

A universal framework for beyond GDP

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On 7 May 2026, the United Nations (UN) High-Level Expert Group on Beyond Gross Domestic Product (GDP) published *Counting What Counts*, a global blueprint for measuring progress beyond GDP.

This paper explores the report's contributions to the broader 'beyond GDP' agenda, its potential influence on policymaking and governance, and its alignment with recent Australian developments in wellbeing measurement, including the SGS Cities and Regions Wellbeing Index (CRWI).

For Australian local governments, these developments could help create a more enabling policy and funding environment that better recognises the sector's role in shaping long-term community wellbeing and progress.

Setting a global standard for wellbeing measurement

In 2024, UN Member States requested that the Secretary-General establish an independent High-Level Expert Group to develop recommendations for universal, country-owned indicators of sustainable development.¹ The group, comprising 14 globally recognised experts in economics, statistics and policymaking, was appointed on 7 May 2025. A year later, the group published *Counting What Counts*, a report outlining a conceptual framework of equitable, inclusive and sustainable wellbeing and progress, as well as a proposed dashboard of 31 indicators.²

At its core, the report reaffirms decades of academic and policy research calling for more holistic measures of progress. GDP alone is an incomplete and misleading measure of long-term prosperity. This idea has inspired a body of literature and an action agenda that is as broad as it is deep, stretching from the social sciences to government wellbeing budgets.

What comes next, both practically and politically, is far less uniform between countries and communities. Having agreed on the limitations of GDP-centric milestones, many of the challenges relate to implementation: How do governments prioritise constrained resources? How do organisations advance institutional capacity? Which indicators are appropriate to represent progress at scale (e.g. neighbourhoods, communities, regions) and at the unit level (e.g. individuals, businesses)?

In grappling with this tension, 'beyond GDP' and other sustainable development agendas emphasise an ongoing balancing act between universal and localised data. The latter refers to translating targets into the local context to ensure their relevance and meaning, since headline indicators may be too general to paint a meaningful picture at a smaller scale. Furthermore, experience shows that localisation is often a necessary diagnostic step for local governments to begin to understand the quality and availability of data, and ultimately, to consider the SDGs as a policy framework.³

¹United Nations (2024), 'Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generations', <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/soft-pact-for-the-future-adopted.pdf>

²United Nations (2026), 'Counting What Counts: A Compass of Progress for People and Planet', <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/high-level-expert-group-on-beyond-gdp-final-report.pdf>

³Ciambra, A., Siragusa, A., Proietti, P., & Stamos, I. (2023). Monitoring SDG localisation: an evidence-based approach to standardised monitoring frameworks. *Journal of Urban Ecology*, 9(1), juad013.

In Australia, the City of Melbourne was the first council in Australia to produce a Voluntary Local Review in 2022, tracking its progress against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A systematic exercise, in collaboration with the University of Melbourne and the Monash Sustainable Development Institute, identified that 87 of the 231 SDG indicators were most relevant to the City and would help to guide collective action for a more sustainable future.⁴ Other Australian local governments continue to embed SDG language and targets in their plans,⁵ e.g. Darebin City Council's 2026–27 Action Plan.⁶

More than rekindling the idea of 'beyond GDP', however, the UN's *Counting What Counts* report makes several distinctive contributions that will be of interest to Australian practitioners and proponents of the wellbeing economy:

- Firstly, the report warns that mainstream wellbeing governance can only shift with systemic recalibration of what we aim for and measure. The ubiquity of 'cross-border spillovers' means that regional, even national, wellbeing frameworks and budgets must not succumb to insular thinking. Global architecture needs to shift from the status quo of GDP as a primary indicator.
- Secondly, the report calls on national accounting systems to formally recognise a broader suite of assets and capitals: human, environmental, and physical infrastructure. In Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics produces a series of environmental accounts (e.g. water, energy, land, national ecosystem, Greater Barrier Reef ecosystem).⁷

Human capital accounting is less standardised at present, however, key statistical and standards-setting bodies around the world are considering what an accounting framework for human capital measurement and disclosures could look like.⁸

- Thirdly, the report highlights the roles of diverse actors, from governments to the statistical community and financial institutions, to animate and sustain the 'beyond GDP' agenda.

Regarding the last of these, it is worth noting that early impetus for *Counting What Counts* – the request to establish the High-Level Expert Group – is contained in Action 53 of the UN's *Pact for the Future* under the theme of 'transforming global governance'.⁹ This is interesting for several reasons.

Per Kennedy's famous declaration that 'Gross National Product...measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile',¹⁰ a common rebuttal of GDP is that it fails to capture the richness and nuance of quality of life. *Pact for the Future*, however, directly extends the imperative into financial and market-based territory: Not only is 'beyond GDP' an incomplete or poor proxy for progress, but the narrow focus stands in the way of the machinery of global governance: how well money flows, how priorities are agreed, and accountability traced. This is an important link and incentive for action, as it may resonate with new stakeholder groups who have yet to see or appreciate the impact of their influence on the wellbeing of the economy.

⁴City of Melbourne (2022), 'United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: City of Melbourne Voluntary Local Review 2022', https://hdp-au-prod-app-com-participate-files.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/4816/5595/7875/SDGs-FINAL_21_06_2022_4195_Voluntary_Local_Review_ONLINE-compressed.pdf

⁵Lodhia, S., Crutzen, N., & Leong, S. (2025). The management, reporting and assurance of the Sustainable Development Goals in local government—an Australian case study. *Meditari Accountancy Research*, 33(7), 369–384.

⁶City of Darebin (2026), 'Our Darebin Action Plan contributing to the global agenda', https://hdp-au-prod-app-dare-yoursay-files.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/8017/7741/9290/Draft_2026-27_Our_Darebin_Action_Plan.pdf

⁷ABS (2026), 'ABS Environmental-Economic Accounts', <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/detailed-methodology-information/concepts-sources-methods/australian-system-national-accounts-concepts-sources-and-methods/edition-8/chapter-23-thematic-accounts/environmental-economic-accounts/abs-environmental-economic-accounts>

⁸IFRS (2026), 'Human capital', <https://www.ifrs.org/projects/work-plan/human-capital/#about>

⁹United Nations (2024), 'Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generations', https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/soft-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf

¹⁰JFK Library (2026), 'Remarks at the University of Kansas, March 18, 1968', <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/remarks-at-the-university-of-kansas-march-18-1968>

The integration of progress measures into accounting systems is reminiscent of another UN-initiated effort, in 2004, to embed social and environment considerations into the financial markets: the seminal *Who Cares Wins* report. That report is credited with mainstreaming ESG (Environment, Social, Governance) as standard investment consideration, leading to a global reckoning around responsible investment and the creation of the Principles for Responsible Investment.¹¹ Even if the locus of ESG action and attention continues to shift, the norm-setting power of the UN report cannot be underestimated. *Who Cares Wins* legitimised the notion that sustainability issues could no longer be relegated to the sidelines and, in fact, directly shape long-term value. In the same vein, *Counting What Counts* conveys the importance of environmental, social and other preconditions for economic health; a continuing relationship between growth, equity, inclusion, and opportunity.

Localisation as a two-way policy process

Recent research in the European context has highlighted several interesting effects of localisation.¹² Through semantic comparison, the researchers sought to understand how closely aligned or ‘proximate’ standard indicators were to the real-world practice of local and regional governments. The study concluded that there was a significant degree of proximity between SDG indicators in standard toolkits and the measures that local governments are adopting, and that this proximity varied by SDG (SDG 12 Sustainable Consumption and Production and SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth had higher proximity scores).

Additionally, the study notes that the process of localisation catalyses several layers of change. That is, more than a translation, localisation evolves into a more dynamic process of data discovery, into conversations about institutional capacity building, and feedback loops in intergovernmental policy learning.

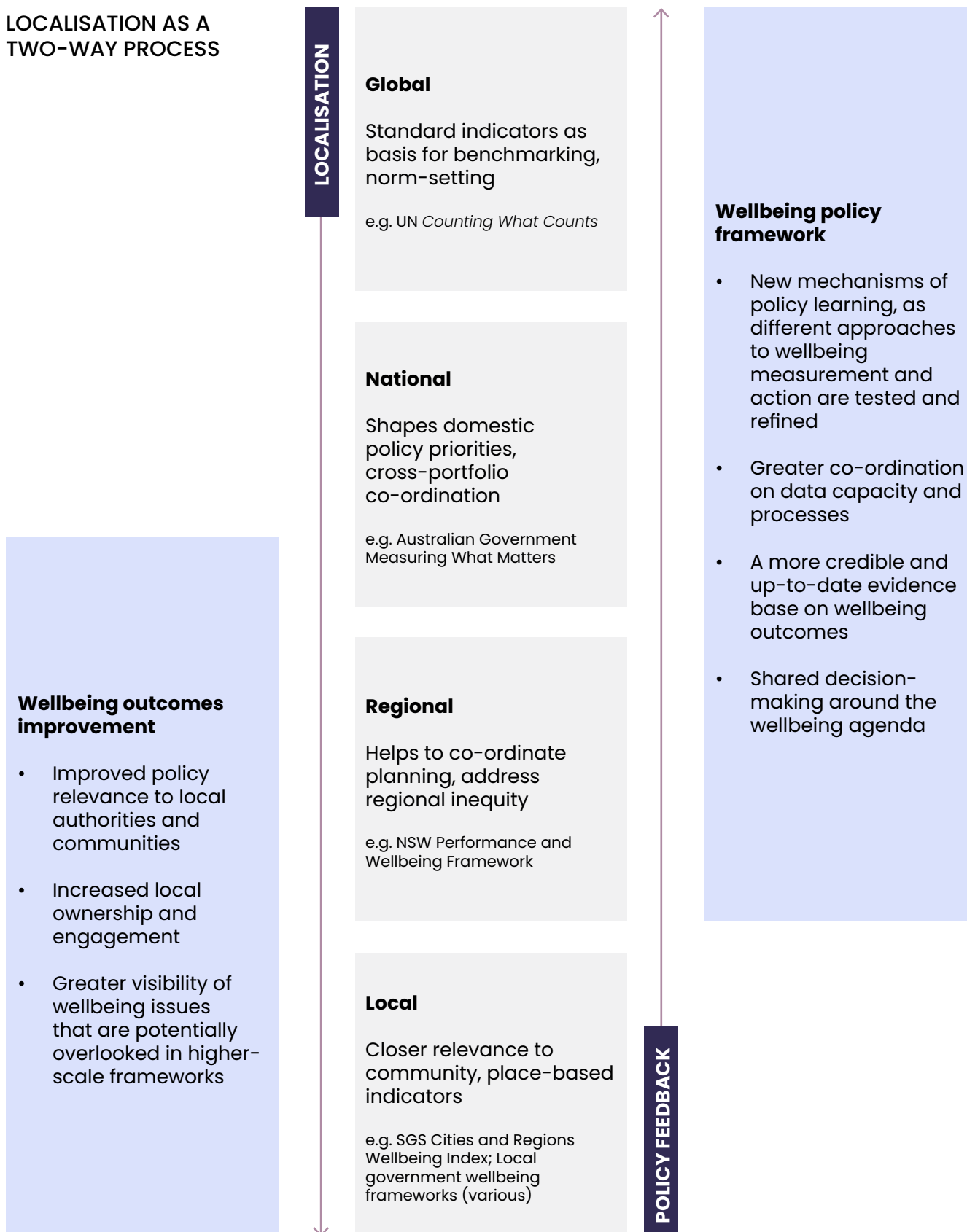


¹¹UNPRI (2026), ‘Principles for responsible investment’, <https://www.unpri.org/>

¹²Ciambra, A., Siragusa, A., Proietti, P., & Stamos, I. (2023). Monitoring SDG localisation: an evidence-based approach to standardised monitoring frameworks. *Journal of Urban Ecology*, 9(1), juad013.

The diagram below attempts to conceptualise the effects of localisation on both wellbeing outcomes and wellbeing policy.

LOCALISATION AS A TWO-WAY PROCESS



31 proposed universal indicators

Counting What Counts proposes a dashboard of 31 indicators selected based on policy relevance, internationally agreed methodological standards, intuitiveness, data availability and update frequency, and relevance to a large population sample.¹³ Almost half of the indicators are drawn from the UN SDGs. Against a backdrop of evolving and piecemeal data collections, this ensures that ‘most countries have the data, the systems, and the experience to begin without delay’.

The table below compares the UN’s proposed indicators with two Australian wellbeing frameworks that operate at different geographic scales and update frequencies. These are the Australian Government’s Measuring What Matters (MWM) framework, which contains 50 indicators across 5 objective and subjective wellbeing domains,¹⁴ and the CRWI, which contains time series data of 24 indicators across 7 wellbeing dimensions for over 500 Local Government Areas across Australia.¹⁵

A tick symbol in the table means the MWM and/or the CRWI frameworks report on the relevant universal indicator. A tick with an asterisk means that the Australian frameworks report on a variant of the universal indicator. For example, the CRWI reports the ‘Gender Domestic Work Gap’ to compare male and female participation in unpaid care, while the corresponding universal indicator focuses on the whole population with ‘Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work’.

Importantly, *Counting What Counts* acknowledges the ‘statistical and data agenda’ that underpins global adoption of the beyond GDP framework. The report authors call for a ‘minimum reporting standard’ that recognises varying national capacities to collect and disaggregate data by regional and rural/urban distinctions, demographic attributes, and other factors. The importance of place-based thinking is a key attribute of the CRWI, presented by an interactive dashboard that allows users to understand the spatial context of wellbeing outcomes.¹⁶

The UN report also distinguishes between Tier I and Tier II indicators based on an assessment of how routinely countries currently produce them. Both Tier I and II indicators are conceptually clear and have internationally established methods. Whereas Tier I indicators are supported by data that are regularly produced for ‘at least 50% of countries and at least 50% of the population in every region’, Tier II indicators are not yet regularly produced. Tier II indicators are therefore potential areas of focus for national data systems, skills and resources. SGS, as part of its submission and hearing attendance at the NSW Legislative Assembly Public Accounts Committee into *A Framework for Performance Reporting and Driving Wellbeing Outcomes in NSW* (2024), has previously outlined a series of practical considerations for indicator selection and framework design.¹⁷

¹³United Nations (2026), ‘Counting What Counts: A Compass of Progress for People and Planet’,

https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/high-level_expert_group_on_beyond_gdp_final_report.pdf

¹⁴Australian Bureau of Statistics (not dated), ‘Measuring What matters themes and indicators’,

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/measuring-what-matters/measuring-what-matters-themes-and-indicators>

¹⁵SGS Economics and Planning (2025), ‘Cities and Regions Wellbeing Index’,

https://sgs-assets.spicyweb.net.au/main/SGS-Economics-and-Planning_CRWI_2024_FINAL.pdf

¹⁶SGS (2025), ‘SGS Cities and Regions Wellbeing Index’, <https://sgsep.com.au/projects/sgs-wellbeing-index>

¹⁷SGS Economics and Planning (2024), ‘Response to Supplementary Questions’, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/ladocs/other/20588/Answers%20to%20supplementary%20questions%20-%20SGS%20Economics%20and%20Planning%20-%2002%20October%202024.pdf>

PROPOSED UNIVERSAL INDICATORS AND THEMATIC ALIGNMENT
WITH SELECT AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL WELLBEING MEASURES

		Objective and Subjective Wellbeing	Objective Wellbeing
UN Framework Theme / Domain / Subcategory	UN Proposed Indicators	Australian Government Measuring What Matters (National indicators)	SGS Cities and Regions Wellbeing Index (Local indicators, national coverage)
Peace	Number of total conflict-related deaths per 100,000	x	x
Human rights	Proportion of population reporting having personally felt discriminated against or harassed in the previous 12 months	✓	x
	Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months	✓*	x
Respect for the planet	Total greenhouse gas emissions and greenhouse gas emissions per capita	✓*	x
	Biodiversity intactness index	✓*	x

Material conditions and work	Household disposable income per capita	✓	✓*
	Composite rate of labour underutilisation	✓	✗
	Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work	✗	✓*
Health	Healthy life expectancy at birth	✓	✓
	Low-birthweight babies (percentage of births)	✗	✗
Education	Proportion of children and young people achieving a minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematics	✓*	✗
	Proportion of youth and adults with information and communications technology skills	✓*	✗
Security	Intentional homicides per 100,000 population	✗	✗
	Proportion of population that feel safe walking alone around the area they live after dark	✓	✗

Subjective wellbeing	Life satisfaction	✓	✗
Social cohesion	Proportion of people saying they felt loneliness “a lot of the day yesterday”	✓*	✗
Quality of institutions	Proportion of population satisfied with their last experience of public services	✓*	✗
Environmental quality	Annual mean levels of fine particulate matter in cities	✓*	✗
	Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services	✗	✗
Wealth inequality	Wealth share of the richest 1%	✗	✗
Income inequality	Gini index	✓	✓
Poverty	Poverty headcount ratio at societal poverty line (fixed at baseline)	✗	✗
Work inclusion	Average hourly earnings of women as a proportion of men	✓	✓

Regional inequalities	Proportion of the rural population who live within 2 km of an all-season road	x	x
Overlapping deprivations	Multidimensional poverty index	x	x
Produced capital	Net produced capital stock	x	x
Human capital	Share of youth not in education, employment or training (NEET)	x	x
	Potential years of life lost (PYLL), all causes	x	x
Social capital	Share of people who say most people can be trusted	✓*	x
Institutional capital	Proportion of population reporting they have confidence in the civil services	✓*	x
Natural capital	Environmental assets (land, water, soil and subsoil resources, etc.) building on the System of Environmental Economic Accounting (SEEA) and complemented by ecosystem accounting approaches that capture ecosystems as integrated assets	x	x

Implications for Australian local governments

The UN's proposed indicators are 'country-owned', meaning that countries can adapt them to reflect their national priorities and capacities. Governments, policy practitioners and decision-makers who already report on community outcomes with reference to the SDGs, MWM, and/or the SGS CRWI will be well placed to leverage and orient those efforts towards the universal framework. This is one of the UN report's recommendations to governments, recognising the sector as a primary driver and indispensable actor in implementing beyond GDP at the systems scale.

Case Study: Camden Wellbeing Report 2025

Camden Council in NSW has developed a community wellbeing framework bringing together almost 50 indicators across 5 wellbeing themes: Health, Safety & Security, Community Cohesion, Resilience and Learning, Skills & Education. 3 outcomes are nominated for each wellbeing theme and map to the indicators.¹⁸ Camden Council's 2025 Wellbeing Report includes a comparison, where data is available, of how the local community is performing against the NSW and national benchmarks.

Camden Council's progress reflects a wider shift towards the localisation of wellbeing measurement in Australian local government. The report acknowledges the themes and indicators in the UN SDGs, the MWM, the NSW Performance and Wellbeing Framework, Council's Community Strategic Plan, and Council's supporting plans, strategies, and frameworks as guiding principles. This alignment establishes a clear line of sight from tracking community outcomes and needs to strategic planning, policy development and investments.

Additional recommendations in the UN report that are relevant to local governments include:¹⁹

- Integrate the proposed dashboard into national policymaking processes, including annual presentations to government bodies, as well as into budgetary approval processes, cost-benefit analyses, and accountability frameworks.
- Reinforce existing efforts to improve the availability of data on the SDGs and strengthen statistical capacity to build enhanced systems for disaggregated data to measure progress for everyone, everywhere, and address emerging priorities.
- Increase investments in data availability and statistical capacity.

Many of these recommended initiatives and opportunity areas will be familiar to Australian local governments, who, for many decades, have sustained a focus on community wellbeing, inclusion, resilience, and on improving intergenerational outcomes. In a sense, *Counting What Counts* and related expressions of 'beyond GDP' validate what local governments have advocated for all along.

One can hope that with broader normative change afoot, there follows an opportunity for policy and investment to better recognise the pioneering role of local governments in driving long-term progress.



¹⁸Camden Council (2025), 'Community Wellbeing', <https://www.camden.nsw.gov.au/community/community-information/community-wellbeing>

¹⁹United Nations (2026), 'Counting What Counts: A Compass of Progress for People and Planet', https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/high-level-expert-group_on_beyond_gdp_final_report.pdf

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