

## Position Paper for SPC

# Climate Change



Globally and regionally, the climate is warming. While there have been warmings and coolings over the long history of the earth, a large majority of climate scientists believe (a) this current warming has major implications for the planet, (b) that much of the warming is due to anthropogenic (human-related activity) sources, and (c) that the global community needs to cut climate-change emissions (principally CO<sub>2</sub>, but also methane and nitrous oxides) to address this.

Economic studies confirm there is less economic cost in taking early action.



*UN Climate 2006. UN Change conference, Nairobi photo, flickr CC*

The business-as-usual case sees CO<sub>2</sub> emission continuing to rise globally unless action is taken. Thus far, global emissions have very largely been sourced from the developed world. Emissions in the developed world are now levelling off. Those in the developing world will comprise the great majority of new emissions as developing countries rightly seek a better standard of living. The challenge is to level off – and in time reduce - total global emission but at the same time ensuring economic development in developing countries continues.

### WCC on climate change

Principle 1 refers to the following critical points: a) the concern for present and future generations; b) equity as a basis for climate measures; c) the “common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities” and d) the role lead developed countries should have in combating climate change. Principle 2 focuses special attention on the needs and circumstances of developing countries and vulnerable communities. These deserve particular consideration. The “Precautionary Principle” is addressed in Principle 3, stressing the importance of anticipating, preventing or minimising the causes and mitigating the effects of climate change...

In the churches' perspective, **justice** must be the basic criterion of applied ethics in all decisions concerning the measures to cope with climate change. Although climate change is a global issue affecting all peoples and nations, those who are and will increasingly be affected by negative climate-change consequences are the vulnerable communities who have contributed the least to global emissions. These include women and children, indigenous peoples, the poorest communities, people with disabilities and inhabitants of coastal low-lying areas. Vulnerable communities and states are also much more dependent on natural resources for their subsistence and do not have the means to mitigate emissions and to adapt to climate change.

*Why are the Churches at the UN Conference on Climate Change at Cancun?*  
by the World Council of Churches (UN Conference of the Parties, Cancun 13 December 2010).

## The core issues

The first issue is the high probability of anthropogenic actions contributing significantly or substantially to global warming. We at SPC are not climate scientists, but although the anthropogenic contribution to global warming is not absolutely and decisively proven, it seems very likely. We have to go with the majority of scientific opinion and argue for prudent early action (the precautionary principle). To wait until finally and undeniably proven or otherwise might be too late. At the same time continued monitoring over time would confirm or discount the concern.



*Courtesy Storm Crypt, flickr CC*

The second issue is whether the world community can achieve the levelling-off of emissions that is sought to minimise the level of warming to within 2 degrees C. The answer is yes, provided the

global community, or the great majority, acts and acts as soon as practicable. We can do this by utilising a whole array of known technologies and strategies – energy conservation, renewables, reforestation, gas, nuclear (despite Fukushima, nuclear will have a role), sequestration and so on. Coal will still have a role but there will be a swing away and we will need to reduce emissions in their use. New technologies will emerge over time also. It can be done.

### Faith and climate change

“[W]e wish to highlight the very real threat to the world’s poor, and to our fragile creation, from the threat of catastrophic climate change. The developed world is primarily responsible for the already visible effects of global heating. Justice requires that we now take responsibility for slowing the rise in global temperature.

We recognise unequivocally that there is a moral imperative to tackle the causes of global warming. This is reinforced by the reality that it is the poor and vulnerable who are most profoundly affected by the environmental impact of climate change – especially drought, floods, water shortages and rise in sea levels.”

Faith Leaders and Participants in the Faith and Climate Change Seminar hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace, 29 October 2009.

The third issue is should Australia take action now or wait to seek a world agreement. The argument is that Australia’s contribution is perhaps 1-2%, therefore our efforts will have no effect. We would be hurting ourselves to no real global impact. On the other hand, the reality of a global agreement happening without some developed countries taking the initiative is highly unlikely. Moreover, Australians are per capita among the highest individual sources of carbon-emitting gases in the world.

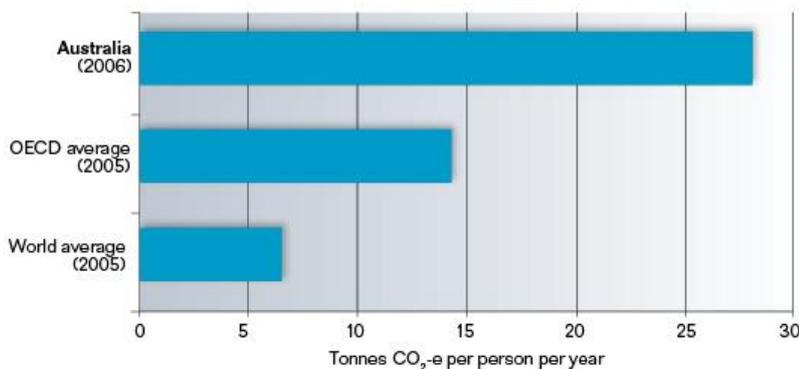
Therefore there is justification for a limited initial action – which can be increased if there is a global agreement. This was the proposal of the Rudd Government prior to Copenhagen. There are key elements to this approach to consider:

(a) exemption for energy-intensive, trade-exposed industries (otherwise we will simply be moving the

- emissions elsewhere and our industry and jobs will be needlessly lost),
- (b) there may a case for adjustment in the power sector – possibly for equity reasons but primarily to ensure power supplies in the transition,
- (c) support for low-income earners - everyone will be faced with higher costs but the former will be least able to cope (however it is important that all change their energy usage).

The fourth issue concerns what action to take? Various measures have been proposed – principally the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), the Carbon Tax, or a lesser known Carbon Consumption Tax; or Direct Funding as advocated by the Coalition. Each has advantages and disadvantages. Emissions trading is probably the lowest cost and most efficient. Direct funding could be the most expensive. The prime focus should be either of the first three schemes, all of which are market-based measures, with preference for an ETS. There should be scope for regulatory actions to assist (eg in automobiles to set limits on vehicle-fuel consumption) to complement the market measures, because in many areas the market-based schemes are not effective.

### Per capita greenhouse gas emissions



This table is sourced from Garnaut’s *Climate Change Review* which notes “Australia’s per capita greenhouse gas emissions are the highest of any OECD country and are among the highest in the world.” The primary reason is our dependence on coal-fired electricity generation (and brown coal in particular in Victoria), as compared with other OECD countries largely sourcing electricity from gas and nuclear generation. Any move away

from coal or to the more efficient use of coal or sequestration, to conservation and greater efficiency, would make a significant impact. A secondary reason is in transport – we drive more than others. There is obvious potential to reduce emissions there also.

The fifth issue for us is why should SPC be involved? As several of the church documents state, there are major issues of stewardship of the planet, intergenerational equity, the impact of climate change on developing countries, vulnerability of the poor who have least contributed to the problem, and the role of developed countries in providing leadership. Domestically there are issues such as impact on low-income people.

A final issue is that the Government is going against its own electoral promises in pursuing this. Should it go to an election to seek a mandate on this? While it cannot be praised for this action, the reality is that some action is likely.

“The Uniting Church regards climate change as a serious threat to the future and integrity of life on earth. ...If we are to meet and overcome the challenge we must think creatively about the organisation of our social and economic institutions, our relationship with each other across national and cultural boundaries and our relationship with the environment.”

*For the Sake of the Planet and all its People: A Uniting Church in Australia Statement on Climate Change* (November 2006).

The government is proposing an interim carbon tax as a lead-in to an ETS. A current issue is whether the carbon tax is too low or high.

A suggested overall stance for SPC is:

- to support a low carbon tax initially with appropriate temporary measures for EITE industries and low-income earners;
- push hard for international action (it may be less than a fully fledged international agreement); and
- if a significant international arrangement is reached, raise the target reduction from 5% to 10-15%.

The outcome of this is to support broadly the current government's policies.

### **What can we do? Suggested Actions**

At meetings with the ALP, the issue is straight forward as we basically support their approach.

At meetings with the Coalition we suggest that their broad thrust is correct but the direct-funding approach may not be the most efficient. We would ask that, should they win government, they review their policies and ensure that the most efficient scheme be in place.

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### **Pontifical Academy of Sciences**

“We call on all people and nations to recognise the serious and potentially irreversible impacts of global warming caused by the anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases and other implement, without delay, effective and fair policies to reduce the causes and impacts of climate change on communities and ecosystems, ... aware that we all live in the same home. By acting now, in the spirit of common but differentiated responsibility, we accept our duty to one another and to the stewardship of a planet blessed with the gift of life.

We are committed to ensuring that all inhabitants of this planet receive their daily bread, fresh air to breathe and clean water to drink as we are aware that, if we must protect the habitat that sustains us. The believers among us ask God to grant us this wish.”

Declaration by the Working Group on *The Fate of Mountain Glaciers in the Anthropocene* (commissioned by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 11 May 2011).