

Submission to Measuring What Matters

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About the author

I am a social researcher with over ten years of experience in a range of areas including wellbeing measurement, child wellbeing, participatory approaches, longitudinal analysis, and program evaluation. I recently submitted my doctoral thesis with the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods which focuses on the value of participatory approaches in the development of wellbeing frameworks. I hold a BSc in Statistics from ANU, a MSc in Public Policy & Human Development from United Nations University, and have held research positions at the ANU, ARACY (The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth), and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

This submission draws on research conducted at the Australian National University. However, the views expressed in this submission are my own, and should not be attributed to the ANU.

About this submission

Public consultation in the development of wellbeing frameworks has been shown to be highly valuable in ensuring that frameworks are relevant to the population they seek to represent, and that they go on to have meaningful policy impact. While ‘Budget Statement 4: Measuring What Matters’ outlined plans to consult with stakeholders and experts going forward, there was no mention of including the general public in this process. Incorporating the perspective of citizens can be as simple as asking individuals and communities the straightforward question “what does wellbeing mean to you?”. Doing so would help ensure that the resulting framework is one that recognises the views and values of everyday Australians¹, and that the Australian Government actually does measure what matters to the Australian people. Overlooking this process would present a missed opportunity on this important undertaking to improve the lives of people in Australia.

In this submission I will firstly outline three key reasons why public consultation is important. I will then put forward four key recommendations for effective consultation. These points are summarised as follows:

Why public consultation?

1. What matters to communities varies by culture and context
2. Public consultation gives a wellbeing framework greater legitimacy and credibility
3. Public consultation has wider benefits through empowering citizens with a voice on how their wellbeing is measured

Key recommendations for effective consultation:

1. Ensure that any consultation process is genuine
2. Ensure that groups marginalised by mainstream policy have their voices heard
3. Wide engagement with policymakers is vital to success
4. Draw on previous research conducted with communities in Australia

¹ See Fabian, M., Alexandrova, A., Coyle, D., Agarwala, M., & Felici, M. (2021). *Respecting the subject in subjective wellbeing public policy: Moving beyond the social planner paradigm*. https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/Respecting_the_subjective_in_subjective_wellbeing_public_policy_WP.pdf

Why public consultation?

1. What matters to communities varies by culture and context

A systematic review by Sollis et al. (2022) of participatory wellbeing studies² throughout the world (i.e. those which ask communities the question “what does wellbeing mean to you?”), and a meta-analysis of the review³, highlighted that there is a high degree of diversity in how wellbeing is understood by different communities. This systematic review identified 30 diverse overarching wellbeing areas that reflect at a broad level how wellbeing is understood throughout the world. There were some wellbeing areas which appeared to be largely universal, such as relationships, physical healthy, emotional wellbeing, and financial security. Such wellbeing dimensions commonly appear in wellbeing frameworks, including that of the OECD. However, the systematic review also identified areas of wellbeing which are less commonly seen in high-level frameworks, such as connection to culture, mobility, access to vital services and supports, identity & self-concept, and sense of purpose & meaning. Such dimensions do not appear in the OECD framework for measuring well-being and progress, and thus such dimensions will only be identified through consultation with the community.

2. Public consultation gives a wellbeing framework greater legitimacy and credibility

A key informant study with developers of participatory wellbeing frameworks⁴ highlighted that a key benefit of consultation was that the resulting framework came directly from the words of community members. Informants noted that doing so gave the wellbeing framework greater credibility and legitimacy, while also ensuring that the framework was accessible to and relatable for community members. The outcomes of such consultation processes can also support governments in communicating and reporting on progress to communities through the use of shared language. This finding is reinforced by other research. For example, through interviews with civil servants across seven jurisdictions (Bhutan, Canada, the European Union, Jacksonville, New Zealand, South Africa, and Tasmania) who had developed wellbeing frameworks, Hall & Rickard (2013) found that consultation helped to “strengthen the machinery of government” by ensuring democratic practices are embedded into the process⁵. They also found that consultation can “make the business of government easier” through citizens better understanding differing viewpoints from across the political spectrum, recognising the trade-offs inherent within policymaking, and developing informal networks within the community. A similar finding has also been identified by Wallace & Schmuecker (2012), who showed the value of consultation processes in improving the legitimacy of wellbeing frameworks⁶ by using a case study approach.

Finally, through examining the process behind indicator selection for a large number of governments, Kroll (2021) highlights the importance of participatory approaches for wellbeing measurement in capturing citizens’ ideas and opinions, increasing a sense of procedural justice, and making the

² Sollis, K., Yap, M., Campbell, P., & Biddle, N. (2022). Conceptualisations of wellbeing and quality of life: A systematic review of participatory studies. *World Development*, 160, 106073. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2022.106073>

³ Sollis, K., Biddle, N., Maulana, H., Yap, M., & Campbell, P. (under review). Cross-cultural conceptualisations of wellbeing and implications for measurement: A meta-analysis based on a systematic review. Working paper can be accessed upon request.

⁴ Sollis, K. (under review). Participatory wellbeing frameworks and the secret to research and policy impact. Working paper can be accessed upon request.

⁵ Hall, J., & Rickard, L. (2013). *People, progress and participation: How initiatives measuring social progress yield benefits beyond better metrics*. Global Choices. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283996367_People_progress_and_participation_How_initiatives_measuring_social_progress_yield_benefits_beyond_better_metrics

⁶ Wallace, J., & Schmuecker, K. (2012). *Shifting the dial: From wellbeing measures to policy practice*. Carnegie UK Trust. <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/shifting-the-dial-from-wellbeing-measures-to-policy-practice/>

populace more aware of societal issues⁷. As noted by Kroll (p.22) “consultation processes...are to be strongly recommended. In this way, citizens are actively involved in the debate, confinement to an ivory tower is prevented and democratic legitimacy is significantly increased, thereby amplifying the potential political attention paid to progress indicators”.

3. Public consultation has wider benefits through empowering citizens with a voice on how their wellbeing is measured

The key informant study with developers of participatory wellbeing frameworks noted above⁸ also highlighted the wider benefits of consultative processes to community members. Through this study, informants noted that the incorporation of authentic consultative processes resulted in greater empowerment of community members, helped them to become connected to services and information, and provided a space for participants to be listened to. This point is also emphasised by Hall & Rickard’s study⁹, with consultation supporting citizens to “build capacity and resilience” through greater empowerment and engagement in the policy process.

Key recommendations for effective consultation

1. Ensure that any consultation process is genuine

While genuine consultative processes can have numerous benefits (as noted above), conducting consultations purely for the purpose of ticking a box would not only be a waste of resources, but may also be counterproductive. Unfortunately, tokenistic attempts to consult with citizens within the wellbeing space are commonplace¹⁰. An authentic consultation process acknowledges and reduces power imbalances and ensures two-way communication between officials and participants, clearly communicates to participants and the public, and provides citizens the opportunity for meaningful, in-depth engagement through community discussions, focus-groups and interviews¹¹.

2. Ensure that groups marginalised by mainstream policy have their voices heard

A national wellbeing framework should seek to represent the many diverse groups that make up the country. Particular care should be taken to ensure that groups typically marginalised by mainstream policy are consulted with. This includes, but is not limited to, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, children and young people, culturally and linguistically diverse population groups, those living in poverty, and people with disabilities.

3. Wide engagement with policymakers is vital to success

It should be noted that alongside consultation with community members, there should also be wide consultation with policymakers. Through an ethnographic study of the process through which a local

⁷ Kroll, C. (2011). *Measuring progress and well-being: Achievements and challenges of a new global movement*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/08509.pdf>

⁸ Sollis, K. (under review). Participatory wellbeing frameworks and the secret to research and policy impact. Working paper can be accessed upon request.

⁹ Hall, J., & Rickard, L. (2013). *People, progress and participation: How initiatives measuring social progress yield benefits beyond better metrics*. Global Choices. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283996367_People_progress_and_participation_How_initiatives_measuring_social_progress_yield_benefits_beyond_better_metricsdiverse

¹⁰ Pennington, A., Pilkington, G., Bache, I., Watkins, M., Bagnall, A.-M., South, J., & Corcoran, R. (2017). *Scoping review of review-level evidence on co-production in local decision-making and its relationship to community wellbeing*. What works for wellbeing. <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Co-production-scoping-review-July-2017.pdf>

¹¹ See Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216-224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>

council in the United Kingdom developed a wellbeing framework¹², Scott (2012) found that for wellbeing frameworks and indicators to be useable, they must have meaning for and resonate with, both decision-makers and the general public. Consultative approaches, involving both policymakers and citizens, are therefore vital in ensuring the relevance and subsequent useability of wellbeing frameworks¹³.

4. Draw on previous research conducted with communities in Australia

The Australian Government can draw on previous research that has been conducted with communities in Australia to gain a better understanding of what wellbeing means to certain communities, and appropriate consultative processes to employ:

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¹² Scott, K. (2012). *Measuring wellbeing: Towards sustainability?* Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203113622>

¹³ See Corlet Walker, C., Druckman, A., & Cattaneo, C. (2020). Understanding the (non-)use of societal wellbeing indicators in national policy development: What can we learn from civil servants? A UK case study. *Social Indicators Research*, 150(3), 911–953. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-020-02358-z>