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LIVEABLE AND JUST: Improving the capacity of local government to respond to climate change in ways which are healthy, just and sustainable

Discussion Paper – Executive Summary

May 2009

The Liveable and Just project is an initiative of the Victorian Local Governance Association, in partnership with the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Department of Sustainability and Environment. It is funded through the Victorian Government's Sustainability Fund under the Victorian Local Sustainability Accord.

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About the Liveable and Just project

Climate change has profound implications for the quality of life experienced by individuals and communities across all Victorian local government areas. Local government has a wide range of responsibilities that impact on both climate change mitigation and adaptation, and the health and wellbeing of citizens and their communities. Whilst many Victorian councils have been proactive in responding to climate change, local government planning and risk assessment to date has tended to focus on the physical implications, including for landscapes, weather patterns and human settlements, with limited consideration of social and equity impacts.

The Liveable and Just project aims to focus attention on the social impacts of climate change. Through a process of engagement with the local government sector, it aims to:

- improve the understanding of the social and equity impacts of climate change;
- investigate the implications for local government, including expected changes to the nature and demand for community services they provide;
- explore the potential roles of local government in addressing the social impacts of climate change; and
- identify tools and resources required to assist local government respond effectively to the social impacts of climate change.

The discussion paper, the first of several key components of the Liveable and Just project, presents a synthesis of knowledge and research to date on the social impacts of climate change relevant to local government responsibilities. It also provides a framework for seeking input from the sector through a series of Liveable and Just workshops with local government staff and elected representatives taking place across Victoria throughout June 2009. The input collected at workshops will inform the contents of a *Liveable and Just* resource kit, intended to facilitate and support local government responses to the social and equity impacts they face as a result of climate change.

Climate change trends and implications

The overwhelming majority of the world's climate scientists agree that human activities resulting in the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere are causing warming of the earth's climate. Global greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise and scientists are observing greater and more rapid climatic changes than previously expected, leading to increased risk of abrupt or irreversible climatic shifts. As climate science matures and the extent of implications for ecosystems, human health and social systems, including economic systems, are understood, the case for urgent action to address climate change becomes increasingly compelling.

Australia, as a hot and dry continent, is understood to be amongst the most vulnerable to climate change impacts, relative to other developed countries. In Victoria, CSIRO predictions show that, if the current high emissions trajectory continues, Victoria in 2070 will be between 1.8 and 3.8 °C hotter, with more frequent heat waves and days of high fire danger, less rainfall, snowfall and frost and a greater risk of coastal erosion and inundation. It is in this context that Commonwealth and Victorian Governments are making policy decisions, to encourage both mitigation, through emissions reductions, and adaptation to current and expected climate changes. These policies in turn, set the context in which Victorian councils must work. Social impacts of climate change will

be influenced not only by changes to the physical environment, but also by changes to the policy context as governments at all levels make decisions to address climate change.

The Liveable and Just project is focussed primarily on adaptation, as it is centrally concerned with how local government can plan for changes in demand for services they provide and effectively respond to social tensions and inequities that arise from climate change. Despite this, it must be recognised that there are profound and serious limitations to adaptation, whether determined by physical realities or shared perceptions of the extent of social disruption which is acceptable to a given society.¹ Any analysis of social impacts of climate change is therefore inevitably as much an argument for prevention – that is, urgent mitigation of greenhouse gases – as it is a warning of the need to plan for change and begin to adapt.

Social impacts of climate change

Social impacts of climate change can be defined broadly as those that influence the health, wellbeing and quality of life experienced by individuals and communities. A growing evidence base is emerging to explain the likely impacts of climate change on the following factors which underpin the quality of life of people and their communities:

- **health and wellbeing** including physical health, mental health and public safety
- **access to essential goods and services** including food, water, housing, energy, transport, emergency services, health services, education and training
- **social inequity and disadvantage**
- **livelihood – employment and financial security** including job security and access to insurance
- **community connectedness** including cultural participation, social cohesion and sense of home and belonging.

Both climate change itself and climate change policy are expected to impact negatively on many of these areas. For example, climate change impacts include: a greater incidence and burden of disease and greater risk to both physical and mental health, threatened access to essential goods and services such as food and water, exacerbation of existing social inequity and trends of disadvantage and decreased community connectedness, including through changing access to public open spaces and community facilities such as sporting grounds. Not all social impacts of climate change will necessarily be negative. For example, whilst climate change policy has the potential to cause job losses, particularly in fossil-fuel intensive industries, there is also emerging evidence to suggest it will mean significant job creation in other industries, notably renewable energy.

The severity of social impacts caused by climate change in a given Victorian community can be predicted to some extent by understanding and measuring the vulnerability of that community. Vulnerability to climate change consists of several components including the *exposure* of a given system or community to climate change impacts, the *sensitivity*, or extent to which changes will affect it in its current form, and the *adaptive capacity*, or capacity to change in a way that makes it better equipped to deal with external impacts.² The social causes of vulnerability and resilience, affecting individuals' and communities' adaptation to climate change, are highly differentiated and will vary by location, population and individual circumstance.³ Central to understanding the social impacts and assessing overall vulnerability is the need to

integrate climate vulnerability with existing understanding of socio-economic vulnerability and other indicators of wellbeing.

Previous research has suggested that amongst the most vulnerable in Victoria are those populations that face place-based impacts, for example, rural, drought-affected communities, coastal, alpine, flood-prone and bushfire-prone communities. Other place-based vulnerabilities arise from dependence on threatened industries and isolation due to remoteness or lack of transport options. At the same time, vulnerabilities arise from socio-economic status or demographic, rather than – and sometimes in combination with – location. Population groups that have been identified as particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts include people living on low-incomes, or in poverty, isolated older people, people with chronic health problems, mental health issues or disabilities, people with low levels of education, newly arrived migrants and refugees, and Indigenous communities.

Local government and the social impacts of climate change

In Victoria local government is responsible for implementing a diverse range of programs, policies and regulations set by the State and Federal Governments. They must also respond to the needs of their local community and they have the power to set local regulations and by-laws and provide a range of discretionary services.⁴ The 79 Victorian councils differ dramatically in terms of their size, demographic, revenue base and resources available. As a result their key challenges and priorities, and the services they provide also vary between councils.

The key question for the Liveable and Just project is: which of the responsibilities and functions of Victorian councils will be affected by the social impacts of climate change and how? Many existing council activities overlap with the areas affecting quality of life listed above, upon which climate change is expected to impact. Some examples include: public health services and planning, community facilities management, emergency services planning, local economic development and local cultural and community events. Whilst legal obligations for Victorian councils arising from climate change are not currently well-defined, it is likely that, as evidence and projections produced by climate scientists become more sophisticated, the expectation that councils will take climate change into account when undertaking key functions such as planning and service delivery will become greater.

Despite the fact that state and federal governments control many of the overarching elements that influence climate change action, local government is in a unique and critical position to make significant gains in this area. This is not only due to its specific authority but also its proximity to communities, leadership and exemplar capacity and local knowledge and networks.⁵ Victorian councils have a number of tools and capabilities available to them with the potential for adjustment to incorporate greater recognition and planning for the social impacts of climate change. These functions include: informing and educating communities, statutory and strategic planning, designing and operating infrastructure and facilities, local regulation and financial instruments, as well as providing leadership and advocating to other levels of government on behalf of local populations.

A framework for discussion and input from the sector

The Liveable and Just project aims to stimulate greater understanding of the social and equity impacts of climate change and their implications for local government in the local context. It recognises the diversity within the sector and seeks to draw on existing knowledge about specific issues facing different councils and obtain local knowledge about what is most needed to facilitate effective responses.

The Liveable and Just workshops are intended to guide discussion and gain input from the local government sector about the implications of climate change for the communities they are part of and the social services they provide. They aim to facilitate exploration of the implications at the local level as well as potential solutions and specific actions that can be taken by those working in councils, at varying levels of seniority.

Discussion will centre on the following questions:

- **What do we know?** Presentation of key themes addressed above, alongside more localised information about climate change impacts
- **What does this mean for us?** What will be the social impacts of climate change in our local area?
- **What can we do?** What can we do to minimise/respond to these impacts?
- **What do we need to do it?** What resources do we need in order to do so?

¹ Adger, W.N., Dessai, S., Goulden, M., Hulme, M., Lorenzoni, I., Nelson, D.R., Naess, L.O., Wolf, J. and Wreford, A. (2008) "Are there social limits to adaptation to climate change?", *Climatic Change*, Vol. 93, No's 3-4, pp. 335-354

² The Allen Consulting Group (2005) *Climate Change Risk and Vulnerability: Promoting an efficient adaptation response in Australia*. Report to the Australian Greenhouse Office, Canberra: Australian Government, p ix

³ Adger, W. N. (2001) "Scales of Governance and Environmental Justice for Adaptation and Mitigation of Climate Change", *Journal of International Development*, Vol. 13, pp. 921-931

⁴ Municipal Association of Victoria (2008) "About Local Government", accessed March 2009 at: <http://www.mav.asn.au/CA256C2B000B597A/page/Council+Information-About+Local+Government?OpenDocument&1=20-Council+Information~&2=05-About+Local+Government~&3=~>

⁵ LGA Climate Change Commission (2007), *A Climate of Change: Final Report of the LGA Climate Change Commission*, London: Local Government Association, p. 48.