
CLIMATE ACTION STATEMENT 2022

Introduction and Background to COP27

Governments are coming together at the United Nations Conference of the Parties Climate Change Conference (COP27) in Egypt in November 2022, to discuss the climate crisis, in what many believe to be one of the world's last chances to take meaningful action and avoid environmental and social devastation.

This is a crucial time for governments across the world to take serious action to address this existential threat. Throughout these international negotiations, all voices must be heard, not only of the privileged and powerful, but also marginalised communities. This must include centering First Nations knowledges and voices from all over the world.

The Paris Agreement and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals outline targets that would limit the global temperature rise to well below 2 degrees Celsius, and to strive to limit warming to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius. It is essential that Australia and all other states cooperate to achieve the Paris Agreement goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius and to do so in a socially just manner in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) welcomes the *Climate Change Act 2022*, passed by the Australian Government in September, as an important step forward to reach net zero emissions. However, the current Australian climate change legislation does not put us on track to limit warming to the Paris Agreement goal of 1.5 degrees Celsius without further, urgent and immediate action within this decade. At the escalating rate of change, neither the actions by Australia nor the rest of the world will be sufficient to avoid irreversible changes to the global climate which will have devastating impacts on humans, animals and the environments in which we live.

Climate change legislation in Australia must be matched with immediate action to achieve the more ambitious Paris Agreement goal of 1.5 degree Celsius¹ and a rapid transition away from reliance on fossil fuels towards a clean economy.

Having access to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment has been acknowledged to be a fundamental human right through a resolution by the United Nations General Assembly in July 2022. Australia is one of 161 states which voted in favour of this resolution. However, like many other governments worldwide, Australia is failing to act with the needed urgency to safeguard this human right. COP27 is our opportunity to further enhance international cooperation among state parties and agree to the necessary climate action.

¹ The AASW supports the position of the Climate and Health Alliance that Australia should legislate a 75% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions below 2005 levels by 2030 and a net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2035. See Climate and Health Alliance (2021), *Healthy, Regenerative and Just*. <https://assets.nationbuilder.com/caha/pages/2769/attachments/original/1655869490/caha-framework-2.0-FA.pdf?1655869490>

The Australian Association of Social Workers makes the following Climate Action Statement and Call to Action for the Australian Government and all State Parties at the international negotiations of COP27:

Climate change is a social justice issue

The worsening impacts of the changing climate are undeniable. Extreme environmental events such as floods, heatwaves, bushfires and droughts are becoming more frequent and their consequences for people, animals and plants are becoming more catastrophic. The direct and indirect impacts of this damage are already having a significant effect on the health and wellbeing of individuals, groups and communities in Australia and across the world.

The effects of the climate emergency compound and exacerbate existing inequalities. These events and other climate related changes have impacts across every aspect of life, including increased food prices and energy costs, changing patterns of infectious disease, failing public and private infrastructure, reduced access to safe and affordable housing, flooding and inundation of coastal areas (where the majority of Australians live) and the loss of culturally significant sites for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. The impacts on health, mental health and increased rates of family violence and abuse are also well documented.

The economic, social, and cultural impacts of climate change are therefore an environmental *and* a social justice issue.

Social workers, social justice and climate action

Social work is a profession committed to enhancing collective wellbeing, advocating for social justice and is underpinned by a human rights framework and principles. As social workers, we work with people who experience some of the most significant and sustained disadvantage due to government systems and structures which fail to adequately uphold the economic, social and cultural rights of all.

While climate change is affecting the entire population, the burden is falling most heavily on already marginalised people. Social workers see this impact firsthand as they provide services within and to communities.

Social workers have become increasingly concerned about the inequities caused by the global environmental crisis. The current and imminent impacts involve large scale economic, social, cultural and environmental costs, meaning that this is a core issue for all social workers, regardless of their field of practice.

As social workers we will always advocate for inclusive policies, and this includes access to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment for all.

Prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and cultures are deeply connected to Country (including land, sea and sky). In September 2022, the United Nations Human Rights Committee ruled that Australia failed to adequately protect Torres Strait Islander Peoples from climate change impacts, which has violated their rights and harmed their livelihood, culture and traditional way of life.

Climate action must prioritise listening to and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (and First Nations peoples all over the world) who, prior to colonisation lived sustainably for more than 60,000 years.

Climate action requires a shift from mere acknowledgment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and knowledges, towards true partnerships, and deep listening to gain greater understanding of the values, cultures and traditions on the lands where we live and work. Through this process of reflection, listening and empowerment, we can learn ways to live more sustainably and to mitigate climate change.

As the traditional custodians of the lands in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples must be empowered to exercise self-determination, and their voices and solutions to climate change must be represented in Australia and throughout international government conferences and negotiations.

A CALL TO ACTION FOR THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AND ALL COP27 STAKEHOLDERS

Time is critical.

The climate emergency poses a global threat like no other. It affects all States Parties and global citizens, yet overwhelming impacts Global South States and disadvantaged and marginalised communities.

The knowledge and solutions exist to reverse the climate emergency. What we need now is urgent and inclusive action from States Parties across the globe.

COP27 is the platform for international cooperation and for States Parties to commit to ambitious targets and solutions.

In this statement, the Australian Association of Social Workers is calling to action States Parties and governments around the world to protect the human rights of all global citizens.

WE CALL ON STATES PARTIES AND GOVERNMENTS TO:

1. Immediately implement sustainable measures to limit the extent of the rise in global temperatures to less than 1.5 degrees Celsius.
2. Uphold and safeguard the economic, social, cultural and environmental rights of those impacted by the climate emergency, including enacting legislation which enshrines the right to a healthy, clean and sustainable environment for all our communities.
3. Proactively mitigate the effects of the climate emergency on all marginalised and disadvantaged communities, including through implementing culturally appropriate and sustainable adaptation measures for communities who are or will be directly impacted by the changing environment.
4. Respect First Nations voices on climate change by listening to the knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and other global First Nations Peoples' and including their voices throughout international climate change negotiations.

About the Australian Association of Social Workers

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the national professional body representing more than 16,000 social workers throughout Australia. The AASW works to promote the profession of social work including setting the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work, while also advocating on matters of human rights to advance social justice.

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