



Source: Green Cross Australia

Dog-lover Mara Bún

THROUGH A HUMAN LENS

Climate change is real, the Victorian bushfire tragedy a stark reminder of how fragile our communities have become, says Mara Bún. Under her leadership, Green Cross Australia is focused on readying the nation for the further environmental calamities and widespread human displacement to come.

Profile by SUSAN WOODWARD

Mara Bún was holed up in her half-constructed Tallebudgera Valley home one night when she spied a newspaper ad seeking a CEO for Green Cross Australia. Outside, a savage storm hammered the Gold Coast hinterland. By the time the tempest passed, Bún had uncovered that former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had first suggested an emergency response model for global ecological issues in 1989, and that the idea had gained significant impetus at the United Nation's 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. The following year, Gorbachev launched Green Cross International.

Intrigued, Bún applied for the job to run Green Cross Australia. With a string of high-level financial and community sector positions on her resume and a passionate, high-energy personality, she got it.

That was 16 months ago. Now Bún can explain how storms like the one she experienced are increasing in incidence and

ferocity. And how, coupled with rising sea levels, severe weather will displace hundreds of millions of people across Asian-Pacific nations.

"If you look the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) in the eye, we have to prepare," Bún said in a February interview at her home, now nearly completed with solar panels and mostly recycled materials. "We're going to have refugee camps across the region."

Small group, big influence

Bún dissects the complex nature of climate-change issues positively and pragmatically, without alarm.

"We are incredibly resilient as human beings," she says when asked if Australia is prepared to respond to imminent catastrophes.

The day after *Ethical Investor* spoke with Bún, the worst bushfires since European settlement raging across Victoria and New South Wales, with some scientists indicating the most extreme weather conditions on record were to blame.

Green Cross Australia had just launched Extreme Weather Heroes. In partnership with the SES and volunteer fire-fighter groups, the project connects extreme weather to climate change and entices under-25s to get involved

and replace an aging volunteer base.

Bún says the urgency of the program — and the need to reconstruct communities with energy-efficient green buildings — had never been so evident.

"Governments in many ways are incapable of leading; they have to follow. I think the role of the community sector is to ... bring business and policymakers along" Mara Bún, GCA

"As we grieve for the tremendous human and animal lives lost and shattered, we begin to focus on the next challenge — how to ensure that a massive rebuilding initiative is green, to begin to break the extreme weather cycle for future generations," Bún says.

Future security

Human and national security advocacy shape the bulk of Green Cross Australia's work. It aspires to lead other humanitarian, environmental and response groups and leverage their existing know-how and resources.

The organisation is small — Bún and one other person are the only employees in its

Brisbane City Hall office — and its operations somewhat ad hoc. Yet its ability to mobilise people is impressive, its credibility likely buoyed by the association with Gorbachev and 30 other Green Cross offices worldwide.

The organisation held a democratic “consensus conference” last year that attracted many renowned academics, politicians and business leaders. Entitled, *How Australia Should Respond to the Humanitarian Challenges of Rising Seas Across Asia-Pacific*, 14 ordinary Australian citizens were recruited to interact with experts and develop recommendations.

The office of federal climate change minister Penny Wong is considering making some of the recommendations official government policy, says Bún.

“The community is way ahead of their leaders on this issue,” she says. “If empowered with really good information, ordinary citizens are more than capable of working out what should be done.”

Community-driven solutions

The premise that communities are better suited than government to find the best solutions is central to Green Cross Australia’s ethos.

“The whole notion that achieving outcomes for the community is about



Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, GCI founder (L) with Alexander Likhotal (R), GCI president

lobbying government using the media to publicise facts in reports is so outdated,” says Bún.

“Governments in many ways are incapable of leading; they have to follow. I think the role of the community sector is to ... bring business and policymakers along.”

In it together


As enthusiastic as she is about Green Cross, Brazilian-born Bún, 46, says her interests are impossible to box.

Her eclectic background may explain it. Bún was born in the teeming city of San Paulo to a Brazilian mother and a Hungarian father and was educated in California. She has worked from Wall Street to Nepal, where she helped plan an award-winning World Bank project to rebuild 60,000 homes destroyed by earthquake. Bún immigrated to Australia 18 years ago, living in Sydney before trading the city for rural Queensland.

“If I end up in an investment bank in two years, that’s ok, too,” she says.

Regardless of the sector, Bún says it’s now essential to lure people by the heart to address the problems we face collectively — even the hearts of our political leaders.

A remarkable 82 per cent of Swiss parliament members are also Green Cross members. Bún imagines the same could one day be true in Australia.

“We are absolutely above politics,” she says. “Everyone is a part of this team.” 

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