

# Acting locally, thinking nationally: layering Indigenous ontology within wellbeing frameworks

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## Key points

- 'Wellbeing' frameworks are an increasingly modern iteration of nation-state policy approaches; however 'universal' wellbeing frameworks are often reductionist, disconnected from place and human-centred
- Long practised, Indigenous ontology underpins planning for living well in a place-based, relational manner
- Indigenous frameworks that are grounded in Country foster intergenerational wellbeing that recognises the centrality of other-than-human elements
- National and local wellbeing could meaningfully intertwine by layering contemporary frameworks with relational, Country-based understandings of good living

## Abstract

There are hundreds of sovereign nations covering the modern nation-state of Australia.<sup>1</sup> Noting the inadequacy of many contemporary terms to encompass Indigenous ontology, Indigenous nations have long practised what is now being expressed as 'wellbeing frameworks' in many nation-states. Unlike the sentiment expressed in contemporary wellbeing frameworks, Country – the complex web of relationships between the human and other-than-human that underpins everything<sup>2</sup> – and relationality are fundamental to Indigenous 'wellbeing'. The philosophy of *mabu liyan* (good feeling), intrinsic to the Yawuru nation of North Western Australia, is only one example of Indigenous governance where Country-centred planning and relational wellbeing are 'business as usual'. Layering elements that are critical to Indigenous expressions of wellbeing, specifically Country and relationality, when developing wellbeing frameworks would broaden and deepen contemporary approaches to wellbeing while accommodating differences at the local scale.

## Introduction

This perspective indicates how philosophies such as Yawuru's *mabu liyan* can support relational, place-based, self-determined wellbeing initiatives while strengthening national policy efforts to capture the human and other-than-human interlinkages of wellbeing. These relational ways of seeing human beings, non-human animals and the natural world as having a common origin, history and future.<sup>3</sup> The authors support the broad idea of wellbeing frameworks but remain concerned about the choice of values incorporated and how to ensure that particularism is not completely lost in the pursuit of universalism in operationalising a national framework at regional or local scales.

Understandings of wellbeing disconnected from place, such as that represented by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) framework<sup>4</sup>, are very difficult to apply beyond the national scale effectively. Applying a national wellbeing framework with the underlying assumption of homogeneity is intrinsically problematic in modern settler-state nations with a history of high immigration, such as contemporary Australia. Wellbeing articulations are complex, framed by the diverse cultural understandings and backgrounds that make up the Australian population. This complexity is compounded by the need to meaningfully incorporate aspects of Indigenous wellbeing, such as Country-centred and relationality (between non-human and human), that differ from that of much of the population.

## From GDP to wellbeing

A decade after the Australian Government *Treasury's wellbeing framework*<sup>4</sup> was developed, the Australian Government's October 2022 Budget papers included, for the first time, a discussion of how national social progress with a wellbeing focus could be measured beyond traditional economic indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) *Framework for Measuring Wellbeing and Progress Statement*<sup>5</sup> for Australia is considered the "foundation of a conversation about how to measure what matters to Australians".<sup>6</sup> There have been other efforts to measure what matters, with wellbeing frameworks increasingly common globally as social, health and environmental issues, alongside economic concerns, are included in national accounting processes.<sup>7-10</sup> Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) was an early attempt to explicitly reject the fiscal bottom line that traditionally dominates government approaches to national accounting. Constitutionally enshrined in 2008, GNH ensures Bhutanese traditions and local values guide the path to collective wellbeing for its peoples.<sup>11</sup> While not adopting the GNH, the Australian Government seeks to better incorporate social and environmental data across different population groups with traditional economic data typically used in Government budgets, with reference to the OECD wellbeing framework.<sup>6</sup> *Closing the Gap* reporting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes was explicitly identified as one of the specialist non-economic reporting tools already employed by the Commonwealth Government<sup>6</sup> to 'measure what matters'. Despite *Closing the Gap* centrality to government measures of Indigenous peoples in Australia's wellbeing, this tool lacks any reference to Country and does not adequately capture the importance of Indigenous relationalities.

The OECD wellbeing framework presents as a universal, mechanistic, linear process where – if the correct mix of siloed wellbeing domains and associated indicators are found<sup>5</sup> – the resulting outcome is a more

palatable set of averages across national population groups. As a global benchmarking exercise, it is based on limited perspectives and a narrow set of values. Telling of the underlying axiology, the factors this framework considers necessary for future wellbeing are categorised into four 'resources', each entitled a form of 'capital' (National Capital, Economic Capital, Human Capital and Social Capital). While increasing attention is being paid to this framework by OECD members (for example, Italy, France, and Latvia), even those nations actively embracing a more comprehensive wellbeing approach (for example, Wales, Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand) are doing so with caveats, creating unique categories to measure what matters based on understandings of wellbeing relevant to their specific national contexts. These caveats represent alternative values of wellbeing on which the OECD framework is silent but which each jurisdiction believes necessary to create meaningful understandings of wellbeing. For example, *Te Tai Waiora: Wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand 2022*, Aotearoa New Zealand's first wellbeing report delivered in November 2022, incorporates *He Ara Waiora*, the Māori understanding of wellbeing.<sup>12</sup> This complements the OECD framework reporting and enables a whole population wellbeing assessment aligned with national values that acknowledges the need for other reporting mechanisms to capture diverse worldviews and priorities.

## Examples of Indigenous relationality

Bhutan and Vanuatu are leading nation-states that are crafting alternative ways to assess welfare and progress. Both nations have adopted versions of wellbeing accounting that redefine this subjective notion in their own ways and contexts, thus making culture foundational. In addition to centring culture, planning and accounting for living well in a connected and balanced sense underpins the way of life and being for many Indigenous groups.

In Latin America wellbeing philosophies such as *sumak kawsay* (a Quechua phrase) and *buen vivir* have emerged from Indigenous worldviews of the 'good life'. These Indigenous wellbeing approaches displace the human centrality evident in frameworks such as the OECD framework. Significantly, each case represents a local, culturally relevant and relational value that guides policy development and is embedded in the assessment of development plans and progress. The latter framework, particularly, takes a non-human-centred approach to wellbeing beyond that of planetary health.<sup>13,14</sup>

Contemporary Australia has ancient, proven approaches to achieving a 'good life', where the Indigenous ontological lens of relational, country-based wellbeing reigns. These Indigenous wellbeing-like frameworks, grounded in the relational web that is Country, are required to ensure that intergenerational

wellbeing becomes a reality rather than remaining aspirational and that the other-than-human is not an afterthought but is relational and central to human wellbeing.

## *mabu liyan*

*Kanyini* and *mabu liyan* are two examples of how Indigenous communities across Australia describe their accountability and responsibility to sustain the health of Country and the collective. Several language groups in Central Australia use *Kanyini* to describe connectedness to four concepts central for Aboriginal life – *tjukurrpa* (one's belief systems), *kurunpa* (one's spirituality), *ngura* (one's Country) and *waltyja* (one's family).<sup>15</sup>

The aspirations of the Yawuru, traditional custodians of lands and waters in and around Rubibi (the town of Broome, Western Australia), have been guided since time immemorial by *mabu ngarrungunil* (strong community), *mabu buru* (healthy Country) and *mabu liyan* (good feelings). All elements together need to co-exist for wellbeing to be realised for Yawuru. *Mabu liyan* is the heart of what it is to have and know a good life for Yawuru people<sup>16</sup>, and actively guides the nation (re)building aspirations of Yawuru since native title was determined in 2010.<sup>17</sup> For the Yawuru, expressions of *mabu liyan* are based on collective structures and living well with Country, culture, others and within oneself.

As saltwater people, Yawuru articulations of connectedness underpinning *mabu liyan* are multi-layered, from Indigenous knowledge and practices learnt as a child and transmission of those to future generations to the reciprocity of sharing and receiving the gifts of Country. These practices are heavily dependent on people's freedom to access the physical aspects of Country and their ability to carry out the responsibilities that have been handed down through their ancestor creation stories.<sup>16</sup> Like many other Indigenous communities, achieving and sustaining wellbeing for Yawuru today is intertwined with surviving in the modern world, negotiating the trade-offs in maintaining the various dimensions of living well against competing development activities and pressures on land and sea Country. *Mabu liyan* acts as a blueprint for wellbeing and prosperity on Yawuru terms.<sup>17</sup>

## Country: conceptualising and expressing the layers of wellbeing

The wellbeing accounting options presented in this article overtly differ from the transactional OECD wellbeing framework.<sup>5</sup> The former places Country, relationality and values at the centre; the latter is centred on people. *Mabu liyan*, one representation of Indigenous wellbeing approaches in Australia, demonstrates that relational-based wellbeing, premised on obligation, responsibility and reciprocity to the human and other-than-human,

is possible and necessary to address the challenges facing the global society. Understanding the significance of relationality and Country to wellbeing, particularly for Indigenous peoples, leaves us asking, how does a national approach to 'wellbeing' as articulated in the Commonwealth Government's 2022–23 budget effectively measure what matters to the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples in Australia?

Currently, 'universal' frameworks do not measure intra-nation wellbeing differences effectively. This matter remains problematic for the OECD, despite recent efforts to make the framework more relevant at sub-national scales.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, the indicators are defined in ways that do not readily reflect Indigenous wellbeing priorities and preferences. For significant activities, including employment, education and health, what constitutes wellbeing in this framework does not represent what matters to Indigenous peoples in Australia. When the time to benchmark comes, where is the place to measure the contribution of Country and relationality to wellbeing?

The Indigenous frameworks noted in this article all reflect collective, local understandings of wellbeing. Be it the 'good life', living well with Mother Earth or *mabu liyan*, each seeks to ensure individuals, the collective and Country experience wellbeing. These definitions of wellbeing are decided locally by those whose experience it is. The associated frameworks highlighted here are embedded in the groups' wellbeing systems and processes rather than as an adjunct to those processes because of the priority placed on Country and relationality in these societies.

A wellbeing focus in budgetary and other policies has been Indigenous practice since before the dawn of colonisation's 'golden age'. The omission of Indigenous approaches to wellbeing from relevant 2022 budget papers is disappointing. *Mabu liyan*, for example, offers a whole-of-life, collective approach to wellbeing. In recent years, the Yawuru have spent much time clarifying how the nature of and need for *mabu liyan* is relevant for their contemporary lives.<sup>19</sup> Strategic plans and annual reporting centred on *mabu liyan* as a framework are just some of the methods deployed by Nyamba Buru Yawuru, Yawuru's native title representative body, to set the frame of engagement with other parties interested to work with Yawuru.<sup>17</sup> The *Cultural Management Plan*<sup>16</sup> which describes the importance of *mabu liyan*, alongside *mabu buru* and *mabu ngarrungunil* remains the foundation document, following native title determination. Importantly, Yawuru women and men have been instrumental in developing community wellbeing indicators for assessing and reporting on their collective and relational wellbeing, setting the scene on which measures matter.<sup>20</sup> The Yawuru approach is in contrast to the *Closing the Gap* and *State of the Environment* reporting, employed by settler-state institutions to measure what matters to Indigenous peoples in Australia, i.e., to articulate aspects of Indigenous wellbeing. The most recent *Closing the Gap* report shows gaps increasing in more 'indicators'

than those where the gap is decreasing.<sup>21</sup> The *State of the Environment* report is so dire that the current Government has declared it will start over with Australian environmental legislation and reporting.<sup>22</sup>

## A layered approach to wellbeing frameworks

It is possible that a national wellbeing project could attract greater success by being more layered in its conception and articulation, centring Country and relationality to allow diversity to flourish in the gap between local and national perspectives. The Aotearoa New Zealand approach, layering *He Ara Waiora* within the OCED framework, exemplifies efforts to localise universal projections of wellbeing. This creates and makes that space visible to recognise the unique position of the Māori, enabling the nation to meet its wellbeing aspirations more equitably.<sup>12</sup>

Should the Australian Government persist with the OECD framework to set national wellbeing goals, the base layers could become what matters according to Indigenous wellbeing values. *Mabu liyan, kanyini* and similar understandings of wellbeing offer tested principles to craft a wellbeing framework that allows local areas to contribute uniquely to national goals. In particular, a framework based on Country and relationality layers offers the opportunity to develop a meaningful aggregate picture of national wellbeing premised on local autonomy. Significantly, such layers radically expand notions of whose wellbeing such frameworks will support.

The silence on Country and relationality in Australian Government budget papers indicates that Indigenous wellbeing values were not prioritised. While recognising that wellbeing is a complex issue and that any framework necessarily simplifies this complexity, to disregard Indigenous peoples' understandings of wellbeing entirely is to leave Indigenous peoples in Australia with yet another gap resistant to narrowing. However, if the framework was layered with relationality and Country, national and local wellbeing might meaningfully intertwine.

## Peer review and provenance

Externally peer reviewed, invited.

## Competing interests

None declared.

## Author contributions

KH was the lead author and crafted the paper structure and narrative with MY. MY worked with EY on the *Yawuru/Liyan* material. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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