1990's. Sadly, none of this work has managed to control GHG emissions, which as of 2020, continue to rise. In 2015, the UN Paris climate accord negotiations pointed to a 2.00 degree Celsius global temperature rise as an upper threshold of future climate change impact risk, and that staying below a 1.5 degrees temperature rise over baseline was a far more preferable option; in terms of limiting likely loss of human and other species life and health, as well as limiting the economic costs of escalating infrastructure damage. The strategy set at Paris was for a concerted effort to stabilise GHGs at a peak by 2020, and then continue to reduce them to achieve a global net zero emissions target by 2050. The Paris agreement, like all other international climate negotiations before it, relies on voluntary undertakings from countries to set targets to limit GHG emissions (known as their National Determined Contributions or NDCs).

In the few years since the 2015 Paris meeting it has become clear that the combined total of all NDC's would be insufficient to achieve the strategy of peaking GHGs in 2020 and then net zero emissions by 2050. So, in summary, attempts to control global heating through GHG emissions reduction at an international level up to this point, and notwithstanding all of the hard work of the UN, IPCC and other relevant bodies must be considered another example of failed risk assessment as part of an unsuccessful intervention process. It remains to be seen whether the next, high level international climate negotiation gathering (the Conference of the Parties or COP) presently postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, can turn this situation around.

It is now clear that a relatively small but highly influential cabal of so-called climate change 'denialists' in positions of strategic power, have managed to greatly impede progress on solving the growing problems thrown up by the climate emergency. Tragically, as has also been seen recently with initial failure of risk assessment on pandemic disease impacts, failure to estimate climate change risk accurately has led, and will continue to lead, to avoidable loss of human life and major disruptions to quality of life around the world.

Next, this section explores each of these contributions toward failed risk assessment on climate change in a little more depth.

1.32 Failure to take proper account of the scientific evidence

It may be hard for a dispassionate observer to understand how the basic scientific facts of climate change, which have been known about in terms of physics and chemistry for almost 150 years, could be rationally disputed, sidelined or even ignored. Such rejection of science and the relevant data useful for accurate, evidenced based risk assessment, can be considered a demonstration of wilful ignorance

or self-delusion. Because of its influence on sound policy formation, and the strategic response to the extreme risk posed by climate change, some researchers have described self-delusion as a form of extreme or existential risk in its own right.

In the face of a powerful, minority and delusional determination to deny the scientific reality of how the planet's climate system functions, let us remind ourselves of what basic science says about the climate change problem.

1.33 A basic climate science overview

There is now a well surveyed history of prior public understanding of the reality and seriousness of climate change going back at least 10 years. For that reason this resource does not cover the basic atmospheric processes, or the physics and chemistry of the phenomenon in any depth, but merely gives an overview. For the interested reader, there are many excellent online resources: websites and complete Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) auspiced by prestigious universities, covering many aspects of climate change, including the role that climate change denial plays in holding back progress on the issues.

At its most basic, global climate change, and consequent terrestrial and ocean warming, are caused by the heat trapping properties of certain gases, such as carbon dioxide, methane, oxides of nitrogen and fluorocarbon chemicals. These gases can re-reflect incoming solar radiation at longer, heat carrying, infra-red wavelengths. This process then heats up the land surface and lower atmosphere and the additional heat gets redistributed around the planet, including the oceans. Overall, everything heats up, and the higher the concentration of these gases in the atmosphere, the higher their heat trapping effect. The process is replicated in miniature by the glass panes of a garden greenhouse – hence the popular term 'greenhouse effect' and, by association, 'greenhouse gases' for those

chemical compound gases responsible for the process. It is important to realise that a natural greenhouse effect existed long before humans arrived on the scene; and indeed, has been necessary to warm the planet to temperatures conducive to life.

Our present climate change problems have occurred because over the last few hundred years, the global economy has added increasing quantities of greenhouse gas (GHG) to the atmosphere and oceans through its increased industrial and agricultural outputs. So, there is already a huge amount of human produced greenhouse gases in both atmosphere (and dissolved in the oceans). In the atmosphere, the present concentrations are estimated to be about one and a half times as great as in the pre-industrial period and since 1990 have caused a 43% increase of the warming effect on the climate. The atmospheric concentration of the most important greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, expressed in parts per million of the gas, or ppm, is about 413 ppm and increasing at around 1 – 2 ppm a year.

It is worthwhile to try and develop an idea of the immense volume of human produced greenhouse emissions. For carbon dioxide, put there mainly by fossil fuel combustion, it runs into the tens of gigatons per year. A gigaton, a billion tonnes of mass, is equivalent roughly to the weight of water in 400,000 Olympic swimming pools, or estimated at over twice the weight of all humans currently on Earth. The greenhouse effect produced by carbon dioxide is also long lasting in the atmosphere – on the order of centuries or longer. The cumulative concentration of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has led to just over a one-degree Celsius average global temperature rise compared to historic temperature baselines. This average conceals higher and lower figures in different parts of the globe. Currently, Australia is about 1.4 degrees Celsius above baseline.

1.34 Recent scientific estimations of the risk posed by climate change trends

Climate science has been able to quantify some elements of the global heating process well: for example, the heating caused by different levels of GHG concentration in the atmosphere and ocean. These calculations have underpinned the predictive reporting process on climate and global temperature change presented, since the early 1990's, by scientific bodies such as the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The IPCC's predictive reporting has formed one of the key data sources for political climate change risk assessments and decision making on policy and strategy development to control climate change. In the last few years, however, there has been growing unease from some sectors of the climate community outside of the IPCC that its reporting has demonstrated too much 'scholarly reticence' and has been too cautious and conservative as a result. One implication of this perception is that, if anything, IPCC reporting may be underestimating the speed and severity of impact of climate change trends.

The scientific understanding of climate change, as with other fields of inquiry, is always advancing: for example, we now know that there is an exacerbation or 'forcing' effect of increased greenhouse gas emissions on what used to be considered natural, albeit unwelcome weather events: heatwaves, droughts, bushfires, storms and flooding rain. Recent research is demonstrating that many of these events are now more intense, prolonged, and made more probable because of the enhanced greenhouse effect.

Even though many in the concerned global community have been aware, in outline, of the basic facts of climate change for many years, far fewer, it seems, have understood just how fast the greenhouse effect has been accelerating, and just how serious its current and predicted future impacts have become. To the point where many researchers are now describing current climate trends as constituting a climate emergency; one which requires an emergency or even wartime level of response to tackle it. It is this revised understanding of the seriousness of the risk posed by climate change which forms the focus of the rest of this section of the resource.

1.35 The psychology of climate change self-delusion and denial

This document has already referred to the power of denialism and self-delusion to impede effective climate change action and, personally, it is the author's view that if anything the strength of these factors in the whole climate change problem has been under-estimated. Fortunately, there is a large and growing science on the psychology and mechanisms involved in self-delusion over climate change and other extreme or existential threats such as pandemic disease. Nonetheless, the so-called predatory delay and obfuscation on taking effective climate change

action, caused by climate change denial in key powerful decision makers in society, remains a very difficult problem to address.

The Swedish psychologist and economist Per Espen Stoknes has described five levels of psychological resistance to the straightforward reception of scientific data and the evidence base on climate change. In part, this resistance to 'the facts' on climate change by certain key decision makers explains why faulty risk assessments on climate change seriousness have often been made.

In psychological terms these processes are forms of rationalisation or 'distancing' tied to the well-known tendency of the human mind to find ways to minimise psychological discomfort or perception of danger. Examples of the thought processes which reinforce these rationalisations is given here.

Distance – the problem may be bad, but it is remote, and therefore irrelevant to me. For example, disappearing Polar Bear/Walrus or Third World disasters events.

Doom – I have apocalypse fatigue – too much bad news is too awful – I don't want to keep on hearing it, so I switch off mentally and distract myself.

Cognitive Dissonance – I want to avoid the stress coming from the gap between what I actually do or see; and the required ethical response to what is actually happening, that is when I know something isn't right but don't feel able to respond.

Denial – A powerful way to reduce my dissonance. I can reject inconvenient truths by choosing 'not to believe' and I may enter an entrenched state of denial where: 'I see but I don't see' problems (because I reinterpret, rationalize or filter what I do see). Increasing climate change impacts, loss of biodiversity, growing economic inequalities - can all be psychologically distanced by such states of denial.

Identity – I rationalise and reinforce various forms of denial into a personal identity which reflects lifestyle and cultural values. For example, some neoliberal free marketeers believe they 'must' support a continued fossil fuel economy – in part to reject interference in free market mechanisms by government.

This psychological process has been used to explain the correlation between environmental beliefs and voting intention or political allegiance; and also, to explain why some people resist adopting behaviour changes - if these are perceived as a threat to their identity. Examples could involve discretionary consumption patterns which might have high climate change impact – such as frequent meat eating or frequent flying.

1.4 **What needs to be done?**

As a global community informed by science we have known how to solve the climate change problem in principle for 30 years or more. In 2020 we know that we must reduce greenhouse gas emissions to the atmosphere dramatically year on year to achieve a rapid transition toward a 'net zero' minimal fossil fuel powered economic system by mid-century at the latest, ideally earlier. This low carbon transition must start immediately and be fast enough to avoid the worse impacts of business as usual climate change, predicted on the basis of current global heating trends. We know that we must also help our global communities adapt to expected future climate change impacts that are already locked into planetary weather systems, probably for many decades to come.

1.41 **The public acknowledgement of climate change as a significant problem**

After more than thirty years of scholarly and popular media focus on the topic of human induced climate change, significant sections of the informed global community are aware of the basic mechanisms which drive global heating and climate change, and recognise that, left uncontrolled, these processes could produce significant or even catastrophic problems for human society in the future. This level of basic understanding and realistic risk perception has been reflected in numerous public opinion surveys on climate change carried out in Australia, the UK and internationally over the last twenty years or so.

Such surveys have consistently shown a majority understanding that climate change is a real phenomenon, that there is a significant level of human causation involved; and that it could pose a significant risk to human health and wellbeing at some point in the future: unless it is addressed, systematically and effectively, by government and other societal institutions.

More recently, polls conducted in Australia in May and November 2019 have demonstrated an increase in public concern, with climate change being ranked second as the most important problem facing Australia and 80% of the survey population saying they wanted to stronger action from government on climate change control; for example, through provision of more renewable energy (90%) and more electric cars (75%).

Finally, polling conducted by the Australia Institute in January 2020 revealed the sensitising effect that experience of the catastrophic bushfire season had had on public perceptions:

> **Almost seven in ten Australians see the clear link between the bushfires and climate change and they want the government to lead on climate action. There is also a clear emotional toll, and the distressing images of dead and injured wildlife and charred forests have left most Australians worried that the bush will never be the same again. Two thirds of Australians agree the current bushfire crisis demonstrates the cost of inaction on climate change. The fossil fuel companies that profit from climate change should be contributing to meet the costs of climate-fuelled disasters, but currently, it is the Australian community who pays.**

1.5 Where is effective action taking place in 2020?

1.51 Globally

This section will cover some positive policies, strategies and initiatives which are moving us, sensibly, toward the key objectives on climate change control.

The early realisation that international negotiations on climate change were failing to deliver emissions reduction fast enough, the tangible experience of intensified weather disasters in many parts of the world, and the continued pressure from informed public opinion for stronger action on climate change risk combined in some sectors of global society to produce a number of initiatives with bold ambition to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

The C40 Cities initiative involves 96 of the world's major cities including Sydney and Melbourne. These cities have pledged to reduce their environmental footprint, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and start to adapt their populations to the reality of a change climate. In 2020 the percentage of cities taking part in some of these initiatives were as follows:

– Setting 100% renewable energy targets to be achieved by 2030 (25%)

– Developing action plans consistent with the Paris 2015 temperature goal of 1.5 degree Celsius above baseline (83%)

– Implementing cycle hire schemes to encourage carbon free transport (85%)

The cherry on the cake is that some of these governments have started to include their citizens in decision making around climate change in their local area. These welcome experiments in deliberative democracy using citizen assemblies and citizen juries – have started to incorporate citizen recommendations on climate action into government decision making on climate change response. Recent examples of these assemblies can be found in southern Ireland, in Oxford, England, the London Borough of Camden and now at national UK government level.

1.52 In Australia

Nationally, Australia is recognised as a laggard on climate change action, with weak and insufficient greenhouse gas reduction targets of a 26-28% reduction below 2005 levels by 2030. Despite political rhetoric to the contrary, the country is not on track to meet even this inadequate goal. There is also a lack of any national climate action plan. It is widely acknowledged that the Federal government needs to set a much stronger emissions reduction target, but at present it seems to be stymied in the self-delusion and poor assessment of climate change risk already described.

As the Climate Action Tracker NGO points out, if all other countries were to follow Australia's "Highly Insufficient" current policy trajectory, global warming could reach over 3°C and up to 4°C later this century.

Thankfully, the picture is far more optimistic and inspiring at a state level, where all jurisdictions now have either 'aspirational or legislated' net zero emissions GHG targets, for example, as in Victoria (net zero emissions by 2050) and the ACT (net zero emissions by 2045). Equally, many of the Australian states have set ambitious renewable energy provision targets. In South Australia, the plan is to source 100% of its energy from renewables by 2030; and the ACT is planning to achieve this same goal in 2020! The picture for the local government level in Australia is even more impressive, with many local councils setting net zero GHG reduction targets by 2030 or even earlier.

The standout positive achievement on taking effective climate change action within government must, however, go to local jurisdictions which have participated in the Climate Emergency Declaration (CED) protocol. The declaration process involves not merely making a symbolic utterance on climate change to the public. The best practice on CED involves local governments using their declaration statement to galvanise more ambitious greenhouse gas reduction targets and to start planning for climate change adaptation in their communities. As of April 2020, there were an estimated 1,490 jurisdictions in 29 countries, covering 822 million citizens, that had declared a climate emergency. In Australia, the figure was 95 local governments covering over 8 million citizens, or almost 35% of the national population.

From this small sample of positive climate change action initiatives it becomes clear that when they choose to act free of delusion, global institutions can make accurate assessments of climate change risk; and implement realistic solutions aimed at reducing that risk. Perhaps then the question to ponder is: will we be able to learn from best global practice on risk assessment and solution implementation for climate change control; fast enough to avoid future catastrophic impacts on global society?

2 The WHAT and HOW of social work involvement with climate

Key learning points in this section:

Social work action on climate change is a form of green or eco-social work practice which shares many of the knowledge skills, and values of mainstream social work. Green social work theory and approaches evolved from academic critiques, in the 1970s and 1980s; of the predominant focus on social as opposed to physical environmental factors in the social work client assessment, planning and intervention cycle.

The ebbs and flows of general public interest in environmental problems over the last 40 years or so increasingly influenced the international social work field across research, strategy and policy. There has been a major upsurge of interest around climate change as a social work concern at peak body and academic level since about 2010, and this interest is diffusing, albeit slowly, into mainstream practice.

One important similarity between mainstream and green social work practice is the pursuit of social justice for clients. This core value aligns closely with the pursuit of ecological justice, for the planet and for all species, which occurs within climate change activism. Put simply, within green social work practice, the pursuit of social and ecological justice is often one and the same thing.

A significant difference between mainstream and green social work is the importance attached to the principle of holism. Put simply, holism is the idea that everything is connected to everything else. The principle of holism contains an ecological acknowledgment of the influential links between humans (clients), the natural environment and the economy.

The principle of holism also points to the importance of the interconnections between the social worker and their continuity of practice across various spheres of their lives: as private individuals, as employees of organisations, or as citizens exercising democratic rights.

In Australia, in 2020, social work action linked to climate change problems is taking the form of:

–   Experimental practice projects, including work in community gardens and the use of green space in preventative and restorative mental health interventions.

–   Education of colleagues and the wider community on the urgency of contemporary climate change trends.

–   Climate change amplified 'natural' disaster response.

–   Political lobbying for faster action on climate change control.

2.1 Green Social Work Action on Climate Change

The feelings of helplessness that may accompany an intellectual understanding of climate change can be immobilizing. The ability to attend to this emotional response- to be present with others as we all grapple with the implications of the climate crisis we face-is a necessary part of the work to help move us all from denial to action.

Terri Klemm, Associate Professor of Social Work, Centenary University New Jersey, USA, 2017.

2.2 What is Green Social Work?

One of the leading Australian theorists on green and eco-social social work models has given a succinct definition of the approach as:

> **a practice that transcends the conventional social environmental focus to place the natural environment as being central to the profession.** Boetto, PhD 2017

Some social work practitioners might consider green or eco-social work (GSW) as a new specialism within the profession but, as is often the case within the history of ideas, there are much earlier precedents.

In part, the contemporary turn towards GSW practice can be traced to a small group of social work theorists in the 1970s and 1980s, who started to critique the absence of an environmental or ecological frame of reference within the social work methodologies of the time. As far back as 1973, social work theorist Professor Carel Germain was arguing that:

> **social workers must be trained to have a higher degree of clinical understanding, as well as skills in environmental activity, interdisciplinary work, and consultation.** Germain, 1973

And in the late 1970s and early 1980's, Associate Professor Anne Weick was calling for an expansion of the person-in-social environment frame to include physical environment elements, arguing that such a reform would allow:

> **the profession to transcend its current conventional wisdom, the paradigm must be strengthened and enriched by a theory of human behavior that gives vitality to the complex interaction between people and environment.** Weick, 1981

Arguably, these pro-environmental or ecological critical stances on earlier social work practice and methodology were linked to even older professional debates, containing physical environmental themes. These were associated with the very origins of the social work profession, evolving as it did from the charitable and philanthropic efforts to counter late 19th and early 20th century public experience of poor housing, insanitary health conditions and structural poverty. Such community challenges were a product of the entrenched socio-economic disadvantage, injustice and environmental mediated disease experienced by many working-class communities in the USA and UK of that period.

It might seem surprising therefore, in retrospect, that there was not a mainstream physical environmental interest within the social work profession by the 1970s and 80s; and when one considers that ecological precepts, were prominent within some theoretical frameworks which did have influence; such as Bateson's systems theory work, Perhaps, as some contemporary researchers have suggested, this ecological reticence was a reflection of the ameliorative (adaptive) tradition in social work practice always having had a stronger influence than the radical (transformative) tradition. Green social work practice, with its associated critique of 'business as usual' economic processes, and their environmentally destructive effects, have a natural affinity with the latter tradition.

Whatever the precise mechanisms, the person in (social) environment frame of social work practice remained pre-

eminent during this early period – and the value of incorporating holistic, environmental and ecological systems theory into mainstream client work remained largely the province of the research community. The focus on green social work practice within the research literature probably then followed the ebbs and flows of wider societal interest in environmental concerns.

There were peaks in international public interest in the environment around the:

– **Early to mid-1970s** when the first international, global environment conference was held.

– **Late 1980s** when the Brundtland Commission helped promulgate the sustainable development model.

– **Early to mid-90s** when a major United Nations conference in Rio de Janeiro crystallised interest in the international administrative machinery set up to monitor and regulate climate change trends. This included the scientific reporting of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCCC) and the national level negotiations on climate change by the Conferences of the Parties system (COP).

– **Mid-2000s** onward. When there was a further upsurge of public and media environmental linked to increasingly apparent climate change impacts; and the lack of effective international progress at the 2009 UN COP meeting in Copenhagen.

2.3 International developments in green social work practice since 2010

At international, peak body level, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) launched the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development in 2012. Objectives of this transformative agenda included making:

> explicit the knowledge and experience of social work and to reclaim the influence of the global social work, social work education, and social development professions in order to effect transformational changes in social policy and practice at international, regional, and national levels, promoting social and economic equalities.

The Agenda has four pillars or focus points:

– promoting social and economic equalities

– promoting the dignity and worth of peoples

– promoting environmental and community sustainability

– promoting human relationships.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES ORIENTED TO GREEN PRACTICE

A major international conference held in Dublin, Ireland in 2018 was organised by the International Federation of Social Workers, the International Schools of Social Work, and the International Council on Social Welfare.

The Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social Development was organised around the key theme of Environmental and Community Sustainability: Human Solutions in Evolving Societies. Presentations on offer included: *Linking Environmental and Sustainable Development and the Role of Social Workers in fulfilling the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.* Up to 2,500 practitioners, researchers and educators were expected to attend this conference.

2.4 Mainstream green social worker interest in Australia

The third pillar of the Global Agenda initiative *'Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability'* influenced the choice of theme for World Social Work Day in 2017. This in turn produced a temporary flurry of interest in green practice ideas from social workers at AASW branch level in Tasmania, NSW, and Victoria. This interest was expressed mainly in the form of information gathering and education of colleagues on what GSW involved. This peak of interest does not seem to have translated into longer lasting practice on the ground - except for Western Australia branch interests tied to social farming and community gardens projects, conducted within a green practice frame.

The Western Australian Branch (2016 – 2017) formed an *Eco Social Work Practice Group* initially to coordinate a branch World Social Work Day Breakfast event. One early theme explored was 'What can Social Work Contribute to Ecological Social Justice?' This group also has an interest in social farming in social work and the value of establishing community gardens for intervention purposes.

The Victorian Branch (2016-2017) developed a *Green Social Work Network* – which described principles of GSW and at one time had a guest speaker initiative 'Greening our Community Practice.'

The Tasmanian Branch (2017) A branch management committee approved the establishment of a Green Social Work Practice Group to commence in 2017–2018. Members of that branch also interviewed some green social work practice theorists and thinkers during this period; so educating their colleagues about the principles and methods underpinning green social work practice. Interviewees included: Lena Dominelli, Jim Ife and Jen Brown.

2.5 Academic research and green social work training

The period from 2010 to 2020 has also been a fertile one for green social work theory and practice development, particularly in Australia. Researchers, practitioners, and social work educators such as Ife, Boetto, McKinnon, Jones, Bailey, Ramsay and Boddy, amongst others, made a strong showing on Australian based GSW research and training. Indeed, some recent academic research suggested that Australia might have been ahead of GSW practice development in the USA and UK during this time. Notwithstanding, researchers such as Dominelli (UK) Besthorn (USA) and Zapf (Canada) provided notable foci of international theory and social work training on GSW in this period.

2.6 The AASW Code of Ethics (2010)

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) – the peak body for the social work profession in Australia, produced a code of ethics in 2010 intended as a *core document which informs and guides the ethical practice of social workers*. The Code is described as aligning with the definition of the purpose of social work practice endorsed by the peak, global social work organisations: The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of School of Social Work (IASSW).

Within the text of the Australian code there are several specific references to the ethical responsibilities and duties expected of social workers, which include specific reference to advocacy actions that promote 'environmental wellbeing.' For example:

> **Social workers will advocate for and promote the protection of the natural environment in recognition of its fundamental importance to the future of human society (p.20) and … social workers will meet their responsibilities to society by engaging in actions to promote societal and environmental wellbeing (p.20).**

Scattered throughout the text of the Code there are several other references to the importance of protecting the 'natural' and 'sustainable' environment as part of an ethical social work practice concerned with promoting social justice, equity, and wellbeing outcomes.

Some references to the importance of an environmental focus within practice are also to be found in the various AASW 'Scope of Social Work Practice documents produced in 2015 which *articulate and promote the role of professional social workers within fields of practice, and which provide information about what employers and clients can expect*. However, these references seem to be more about socio-cultural, person in social environment as opposed to physical environment concerns. Significantly, there is no explicit reference made to climate change impacts in relation to client health and wellbeing concerns in either the 2010 Code of Practice or the 2015 Scope of Social Work documents.

This absence of explicit, high level strategic recognition of climate change as a factor relevant to social work practice was countered by the AASW's endorsement, in 2017, of a Declaration by the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA) an Australian NGO active in the climate and health policy space since 2010. The Alliance represents the climate change impact concerns of a diverse range of organisations with direct or indirect links to the health sector. The Declaration makes clear the need for assertive, cross-sectoral action on climate change trends:

> **The Alliance aims to protect and promote health by acting, encouraging, and empowering organisations and individuals in the health care sector and the wider community to contribute to developing effective political, sectoral and community responses to climate change.**

The Declaration lists 13 policy level actions which would help reduce greenhouse gas emissions from within the health sector and start effective adaption planning for the impacts of future climate change on health sector outcomes. The AASW's support for this position statement demonstrated an increased policy focus on climate change within the organisation, and this impetus has continued more recently.

2.7

Developments in green practice over the last few years

Within the last couple of years in Australia, centres of social work research and training with a special interest in green and eco-social work practice have become more prominent: for example, at:

– Charles Sturt University (Dr. Heather Boetto)

– James Cook University (Dr. Peter Jones)

– WA institutions of Curtin, University of Western Australia and Edith Cowan University (Bailey, Hendrick, Palmer).

Academics and practitioners in these centres are providing sustainability and climate change-oriented student-in-training projects, publishing GSW oriented research, or reporting on green practice projects which they have initiated themselves, for example, the eco-social community gardens work of Bailey, Hendrick and Palmer in Western Australia. Such work shows a way forward for GSW in Australia; but it starts from a low base. In 2020, GSW projects which are in documented process, or which have been completed and officially described, appear to be thin on the ground.

At the professional association level, the AASW has increased its activity around green practice issues in this period. Following its endorsement of a position statement on climate change and health in 2017, the organisation made submissions to a number of federal and state level inquiries on climate and health linked to environment related matters such as climate and health policy. In 2019, it became a signatory to the international climate emergency declaration initiative (2019). And in 2020, the AASW announced it would be convening a national advisory panel on climate change and developing an entry level CPD course on climate change and social work.

The previous section has considered the history of the green social work turn and some of its recent developments in Australia. The next section will consider the nature of GSW practice in more depth.

2.8 Research perspectives on social work and climate change action

Green social work practice which responds to climate change risk and impacts in various ways has been seen by some as a new specialism within mainstream practice. On the other hand it can also be characterised as a rediscovery and incorporation of a social work understanding of the importance of physical environmental influences on social systems, and client problems, which has always been present in the profession, albeit for long periods in latent form. The increasingly dangerous turn taken by human produced global heating and climate change trends is now bringing this formerly submerged understanding, of the importance of physical environmental factors in risks posed to client health and wellbeing, to the surface of social work practice. A similar increase in professional interest began around the same time in related sectors, such as psychology and health care.

A functional definition of green social work practice, oriented toward climate change action, might therefore recognise a reorientation of existing practice methods to allow environmental factors, such as climate change, to be incorporated into practice concerns directly:

Climate change action by social workers is a form of green practice that can use many of the profession's existing skills and methods: and which extends worker client assessments, planning and interventions by factoring in existing and future climate change impacts and risks, as they may affect client need and wellbeing. Nicholson, this resource, 2020

We can now move on to consider some other questions. What has mainstream social work already achieved on climate change action? What could social work practice aimed at climate change action achieve in the future? Some answers to these questions may be found within the strong emerging interest in a public health preventative and protection role for social workers in relation to natural disaster response. This focus also brings up one of the key tenets of generic green social work practice: the alignment of client social justice concerns with the need for environmental justice. An extract from a recent article in the American journal, Social Work Today, makes this clear:

As a profession dedicated to supporting the most vulnerable among us - those disproportionately affected by environmental disaster – social workers can play a key role in the fight for environmental justice, helping to prevent and address the consequences of climate change through education, advocacy, community organizing, and research. Jackson, Social Work Today, 2017

In Australia, Dr. Heather Boetto from Charles Sturt University produced an article for the AASW in 2018, setting out some of the GSW links between social justice, human rights and the disproportionate environmental risk posed to marginalised clients by climate change.

"Our profession is underpinned by values of social justice and human rights, and now we are starting to understand the disproportionate impacts of climate change on disadvantaged people, whether in terms of disability, migration, refugees, homelessness. Any group that suffers disadvantage are often unable to prepare for an extreme weather event, less able to respond to an extreme weather event, and less able to recover. And quite often, people from a disadvantaged background are located in areas that are more environmentally at risk. So, it is important for social workers to become more involved in this issue, as well as advocate and provide a voice for marginalised groups."

Well regarded social work theorists and practitioners such as Lena Dominelli, Jim Ife and Heather Boetto have each described their recent conceptions of the practice methods and principles which must underpin generic green social work, and by extension, climate change oriented practice within the generic model. The following list is a composite selection of ideas from these theorists, on the tasks that could underpin social work action to counter climate change risk. These ideas are grouped under strands of intellectual and practical action. In the light of Nicholson's definition of GSW think about your existing social work role and the possible links between what you do now and what is being suggested here.

2.9 Social work for climate change action: intellectual and practical activity

– Educate self and others to become better aware of the impending multiple risks we all face from climate change, clients and social workers, in the form of future unhealthy environments, the consequent effects on people's longevity, wellbeing, livelihoods and leisure, as well as other climate change linked factors, such as biodiversity loss. Within social work education and mainstream practice, conceptualise dangerous climate change trends as a product of failed risk assessment.

– Educate self and others on how community level greenhouse emission reduction (mitigation) and climate change adaptation projects can provide co-benefits for the environment and human health e.g., better home insultation, urban street tree planting, community garden projects, encouragement of walking and cycling as transport modes.

– Learn from the knowledge that indigenous people have to teach about wise, enduring stewardship of natural systems; and help make sure that indigenous worldviews are well represented in any project or initiative developed to provide improved climate change risk assessment; and associated policy and strategy development on greenhouse gas mitigation and community climate change adaptation strategies.

– Consider forming a green social work or eco-social work support group at AASW branch level or within your workplaces. This will provide opportunities to meet and talk about climate change, social work practice and help focus educational efforts and share energy and ideas on climate change action with colleagues.

CAPACITY BUILDING / MOBILISING COMMUNITIES

–   Help to promote or coordinate responses to climate change at the community level. For example, by helping initiate or taking part in projects to promote community level greenhouse gas reduction; through adoption of organisational environmental management schemes, energy efficiency and waste reduction. Or research and contribute toward community climate change adaptation planning strategies facilitated by the health or local government sector.

–   Facilitate different interest groups, bringing them together to dialogue across controversial or disputed topics, such as climate change risk implications for future community wellbeing. Advocate for deliberative democracy and the convening of citizen juries and assemblies on climate change. Social workers also need to have a strong future voice and representation within urgently required, cross-sectoral expert groups planning for local or regional climate change mitigation and community climate change adaptation.

LOBBYING

–   Add your social work voice at individual, group, organisational and professional level to the calls on government and other relevant institutions, to take much stronger action on greenhouse gas reduction strategies, and systematic climate change adaptation planning across multiple sectors: health, housing, infrastructure, transport. For example, support the Climate and Health Alliance NGO in its advocacy for adoption of a National Strategy for Climate, Health and Well-being.

–   Join social and political movements seeking radical change to the current 'business as usual' social, economic and political models which actively contribute to the climate change emergency. For example, those initiatives promoting Climate Emergency Declaration, the Green New Deal or visions for Australia to become a 'low carbon superpower.'

CRITICAL THEORY

–   Adopt a holistic worldview, which perceives every aspect of life as interconnected within a much larger system for example as reflected in Indigenous perspectives on the natural world.

–   Adopt fundamental ecological values within the profession which promotes genuine ecologically sustainable development, health and wellbeing outcomes for all species, including humans.

–   Use those fundamental ecological values to challenge growth-oriented, extractivist, /consumerist, neo-liberal capitalism – in those areas that it runs contrary to minimising future climate change risk.

–   Reconceptualise an understanding of client well-being needs to include holistic, and environmental as well as social system factors

–   Expand the activities of social workers, to include environmentally related work at personal, individual, collective, community and political dimensions of practice.

–   Support global citizenship approaches within social work, to reflect an appreciation for cultural diversity and contributions made to social work by the Global South. For example, through the Sustainable Development Goals framework.

One practical importance of developing critical theory on any area of social work practice is that it should allow a succinct description of the way in which social work knowledge, skills, and values will be used to address the problems relevant to that particular practice area. The recent declaration of green social work principles applied to climate change action, made by the Australian Social Workers for Climate Action group in 2019, is a great example of theory being used to inform and shape everyday practice. I reproduce it here in full.

2.10 Declaration of climate change action principles by Social Workers for Climate Action (2019)

Social Workers for Climate Action (SW4CA) is an alliance of social work practitioners, students, educators and researchers concerned about the impacts of climate change on human wellbeing and committed to taking action to address this crisis.

We acknowledge the overwhelming scientific consensus that climate change is driven by human activity, above and beyond natural variability. We recognise that the impacts of climate change are already being felt across ecosystems and human societies and that without urgent action these impacts will continue to worsen. It has become clear that these negative impacts are not equitably distributed but fall most heavily upon already disadvantaged and marginalised individuals, communities, and societies. We note particular impacts upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and other First-Nations peoples around the globe, the traditional owners and stewards of the land. Climate change is therefore not only an environmental concern, but a fundamental issue of social justice and human rights.

In particular, we recognise that climate change is already impacting on a number of areas of specific concern for social workers. These include, but are not limited to: disaster responses, health, mental health, food security, energy security, housing and homelessness, employment, migration, poverty, family violence, and crime. Impacts in these areas will continue to develop and worsen as the climate crisis progresses.

We recognise that social workers are, and will continue to be, at the front line of responding to these human impacts, using their knowledge, skills, and values to address the needs of climate casualties as part of their professional practice. However, we also believe that social workers have an important contribution to make by supporting individuals, communities, and societies to adapt to the changing climate, and by actively engaging in efforts to mitigate climate change and avoid future catastrophe.

Social Workers for Climate Action aims to support these efforts by: providing social workers with current, accurate information about the nature, scale, and impacts of climate change; supporting social workers to make changes in their individual lives, practice, organisations, and communities; providing practical resources and tools for workers to use in their practice that reflect an understanding of climate change and an eco-social orientation; by providing opportunities for active engagement in political processes, policy formulation, community development and social action.

Climate change poses an existential threat to humanity. Social workers are uniquely skilled to respond to this threat through practice focused on reaction to climate impacts, but also adaptation and mitigation. SW4CA strongly believes that it is our ethical obligation to do so.

3 The public health concern over human induced climate change

Key learning points in this section:

Public health sector interest in climate change problems took off in the mid-2000's at about the same time as it did in the social work field but has developed a greater subsequent momentum. Possible reasons for this difference may lie in the greater opportunities for operationalising climate change concerns directly into health practice, than exist in many forms of social work client interventions.

Whatever the reasons for the different levels of practice experience developed within the two sectors over the last 10 years or so, the social work profession can learn from the expertise developed by the health sector on climate change response in areas such as training and professional development, national inter-agency and international professional co-operation.

At a national level in Australia, the synergy between the health and social work sector response to climate change has been recognised in the form of partnerships forged between the AASW and the Climate and Health Alliance, the peak NGO advocating for greater strategic response and resourcing for climate change response in the interest of better public health.

Many social workers are employed in the health sector and may well get their first taste of climate change related client intervention in the context of the increasing likelihood of climate change impacts on public health occurring through amplified weather events such as heatwaves, droughts, bushfires, storms and floods.

3.1 Brief background of the present concerns on climate change and health

The Paris Agreement is potentially the strongest health agreement of this century. The evidence is clear that climate change is already having a serious impact on human lives and health. It threatens the basic elements we all need for good health - clean air, safe drinking water, nutritious food supply and safe shelter – and will undermine decades of progress in global health. We can't afford to delay action any further. Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO, 2019

An awareness of the probable human health impacts of anthropogenic climate change goes back at least 25 years. For example, health concerns were mentioned in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, published in 1992. It is both sobering and frustrating to realise that the current, heightened concerns being debated on the threat anthropogenic climate change poses to economic, social and environmental wellbeing in 2020, were well understood in principle in the early 1990s. The international scientific, government and NGO consensus, even at that time, on the likely future seriousness of climate change, were recklessly sidelined. The disregard for science and evidence-based approaches to climate change problems is one of the key contributors to the faulty assessment of climate change risk mentioned at several points throughout this reference resources.

Over the last decade, concern about climate change has started to intensify once again; in tandem with both refined scientific predictions on the scale of expected climate change impacts; and the direct, witnessed evidence of its impact on the health and wellbeing of vulnerable human and other species populations. For instance, through the climate change contribution made to the amplification and increased likelihood of natural disasters such as flood and heat waves.

3.2 Opinion leaders on climate change and health

3.21 The Lancet (Countdown on Health and Climate Change)

In 2009, the prestigious international medical journal, The Lancet, acting through its climate change commission initiative, called for a public health movement which: 'frames the threat of climate change for humankind as a health issue'. Climate change was characterised by the commission as the biggest global threat to health of the 21st century although, as often is the case, there was a minority of dissenting voices on this suggested prioritisation. In 2015, the Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change reframed the climate change threat when it concluded that:

> ... anthropogenic climate change threatens to undermine the past 50 years of gains in public health, and conversely, that a comprehensive response to climate change could be the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century.

A major international research project which developed from these calls to action, the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change

> ... tracks progress on health and climate change and provides an independent assessment of the health effects of climate change, the implementation of the Paris Agreement, and the health implications of these actions.

The international climate and health reporting initiatives connected with The Lancet has had significant influence in Australia. The creation of the pivotal, Climate and Health Alliance NGO being a major example. By 2018, the Lancet Countdown reporting project had arrived at three key conclusions in relation to the climate and health nexus.

Impact – Present day intensification of heat waves, reduced labour productivity in relation to extreme heat, vector-borne disease, and food security provide early warnings of

compounding and potentially overwhelming impacts on society if global temperatures continue to rise.

Delay – A lack of progress in reducing emissions and building adaptive capacity threatens both human lives and the viability of the national health systems they depend on, with the potential to disrupt core public health infrastructure and overwhelm health services. This is another example of faulty risk assessment compromising strategic planning for effective climate change response.

Opportunity – Despite these delays, trends in a number of sectors see the beginning of a low-carbon transition, and it is clear that the nature and scale of the response to climate change will be the determining factor in shaping the health of nations for centuries to come.

The internationally respected Australian academic and Nobel Laureate for Medicine, Professor Peter Doherty, expressed similar concerns in the foreword to an important framework report produced by the Australian Climate and Health Alliance NGO in 2017.This report advocates for the adoption of a National Strategy on Climate Health and Wellbeing for this country.

> **'Without urgent action on climate change, the conditions that underpin the health and well-being of the human population will be greatly diminished in coming decades and may only be available to a small number of people living in a few parts of the planet by the end of this century.'**

3.22 The World Health Organisation (WHO)

In terms of climate change risk assessment this organisation aligns with the views of other opinion leaders, on the potential severity of climate change impacts on public health. In a December 2018 report, Health and Climate Change, the WHO drew strong links between climate change, the need to reduce (mitigate) greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution, and the extent of avoidable death through respiratory problems. The report's executive summary put it this way:

> **The drivers of climate change – principally fossil fuel combustion – pose a heavy burden of disease, including a major contribution to the 7 million deaths from outdoor and indoor air pollution annually.**

WHO SELECTED DATA ON CLIMATE AND HEALTH, 2018

– Climate change affects the social and environmental determinants of health – clean air, safe drinking water, sufficient food and secure shelter.

– Between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250 000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress.

– The direct damage costs to health (i.e. excluding costs in health-determining sectors such as agriculture, water and sanitation), is estimated to be between USD$ 2-4 billion per year by 2030.

– Areas with weak health infrastructure – mostly in developing countries – will be the least able to cope without assistance to prepare and respond.

– Reducing emissions of greenhouse gases through better transport, food and energy-use choices can result in improved health, particularly through reduced air pollution. This is also an example of a co-benefit where two objectives, climate change control and better health as well as cost savings are achieved together.

At a global level of remedial action, the Health and Climate Change report pointed to the relative lack of investment in preventative strategies as an obstacle:

The health impacts of climate change could be greatly reduced by proven interventions in climate-resilient health systems, including climate-resilient health facilities, and through health-determining sectors such as water, sanitation and food systems and disaster risk reduction. At present, however, only 3% of health resources are invested in prevention, and only 0.5% of multilateral climate finance has been specifically for health projects.'

In a press release commenting on the report's release, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO was quoted as saying that:

> **The Paris Agreement is potentially the strongest health agreement of this century. The evidence is clear that climate change is already having a serious impact on human lives and health. It threatens the basic elements we all need for good health – clean air, safe drinking water, nutritious food supply and safe shelter – and will undermine decades of progress in global health. We can't afford to delay action any further.**

3.23 The Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA)

Formed in 2010, CAHA is now the peak Australian NGO working to promote more effective responses to climate change as it affects health and wellbeing in this country. The organisation began as a direct response to the 2009 call from The Lancet journal as already described - to frame the threat of climate change as a human health issue.

The Alliance is a:

> **… coalition of health care stakeholders who wish to see the threat to human health from climate change and ecological degradation addressed through prompt policy action. This commitment is based on the understanding that further global warming poses grave risks to human health and biodiversity and if left unchecked, threatens the future of human civilisation.** Climate and Health Alliance website, 2020

Some selected climate and health data for Australia taken from CAHA documentation makes sobering reading (from CAHA, 2017 p.5)

– Heatwaves in Victoria in 2009 and 2014 contributed to 374 and 167 excess deaths, respectively.

– The increased incidence and severity of heatwaves from global warming could contribute to several thousand additional deaths nationwide by 2050.

– Climate change is contributing to health risks posed by allergenic pollens and fungi, increasing the likelihood of events such as the 2016 thunderstorm asthma event in Victoria, which caused a 3,000% increase in asthma related admissions to intensive care and is thought to have contributed to the death of nine people.

– Air pollution from coal-fired electricity generation is responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths globally each year, and the health impacts of coal-fired power generation is estimated to cost Australia AUD $2.6 billion annually.

– The health and social costs of climate mediated events represent a significant economic burden, with the health and social costs of the Black Saturday bushfires and 2011 Queensland floods totalling AUD$3.9 and $7.4 billion, respectively.

– Reduced productivity due to extreme heat already costs the Australian economy over AUD$8 billion annually and the economic losses and health risks will increase significantly due to climate change.

– Many climate change mitigation and adaptation policies offer significant co-benefits for health. For example, the health benefits from climate mitigation policies which reduce air pollution can offset the cost of implementation by up to 10 times.

Currently, CAHA is in coalition with over 30 Australian partner organisations, including some of the most important, national NGO stakeholders on public health:

– Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association (AHHA)

– Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF)

– Doctors Reform Society (DRS)

– Psychology for a Safe Climate (PSC)

– Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS)

– Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW)

Each of the organisations named have some form of policy position, strategy or educational briefing pointing to the importance of climate change impacts on physical and mental health in this country. The alliance that the AASW has with CAHA was consolidated by adoption of a position statement on climate and health in 2017.Since that time the AASW has also gone on to declare a climate emergency as well as contribute to a number of other policy level initiatives highlighting the need for urgent action on the climate change – health nexus.

One of CAHA's many campaigns is to persuade the federal government to adopt a National Strategy on Climate Health and Wellbeing for Australia.

3.24 The CAHA principles for a national strategy on climate and health

The eight foundational principles underpinning the CAHA framework for a national strategy are:

The right to health – action must be taken to protect the environment and achieve sustainable development that meets the needs of present and future generations.

Community safety and resilience – creating the conditions to ensure communities are prepared for and able to respond to the impacts of climate change.

Environmental protection as a foundation for health and well-being – the dependence of human population health on a healthy functioning natural environment is recognised in many international treaties and must be core to policy development on climate change and health

Health to be integrated in all policies – action to reduce the health risks from climate change requires working across all policy areas and sectors to consider the health impact of their policies and practices. This is best captured through a Health in All Policies approach.

Intragenerational and intergenerational equity – to ensure the rights of all people and communities to access societal and environmental conditions for optimum health and well-being, now and for future generations.

Minimising and managing risk – reducing and managing current risks and anticipating and preparing for future risks to health from climate change must be a key element of policy development and should be incorporated into risk management strategies for all public and private institutions.

**Indigenous rights, recognition and reconciliation** – the rights and wisdom and unique cultures of Australia's Indigenous people must be central to policy development on climate mitigation and adaptation policies.

Citizen engagement – all policy development must occur in consultation with, and account for, the stated needs and priorities of affected communities and stakeholders.

3.25 The Seven Areas of Policy Action for the National Strategy on Climate, Health and Wellbeing for Australia

The Areas of Policy Action outline the key actions that must be taken at the federal, state/territory and local level to achieve the vision of

a fair and environmentally sustainable national policy framework that recognises, manages and addresses the health risks of climate change and promotes health through climate change action.
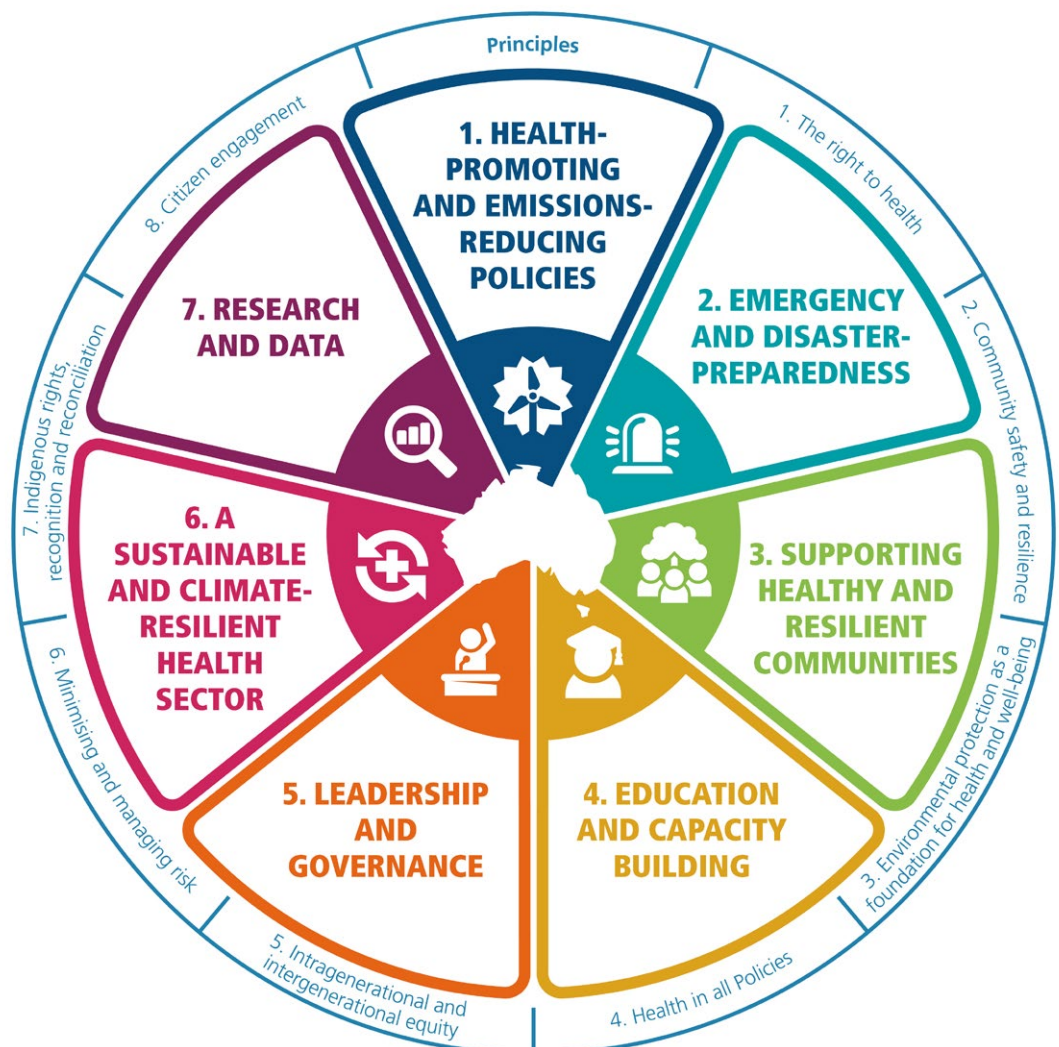
Right: CAHA Framework for a National Strategy on Climate Health and Wellbeing — Seven Areas of Policy Action

3.3 Hospital and nursing sector initiatives on climate change (2017–2018)

The Global Green and Healthy Hospitals (GGHH) initiative is a worldwide community of hospitals, healthcare systems and organizations dedicated to reducing the ecological footprint of the health care sector in order to improve environmental and public health. In turn, the GGHH is a project of the global Health Care Without Harm program.

The Health Care Climate Challenge is an initiative organized by the Global Green and Healthy Hospitals network to mobilize the health care sector around the world to focus on three core objectives linked to climate change, health and wellbeing impacts:

Mitigation – Reducing the carbon footprint of the health sector - for example by reducing green house gas emissions (GHGs) through energy efficiency programs.

Resilience through adaptation – preparing for the impacts of extreme weather and the shifting burden of disease.

Leadership – education of staff and the public about climate and health concerns and promotion of policies to protect public health from climate change 'to help lead the effort for a healthy climate.'

Reduction of the sector's carbon footprint and fostering low carbon health care.

Hospitals participating in the Challenge process set GHG reduction targets and track their progress over time. Some of the Australian health sector participants who have signed up to the GGHH Health Care Climate Challenge include:

– **Mater Misericordiae Limited** (Brisbane)

– **New South Wales Nurses and Midwives' Association**.

Further examples of hospital sector management to reduce their environmental footprint is contained in a 2018 Hospital and Health Care bulletin listing five examples of green practice in Australian hospitals

3.31 Nursing sector initiatives

– **Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation** (ANMF). The ANMF has a Position Statement on climate change and several of its branches have active programs on climate change and health and environmental sustainability.

– **Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union** (QNMU). Article: Queensland nurses help combat climate change – 11 September 2018

– **New South Wales Nurses and Midwives Association** (NSWNMA). Article: Climate change action starts in our workplaces - The Lamp 2019

– **Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation** (Victorian branch) has a comprehensive program of work.

4 Some government responses on climate change and health

4.1 Federal government policy linked to climate and health

In ratifying the Paris Agreement in November 2016, the Australian Government formally agreed to consider the 'right to health' or the right to the 'enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health' of citizens in the context of the nation's climate change response, and to recognise the health co-benefits in developing mitigation strategies.

In addition, the National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy, published by the Federal government in 2015, 'highlights that all levels of government share responsibility in responding to the challenge that climate change presents to health and well-being. At the same time the Federal government acknowledged that there was no national program specifically targeting this area of need. As the Climate and Health Alliance put it:

> **While there are examples of adaptation and mitigation actions being undertaken at the state, territory and local levels that focus on climate change and health impacts, this is occurring in the absence of an overarching policy directive at the federal level.**

Climate and Health Alliance, Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-being for Australia, (p.13).

4.2 Queensland government policy linked to climate and health

Queensland is the home state of the author and the adaptation plan project described here has been the subject of recent academic research. It may hold potential as a template for other state-based climate and health adaptation planning in the future.

The Human Health and Wellbeing Climate Adaptation Plan (H-CAP) 2018 was commissioned by the Queensland government and published in late 2018 as one component of its Climate Adaptation Strategy (Q-CAS).

> **The goal of the H-CAP is to support human health and wellbeing services to be innovative and resilient in managing the risks associated with a changing climate, and to harness the opportunities provided by responding to the challenges of climate change. It provides a preliminary climate change adaptation framework and guidance for stakeholders across health care, aged care, and childcare services.'**

₅ **Conclusion**

There is a natural alignment between the serious problems emerging from present and predicted climate change impacts on public health and wellbeing, and the scope and objectives of the still evolving field of Australian green social work practice. Such an alignment is supported by an increasingly well articulated theoretical and practice-based expectation, that physical environmental factors should be incorporated within social work intervention. This green practice principle is recognised within the AASW's code of ethical practice, and in the more recent AASW and Climate and Health Alliance Declaration on Climate Change.

Notwithstanding these promising antecedents, a challenge remains to extend social work climate change action into the mainstream of Australian practice. Can we now build on the distinctive poles of interest and energy in green social work theory and practice development, occurring in the training institutions; and in the high-level policy and strategy development around climate change response occurring within the AASW? How can we develop further green practice conduits to connect these existing professional nodes with mainstream social workers in the field?

The CPD training course on social work and climate change action associated with this reference resource is one contribution. Another is the forthcoming national advisory panel on climate change being convened by the AASW. It is to be hoped that given such precursors, the next few years can witness an exciting acceleration of mainstream social work client intervention oriented toward climate change action.

Despite this optimistic professional outlook, we should not underestimate the challenges ahead.

Due to the power of vested economic interests, weak, deluded and irresponsible governance, and growing apocalypse fatigue amongst some sectors of society, we have postponed taking effective action on climate change for decades now; compounding and intensifying problems we now must face squarely and immediately.

In 2020 we know, more clearly than ever, that climate change, if left unchecked on current trends, has the capacity to destroy human and other species life, damage physical and mental health at an increasing rate; impoverish local communities in both the developing and developed world at increasing scale; and create a new and growing class of environmental refugees and the political instability that goes with that process.

In this now strongly globalised world, it is increasingly evident that climate change disruption has the capacity to further marginalise and disadvantage not only the weak, vulnerable and under-represented individuals who traditionally form our client groups – it has the power to do the same to us, and very many other citizens over the remainder of this century. I believe that as social workers we must play our part in overcoming this potential existential threat.I hope that we can build on the energy and ideas of learners on the associted CPD course - to help catalyse an upsurge in green and climate oriented mainstream social work practice in Australia

Andrew Nicholson May 2020

CLIMATE AND HEALTH ALLIANCE