



Opportunities for improving Climate Group Networking in Victoria

DISCUSSION PAPER

Climate of Change Project 14 September 2009

1 Introduction

A need for strong government policy and action to achieve adequate emissions reductions in line with scientific recommendations has motivated Climate Action Groups to take a strong leadership and advocacy role. The need to provide effective input into policies that impact directly on Climate Action Groups (CAGs) has catalysed the strengthening of communication between groups. In addition, the need to share ideas, stay informed, coordinate and collaborate have all seeded connections between groups at local, regional, state and national levels.

The A Climate of Change project, funded through the Sustainability Fund, has undertaken surveys and interviews of climate action groups across Victoria to determine support requirements. Networking needs across the State and the Nation was one support area discussed.

This paper sets out a number of needs identified through this process and recommends possible ways these needs can be addressed through networking for Victorian CAGs with a particular focus on CAGs in regional Victoria.

1.1 The Climate Groups and their Members

To properly identify the networking requirements of Climate Action Groups, it's worth considering briefly who the people involved in these groups are. While all groups have their own distinct identities, there are a number of patterns that can be found.

Members are predominantly volunteers and as they are undertaking their climate work around their already busy lives, they are often time poor. Networking needs to be simple and provide a way to build on and extend the work already done by others.

Members bring a range of skills and knowledge to their work and often possess a considerable degree of expertise and experience in a particular field. Very often, their



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ideas and programs are innovative and original and as they are working in small groups, they often have freedom to pursue these. Forums where groups can share their stories and inspire others would allow other groups to learn from and leverage the amazing and diverse work that is happening at the grassroots.

A further observation is that regional and metropolitan climate action groups have tended to concentrate on different types of action. Anecdotally, regional groups have focused more on community-based action to reduce emissions while metropolitan groups have concentrated more on national and statewide advocacy and policy development.

Finally, groups range in size from those with several hundred or perhaps thousands of members (of which there are only a few), to much smaller groups, which are by far the majority. Networking between these groups must take into account both the greater capacity of larger groups to contribute and the greater need of smaller groups for support.

2 Some existing networks

The realm of climate action is dynamic. New groups are forming and connections between groups are evolving all the time. A short list of connections is provided below, but is by no means comprehensive. Networks mentioned here are ones which have been used by BREAZE and other climate groups in Central Victoria.

The two main roles they perform are to keep groups informed about each other's work and, in some cases, to share resources.

2.1 National

At the national level, there are two main networks:

- The [National Climate Summit](#), held in Canberra from 31 Jan – 3 Feb 2009, strengthened and formalised communications between climate action groups across the nation¹. Its primary means of communication is the [Grassroots Climate Oz](#) email list. The summit has recently released its proposal for a national network, to be called Community Climate Network (Australia) or CCN. This proposal, if enacted, will create a structure for ongoing organisation of climate groups across the country. Organisation of annual summits and preparation and dissemination of policy proposals and media content are primary goals of the network.
- The [Climate Action Network Australia \(CANA\)](#) provides networking opportunities for member organizations. CAGs can become members alongside environmental NGO's and business groups.

2.2 State

- Within Victoria, several communication channels operate to inform climate action groups of political and policy developments: [Environment Victoria](#) (EV), a peak body for Victorian environmental groups, provides opportunities for groups to update

¹ See <http://www.climatesummit.org.au/forum/networking-forum/what-we-already-have> and <http://www.climatesummit.org.au/our-network>



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each other on the latest local developments within their area and supplies resources for advocacy on key policy issues. EV has set up the [Victoria Climate Action](#) google group mail which provides an avenue for emailing other groups who have registered in the site. The [Climate Action Centre](#) provides information on some of the latest advocacy campaigns. Its website links to the Climate Emergency Network Calendar and a list of [Victorian climate action groups](#)

The [Climate Emergency Network](#) has been actively working to facilitate group communication and action and has established the [Victorian climate action calendar of events](#).

2.3 Regional Victoria

Following on from the National Climate Action Summit, a [Regional Climate Action Summit](#) was held in Daylesford on 21 March 2009. The event was very well attended by groups and individuals, mainly from Western Victoria.

One of the outcomes of the day was to begin an informal regional advocacy alliance. Through their community-based work, regional Victorian CAGs have developed significant membership numbers, with financial membership of the three largest groups in the region exceeding 2500 people in total. It was recognised that this membership base provides real legitimacy when groups advocate for strong government action on climate change. It was determined to explore this opportunity further.

In the central Victorian region, the [Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance](#) (CVGA) was established to network local government and other organizations, setting aspirational targets for emission reductions, acting to implement government policy on climate change initiatives and providing a significant advocacy role in the region. Until about a year ago, climate action groups were not on their membership list, but recently climate action groups have begun to join CVGA. There is an opportunity for CVGA to operate in a supporting and linking role between climate action groups and other member organisations in central and northern Victoria and this remains to be fully developed. This model may be equally applicable to other regions and Greenhouse/Sustainability Alliances across the state, and would complement other climate action group networks.

3 Opportunities and benefits of improving statewide networking

Several networking support needs have been identified through the Climate of Change Project. These needs were determined through consultation at the following events;

- The Climate of Change CAG consultation session run in partnership with EV in Melbourne (27/11/08).
- The National Climate Summit (31/1 - 1/2/09)
- The Regional Climate Summit (21/3/09)
- Regional Advocacy Alliance Meeting (4/9/09)
- Individual and direct consultation with groups.



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3.1 Networking Needs

The groups felt that assistance with their work would be welcome but is generally lacking. It was recognised that many groups were going through the same processes and that learnings from one group are often transferable to others. Much of the assistance required could be supplied simply by sharing resources and stories more effectively.

Requests for support that could be supplied through effective networking fell into the following broad categories:

- Sharing of Skills and Resources
 - developing a media profile, general media training
 - developing effective bulk buy programs
 - facilitation
 - obtaining templates for newsletters and media releases
 - list of practical actions that are easy to do and easy to measure (“a jar of ideas that you can reach into for your community”)
 - running a community event (CD available from MASG)
 - presenting and public speaking (Climate Emergency Network have a course to present their approach²)
- Organisational Development
 - obtaining guidance and assistance with strategic planning
 - seeking grants and funding
 - establishing partnerships
 - managing the dynamics of groups
 - a standard set of documents (simple, short and clear) relating to aspects such as insurance, volunteers, fund management, communication etc
- Advocacy
 - obtaining expert and timely analysis of current issues and government policies
 - sourcing media releases around issues of the day
 - being well informed about timing of input to policies
- General Information
 - developing a newsletter / calendar of CAG group activities
 - opportunities to present local successes to other groups
 - compiling and maintaining an up-to-date list of CAG groups and NGO websites
- Meeting opportunities
 - running an annual forum/get together of CAGs in Victoria – perhaps more frequently at a regional level.
 - implementing a hosted web network which is independent, secure, updated regularly and has on-going resourcing.

2

http://www.climateemergencynetwork.org/index.php?option=com_contact&view=contact&id=3&Itemid=74



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Interestingly, many of these requests are currently being catered for by existing forums and organisations. For instance, regular get-togethers of Victorian CAG's already take place under the umbrella of the Climate Emergency Network meetings, which are held every few months and primarily centre on advocacy work. Also, organisational policies have been developed by MASG & BREAZE and are beginning to appear on their respective web sites.

The issue is not that the needs are not being met, but rather that the networking opportunities are not widely enough publicised or the benefits of a group being represented at a particular event may not be well enough understood.

Also, a number of these requests are now being delivered through the current Climate of Change project and will be publically available at <http://www.breaze.org.au/groups> from September 2009. Again, delivering the resources is only the first step. The existence of the resources must be well publicised and their benefits to groups clearly explained.

3.2 Other issues

3.2.1 Use of the internet as a networking tool

A single web-based networking site was suggested with events listed and an online discussion forum. The Climate Emergency Network calendar of events has emerged to help fulfill this need and they also host an on line discussion group.

Whilst it was understood that email and web-based groups are available they didn't appear to be linked, and it was confusing for groups to identify which one they should focus their efforts on. More than one statewide group means more emails and doubling up – and this was definitely not desired.

There was concern that group representatives were sometimes bombarded with emails and that the telephone or post worked better for others.

Melbourne meetings provided a convenient central point for some groups, but regional groups especially saw value in meeting outside Melbourne in places which were closer to them.

Currently web based support for networking within Victoria is being provided on a voluntary basis or with very limited paid labour.

3.2.2 Administration

Most groups found administration assistance would be useful, but were aware that the addition of a salaried person to a volunteer group could change its dynamics and that care would need to be taken to identify volunteer versus paid work.

The possibility of some ongoing, central administrative support is worth exploring. It could be jointly funded by groups who draw on these services. This would be particularly relevant to smaller groups who are only lightly resourced and whose key volunteers feel



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they are being overstretched. Combining administrative work offers the possibility of spreading the cost of a part time administrator across a number of smaller groups, making it more feasible.

3.2.3 Event support

The workload of organising speakers, venues, marketing, insurance, etc for events is very time consuming for all groups who run their own events. In addition, many groups feel they are reinventing the wheel as they go through the process of learning to manage events themselves.

3.2.4 Strategic Planning

Groups were interested in the idea of developing strategic plans for both their organisation and for specific campaigns.

Most groups agreed that strategic planning for the organisation should be done in one hit and be facilitated, but groups were aware of the tendency not to refer back to it. Guidance with both creating and fully utilising strategic planning could be helpful.

3.2.5 Partnerships

Effective partnerships with local funded organisations were one of the greatest enabling factors that emerged from all groups. Sharing stories of successful partnerships was recognised as a great way to help groups build capacity.

3.3 Principles to guide a future network

Some principles to guide future networking were identified:

- Build the resources, skills and strength of climate action groups to implement change within their community
- Reduce duplication of effort and maximize resource usage between groups
- Tell the story of successful local actions - using local examples and people
- Maximize our impact. Choose actions where we can have the most influence and work together to achieve it.
- Nurture members to keep growing and renew their energy levels
- Ensure that smaller groups have a strong voice
- Provide assistance in a supporting and facilitatory way rather than a proscriptive or controlling way.

3.4 Vision of a future network

The principal roles of a successful CAG network would be:

- to share resources and learnings around particular processes
- to keep in touch and stay abreast of one another's activities
- to facilitate advocacy work that is well-informed and has maximum political impact
- to reduce administrative workload, particularly for smaller groups.

A number of goals and activities of a successful CAG network were identified:

- increase community understanding and participation in climate change policy and politics,



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- advocate for changes which, when implemented, would result in minimum GHG emissions,
- make the story of change easy and fun,
- promote and support gatherings of the community climate groups (friendly to regional and rural groups) where groups can share information on past activities with purpose,
- give an opportunity for groups to share their passion and new ideas face to face in an informal setting,
- help groups stay connected across the country (and indeed the world) to share learnings, coordinate where possible and achieve the most effective campaigns,
- coordinate a series of support training/seminars/meetings and forums for advocates to increase their skills, connectivity and prevent burnout and despair (eg BSG running Changing the Dream symposium, MASG hosting Despair and Empowerment workshop, Alliance running the Regional summit in Daylesford)
- Enable a regional presence and voice in State and National actions or programs
- Communicate State and National policy implications to the local level.
- We should remain apolitical, independent and funded to maintain links into the future

4 Conclusions

4.1 Communication

Existing communication networks are partially functioning to get information to and from climate action groups. Information is not always accessed by all groups and communication between groups seems to be the weakest process.

Communication from central advocacy agencies to groups appears to be functioning effectively, though is not always coordinated or targeted correctly.

Communication is working well for the Central Victorian groups through informal networks and phone and email lists. This works because the people involved are experiencing the benefits of collaborating and are motivated to stay in touch.

There are a number of existing communication networks available to Victorian CAGs whose functions are not always well understood. It is not always clear to CAGs where they can find learnings and resources from other groups who have already trod the path they wish to take.

Recommendation 1: Catalogue existing resources and forums in an easy-to-follow way and ensure they are well publicised and their relevance to groups clearly explained.

Some specific areas of resource sharing to be catalogued are:

- known facilitators who can assist groups with strategic planning
- stories of groups who have successfully completed partnership projects



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Recommended Implementer: Environment Victoria

Recommendation 2: A funded web facilitator could greatly assist communication. The facilitator would stay abreast of the information needs of participating groups and concentrate on maintaining relevance of information and links established in Recommendation 1.

4.2 Regular Gatherings

Annual national gatherings appear set to continue under the national Community Climate Network. These will remain a valuable way for Victorian CAGs to maintain national links as well as to meet amongst themselves. In addition, the need for regular statewide and regional face to face networking opportunities was identified. Groups agreed that improved inter-group connections would help avoid reinventing the wheel, especially for communicating examples of projects and activities that have worked for other groups.

Recommendation 3: The possibility of a regular Central Victorian gathering of CAGs should be explored, perhaps rotating the event between the larger groups to share the workload.

4.3 Regional Advocacy

The need was also identified to connect local issues with regional and state wide campaigns – e.g. for each group to identify key policy priorities for their region and to communicate this locally and to campaign agencies such as Environment Victoria, ACF and the Climate Emergency Network.

This is potentially a role that Greenhouse/Sustainability Alliances such as CVGA would fill.

There is also the need for coordinating campaign agencies to develop “campaign themes” that can connect at the local level and that these campaign themes are directly communicated to the relevant people within climate action groups.

Establishing a communication conduit for Climate Action Groups within regions, like the Regional Advocacy Alliance, helps groups share ideas relevant to their location. It also offers the possibility of leveraging the strong membership base of Central Victorian groups in advocacy to government.

This model could be used to network groups regionally in other areas of the State and provide a communication conduit for the existing state networks.

Recommendation 4: A part-time position be created, perhaps under the auspice of one of the larger Central Victorian groups, to establish the framework of a Regional Advocacy Alliance and begin networked advocacy activities.

Recommendation 5: To further explore and identify the role that CVGA and other Greenhouse Alliances may play in supporting Climate Action Groups, particularly in the area of policy advice.



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4.4 *Assisting Smaller Groups*

Community expectations of what CAGs can achieve are often well beyond what groups are able to deliver, particularly when groups have only a handful of active volunteers. Ways in which smaller groups can pool their resources, while drawing on those of larger groups should be explored, with a view to reducing the amount of time smaller groups spend on simply keeping their groups afloat.

Recommendation 6: Explore the possibility of paid support for administration & event support for smaller groups, with the cost being spread across a number of groups.



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