



Never Stand Still

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Australia's Progress in the 21st Century: Pilot Program on Measuring Social Progress

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1 Introduction and Background

Interest in the value of developing comprehensive measures of social progress is gaining momentum, nationally and internationally. There is growing concern that a narrow focus on the economic dimension of progress – as captured in movements in GDP, for example – is not consistent with broader conceptions of wellbeing or quality of life that are relevant to assessing overall progress and does not reflect community views about what constitutes progress. If undue attention is focused on narrow measures like GDP, this is likely to divert attention away from the role of important environmental, social and political factors in contributing to social progress.

Although the limitations of GDP and other economic measures have long been acknowledged, it is only recently that countries have started to develop alternative frameworks that are explicitly designed to overcome these weaknesses. In Australia, the role and importance of developing a new index of progress was discussed by participants in the 2020 Summit held in Canberra in 2008 (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2009). One of the ‘big ideas’ to emerge from those discussions was the need for development of a national index of progress that would be based on ‘engaging with the community in discussions about what is important for progress and development’ (p. 180).¹ In the global context, participants in the 2009 G20 Summit supported a similar approach and ‘encouraged work on measurement methods that better take into account the social and environmental dimensions of economic development’ (quoted in ABS, 2010a).

In order to establish whether progress is being achieved it must first be defined and measured. Writing over a decade ago when introducing an important Australian contribution to this issue, Eckersley (1998; p. vii) noted that:

‘How we answer the question of whether or not life is getting better depends crucially on how we define and measure ‘a better life’. Definitions and measurements of progress exercise immense influence on public policy, private practice and personal choice. Indicators of progress are the subject of growing international debate. At one level, the debate is about the adequacy of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the dominant measure of a nation’s performance, relative to both past and other nations. However, the debate also reaches far beyond this question to challenge conventional thinking about progress and the relationships between economic growth, quality of life and ecological sustainability. This debate could alter radically our perceptions of progress, what it means, and how we measure it.’

¹ It is also worth noting in this context that the federal government’s social inclusion agenda includes as one of its domains in the broad area of participation that people should ‘have a voice’ with a headline indicator that captures political and civic participation by adults (see Australian Government, 2010; 2012).

The Australian Statistician has recently reinforced the importance of these issues, noting that measuring progress 'is perhaps the most important task a national statistical agency undertakes' (see ABS, 2012; p. 7). Reflecting this, the ABS has recently undertaken an extensive consultation process designed to get a better understanding of what the Australian community understands by the notion of progress and how it should be measured (ABS, 2012b).

These concerns have been given international impetus by the eminent authors of a report commissioned by former French President Nicholas Sarkozy (hereafter the Stiglitz report), who argued that a:

'shift of emphasis' is required, away from a 'production-oriented' measurement system like that which generates GDP to 'one focused on the well-being of current and future generations, i.e. towards a broader measure of social progress' Stiglitz, Sen and Fiitoussi, 2009; p. 10).²

Following the release of the report, many countries have adopted the broad approach of developing indicators that cover three specific areas: (1) revised and improved coverage of economic issues; (2) quality of life; and (3) sustainability. This framework contrasts with that used in some existing efforts to develop a more holistic approach - for example, the UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI), which covers three dimensions: income, education and health (see UNDP, 2010).

Despite its impact and influence, the HDI does not achieve the goals required of a broader measure of social progress. As the OECD has noted:

'... existing approaches lack public understanding and political support. Notwithstanding some good ideas, the "Holy Grail" has not yet been found: none of the proposed frameworks has been recognised as fully satisfactory and none has emerged as a worldwide reference' (Hall et al., 2010; pp. 12-3)

These limitations are being addressed by the OECD in its Better Life Initiative, launched by the OECD secretary-General at the 2011 OECD Forum and culminating in the release of the report *How's Life?* later that year (OECD, 2011).

The OECD Initiative has also resulted in the production of the Your Better Life Index – an interactive composite index that allows individuals to select their own weighting scheme to combine the different dimensions as a way of 'involving citizens in the debate on social progress'.³ As the Secretary-General of the OECD notes in the Foreword to the report:

² One of the authors of that report, Nobel prize winner Joseph Stiglitz has emphasised the importance of this 'fundamental work, which is so essential to policymakers, and other stakeholders, including the wider public' (Stiglitz, 2009).

³ An important feature of the OECD project is the emphasis given to incorporating the views of individuals into the dimensions (or domains) of progress that should be included in any holistic approach.

'Better policies need to be based on sound evidence and a broad focus: Not only on people's income and financial conditions, but also on their health, their competencies, on the quality of the environment, where they live and work, their overall life satisfaction. Not only on the total amount of goods and services, but also on equality and the conditions of those at the bottom of the ladder. Not only on the conditions "here and now" but also those in other parts of the worlds and those that are likely to prevail in the future. In summary, we need to focus on well-being and progress' (OECD, 2011).

Australia has played an important role in the development of a broader approach to measuring progress, with the ABS playing the lead role. One of its flagship publications *Measures of Australia's Progress* (Catalogue No. 1370.0) - first released in 2002 – provides 'an informative "dashboard" of information for those wishing to assess national progress [that is] internationally acknowledged as a best practice model in this area' (ABS, 2010b; p. 4).⁴ The ABS has recently undertaken an extensive national consultation designed to review the approach and ensure that 'it remains relevant to today's society – that we are measuring what Australian society cares about' (Pink; p. 7 in ABS, 2012b).

The MAP 'dashboard' approach provides an important conceptual framework that underpins the notion of progress, identifies a set of domains that capture different dimensions of progress and, within each domain, a list of headline and supplementary indicators that reflect specific elements within each domain.⁵ (it is worth noting, in passing that although the dashboard approach avoids the need to combine the indicators – a process that requires weights to be attached to each element – the distinction between headline and supplementary indicators already implies that some indicators are seen as more important than others). The recent MAP consultation is serving an important role in ensuring that the domains and indicators reflect the views of members of Australian society about what matters to them when it comes to identifying social progress.

However, what the MAP project does not do is seek to combine the indicators *within* each domain into a single index for that domain, or to combine the information *between* the different domains into an overall index of progress. Whether or not such an extension would be conceptually and practically viable within the existing framework, or what revisions to the framework would be required to facilitate such a change, were not considered as part of the recent MAP community consultation exercise.

⁴ Salvaris (2013; p. 10) notes that with the implementation of MAP 'the ABS became the first national statistical organisation in the world to develop a framework which acknowledged the limitations of GDP as a measure of social progress' and that subsequent revisions and innovations have ensured that MAP 'remains a global leader among national statistical offices'

⁵ A similar approach has been applied by the Australian Social Inclusion Unit in its development of a social inclusion indicator framework for Australia that is being used to monitor progress made under the federal government's social inclusion agenda (see Australian Government, 2012; Appendix A).

One approach that does seek to combine the indicators into an overall measure is the Canadian Index of Well-Being (CIW) developed by researchers in the Faculty of Applied Health Sciences at the University of Waterloo, but with the support of a range of other contributors and with funding from a charitable organisation (see Canadian Index of Well-Being, 2012). As explained by Kroll (2011):

'The explicit goal of the CIW is to influence the debate on [progress in Canada by providing the public and the media with information and thus, at the end of the day, to make politicians more aware of indicators beyond GDP' (Kroll, 2011; p. 12)

In order to achieve this aim, the CIW is now presented not just using a dashboard of indicators (in their case, 8 indicators in each of 8 domains – 64 in all) but as a single composite index whose movements over time can then be compared with (for example) GDP. The construction of a single index raises many conceptual and practical challenges but is regarded by many as an important step because it provides a single figure that can be easily communicated to the public and generate meaningful debate about the meaning of progress and how well society is travelling.

The approaches referred to above that seek to develop a basis for establishing how social progress is defined and how it is changing share several features. Not all of these are reflected in each approach, although they are all consistent with the motivations and insights that underpin the efforts to measure social progress. These key features are that the measurement of social progress should:

- extend beyond the economic;
- be multidimensional in theory and practice;
- adopt an indicator approach rather than one based on measures; and
- include both subjective and objective variables.

As noted, not all approaches have tried to aggregate the indicators into an aggregate index that captures overall movements within or between domains, but where this is attempted, it is important to recognise that different individuals will assign different weights to the different components within each domain and to the relative importance of the different domains, making it problematic to establish 'the' answer to the question of whether progress has been achieved, in which dimensions, and by how much.

Against the above background, the aim of this report is to contribute to the pilot project that is underway on 'Australia's Progress in the 21st Century' (AP21). Part of the AP21 pilot involves a critical review of national and international work in the field over the last two decades, which will: .

'... summarise the most important projects, books and articles, progress measurement models, indicators of progress and relevant instruments for measuring progress, both nationally and internationally. It should be written within the broader context of exploring or analysing the overall measuring

progress movement in the last 20 or so years, including its likely future development and implications for policy-making and government in Australia with some recommendations for further detailed development.'

It is acknowledged that because of the limited funding available and the tight timeline for completion of the work the report will not contain:

'a comprehensive or definitive review of all ... items but rather a concise summary of the most important items and trends, and a clear indication as to how a comprehensive and analytical literature review would be carried out as part of a three-year fully funded project'.

In addressing this task, the agreed goals of this report are to:

- Provide a listing of current work being undertaken in Australia on the measurement of well-being and social progress, including that being conducted by the ABS and by independent research institutes;
- Summarise work on well-being and social progress being undertaken in a limited range of countries, focusing on those that have most in common with Australia (i.e. Canada, the UK and New Zealand);
- Summarise the main features of the OECD Better Life Initiative and related work being undertaken by leading international agencies;
- Draw out the main trends that emerge from this work on the framework being used, the scope of well-being, and efforts to engage the community in the development of new measures of progress;
- Provide a brief critical assessment of the alternative approaches and draw out some of the main implications for developing and disseminating new measures of social progress in Australia;
- A brief assessment of the main policy and other applications of new progress measures and the implications for government; and
- An indication of how future work in this area could be developed under a better resourced project.

In addressing these issues, the report addresses the following specific questions:

- 1) How is the scope of social progress identified in the different approaches and what domains of progress are identified?
- 2) Are the domains aggregated into a single index and, if so, what weighting scheme(s) is/are used?
- 3) How form does engagement with the community take and how are the results integrated into the measures used?

The following section of the report addresses the first two of these questions, while Section 3 addresses the consultation issue and the final section draws together the main threads of the argument and sets out some of the implications for future work in the area.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that the degree of detail that has been possible to incorporate has been restricted by the resources and time available. The

report should thus been seen as taking stock of broad trends and highlighting important implications for future work, rather than providing a definitive assessment of the huge volume of material that currently exists. An indication is, however, provided in the final section of what the scope and content of a larger that is adequately resourced project designed to conduct a systematic review of available material and its application in Australia would look like.

2 Identifying the Domains of Social Progress

The discussion in this section focuses on developments in a small range of countries that have traditionally been of interest to Australia because of historical and/or institutional similarities. Although there is much to be gained from studying the experience of the countries included in addition to Australia (Canada, the UK and New Zealand), as well as from the OECD experience that is leading international efforts in the field, there are many other examples that could be usefully discussed in a fuller project. Some aspects of these are covered in a summary table (see [Appendix A](#)) but it has not been possible to cover all of the details of the developments summarised there.

2.1 Selected Country Experience

2.1.1 Australia

The measurement and monitoring of social progress and well-being in Australia has been extensive and acknowledged internationally. One of the main initiatives in Australia is that of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Following the global movement in measuring societal progress and well-being, the ABS was the first national statistics office in the world to develop a framework of progress in 2000. **The ABS *Measures of Australia's Progress* (MAP) project is grounded on the belief that the measurement of progress actually promotes progress, and that its framework can be used to support evidence-based policy making, encourage public debate and foster democracy (ABS, 2009).** The framework is built around three key questions: (1) what is meant by progress overall?; (2) how can progress be described across society, the economy and the environment?; and (3) what indicators best encapsulate progress in each dimension?

The domains of progress identified in the MAP project are based on a three-dimensional view encompassing economic, societal and environmental concerns. Within these three domains, 17 dimensions have been identified, including: health; education and training; work; crime; family, community and social cohesion; democracy, governance and citizenship; national income; national wealth; household economic well-being; housing; productivity; biodiversity; land; inland waters; oceans estuaries; atmosphere and waste.

MAP portrays progress in Australia using a suite of indicators approach. That is, indicators are presented side by side (within each of their domains) and published by the ABS using a 'dashboard' approach. The dashboard approach allows a simple method of monitoring progress by reporting whether each domain has improved, deteriorated or experienced no significant change. **This allows the public to view the state of Australia's progress across all domains at a glance. However, because**

there is no overall assessment as reflected in a composite index that combines the different indicators into a single index, it is up to the reader to evaluate whether life in Australia has improved or worsened overall. The latest (2012) MAP publication indicates that positive progress has generally been made in the areas of health, education and training, work, national income, national wealth and household economic well-being. There has been no significant movement in the area of housing, and the productivity domain has regressed (ABS, 2012).

In terms of public views and community engagement, the ABS has engaged key players in determining what is meant by progress and how it should be measured. First, it has directly consulted stakeholders and experts in the field of social, economic and environmental measures about which domains and indicators to include. Secondly, it received feedback and input through the ABS regular user group discussions and third, through a series of wide-ranging consultation processes which began in 2001. More recently, the ABS recently announced that a new MAP framework is under development following a comprehensive consultation process with the Australian community. The consultation, known as MAP 2.0, was carried out at the end of 2011 to identify aspirations of Australians by asking them 'What is important to you for national progress?' (ABS, 2012b) The findings from this consultation will be used to revise the current framework and to adjust it to changing social priorities (see below).

Another important initiative in Australia is the Australian Unity Well-being Index (AUWI). Launched in 2001, this is a joint project based on a partnership between Australian Unity and the Australian Centre on Quality of Life at Deakin University. The index has been described by Australian Unity as having 'established itself as the leading and most comprehensive measure of wellbeing in Australia' and in its construction encompasses subjective well-being measures that capture 'how Australians feel about personal issues such as their relationships or national issues such as satisfaction with government'. This provides a new perspective that focuses on the kinds of subjective indicators that were given emphasis in the Stiglitz report, most of which are not captured in traditional measurement frameworks based largely on objective economic considerations. The index thus complements other frameworks such as the MAP by examining well-being subjectively, as opposed to the predominantly objective approach adopted by MAP.

Life satisfaction is measured using two scales – a personal well-being index and the national well-being index. The former comprises of seven aspects of personal life: standard of living; health; achievements; personal relationships; safety; community connectedness; and future security. The national well-being index concentrates on aspects of national life such as the economy, environment and social conditions. The survey is conducted twice yearly by telephone on around 2,000 people and also includes additional questions on specific aspects of life such as trust, marriage and climate change. Respondents are asked to rate their level of satisfaction with each identified topic using a scale from 0 to 10. The reported satisfaction scales are then

aggregated into two composite indexes which are each adjusted to have a range of 0 to 100 – ‘life as a whole’ for the personal well-being scale and ‘life in Australia’ for the national well-being scale.

The Australian National Development Index (ANDI) is based on a citizen’s initiative, launched in 2010, with the aim of engaging Australians in a national debate about what progress means to Australians in the 21st century (Allen Consulting Group, 2012). ANDI is made up of a consortium of non-government organisations, businesses and universities that represent a diverse range of community interest and knowledge. It receives support from its key research partner, the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA), a national peak body of scholars and researchers that spans universities and disciplines.

ANDI’s goal is to move towards the development of a holistic measure of progress that reflects the views and priorities of Australians. Building on the recommendations in the Stiglitz report and subsequent work undertaken by the OECD, ANDI will promote a series of national conversations and debates about what progress means as a prerequisite to the development of new measures and indicators of progress (Salvaris, 2013). In terms of its structure, ANDI is modelled on the Canadian index of Well-being (CIW – see below) and CIW has become a ‘partner’ to the ANDI [project as a way of promoting the exchange of ideas and practices. As part of the development of ANDI, a pilot project has been carried out to collect the views of community members in New South Wales and Victoria, and a series of focus groups have been conducted to discuss what Australians are thinking about progress and wellbeing, and to help identify key priorities and values and aspiration for progress. These focus groups were conducted using an ‘unprompted’ approach that encouraged a general conversation about the drivers of progress rather than seeking to build on existing frameworks. The outcomes from these discussions align very closely with the domains and themes identified in other studies on progress (Kellard and Pennay, 2013).

In terms of its structure, ANDI is being developed around 12 domains. These are: children’s and young people’s well-being; community and regional life; culture, recreation and leisure; governance and democracy; economic life and prosperity; education, knowledge and creativity; sustainability and environment; health; indigenous wellbeing; justice, fairness and human rights; subjective wellbeing; and work and work life. It is proposed that a composite index will be derived for each domain and across the 12 domains to measure and monitor Australia’s overall progress over time and its breakdown. It is expected that each domain index will be released annually but in a different month of the year in order to maintain interest in the project and its findings and to further encourage discussion and debate among the public about the priorities for national progress (Salvaris, 2013). Although currently in its infancy, the ANDI project is a progressive initiative, particularly in its proposed involvement with the local, national, and international communities, and

plans to engage Australian citizens through an array of participatory programs such as forums, surveys and the social media

In addition to the MAP and ANDI initiatives, other work has been conducted in Australia on measuring well-being and progress that could not be reviewed here because of time and funding limitations. The Australian Treasury has developed a wellbeing framework to underpin its analysis and advice across the full range of their public policy responsibilities (Parkinson, 2004). The framework is built upon traditional ideas used in welfare economics and the theory of utilitarianism but extends the understanding and determinants of well-being using Sen's capability approach (Sen, 1999). The resulting dimensions are however, narrowly focused on consumer capacity and economic performance of individuals and no attempt has been made to take account of a wider range of economic, social and environmental factors. Other Australian initiatives include the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) (Hamilton, 1998) and, more recently the Herald-Age-Lateral-Economics (HALE) index of Australia's wellbeing (Fairfax Media and Lateral Economics, 2011).

2.1.2 Canada

The Canadian Well-being Index (CIW) was established in 2004 to meet the need for an independent and credible voice to measure the economic, health, social and environmental well-being of Canadians. Today it is seen as a global pioneer in developing a holistic and integrated framework of well-being which is widely acknowledged around the world as a leader in the field. The CIW is supported by the combined efforts of national and international leaders, researchers, organisations and citizens through a network that is based in the Faculty of Applied Health Sciences at the University of Waterloo (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2012).

Importantly, the CIW is not seen as an alternative to GDP but as a complement to it. Thus as the co-Chairs of the CIW Advisory Board note when introducing a recent report on its development note:

'Canada, like most countries, is facing difficult challenges ahead. In these uncertain times, we are fortunate to live in a country where we have choices about how we want the future to look. The CIW provides a broader depth of understanding that, *when partnered with GDP*, gives us the evidence needed to help steer Canada forward and build a society that responds to the call for greater fairness' (Romanov and Bégin, in Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2012; Italics added)

The development of the CIW has been categorised as reflecting a 'bi-directional' approach, whereby a conceptual framework is built alongside investigation into possible datasets that could be used to populate that framework (Michalos et al., 2011). Those involved in the development of CIW also collected community views about what really matter to people's well-being through three rounds of public consultations that were used as inputs into the design of the domains and indicators (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2012).

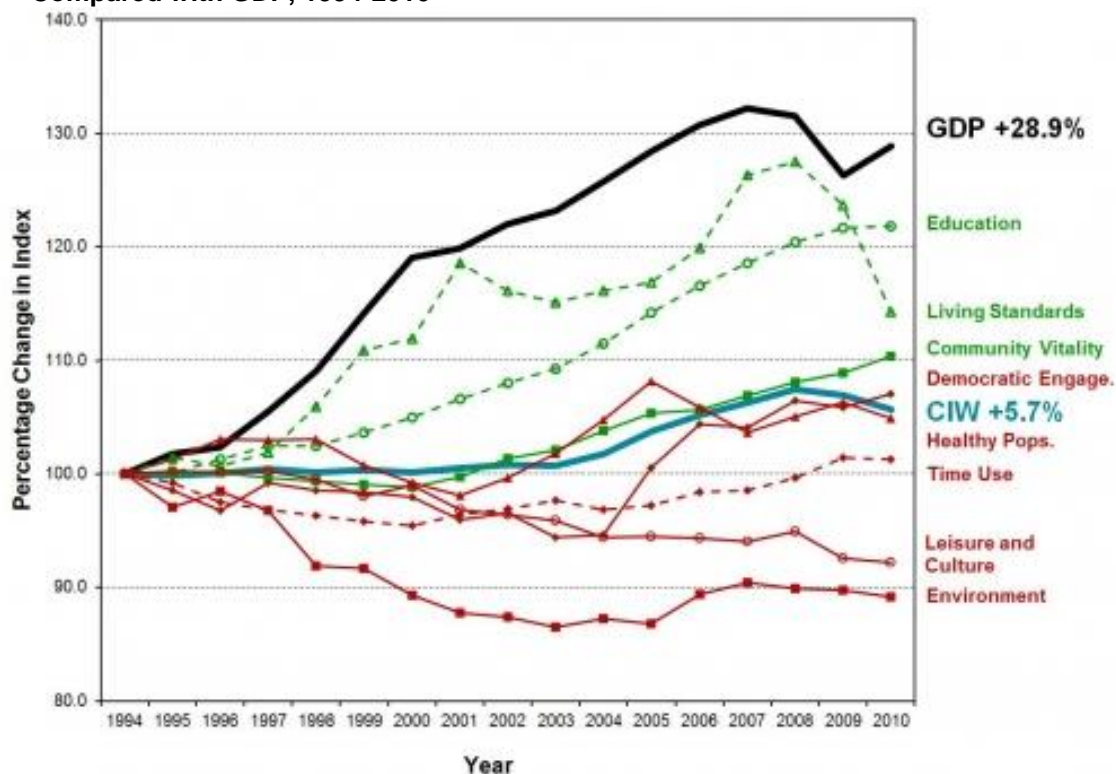
Discussion surrounding the conceptual framework of the CIW began by reviewing the central topics surrounding the CIW; wellbeing, quality of life and health. The CIW technical report, *Technical Paper: Canadian index of wellbeing 1.0*, suggests that 'overall well-being' is roughly synonymous with 'quality of life', where quality can vary according to the different perspectives or domains from which they are viewed, and that 'measuring what matters' directly implies the need to measure what is important from the perspective of the individual (Michalos et al., 2011).

The bi-directional approach resulted in the identification of a set of eight key domains surrounding the quality of life in Canada. These are: community vitality; democratic engagement; education; environment; healthy populations; leisure and culture; living standards; and time use. These domains clearly shift the focus of CWI away from traditional economic measures of progress like GDP, to a more complete and inclusive view of what matters most to Canadians.

Within each domain, there are eight headline indicators which were developed by both national and international experts in the areas of wellbeing and the data are primarily drawn from various cycles of the National Population Health Survey (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2012). The constructed domain indexes are aggregated to form the CIW composite index. In constructing the aggregates indexes for each domain and the overall CWI index, the relevant indicators and domain aggregates are assigned an equal weight (Michalos et al., 2011).

The CIW has attracted considerable attention in Canada and internationally not only because of the innovative ideas, methods and data used in its construction, but also because of the ways in which the findings it has generated have been disseminated. Figure 1 compares movements in CIW and GDP over the period 1994-2010 and highlights the very different picture of progress that is revealed by the two indexes. In overall terms, the 28.9% increase in GDP over the period was around five times greater than the 5.7% growth in CIW. And as the report notes, while GDP declined as a result of the recession induced by the global financial crisis in 2008 by 8.3% but had started to recover by 2010, the decline in CIW was almost three times greater (at 24 per cent), with no sign of recovery evident by 2010. **These differences illustrate vividly what difference the measure adopted makes to any conclusions about how a particular society is travelling – over the medium-term but also in response to short-run external shocks.**

Figure 1: Trends in the Canadian Index of Wellbeing with Eight Domains and Compared with GDP, 1994-2010



Source: Canadian Index of Wellbeing (2012)

A striking feature of the trends displayed in Figure 1 is how different the growth rates are for the different domains of CIW. While two of them (education and living standards) show reasonably strong growth (over 10%), growth in community vitality, democratic engagement and healthy populations grew by less than 10%, while time use hardly grew at all and leisure and culture and environment declined overall – in the latter case by more than 10%. Comparison of the domain movements with that of GDP also show which domains have (at least over this period) best tracked what has happened to GDP and which show the greatest divergence.

Although (like all composite indexes) the methods used to construct CIW can be challenged and criticised, the trends shown in Figure 1 reveal the powerful effects that an index like CIW can have on public understanding of how much progress has been achieved and on what factors have contributed most to it. The comparisons also show that if greater weight was placed in factors like education and living standards when constructing CIW, it would show a more similar pattern of change to GDP than if greater weight was placed on leisure and culture and the environment. The relatively poor performance of this latter factor over the period raise questions about the third of the three factors emphasised in the Stiglitz report as contributing to overall progress - sustainability. In contrast, the sluggish movements in community vitality and democratic engagement suggest that many people feel alienated from the processes that underpin social change, raising further questions about its sustainability.

These reflections on the trends shown in Figures 1 illustrate the great potential that a progress index like CIW has to generate an informed debate about the meaning of progress, how it is conceptualised and measured, and how an index can be used to inform such debate. The community engagement that has already gone into the development of CIW will benefit further from the discussions that surround what the index reveals about the extent and nature of progress and those discussions can feed into further improvements in the construction and dissemination processes.

2.1.3 United Kingdom

There has been a significant shift in recent years towards the importance of measuring well-being in the United Kingdom (UK). In November 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron announced that a large scale initiative, led by the Office of National Statistics (ONS), would be carried out to devise new measures of well-being for the purpose of guiding policy. He announced in particular that:

'...we'll start measuring our progress as a country, not just by how our economy is growing, but by how our lives are improving; not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life' (Cameron, 2010).

The framework for measuring and understanding well-being in the UK was based on both a conceptual approach as well as consultative approach in which domains and dimensions are determined through consultation (ONS, 2011a). Specifically, the framework is a product of outcomes from a national debate as well as responses from organisations such as the New Economics Foundation and by referring to international literature on well-being such as the Stiglitz reports and the OECD compendium of well-being indicators (ONS, 2011b).

Four major themes that reflect national well-being in the UK have been identified: (1) the idea that individual well-being is central to the understanding of national well-being and should include subjective as well as objective measures; (2) national well-being is affected by individual circumstances and the sustainability of current levels of well-being; (3) a set of domains need to be established to capture individual measures and determine national well-being; and (4) local factors are relevant to well-being (ONS, 2011b). The ONS have also taken a bi-directional approach in developing its set of well-being measures. Objective measures have been collected from an array of existing sources, as well as those suggested in the national debate and potential measures under development.⁶ However, because subjective responses are not currently available in large-scale UK datasets, the ONS has launched an *Integrated Household Survey* to consistently measure subjective well-being.

⁶ Sources include the Equality Measurement Framework which was established by ONS in partnership with other bodies, Defra's Sustainable Development Indicators and measures used by the OECD, quality of life indicators as currently being developed by Eurostat (ONS, 2011).

In 2011, four questions relating to subjective well-being were asked to approximately 200,000 individuals.⁷ The purpose of this initiative was to complement the objective measures and to move towards providing a more complete picture of well-being. The ONS has also capitalised on its previous work on measuring children's well-being to develop measures related specifically to children (ONS, 2009). It has also built on existing measures of economic well-being to take account of extended measures of household income and consumption and to reflect the contribution of 'in kind' services provided by government (ONS, 2011). Other topics that were emphasised in designing the framework included 'fairness' and 'equality' as well as the present and future conditions of the environment (ONS, 2011). In addition, the ONS has recognised two essential elements in maintaining a consistent approach to the measurement of well-being: first, that the data needs be relevant to specific policy areas; and secondly, that the framework should be sustainable.⁸

The overall effects of the central role of individual wellbeing as well as the different factors mentioned above are reflected in Figure 2. This framework and thematic areas were used to develop the domains of wellbeing (ONS, 2012). The ten domains identified in the UK framework centre not only on well-being at the individual level but also include contextual domains that reflect well-being within the government, economy and the environment. The focus on individuals is reflected in the description of the domains, which include individual well-being (subjective well-being), our relationships (family and social life), health, what we do (work and leisure), where we live (crime and neighbourhood), personal finance (income and wealth), education and skills, the economy (national accounts), governance (democracy and trust) and the natural environment.⁹ The indicators within these domains have gone through comprehensive evaluation by the ONS to ensure their integrity.¹⁰ There is no composite or single overall index although information about the construction and nature of the indicators is reported in the ONS publication *Measuring National Well-being: Life in the UK, 2012* (Self et al., 2012).

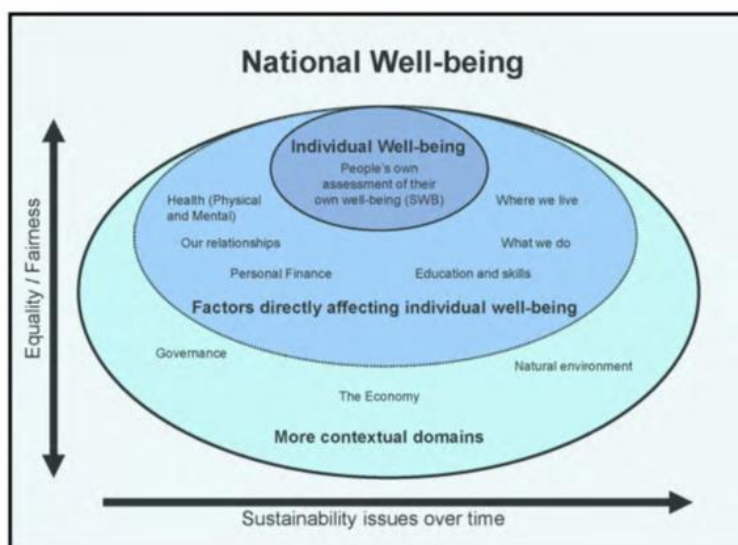
⁷ The questions ask 'how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?', 'how happy did you feel yesterday?', 'how anxious did you feel yesterday?' and 'to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?' (see Kroll, 2011; p. 6).

⁸ The ONS proposed to work with the Government Statistical Service departmental heads of profession to address data for policy areas and is currently working with Defra's Sustainable Development Indicators (ONS, 2011).

⁹ The consultation process encountered some criticism on the scope of these domains, with the suggestion that they should either be merged or divided. There were also responses suggesting that there should be additional domains that address other detailed individual areas (ONS, 2012).

¹⁰ More detail on the evaluation of the indicators is provided on page 16 of ONS (2011), *Measuring What Matters: National Statistician's Reflections on the National Debate on Measuring National Well-being*, UK Office of National Statistics.

Figure 2: Framework in Measuring National Well-being in the UK



Source: ONS (2012)

2.1.4 New Zealand

In New Zealand, the then Ministry of Social Policy took on the task of regular monitoring and assessment of the social state of the nation over a decade ago (Ministry of Social Policy, 2001). The annual publication of *The Social Report*, now produced by the Ministry of Social Development and in its tenth year, provides a compilation of social indicators in which New Zealand's progress in key social goals and areas of well-being can be monitored over time. The four key aims of *The Social Report* are: (1) to report on social indicators that complement existing economic and environmental indicators; (2) to compare New Zealand with other countries on measures of well-being; (3) to contribute to better-informed public debate on the nature and determinants of well-being; and (4) to aid planning and decision-making and to help identify key areas for action (Ministry of Social Development, 2010).

New Zealand's social reporting framework is based upon national research such as that generated by the Royal Commissions on Social Security (1972) and Social Policy (1988) on issues relating to quality of life, as well as the international convention on human rights (Ministry of Social Policy, 2001). The framework contains two main attributes in relation to its approach to measuring progress: where the improvement or deterioration in the quality of life can be easily interpreted and detected; and the use of indicators that focus on outcomes rather than inputs.¹¹ In addition, the framework has also been developed following consultations with government and non-government social policy experts about their views on what

¹¹ A full list of criteria for selecting indicators is listed on page 10 of *The Social Report 2001* (Ministry of Social Policy, 2001).

constitute good outcomes for New Zealand and its people (Ministry of Social Policy, 2001).

In 2001, *The Social Report* started off with reporting on 36 indicators of social well-being across 9 domains. Because these indicators are updated and revised every year to reflect new and better data, as well as community feedback and expert comment, the 2010 report contains 43 indicators across the following 10 domains: health; knowledge and skills; paid work; economic standard of living; civil and political rights; cultural identity; leisure and recreation; safety; social connectedness; and life satisfaction. The physical environment domain has been dropped altogether in the 2010 report due to limited information on air quality and drinking-water quality, which reduces the usefulness of the information as social indicators (Ministry of Social Development, 2010). Against this, life satisfaction was included as a new domain in 2010. **Another important aspect about the domains used in New Zealand is that they each contain a desired outcome statement, which is used to guide the development and scope of the indicators within each domain. So far, no attempt has been made to construct a composite index that combines the domains into an overall measure.**

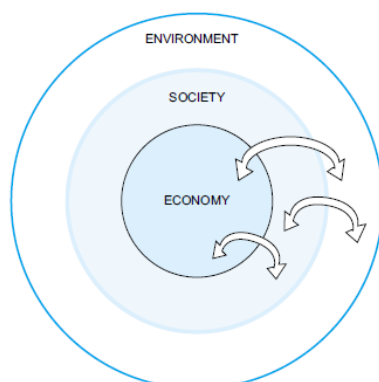
Statistics New Zealand has also made a move towards measuring social progress in its experimental report on *Monitoring Progress Towards a Sustainable New Zealand*, released in 2002. Following this, Statistics New Zealand was invited to participate in 2006 in an international working group on statistics for sustainable development with the OECD, the United Nations Economic Committee for Europe (UNECE) and Eurostat (part of the European Commission). Outcomes from the working group and the 2002 report resulted in the development of a framework for measuring sustainable development released two years later (Statistics New Zealand, 2008).

Statistics New Zealand has adopted the capital approach in measuring sustainable development and is based on the MONET framework (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2004).¹² The conceptual framework uses three target dimensions to describe New Zealand's development path: environmental responsibility; economic efficiency; and social cohesion. The indicators have been chosen to measure both the status of these dimensions and the interactions between them – at a point in time and over time (Figure 2). There are 15 indicator topics that have been identified that relate to one or more of the target dimensions – population; atmosphere; biodiversity; culture and identity; economic resilience; energy; health; innovation; land use; living conditions; social connections and governance ; transport; waste; water; and work, knowledge and skills. A small number of these indicators are then allocated to

¹² Essentially, two methods are combined in order to set up the indicators for sustainable development, 1) a thematic approach asks which content is relevant and should be represented by indicators therefore answering the question of 'what to measure' and 2) the procedural approach focuses on processes influencing sustainable development, hence, answering the question of 'how to measure' (Statistics New Zealand, 2008).

each topic area (for details, see Statistics New Zealand, 2008; Statistics New Zealand, 2009).

Figure 3: Model of sustainability



Source: Statistics New Zealand (2002)

Information on the indicators and trends were first published in *Measuring Sustainable Development: 2008* (Statistics New Zealand, 2009). The focus of the report was on answering the question: 'How is New Zealand progressing towards or away from sustainable development?' Similar to the ABS' Measure of Australia's Progress reports, the outcome-focused indicators are presented using a dashboard approach. Changes between 1988 and 2008 are compared and trends are identified for each indicator. They are then labelled with a positive, negative or neutral change relating to the target trends for sustainable development (Statistics New Zealand, 2009).

2.2 Selected International Experience

2.2.1 The OECD

The OECD has long been a world leader in the development of quality of life indicators. It drew attention to the importance of social indicators in the 1970s and produced a major report on their development and use in the 1980s (OECD, 1986). More recently, it has made significant contributions to the debate on measuring well-being and social progress. In 2004, it hosted the first World Forum on Statistics, Knowledge and Policy in Palermo, followed by two consequential forums in Istanbul in 2007 and Busan in 2009. This led to the signing of the highly influential Istanbul Declaration and the launch of Global Project on Measuring the Progress of Societies (OECD, 2008). These initiatives share three key objectives: (1) to involve citizens in the discussions of what type of progress societies should strive for; (2) to identify a range of indicators that paint a more accurate picture of whether people's lives are getting better or worse; and (3) to reflect on how better measures of well-being and progress can inform public policy (OECD, 2011a).

In May 2011, the OECD launched the *Better Life Initiative* with the goal to:

'... allow a better understanding of what drives the well-being of people and nations and what needs to be done to achieve greater progress for all' (OECD, 2011a)

In line with its key objectives, the OECD published a *Compendium of OECD Well-being Indicators* (OECD, 2011b) and the interactive web-based tool, *Your Better Life Index*. The findings for the 34 OECD countries using these indicators have also been documented (see OECD, 2011a).

The conceptual framework underpinning the *How's Life?* report draws largely on the recommendations of the Stiglitz report, along with previous OECD work and is informed by measurement practices around the world – including in such countries as Australia, Finland, Germany and New Zealand. Following the Stiglitz report, the framework includes three main pillars of well-being: material living conditions; quality of life; and sustainability. The OECD identified these pillars as being critical to people's lives today ('well-being today') and for the conditions that have to be met to preserve the well-being of future generations ('well-being tomorrow') (OECD, 2011a). The focus of the framework is on individuals and households rather than the aggregate economy, on well-being outcomes rather than drivers of well-being, on subjective as well as objective measures, and on the distribution of well-being across individuals and groups according to age, gender and socioeconomic background (OECD, 2011a).

Taking all of these elements into account, the OECD has identified 11 dimensions of well-being: housing; income; jobs; community; education; environment; governance; health; life satisfaction; safety; and work-life balance. The specifications and values of these indicators can be accessed for each of the 34 OECD member countries on the *Your Better Life* website. What is unique about the Better Life Index is that it allows online users to change the weighting of each domain according to their own preferences and see what impact this has on the overall index. The domains can then be aggregated into a composite index using the assigned weights and compared across the other OECD countries. Through this process, the public are able to customise the relative importance of each domain according to what they think matters most to them when it comes to assessing the progress of their (and other) societies. Although still in its infancy, the OECD Better Life Index draws on a wealth of accumulated evidence, data and methodologies and provides a conceptual, measurement and practice framework that can be tailored to fit the specific circumstances of particular countries or socioeconomic groups.

2.2.2 A Selective Summary

The table in Appendix A at the end of this report shows the common domains across Australian, and selected other national and international (comparative) frameworks for measuring social progress and well-being. The examples covered are all discussed here, with the exception of the Bhutan Gross National Happiness Index (Bhutan GNH) and the Italian 'Benessere Equo e Sostenibile' (BES) or 'Equitable

and Sustainable Well-being' framework, which have not been included due to time and resource restrictions. However, the summary includes most of the important international examples of models that have been developed using holistic and sustainable approaches to well-being measurement.

The column on the left of the table presents the domains that have been identified in each of the frameworks. An important point to take into account is the breadth of the domains, which reflects how they have been defined both objectively as well as from a subjective standpoint. Some of the domains are very broad and almost all-encompassing. For example, the ABS MAP's areas of sustainable progress were chosen based on a 3 domain-view of economic, societal and environmental concerns. In this case, the dimensions listed in each of these domains have been used in producing the Appendix Table. The domains are listed in the table using a ranking order, in which those which are most common are shown first, followed by those that are least common (across the 11 examples included).

There are three areas which appear consistently across all of the frameworks: health; family; and community and/or social cohesion, while domains concerning aspects related to governance, democracy and citizenship are also commonly included. The Education domain is also included across all of these models except for the Australian Unity Well-being Index (AUWI) and environmental quality was initially included as part of the initial New Zealand Social Report, but has since been removed due to the lack of information on the environmental indicators (Ministry of Social Development, 2010). In terms of a domain related to work, most of the frameworks include this domain but in some frameworks (e.g. the AUWI, the Canadian Wellbeing Index (CIW) and the Bhutan GNH), indicators relating to work and employment are included under a standard of living domain. The standard of living domain, along with domains relating to crime and safety and culture and leisure are the other domains that are included in a majority of models.

The domains listed in some of these frameworks (for example the OECD BLI) represent measures at a household or individual level only, but most of them consist of a mix of both individual and aggregate (national) measures. The lower half of the table presents domains which do not appear consistently across all applications of the approach, and consists of some of the 'non-traditional' or alternate dimensions of well-being such as research and service quality or the well-being of specific sub-groups within the population (e.g. children or Indigenous populations). The comparisons highlight the differences between the domains included (or not included) in Australia compared with other national and international frameworks. For example, although subjective well-being measures are included in the AUWI and ANDI frameworks, none of the measures in Australia include psychological well-being, research and innovation, quality of services and policy and institutions as represented in the Bhutan GNH and the Italian BES. The ANDI framework is the only Australian model to include employment and work-life as a separate domain. It also includes justice and fairness as a domain and examines the well-being of

specific groups such as children and Indigenous Australians as separate domains of well-being.

The appendix table also includes a flag to highlight whether each of the frameworks includes a composite index, and whether weights are used in constructing this composite index. In Australia, apart from the ABS MAP which uses a suite of indicators (or dashboard) approach, all of the other models include a composite index as part of their framework. On the other hand, of the other national examples included, only the CIW and Bhutan GNH models include a composite index. The OECD BLI has a composite index where (as noted earlier) weights are determined by the web-friendly interactive tool accessible to the public. Because the ANDI and Italian BES are still under development, the development of their respective composite indices and weights are yet to be determined.

3 Community Engagement and Input

One of the motivating forces behind the growing interest in, and application of, an index of social progress is the opportunity it provides to examine in a systematic manner what the concept of progress means to members of the community. It is significant to note in this context, that the growing interest in progress indicators in part reflects a perceived gap between what the existing (largely GDP-based) measures indicate and what the OCED (2011a) describes as ‘the perceptions of ordinary people about their own socioeconomic conditions’. The social progress movement does not thus just seek to develop a new index of progress, but to engage actively with the community to ensure that it captures what ‘ordinary people’ see as important markers of their own progress.

As Stiglitz argued in Australia in a presentation to the Productivity Commission in 2010:

‘Part of the objective of rethinking our measurement systems is to generate a national and global dialogue on what we care about, whether what we are striving for is achieving what we care about, and whether this is reflected in our metrics’

Implicit in these words is the view that a new index should not only better capture the community’s priorities and aspirations, but that unless it does, it will not be seen as valued and useful by potential users. Furthermore, without those requirements, it will not be seen as reflecting the concerns of potential users and is thus unlikely to be used. What is involved here is not just to develop a better measure of past achievement, but also to ensure that it can guide future choices and actions. This will only happen if the new index addresses the weaknesses of existing measures (e.g. GDP) but does so in a way that is widely acknowledged to provide an alternative (and better) basis for making future choices that will affect all aspects of our (material and non-material) well-being.

This latter condition will only be met if some form of engagement with the community is used to help shape the content and formulation of the index. Indeed, it is worth noting that the previous section has indicated that community and civic engagement is generally included as one of the domains of progress that the index seeks to measure, and in light of this it would be anomalous if the methods used to construct the index did not themselves embody a degree of community engagement that is consistent with this aspect of well-being.

This section considers what form(s) such engagement might take and on which aspects of the task of constructing an index it should focus. This is not entirely new ground in Australia and there have already been several efforts on which to build. The recent ABS consultations about the future of the MAP project involved seeking advice from an Expert Reference Group, as well as from ‘a wide range of

community, government, business and academic users of ABS statistics' (ABS, 2010; p. 5). A range of different methods was used in the consultation process, including targeted interviews with leading Australians, specially convened expert panels, and open forums including those conducted via a blog linked to the ABS website and radio call-back programs (ABS, 2012). The feedback provided through each mechanism 'resulted in a set of aspirations that evolved and continued to be refined throughout the consultation process [that will] resonate with all the consultation participants and with Australians more generally' (ABS, 2012b; p. 83).

The need to engage with the community about what should be included in an index of social progress is important because unless the index reflects what the community sees as important, it will not be used to measure and influence change and improvement. However, such a process is also important for theoretical reasons. As the authors of the Stiglitz Report noted, the conceptual basis for a new progress measure that embodies both objective and subjective elements of people's quality of life draws heavily on the work of Amartya Sen on the capability approach (e.g. Sen, 1999). The report thus argued that:

'The information relevant to valuing quality of life goes beyond people's self-reports and perceptions to include measures of their "functionings" and freedoms. In effect, what really matters are the capabilities of people, that is, the extent of their opportunity set and of their freedom to choose among this set, *the life they value*' (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009; p. 15: italics added).

Clearly, if the index is to include items that reflect people's own values – what they regard as important in their own lives – the construction process must include an attempt to identify what is important for individuals in order to ensure that the index is consistent with those values. Furthermore, the index should include subjective as well as objective indicators, since the former tap more directly into people's own perceptions of how *the things that matter to them* are changing.

The importance of involving the public in the development of an index of national well-being has been emphasised by Kroll (2011), who concludes after reviewing the arguments that:

'In sum, such consultation processes – at least by supplementing expert round tables – 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*' (Kroll, 2011; p. 22: italics added)

The idea of conducting consultations with the community is, of course, only the first stage in building individual priorities and values into an index of progress. Although the *process* itself is important for garnering community support for the index and establishing its legitimacy, what is ultimately important is how the information generated by those consultations is embodied into the index itself. People will only be convinced to support the index if they are convinced that the *outcomes* of the

consultation have an influence on how the index is constructed and used. At a minimum, this requires the consultation process to be *transparent* – not only in relation to how it was actually conducted, but also in relation to how the information provided has been used to help construct the index.

Underlying the emphasis given to the importance of community engagement are two assumptions about the anticipated findings. The first is that there is a *degree of community consensus* about what is important to include in the index – at least in broad terms such as which domains to include and their relative importance. The second assumption (emphasised by the ABS in its recent MAP consultations) is that, over time, the views *remain relatively stable*, so that they allow a set of rules to be established for constructing the index on a consistent and hence, over time, comparable basis. If there is not a consensus in relation to what the index should cover or the importance of its constituents, nor any stability on these two basic elements, it is unlikely that the consultation exercise will generate any reliable guidance for construction of the index.

It does, however, seem unlikely that these conditions will prevail. Academic studies of social attitudes show that such attitudes are relatively stable over the medium-term, although they are also subject to a degree of short-term volatility in response to prevailing conditions or events. Thus, people are likely to place greater emphasis on their personal safety following a violent event (e.g. a terrorist attack or reports of a growing crime rate), or to rate health as a more important issue following a major health scare (e.g. the SARS outbreak). But these movements are likely to be temporary deviations from a stable longer-term trend and to be reversed as external conditions return to normal – a process referred to as homeostasis by Cumming (2003).

Against this, there is also likely to be some longer-term shifts in how the community ranks particular social objectives or conditions and the rising importance attached to the environment generally and to climate change in particular is a vivid example of this. This suggests that it will be necessary to tap into public opinion on a regular basis (at least every five years) in order to capture such shifts and ensure that the progress index reflects them.

On the question of whether a consensus exists about the relative importance of different dimensions of progress, the evidence indicates that there is a diversity of views on many specific issues, but there is more agreement on which broad areas (or domains) are relevant to people's well-being and hence to deciding whether or not progress has been achieved. This is not surprising, since the more detailed the level at which the indicator applies, the less likely it is that 'ordinary people' will have the knowledge required to make an informed assessment and the more likely it is that expressed views will reflect opinion rather than evidence. Individual preferences will also exert more of an influence as the level at which opinion is sought becomes more specific and will dominate attempts to derive a consensus view.

Two important general lessons thus emerge from these initial observations: (1) The consultation process should be as broad as possible and on-going rather than a one-off event if the impact on the progress index is to be and remain tied to public opinion in some way; and (2) Careful thought needs to be given to the level at which community opinion is sought if the information provided is to genuinely reflect the informed views of those consulted and to form the basis for action.

The discussion so far is predicated on the view that the goal of the consultation process is to tap into community opinion in a way that can be reflected in how an index of progress is constructed. This is an important step in the process of grounding the index in community values and priorities, but also gives greater legitimacy among those who are expected to use and, ultimately, benefit from its construction. However, this is only one form of stakeholder input into the index construction process and other methods are also important.

In addition to the input from *citizens*, there are two other broad groups that need to be involved in the consultation process. These are:

- *Users* – stakeholders with an interest in measuring progress and reflecting on its achievement and implications for policy and practice (e.g. leading figures in commercial and non-government agencies that will apply the new data to assess performance and develop new strategies) and policy makers who (it is hoped) will use the index to change the way that they view and judge alternative interventions; and
- *Experts* – academics with expertise in studying community attitudes and index construction, and statisticians who are familiar with data availability and limitations and with the properties of composite indexes.

The input of the three groups – citizens, users and experts – should reflect the different contributions they can make to the construction and legitimacy of the index and draw on methods that reflect these diverse inputs. No single method is capable of maximising the input at the different levels and a multi-pronged approach is therefore warranted. Such an approach is also important because of the different stages in the construction of an index at which external input (and hence consultation to elicit relevant views) can apply.

For this purpose, it is useful to distinguish between three stages in the index construction process:

Stage 1: Identification of broad domains

Stage 2: Identification of indicators within each domain

Stage 3: Identification of the relative importance of indicator (within domains) and of each domain in the construction of an overall (weighted) index

The groups involved in each stage of any consultation process do not have to be the same, and neither do the methods employed to obtain the relevant views.

In terms of the *methods* used during the consultation process, it is also possible to distinguish between:¹³

Method 1: A survey aimed at the general population designed to obtain information that is broadly representative of community opinion¹⁴

Method 2: A small scale workshop or roundtable aimed at a targeted audience of participants with the goal of discussing alternative viewpoints but designed to reach a consensus on their relative importance and applicability

Method 3: Focus groups conducted with targeted participants (e.g. from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, or with similar demographic characteristics) designed to elicit their views and, where possible, to identify a common or consensus position

The matrix in Table 1 sets out which method is likely to be best suited to address each of the three broad groups of users. The recent ABS MAP consultation involved a range of activities that fit into the broad framework described by the matrix. It included, for example, the MAP 2.0 blog which provided ‘a platform where the ABS published short posts and responded to comments provided by members of the public [and] allowed people to provide relatively detailed feedback if they wished’ (ABS, 2012b, p.25). Several prominent Australians were invited to write about or record their thoughts on Australia’s progress, and workshops were held with experts, ABS clients in each state and territory, and submission were sought from a range of Commonwealth Government agencies. The whole process was guided and endorsed by a MAP Expert Reference Group comprised of eminent experts, many of whom have been advising ABS about the content of MAP since its inception.

¹³ The actual conduct of methods 2 and 3 (and to some degree, method 1 also) can be designed to be more or less deliberative by providing participants with information about the issues they are discussing or responding to, and by providing them with an opportunity to change their views as a result of information obtained or the nature of the process itself. Again, time constraints prevent a discussion of these issues, but they can be taken up in a more comprehensive analysis.

¹⁴ There are, of course, various ways in which such a survey can be conducted, including using a mail-out questionnaire, a telephone interview conducted using CATI, or an on-line survey. The different methods are likely to vary in their ability to reach specific groups (differentiated on the basis of age, for example) and this should be borne in mind as an additional (and important) factor when deciding which method to use.

Table 1: Matrix of Possible Consultation Stakeholders and Methods

		Method		
		Large-scale survey	Workshop/ Roundtable	Focus Groups
Stakeholder Group	Citizens	√		√
	Users		√	√
	Experts		√	√

The MAP consultation resulted in the articulation of a series of ‘aspirational statements’ that evolved and were refined during the consultation process. There are 26 such aspirations, arranged into four broad areas: society; economy; environment; and governance. Although some of the underlying statements are rather broad (for example, the aspiration relating to ‘A fair go’ is described as ‘Australians aspire to a fair society that enables everyone to meet their needs’), the ABS expressed the view (consistent with the earlier argument) that ‘due to their broad nature, the aspirations will be fairly stable over time’ (ABS, 2012, p. 83). Notwithstanding these issues, the MAP consultation has produced a wealth of valuable new information that can guide further improvement of MAP publications and raise its profile and influence.

With this work already conducted, there is no need to replicate the process of identifying broad domains of progress using methods 1 and 2. Instead, the remainder of this report concentrates on the design, role and impact of consultation designed to guide the development of an overall index like the CIW described earlier. In light of the work already undertaken by ABS, this task is further reduced by assuming that there is agreement on the broad domains and on the indicators to be used in each domain. (Both assumptions could, of course, be tested as part of a more comprehensive, better-resourced review).¹⁵ Specifically, the task thus involves seeking community input using the methods identified above into the relative importance of the different domains and, within each domain, on the weighting to be assigned to the different indicators.

The use of a large-scale nationally representative survey is capable of providing valuable information on how the community ranks the relative importance of the different domains - and this can be referred to as a ‘first tier’ issue. Surveys of this kind are regularly conducted by academic researchers, with the most prominent in Australia currently being the *Survey of Australian Social Attitudes (AuSSA)*, a mail survey that is run every two years by a consortium of researchers lead by a group based at the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research at the ANU (see Denmark, Meagher, Wilson, Western and Phillips, 2007 for a summary of the second AuSSA

¹⁵ It would be possible to extend the approach now described to include discussion of any dimensions of progress (and corresponding indicators) that are missing from the list, but this has not been considered.

findings).¹⁶ The first survey was conducted in 2005 and the most recent in 2011, with each survey involving around 4,000 adult Australians drawn from the electoral roll and the data collected form Australia's contribution to the International Social Science Project (ISSP).

Like all mail surveys, AuSSA can only examine issues at a general level, with no opportunity to discuss or query the responses provided, and only limited ability to investigate people's views in any detail. It is possible, for example, to ask participants in this kind of survey to rank a short list of issues in terms of their importance (for the respondent, or in the respondent's view, for society). Alternatively, respondents can be asked to identify which (say) 3 issues out of a list of (say) 10 items are most important to them (again, for themselves or for society as a whole). Either approach is capable of producing an ordering of the importance of the issues (which can be thought of as progress domains or aspirations) across the population (if the survey responses are weighted using official population data to offset any response biases).

What this kind of approach cannot do is provide the basis for establishing the weights that can be used to combine the different issues/domains/aspirations into a single composite index. This requires not just an ordinal ranking of the alternatives but a cardinal scale that allows the differences not only to be ranked, but to be quantified. This can, in principle, be done by asking respondents to assign (say) 100 points across a series of specified domains in a way that reflects the degree of importance they attach to each. The implied weights (which may be zero for some domains) can then be derived directly from how the points are allocated and can be aggregated across all participants (or compared between different socioeconomic or demographic groups to see if there are any systematic variations). However, these kinds of question are relatively complex and difficult to ask in a mail survey that requires brevity and clarity if the response rate is not going to be compromised. A focus group format may thus be a preferable format for obtaining information about these kinds of ('second tier') issues.¹⁷

A focus group approach also has several other advantages over a mail survey. The most important of these is that it provides a forum for discussion and debate about the issues that allows participants to reflect on their views and, where relevant, change them. Participants can also be provided with information about the issues they are discussing using a deliberative approach and the impact of this on the

¹⁶ Another survey on how the community ranks a variety of economic and social issues that is regularly conducted in Australia focuses on the federal election campaigns (see McAllister and Clark, 2007) although the focus here is more on identifying the shorter-run issues that had an electoral impact.

¹⁷ If the survey approach were to be used the two obvious vehicles would be to insert a suite of questions into either forthcoming version of AuSSA (e.g. in 2015) or in the ABS *General Social Survey* that already has a focus on these kinds of issues. The next GSS is currently scheduled to take place in 2014, although it is probably already too late to change to questionnaire and GSS 2018 may be a more practical alternative.

views expressed established. A focus group format also allows more complex issues to be debated and if the participants are told in advance that they need to come up with an agreed position, then experience shows that this is possible.

One example where this 'consensual' approach has been used relates to the setting of a poverty line in New Zealand (see Stephens, Waldegrave and Frater, 2005). This involved getting focus groups to agree on the expenditures needed in different budget areas (food, housing, clothing, etc.) to attain a minimal standard of living. In summarising their research, the authors explain that:

'Focus groups were used to develop a poverty standard which would provide households with a minimum adequate expenditure. The evidence suggests that this is a more robust method for setting a consensual poverty line than direct survey questionnaires' (Stephens, Waldegrave and Frater, 1995; p. 112)

A similar approach has been used in recent research in the UK that has used focus groups to identify the expenditures needed to support a minimal household budget (Bradshaw et al., 2008). Again, participants were asked to reach a consensus position on which items to include in the budget and, given that, what expenditures were required to acquire the identified items. In the (relatively few) instances where agreement could not be reached, experts were asked to adjudicate and these decisions were incorporated into the final budgets.¹⁸

It can be argued that these examples have limited applicability in areas other than household budgeting, where participants can draw on their own everyday experiences of shopping and managing the family budget in order to meet their needs. However, individuals also have strong views on the things that they value – what matters to them and their well-being – and the goal of the focus group in the current context is to encourage participants to articulate these views and debate them with others. Participants can be provided with an initial list of domains to help kick-start the discussion and in fact, the examples cited above also used illustrative family budgets to start the discussion.

Focus groups have been used in this way in recent research on social disadvantage conducted by the authors of this report and colleagues at the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of New South Wales. In seeking to develop new indicators that are grounded in the experience of those living at the coalface of poverty, focus groups were conducted with low-income Australians in order to help identify which items they thought were necessary or essential for people like them to live a minimal but decent life (Saunders and Sutherland, 2006). Although no explicit attempt was made to reach a consensus on which all agreed, the discussions

¹⁸ Australian research on budget standards conducted by Saunders and colleagues at the SPRC in the 1990s (see Saunders et al., 1998) also used a focus group approach to help validate the preliminary budgets, and a similar approach is currently being employed in an ARC-funded project on developing budget standards for selected household types with Saunders as chief Investigator.

helped the researchers to refine a list of items that were then included in a general (mail) survey designed to identify ‘the essentials of life’ – defined as ‘things that no-one in Australia should have to go without today’ (Saunders, Naidoo and Griffiths, 2007; Saunders and Wong, 2012).

It cannot, of course, be claimed that the consensus views expressed by a focus group (unless the exercise is undertaken on a massive scale) can be seen as representative of the community as a whole. However, as with the SPRC research on social disadvantage, focus groups could be used in the current context in conjunction with other efforts to elicit community opinion (including the ABS MAP consultations, the output from which can be used to guide the focus group discussions). It is, however, important that the focus group participants are recruited from all sections of society so that all views are canvassed. Implicit in the framework being used here, there would also need to be separate focus groups conducted with experts and users that can be recruited relatively easily so the main challenge will be in ensuring that those that represent the input from citizens are appropriately broad in their coverage. How this can be done is not addressed here, but this issue raise many challenges and would need to be covered in a more extensive report.

Another issue to bear in mind is that the degree of detail that can be covered in a focus group discussion (which normally lasts for about 1 ½ hours with between 8 and 10 participants) is limited – particularly if the aim is to reach a consensus position. It is of interest to note in this context that the authors of the Qualitative Pilot Research Report commissioned as part of this project noted that:

‘.. it was apparent that a focus group of 1.5 hours was insufficient time to identify and ‘unpack’ the areas that people felt were important, and then to consider progress and possible measurement of such areas’ (Kellard and Pennay, 2013; p. 36)

This is consistent with our assessment of what is achievable through a focus group that consists of general citizens, and suggests that a good deal of planning (and possible piloting of alternative options) will be necessary to produce the best format. In particular, our view is that the focus group discussion should focus on trying to reach a consensus on the weighting of the different domains and (possibly) on the selection of one or two ‘headline’ indicators within each domain.

If only the former task is attempted, it may be possible to experiment with asking the group to reach agreement on how they would allocate 100 points between the domains, so that a cardinal scale can be derived to use as the basis for a weighting scheme. In order to start the discussion, participants would need to be provided with a list of the domains (and a brief description of each, along the lines of the aspirations identified in the ABS MAP consultations. They can then be told that the ‘starting point’ for constructing an index is that each domain is weighted equally and be asked to discuss their ranking of the domains in terms of which is most important

to them, and (time permitting) to seek agreement on the allocation of points between them.

It would not be so productive to try to use the citizen's focus groups to obtain feedback on the indicators used in each domain or to try to rank these in terms of importance. The specification of the indicators themselves raises technical issues that most participants will not be equipped to comprehend and it is likely that the views expressed will be either ill-informed or reflect the views of those who are best able to deal with the jargon and technicalities. As Kroll (2011) has observed in this context:

'As the number of indicators increases, so people's attention tends to drift away from what are supposed to be the key variables and the main focus becomes obscure' (Kroll, 2011; p. 20)

In a similar vein, the authors of the Qualitative Pilot Research Project noted that:

'It was also evident in the groups that some people found it very difficult, conceptually, to think about progress and measurement. The complementary language study undertaken to analyse the language used by participants in the groups ... noted that respondents felt 'distant from language like index, measurement and indicators, or domains of progress' (Kellard and Pennay, 2013; p. 37: italics in the original)

These observations are not surprising. They reflect the fact that the issues being grappled with at the indicator level are complex and the terms used to describe them are inevitably technical, with no link to the everyday experiences of 'ordinary Australians'. Even the word 'domain' is not one that most people would come across in their daily lives.

These more technical issues do not have to be resolved by the focus groups conducted with citizens, since there are other elements of the consultation process (with users and, more specifically, with experts) that can address these considerations. The role of the citizen's focus groups is to engage ordinary people in the process of identifying and ranking the domains in ways that can guide how a composite index can be constructed. It is important to have a realistic understanding of what each stage in the process is capable of producing, and design its methods so that these outcomes are most likely to be achieved. Demanding less can often produce more when it comes to tapping into public opinion.

It is also important to ensure that engagement with citizens, users and experts should be on on-going process rather than a one-off event. This will allow new developments to be reflected in how the index is constructed, even if it achieves this at a loss in terms of strict comparability. As those in Canada involved in constructing the CIW have noted:

'As the world changes, new issues become salient, and new knowledge, data, and technology become available, some of the things that matter most

to people today may be supplanted by other things in the future. Validating and continually improving the CIW is an ongoing process' (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2012; p. 14)

A process of this kind is necessary not only to reflect changes in data availability and people's values and aspirations, but also to ensure that the index remains connected to the issues that people care about. Unless this is done, the relevance and hence impact of the index will decline over time as its in-built assumptions and methods of construction (e.g. weighting) gradually drift away from actual experience.

4 Key Issues for Application and Future Development

This section identifies some of the key issues that are relevant to promoting the use of an index of social progress in Australia in policy making and other activities, and what this implies for future work in the area. The discussion reflects the content of this report overall, but because of the limited time available it has not been possible to engage in the kind of detailed discussion that is warranted.

Four key issues are discussed briefly below under the headings of Construction, Engagement, Dissemination and Focus.

In regards to *Construction*, the first point to emphasise is the importance of establishing that the index embodies the views and opinions of the three groups identified in the previous section – citizens, users and experts – as a way of ensuring that it builds on existing evidence (and data) and adequately reflects community values. Until this is achieved, there is little prospect that the index will be widely used to inform important choices and shape the actions that will affect community well-being and social progress in the longer-term. The Canadian experience with CIW is salutary here because the early uses of CIW (described on pages 63-4) are a direct consequence of the high regard with which it is held within Canada and internationally.

A critical element of the construction process is *Engagement*. The importance of ensuring that all groups are engaged in the construction, presentation and use of the index has already been emphasised. In relation to input from users and experts, this process is designed to ensure that the index embodies the best available evidence (and data) and takes account of possible uses as far as is practical. Support from these two groups will (in addition to the scope and impact of community engagement) add to the legitimacy of the index, help to raise its profile and the prospects that its findings will be noticed, thereby increase the probability that it will be used in decision-making.

Dissemination is a critical part of any effort to get the index onto the agendas used by decision makers in government, commercial and non-profit organisations. Such dissemination must be effective and targeted specifically at future users. A dissemination strategy needs to be developed to not only raise community awareness about the value of the index, but also to target specific groups whose actions can be affected by it.

As knowledge about the index gathers momentum, the pressure on decision makers to take it into account will grow, but only if it can be shown to offer different – and better – insights and solutions to those that already exist. This requires specific examples to be highlighted that can demonstrate convincingly how the limitations of

the existing (GDP-focused) approach can be improved through *specific actions that will show up as improvements in the index.*

Finally, in relation to *focus*, much of the work that has been done so far has focused on developing an index (or identifying its domains and the indicators used within each domain) and using the results produced to better describe past developments and assess whether or not social progress has been achieved. *The focus has thus been primarily backward-looking*, using the index as the basis for re-thinking the meaning of progress and monitor what has been achieved. This is an inevitable stage of the process of integrating the index into decision-making processes, but there is also a need to think about how the focus can be shifted towards a more forward-looking perspective. It is one thing to establish *ex post* why past decisions have not achieved what they promised, but quite another to try to influence *ex ante* decisions that will affect future trajectories.

One of the great advantages of the GDP approach is that underlying it is a huge amount of knowledge and evidence about its short-run and longer-term determinants and about its consequences for things like employment and real incomes that exert a direct influence on people's economic well-being. The importance of, and effort put into, political struggles to establish which party is better able to manage the economy (and implicitly generate and sustain the highest level of GDP growth) reflect this reality. In Australia, projections of GDP growth under alternative policy scenarios produced by The Treasury and other forecasting agencies are taken seriously because they build on the theories and evidence accumulated by generations of economists.

To what extent can this situation be mirrored by an index of social progress? Certainly, if the focus remains on past achievements as indicated above, the scope in this area will be limited. What is needed is a framework not only for developing the index but also for forecasting future movements and examining how they will be influenced by different policies and other interventions. This is an essential ingredient if the index is to measure not only past progress, but also to help shape future progress. Decision makers want to know the impact of alternative policy choices so that they can align their decisions with their priorities.

This presents a series of challenges – many of them formidable. However, it would seem possible to begin along this path by applying a forward-looking approach to those elements of the index where existing data and knowledge make this viable. In the area of education, for example, it ought to be possible to simulate the impact on an index of alternative educational policy achievements and to use the results to illustrate the value of the approach more generally.

One obstacle to the adoption of such an approach relates to the use of subjective indicators in the index. These are important as has been argued earlier and many countries have recognised this when developing their index, but this implies that future movements in the index will reflect future movements in the various aspects

of subjective well-being that will be very difficult (perhaps impossible) to predict in advance. More thought needs to be given to this issue than is possible here, but the need to adopt a more forward-looking perspective will have an important bearing on how widely an index of social progress is used by decision makers in ways that can exert an influence on what they do.

Finally, it is important to be realistic about the timeframe within which it will be possible to achieve these objectives. The existing measures (like GDP) took many years to develop to the point where they could influence our understanding of (economic) progress and they will not be replaced overnight by an alternative progress index. It is likely to take decades rather than years to achieve the kinds of re-orientation that are embodied in those who are currently leading the social progress index movement. Much has been achieved with the support of influential bodies like the ABS and OECD, but patience and persistence will be needed before a social progress index replaces GDP as the benchmark against which we monitor and assess our actions and policy choices.

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Appendix A Summary Table of Common Wellbeing Domains and Progress Frameworks and Indicators

Domains	Australia				International					Global	
	ABS MAP	AUWI	ANDI	HALE	CIW	UKNW	NZSR	NZMSD	Bhutan GNH	Italian BES	OECD BLI
Health	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Family, community and social cohesion	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Governance and citizenship	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Education	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Environmental quality	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Work	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Culture and leisure	S		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Crime and safety	✓	✓				✓	✓			✓	✓
Standard of living		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
National economic conditions	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓			
Personal economic wellbeing	✓			✓						✓	✓
Housing	✓		✓			✓					✓
Productivity	✓										
Personal achievements and life satisfaction		✓				✓					✓
National security		✓									
Time use and work-life balance			✓		✓				✓	✓	✓
Subjective wellbeing		✓	✓			✓				✓	✓
Psychological wellbeing									✓		
Research and innovation									✓	✓	
Quality of services										✓	
Children's wellbeing			✓								
Indigenous wellbeing			✓								
Justice and fairness			✓								

Policy and institutions



Composite index	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Possibly	Yes
Weights	No	No	Possibly	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Possibly	Yes

Glossary and Sources: ABS MAP: Australian Bureau of Statistics Measures of Australia's Progress, AUWI: Australia Unity Well-being Index, ANDI: Australia National Development Index, HALE: Herald/Age Lateral Economics Index of Wellbeing, CIW: Canadian Index of Wellbeing, UKNW: United Kingdom New Measures of Wellbeing, NZSR: New Zealand Social Report, NZMSD: New Zealand Measures of Sustainable Development, Bhutan GNH : Bhutan Gross National Happiness Index, Italian BES: Italian 'Benessere Equo e Sostenibile', OECD BLI: OECD Better Life Index, S: Supplementary domain

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