







A strong community sector
for a safe climate

About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria.

VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

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The Equitable Responses to Climate Change Project is supported by the Victorian Government.

VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country and pays respects to Elders past and present, and to emerging leaders. We conduct our business on sovereign, unceded Aboriginal land. This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.



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To prepare for all the impacts of climate change and ensure people experiencing disadvantage remain safe, Victoria needs a strong community sector.

Executive summary

In the context of the ‘global boiling’ we are anticipating and starting to experience, Victorians will face a range of unprecedented challenges. In this world, rolling heatwaves will be the norm, food and water security will become increasingly tenuous, and natural disasters will threaten more homes, organisations, livelihoods and lives.

All these impacts will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable in our society, including people experiencing poverty, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians, people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and those with disability.

These are the cohorts that community sector organisations (CSOs) primarily exist to support.

CSOs are well placed to help communities cope with the impacts of climate change because they are locally embedded and knowledgeable about the strengths and needs of their communities.

Climate change will exacerbate pre-existing disadvantages, making the community sector’s work even more vital.

It will also compound the already intense demands on the sector, while compromising organisations’ capacity to meet those demands. This is because CSOs are themselves vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and face a range of risks to workers’ wellbeing and organisations’ viability. Many organisations, for instance, have already been affected by devastating floods and fires.

To prepare for all the impacts of climate change and ensure people experiencing disadvantage remain safe, Victoria needs a strong community sector. And, likewise, a strong community sector is one that is prepared for climate change.

CSOs, however, face a range of barriers to becoming adequately prepared and resilient so that they can support their communities through the oncoming challenges.

CSOs are well placed to help communities cope with the impacts of climate change because they are locally embedded and knowledgeable about the strengths and needs of their communities.

This report, the product of extensive qualitative and quantitative research and engagement with CSOs, explores how organisations are responding to climate change, and what they need in order to ramp up that response to continue meeting the needs of their communities.

The sector’s important role in the context of climate change must be adequately recognised and resourced, and work is needed to map services and service gaps across the state.

Vitality, the sector needs consistent and long-term funding to continue meeting demand for its services (which will increase as climate change progresses), and to prepare its workforce and operations to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Work is also needed to build awareness and knowledge within the sector, in order for community organisations to survive and thrive as supports for their communities.

Organisations cannot afford *not* to plan for the major risks that climate change poses.

The community sector also plays a critical influencing role in raising awareness within communities on climate change, and advocating for change on communities’ behalf.

Our society must invest strongly in the sector that will support vulnerable communities through the challenges climate change will bring.

A well prepared, resourced and resilient community sector will lead to a stronger, healthier and safer Victoria in the decades to come.

The context

The climate

In May 2023, the World Meteorological Organization warned that the global average temperature will reach 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels for at least one year by 2027.¹ The International Panel on Climate Change's *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis report* issued a 'final warning' to limit global average temperature increases to 1.5°C.² In July 2023, officially the hottest month on record,³ the United Nations warned the earth is entering an era of 'global boiling'.⁴

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions is more urgent now than it has ever been. But no matter how much the world successfully reduces emissions moving forward, the impacts of climate change are here to stay. Extreme heat, flooding, and bushfires are becoming the norm in global news cycles, making efforts to adapt to climate change as critically important as mitigation.

In Victoria, climate change is expected to result in hotter and more frequent hot days; fewer cold days; more intense heatwaves; a significant reduction in rainfall; an increase in dry conditions across the state; and an increase in the number and intensity of fire days.⁵ This will have many flow-on impacts, including food and water insecurity, housing insecurity due to damaged homes, and illness due to heat and other disasters.

All of these impacts have both physical and mental health impacts on individuals and communities, and may eventually lead to civil unrest.

The economic impact of *not* preparing for climate change is anticipated to be vastly higher than preparing in advance. While the avoided costs of adaptation are difficult to value, the costs associated with disaster recovery in Victoria are anticipated to amount to \$185 billion over the next 40 years.⁶

The Victorian community sector



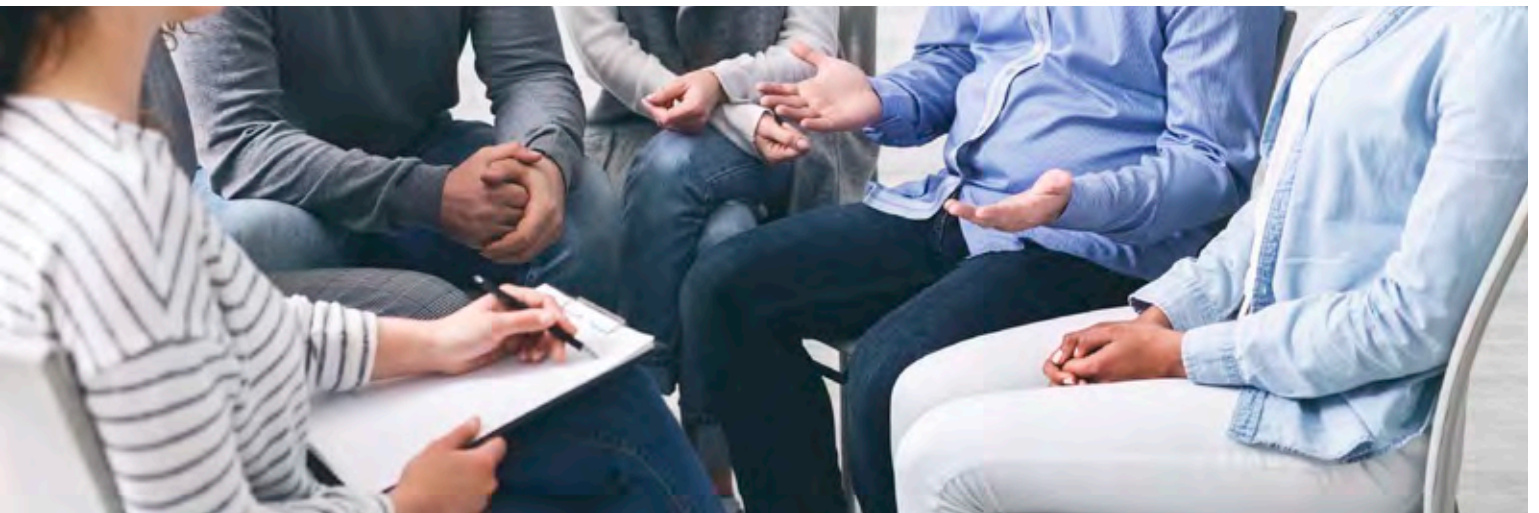
The role of CSOs is really to support communities and individuals who have nowhere else to turn – we're essentially talking about matters of life or death for different community members."
Research participant, service provider, Melbourne

The Victorian community sector consists of over 8,000 organisations, providing a range of services.

These include providing immediate relief, food assistance, mental health support and legal advice to victims of natural disasters; advocating for the inclusion of marginalised members of society in climate policies; providing public spaces for communities to gather and connect; delivering health services; providing support to victims of family violence; and so much more.

Victorian community organisations range in size from a few staff or volunteers with little physical infrastructure, to over 6,000 employees with multiple offices and facilities like community centres or accommodation.

Community sector organisations support people experiencing poverty and disadvantage to live a good life. They are well placed to help communities because they are locally based and embedded, with valuable insights into their communities' strengths, needs and vulnerabilities.



Climate change and the Victorian community sector



Community sector organisations are the first port of call in times of need, but are themselves vulnerable to disruption when needed most. This then has flow-on effects both for our state’s largest workforce and for communities who have the least resourcing and capacity to respond. Support for the work of the community sector needs to start from the ground up (i.e., led by the organisations themselves) and with commensurate resourcing and funding to support place-based, evidence-based practice in relation to climate change adaptation.” **Research participant, service provider, Melbourne**

Like other sectors across our society, the community sector is a contributor to climate change, and can look to reducing its own emissions to be part of climate mitigation and to make the future more liveable.

As is made clear by the *Climate Change 2023* report, a great deal of warming and consequent damage is already locked in. In regard to mitigating climate change, there is only so much that many CSOs can do.

The fact is not that community organisations bear zero responsibility for climate mitigation. We all play a part in this and must examine our actions and how we can contribute to solving the problem climate change presents.

However, the community sector arguably makes a much smaller contribution towards climate change than resource-intensive businesses.

The community sector’s emissions generally come primarily from energy use within buildings (e.g., offices, accommodation, op shops, etc) and vehicle fleets. Mitigating these emissions is discussed later in the report.

However, because of these realities, this report focuses primarily on climate adaptation within the community sector, while acknowledging that climate mitigation remains a critical task across all sectors.

The unfortunate reality is that no one is safe from the effects of climate change, and that clients of CSOs will be amongst the most heavily impacted in our society. For example, low-income households tend to live on urban fringes, or in regional or rural areas, which may be more prone to bushfires or flooding. These households are also more likely to live in poor quality housing which exposes them to extreme heat, causing adverse health impacts. These households are more likely to be accessing the services of CSOs, such as food relief, in the best of times. In times of climate crisis, they may become more dependent.

Because of this, climate change will increase demand for the community sector's services, while reducing the capacity of organisations to deliver those services and assist clients.

The anticipated impacts of climate change on Victorian community organisations include:

- damage to organisations' assets, including buildings and vehicle fleets;
- staff being unable to remain safely housed in the local vicinity of their employing organisations;
- staff being unable to get to work during climate events like bushfires or flooding, or even on hotter-than-normal days; and
- reduced ability of staff to visit clients in their home.

Any of these impacts alone may reduce the ability of a CSO to serve its clients; together, these impacts could halt an organisation's operations completely. In times of disaster, client need will increase while an organisation's ability to meet demand may decrease. This would lead to crisis.

Extreme weather events including bushfire, flooding and storms pose particular risk to organisations in certain areas of the state.

Community organisations that aren't prepared for the impacts of climate change will face difficult decisions about whether they can continue serving clients, employing staff, or operating altogether.

The unfortunate reality is that no one is safe from the effects of climate change, and that clients of CSOs will be amongst the most heavily impacted in our society.

Because of the diversity of the Victorian community sector, it is difficult to generalise about where CSOs are currently positioned in their preparations for climate change.

Some Victorian CSOs have already experienced intense natural disasters, and are doing work related to climate change incidentally in the recovery phase while they plan for how to cope with the next emergency.

Many others have the will to take action but may not know exactly where to start or what action to take. Some organisations may not have the organisational resources or capacity to take action, for example through creating a climate adaptation plan.

And some CSOs have not yet recognised climate change as an issue requiring planning, preparation and response. These organisations are entirely focused on other pressing day-to-day challenges.

The community sector *will* need to adapt to climate change to continue supporting its clients; adaptation is non-negotiable.

And wherever organisations are currently positioned in the spectrum of preparation, the sector as a whole faces significant barriers to adaptation.

This report identifies the support required by the Victorian community sector to respond to climate change. It sets out much-needed evidence in the Victorian context for the solutions organisations need in order to overcome barriers to climate change mitigation and, crucially, adaptation. Supporting the community sector ultimately supports vulnerable Victorians to cope with climate change.



Climate change will increase demand for the community sector's services, while reducing the capacity of organisations to deliver those services and assist clients.

What Victorian CSOs are doing

By surveying organisations about their current climate-related activities, we learned about a combination of mitigation and adaptation strategies currently being taken up in and by the sector.

These include:

- Implementing waste reduction measures (60%);
- Installation of solar photovoltaics (PV) (44%);
- Energy efficiency upgrades (40%);
- Greening measures (40%);
- Reduction in energy consumption (28%);
- Developing a climate adaptation or resilience plan (12%); and
- Removal of gas supply from premises (8%).

Some respondents have also applied for grants to undertake climate action (40%), assessed the energy efficiency of their premises (40%), or assessed the climate change risk to their premises (16%).

Many of these strategies that are primarily geared towards climate mitigation will also have positive adaptation flow-ons for organisations' resilience in our climate future. For instance, installation of energy efficiency upgrades will make organisations healthier and more heat-safe during more frequent heatwaves, and greening measures will help keep buildings and surrounding areas cool.

However, the percentage of surveyed organisations that had developed a climate adaptation or resilience plan was relatively low (12%). This is despite the fact that, when asked about the potential consequences of climate change, community sector workers discussed a range of concerns that will require dedicated adaptation efforts in the climate future that is coming.

Participants suggested that inaction on climate change would result in:

- **Temporary or permanent loss of service delivery capacity** – Community organisations will be less resilient to the impacts of climate change. Their facilities and staff will be sufficiently affected that organisations may be unable to provide services. In extreme circumstances, some organisations may not recover, for example due to permanent loss of facilities – this is of particular concern in areas at high risk of bushfire and flooding.
- **Inability to keep up with increased service demand** – Community members will need additional services due to the impacts of climate change, increasing the costs for organisations. Some organisations may not be able to meet excess demand due to insufficient staff or financial resources.
- **Poor health and social outcomes for vulnerable communities** – Loss of services will have flow-on implications for the community members who depend on these services. Many of these community members experience disadvantage and have complex needs exacerbated by climate change.
- **Reputational damage** – Organisations will lose trust with community members and funding agencies if they are unable to deliver their services for a period of time due to climate-related disruption.

The above is essentially a list of situations that community organisations put a great deal of effort towards avoiding. In other words, community organisations are broadly aware of how high the stakes are when it comes to preparing for climate change, even if this awareness hasn't yet translated into consistent adaptation planning or action.

What Victorian CSOs can do

Below is an inexhaustive list of measures that organisations can take towards responding to climate change. It is divided into adaptation and mitigation measures but, as discussed above, many strategies can serve both ends.

CLIMATE ADAPTATION		
Measure	Description	Benefit
Climate change risk assessment	An initial assessment can help determine what climate impacts pose a risk to an organisation.	Helps determine where efforts can be focused to mitigate risk in the short and long term.
Adaptation planning	Determine how an organisation will cope with the various impacts of climate change, including extreme heat, flooding and bushfires.	Ensures organisation staff continue to have jobs, services continue to be delivered, and community is supported.
Greening of outdoor areas	Plant trees and plants outside facilities.	Absorbs heat to cool the building and surrounding area, and stores carbon which contributes to climate change.
Water efficiency and conservation	Install low-flow water fixture fittings, install rainwater tanks and change behaviour to use less water.	Reduces fresh water consumption and reduce energy used to heat water, leading to economic savings and saving water in a water-stressed environment.
Providing areas for community to gather during heatwaves and blackouts	Create heat refuges like cool rooms and shaded areas.	Provides safe, healthy, comfortable indoor or outdoor spaces during heatwaves for people who may not be safe at home.
Energy efficiency upgrades to facilities	Reduce the energy use of facilities like offices and accommodation through installing efficient appliances, insulation and draught sealing.	Saves money and improves health and comfort. More energy efficient facilities can act as a refuge for the community during heatwaves.
Build relationships	Building relationships with community organisations, local government and the community.	Building relationships can improve an organisation's capacity to respond to climate change and climate-related disasters.
Educate communities about climate change	Let communities know what impacts to expect from climate change and how to prepare. Education can take place through workshops, activities, pamphlets, etc.	Making communities aware of the potential impacts of climate change can help them prepare for these impacts physically, mentally and emotionally.

CLIMATE MITIGATION		
Measure	Description	Benefit
Emissions baseline	An initial assessment can help determine how an organisation contributes to climate change. An assessment may include an energy audit of facilities, a transport audit, air travel assessment, a waste audit, etc.	Helps determine where efforts can be focused to effectively and affordably reduce emissions.
Electrification of facilities	Remove gas-burning appliances from facilities like offices and accommodation.	Can significantly reduce energy costs and removes a source of fossil fuels. On-site electricity can be powered by renewables.
Install solar photovoltaics (PV) on facilities	Install solar panels to take advantage of clean energy from the sun.	Provides free electricity when the sun is shining, leading to reduced electricity bills.
Purchase green power	Purchase certified renewable energy from electricity providers, which contributes to the generation of off-site renewable energy.	Solar PV doesn't need to be installed on-site, which may be preferable for some organisations, especially if space limitations exist.
Transition to electric vehicles (EVs)	Phase out internal combustion engine cars and replace with EVs.	EVs are much cheaper to run than petrol-consuming cars and can be charged on-site.
Waste reduction	Reduce the amount of waste going to landfill and recycling centres. Landfill produces emissions, and recyclables require energy to process.	Reduces organisational climate and environmental impact through less need to haul and process waste, and consumption of fewer resources.
Sustainable resource procurement	Purchase sustainable materials for use within organisations, such as recycled paper.	Reduces resource consumption, which means fewer new materials need to be created.
Encourage behaviour change within communities	Teach communities about more sustainable behaviours, such as taking public transportation instead of driving where possible.	Changing behaviour to more sustainable options can have an enormous positive impact, particularly when multiplied across many individuals.

This array of options for adapting to and mitigating climate change is hypothetically available to all Victorian CSOs.

However, day-to-day operating conditions often dictate what climate actions organisations are able to undertake.

Through our engagement with CSOs, we identified a number of organisational enablers that have a positive correlation with being able to take action on climate change.

Organisations with higher levels of awareness, preparation and resilience tend to have:

- **Support for climate action at the executive level.** Climate action efforts can rarely progress without support from key decision-makers within an organisation, even with supportive staff.
- **Seen the impacts of climate change** already, or have had to reactively support their communities in this context. Through this firsthand experience, these organisations understand that they *must* prepare for climate change; the alternative is being impacted without prior preparation and being forced to respond reactively to cope with impacts after the fact.
- **A benevolent purpose as the basis of the organisation**, such as a religious or social justice grounding, or commitment to broader social change.
- **Climate change included within the strategy of the organisation**, which gives them a direct mandate to focus efforts in this area. This also tends to mean that resourcing can be more easily dedicated towards climate action efforts, and executive leadership has already explicitly agreed to the need for the organisation to do this type of work. Climate change may also be incorporated into all organisational decision-making.
- **A robust revenue source** that can be dedicated towards climate work, such as revenue from op shops.

- **A larger organisational size** which inherently has greater buying power for things like renewable energy due to a greater resource pool. Smaller organisations that band together to take collective action can achieve similar impact to large organisations.
- **An active relationship with the local council, state government or other entities**, meaning the organisation is more likely to get the support they require to help the community through active, ongoing conversations.
- **Strong connections with the community**, meaning the organisation understands the needs of the community and is more likely to seek and provide support that speaks directly to these needs.

Not all or even most of these enablers are necessarily within the reach of individual organisations to control.

Many organisations are simply too resource scarce and/or too stretched in their day-to-day operations to be able to devote the time and resources needed to plan and act for climate change.

For this reason, it is imperative that government understands and helps dismantle the barriers currently limiting the sector's readiness (see Barriers and recommendations).

Nevertheless, there *are* practical and immediate actions that most CSOs can adopt to improve their own readiness and resilience right now.

They are explored in the actions below.

Practical and immediate actions

Actions community organisations can take on climate change straight away include:

Building partnerships

with other organisations, governments and the community to progress action on climate change. Relationships and knowledge-sharing are critical to prepare for and combat climate change because otherwise we're all siloed and must use a lot more effort to create and execute ideas.



Improving networks and relationships

within communities to improve community resilience. Communities where people know each other and look out for each other tend to be much more resilient to disasters.



Encouraging staff members to attend trainings

on climate change. This can help build knowledge and capacity within the organisation to progress climate action over the long term.



Educating communities

about climate change and its impacts, how it might affect them, and what to do in emergencies. This may be able to be incorporated into existing streams of work.



Incorporating climate messaging

into advocacy and project work. Where CSOs have less capacity to fully mitigate their own climate impact, they can still incorporate messaging around climate change into existing projects and let governments know this is a priority.



Advocating for funding and further support

for the sector for climate work from governments and external entities.



Utilising low-cost advice

on climate action, including the resources contained in this report. This could include undertaking self-guided climate risk assessments, and self-guided resilience and energy audits.



Creating an organisational climate change strategy

to consider different climate adaptation and mitigation measures to be taken into the future. Strategies could include emissions reduction targets for the organisation to reach to help motivate action.



Monitoring organisational investment strategies

to ensure investments aren't being directed towards fossil fuels and other projects that contribute to climate change.



Taking advantage of Victorian government programs

such as the Victorian Energy Upgrades program when replacing appliances.



Considering installation of solar PV

on facilities where rebates and incentives exist.



Negotiating green energy contracts

, where installation of solar PV is not possible, to ensure procurement of renewable energy.





CASE STUDY

Climate action in women's organisations

Wellsprings for Women is an organisation that provides programs and education for women primarily from migrant and refugees backgrounds throughout the Cities of Greater Dandenong and Casey, Victoria. The organisation includes “a sustainable organisation” as one of its strategic goals within its organisational strategy.

Embedding this goal within the strategy has enabled Wellsprings to commence projects to support its clients with climate change, including:

- In 2022, Wellsprings trained workers to speak with their communities about staying healthy in extreme heat; and
- In 2023, Wellsprings is kicking off a project to co-design resilience-building plans with communities.

GenWest is a service organisation located in Melbourne's west that helps victim-survivors of family violence. GenWest also supports communities to lead safe and healthy lives by running social and education programs for people who experience inequity.

GenWest embedded climate justice in its 2020–25 strategic plan with the acknowledgement that climate change is “vital to our future and increasingly relevant to our vision, purpose and communities”.⁷ GenWest sees contributing to the global climate action movement part of its responsibility as an organisation, workplace and service provider. By embedding considerations around climate change and climate justice in its strategic plan, GenWest has the impetus in place to consider how it will respond to climate change across its projects and service delivery areas.

Barriers and recommendations



Understand and recognise the community sector

RECOMMENDATION 1

Recognise the role community organisations play in climate change response

RECOMMENDATION 2

Invest in data collection through social infrastructure mapping



Fund the community sector to take action and adapt

RECOMMENDATION 3

Fund community service organisations to proactively undertake climate change planning

RECOMMENDATION 4

Improve the energy efficiency of community sector facilities



Provide the community sector with stable, long-term funding

RECOMMENDATION 5

Increase the contract length of funding agreements with the community sector

RECOMMENDATION 6

Fund community service organisations to meet service demand



Build awareness and knowledge in the community sector

RECOMMENDATION 7

Educate CSOs on the risk climate change poses to the viability of community organisations

RECOMMENDATION 8

Provide CSOs with advice and support for climate change planning

RECOMMENDATION 9

Fund networks of community service organisations learning how to respond to climate change



Understand and recognise the community sector

One of the strengths of the community sector is its ability to be responsive and act quickly.

CSOs often jump in to lend a helping hand without even being asked because these organisations are there on the ground, embedded in their communities and aware of people's needs.

However, the sector is not always properly supported or resourced to do this early response work. CSOs play a vital role in supporting communities to respond to climate change and climate-related disasters, but when they get involved early out of necessity they put strain on their resourcing that can be unsustainable.

Underlying the insufficient support that CSOs receive for this work is insufficient recognition of it.



[We need] acknowledgement of our role within the broader emergency management service system, which focuses on legislated responders [and] less so on preparation through building community resilience and capacity."

Research participant, service provider, Melbourne

RECOMMENDATION 1

Recognise the role community organisations play in climate change response

While state emergency services are generally thought of as providing support after a disaster, CSOs are often the ones on the front lines immediately, before state support can arrive. But the sector is rarely formally recognised for this role.

Additionally, CSOs perform vital work preparing their communities for disasters by building community resilience and capacity.

Proper recognition by governments and organisations themselves would help ensure CSOs are front of mind for the allocation of resources to respond to climate change and support communities.



“We’re constantly having to fight to be included” [in considerations around who does climate adaptation and disaster resilience work].

Research participant, peak body, Melbourne

**CASE STUDY****Recognising the strength of the community sector**

In October 2022, northern Victoria was hit with significant flooding. Mooroopna Education and Activity Centre (MEAC) was one of the community organisations that found themselves on the front lines of providing relief for the community in the wake of this natural disaster. MEAC itself was also affected by the disaster, with a kindergarten and community room lost to flooding.

After the flooding began, MEAC provided a space for healthcare practitioners – including general practitioners, nurses, chemists, pathologists, podiatrists, psychologists and others – to set up to continue providing their services to the community. The centre also functioned as a food relief site for the community.

MEAC applied for grants in the early weeks of the floods, enabling them to distribute food hampers. Donations from local and Melbourne businesses have enabled MEAC to continue to distribute other essentials to the community.

MEAC also coordinated community members who volunteered their time to assist with recovery. Learnings from previous disasters were useful, including having a volunteer list developed ahead of time and available for use during the floods.

State emergency services were an important factor in the community’s response and recovery. However, their capacity to assist was limited, with many of the agencies’ finite resources having been directed towards the earliest flooded areas. MEAC understood that they needed to ‘step up’ to enable the Mooroopna community, which was a later-flooded area, to recover.

By nature, small organisations like MEAC can be nimble, quick and reactive. MEAC knows the community and the local landscape well, enabling them to assist community members with what was needed most.

Nearly a year later, the community is still in the recovery phase. Many residents are still experiencing homelessness or living with relatives. MEAC is continually seeking opportunities to help the community.



RECOMMENDATION 2

Invest in data collection through social infrastructure mapping

Community services exist across Victoria; however, there is little data around where services exist and what types of services are offered. Mapping this information would help government and the sector better understand where gaps need to be filled.

Once collected and mapped, this information could be overlaid with a climate vulnerability map to direct funding towards areas at particular risk of climate impacts and to support service delivery where it's needed most. This information could also help inform future funding investment decisions.



Increasingly, there's a body of evidence to show that social infrastructure builds resilience – investment in this can save more lives than equivalent investment in grey infrastructure.”

Research participant, service provider, Melbourne



Fund the community sector to take action and adapt

A lack of access to sufficient financial resources was the barrier to climate action most frequently cited by research participants. Many organisations operate in a consistently tight funding environment, often with resources already stretched to cover core service delivery. This means they simply lack funding to dedicate towards climate work, including staff time.



We're really seeing those government funding gaps. There's a place for no-interest loans [after disasters], but a lot of what we're doing at the moment is filling gaps that should be met by government." **Research participant, financial services, Melbourne**

Without specifically targeted funding, organisations are unlikely to plan ahead to adapt their operations to a changing climate. This means they're less likely to be able to fully support their clients and communities during climate events and natural disasters.

Existing resources generally aren't directed towards proactive planning before disasters occur because, understandably, organisations put most of their financial resources towards core service delivery. CSOs rarely feel they should be using resources 'for themselves' for internal planning purposes, although this forward planning is exactly what would enable them to continue their core service delivery in a changing climate.



Implementing these measures requires a whole-of-organisation approach. We have developed a strategy to do this but this takes time and resourcing to embed, particularly when considering the pressing – and increasing – community needs that our frontline support staff are working to support." **Research participant, service provider, Melbourne**



Although there is consideration about implementing further measures, there has been a lack of priority to using staff and funding resources." **Research participant, Neighbourhood House, regional Victoria**



As a Community Organisation, we strive to do all we can in this area but are limited by funding and resources." **Research participant, service provider, Melbourne**



[Creating safe, cool spaces] doesn't happen by simply planting trees – it happens by creating relationships with the community." Research participant, community centre, Melbourne

RECOMMENDATION 3

Fund community service organisations to proactively undertake climate change planning

Planning in advance for climate impacts helps ensure operational continuity in the face of climate change, meaning staff are able to continue working and communities can still be taken care of. Organisations – particularly larger ones – can also plan to reduce their climate impact over time, enabling them to meet their duty of care to clients while also providing direct support.



They [community organisations] really need support, because they're supporting the community, putting the oxygen mask on yourself before you can actually do the service. If they're not supported it's disastrous."

Research participant, peak body, Melbourne

The community sector needs funding that is:

- Targeted towards climate work, so organisations can feel confident using it for this purpose;
- Flexible, so it can be used for what the organisation needs, with application timelines that are suitable for obtaining quotes and permission from facility owners; and
- Sufficiently robust and long term to avoid loss of internal capacity and enable long-term projects to be carried out.

This funding could be delivered by dedicating resources to implement actions within the Health and Human Services Adaptation Action Plan. It could also be delivered by reinstating the Community Climate Change Adaptation (3CA) grants program.

The 3CA grants program specifically targeted funding towards adaptation measures within community organisations. The program resulted in successful adaptation initiatives across Victoria.

Challenges with the application process for some funding opportunities has meant that some organisations had difficulty accessing funding. Programs and application processes can be improved to overcome these challenges by:

- Opening non-competitive grants, where applications are assessed against selection criteria, rather than against other applications. Competitive grants mean organisations are bidding against each other to receive support for climate work, which is counter-productive given that all organisations must take action, and must work together to do so.
- Lengthening application windows so funding availability aligns with organisations' budget cycles. Otherwise some organisations risk missing out completely.
- Reducing financial co-contribution requirements, which are a limitation for organisations – particularly smaller, volunteer-run organisations with extremely limited financial resources.

Supporting organisations to plan for climate change *now* will save public spending on climate-related disaster recovery in the future.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Improve the energy efficiency of community sector facilities

Improving the energy efficiency of buildings can drastically reduce the energy required to heat and cool CSO premises. This will save organisations money on their energy bills, and make staff and clients more comfortable, healthy and prepared to cope with heatwaves.

Taking advantage of renewable energy by adding solar panels and potentially battery storage can further reduce energy bills, and will also assist organisations to continue uninterrupted operations in the climate future.

And all of this has the added bonus of contributing towards reducing organisations' climate impact.

Community organisations generally occupy office spaces, community centres, and other accommodation owned by state or local government, or another entity. Of the organisations that responded to our research survey, 72 per cent rent some or all of their facilities.

This can create roadblocks when CSOs want to make changes to facilities – such as energy efficiency upgrades, installing solar PV, or creating a community garden – because permission must be granted by the building owner.



Things like insulation and heating upgrades that have multiple benefits – energy efficiency and reducing emissions from a use standpoint, instead of an energy generation standpoint, would've been a useful thing for community groups."

Research participant, sustainability organisation, Melbourne



In addition to resourcing and dedicated capacity, there is also the need for leasing arrangements which are conducive to enabling the upgrades and measures required."

Research participant, service provider, Melbourne

Requests from CSOs for these types of alterations may not be interpreted as high priority for facility owners, particularly if the owner is a busy government department dealing with urgent maintenance requests from other buildings or social housing. And obtaining approval from facility owners also creates an extra step for organisations, slowing down grant application processes and generally delaying beneficial works.

CSOs may also be reluctant to make alterations to buildings where the longevity of their occupancy is uncertain due to rental contracts. For example, installing solar PV may be feasible even for shorter-term rentals, but installing insulation or new, efficient HVAC systems may be impossible for rented spaces where organisations are unlikely to reap the full lifetime benefits of these higher-cost upgrades.

As energy use within buildings makes up a large share of emissions for most community organisations, enabling these upgrades more easily would help organisations reduce their climate impact while also taking steps towards adaptation.

State and local governments can take action now to support community organisations by upgrading their community-occupied buildings. Where governments take this step on their own, they remove the burden from community organisations, saving them money and staff time that can be directed elsewhere. And by taking action in this space, governments demonstrate that supporting the community sector and showing leadership on climate action are priorities.



Provide the community sector with stable, long-term funding

As discussed, we need a strong community sector in order for CSOs and the people they serve to be well-equipped to cope with climate change.

The building blocks of a strong sector include secure work and proper funding. When the sector has these fundamental conditions in place, all other barriers to climate action will be much more easily overcome.

Currently, climate work isn't the norm within the community sector because CSOs' resources are already stretched, providing little room for extra work. If daily financial and capacity burdens were reduced through the provision of stable, long-term funding, organisations would have the necessary breathing room to think about and plan for the changing climate and all the upheavals it brings. The result would be a more stable and resilient sector, equipped to manage the spectrum of disruptions that will continue to increase demand for services.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Increase the contract length of funding agreements with the community sector

Delivering long-term projects or climate strategies requires staff continuity, in order to build and maintain internal knowledge, capacity and community/ inter-organisational relationships. This is difficult in the current environment, where funding often runs on short-term contracts and staff lose their jobs or move on due to funding uncertainty.

Increased contract lengths can provide long-term certainty for organisations, allowing them to keep staff and see projects through to their conclusion. Staff continuity will also allow organisations to maintain relationships within the sector and the community, enabling strong and connected responses during climate events.



CASE STUDY

Heat garden and community capacity-building in Broadmeadows

Banksia Gardens Community Services (BGCS) is a Neighbourhood House and community service organisation in Broadmeadows, in Melbourne. The centre offers programs focusing on environmental sustainability, early childhood, education and training, gender equity, young people, community participation and advocacy.

BGCS has five gardens created for climate adaptation, education and food production. These include a food forest, a community garden, two bush tucker sensory gardens, and a heat haven.

In 2023, BGCS built the Heat Haven in front of its facilities as part of its efforts to adapt the community to climate change. The garden is a shelter that protects the people inside from the sun, and can hold misters on particularly hot days. This is a place where people from the community can gather to escape the heat. Located roughly halfway between a nearby shopping centre and a social housing neighbourhood, it's also a place where community members can stop on their way home from the shops on hot days.

Aside from the Heat Haven, BGCS is active in supporting its community in the context of climate change. BGCS ran the first Climate Adaptation Requires Youth Action (CARYA) program in 2019 as an eight-week training program for young adults on topics including biodiversity, climate change, First Nations justice, gender equality and climate, and urban design. After the eight-week training, participants created an environmental project within the community. BGCS is preparing for the fourth year of the CARYA program.

BGCS has an endless list of ideas for climate projects to undertake at the centre and within the community, but financial resources and staff capacity limit the organisation's ability to carry them out.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Fund community service organisations to meet service demand

Community sector staff are committed and hard-working, often going above and beyond for their communities to the point of burnout, as we saw during COVID-19.

Due to limited resources, sector staff already struggle to provide the level of service they know communities need. And this community need becomes even greater during climate events, with more people needing help, and needing it more urgently.

In addition to longer-term contracts, increased funding will enable organisations to keep working for their communities, and to prevent the loss of sector capacity we witnessed in healthcare during the pandemic.

Without more adequate, secure and ongoing funding, widespread staff burnout is a real risk in the coming years, as Victoria experiences repeated, overlapping climate impacts and disasters.



Neighbourhood Houses and Community Centres are currently [so] overwhelmed with day-to-day demand on service and program delivery that climate mitigation and adaptation is not a priority. This is not a result of not caring, or not knowing that climate change is real and will impact them – it is simply a lack of capacity and resourcing. Long-term, sustainable resourcing of the sector is required for the work that is needed to undertake mitigation and adaptation work. Further training is also required, including templates for action plans and strategies, case studies of what works, and sector support in terms of fatigue and burnout. Otherwise, nothing will change.”

Research participant, community development, Melbourne





Build awareness and knowledge in the community sector

The question as to how community organisations understand their position in the context of climate change is complex.

Our research indicates that most CSOs understand their roles in directly supporting communities as temperatures continue to rise, conditions get drier, and disasters become more frequent.

However, organisations may be less likely to recognise the need for internal preparation, to ensure they can continue delivering services through the challenges that climate change brings.

Part of the challenge is that, for organisations to take significant concrete action on climate change, the need for this action must be recognised by decision-makers. Executive leaders and boards have the agency to channel resources towards climate action and make necessary approvals. Without this buy-in, the ability to progress climate action can be limited.



Many organisations are at the literacy end of things, and haven't had the opportunity to reflect on climate change within the context of their work."

Research participant, service provider, Melbourne

RECOMMENDATION 7

Educate CSOs on the risk climate change poses to the viability of community organisations

The community sector needs to be supported to understand how climate change is likely to impact organisations, with flow-on impacts to communities. This includes knowledge-building at the leadership level. Organisations with an understanding of what may happen, and how it may impact staff, jobs and communities, are more likely to prioritise climate work.

Similarly, organisations with executives who understand the impacts of climate change are more likely to prioritise climate action within their organisations. Executives have the power to direct resources and staff time, making climate action a reality.

Education may take the form of resources, training for CSO staff and executives, and outreach and engagement.



RECOMMENDATION 8

Provide CSOs with advice and support for climate change planning

While immediately useful for some organisations, information and training may be interpreted as simply more items on an ever-growing to-do list for organisations with no or low climate change literacy.

These CSOs may benefit from additional support to navigate resources, and from advice tailored to their individual circumstances. However, obtaining advice from external experts such as consultancies is often cost-prohibitive.

Providing organisations with free or low-cost advice and support would help overcome these barriers. This source of guidance could come from within government (state or local) or the community sector. It requires the dedicated resourcing of staff whose primary role is helping community organisations with climate action – through support navigating resources and tailoring advice.

Another option would be to provide funding specifically for organisations to seek advice from existing external entities.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Fund networks of community service organisations learning how to respond to climate change

Community organisations have indicated that networking with other organisations about their climate change experiences and preparations would be invaluable to share knowledge and create connections.

A lot of important climate-related work is already under way in the sector, so organisations that are just starting to take necessary actions need not do it alone or reinvent the wheel; they can learn from the mitigation and adaptation work of other organisations.

And when organisations are able to connect directly and share their stories, they have the opportunity to forge relationships that can spur further collaboration on climate change and other issues.

Further, when organisations band together, they can also achieve greater impact with collective action.



Appendix A

About the research

Scope

This research project includes all community sector organisations (CSOs) in Victoria. It doesn't focus specifically on any one type of community organisation, but rather applies to all organisation types at a high level.

The primary research questions pursued through this research included:

- What does climate change mitigation and adaptation look like for CSOs?
- What are the barriers (and limits) to adaptation for CSOs?
- What is the cost of inaction in terms of mitigation and adaptation of the community sector?
- What are the benefits of action?
- How can CSOs be supported to mitigate and adapt?

Methodology

The development of this report involved a mixed methodology of qualitative and quantitative research, including:

1. Desktop research and literature review;
2. A survey, which enabled an understanding of what climate mitigation and adaptation measures are currently being undertaken by the community sector, and what support community organisations require to undertake these measures. The survey was distributed to policy leads within organisations in VCOSS' network, including member and non-member organisations. The survey received 22 complete and 20 partial responses from at least 24 organisations from across Victoria;
3. Interviews, which enabled a deeper dive into the climate-related work being done by organisations, and what support enabled them to undertake this work. Organisations interviewed were chosen to span a range of types of community organisations, and government representatives were also included; and
4. A workshop, which enabled a wider range of organisations to give detailed insights into the interview questions. Invitations to the workshop were distributed to policy leads within organisations in VCOSS' network, including member and non-member organisations.

Appendix B

Acknowledgements

Interviewees

- Banksia Gardens Community Services:
Edgar Caballero Aspe, Education and Sustainability Coordinator
- Federation of Community Legal Centres:
Bronwyn Lay, Climate Justice and Disaster Response Lead
- Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand:
Emma O'Neill, Senior Policy & Advocacy Advisor
- Jesuit Social Services: Andrea Wolf, Climate Justice Coordinator – Policy, Research and Advocacy
- Sustainability Victoria: Ethan Berry, Program Support Officer – Regions & Community Action
- Western Alliance for Greenhouse Action:
Fran MacDonald, WAGA Coordinator – Environment

Workshop participants

- Banyule Community Health: Leanne Tutin
- Brotherhood of St Laurence: David Bryant
- City of Greater Dandenong: Darren Wilson
- Eastern Community Legal Centre: Ebony Hogg
- Gateway Health: Tracey Farrant
- Merri-bek City Council: Veronika Pradel
- Network West: Maggie Mildenhall
- North Richmond Community Health: Paul Geyer
- Royal Flying Doctor Service Victoria:
Heather Morecroft
- Sacred Heart Mission: Olivia Killeen
- Salvation Army: Elyse Anderson
- Wellsprings for Women: Robyn Erwin, Samar Geid

Appendix C

Definitions

Defining key terms

Acute climate impacts: short, intense impacts of climate change, including extreme weather events.

Chronic climate impacts: longer-term, slower effects of climate change, including sea-level rise, decreased overall precipitation, increased average temperatures.

Climate action: climate mitigation and climate adaptation.

Climate adaptation: altering operations or infrastructure to cope with the impacts of climate change. This is an ongoing process.

Climate events: an extreme weather event that occurs as a result of climate change.

Climate mitigation: reducing global greenhouse gas emissions to minimise the impacts of climate change.

Climate resilience: the ability of a system, person or organisation to 'bounce back' after a disruption.

Climate risk: the potential adverse impacts to an organisation or community resulting from climate change.

Electric vehicles: cars that are powered by electricity instead of fossil fuels.

Electrification: replacing gas-burning appliances and equipment with versions that use electricity, which can take advantage of renewable electricity.

Emissions baseline: measuring an organisation's emissions before emissions reduction projects are implemented, to enable later comparison.

Natural disasters: extreme weather events that may or may not occur as a result of climate change.

Appendix D

Snapshot of climate change impacts in Victoria over next 10–20 years

The impacts Victoria is likely to experience over the next 10–20 years depend on the decisions that are being made now. These are likely to include “hotter and more frequent hot days, fewer cold days, more intense heatwaves and fewer extreme cold nights”, and overall drier conditions, across the state and greater Melbourne.⁸

Climate change impacts are being felt differently across the world. Victoria has already experienced severe bushfires in summer 2019–20 that are directly linked to climate change. Recent flooding in Victoria in 2022 is less explicitly linked to climate change, but similar impacts can be anticipated in the coming years.

All Victorian community organisations will be impacted by climate change. The degree of impact will depend on:

- The size and location of the organisation;
- The level of preparation the organisation has achieved for climate events;
- The degree to which the organisation is able to adapt to climate change; and
- The extent to which global society is able to mitigate climate change.

Anticipated impacts of climate change on Victorian community organisations include:

- Damage to organisations’ assets, including buildings and vehicle fleets;
- Reduced ability of staff to remain living local to the service area of an organisation in safe, resilient, secure housing;
- Reduced ability of staff to get to work, even on hotter days and during climate events like drought or flooding;
- Reduced capacity to deliver services and assist clients, even during climate events; and
- Some organisations are located in areas at particular risk of climate impacts, such as bushfire, flooding, and sea level rise.

Appendix E

Survey questions

Empowering the community sector to manage climate change

Survey for community sector organisations – June 2023

The community sector both contributes to, and is affected by, the impacts of climate change. This means that community sector organisations (CSOs) have the opportunity to contribute towards mitigating (reducing) climate change impacts, and must also adapt their operations to cope with these impacts.

Climate change will have both chronic impacts, such as increased average temperatures and reduced precipitation, and acute impacts, such as bushfires and flooding. These impacts are already being felt in many Victorian communities.

The vulnerability of CSOs to the impacts of climate change has important implications for the vulnerability of those that depend on them. This is because CSOs are a critical part of the social infrastructure in Victoria in responding to the impacts of climate change, including:

- Delivering important social services, which may experience both increased demand and reduced delivery capacity particularly during acute climate impacts; and
- Having important connections to the community, including contact information, knowledge of vulnerable residents and trusted relationships with clients.

This survey will help gauge what climate mitigation and adaptation measures are currently being undertaken by the community sector, and what support community organisations require to undertake these measures.

VCOSS will use the findings from this survey to shape its advocacy and build an evidence base for the types of support the sector needs and to contribute towards climate change mitigation, and to adapt to climate change.

General questions

1. What is your name? *(optional)*

2. What is your email address? *(optional)*

3. What organisation do you work for? *(optional)*

4. Where is your organisation's work based? *(multiple choice)*
 - a. Barwon South West
 - b. Gippsland
 - c. Grampians
 - d. Greater Melbourne
 - e. Hume
 - f. Loddon Mallee
5. What is your role? *(multiple choice)*
 - a. Communications and media
 - b. Corporate services
 - c. Direct work with clients
 - d. Executive leadership
 - e. Policy research and advocacy
 - f. Project coordination
 - g. Staff management
 - h. Other:

6. Roughly how many staff members work at your organisation? *(choose one)*
 - a. 1–10
 - b. 11–30
 - c. 31–50
 - d. 51–100
 - e. 101+

The following questions are about your organisation's relationship to climate change.

7. Is climate change mentioned in your organisation's strategic and/or operational plans? *(choose one)*
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Unsure
 - d. Other: _____

8. Does your organisation have a staff member(s) whose role entails planning for your organisation's response to climate change? *(choose one)*
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Unsure
 - d. Other: _____

9. Has your organisation experienced any impacts of climate change? *(multiple choice)*
 - a. Flooding
 - b. Extreme heat
 - c. Bushfire
 - d. Hail
 - e. Extremely dry conditions
 - f. Other: _____
 - g. Unsure
 - h. None

10. Has your organisation helped your local community prepare for, respond to, or recover from disasters? Please explain and provide examples, if possible. *(short answer)*

11. Is your organisation prepared to help your local community prepare for, respond to, or recover from disasters in the future? Please explain and provide examples, if possible. *(short answer)*

The following questions are about your organisation's facilities, as they could be affected by the physical impacts of climate change (i.e., bushfire, flooding, etc) in the future.

12. Does your organisation rent or own its premises? *(choose one)*
 - a. Rent privately
 - b. Rent from local government
 - c. Rent from state government
 - d. Own
 - e. Unsure

13. What type of power do you receive at your premises? *(choose one)*
 - a. Electricity only
 - b. Gas and electricity
 - c. Unsure

14. Does your organisation have renewable energy (i.e., rooftop solar PV) on any of its premises? *(choose one)*
 - a. Yes, all
 - b. Yes, some
 - c. None
 - d. Unsure

The following questions are about the climate mitigation and adaptation measures your organisation has undertaken so far.

15. Have you implemented any of the following at your organisation's premises? (multiple choice)

- a. Applied for a grant for climate mitigation or adaptation measures
- b. Assessed energy efficiency of premises
- c. Assessed climate change risk to premises
- d. Energy efficiency upgrades (i.e., efficient heating and cooling, efficient hot water system, insulation, draught sealing, cool roof, efficient lighting)
- e. Reduced energy consumption
- f. Removed gas supply from premises
- g. Installed solar panels
- h. Greening measures (i.e., a community garden, tree planting)
- i. Developed a climate adaptation or resilience plan
- j. Implemented waste reduction measures, i.e., recycling or going paperless
- k. Other: _____
- l. None of the above

16. If your organisation has implemented one or more of the measures in question 15, what has enabled this? (multiple choice)

- a. Funding from a non-profit or philanthropic organisation
- b. Funding from local, state or federal government
- c. Cooperative landlord of the premises
- d. Premises are owned by the organisation
- e. External advice
- f. Hands-on support from external experts
- g. Fits with organisational priorities and/or goals
- h. Knowledgeable staff
- i. Adequate staff capacity
- j. Training for staff
- k. Learning from other organisations
- l. Written tools, guides and checklists
- m. Other: _____

17. If your organisation hasn't implemented one of the measures in question 15, what has prevented this? (multiple choice)

- a. Competing priorities
- b. Lack of funding or financial resources
- c. Difficulty applying for grants
- d. Lack of available grants

- e. Lack of knowledge to pursue measures
- f. The organisation's premises are rented
- g. Lack of staff capacity
- h. Other: _____

18. If the barrier(s) identified in question 17 weren't an issue, which of these measures would your organisation undertake?

- a. Applied for a grant for climate mitigation or adaptation measures
- b. Assessed energy efficiency of premises
- c. Assessed climate change risk to premises
- d. Energy efficiency upgrades (i.e., efficient heating and cooling, efficient hot water system, insulation, draught sealing, cool roof, efficient lighting)
- e. Reduced energy consumption
- f. Removed gas supply from premises
- g. Installed solar panels
- h. Greening measures (i.e., a community garden, tree planting)
- i. Developed a climate adaptation or resilience plan
- j. Implemented waste reduction measures, i.e., recycling or going paperless
- k. Other: _____
- l. None of the above

19. What support would your organisation require to be able to carry out the measures listed in questions 15 and 18?

- a. Financial support
- b. Additional staff members
- c. Assistance from local or state government (i.e., a staff member within government)
- d. Other: _____

20. What support would be most useful for your organisation to build its climate resilience and/or reduce its emissions? (multiple choice)

- a. Funding for staff time
- b. Funding for mitigation/adaptation measures
- c. Support from landlord of premises
- d. External advice
- e. Hands-on support from an expert
- f. Updated organisational priorities and/or goals
- g. An additional staff member with knowledge in this area
- h. Training for staff
- i. Networking with/learning from other organisations
- j. Written tools, guides and checklists
- k. Other: _____

Appendix F

Interview questions

- What does your organisation do/what services do you provide?
- Do you see your organisation as having a role in supporting your clients in the context of climate change & EWEs? what do you see as its role?
- Ask about the specific program/project the interviewee facilitated/was involved in
 - What mitigation/adaptation activities were implemented through the program? would these activities have been able to go ahead without the program?
(can run the list past them to jog their memory)
 - What support was provided to CSOs to undertake these activities (financial, administrative, expertise, etc)?
 - How successful was the program? was it taken up/funding allocation maximised? or was there limited uptake, and if so why?
- What's the role of CSOs more broadly in supporting people in the context of climate change and extreme weather events?
- What are the most important mitigation and adaptation measures CSOs should be undertaking? what are the most feasible measures they can undertake?
- What barriers do CSOs face in undertaking mitigation and adaptation activities?
- What support is needed by CSOs to implement mitigation and adaptation measures?
- In your view, what are the consequences for CSOs of not being able to contribute to climate mitigation, and to adapt to climate change? what are the benefits of action?

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