



# Making Things Right

Australian attitudes to climate change and  
our responsibility to low-emitting countries

October 2021



Supporting women.  
Defeating poverty.





*“We emit far more per capita than most, therefore we ought to be shouldering the work of making things rights.”*

Male, 25-34, Greater Darwin

*“We should be helping out poorer nations like those of the Pacific Islanders who will bear the brunt of natural disasters.”*

Female, 45-54, Regional NSW

This report was written by Iona Salter with contributions from Suzi Chinnery, Hayley Conway, David Sims and Olivia Zinzan. All images used with the permission of those photographed.

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## Executive Summary

**The people who have contributed the least to the global climate crisis are feeling its impact the most.** People living in poverty, and women in particular, have caused minimal CO2 emissions yet they are often the least able to adapt to rising sea levels, drought, and increasingly severe cyclones and floods. Climate justice is about tipping the scales so that poor communities, women and other marginalised groups don't pay an unfair price.

Climate change is a global issue — its impact does not stop at national borders. As a wealthy country and a very high per capita emitter, Australia has an obligation to support low-income countries to adapt to a changing climate. Women and other groups that are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change must be a particular focus. Australia's current levels of support, through aid and multilateral programs, are falling short of our fair share.

And Australians agree. The research presented in this report was conducted by YouGov on behalf of the aid organisation CARE Australia from 24 to 27 September 2021. It builds on research on Australians' attitudes to domestic climate policy, such as the Lowy Institute's annual Climate Poll, by providing a picture of Australian attitudes to global climate justice.

The research found the majority of Australians think climate change impacts the poor the most, and 61% believe the Australian Government should be doing more to help low-income countries in the face of climate change. The majority of Australians also underestimate how our per capita emissions compare to other countries. For example, only 14% of people correctly stated that Australia's per capita emissions were higher than China's (they are more than double). This indicates Australians are vastly underestimating our contribution to the climate crisis. Despite this, 64% of people thought rich countries have contributed the most to climate change and should be doing the most to combat it.

CARE wants the Australian Government to hear the public and provide more funding for low-income countries to adapt to and mitigate climate change ("climate finance"), with a particular focus on women and other vulnerable groups. As a first step, Australia should immediately double its climate finance commitment to AU\$3 billion over 2020-2025. Australia is a prosperous country that has developed at the expense of those who are now experiencing the worst impacts of the climate crisis, in particular our neighbours in the Pacific.

**As we head into the COP26 climate change conference in Glasgow, now is the time for Australia to take meaningful action towards climate justice.**

# Climate change in low-income countries

## LEAST TO BLAME, YET MOST AFFECTED

**People in low-income countries are feeling the effects of climate change the most, despite contributing the least to the problem.**

The poorest half of the world's population collectively contributed less than half the carbon emissions of the richest 1% between 1990 and 2015.<sup>1</sup> Despite their relatively miniscule emissions, the world's poorest people — particularly women — are paying the price as our climate changes. This is *climate injustice*.

Island nations such as Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Maldives risk being wiped off the map by rising sea levels, with many communities already forced to relocate. Rising sea levels are not only impacting island nations, but all low-lying coastal settlements. As much as 40% of the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, now sits below sea level, causing frequent floods.<sup>2</sup> In Bangladesh, 15 million people living on the coast could be displaced by sea level rise by 2050.<sup>3</sup>

People living in poverty are also bearing the brunt of rising temperatures, heat waves and droughts. Around 85% of the world's poorest people live in the tropics.<sup>4</sup> Even slight temperature rises in the tropics can be devastating to human health and agriculture, simply because it's so hot to begin with.<sup>5</sup> In more arid zones, droughts are becoming more frequent and severe as a result of climate change. People living in poverty have fewer resources at their disposal to adapt to drought, and the consequences can be devastating. From 2008 to 2018, more than 80% of drought damage was absorbed by agriculture in low- and lower-middle-income countries.<sup>6</sup>

**These challenges are of particular significance for Australia and its neighbours.**

Not only does climate change threaten the very existence of some of our island neighbours, but our region — Asia and the Pacific — is often labelled the most disaster-prone region in the world.<sup>7</sup> Between 1970 and 2020, 57% of deaths from natural disasters occurred in Asia and the Pacific.<sup>8</sup> As climate change increases the frequency and severity of cyclones, floods, bushfires and droughts, it is people living in poverty in Asia and the Pacific who are paying the highest price.

<sup>1</sup> Oxfam, [Confronting carbon inequality](#), 21 September 2020

<sup>2</sup> NASA Earth Observatory, ['As Jakarta Grows, So Do The Water Issues'](#), 11 September 2019

<sup>3</sup> Environmental Justice Foundation, ['Climate Displacement in Bangladesh'](#), accessed 14 October 2021

<sup>4</sup> Shulmeister, James, ['Climate explained: will the tropics eventually become uninhabitable?'](#) in *The Conversation*, 16 September 2020

<sup>5</sup> Hsiang, Solomon, quoted in ['Climate change could force huge migrations for people and animals living near the equator'](#) in *The Washington Post*, 6 June 2016

<sup>6</sup> Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, [The impact of disasters and crises on agriculture and food security](#), 2021

<sup>7</sup> Stockholm Environment Institute, ['2019 Asia-Pacific Disaster Report shows a region at risk and running out of time'](#), 11 September 2019

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), ['Asia Pacific Disaster Report'](#), 2021



## POVERTY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

**About 9.2% of the world, or 689 million people, live in extreme poverty on less than \$1.90 a day.<sup>9</sup>**

In 2020, the World Bank predicted the effects of climate change would push up to 132 million extra people into poverty by 2030.<sup>10</sup> That's more than five times Australia's population, forced into poverty in just ten years. The COVID pandemic is compounding this further, and is estimated to plunge an extra 150 million people into extreme poverty.<sup>11</sup>

The relationship between poverty and climate change is two-pronged: people living in poverty lack the resources to adapt to and withstand climate change, while at the same time, the effects of climate change push more people into poverty. This link has been recognised by a range of leaders from Pope Francis, who called the world's slow action on climate change "a brutal act of injustice toward the poor",<sup>12</sup> to UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who said "richer nations have reaped the benefits of untrammelled pollution for generations, often at the expense of developing countries."<sup>13</sup>

**Climate change is making cyclones, storms and floods more intense, and people living in poverty tend to lack the savings or insurance necessary to rebuild their homes and lives following a disaster.**

In Asia and the Pacific, one positive trend is that improved early warning systems and infrastructure mean fewer people are dying from extreme weather events.<sup>14</sup> However, the increased severity of climate disasters is a huge threat to people's livelihoods and wellbeing, and is setting back the economic and social development of low-income countries.

Many people living in poverty are reliant on the land and sea for their food and their income. This is becoming increasingly difficult as weather patterns change, droughts become more prolonged, fresh water sources dry up, and oceans acidify as a result of climate change. Poor farmers and fishers often lack the resources and technology to adapt to such changes, with devastating consequences for their health and livelihoods.

Climate change is also exacerbating the risk of violent conflict as people compete over deteriorating natural resources, including the very essence of life, water.

<sup>9</sup> World Bank Blogs, '[Progress toward ending poverty has slowed](#)', 16 October 2020

<sup>10</sup> World Bank, '[Revised Estimates of the Impact of Climate Change on Extreme Poverty by 2030](#)', September 2020

<sup>11</sup> World Bank, '[COVID-19 to Add as Many as 150 Million Extreme Poor by 2021](#)', 7 October 2020

<sup>12</sup> Vatican News, '[Pope on climate crisis: Time is running out, decisive action needed](#)', 14 June 2019

<sup>13</sup> The Independent, '[Climate: Big polluters have 'duty' to pay for poor countries to go carbon-neutral, says Boris Johnson](#)', 19 September 2021

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), '[Asia Pacific Disaster Report](#)', 2021

Cyclone Harold left 18,000 people homeless when it hit Vanuatu in April 2020.  
Photo © Valerie Fernandez/CARE



## Australian attitudes:

**58%** of Australians believe climate change impacts poor people more than wealthy people

- 28% disagreed, while 15% said they didn't know
- Men (62%) are more likely to agree than women (54%)
- People aged 25-34 are most likely to agree (64%), while people aged 65+ are most likely to disagree (38%)
- People with a university education are most likely to agree (76%)

**61%** of Australians agree that people in Pacific Island countries face the most risk from disasters fuelled by climate change

- 16% disagreed, while 23% said they didn't know
- Men (64%) are more likely to agree than women (59%)
- People aged 25-34 are most likely to agree (74%), while people aged 65+ are most likely to disagree (26%)
- People with a university education are most likely to agree (73%)





Susan stands where her house once stood, before it was destroyed by Cyclone Harold in 2020.  
Photo © Arlene Bax/CARE

## Climate change in action: Cyclone Harold in Vanuatu

Tropical storms are becoming more intense as ocean surface temperatures rise, because storms draw their energy (heat) from the surface waters of the ocean.<sup>15</sup> This phenomenon is being experienced firsthand in Vanuatu, which experienced two of its worst cyclones in history in 2015 and 2020.

Cyclone Pam, in 2015, impacted more than one in three people in Vanuatu and caused an estimated US\$600 million worth of damage. Many people in Vanuatu thought Pam would be the strongest storm the country would experience in their lifetime — until Cyclone Harold hit in April 2020. Harold impacted half the population and left 18,000 people homeless.

Susan, a mother-of-five from Pentecost Island, was one such person. “When the wind became strong, my son came and said to me ‘Mama, what will happen? Will we die or what?’ I held him and I said ‘no we won’t die, we are in our house’.”

But the wind was too much for Susan’s family’s four-bedroom home. When one of the bamboo walls was ripped away, the family fled to a safe house nearby. In the morning, their home and most of their belongings were gone. Four months later, they were still living in a small, temporary shelter.

Another woman from Pentecost Island, Risa, said she had never seen a cyclone like Harold.

“Most of the people here are still living in temporary shelters because all the local palm trees that we use as roofing for the house have all been damaged and it will take years and years before these palm trees give us supplies for thatch roofing again.”

Homes aren’t the only thing destroyed by the cyclone, Risa explains. “The women here, we earn the majority of our living from selling vegetables, but now that the gardens have been

damaged it will take months before we can come back to the normal life of selling root vegetables and green leafy vegetables in order to survive.”

This is one of many examples of how the effects of climate change are setting communities back, ruining homes and livelihoods and dashing people’s chances of ever escaping poverty. But there are solutions — read more on page 11.

## How climate change disproportionately impacts women

Poverty is not the only factor making people more susceptible to the effects of climate change. All marginalised groups will see the challenges they face compounded as climate disasters become more severe and natural resources become scarce. Here are four ways climate change disproportionately impacts women:

1. The majority of small-scale and subsistence farming work is done by women,<sup>16</sup> and the collection of water and firewood also tends to be the role of women and girls. As farming faces greater challenges and natural resources become scarce, women and girls are having to work longer and harder. Women also make up less than 20% of the world’s landholders, meaning they have fewer assets to fall back on when times get tough.<sup>17</sup>
2. Evidence shows domestic violence increases in the aftermath of a disaster<sup>18</sup> because of increased tension and financial pressures. As climate change increases the frequency and severity of disasters, women are at greater risk of violence at the hands of male partners and relatives.
3. More women than men live in poverty — globally, women earn 24% less on average.<sup>19</sup> This means single women have less money to rebuild their home after a disaster or invest in drought-resistant farming techniques, while partnered women are less likely to have a say in decisions about this kind of spending.

<sup>15</sup> Climate Council, *Tropical Cyclones and Climate Change: Factsheet*, accessed 14 October 2021

<sup>16</sup> Global Agriculture, *‘Women in Agriculture’*, accessed 14 October 2021

<sup>17</sup> World Economic Forum, *‘Women own less than 20% of the world’s land. It’s time to give them equal property rights’*, 11 Jan 2017

<sup>18</sup> Thurston, AM, Stöckl, H and Ranganathan, M, *‘Natural hazards, disasters and violence against women and girls: a global mixed-methods systematic review’*, in *British Medical Journal*, 2021

<sup>19</sup> Oxfam, *‘Why the majority of the world’s poor are women’*, accessed 14 October 2021

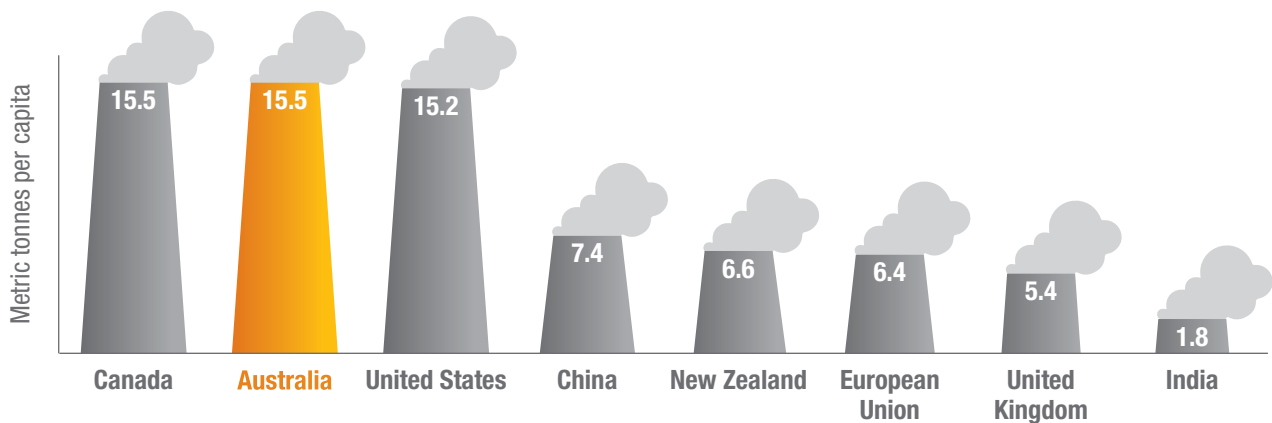


# How Australia is contributing to the climate crisis

Australia is the world's equal 7<sup>th</sup> highest per capita emitter of CO<sub>2</sub>, ahead of most of the countries to which we're often compared, including the US, UK, China and all EU countries.

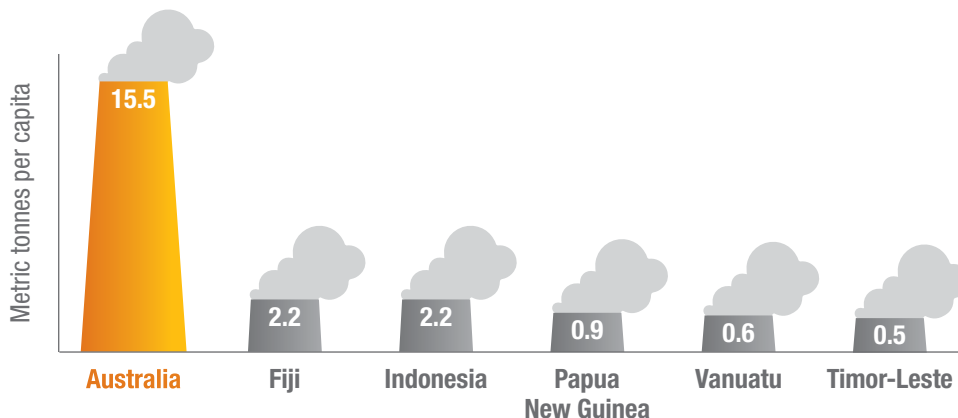
Our per capita emissions are twice that of China's, and they dwarf the emissions of all our low-income neighbours. Timor-Leste, for example, produced 0.5 metric tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per person in 2018, while Australia produced a whopping 15.5.

## How do Australia's emissions compare?



Source: The World Bank, all figures from 2018<sup>20</sup>

## In our neighbourhood:



Source: The World Bank, all figures from 2018<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> World Bank, '[CO<sub>2</sub> emissions \(metric tonnes per capita\)](#)', accessed 14 October 2021

<sup>21</sup> World Bank, '[CO<sub>2</sub> emissions \(metric tonnes per capita\)](#)', accessed 14 October 2021



From 2008 to 2018, more than 80% of drought damage was absorbed by agriculture in low- and lower-middle-income countries.  
Photo © Georgina Goodwin/CARE

National emissions are often talked about in absolute terms, but considering per capita emissions reveals a more equitable understanding of where responsibility for the climate crisis lies. Australia's contribution to the problem is wholly disproportionate to our relatively modest population.

It is also important to consider not just current emissions levels, but historical emissions. While industrialisation in developing nations has increased their carbon outputs in recent decades, countries like Australia got a much earlier start at consuming the world's "carbon budget" (that is, the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> that can be emitted if we are to limit warming to 1.5 °C). As a result, we have achieved a level of prosperity that allows us significantly more resilience in the face of climate change than low-income countries.

Despite our high emissions, Australia is lagging dangerously behind in taking action on climate change. Despite finally committing to net zero emissions by 2050 — a goal which was pioneered by the Marshall Islands and has been widely adopted by the rest of the international community — Australia has not updated its commitment for 2030.

**Our neighbours in the Pacific are leading the way and calling for Australia to step up.**

# Australian attitudes:

**64%** of Australians agree that rich countries have contributed the most to climate change and should be doing the most to combat it

- 22% disagreed, while 14% said they didn't know
- Men and women were equally as likely to agree
- People aged 25-34 are most likely to agree (73%), while people aged 65+ are most likely to disagree (27%)
- People with a university education are most likely to agree (77%)

**Most Australians underestimate how our per capita emissions compare to other industrialised countries**

**We asked people how they thought Australia's per capita emissions compared to three countries:**

1. One other high-income country — the US
2. One recently industrialised country — China
3. One low-income country in our region — Papua New Guinea

**Their responses:**

- 40% of respondents think Australia's per capita emissions are lower than the US's, while 12% think they are higher (correct), 19% think they are about the same, and 29% said they didn't know.
- 49% of respondents think Australia's per capita emissions are lower than China's, while 14% think they are higher (correct), 10% think they are about the same, and 27% said they didn't know.
- 10% of respondents think Australia's per capita emissions are lower than Papua New Guinea's, while 46% think they are higher (correct), 9% think they are about the same, and 35% said they didn't know.



# Towards Climate Justice: What Australia Can Do

**The countries most responsible for the climate crisis must not only reduce their emissions, they must also support people on the frontlines of climate change and compensate and support them for the upheaval they are experiencing as a result of this global challenge. This is *climate justice*.**

Australia has already taken some steps towards climate justice, but much more needs to be done.

Financial support and compensation from wealthy countries to poorer countries to deal with climate change is referred to as climate finance. Climate finance funds both climate change mitigation and adaptation. In practical terms, this means helping low-income countries move towards low-emissions technologies as they industrialise (mitigation) and helping them prepare for and withstand the effects of climate change (adaptation). While both are chronically underfunded for the task at hand, adaptation is especially so.<sup>22</sup>

As part of the 2015 Paris Agreement, wealthy nations reaffirmed a 2009 pledge to collectively provide US\$100 billion in climate finance each year from 2020 to 2025. This commitment will need to increase post-2025 in order to limit warming to 1.5 °C. Based on Australia's wealth and emissions levels, our fair share of global climate finance is estimated to be 2.5%.<sup>23</sup> We are currently falling well short of our fair share, with a leading global affairs think tank referring to Australia as a "significant laggard".<sup>24</sup>

**In the lead up to COP26, a coalition of Australian NGOs have recommended the government immediately double our climate finance commitment to AU\$3 billion over 2020-2025, and progressively increase this to achieve our fair share of AU\$12 billion annually by 2030.**

In 2019, Australia pulled out of one of the major multilateral climate finance mechanisms — The Green Climate Fund. There are more than 50 projects underway in the Asia Pacific with finance from the Green Climate Fund, including a new hydro-power plant to reduce reliance on dirty diesel in the Solomon Islands, and new irrigation to deal with droughts in Vietnam.<sup>25</sup>

Australia should recommit to a multilateral approach to climate finance by rejoining the Green Climate Fund, while continuing to support our neighbours in Asia and the Pacific through regional and bilateral aid.

<sup>22</sup> *Climate Home News*, '[Only one-fifth of climate finance going to adaptation, finds OECD](#)', 13 September 2019

<sup>23</sup> Jacobs, PJ et al., *Fairer Futures: Financing Global Climate Solutions*, October 2021

<sup>24</sup> Overseas Development Institute, *A fair share of climate finance? Apportioning responsibility for the \$100 billion climate finance goal*, September 2021

<sup>25</sup> Green Climate Fund, '[Project Portfolio](#)', accessed 14 October 2021



## Solutions in Action: Preparing for Cyclones in Vanuatu

With support from donors including the Australian Government, communities in Vanuatu are becoming better prepared for cyclones. This is crucial because climate change is making cyclones more intense, and Vanuatu experienced two of its worst ever cyclones in 2015 and 2020 (read more on page 6).

Roslyn, from Vanuatu's Pentecost Island, is a member of her community's disaster and climate change committee. She's received training in cyclone preparation, which was crucial when, on 6 April 2020, she received word from the capital that a huge cyclone was heading their way.

"I told everyone 'now we must get ready, put the rocks on top of the houses, get your torches ready, check around your house to see what trees are close to the house and cut them down'."

Roslyn then went and helped elderly community members to safety. As the winds picked up, she could tell this was going to be like nothing she had ever experienced before. "I felt 'no, this cyclone is stronger than any other cyclone'."

Roslyn's advice undoubtedly reduced the damage, but many in her community still lost their homes and belongings to Cyclone Harold. Roslyn helped people take stock of the damage, reported the findings to national authorities, and helped coordinate the delivery of aid.

Roslyn's story is an example of the difference that can be made when people receive training and resources to adapt to the effects of climate change. But not enough people are getting this support.

**As the main contributors to the climate crisis, wealthy countries like Australia have an obligation to support more people on the frontlines of climate change.**

# Australian attitudes:

## 61% of Australians agree that our government should do more to help poorer countries in the face of climate change

- 26% disagreed, while 13% said they didn't know
- Men and women were equally as likely to agree
- People aged 25-34 are most likely to agree (73%), while people aged 65+ are most likely to disagree (32%)
- People with a university education are most likely to agree (76%)

### PEOPLE WHO AGREED SAID:

*"Rich countries like Australia, the USA and others, have burned fossil fuels to fuel growth. They are responsible for climate change. Poor countries have contributed the least to the causes of climate change but stand to suffer the most from extreme weather, flooding and food insecurity caused by drought etc."*

Male, 55-64, Greater Perth

*"As a wealthy and relatively prosperous nation and a high producer of carbon emissions we have a duty of care to help our neighbours."*

Female, 65+, Greater Sydney

*"Poor countries shouldn't need to cripple their economies to make up for our mistakes."*

Male, 18-24, Regional Victoria

*"The world needs to come together to assist everyone everywhere when such a global issue arises."*

Female, 65+, Regional Queensland

*"We should be helping out poorer nations like those of the Pacific Islanders who will bear the brunt of natural disasters."*

Female, 45-54, Regional NSW

*"Australia should do more for poorer countries in general but as a wealthy Pacific country we have a particular duty to help our international neighbours at high risk to rising sea levels et cetera."*

Male, 25-34, Greater Sydney

*"The Australian government could not do any less [on climate change] than they do. So anything would be more. And they should do more. Simple."*

Male, 45-54, Greater Sydney

*"We're the ones stuffing things up for them. We could be helping them with greener and more sustainable infrastructure, and helping them get things shored up to make their people safer in the face of the massive storms, fires and flooding events that are becoming more common."*

Female, 55-64, Greater Melbourne

*"It's the Australian way to help others less fortunate than ourselves."*

Male, 65+, Greater Perth

*"We emit far more per capita than most, therefore we ought to be shouldering the work of making things right."*

Male, 25-34, Greater Darwin



## PEOPLE WHO DISAGREED SAID:

*“I don’t think it’s our responsibility and the money should be used for Australians.”*

Female, 55-64, Greater Sydney

*“Apart from resettlement of Pacific island country’s citizens threatened by possible rising sea levels I don’t believe that Australia can provide much useful aid.”*

Male, 65+, Greater Melbourne

*“They need to concentrate on our own people. We have poor and homeless, people in crisis and down and out.”*

Female, 65+, Regional Victoria

*“Climate change is as a result of many nations in the world. Not just Australia”*

Male, 18-24, Greater Melbourne

*“I don’t believe we should do any more than sharing technologies and advances to help them make their own changes. We need to concentrate on getting it right here before we have the right to tell others what to do.”*

Female, 65+, Greater Perth

*“Australia should look after its own affairs before helping others.”*

Male, 35-44, Greater Perth

## Recommendations:

### For government

The majority of Australians are supportive of Australia doing more to help low-income countries in the face of climate change. In addition to reducing Australia’s carbon emissions, CARE recommends the Australian Government:

1. Contribute our fair share of climate finance, by immediately doubling our commitment to AU\$3 billion over 2020-2025, and progressively increasing this to achieve our fair share of AU\$12 billion annually by 2030. This should be in addition to the current aid budget, and should not take away from funding other vital areas of aid such as health, education and women’s empowerment.
2. In recognition that women are particularly vulnerable to the climate crisis, dedicate at least 20% of climate finance to projects that specifically target women and address gender inequality.
3. Recommit to a multilateral approach to climate finance by rejoining the Green Climate Fund, while continuing to support our neighbours in Asia and the Pacific through regional and bilateral aid.
4. Don’t neglect adaptation — ensure a 50:50 split of funding for climate mitigation and climate adaptation.

### For climate justice campaigners

This research into Australian attitudes provides some valuable insights for global climate justice campaigners working in Australia.

The majority of Australians agree with the premise and principles of global climate justice, and believe Australia should be doing more to help low-income countries in the face of climate change. This public mandate can be used to encourage action from government, business and civil society.

Of those who agree with the statement “the Australian Government should do more to help poorer countries in the face of climate change”, qualitative responses indicate there is much more awareness of mitigation strategies than adaptation strategies. As adaptation is particularly underfunded, greater communication and advocacy is required in this area.



## About YouGov

YouGov is an international research and data analytics group. YouGov data is regularly referenced by media worldwide and is one of the most quoted research and polling source in Australia.

The data in this report was collected from a nationally representative online sample of 1,025 Australian residents aged 18+ in both city and regional areas between 24-27 September 2021. The data was weighted to reflect the latest ABS estimates on gender, age, location and education. The effective sample size after weighting is 783, and the theoretical margin of error is  $\pm 3.5$  percentage points. Due to rounding, totals for results may not add to 100.

YouGov is a founding member of the Australian Polling Council (APC) and complies with the APC Code of Conduct designed to promote transparency in public opinion polling.

Information about this poll is publicly available at: <https://au.yougov.com/results/apc>

## About CARE Australia

CARE Australia supports women around the globe to save lives, defeat poverty and achieve social justice.

We work in partnership with local communities to provide equal opportunities for women that they have long been denied: the ability to earn an income, gain access to their fair share of resources, to lead and participate in decisions that affect their lives, and to be able to withstand the increasing impacts of climate disasters and other crises.

CARE Australia is a member of the international CARE confederation, which dates back to 1945 and works in more than 100 countries.

Website: [www.care.org.au](http://www.care.org.au)

Email: [info@care.org.au](mailto:info@care.org.au)



Supporting women.  
Defeating poverty.