

# JUST ACT

ACT WITH JUSTICE IN MIND

News & resources from the Justice and International Mission Cluster

APRIL 2024



## COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT COMMITTS TO AN AUSTRALIAN SOLAR PANEL INDUSTRY

**We have raised with you concerns about solar panel corporations benefiting from the use of forced labour in China. Almost all solar panels sold in Australia are manufactured in China or draw on major components manufactured in China.**

In late January 2024, the JIM Unit arranged for the Australian Churches Ecological Taskforce to write to the Minister for Climate Change and Energy, Chris Bowen, to request that the Commonwealth Government move forward with its consideration of setting up solar panel manufacturing in Australia, free from the use of forced labour.

The Australian Churches Ecological Taskforce is a body under the

National Council of Churches in Australia for churches to collaborate on seeking environmental reforms. The JIM Cluster acts as the secretariat of the Taskforce.

Good news was announced on 28 March 2024, with the Commonwealth Government announcing it will spend \$1 billion on a "Solar Sunshot program." The program will help ensure solar panels are made in Australia, including in the Hunter Region of NSW. The Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA) will examine the manufacturing of the entire solar panel supply chain in Australia, from ingots and wafers to cells, module assembly, and related components.

One in three Australian homes has solar panels, which is the highest uptake in the world. ●

# ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE — A CONGREGATION CASE STUDY

BY SUE STRONG

**At Wesley Uniting Church, Geelong, we have a large, heritage-listed old church with adjoining rooms, large and small, all cared for by an active, capable property team. Our manse is a reasonably modern house located a few kilometres away.**

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on reducing our carbon footprint, and several actions have been taken.

In April 2022, we installed solar panels on the manse's roof. The installation was after the summer, and the full benefit was not found until much later in the year.

In the same year, a gas stove was replaced by an electric one in one of the

kitchens used by our many community tenants, who include Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Welcome Place (refugee support).

We also switched our energy provider in 2022 and now use CoPower, which the Synod endorses.

In the hall where we gather after worship, for funerals and large gatherings, in 2023, we switched from gas wall furnaces to reverse cycle air-conditioners.

Then, in the winter of 2023, the underfloor heating in the church failed, and we had no heating for part of the winter until reverse-cycle air conditioners were also installed there. These have proven very efficient and only need to be turned on for an hour before worship, as opposed to the long lead-in time that the underfloor heating needs.

We have also been working on

signage on the property to remind users to switch off lights. We have put timers on lights and water heating and close doors as much as possible. So, changing habits has also been helpful.

We have now measured our energy use in gas and electricity, using all the data from 2022 and 2023.

Comparing 2023 usage to 2022 usage, we calculated the following:

- The electricity usage was reduced by 15.4 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, and,
- The gas usage was reduced by 3.6 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>.

In summary, we reduced our energy use from 50.7 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent to 31.7 tonnes, which meant an overall saving of 37.5%.

With grateful thanks, we have shared this with our community and plan to do all we can to reduce our carbon footprint further.

And there's still more to come! ●



## FROM THE JUSTICE & INTERNATIONAL MISSION CLUSTER

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All of the resources in this mailing can be found on the JIM website.

If you would like to subscribe (or unsubscribe) to either this hardcopy mailing (bi-monthly) or email update (weekly), contact the JIM Cluster.



# AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT RESTORES FUNDING TO THE UN RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY IN GAZA

**On 27 January 2024, the Australian Government joined with 15 other governments to suspend funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which provides humanitarian assistance to Palestinians, including in Gaza. The suspension came as a result of the Israeli Government raising allegations that staff from UNRWA had participated in the Hamas atrocities committed on 7 October 2023, in which over 1,200 people were murdered.**

On 27 January 2024, the Australian Government joined with 15 other governments to suspend funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which provides humanitarian assistance to Palestinians, including in Gaza. The suspension came as a result of the Israeli Government raising allegations that staff from UNRWA had participated in the Hamas atrocities committed on 7 October 2023, in which over 1,200 people were murdered.

The UN has stated that over two million civilians in the Gaza Strip depend on lifesaving aid provided by UNRWA. Further, UNRWA operates shelters for over one million people. It provides healthcare, food and education to Palestinian refugees, with 5.9 million relying on its services.

The Netanyahu Government has had a long history of hostility to UNRWA. The Netanyahu Government's hostility to UNRWA was on display recently with their unsubstantiated claim that UNRWA was "a Hamas front organisation".

Prime Minister Netanyahu appears to seek the closing down of UNRWA as he believes it "perpetuates the Palestinian refugee problem." It has been alleged that the Netanyahu Government hopes that by the elimination of UNRWA, millions of Palestinians would lose their refugee status, which in turn would remove their right to return to properties lost to Israelis in 1948 under UN Resolution 194. The Uniting Church has not taken a position on the Palestinian 'right of return', instead seeking to support a negotiated just peace which would leave the issue of a just response to lands seized from Palestinians in 1948 to be part of such negotiations.

On 15 March 2024, the Commissioner-General of UNRWA accused the Netanyahu Government of inundating donor governments with "misinformation to foster distrust and tarnish the reputation of the Agency."

In early February, resourced by the JIM Cluster, the Synod Moderator, Rev David Fotheringham, wrote to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Penny Wong, to urge the Australian Government to restore funding to UNRWA as soon as possible. The letter stated, "With the severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza, any additional disruptions to assistance for the Palestinian population will undoubtedly result in a significant number of preventable deaths and suffering."

The letter from the Moderator stated:

*Unless the UNRWA management has been negligent in taking reasonable steps to screen their staff and monitor their activities in work time, it would seem unreasonable to us to cut off support to UNRWA in response to actions taken by employees which it would be unreasonable to expect UNRWA management to have knowledge of given the 30,000 staff in the organisation.*

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Good news came on 15 March, with Minister Wong announcing that Australia would lift the pause on funding for UNRWA. The lifting of the suspension will mean that the Australian Government will provide \$6 million to UNRWA. The lifting of the suspension followed UNRWA's actions to strengthen the integrity of its operations. The Australian Government has required stringent conditions on the \$6 million to ensure the funding

to Gaza followed similar decisions by the Governments of Canada, Sweden, and the European Union.

In lifting the suspension of funding to UNRWA, the Australian Government stated:

*More than 1.7 million Palestinians have been displaced, most living in crowded and unsanitary conditions. Access to health care and food is limited; the risk of widespread famine is growing. Women and children are facing the most acute impacts, but the suffering is widespread and threatens to have enduring health effects.*

Anthony Albanese joined the Prime Ministers of Canada and New Zealand in calling on the Israeli Government to protect Palestinian civilians in Gaza:

*Rapid, safe and unimpeded humanitarian relief must be provided to civilians. The International Court of Justice has been clear: Israel must ensure the delivery of basic services and essential humanitarian assistance and must protect civilians. The Court's decisions on provisional measures are binding.*

The three Prime Ministers outlined their vision for peace:

*Ultimately, a negotiated political solution is needed to achieve lasting peace and security. Australia, Canada, and New Zealand remain steadfast in their commitment to a two-state solution, including the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, where Palestinians and Israelis live side by side in peace, security and dignity.*

In late March 2024, the Israeli Government announced it would no longer approve UNRWA food convoys to the northern part of Gaza, where the famine amongst Palestinians is at its worst. An internal UN investigation recorded incidents of Israeli soldiers beating UN staff at checkpoints.

Thank you to everyone who has written letters using the two letter-writing actions we have issued urging the Australian Government to support efforts to achieve a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. If you did not get a chance to write a letter, it is not too late to do so. ●

**“ ONLY UNRWA HAS THE INFRASTRUCTURE TO RECEIVE AND DISTRIBUTE AID ON THE SCALE NEEDED RIGHT NOW IN GAZA ”**

will provide support directly to those in need in Gaza.

In lifting the suspension, Minister Wong stated, “Only UNRWA has the infrastructure to receive and distribute aid on the scale needed right now in Gaza. But aid can only reach the civilian population at scale if Israel lets it into Gaza. Australia implores Israel to allow this to happen.”

The Australian Government's decision to lift the suspension of funding

In addition to the \$6 million for UNRWA, the Australian Government is providing an additional \$4 million to UNICEF to provide urgent services in Gaza. Further, the Australian Government is providing \$2 million to the new mechanism of the UN Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza to facilitate expanded humanitarian access into Gaza.

On 15 February 2024, Prime Minister

# LAWS TO CURB BRIBERY OF FOREIGN OFFICIALS PASS THE PARLIAMENT

**In 2019, we issued a postcard action calling on the Commonwealth Government to pass reforms to make Australian laws to prevent bribery of foreign officials more effective. In March 2020, we followed up the postcard campaign with a letter-writing action that requested you write to the Labor Opposition at a time to urge them to support the reforms.**

At the end of February, there was



good news, with the Parliament passing the *Crimes Legislation Amendment (Combatting Corporate Crime) Act*. The new law will mean a corporation can be prosecuted if a bribe is paid to a foreign government official by one of its employees or agents and the corporation fails to have adequate systems in place to prevent the bribe from being paid.

Up until now, the Australian Federal Police has found it very difficult to secure a conviction for Australian corporations whose employees have paid bribes to foreign government officials, as it has been necessary to prove that the

corporation intended the bribe to be paid.

Only seven individuals and three corporations have been convicted in the 25 years that it has been illegal for an Australian or an Australian corporation to pay bribes to foreign government officials.

The new law will incentivise Australian corporations to implement measures to prevent their employees and agents from attempting to bribe foreign government officials and politicians.

Thank you to everyone who took action in support of reforming our laws to prevent the bribery of foreign officials. ●

## CHANGE OF DATE FOR THE FAITHS 4 CLIMATE JUSTICE GLOBAL WEEK OF ACTION

**In the last JustAct, we included a flier for the Faiths 4 Climate Justice Global Week of Action. GreenFaith International coordinates the event globally. They have announced the need to move the event date from May to September.**

The organisation of the event was disrupted by the Tanzanian Government harassing, intimidating and detaining ten GreenFaith Circle leaders and members who have been campaigning against the East Africa Crude Oil Pipeline. GreenFaith

International has needed to direct its resources to secure the release of the GreenFaith Circle members. ●



# THE COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT PROVIDES INCREASED SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE FROM TIMOR LESTE ON THE PACIFIC AUSTRALIA LABOUR MOBILITY SCHEME

**The JIM Cluster has invited you to write letters several times in support of increased protection and support for people on the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme.**

In addition, many congregations connect with people on the PALM scheme, offering them social, spiritual and material support. The PALM scheme allows people from the Pacific Islands and Timor Leste to come to Australia and work in industries where it has not been possible to find enough Australians to fill the positions available.

The workers can stay in Australia for up to four years. Key industries in which the people on the PALM scheme work include horticulture, meat processing, and aged care.

Good news came at the end of January 2024, with the Commonwealth Government announcing \$4 million in funding to provide additional social and reintegration support to maximise the scheme's benefits for people coming to Australia from Timor Leste. The reintegration support will include financial literacy skills and support to connect with employment and education

opportunities.

Additional support will also be provided to prepare workers' families for separation during participation in the PALM scheme.

At present, approximately 4,500 people from Timor Leste are on the PALM scheme. Remittances sent from these people back to Timor Leste are the country's second-largest source of income after oil and gas sales, excluding foreign aid.

Thank you to everyone who has taken action to support people in the PALM scheme. ●

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## SYNOD CONTINUES TO SUPPORT HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVES BY THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST IN THE PHILIPPINES

**The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania continues to provide \$15,000 annually to the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), Southern Luzon Jurisdiction (the equivalent of a Synod), for human rights initiatives.**

In the latest report to the Synod on the initiatives, the UCCP reported that the funding had allowed them to provide sanctuary to two human rights defenders whose lives were in danger.

In addition, 71 people from five of the nine conferences (the equivalent of Uniting Church presbyteries) in the Southern Luzon Jurisdiction were provided with paralegal training. Six participants were staff from the Integrated Development Program for Indigenous Peoples (IDPIP). The training

provided participants with knowledge of legal processes in the Philippines, how to conduct investigations, how to gather documentation for legal processes and how to make an affidavit. Of the participants, 80% were formed into Quick Reaction Teams to respond to cases of human rights abuses in their local area. ●





## INCREASED SANCTIONS ON THE MYANMAR MILITARY REGIME

**In October 2022, we requested that you write letters to the Australian Government urging them to apply additional sanctions to entities controlled by the military junta in Myanmar to pressure the regime to restore democracy to the country. We followed up by issuing a postcard campaign in September 2023. Thank you to everyone who has written letters or sent postcards in response to these actions.**

Good news came on 1 February 2024,

when the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Penny Wong, announced that sanctions would be applied to an additional five entities with direct links to the Myanmar military. Two of the entities are banks that facilitate the regime's activities. The other three sanctioned entities are corporations that supply jet fuel to the Myanmar military, assisting them in their war against groups that have not accepted the military dictatorship.

As of 1 March 2024, it is reported that 4,611 people have been killed as a result of the military coup that put

the dictatorship in place. In addition, 20,156 people are being held as political prisoners for protesting against the regime. There have been 1,588 reported deaths of political prisoners who were detained by the junta. A further 121 political prisoners have been sentenced to death.

Approximately 2.4 million people have been forced to flee their homes as a result of the coup and remain displaced.

We will continue to provide you with opportunities to seek a restoration of a proper democracy in Myanmar. ●

## COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT REFORMS FOR FIRST PEOPLE JOBS PROGRAM TO BE IMPLEMENTED

**In April 2018, we requested that you write letters to the Commonwealth Government urging reforms to the Community Development Program (CDP).**

The CDP was a Commonwealth Government program that resulted in discrimination against and exploitation of many First People who had been locked out of the regular job market.

The Albanese Government promised to scrap the CDP and replace it with a jobs assistance program for First Peoples codesigned with First Peoples. On 14 February 2024, the Commonwealth Government

announced it would improve access to education, training and employment in the Northern Territory with a \$30 million boost over five years to deliver a Remote Training Hubs Network to First Peoples in Central Australia. The Network will aim to assist First Peoples in accessing on-Country vocational education and training that meets community needs and leads to local, sustainable jobs.

Up to seven remote training hubs will be established as part of the Network to help First Peoples access training in the skills they need.

Mentors and community advisors will be engaged to support the hubs

and community members in realising community aspirations for job and enterprise development.

The Remote Jobs program aims to create 3,000 jobs in remote Australia over the next three years. It will be implemented in partnership with First Peoples and will build the skills and experience that communities are calling for. It will be anchored in First Peoples' self-determination, with remote communities deciding what is needed locally.

Thank you to everyone who supported the campaign for the reform of the CDP. ●



# A BRIEF HISTORY OF EQUALITY

## BOOK REVIEW BY MARK ZIRNSAK

**When thinking of the brilliant French economist Thomas Piketty, accessible writing does not usually come to mind. His 2021 book “A Brief History of Equality” is a notable exception. The book is an easy read and really shook up how I viewed the world. I took the book to discuss when catching up with a friend for dinner. Seeing the book on our table, the waitress came over and asked if I had read it. She shared my view it was amazing and had also given it to her 16-year-old daughter to read.**

Piketty starts by making the point that levels of equality and inequality in society and the world are a choice:

*Inequality is first of all a social, historical, and political construction. In other words, for the same level of economic or technological development, there are always many different ways of organising a property system or a border system, a social and political system or a fiscal and educational system. These options are political in nature.*

Piketty follows the history of equality and inequality to the limits of recorded data. France has some of the best data on historical ownership of wealth, but the global story is much the same for many other countries, including Australia. In 1910, the wealthiest 1% of people owned about 55% of all wealth in France. The 20th Century saw the “great redistribution”. The wealth of the top 1% declined to 20% by the start of the 1980s. Then, neoliberal economics was

imposed by governments, and wealth has been flowing back to the super-rich again. In France, by 2020 the wealthiest 1% of people owned 25% of all the wealth in the country.

The bottom 50% in France owned 2% of all wealth in 1910, which increased to around 5% by the 1980s. For those between 50% and 90% of wealth, their share increased from 13% in 1910 to 40% by 1980 and has been in slow decline since then.

On the issue of global inequality and injustice, he makes a compelling case that much of the injustice has its roots in the period of racist colonialism. We have not recovered from the legacy of that period. Colonial powers used their military might to take what they wanted to enrich themselves at the expense of the colonised.

As a stunning example of global injustice, Piketty points to the case of Haiti. Haiti had been a French colony where, by the 1780s, nearly half a million Africans had been trafficked to work on plantations under ruthlessly brutal conditions where enslaved people were murdered and tortured with impunity. A series of slave revolts saw the enslaved people being able to declare independence from France by 1804. France only recognised Haiti’s independence in 1825. However, under

threat of French military invasion, Haiti was forced to pay 150 million gold francs as compensation to the former slaveholders as compensation for

the loss of their property, the enslaved people.

Haiti had to make these compensation payments from 1825 to 1950, stifling its development. Without fully accounting for interest, the payments in today’s terms would be \$50 billion. The Haitian Government has been asking for such a repayment, which French Governments refuse to consider.

Piketty offers many ideas to make society fairer and better for everyone. His vision for a desirable future world he summarises as democratic:

*Decentralised and participatory, ecological and multicultural, based on the extension of the welfare state and progressive taxation, power-sharing in business enterprises, postcolonial reparations, the battle against discrimination, educational equality, the carbon card, the gradual de-commodification of the economy, guaranteed employment and an inheritance for all, the drastic reduction of monetary inequalities, and finally, an electoral and media system that cannot be controlled by money.*

“A Brief History of Inequality” is a must-read for anyone interested in social justice. ●

