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Climate Change and Social Inclusion: Opportunities for Justice and Empowerment.

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...the greatest untapped resource at our disposal lies in the disadvantaged Australians living in our most excluded communities. (Nicholson 2007 p. 4)

The commons are where justice and sustainability converge. where ecology and equity meet. (Shiva 2005 p. 50)

Since 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has recognised human induced climate change to be primarily a result of burning fossil fuels and land clearing (Lee 2007). Changes to the world’s climate patterns have been occurring for decades, but only in recent times has climate change arrived in our collective conscious. An onslaught of extreme weather events, destruction and failure of crops, increasing levels of water restrictions, government announcement of desalination plants, proposed increase in prices for utilities such as power and water - have ushered climate change into the Australian lexicon.

The challenges for all of us are many and varied and perhaps even unimaginable, as many propose a global reduction in annual CO2 emissions of between 60-80% (compared to 1990 levels) by 2050.

We are not talking just about the re-construction of our world, but about its re-invention. Ryan (2007)

How will climate change affect us? Who is most vulnerable? What will be the features of policies and strategies to combat climate change that ensure an equitable and just response across our entire society? Are our present social-cultural justice paradigms of social exclusion and inclusion adequate in addressing the impending health consequences that are likely to result from climate change, and in supporting an equitable, harmonious and fruitful life for all population groups in the future?

This paper, written in the spirit of solution-oriented research, focusing on the causes of positive health rather than the causes of disease and other problems (Robinson & Sirard 2005), explores the possibility of a paradigm shift which imagines the social inclusion of specific population groups, not as an appended extra, but integral to the design of an equitable, sustainable low carbon society of the future.

Defining Population Groups

In the development of their Mental Health Promotion Framework, VicHealth gives priority to groups experiencing disadvantage as a result of their geographic location, income, education or Indigenous, cultural and linguistic heritage (VicHealth 2007). For this reason, and for these groups’ potential to lead society in its carbon descent to the future, the term we should give in recognising agency in vulnerable, disadvantaged or marginalised population groups is ‘priority population groups’.

Social Exclusion

Social exclusion is a complex term, the rhetoric of which may not add to our understanding of deprivation, unless used in a critical capacity. Social exclusion is most often associated with poverty, but it is more than the absence of money. As Sen (2000 p. 3) explains social exclusion means ‘looking at impoverished lives, not just depleted wallets’. In order to avoid the ‘sometimes bewildering rhetoric of social exclusion’ (Sen 2000 p. 9) we can identify the essential features in comprehending social exclusion as relational deprivations that are constitutively significant and lead to capability deprivation (Sen 2000).

At the risk of employing reductionist terms to complex ideas’, social exclusion is about being deprived of social interaction and excluded from social relations because of an interaction of events/situations that either actively promote exclusion (for example refugees not given a usable political status), or passively promote exclusion (for example increased unemployment amongst young and unskilled workers due to macroeconomic circumstances) Sen (2000).

Climate Change and Social Justice - the Reactive Paradigm Response

Whilst the burgeoning concern about climate change and its impact on human populations has recently generated a plethora of research, forums, policy responses and the like, much is still not known. What is known is that climate change will affect all population groups globally, including all levels of the Australian population. Water restrictions, increases in utility and food prices, and scarcity, are some examples of the known future impacts of a change in the global climate. Government, corporate and private sectors are responding with strategies to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

How different population groups experience these changes will vary dramatically. Internationally, those population groups who are poor,
residing in countries with destabilised or authoritarian governments, in low-lying countries or island states, will be most severely affected by the negative impacts of climate change. The injustice of this phenomenon is magnified by the fact that these population groups have contributed the least to carbon emissions that are responsible for world-wide climate change (Kjellstrom et al 2007).

However, even within countries such as Australia, the impact of climate change will differ across population groups. Some groups will bear the brunt more heavily than others, and may not enjoy full access to strategies implemented across society towards mitigation and adaptation. They will be less able to adapt to the severe repercussions of global warming, on water, food, energy and housing security. These Australian population groups, and perhaps newly emerging environmental refugees from neighbouring countries, will be most at risk of the negative impact of climate change, including an increase in the risk of social exclusion.

Fifty-three per cent of greenhouse gas emissions currently comes from burning fossil fuels to create energy (Dow & Downing 2006), a particular focus will be on reducing energy consumption and shifting energy sources to low carbon alternatives. Policies to address these activities will be in two main areas, and both will result in increased costs. Firstly, there will be widespread introduction of minimum energy performance standards for electrical appliances, cars and buildings. Secondly there will be pricing of carbon into energy, including oil, gas and electricity, which means unit costs will rise (Sharrard & Tate 2007). This translates as increases in price of most goods and services. The most disadvantaged/vulnerable population groups may struggle to withstand increased costs or to change their behaviour to avoid price rises, and these factors may also increase vulnerability to social exclusion as these population groups struggle to meet basic living requirements. A recent finding from the State of the Regions Report indicates that rural communities will bear the brunt of the proposed 17 billion dollar bill for climate change in Australia, with the average weekly cost to rural household estimated to be $60 compared with $32 for city families (Millar 2007).²

In addition to increased costs and price rises, the greatest challenges in establishing social and economic justice for vulnerable populations of climate change can be summarised as follows:

- **Health impacts:** heat exhaustion, cramps, heart attacks and stroke. Those most vulnerable to heat-related stress include the elderly, the very young, and those with cardiovascular disease. Changed distribution of vector-borne diseases including Dengue Fever, Malaria and Ross River Fever. Other health impacts include water-borne diseases, food borne-diseases, respiratory diseases and skin cancer.

- **Impact on everyday way of life:** including access to public open space for sport and recreation, especially for those population groups who have little or no access to alternatives to community-based sports facilities. Homes most at risk of repeated onslaught of extreme weather events are often those that are older and less well maintained. These tend to be rental home for low income tenants.

- **Impacts on livelihoods** and the continued economic viability of parts of rural Australia, including the possibility of forced internal migration. Ongoing employment in some industries, such as energy intensive industries, tourism and coal mining are also at risk.

- **Indigenous Australians,** particularly those in remote communities in northern Australia are most vulnerable to changing climate effects.

- **Changes in electricity and petrol prices,** and the availability and affordability of alternatives.

- **Increase in water prices.**

- **Border security.** The Asia-Pacific region will be badly affected, most likely displacing people and creating climate refugees.

_Brotherhood of St Laurence et al (2007)_

Any of these projected outcomes of climate change will increase the risk of social exclusion as priority population groups find it increasingly difficult to access those structures and resources (such as employment, good physical and emotional health, housing, adequate income etc) which facilitate participation in mainstream society. These recent reports (Brotherhood of St Laurence et al 2007; Sharrard & Tate 2007) project scenarios of disadvantage, and indicate that increasing social exclusion will result if protectionist measures are not included in policy formulation. Several social welfare groups have initiated advocacy campaigns for such protectionist measures (Brotherhood of St Laurence et al 2007)³.

However, what might emerge if we were to embrace a paradigm shift which enables these population groups to be no longer vulnerable and requiring protection, and instead to be pioneers of resilience to a changing climate - people who are instrumental in shaping a path to global sustainability and low carbon lifestyle⁴.

**Imagining a Paradigm Shift**

One of the many challenges in this endeavour of exploring climate change and social inclusion, is to imagine a conceptual framework which acknowledges the lived reality of priority population groups as the means to empowerment. Making reference to progress made in the field of public health will assist in illustrating foundations to this concept.

In the development of their Mental Health Promotion Framework (2005-2007) VicHealth (2007) names social inclusion as one of
the three key social and economic determinants of mental health. The vital elements of social inclusion are identified as: supportive relationships, involvement in community and group activities, and civic engagement.

While the paradigm shift that re-conceptualises passive disadvantaged recipient into active participant contributor, may be novel - the knowledge that informs its adoption is not new. Few (2007) examined studies that looked at vulnerability, response and adaptation to health risks from present and future extreme weather events. He found that:

"...a similar range of social, cultural, political and environmental factors that shape coping capacity of populations and health systems also serve to shape adaptive capacity or the ability to make changes. (Few 2007 p. 291)"

If all population groups were to enjoy equitable access to social, cultural, political and environmental resources that promote health, these resources will hold them in good stead in adapting to the negative consequences of climate change. Implicit in this is the acknowledgment of the interplay between social structure and agency. Few (2007) also calls for the need of research at the micro-scale on individual, household and community response, both to identify heightened risk to social groups and to support efforts to strengthen grassroots coping capacity (Few 2007 p. 292). This is a sentiment increasingly echoed in participatory public health promotion.

Mounting critiques in the field of public health promotion have at their heart the primacy of participation, community involvement, autonomy and empowerment. Climate change presents us with an unparalleled challenge in the history of public health promotion interventions. While we may be able to identify the aetiological mechanisms of diseases and risk factors as a consequence of increasing global temperatures (increasing heat stroke, southward shift of vector-borne diseases etc), iterant measures are no longer adequate. The impact of climate change on the health of the population is greater than the sum of its parts. When increasing temperatures result in escalating negative health repercussions, society’s capacity to respond will be stretched to unprecedented limits. We will not be able to metaphorically, and literally, put out the increasing number of spot fires.

Imagining a paradigm shift from ‘vulnerable population groups requiring protection and rescuing’ to ‘climate change pioneers blazing a path to ecological sustainability and low carbon lifestyle’ is within our current social vocabulary. Although there is an urgent need for innovative and participatory research with priority populations, some models of community development already exist which enable such a paradigm shift.

What Can a Paradigm Shift Reveal?

Nicholson (2007) outlines six modern employment services characteristics which could structure a program of social inclusion utilising a human capital development approach. The first strategy is to improve people’s long-term employability through improved education, skills, health and personal development. This provides a key opportunity in the face of policies and programs to adapt to and mitigate climate change.

Interventions to address climate change can also be found in some past examples of social justice programmes, and they can also be seeded by the ‘imagineering’ (or projecting) of sustainable future scenarios. One of the founding principles inherent in both past and future examples is that they are based on distributed rather than centralised social and economic systems.

Vandana Shiva (2005) articulates a global vision for a just and sustainable ‘earth democracy’, which has as its essential tenet the ‘commons’, being critical environmental resources that must be readily accessible to all. These ‘commons’ include (amongst others) energy, water, food and shelter. Shiva (2005) insists that global sustainability cannot begin to exist where those in power espouse social justice and equity, whilst actively or passively ‘enclosing the commons’ (Shiva 2005). Brief examples of intervention based on the two contested paradigms are considered below, within Shiva’s framework of the ‘commons’.

The socially exclusive paradigm attempts to protect vulnerable populations, as recipients of welfare delivery, from the worst social, economic and health impacts of impending climate change, as these impacts take hold.

The socially inclusive paradigm builds capacity in priority populations, to actively prepare for, engage in, and gain health from social and economic reconstructions that meet the climate change challenge.

Energy

In the protectionist paradigm, policies proposed to secure energy for vulnerable populations in the face of climate change and carbon pricing, are based on increased monetary concessions and rebates on gas and electricity bills (Lee 2007; National Institute of Economic and Industry Research 2007; Owen 2007). Recent Federal Government policy has provided rebates (and its Shadow Government has proposed low-interest loans) for solar hot water and photovoltaic power installations for the home (ALP 2007a; ALP 2007b; Australian Greenhouse Office 2007). However these schemes are limited to owner-occupiers, and are capped to provide top-up funding only towards what is significant private monetary outlay required for such home improvements. No consideration has been given to rental properties in which the more financially vulnerable tend to live. Hand-out of free energy-efficient (compact fluorescent) light globes
CLIMATE CHANGE AND SOCIAL INCLUSION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR JUSTICE AND EMPOWERMENT.

...in NSW during 2007 is surely welcome, but maintains vulnerable populations as the passive recipients of government and corporate benevolence (NSW Government Greenhouse Gas Abatement Scheme 2007).

In the paradigm of enablement and empowerment, priority populations can (with considered support) be trained and mobilised in the business of retrofitting the homes of other low-income families to improve comfort and energy efficiency - good work which CERES and BESD11 pioneered in the 1980’s. Since then such programmes have had little ongoing support. But recently, in response to the rapidly accelerating community concern about climate change. MEFL12 (with partner organisations) has been able to establish the ‘Phoenix Fridge Project’ (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2007). This project trains and employs disadvantaged people to retrofit second-hand fridges (for improved energy efficiency) and redistribute them to low-income households. There are many other enormous opportunities (as yet not embraced in Australia) for priority populations to link up with local government, training organisations (egTAFE) and some seedling finance, to become producers of energy under the auspice of local cooperative enterprise. For example, by collecting existing woody waste (and by radically increasing fast-growing woody bio-mass for future harvesting) from our highway verges and the open space of our suburbs and rural towns, a huge and renewable resource of bio-energy could be accessed for local generation (via gasification) of electricity with zero net carbon emissions, to be distributed locally through the existing power grid13. The participants in such an enterprise would soon be central actors and beneficiaries of our new low carbon economy. They would sell the electricity they produce, they could accrue credits for their own electricity consumption, and they could trade in renewable energy certificates (RECs) that their accredited renewable electricity would attract (Office of the Renewable Energy Regulator 2007).

Food

In the protectionist paradigm, welfare groups provide food vouchers and soup kitchens. Government provides aid in the form of drought relief to farmers, with the aim of keeping them productive on the land, thereby hopefully maintaining food supply at reasonable prices for all. But with or without this relatively minor monetary relief, farmers sticken by regular drought in a changing climate will in time walk off their land, the consequent loss and necessary adjustment in agricultural production will lead to much higher food prices, which in turn will disproportionately affect the low income groups.

By enabling a paradigm shift towards a culture of true nourishment, much more healthy food (particularly from fruit, vegetables and small animals) can be produced and traded where it is consumed, in the context of communal self-reliance. Our priority populations are able to engage well in such activity, whether independently or cooperatively, self-sufficiency or trade. Some people have plenty of free time and energy to contribute. Multicultural backgrounds mean that some population groups have considerable alternative expertise in food production to share. Which may be particularly valuable to our future survival under a changing climate, economy and society. Elderly people also have much to offer through their perspectives from past eras of greater communality and self-sufficiency.

Since their establishment in the early 1980’s, the community garden plots at CERES for land-poor local residents (modelled on the commons of England and India, the Schliebergarten in Germany and the Orto in Italy) have been extremely popular and productive. In addressing priority populations, these projects for many obvious reasons warrant a great deal more support from government, business and landholders than they have enjoyed until now.

Through one of its imagineerings into the future, VEIL (Victorian Eco Innovation Lab) has proposed the Edible School Garden, based on principles similar to the Stephanie Alexander Community Kitchen Garden, where children participate in growing fresh produce on school grounds and cooking their harvested crop, all as an integral part of their school curriculum14. VEIL extends the Stephanie Alexander Community Kitchen Garden vision, seeing parents of the children offering some of their residential garden space to extend the school’s...
edible garden. This then spreads to the use of neighbours’ gardens, nature strips and other nearby under-utilised land.

Water for the edible garden is harvested from domestic rain tanks and from the substantial yield from the school’s roof. Many older people enjoy and value gardening, and this model enables a transfer of inter-generational knowledge along with physical assistance for those very old or disabled. This integrated community activity fosters a stewardship role in relation to the environmental and social health of the community through communal gardening and information sharing (VEIL 2007 Quarter Schools).

Shelter

In the paradigm of welfare delivery, financial assistance is provided to low-income renters, and calls for increased and upgraded public housing stock. The reality is that rental assistance inflates the private rental market through supply and demand, and private property in central and well-serviced locations (crucial for vulnerable populations) is often deemed too expensive to purchase for public housing development. Recognising the political worth in addressing the housing plight of Indigenous Australians, governments fund mainstream design and the construction industry to deliver what has long been an expensive and largely inappropriate handout fix. The general economic hardship likely to evolve with climate change will do nothing to improve the availability, location or amenity of housing for vulnerable populations, certainly while we remain in the existing paradigm.

A paradigm shift, that has empowerment as its foundation, re-opens the possibility for priority populations to engage in government assisted self-build housing programmes. In the 1980’s, the Victorian Ministry of Housing provided technical assistance and low-interest loans to low-income families who could not breach the deposit gap but were prepared to help themselves by building their own homes independently (self-build), by building their homes jointly within a small collective (group self-build) (Victorian Office of Housing 2007), or by renovating cheaply purchased run-down houses (urban homesteading). The owner-builders’ work accrued them ‘sweat equity’ in lieu of a cash deposit towards their home ownership. The quality in design and construction, their creative improvisation towards low-cost outcomes, the low embodied energy in building fabric (earth brick and stone walling, recycled timber walling, sound second-hand hardware), and the energy performance of these homes once completed, were compelling. And the experience of owner-building enriched many lives. Through the 80’s and early 90’s, Victorian architect Paul Haar encouraged and assisted Indigenous communities in remote parts of northern Australia to design and build their own homes at extremely low cost, embracing the local climate and dwelling aspirations, sourcing materials that were locally available in the bush, and adopting simple construction methods that were suited to the skill base of the local communities. The outcomes from these self-help housing programmes were extraordinary, both directly by way of beautiful architecture, home ownership, skill development and self-esteem for local families, and indirectly by the courage then instilled in the communities to embark on other new local and sustainable enterprises (Haar 2003). Such initiatives, that allow low income population groups to provide for their own shelter needs, also promotes good health, and builds economic, social and environmental resilience – crucial in the context of climate change.

Conclusion

Climate change presents us with the most pressing global issue of our times. All population groups will be affected by the negative repercussions of increasing global temperatures, extreme and unpredictable weather events, including increasing droughts and floods. Disadvantaged, vulnerable and marginalised population groups, already at risk of social exclusion, will disproportionately bear the brunt of the negative repercussions of climate change including increased social exclusion. In adapting to and mitigating the negative affects of climate change our existing welfare paradigm will cause us to formulate and implement policy that aims to protect vulnerable groups from disadvantage.

However, climate change also presents new opportunity for a paradigm shift, which re-visions vulnerable populations as dynamic contributors to a just society in a future of carbon descent. This transformative thinking is within our realm of possibility, utilising past examples of social justice programmes and future envisaging. Within the parameters of the commons as described by Vandana Shiva (2005) and distributed local systems of production and consumption, an array of co-operative programmes and micro-industries can be developed. Clearly it is not appropriate to formulate all new policy relating to socio-economic disadvantage in singular accord with this new paradigm of empowerment and capacity building. Social welfare safety nets must always remain in place, particularly as the grip of climate change takes hold. But from these nets, just policy must build new, enticing and durable stairways to opportunities that climate change will generate. Whether in production of good food and renewable energy, in harvesting of rainwater, or in construction of affordable housing, all people need to be included – to rebuild good health, strong inclusive community and a true common wealth for Australia, together ready to meet our global climate change.

Endnotes

1. Levitas et al (2007) detail the complexity involved in not only defining social exclusion, but in developing definitions which are amenable to measurement. Distinguishing between ‘social exclusion’ and ‘deep exclusion’ they define the former as ‘... a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of

Just Policy No. 47, March 2008

27
people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political
arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and equity and
cohesion of society as a whole.' Levitas et al 2007 p.9

2. The pricing of climate change included carbon costs (estimated at
$33 per tonne for greenhouse gas emissions when carbon taxes are
introduced), loss of farm income through drought and other climatic
problems and the cost of water provision (Millar 2007).

3. Recommendation seven from the Joint Submission to the Prime
Ministerial Task Group on Emissions Trading tasks government to
accept responsibility for '7(a) Financial compensation programs...'
and '7(b) Energy assistance programs...' Brotherhood of St Laurence,

4. Some of these concepts have been articulated by Brotherhood of
St Laurence: 'Climate change could with the right measures, create
opportunities for disadvantaged people as new economic activities
developed.' (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2007). But the centrality of
specific population groups needs to be emphasised. How can the
unique capabilities and assets of these population groups illuminate
the quagmire which is the reality of decreasing our carbon footprint?

5. Freedom from discrimination and violence and, access to economic
resources, make up the other key determinants.

6. In the social sciences the social structure/agency debate is concerned
with the extent that societal processes largely shape or delimit
personal capabilities and actions and the capacity of individual

7. One such model is the Community Enterprise Development
Initiative (CEDI), which has been developed by the Brotherhood of
St Laurence, with support from the Department for Victorian
Communities and Neighbourhood Renewal. Its four main objectives
are: 'increased social participation via community engagement;
employment creation and career pathways for participants;
community support and connection; and enterprise financial
sustainability.' Bedson (2007 p.1). Although none of the current
twelve case studies focus on initiatives that address climate change,
their structure can be readily adopted for this purpose.

8. 'Imagineering' is a tool for creative thinking utilised extensively by
the Victorian Eco-Innovation Lab (VEIL) in its mission to research,
envision, innovate, create and test desirable and realisable concepts
for sustainable products, services, built environments and lifestyles.
VEIL is funded through the Victorian Sustainability Fund as part of
the Government's Sustainability Action Statement 2006, and can be
accessed at http://www.ecoinnovationlab.com

9. Distributed systems are characterised by localised, small to medium
scale production of water harvesting and energy generation and
distribution. Centralised systems are corporate and government based
where as distributed systems are community based. Distributed
system is also distinguishable from 'decentralised' system because of
its connectivity to a 'network' for sharing excess (Ryan 2007).

10. At the time of writing, Australia has just emerged from a Federal
election resulting in a change of government. All parties are currently
repositioning themselves in response to proceedings at the Bali
Conference on Climate Change (December 2007).

11. CERES is the Centre for Education and Research in Environmental
Strategies. And is situated in East Brunswick (http://www.ceres.org.
au/). BESD was the Brunswick Electricity Supply Department, a
locally and publically owned and operated electricity distributor and
retailer until the mid 1990's.

12. MELF is the Moreland Energy Foundation Limited, that grew from
the achievements of CERES and BESD. In partnership with the
Brotherhood of St. Laurence, it currently runs the Phoenix Fridge

13. The Beddington Zero Energy Development (BedZed) is a new
carbon-neutral social housing project in London UK which, as one
of its many eco-friendly features, has its electricity, hot water and
space heating provided from a small-scale combined heat and power
plant (CHP). This CHP is fuelled by woody waste from the local
area that would otherwise go to landfill (Sustainable Development
Commission 2007). Gasification Australia Pty. Ltd. is currently
developing a small (Tasman Class) gasifier for electricity generation
(http://www.gasificationaustralia.com/)

14. The logic in this is as for grid-interactive photovoltaic electricity
generation, being more cost-effective than stand-alone battery-based
photovoltaics in the urban context (and vice versa in the rural/remote
context).

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Acknowledgement

I'm indebted to my husband Paul Haar for his insight and constructive input to this publication. His own work in environment and community sustainability has inspired and informed this paper.