

Submission: Measuring what Matters

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to *Measuring what Matters* for consideration by the Department of Treasury and Finance.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria, representing more than 150 community service organisations, students and individuals. The Centre advocates for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. Our vision is for a community that is fair, equitable and creates opportunities for children and their families to thrive. We work closely with community service organisations, government, other peaks, philanthropy and business to make sure vulnerable children are seen and heard and supported in their development.

Introduction

The way productivity and societal development is measured in Australia is largely through Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Australia has the 9th highest GDP per capita in the world and the 12th largest economy in the world, consistently ranking highly in global indexes as a desirable destination to live, work, study and invest.¹ However, these statistics do not reflect the direct experience of many children and families in Australia, and does not present a complete or holistic view of community wellbeing.

Over the past three years we have witnessed concurrent crisis across the nation and internationally, in the form of climate events, the global COVID-19 pandemic and worsening inequality caused by rising inflation and harsh economic conditions. Alongside these events, global poverty has increased for the first time in 25 years.² A report released in January 2023 by Oxfam found that the richest 1 per cent of Australians have accumulated 10 times more wealth than the bottom 50 per cent in the past decade.³ At present, Australia has the 15th highest poverty rate out of the 34 wealthiest OECD countries, higher than the average for the OECD and higher than Germany, the UK and New Zealand.⁴

As a result of these rising pressures and increased inequality, it is more important than ever to commit to a budget and economy based on wellbeing in Australia, and we commend the Department of Treasury for opening these preliminary consultations and supporting more informed policy making and improved accountability.⁵ However, to create a true wellbeing economy, consultation needs to occur more directly with the individuals and communities the indicators are being created for. For example, this would include in-person consultations with families, children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, people with

¹ The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022, *Australia is a top 20 country for economy*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-is-a-top-20-country-all-topics.pdf>

² Christensen et al 2023, *Survival of the richest, how we must tax the super-rich now to fight inequality*.

<https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621477/bp-survival-of-the-richest-160123-en.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ The Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) 2022, *Poverty in Australia*, <https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/a-snapshot-of-poverty-in-australia-2022/>

⁵ Australian Government, 2022, *Measuring what matters, budget paper one*, https://budget.gov.au/2022-23-october/content/bp1/download/bp1_bs-4.pdf

disability and LGBTQIA+ communities. This submission focuses on the wellbeing of children and families, and makes suggestions for further areas of consultation.

Measuring wellbeing

Measuring wellbeing is difficult, due to conflicting views about what constitutes wellbeing. Wellbeing can be associated with a range of factors in a person's life, such as social relationships, safety, employment, mental and physical health, connection to family and overall life satisfaction. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) defines wellbeing as 'a state of health or sufficiency in all aspects of life',⁶ while the New Zealand Treasury defines wellbeing as 'people (being) able to lead fulfilling lives with purpose, balance and meaning to them.'⁷ The Australian Capital Territory wellbeing framework offers a more in-depth definition:

Wellbeing is about how we are doing, as individuals, as a community, and as a place to live. It's about having the opportunity and ability to lead lives of personal and community value – with qualities such as good health, time to enjoy the things in life that matter, in an environment that promotes personal growth and is sustainable. Measuring wellbeing is about having a sense of our progress around the things that matter to our quality of life and help us to live our lives well.⁸

When it comes to the wellbeing of children, we need to remember that they are not homogenous; all children grow, learn and develop differently which also makes measuring wellbeing difficult.⁹ Research from the OECD indicates that a multi-dimensional view of children's lives (psychological, physical and social) is needed to measure their wellbeing.¹⁰

Common themes in the wellbeing research suggest that child and family wellbeing is about all children growing up safe and free from violence or abuse, having access to mental and physical healthcare, access to education, support to participate in decisions that affect them, and families being supported economically and emotionally to be able to care for their children and themselves.

Poverty and wellbeing

As a society, Australians seem to have accepted that a certain percentage of children and families live in poverty, and as tough economic conditions become more entrenched, this percentage continues to rise. In Australia, we measure poverty primarily through a lens of household income, and define 'poverty' as the experience of having a lack of income or a lack of money in general. The 'poverty line' in Australia is defined as below 50 per cent of medium household income, being \$489 a week for a single adult and \$1027 a week for a couple with two children.¹¹

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2001, *Measuring Well-being, Frameworks for Australian Social Statistics*.

⁷ New Zealand Treasury, 2019, *The Well-being Budget*, <https://www.treasury.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2019-05/b19-wellbeing-budget.pdf>

⁸ See ACT Government 2020, *ACT Wellbeing framework*, https://www.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1498198/ACT-wellbeing-framework.pdf

⁹ Cho, E.Y.-N & Yu, F.-Y 2020, A review of measurement tools for child wellbeing, *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 119, p. 1-26.

¹⁰ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2009, *Doing Better for Children*.

¹¹ ACOSS 2022.

Within the OECD, Australia has the 3rd highest average household income, and the 9th highest earnings.¹² Despite this, poverty rates remain high, demonstrating the limitations of measuring poverty through the lens of household income. Household income is not always equal or shared, and the experience of the person with income is taken to represent the ‘average’ experience of everyone who lives in the household.¹³ This measurement does not show what interventions have the greatest impact, because even as incomes have increased in Australia, poverty has not decreased.

The reasons families are pushed into poverty are often intersecting, for example a lack of access to social and affordable housing, a lack of employment opportunities, experiences of violence or trauma, low rates of government income support payments, intergenerational poverty, poor mental health, or a lack of access to services. Policy responses to these issues largely exist in silos. There needs to be a better understanding of how unmet needs intersect to push people into poverty and of people’s experiences.

The Centre recommends Treasury undertake consultations more directly with families who have experienced poverty to make sure the construction of new indicators is underpinned by lived experience. This should include investing in research to understand the intersecting barriers that produce poverty and decrease wellbeing, to inform wellbeing budget funding.

Child Poverty

When poverty in Australia is measured through an individual or family lens, the experiences of children living in poverty are rarely examined. Childhood poverty can have an enormous effect on children’s future wellbeing, including delayed development, decreased engagement with education, decreased future employment opportunities and a lack of social connection resulting in isolation. Research shows that childhood development is foundational to all aspects of future wellbeing, and while the impact on children who grow up in poverty is enormous, there is also a significant impact on societal wellbeing.¹⁴

Policy responses to child poverty generally focus on household income, rather than being child-centred.¹⁵ This measurement does not take into account the multidimensional ways in which children experience poverty. Their household may sit above the ‘poverty line’ while they still experience poverty, disadvantage and decreased wellbeing in other ways, as access to money alone does not prohibit these experiences.¹⁶

For example, children living in poverty may lack access to education or not have the ability to meaningfully engage with education. They may experience family violence, be unable to access mental and physical health services or experience housing stress. This experience of ‘non-material’ poverty still undermines a child’s rights and impacts their current and future wellbeing.¹⁷

¹² Ibid, DFAT

¹³ Equality Insights, *household-level measurement, around the world poverty measurement assesses*, <https://iwda.shorthandstories.com/the-way-poverty-is-measured-is-problematic/index.html#group-section-Household-level-Measurement-fe2g7l3Qbw>

¹⁴ Bessell, S (2021): Rethinking Child Poverty, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, DOI: 10.1080/19452829.2021.1911969

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

As a first step to building a true wellbeing society in Australia there needs to be a stronger focus on eradicating child poverty and enhancing child wellbeing. Indicators of child wellbeing need to be based on more than simply financial access or school enrolment rates, moving toward a holistic view of a child's life and future. The Centre suggests that comprehensive consultation is undertaken with children, child-centred organisations and services that engage with children to form a set of indicators. A child-impact lens should be at the forefront of future budgeting and policy decisions, to ensure the impact on children is fully considered and understood. A useful starting point for this exercise is the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, which uses the following indicators to measure wellbeing:¹⁸

INDICATORS (SHANARRI)



SOURCE: *Getting It Right for Every Child*

We suggest that Australian measurements of child wellbeing should take into account additional factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (henceforth referred to as Aboriginal) children. The wellbeing of Aboriginal children is broader in concept than non-Aboriginal children, and includes connection to country, land, community and considers the wellbeing of the entire family and community as contributing to the individual wellbeing of the child.¹⁹

Similarly, wellbeing in the context of asylum seekers and refugees needs to be explored more fully given the complex and chronic nature of the trauma and health challenges that many face, the compounding trauma of resettlement, and the impact of these various stressors on individuals and families, the low rates of

¹⁸ Scottish Government, 2016), *Getting it right for every child*, <https://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20190215053200/http://www.gov.scot/publications/getting-right-child-named-person-leaflet/>

professional help-seeking of many in this group of new arrivals, and the intergenerational trauma that can ultimately affect their capacity to integrate into the Australian community.²⁰

Regional Australia

Around 28 per cent of the population in Australia live in rural and remote areas.²¹ Data shows that people living in these areas have poorer outcomes across a range of domains, including higher rates of hospitalisations, deaths, injury and poorer access to, and use of, primarily health care services than people living in major cities.²² This is despite Australia having the third best healthcare system in the world.²³ This data corresponds with the Centre's own findings through consultations with our members, which highlight the consistent barriers faced by children and families in regional areas, including a lack of access to services, a shortage of workers in the child and family services sector, declining mental health for young people and the need for additional support in response to COVID, the floods and the rising cost of essentials.

Regional members have described feeling far removed from the decisions of Government and the broader community services sector, who primarily operate in metropolitan areas and often use a 'one size fits all' approach. There is a need for increased opportunities for regional and rural voices and expertise to be incorporated into policy responses. This means talking to organisational leaders in these areas, their staff and most importantly the children, families, and young people they support – to listen and understand the voices of people with lived experience.

We suggest that wellbeing indicators are informed by data that is de-aggregated and specific to regional areas, to ensure the wellbeing outcomes and experiences of regional communities is adequately captured and budget investments are made accordingly.

Aboriginal knowledge

The Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association describes social and emotional wellbeing as a holistic view of health that 'incorporates the physical, social, emotional, and cultural wellbeing of individuals and their communities' across the whole spectrum of their lives.²⁴ The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework, otherwise known as the *SWEB model*, defines social and emotional wellbeing as a 'multidimensional concept of health that includes mental health, but also encompasses health and wellbeing' underpinned by self-determination, connection to culture, community, country, family and kinship systems.²⁵

²⁰ Sangalang, C & Vang, C 2016, Intergenerational trauma in refugee families: A systematic review. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 19(3), pp. 745-54. doi.org/10.1007/s10903-016-0499-7

²¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Measuring the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/5b75be10-49ee-4d9c-baf0-5092936c585e/msewatsip.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

²² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Measuring the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/5b75be10-49ee-4d9c-baf0-5092936c585e/msewatsip.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

²³ Ibid, DFAT

²⁴ Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association, *Indigenous Knowledge and Mental Health – A Global Perspective*, <https://indigenopsychology.com.au/news/resource/indigenous-knowledge-and-mental-health-a-global-perspective/>

²⁵ Commonwealth of Australia 2017, National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing. Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

During 2022 in Victoria, the *Centre for Balit Durn Durn* was launched by the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO). The aim of Balit Balit Durn is to foster ‘a more collaborative approach to the expansion of Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) services in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and mainstream mental health services’ in response to the Royal Commission into Mental Health.²⁶ Balit Durn Durn comes from the Wurundjeri / Woiwurrung language and means Strong Brain, Mind, Intellect and Sense of Self.²⁷

As part of the work of the Balit Durn Durn Centre, they have developed the social and emotional wellbeing wheel:



Source: The Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) 2022.

The wheel represents holistic healing and includes protective factors that support good mental health for Aboriginal communities, ‘presenting a strengths-based approach to mental health care and clinical practice through the restoration of strengthening connections for an individual’s healing journey’.²⁸ Balit Durn Durn also emphasises the interconnected nature of wellbeing, and how the disruption of one of the connections can result in poorer SEWB for Aboriginal people and their communities.²⁹

Balit Durn Durn is a good starting point to form national indicators of wellbeing for Aboriginal communities, and we suggest further consultation is undertaken with VACCHO on the adaptation of the Balit Durn Durn principles on a national level.

²⁶ The Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, VACCHO, 2022, *The Balit Durn Durn Centre*, <https://www.vaccho.org.au/balitdurndurncentre/>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

Self-determination and wellbeing

The Australian Human Rights Commission defines self-determination as an ‘ongoing process of choice’ to ensure that Indigenous communities are able to meet their social, cultural and economic needs.³⁰ Despite notable progress in the commitment to and application of self-determination principles in Australia, there is still no consistent national approach to elements such as Treaty, truth-telling and the adoption of self-determination in legislation. The Centre believes that a holistic approach to Aboriginal wellbeing can only come from a commitment to self-determination, and Australian and international evidence demonstrates that self-determination is the only policy approach that has produced effective and sustainable outcomes for Aboriginal people.³¹

This means self-determination that is legislatively enshrined, for example:

- Amending the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 to recognise the right of Aboriginal people to self-determination.
- Working toward national a national truth-telling and Treaty process, as is taking place in Victoria.
- Installing a national independent Commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people.

At present, South Australia is the only jurisdiction that has a fully legislated independent commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people.³² The South Australian commissioner works alongside other independent oversight and advocacy bodies and is empowered to undertake a range of functions to protect Aboriginal children and young people’s rights, wellbeing and development.³³ The Centre recommends that this is replicated on a national level, in keeping with commitments to Closing the Gap and working toward national parity for Aboriginal children and young people.

Further consultation is needed with Aboriginal communities and ACCOs to inform the wellbeing indicators. Aboriginal wellbeing indicators should centre Aboriginal knowledge, understanding and perspectives, and their creation should be Aboriginal-led and authoritative. These consultations should not only be in the form of submissions or online consultations but should take place in-person with a diverse range of Aboriginal communities, including remote communities, Aboriginal families, children and young people, people with disability and LGBTQIA+ community. Aboriginal organisations and communities should have the decision-making authority on the final wellbeing indicators and the consultation process.

³⁰ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Right to self-determination*, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/right-self-determination>

³¹ Behrendt L, Jorgensen M, Vivian A, 2017, *Self-Determination Background Concepts*, University of Technology Sydney, <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/migrated/files/collections/research-and-reports/s/self-determination-scoping-paper.pdf>

³² Ibid.

³³ Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Family and culture is everything*, <https://cacyp.com.au/>.