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Department of Industry Science & Resources

GPO Box 2013, Canberra, ACT, 2601

Sydney Community Forum (SCF) and the Voices for Power leaders appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback to the discussion paper on future gas strategy.

Sydney Community Forum is a regional community development organisation that has worked towards social justice, inclusion, and sustainability outcomes for disadvantaged and marginalised communities in Sydney since 1974. Through the Voices for Power project, in the past seven years, along with migrant community leaders and in collaboration with Sydney Alliance and its partner organisations, we have worked very closely with hundreds of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) community members, privileging their voices in climate action. In the last three years, through our targeted and co-designed energy literacy program, we have listened to the most marginalised members of the migrant communities in Sydney, most of whom are renters and low-income households. **We are writing this submission, co-written by the following Voices for Power (VfP) leaders, to express our concerns about the Future Gas Strategy.**

List of signatories

1. Rev. Alimoni Taumoepeau, Acting Director Mission Enablement Team Uniting Mission; VfP founding Pacific Community leader.
2. Asha Ramzan, Executive Officer, Sydney Community Forum; VfP founding leader.
3. Chantelle Ogilvie-Ellis, Co-Lead Organiser, Sydney Alliance.
4. David Deng, VfP Chinese leader.
5. Dibya Sree, Academic, Western Sydney University; VfP Nepalese leader.
6. Ibtisam Hammoud, VfP Lebanese leader.
7. Prince Vijayan, VfP Indian leader
8. Faisal Sayani, Research Scholar, Western Sydney University & VfP Pakistani leader
9. Jijo George, VfP Indian leader.
10. Shahil Gupta, VfP Fiji Indian leader

We appreciate that the federal government is proactively leading the country's transition into renewables. At Voices for Power, we have campaigned for our communities to have access to clean and affordable energy in the last seven years. Now that policies are being laid out to target zero emissions, we want to ensure that the structural and cultural hurdles for migrant communities to engage in this transition are appropriately addressed. We ask for transparency in the gas future of Australia and expect the strategy to be consistent with zero-emission targets and other renewable transition strategies like the National Energy Performance Strategy.

In this context, we ask for:

Consistent messaging and commitment

We ask for consistent messaging regarding the Federal Government's commitment to net zero and the practical strategy to reduce dependency on gas. For our communities, the Future Gas Strategy's emphasis on placing Australia as a trusted supplier of LPG to the region and its positioning as the largest exporter of gas, at the same time, energy-related policies pushing domestic customers to

transition out of gas is confusing. It leaves the moral imperative of Australia's transition on our communities, including low-income migrant families. At the same time, the Future Gas Strategy is elusive about its commitment to transition out of gas. This contradicts several other policy communications around community participation in renewable transition. To us, it feels like while our communities aspire to engage in the energy transition and there is bottom-up pressure on communities to transition out of gas, the higher-level strategic direction of the country's gas future is taking the opposite direction.

While we acknowledge the importance of grid firming in ensuring energy security, the Future Gas Strategy fails in explicitly mentioning a gas phasing-out plan. Instead, it reemphasises the need for ongoing investment in LNG production.

The strategy speaks about investing in carbon-offsetting projects. Such investments in Carbon Capture and Storage, even though necessary, do not compensate for the lack of a specific decarbonising strategy. This strategy document, while mentioning the zero carbon targets, does not draw connections between this target and the ongoing role of Australia's position as a trusted exporter of gas. Even though the strategy promises to support its trade (gas) partners in achieving their emission targets, the strategy to achieve it is not mentioned.

Affordability of gas: The consumer-end cost of transitioning

As our communities face the high cost of living, we want to be assured that we don't bear the cost of the ageing gas supply infrastructure. New migrants and low-income families will need additional time and support to transition off gas. Recovering the cost of ageing network infrastructure from residential customers will leave them in a precarious situation of being stuck in a highly unaffordable energy system. This recovery model will also lead to a "gas death spiral",¹ which will leave a disproportionate burden on low-income households. We are concerned that renters will be the most affected as they will be stuck to the most expensive energy plans. We ask for clarity on who will bear the cost of the decommissioning of the distribution network and how domestic customers will be protected from being passed on the cost.

Support in participation in energy performance

Through the Voices for Power project in 2023, we have listened to more than 500 migrants from diverse cultural groups. They all aspire to achieve energy efficiency in their households and transition to clean energy. However, many face several pressures of settling down and managing the high cost of living. We are conscious that the high upfront cost of energy-efficient appliances will keep them locked in the gas network. Also, renters will be locked out of the transition as they have no choice.

"I live in an accommodation managed by the University. Even though I pay the rent and hold the electricity account, I am not allowed to change the energy provider. Through Energy Made Easy, I found that I could save up to 40% of my energy bill by switching the provider. However, I am not allowed to".

(story from one of the Voices for Power community listening sessions held in Parramatta)

Measures like the Mandatory Gas Code of Conduct take a top-down approach, providing additional support to gas investors. These measures do not help low-income families and renters transition out of gas. We want a more precise direction in the support available for low-income families and renters

¹ <https://ieefa.org/resources/managing-transition-all-electric-homes>

to become more energy-efficient and transition out of the gas network. The strategy needs to consider the intersectionality of tenancy, and we recommend considering Minimum Energy Standards as a long-term energy efficiency solution for renters.

Community Education, Ongoing Engagement & Capturing CALD Communities' Aspirations

As community members keen to engage in Australia's net zero transition, with several policies and strategies in the making, we find it exhausting to keep pace with them. We ask for coherence in the strategies and policies. The lack of trustworthy spaces for CALD communities to participate in the transition creates the danger of migrant clean energy aspirations not being captured and our communities being labelled climate laggards. Moreover, the country is losing out on utilising CALD communities' knowledge and skills that can help the nation transition more efficiently. We are hearing innovative ideas on the ground, which nobody is listening to. We urge the government to invest in sustained community education and, place-based engagement with CALD communities to support their active participation in the transition. By understanding the specific needs and barriers these communities face, and doing deeper skill mapping, we can tailor solutions that foster their inclusion.

Strengthening CALD engagement and education through grassroots organisations will provide trusted spaces for communities to share their concerns, build confidence to participate in energy transition, and provide empirical evidence to guide the formulation of domestic electrification policies. We urge the government to invest in and partner with grassroots organisations to support active and unforced CALD community participation in the Future Gas Strategy.

We sincerely appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the consultation paper on Future Gas Strategy and hope our recommendations will be considered seriously. If you have any questions about our comments in this submission or want to discuss this further, please contact Nirmal Joy at projectofficer@scfonline.org.au.