

Submission to the Treaties Committee on the Paris Agreement

1. Climate change is currently impacting on the world, and those impacts are clearly visible in Australia as weather extremes, changing ecosystems, rising sea levels, for example, and as social issues related to climate impacts and our responses to them.
2. The Paris Agreement is a treaty that is crucial for Australia's physical and social well-being, and national security. Key parts of the Paris Agreement are the globally agreed goals of limiting global average temperature rise to between 1.5C and 2.0C, and a framework for national goal setting and action, and mechanisms to monitor and strengthen those national goals and actions.
3. For Australia's national wellbeing the acknowledgment of the importance of human rights is very important. In the Paris Agreement Australia acknowledges that: *'climate change is a common concern of humankind. Parties should, when taking action to address climate change respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, **the right to health** [authors emphasis], the rights of indigenous people, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity'*.
4. In Australia climate change is already impacting on health in a number of ways. **Some of these impacts are a result of the changing climate directly altering weather patterns and environments.** For example, higher temperatures and less rain dry the landscape, increasing bushfire risk and the physical, social and economic consequences for the individuals and communities impacted. Heatwaves are a major killer, especially of older people¹. High impact natural disaster increase rates of violence against women and children and some mental health issues². In natural disasters people with disability are the most likely people to die³. **Other impacts are due to climate policy choices that enhance or hinder the health and wellbeing of particular population groups.** For example, energy policies have a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing low income populations and their capacity to adapt to climate change impacts⁴.

The current major impacts of climate change on health and wellbeing of the Australian people include the impacts of: extreme weather events including extreme heat, mental health consequences of environmental change especially in rural communities during drought, respiratory disease from air pollution, and water insecurity. In the future these impacts will become more marked due to the effects of greenhouse gases currently in the

¹ Rae Walker and Wendy Mason Eds (2015) Climate change adaptation for health and social services. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.

² Rae Walker (2012) The relationship between climate change and violence: A literature review https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282650810_Relationship_between_climate_change_and_violence_Literature_review

³ Rae Walker and Wendy Mason Eds (2015) Climate change adaptation for health and social services. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne. Chapter 5. People with disability and their carers.

⁴ SECCA (2016) Final report – Executive Summary Low Income Energy Saver Direct Care and Motivators Project. <http://energysaver.seccca.org.au/>

environment. Additional greenhouse gases will exacerbate these impacts even more and increase the harm from additional impacts such as food insecurity.

Rapid and effective mitigation of climate change is essential if the impacts of climate change on the health and wellbeing of the Australian community are to be kept within manageable bounds. The lower the average global temperature rise the better for the Australian people. Australia's current climate change mitigation policies are insufficient to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement.

In addition, effective and systemic adaptation of Australian institutions and communities are essential if we are to deal with the climate change impacts due to the existing levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Current national adaptation policies are not fit for the purpose of protecting the health and wellbeing of the Australian community.

5. Mitigation action by the health sector institutions has received little attention in Australian health and climate change policies. This is despite the evidence that strong mitigation action has concrete health benefits. The requirement of the Paris Agreement for increasingly strong mitigation action may be a vehicle for strengthening policy settings to reduce substantially emissions associated with health institutions.

Adaptation action is promoted in some parts of the health system but is poorly supported at a policy level. In the health sector, action to enhance the health and wellbeing of citizens is expected to incorporate the relevant aspects of the human rights listed in the Paris Agreement as a necessary part of climate change action⁵. The human rights agenda links health and community services sectors in Australia through the need of many citizens, especially the most disadvantaged, to access institutions in both sectors to address their health needs.

Recommendation

6. **For Australia to meet its health and human rights obligations under the Paris Agreement a national strategy on climate, health and wellbeing is a necessary development. In such a strategy it is necessary to focus the health and community services sectors on the risks from climate change to health and wellbeing and the actions necessary to rapidly reduce emissions, adapt infrastructure, adapt service provision and communications for the purpose of making Australian health and community service institutions more relevant to the needs of the population under conditions of climate change.**

⁵ Rae Walker (2009) *Climate change and primary health care intervention framework*. Australian Journal of Primary Health 15(4) . . https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242756935_Climate_change_and_primary_health_care_intervention_framework