**MEASURES OF AUSTRALIA'S PROGRESS, 2010**

# Feature Article

# Future directions for measuring Australia's progress

September 2010

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# 1.    Future directions for measuring Australia's progress

"Over the last 10 years or so there has been an explosion of interest in producing measures of societal progress. Measures that go beyond GDP to represent a broader view of the ways in which societies are progressing and regressing"

*Global Project on Measuring the Progress of Societies,* OECD, viewed 2010[i]

There is a long history of the idea of progress as societal improvement, reaching back as far as Aristotle, and developing through the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution to modern times.[1] It is an important idea, especially in a modern democracy, but it is also a contestable idea, and its meaning can vary over time and for different interested parties.

Measuring Australia's progress has been a responsibility of the ABS and its predecessors since Colonial times. Then, the idea of progress and the measures required were somewhat simpler – cattle exports, for instance. Over time, more complex measures were introduced, such as labour force measures and economic accounting, which responded to social and economic disruption following the First and Second World Wars.[2] In more recent decades, there has been a growing view that understanding progress involves bringing together measures from across the areas of social, economic and environmental activity.

The ABS was the first national statistical organisation to move forward with this notion. Responding to a Senate Inquiry into *National Wellbeing* in 1996, a national conference on measuring national progress in 1997, and other important milestones,[3] the ABS released Measuring Australia's Progress in 2002.

Now known as Measures of Australia's Progress (MAP), this publication displays progress measures for key areas of interest side by side, to allow the public to assess whether life in Australia is getting better. This approach is based on providing an informative "dashboard" of information for those wishing to assess national progress, and MAP is internationally acknowledged as a best practice model in this area.[4]

Since the first release of MAP, national and international interest in the topic of measuring progress has accelerated. The time line in Appendix A shows how interest has intensified in the last decade and galvanised in the last few years. In 2009, the Australia 2020 Summit discussed the need for improved indicators of progress and the G20 Summit encouraged work on measurement that better takes into account the social and environmental dimensions of economic development. The 2009 Report from the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress recommended a rethink of statistical measures and encouraged a global dialogue to ensure national statistical organisations are measuring what societies care about.

The ABS has taken the opportunity to incorporate the best learning and ideas from this international discussion, and to carry forward its work on measuring progress and articulate how Australia's progress may best continue to be measured into the future. Together with an Expert Reference Group (Appendix B), and in anticipation of extensive community input, the ABS is further developing the MAP approach. Some key steps to arriving at a refreshed approach are outlined in this article.

## 1.1 Consultation: Join our blog discussion

> "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"
>
> *From Measuring Production to Measuring Well-being*, Joseph E. Stiglitz, Presentation to the Productivity Commission, Melbourne, July 29, 2010[ii]

This article, and the approach it proposes, are intended as a starting point to assist discussion and guide a program of consultation and more in-depth work. They are intended to "generate a national dialogue about what [Australians] care about"[5] and whether those aspects of life are reflected in our national progress statistics.

As a starting point, readers are encouraged to share their views on the approach proposed in this article in the MAP blog attached to the MAP 2010 website. We will be posting specific questions we would like feedback on, but would also like to hear people's more general views.

In addition to monitoring this blog, the ABS will undertake a more structured program of consultation over the next 12 to 18 months to gain feedback on the approach and enhance it, with a view to adopting it for subsequent editions of MAP.

For example, we will consult the range of government, business and other non-government organisations involved in understanding and implementing relevant research, programs and policy in Australia, and with groups involved in distilling community views in this area. The group of community facilitators and academics developing the Australian National Development Index are one such group, as is the Community Indicators community. Other examples of organisations who may be important contributors include the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) – representing over 1300 organisations and individuals; state government agencies developing state plans, such as Tasmania Together and South Australia's Strategic Plan; and business groups such as The Global Foundation.

During 2011, several national forums will discuss each of the major aspects of the proposed approach. The first will focus on whether we are measuring the aspects of progress Australians care about, and on identifying those aspirations more explicitly. We will then explore specific outcomes Australians would like to see developing out of these goals. Finally, it will be important to gain views on what new or enhanced statistical measures might inform on these progress goals and achievements.

Four streams of consultation will be ongoing, covering each core topic area identified in this article and drawing on expert, business and community views in these areas of social, economic, governance, and environmental progress.

ABS will also continue to seek advice from its Expert Reference Group and draw on input from a wide range of community, government, business and academic users of ABS statistics.

## 1.2    Broad aims

This feature article aims to outline a logical and accessible structure that will assist us to access a broad range of views coherently.

To fully meet the requirements of statistical investigation, the development work outlined in this article must also be framed in such a way that Australia's statistical needs can be readily met when it is eventually applied in practice. To achieve this, future directions in thinking must, to an extent, be anticipated. The MAP  Expert Reference Group have guided development of the approach presented in this article with the aim of ensuring it is well placed to encompass expected directions in thinking, and provide leadership, in the area of progress measurement.

It is hoped that the statistical framework that ultimately emerges from this work will:

- provide increased structure and direction to the process of measuring progress

- allow gaps in measurement to be clearly identified, and

- prompt the development of new, targeted measures to fill those gaps.

# 2.    The nature and purpose of statistical frameworks

The explanation of our proposed approach begins with an overview of the nature and purpose of statistical frameworks. It is important to recognise that a statistical framework is not intended to lay out a particular world view or agenda. Rather it should reflect the nature and extent of the different perspectives associated with a topic in order to define the scope of the topic and guide decisions about how the topic can best be measured.[6]

Statistical frameworks in particular need to take account of all aspects of the debate so the statistics produced as a consequence are relevant to the issues being discussed and represent them in a balanced way.

For this reason, wherever possible, we have attempted to identify and adopt common themes emerging from current research and commentary about progress measures. These sometimes divergent themes are highlighted in quotations throughout the article. Recognising this diverse reality, the ABS will hold consultations over the coming months to ensure all aspects of the debate are taken into account in a final progress framework.

## 2.1    What are statistical frameworks?

> "Frameworks delineate the dimensions used to build up a particular concept and create a logical structure that illustrates how these … relate to one another."
>
> *A Framework to Measure the Progress of Societies,*
> Giovanni, Hall, Morrone and Ranuzzi, OECD, 2009[iii]

Statistical frameworks 'map' the conceptual terrain surrounding an area of interest.[7] They are often presented, for simplicity, in the form of a diagram which summarises the key ideas involved.

When designing a statistical framework, decisions have to be made about what ideas lie within the bounds of the topic, and which fall outside that terrain. So a framework defines the logical limits of the inquiry.

Frameworks also identify and delineate the component concepts associated with the topic. That is, ideas of interest that are distinct from one another but together make up the whole. In a framework representing the natural environment, such broad concepts might be land, water, and air.

Finally, frameworks organise these ideas into a logical structure. In the case of the environment, the layout of the framework might clarify the relationships and interdependencies between land, water and air.

A good statistical framework will also be adaptable to cater for developments in thinking over time.

In general, successful statistical frameworks share common attributes, such as being:

- logical in structure
- comprehensive but concise
- dynamic and flexible to allow for change, and
- cognisant of other relevant frameworks, classifications and standards.

## 2.2    Why frameworks are useful – A tool to facilitate discussion

" 'When I use a word' said Humpty Dumpty, 'it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less.'  'The question is', said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.' "

*Through the Looking Glass,* Lewis Carroll, 1871[iv]

"The lack of a common starting point that sets out in general terms what progress looks like can lead to long, and not necessarily fruitful, discussions and a duplication of effort."

*A Framework to Measure the Progress of Societies,* OECD[v]

While it is challenging to collect data about multifaceted ideas such as progress, the conceptual breakdown provided by a framework brings order to such initiatives, making them easier to tackle.

Because they lay out all the important ideas and areas of interest, frameworks can also be used to assess how well a statistical program covers a topic, and gaps in information may be more readily identified. So frameworks can assist in determining priorities for new work.

The process of developing a framework often brings to light the full variety of perceptions about a topic. This is important because people interpret ideas differently, particularly

intangible concepts such as happiness, wellbeing or progress. This can then also guide research (eg, survey questions can be designed to ensure a consistent interpretation). Above all, frameworks transparently represent an agreed way of thinking. For example, they represent agreement about the key components of the topic and the relationships between them. This agreement can then support a fruitful conversation between statisticians and the community and government about what specific data should be collected and with what interpretation.

In summary, a framework is designed primarily to allow stakeholders to critique their thinking in a structured way and arrive at an agreed approach. Frameworks visually distil debate and clarify the major themes, boundaries and issues in play, so decisions about these can be made more coherently.

Thus, the elements and relationships included in diagrams presented in this article are not chosen from the perspective of a particular ideology or set of values, but via an analysis of local and global discussion around the topic of progress. They aim to allow the wider community to discuss the issues more effectively.

Appendix C, *Identifying and positioning elements of a framework,* explains the basis on which the elements and relationships shown in diagrams in this article have been selected. For more general information on frameworks used in social statistics see *Measuring Wellbeing: Frameworks for Australian Social Statistics* (ABS cat. no. 4160.0).


## 2.3    Specific aims for a progress framework

"… for a good portion of the 20th century there was an implicit assumption that economic growth was synonymous with progress: an assumption that a growing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) meant life must be getting better. But now the world recognises that it isn't quite as simple as that."

*Global Project on Measuring the Progress of Societies,* OECD, viewed 2010[vi]

In developing a framework for measuring progress, the ABS aims to explain how progress is understood by the wider community and to reflect the values Australians place on the various dimensions of progress. The aim is to arrive at a framework that articulates what progress is and shows the important linkages and interdependencies involved. Such a framework could then be used to:

- ensure we identify the right areas for measuring progress in the Australian context
- consider what statistical indicators best demonstrate progress, and
- ensure those measures focus on outcomes rather than inputs.

A progress framework would also help: the general reader navigate and interpret progress indicators and their interrelationships; the expert reader locate MAP in relation to other policy and research frameworks and agendas; and the ABS bring to light areas for further development of indicators or underlying statistical systems.

# 3.    Defining "progress"

> "The idea of progress means that civilisation has moved, is moving and will move in a desirable direction. But in order to judge that we are moving in a desirable direction, we should have to know precisely what the direction is."
>
> *The Idea of Progress*, J.B. Bury, 1920[vii]

The word 'progress' has many connotations. It has previously been associated with industrial development and economic growth, but also with 'progressive' social movements. In current discussions it is often connected with newer concepts such as sustainability. A short essay on the varied history of the idea of progress is included in Appendix D. And each person coming to the progress debate brings a slightly different interpretation.

So, before proceeding, a useful working definition is needed. This definition should be a functional one that will facilitate further discussion; and it may evolve as the broader discussion around progress proceeds.

Many scholarly discussions are to be found about the meaning of societal progress.[1] But, as a starting point, two basic, commonly discussed components of the concept are:

- Progress is the **movement** of society in a positive direction – an improvement
- This improvement implies there are one or more **goals**, standards or end points in mind – which must be defined in order to know whether progress is occurring.

## 3.1    Distinguishing between progress and its goals

> "By choosing particular indicators, one is also defining what is important—one is defining goals"
>
> *Beyond GDP: The Need for New Measures of Progress*,
> Costanza, Hart, Posner, Talberth, 2009[viii]

In terms of designing a framework for progress, it is useful and conceptually clear to separate the 'movement' aspect of progress from the 'goal' aspect (the element that relates to the standards or aspirations the progress is aiming for).
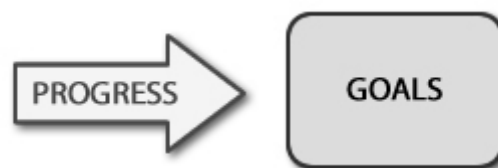


Some reasons for separating the idea of 'movement' from the idea of 'goals' include:

1. The movement aspect of progress is relatively simple and readily understood. In statistical terms, it is simply the direction shown by a series of data taken over time. It is the goals of progress, and the relationships and trade-offs between these, that are complex, numerous, and that can be controversial. When developing an approach for measuring progress, dealing with a complex concept involving both movement and goals is challenging, even just in terms of discussing the associated issues. Separating the two ideas reduces complexity.

2. The goals of progress are inherently associated with people's values. If these goals are made explicit, values-based assumptions are not hidden by being embedded in the concept of progress. The proposed goals can be clearly identified and assessed for their usefulness. In other words, isolating goals makes the values being expressed transparent.

3. Statistical measures have the potential to influence societal goals and must in some ways anticipate these in order to remain responsive to contemporary concerns (see quotations below). However, it is in fact the role of the Australian community and government to define the goals inherent in "Australia's progress", not the role of statisticians. So, isolating goals assists by making this role separation clear.

> "What we measure shapes what we collectively strive to pursue – and what we pursue determines what we measure"
>
> *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*, Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi, 2009[ix]
>
> "Indicators reflect societal choices, values and goals. We measure what we think is important and our choice of indicators implicitly defines our goals."
>
> *Beyond GDP: The Need for New Measures of Progress*, Costanza, Hart, Posner and Talberth, 2009[x]

Progress goals are discussed in more detail below (4.2 What aspects of progress do Australians care about?).

# 4. Other key elements to include

If six blind men were describing an elephant, each holding a different part of the elephant (its trunk, tail, hide, tusks, legs, etc), each would describe a different creature. Similarly, there are many different angles to the progress debate reflecting the points of view of different stakeholders: statisticians, community workers, academics, policy makers, business people, and so on. Each tells a different story about progress – but all need to be represented when considering developing a useful overarching framework.

For example, when analysing discussions about progress, many broad themes emerge, such as:

Wellbeing  Governance  Australia  Individuals
Society  Indicators  Dimensions  Sustainability  Equity
Economy  Community  Indexes  Environment
Social inclusion  Population groups  Families
Disadvantage  Accounts  Capital  Etc

These themes are all related to the topic of progress in some way, but are quite diverse in regard to which aspect of the topic they address. For instance, discussion about indicators relates to the measurement aspect of progress, and discussion about principles such as equity relates to the "goals" aspect.

Grouping these themes into different categories helps clarify and structure the discussion. So, having answered the question "What is progress?", these other themes might usefully be categorised under three further questions:

i) **What is progressing?** — What is the <u>subject</u> of the desired improvement?

For example, from the above list, the subjects we are seeking progress information about are: Australia, society, individuals, families, communities and population groups (eg, elderly people, lone parents), the economy, civic life, the natural environment.

ii) **What is it progressing to?** — What is the intended <u>goal</u> of the improvement?

Ideas that refer to our aspirations for progress – the desired end point of progress – can be grouped here, for example, wellbeing, equity, reduced disadvantage, sustainability, social inclusion.

iii) **How will we measure progress?** — How will we <u>measure</u> the improvement?

Ideas that refer to the methods and tools we will use to measure the extent of progress – the indicators, indexes, model dimensions, accounts, capital measures – can be grouped here.

A simple depiction of these three basic categories of interest and the relationships between them might show:

- the subject of the investigation (eg, Australia, society, the economy, and so on)
- progressing towards goals (as yet unspecified), and
- the measures designed to assess and inform on the extent of progress



Some enhancements of this basic approach are discussed in detail in the rest of this article. For example, this depiction could be given more depth by clarifying what is meant by Australia and specifying what Australians care about in terms of progress goals or aspirations. It might also be useful to include an element that addresses concrete outcomes relevant to those aspirations, to provide a bridge between broad goals and detailed statistical measures. That is, to specify what real world changes would demonstrate whether we have come closer to a particular societal aspiration.

Ideally, it would also be valuable to indicate what important relationships exist between the identified elements, to better reflect some of the complexity involved. Eventually, specific measures that effectively report on the aspirations and outcomes articulated should also be identified.

## "Australia" — the subject of progress

In looking more closely at what is progressing – the subject of the improvement being sought, in this case, Australian society – commentators commonly emphasise the importance of these elements:

- People – for example, their quality of life, their wellbeing, their relative prosperity

- Human society overall – for example, its cohesion, resilience, tolerance, values

- Societal enablers – for example, the economic, cultural and governance institutions which are key factors determining how well society functions, and

- The natural environment, upon which people and their social structures depend.

These are all subjects of perennial interest when describing progress. For example, the ABS currently provides measures of progress that address wellbeing, social cohesion, the economy, culture and governance, and the natural environment. And there is little controversy about the need for their presence in a progress framework.

Focusing on these areas is logical. For example, the natural environment is a recurring topic in discussion around progress because it is both valued by society for its own sake and because it is instrumental to (affects) human wellbeing: it provides resources and raw materials we need to survive, support our societies and prosper.

Governance structures are central to progress debates because they reflect societal values and are the means by which we collectively organise to achieve our progress aspirations. Research has shown that a country's governance strongly influences its progress outcomes.[8]

However, perception of how these areas are prioritised and how they relate to one another does tend to shift over time. For this reason, issues around how the various relationships between these areas might best be depicted in a progress framework are discussed in more detail below.

## Human society and the natural environment

Perceptions about the status of the natural environment in the context of progress have changed. At times in the past the environment has been seen strongly in terms of its functional utility and as an infinite resource at the service of human society. But the resources provided by the environment are now increasingly understood to be finite.[9]

The view that humans and their societies are wholly dependent on the natural environment, and that they need to actively protect and rehabilitate it for this reason, has been emphasised as climate change concerns have heightened.[10] The environment is also a crucial aspect of the frequently discussed notion of sustainability, whereby current living conditions can be maintained into the future. And, with continuing loss of species and habitats, there has been an increase in those arguing that these species and habitats are inherently valuable: valuable in their own right.[11]

A majority of Australians now say they have concerns about the natural environment, with 82% of adults nominating a concern about environmental problems in 2007-08.[12]

The OECD framework for measuring the progress of societies presents two systems side by side: the Human System and the Ecosystem.[13]
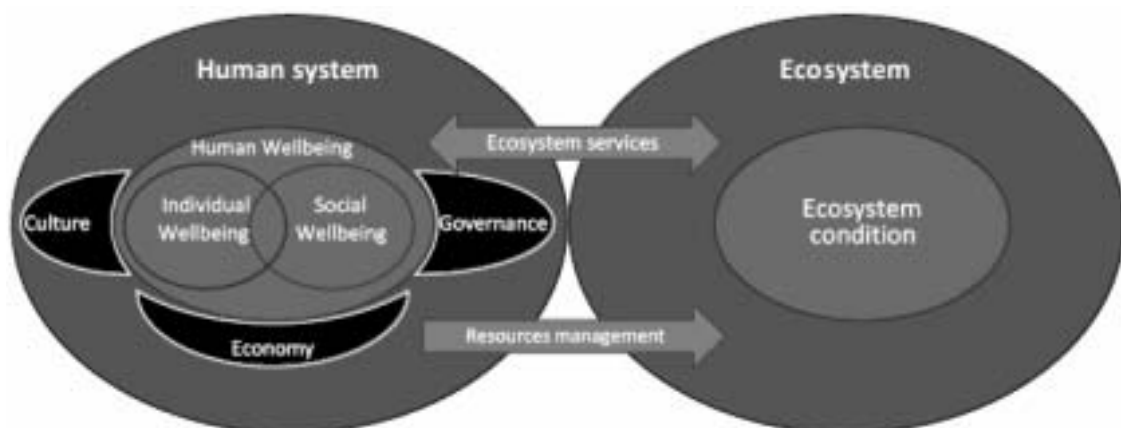


This framework emphasises the importance of the ecosystem to progress, putting it, and its condition, on a par with human systems and wellbeing, and showing the interdependent relationship between the two systems as a priority (orange arrows). The OECD also acknowledge that "One alternative way to represent the framework is to show the Human System within the Ecosphere, to underline how much the former is strictly embedded in the latter."[13]

The ABS has embraced this alternative OECD suggestion in its approach. It is logical from a purely empirical perspective to depict human society as embedded in the natural environment, as human society cannot exist outside the natural environment. And this is also a simple way to represent one of the issues at the core of current Australian and international debate about progress. That is, the extent to which this interdependent relationship, and the notion of sustainability, is addressed by our statistical measures.

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**This Side of Pinnaroo**
Wal O'Neill

Oh, we rounded up the horses and we yoked them to their chains;
We laboured sixteen hours a day to clear those Mallee plains;
We robbed the Dingo of his home and scared the Kangaroo
The time we cleared the Mallee land this side of Pinnaroo ...[14]

The Mallee region in South Australia serves as an illustration of this shift in thinking. European settlers focused on clearing the area for farming from the late 1800s. But by 1948 the Murray Mallee District Soil Conservation Board had been formed to provide leadership, soil conservation and land care for the area, which had degenerated as a result of clearing.[15] In 2009, the Little Desert Nature Lodge Environmental Studies Program stated "the Mallee is the critical test of the ability of Australia to sustain itself."[16]

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## Society and the economy

"The time is ripe for our measurement systems to shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people's well-being. And measures of well-being should be put in a context of sustainability"

> *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*, Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi, 2009[xiv]

"What we should be aiming for is improved human wellbeing, broadly defined, which must also be sustainable in the light of the immense ecological difficulties we face."

> *The Happy Economist*, Ross Gittins, 2010[xv]

There has also been a shift in thinking about whether constructs such as the economy should be depicted as equivalent to society, or whether they are more appropriately depicted as being in the service of society. This shift is reflected in current international debate about the adequacy of only using traditional economic measures to assess national progress.[17]

The limitations of economic measures such as GDP were understood by those who designed them, and many statistical experts and commentators are now engaging in a debate about what measures better reflect societal wellbeing.[17] This debate is shifting focus away from economic growth towards overall wellbeing as the key goal (the OECD nominate "sustainable and equitable wellbeing"),[13] with the economy and material consumption ideally functioning as a means to improve wellbeing, or as one element among many contributing to wellbeing.

In anticipating Australia's future statistical needs, the ABS has taken the opportunity to respond to this shift in thinking and to depict the economy as a system that exists within human society and underlies its functioning. By clearly portraying these changing priorities for measuring progress, the ABS hopes to assist in managing the move towards new measures of progress, for statisticians, governments and the community.

## Society and governance

"Democracy and progress measurement are linked …The development of democracy is itself a key component of social progress [and] healthy democracy improves progress and wellbeing in other areas"

*Measuring Progress of Societies*, Professor Mike Salvaris,
OECD Kyoto Conference, 2009[xvi]

Australia has a range of governance systems that, like the economy, underlie our society and determine how it functions. For instance, laws and regulations are developed and applied through our criminal justice system, and our electoral system aims to ensure the representation of citizens' views in government. Governance institutions distil and apply individual and group judgements about how society should work, and are often instrumental in determining how society will progress.

The ABS have chosen to depict governance as being a distinct factor within human society. It is also depicted as underlying, or supporting both the economy and society.

As with the relative positioning of the environment and human society, the depiction of the economy and governance is based on logic as well as contemporary thinking. That is, governance institutions and economies do not exist outside human society.

## The components of society

"We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community ... Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own."

Cesar Chavez, (1927-1993)[xvii]

A society's culture is another determining factor in its wellbeing. For example, cultural traditions and heritage can influence the amount and type of connection and cooperation among citizens, how open or inflexible the society is towards change and other cultures, and its creativity. A society's identity finds expression in cultural activity, and culture embraces the ethical, qualitative and spiritual dimensions of life.

However, culture is not a system that is clearly delineated by society or separate from it. For this reason, the ABS acknowledges the importance of culture to progress, but combines society and culture together in its depiction.

There tends to be little controversy around labels and logical depictions for the various building blocks of society. The individual is regularly and logically depicted as embedded in their family and core community, and these are seen as being components of the wider community and society as a whole. The ABS has used a classic diagram of concentric circles to represent these key areas of social measurement.

Another aspect of Australia that needs to be acknowledged is its global context. Although it would be possible to enhance the diagram to show Australia as just one country in an international context, global concerns may be better expressed in terms of progress goals: for example, goals associated with upholding international agreements or minimising international environmental impacts (goals are discussed further below). However, the approach outlined below can be readily adapted to an international context. For example, it could apply to any given country or state, or depict the subject of progress as the world as a whole.

## Putting it together

Following the logic outlined in the preceding discussion, a starting point is to depict the subject of progress — "Australia" — as shown below:
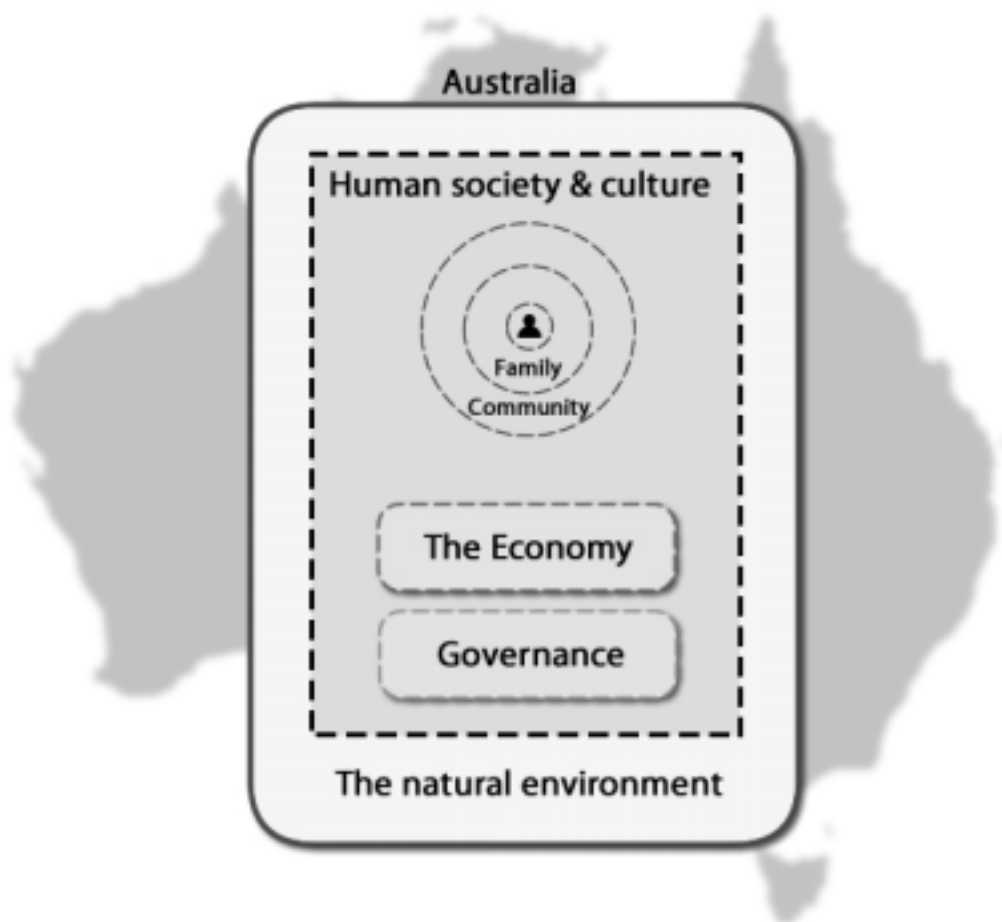
## 4.2   What aspects of progress do Australians care about?

> "Social indicators ... enable us to assess where we stand and are going with respect to our values and goals."
>
> *Social Indicators*, Raymond Bauer, 1966[xviii]
>
> "We must consider the values and the principles we need to guide us to more equitable, peaceful and sustainable ways of living. We must try to imagine this alternative life – what might it look like? How will we know if we are making the 'right' kind of 'progress'?
>
> *An Economy of Life*, Uniting Church in Australia, 2009[xix]

With the various aspects of "Australia" further clarified, and the notion of progress understood to be movement towards goals, the next step is to look more closely at those progress goals.

This section sets out a number of related discussions, such as:

- Should a statistical framework set out progress goals?
- Simplifying the issues – articulating different goals for different subjects
- What do we mean by "progress goals"?
- Broad goals vs specific outcomes – how detailed should the goals be?
- Managing values expressed in progress goals – arriving at a balanced set of goals

### Should a statistical framework set out progress goals?

It is important here to restate the purpose of the approach presented in this article, which is to support discussion around progress measurement by providing direction and clarity. The approach is intended to provide a refined mind map of the issues, with a view to enhancing progress measures to be used in the future. The ABS is interested in whether readers support the idea of defining a set of progress goals in this context, and welcomes your comments.

As discussed previously, it is not the role of the ABS to define the goals implicit in a progress framework, and we are planning a program of consultation regarding the value and content of this aspect of a final progress framework (as outlined above).

Further ways in which the ABS aims to approach this issue are looked at in more detail in the section "Managing the values expressed in progress goals" below.

### Simplifying the issues

The diagrams presented in this article are intended to guide the consultation process and facilitate discussion by providing structure and clarity. But it can be challenging to simplify the complex area that addresses Australians' aspirations for the future.

This aspect of progress is complicated partly because there are fundamental differences between the arenas of progress we are interested in (social, economic, governance and environmental). Progress for individuals may be different from progress for society overall, and different again from progress for the economy or the environment. For instance, the kinds of measures used to describe progress in these areas differ.

Further, some relevant concepts change in nature depending on which arena of activity is being considered. For example, social 'equity' differs from 'equity' in an economic context. Another example is the notion of 'sustainability', which has different implications depending on whether economic sustainability or environmental sustainability is being considered. This can lead to confusion, because, although the broad theme may be the same, the specifics and measurement issues for each arena are different. [18]

To assist in managing this complexity, the ABS proposes that different goals be defined for each progress arena: social, economic, governance and environmental. This way the different issues unique to each arena can be looked at separately. Where broad goals recur, say in the case of equity or sustainability, these can also be addressed in regard to each separate arena, so the particular issues for each can be clearly understood.

At the same time, this approach allows us to identify when a particular goal does recur across a number of arenas. We can then treat these recurring goals as a group of particularly important themes in the area of progress. [18]
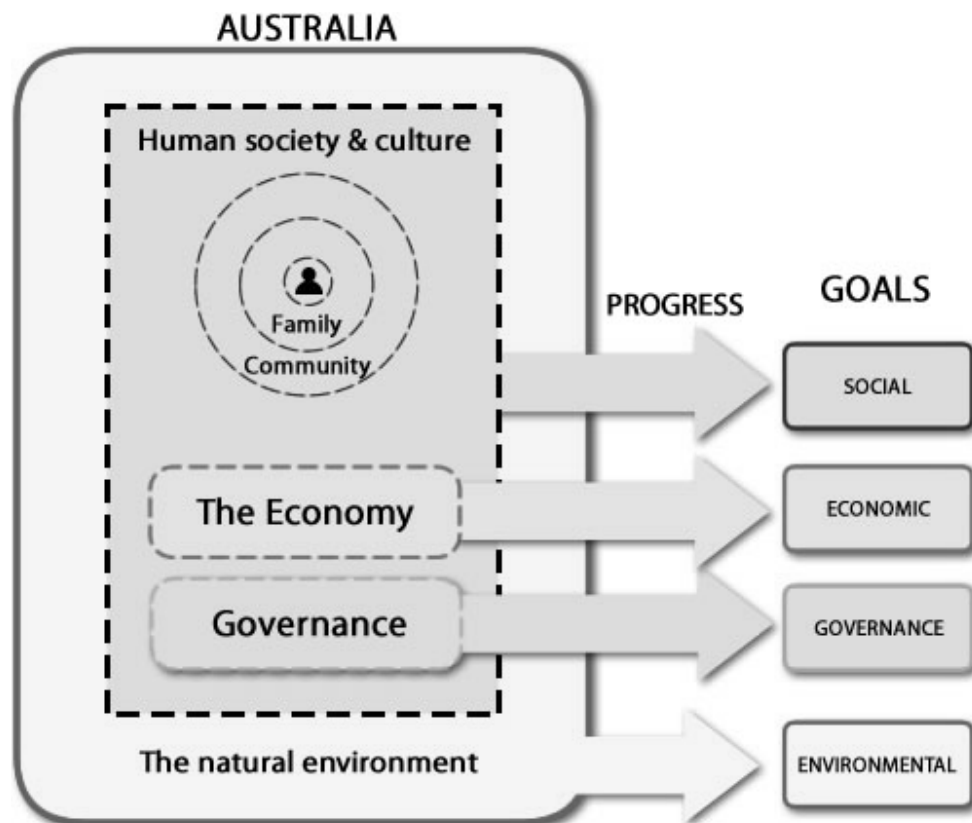
## What do we mean by progress goals?

> "The day will come when nations will be judged not by their military or economic strength, nor by the splendour of their capital cities and public buildings, but by the well-being of their people: by their levels of health, nutrition and education; by their opportunities to earn a fair reward for their labours; by their ability to participate in the decisions that affect their lives; by the respect shown for their civil and political liberties; by the provision made for those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged; and by the protection afforded to the growing minds and bodies of their children."
>
> *The Progress of Nations*, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), viewed 2010[xx]

A set of progress goals should reflect what Australians care about: directions they consider important for the future and wellbeing of Australian society. They are collective aspirations for the future. But what might they look like in practice?

As an example, in its *The Progress of Nations* (see excerpt above), UNICEF makes several broad statements that articulate widely held values and reflect universal principles, and that might be usefully adapted to form progress goals, such as:

- High levels of health, nutrition and education

- The opportunity to earn a fair reward for labours

- The ability to participate in decisions that affect our lives

- Respect for civil and political liberties

- Provision for those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged

- Protection for the growing minds and bodies of our children

There are many other ways of approaching progress goals, and many well respected researchers, commentators and organisations have articulated societal goals. At a global level, an example is the Millennium Development Goals which emerged from the Millennium Declaration endorsed by 189 world leaders in 2000. The Millennium Development Goals aim to "build a safer, more prosperous and equitable world".[19]

Internationally, a range of progress measurement initiatives have summarised the issues into a few key points of action, for example, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing.[20]

Australian organisations have also addressed the question of societal progress by setting out goals for the future, at both state and national levels. For example, the Tasmanian Government's Tasmania Together initiative articulates an overall vision and sets out 12 key goals that are reported on annually (Appendix E). The Australian Government's social inclusion initiative has the broad aim of building "a stronger, fairer Australia". It sets out underlying principles, reform priorities and a framework for action built on five pillars.[21] And a range of advocacy groups, charitable organisations and think tanks have brought together their views in the form of a set of aspirations for Australia's future, for instance, The Australia Institute,[22] the Uniting Church of Australia,[23] and the Australian Conservation Foundation.[24]

In many ways, the statistical indicators presented in the current and previous editions of MAP implicitly reflect societal interests and aspirations, as do all official statistics. This is

because these statistics are derived from the expressed needs of a wide range of government, business and community users concerned with developing Australia through public and private programs, research, education and so on; and because they are prioritised for broad community relevance and utility.

For example, some explicit societal aspirations that might be drawn from the commentary and indicators included in this edition of MAP are set out below.

**Social**

- Good health for all

- Education and training for individual development and a skilled workforce

- Paid work supporting individual wellbeing and economic growth

- Freedom to express cultural identity and cultural differences

- Families and communities that support their members and are inclusive

- Low levels of crime and high feelings of safety

- Access to services such as transport and communications technology

- Participation of citizens in community life

**Economic**

- Equity of opportunity to enhance material living standards

- Adequate wealth, assets, personal income and economic security

- Households able to maintain an acceptable material standard of living

- Access to shelter, security, privacy and assets provided by adequate housing

- A productive and efficient economy

- Low and stable inflation rates

- Effective, equitable distribution of income and wealth among Australians

**Governance**

- A fair and effective judicial system

- A healthy democracy

- Participation of citizens in civic life

**Environmental**

- Healthy native species and habitats, and sustainable biodiversity

- Sustainable activities impacting native forests and vegetation, eg, land clearing

- Sustainable consumption, and reduced pollution, of freshwater

- Healthy oceans and estuaries and sustainable diversity of marine life

- Clean air and reduced activities that release greenhouse gases

- Waste disposal and management safe for the environment and population

This set of goals does not include some ideas common to a range of other societal goal systems, such as:

- Provision for those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged
- A healthy balance between working and leisure time

That such gaps can be identified and considered highlights the value of making progress goals explicit.


## Broad goals vs specific outcomes

"The future is not a result of choices among alternative paths offered by the present, but a place that is created — created first in the mind and will, created next in activity."

John Schaar, US Futurist and Political Philosopher, University of California[xxi]


An important question related to goals is their appropriate level of detail. Should these goals be large and theoretical, or related to specific actions?

Broad aspirational goals, such as those outlined above, have the advantage of encapsulating a range of complex values. They tend to relate to self-evident truths – many Australians will understand their relevance and value. Such statements are likely to remain relevant over the long term. And there are a range of reputable charters which may inform the development of such a set of goals, such as the United Nations Charter of Human Rights.

However, statistics relating to more detailed goals may be more useful to policy makers and others seeking to apply the measures to specific community planning. In addition, the statistical measures ultimately used will have greater validity if they relate to pragmatic real world outcomes rather than the more intangible concepts expressed in aspirational statements.

Outcome measures are intended to represent real world change and be an unambiguous measure of whether a given aspiration is being achieved. Wherever possible, the progress measures included in this edition of MAP focus on outcomes. For example, some outcome measures in the area of health are life expectancy, or the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Related concepts are "input measures", which demonstrate activity or status in an area, but not necessarily whether a specific outcome is being achieved (eg, number of GPs per capita); and "output measures" (eg, the size of hospital waiting lists).

For this reason, the ABS identifies both broad aspirations and specific outcomes in its approach. Outcomes provide a conceptual stepping stone between long term goals and precise statistical measures, and will result in statistics that more directly inform policy, research, community and development programs.

## Bringing it together

So, progress goals, or, more descriptively, the aspirations that describe what Australians care about, are included in the diagram below. This dimension of the model is intended to indicate overall societal directions for each area of interest. It will lend stability to the overall approach and give it relevance over time (a useful feature of a statistical framework structuring a set of time series measures). The aspirations selected to populate this dimension will aim to reflect universally recognised principles and self-evident truths rather than particular agendas (discussed in more detail below).

A dimension addressing outcomes is also included. These more detailed outcomes may be subject to change over time, for example, in response to incremental achievement of society's aspirations.

As a practical example, if sustainability is included as an aspiration for the natural environment, one specific outcome might relate to renewable energy capability. The details of this outcome may change over time, with an initial focus on research and development and a subsequent focus on production or usage. Such shifts will also be reflected in the specific measures used to inform this stream of inquiry. But the broad aspiration of environmental sustainability will remain a stable focus point.

As discussed above, differentiating between aspirations and outcomes brings further clarity to the debate, especially where concepts pervasive to progress discussion, such as sustainability or equity, are relevant to more than one arena of activity. That is, sustainability can, appropriately, be an aspiration for the economy and for society as well as for the natural environment. But the different implications of sustainability for each of these arenas will be reflected in the outcomes articulated in each instance.
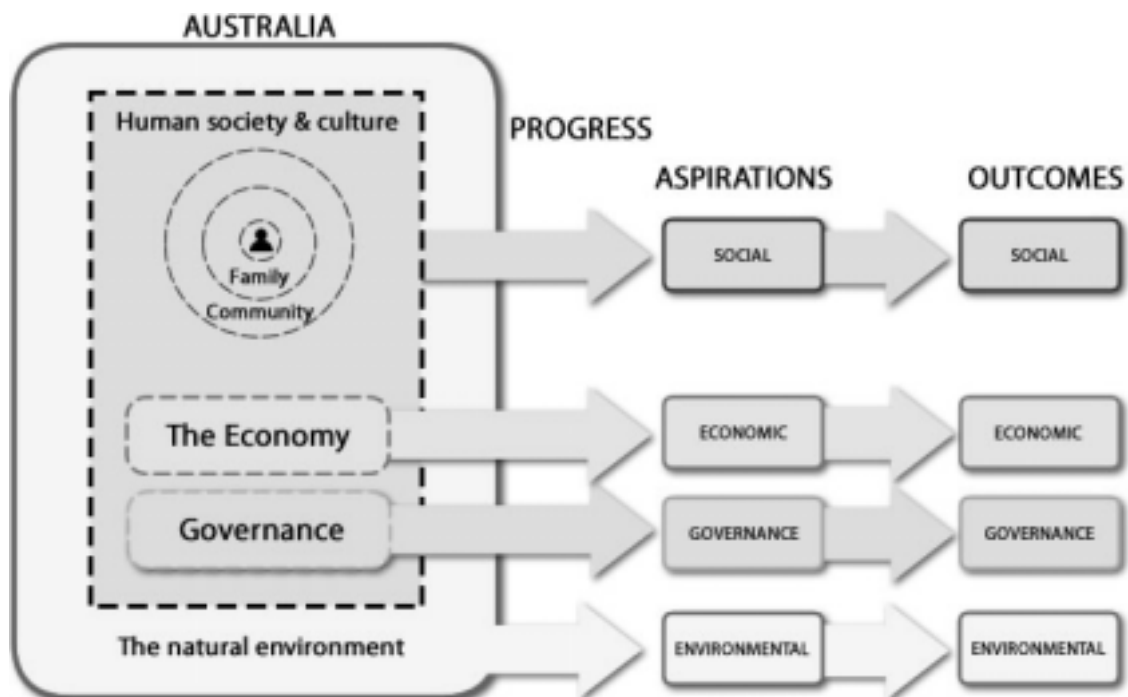
## Managing the values expressed in progress goals

"Understanding our nation's progress towards widely accepted goals is imperative in an age where most of us know far too little about the problems and opportunities we face. Supplying such information requires a trusted, non-partisan source, with scientifically credible and useful data."

Derek Bok, Professor Emeritus of Harvard University, 2007[xxii]

"Social measurement, both official and unofficial, inevitably embodies the values of the group doing the measurement. If only politically marginalised groups voice objections to the categories being used, the indicators can easily appear to be neutral and non-ideological. That is why the ideological character of official statistics becomes harder to detect as we approach the present. Our own ideology is usually invisible to us."

*Measurement Tools and the Quality of Life*, C. Cobb, 2000[xxiii]

Defining progress goals inherently involves expressing values. For this reason, this section of the article considers whether such an exercise has the potential to compromise the apolitical nature of the ABS, or to omit important viewpoints, and how this might be handled by the ABS with its charter for objectivity and independence.

As well as providing valuable input into the content of a progress framework, the discussion prompted by this article and the consultative events planned by the ABS, will clarify whether it is possible to navigate this terrain in a balanced way. Ideally, the ABS would like to arrive at a framework that covers all the areas of interest, ensures new statistical work is relevant to the wider debate, and supports the provision of balanced information to inform that debate.

One way to achieve a balanced outcome will be to ensure feedback is obtained from a representative group of commentators. That is, ensure a cross-section of types of organisations are included in the consultation (eg, community, academic, governmental, business), as well as providing opportunities for the general public to comment. The ABS will also actively seek to represent thinking across the political and apolitical spectrums, and to acknowledge, for example, Article 12 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.[25]

Once information has been gathered from the community and expert commentators, the ABS will need to analyse and synthesise that information. This analysis will be undertaken with a view to arriving at progress aspirations and outcomes that:

i)   Address a desired end state rather than the means of achieving progress. For example, some may suggest the aspiration of having a healthy population be achieved by privatising health services, while others will argue for publicly funded health services; but these are the means by which the goal may be achieved. Regardless of the means, all may agree on the desired end condition.

ii)  Focus on broad aspirations (for goals) and end results (for outcomes), and not on programs or policies associated with specific governments. For example, equity is a widely valued principle in addressing societal progress,[26] and a certain minimal level of literacy for all Australians may be one outcome of that principle. Particular education policies or programs do not need to be referred to.

The ABS is also cognisant of precedents for similar exercises undertaken by government, such as those resulting in the Values for Australian Schooling articulated by the Department of Education Science and Training, and the Australian Values Statements developed by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Another example is the framework supporting the Social Inclusion Strategy developed by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Future-related analyses, such as the Intergenerational Report produced by the Australian Treasury, and the five yearly State of the Environment report produced under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act may also provide valuable reference points for developing goals, as will the objectives, both implicit and stated, in the National Agreements produced by the Council Of Australian Governments (COAG).

## 4.3   Relationships and trade-offs

> "The argument is that increasing our reliance on impersonal markets may well be more efficient, so that it does indeed raise our material standard of living, but that this comes at the less-visible cost of breaking down the social connections that contribute so much to our personal happiness"
>
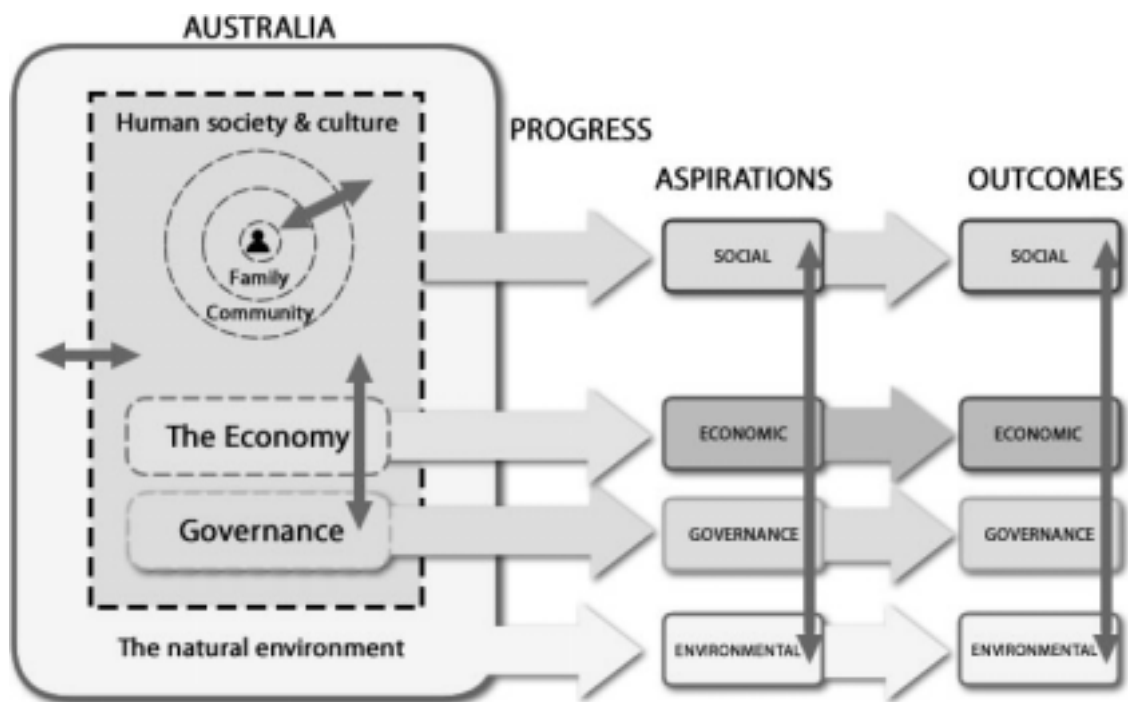> *The Happy Economist*, Ross Gittins, 2010[xxv]

There are a range of relationships between the elements discussed so far that are of interest in the context of measuring progress, such as support or "reinforcement" relationships. Some commentators for instance describe how economic equity, or the equitable distribution of wealth, supports individual and societal wellbeing.[26] There are also relationships, both positive and negative, that occur between individuals and their families, families and the wider community, the community and government, and so on.

One key aspect in the progress debate is the notion of trade-offs, whereby progress in one area is linked to regress in another. This is a concern often expressed, for example, in relation to the connection between economic growth and environmental sustainability. (Although assessing the relationship between economic growth and environmental sustainability is complicated by the fact that sustainability is not fully factored into growth measures – discussed further in the box below).

It is valuable to include the concept of trade-offs in a progress model, as this prompts and structures an examination of relationships that can reflect on the validity of the model, the design of progress measures (as in the example above), and, for those interested in wider questions, the feasibility of society's aspirations.

Some of the areas where these relationships of interest, both positive and negative, may occur are broadly indicated in the following diagram with arrows, and a more detailed discussion of trade-off relationships follows.

AUSTRALIA

Human society & culture

Family Community

The Economy

Governance

The natural environment

PROGRESS

ASPIRATIONS

SOCIAL

ECONOMIC

GOVERNANCE

ENVIRONMENTAL

OUTCOMES

SOCIAL

ECONOMIC

GOVERNANCE

ENVIRONMENTAL

"Choices between promoting GDP and protecting the environment may be false choices, once environmental degradation is appropriately included in our measurement of economic performance."

*Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*, Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi, 2009[xxvi]

A caveat when examining trade-off relationships is to consider whether an apparent trade-off is partially the product of statistical measures not suited to the purpose they are being used for. For example, while economic growth may in fact conflict with environmental sustainability, assessment of this is complicated by the fact that sustainability is not currently fully factored into economic growth measures (eg, GDP does not account for depreciation or depletion).[27]

In other words, real world economic development may be compatible with environmental sustainability. There are a range of accounting methods such as the OECD's Framework for Green Growth Indicators[28] and the ecological economics theories articulated by Herman Daly and others[29] that seek to reconcile these issues on paper and provide a platform for a real world reconciliation between seemingly competing ends.

## Trade-offs

Using the above diagram as a guide, it is possible to consider the trade-offs occurring between elements in the progress terrain. Represented in a matrix, the following pairs of areas might be examined (note there may be trade-offs within a given arena):

|              | Social | Economic | Governance | Environmental |
|--------------|--------|----------|------------|---------------|
| Social       | x      | x        | x          | X             |
| Economic     |        | x        | x          | X             |
| Governance   |        |          | x          | X             |
| Environmental|        |          |            | X             |

These pairings could be considered in relation to either aspirations or outcomes. That is, those interested in ethical issues or prioritising broad social planning might consider possible contradictions in what Australians care about. Whether our economic desires imply a compromise of our social ideals, for example, or whether our goals for a productive labour force compromise our goals for family connection and leisure time.

Policy makers, community developers or business analysts might be more interested in outcome contradictions. For example, in whether increased life expectancy contributes to increased demand for health care services.

Once particular trade-offs are identified, analysts might consider whether these are:

- *Deliberate trade-offs* – for example, where individuals or groups have consciously decided they are willing to have less progress in one area in exchange for progress in another area (deliberate values trade-offs), or where delivering progress in one area is not possible without forgoing progress in another area (pragmatic trade-offs – which might occur for example when individuals or societies are under stress).

or whether the trade offs are

- *Unintended trade-offs* – for example, where historical or cultural behaviours have resulted in societal compromises we are no longer fully aware of (eg, where smoking compromises the health of individuals or society's health care capability, or where increased consumption possibilities compromise other aspects of life).

Further important questions might relate to how large a given trade-off is, how unbalanced it is, or how it is being realised into the future. For example, is the depletion or loss of fisheries too large a price to pay for continued industrial fishing in a given area? Some trade-offs might be acceptable within a given arena, such as economic progress, but might be detrimental to overall wellbeing and progress.

While there may always be trade-offs occurring across society, the number of trade-offs identified in total might also be a useful measure. That is, fewer trade-offs overall may indicate that a level of balance has been achieved across aspirations for the different arenas of social, economic, governance and environmental activity.

So, while not delineating how trade-offs might be measured statistically, the diagram encourages a full set of trade-offs to be identified and addressed methodically, and functions to alert analysts as to where particularly damaging trade-offs might occur.

Such an approach could potentially provide feedback on whether our aspirations are in conflict, our outcomes are aligned, and our measures are appropriate, and may be useful in testing the aspirations developed for a final progress framework.

## 4.4   Measures

A final dimension that needs to be considered in a progress framework is the actual statistical measures used.

It is likely many of the measures currently used in MAP will remain relevant. However, re-casting the MAP framework to more explicitly state progress aspirations and outcomes will support a structured review of measures against these stated aims. It will also allow us to more precisely identify where there are gaps in information. We will then be in a position to better target the development of new measures to effectively inform on Australia's progress and measure what Australians care about.

This work will be possible once the consultation events outlined at the start of this article are complete and a final framework has been developed and agreed upon.

The measures developed will need to be cohesive, comprehensive and relevant to the aspirations and outcomes identified, which may in turn be linked to the wider policy and research environments.

To this end, relevant statistical frameworks may be used to organise measures within a given area. For example, the ABS Social Capital framework and/or the Social Inclusion framework prepared by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet may be valuable as organising principles for social progress measures. Other frameworks that may be valuable include The Treasury's Wellbeing Framework and the OECD's Framework for Green Growth Indicators.[29]


## 5.    A progress model

Pulling all the previous development steps together, the proposed approach is illustrated in the following diagram. This approach should provide a valuable basis for further discussion about the nature, subject, goals and measures of progress. The ABS hopes it will assist those interested in the topic of Australia's progress to more effectively negotiate the conceptual terrain and arrive at broad consensus.
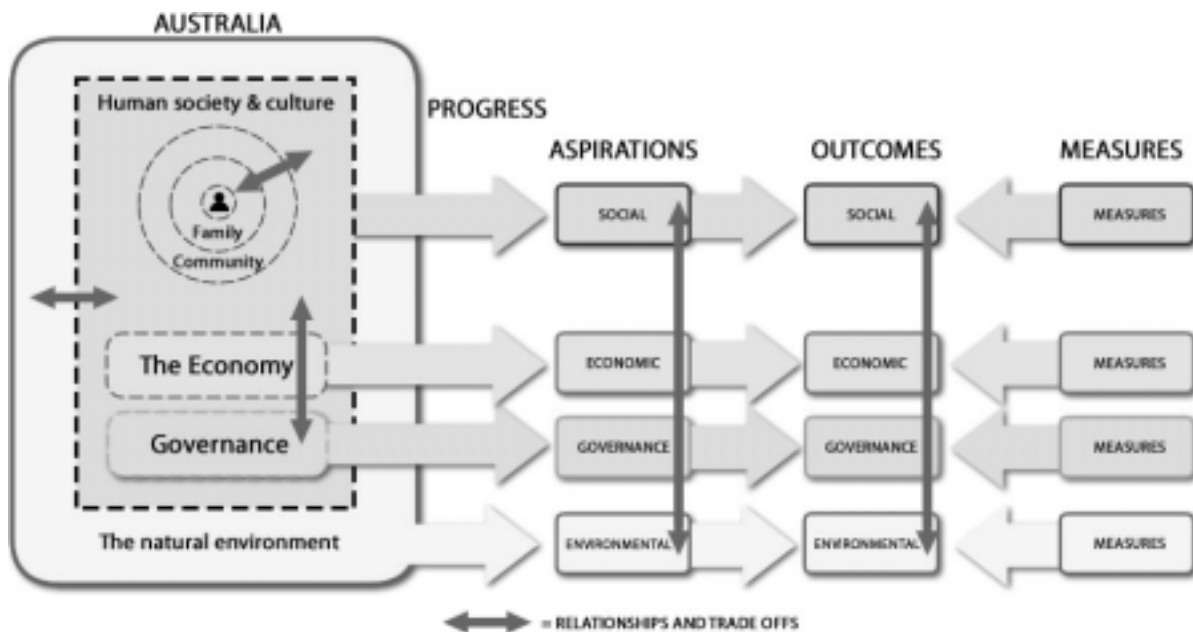


## 5.1   Advantages of the model

Of key value is the clarity provided by differentiating "progress" from its goals. As well, delineating different arenas of progress allows different, subject-appropriate goals to be articulated – managing some of the complexity in this area. Stable universal goals are represented to reflect what Australians care about at a broad level, and pragmatic outcomes that aim to monitor progress towards these aspirations are also provided for. Finally, trade-offs and other relationships of interest can be located more precisely on the conceptual map.

In terms of the objectives identified at the start of this article, this model maps the conceptual terrain, delineates important concepts, organises these into a logical structure and shows how they relate to one another. It explains how the community of interested statisticians, stakeholders and commentators view progress, picking up common themes from research and commentary and anticipating future directions. It can also be used as a general starting point for discussion, providing a logical and accessible structure to ensure community views can be captured coherently and comprehensively.

Once populated with goals, outcomes and measures, and further developed through consultation, the final progress framework should better explain how progress is understood by the wider community and reflect the values Australians place on the various dimensions of progress. In other words, bring us closer to measuring what people care about.

## 5.2　We would like to hear from you

"Since the Industrial Revolution, the idea of 'progress' or 'development' has occupied a central position in Western society ... And it is potent not least because it conveys a sense of destiny."

*Citizenship and Progress*, Mike Salvaris,1998[xxxi]

"The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths to the future are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination"

John Schaar, US Futurist and Political Philosopher, University of California[xxxii]

The ABS hopes this article will contribute to the thinking and activity surrounding the important but challenging area of measuring the progress of society. It is an area that is being pursued by statisticians as pressure for change increases. However, there are only so many steps that can be taken from a statistical point of view towards arriving at a new vision for the future.

At this point we must look to others to provide input. To those who are experts in the arenas of social, economic, governance and environmental progress. To historians, philosophers, sociologists, scientists, psychologists, and business and religious leaders, as well as politicians and policy makers.

But it is also an area that requires the active engagement of citizens. Parents, students, community leaders and elders, who can bring their views, experience and wisdom to the debate.

The approach outlined in this article is designed to assist these people to have a meaningful conversation about progress, and to reach a consensus, so the ABS is in a stronger position to measure what people care about.

We hope those measures will then reflect and inform on Australia's progress into the future.

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(Note: Quotations highlighted in this article are listed in "Highlighted quotations" below)

1. Professor Mike Salvaris from RMIT University, Melbourne has contributed a short essay to this article – Appendix D– which summarises how the idea of progress has developed and shifted over the ages. Professor Salvaris has an extensive background in this area and has worked with many of the key groups and individuals who are contributing to community and academic developments in measuring progress both nationally and internationally. His assistance with developing future directions for the ABS in this area has been invaluable. The essay ends by bringing together some of the consistent ideas about progress that have emerged over time, and are still relevant today.

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18. The important concepts of sustainability and equity are not discussed further in this article as the article focuses on establishing a broad approach where such concepts would be dealt with under the "Aspirations" dimension. The ABS intends to look more closely at the "Aspirations" dimension following a process of consultation (outlined at the start of the article). The complexities and conceptual nuances associated with

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**APPENDIX A**

# A progress time line

This time line tracking selected international developments in progress measurement is intended as a brief and representative overview of the last decade.

Many other developments occurred before 2000. For example, in Australia there was a Senate Inquiry into *National Wellbeing: A system of national citizenship indicators and benchmarks* in 1996; a national conference on measuring national progress in 1997; and the release of the seminal publication *Measuring Progress: Is life getting better?*, edited by Richard Eckersley and published by CSIRO Publishing in 1998.

Some international developments before 2000 include the Human Development Index and the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) launched in the USA in 1990 and 1995 respectively.

This time line focuses on events concerned with presenting social and environmental measures together with economic measures. Another closely related area of development is the broader and very considerable social indicator movement which had its origins in the early 1970s when the OECD launched the 24-nation Social Indicators Program.

## 2002

Australia - ABS release
Measuring Australia's Progress
**New Zealand - Local Government Act**
Integrated reporting on sustainable wellbeing
**Canada - Citizen consultation**
Quality of life priorities

## 2004

OECD - First World Forum
Statistics Knowledge and Policy
OECD - Global Project
Measuring the Progress of Societies
Australia - ABS release
Measures of Australia's Progress 2004

## 2006

Australia - ABS release
MAP 2006
**USA - Launch**
State of the USA

## 2007

OECD - Second World Forum
Measuring the Progress of Societies
Europe - Conference Beyond GDP

## 2008

Europe - Commission established on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress
Australia - NATSTATS Conference focuses attention on Global Project

## 2009

USA - G20 Leaders Pittsbugh Summit
New growth measures accounting for society & environment
Europe - EU Communication
on "GDP and beyond - measuring progress in a changing world"
Europe - Final report delivered
Commission for the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress,
By Stiglitz, Sen, Fitoussi
Australia - 2020 Summit
Proposed National Development Index
OECD - Third World Forum
Measuring the Progress of Societies
**Canada - Launch**
Canadian Index of Wellbeing
**Asia & South America - 5th International Conference**
on Gross National Happiness, 800 participants

## 2010

Europe - Statement released by Chancellor Merket, heads of OECD, WTO, ILO, IMF, World Bank: complement GDP with social, employment & environmental measures
Europe - Sponsorship Group established on "Measuring Progress, wellbeing & sustainable development"
Europe - Meeting of EU Director Generals
Topic is measuring progress, welbeing & sustainable development
OECD - Priority areas identified
One of six areas is Measuring Wellbeing & the Progress of Societies
OECD - Commission hosted
Commission for the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress to be continued and hosted by OECD
Australia - ABS release
MAP Traffic light summary & proposed new progress model
Australia - Launch
Australian National Development Index
USA - Legislation approved
Key national indicator system, US National Academy of Science

## APPENDIX B – MAP CONTRIBUTORS

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## Identifying and positioning elements of a framework

To assist in explaining the selection of elements and relationships used in this article, below is an overview of some basic steps in designing a statistical framework.

### i)      Deciding what elements should be present

Elements are factors important to the topic. They may be important ideas, states, players, population groups, resources, barriers, influences, etc. They are factors that:

- are fundamental to the debate — without which the debate would not exist

- are logical extensions of, or implied by, fundamental elements

They are signalled for inclusion in a statistical framework because they arise frequently in discussion. So they are equivalent to the big words in a word cloud or large clusters of thoughts in a mind map. They are not included because they portray an ideal real-world situation but because they are inherent to the debate, whether valued by society or not.

### ii)      Deciding what relationships should be shown between the elements

Relationships are often depicted by arrows or connectors in a diagram. They can also be indicated by how elements are positioned in relation to one another. For example, if one element is the product of another element it might be shown as smaller than, or embedded within, the parent element.

A classic example is the depiction of family, community and society as forming ever-widening concentric circles around the individual. Another example is where an element representing "resources" is shown graphically as "supporting" other elements, eg, as a base level building block, or a pillar holding up other elements.

As with elements, choices about relationship depiction are optimally driven by the need to accurately reflect the language around the debate and by logic — by what is clearly apparent.

**APPENDIX D**

# The idea of progress in history

By Mike Salvaris
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> Inherent in the idea of Progress is a firm belief that it is given to humanity to pass from a qualitatively inferior to a qualitatively higher stage, in a sequence that will ensure a radically better spiritual and material life for not just a part but the whole of the human community … Progress therefore means continuous and indefinite improvement of man's faculties and growing success in pursuit of the greatest possible individual and collective happiness, by means of a harmonious integration of rational enquiry, scientific research, technology, economic development, political and social institutions, and private and public ethics. (Salvadori, 2006, p 8)

To measure anything properly, you must first be able to describe it. Measuring a concept as broad as the progress of a whole society is especially challenging because the idea of societal progress is complex; its meaning is contestable; and it is a value laden notion.

## A powerful idea

Yet this idea has been a very powerful one in human history. First, because it requires us to imagine the kind of future life or world we want to 'progress to', or at the least, to have some model or ideal of 'a good society' against which to measure our contemporary social life. In this sense the idea of progress, like religion, is something that societies can believe in. 'There is general agreement that although the past cannot be changed, the future is ours to make ... (and so) identifying and promoting better societies has always been a powerful motivation for people' (Giovannini et al, p.2).

The second reason is more directly political: the model of progress or development that a society (or its dominant group) adopts will strongly influence the actual political and social outcomes in the society, and how they are perceived. So in modern societies the meaning of 'progress' also raises central democratic issues: What does it mean? Progress for whom? Who should decide?

For such reasons, and not least because it is inherently an interesting and challenging question for thinkers and policymakers alike, the idea of progress has been debated for thousands of years. In this journey it has taken on many different meanings and emphases, according to the times, and the prevailing culture, political regimes and circumstances of different societies and nations. But looking back over this long history, we can also see that a number of themes are common to most versions of progress. In a short essay, we can only highlight some of the main ideas that have emerged throughout history and note the ways they have differed or converged. All have added something to our present understanding and ideas about progress.

**A short history: from Plato to Sen** [1]

The modern "western" concept of progress is often traced back to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries during the European Age of Enlightenment (see below); but other and older cultures - Greek, Chinese and Buddhist, for example - had by then already developed their own distinctive notions of progress. In Asian thought, there is a long line stretching from Confucius and Buddhist teaching (500 BC) to the modern kingdom of Bhutan, which emphasises progress as ethical and spiritual development, happiness and integrity in government.

In Islamic teaching, it has been said that "sincere accomplished work towards progress and development is, therefore, an act of religious worship and is rewarded as such. The end result will be a serious, scrupulous and perfect work, true scientific progress and hence actual achievement of balanced and comprehensive development" (Muhammad El-Ghazali, Islamic theologian and philosopher, 1058-111).

The Greek philosopher Plato (427 –347 BC) developed a notion of progress as 'a continuous process, which improves the human condition from its original state of nature to higher and higher levels of culture, economic organisation and political structure towards an ideal state. Progress flows from the growing complexity of society and the need to enlarge knowledge, through the development of sciences and arts'. (WikiProgress, 2010). His countryman Aristotle (384 -322 BC) argued that human advancement must include both moral and ethical life (necessary to attain happiness or 'eudaimonia'), and material life (necessary to meet basic needs, and provide 'external goods' such as health, wealth, and beauty). He also believed that successful communities must share common principles on what is important for wellbeing, and that consultation is an essential tool to develop consensus on what is important for the good life.

In mediaeval Europe (500 – 1400 AD), the notion of broad social progress languished for centuries in the face of the more powerful ideas of 'individual salvation' and feudal hierarchy, and the lack of a strong common national or societal identity. But during the Renaissance (14th – 17th centuries), a new notion of progress sprang up which increasingly came to be associated with scientific and cultural advancement. Francis Bacon (1561 –1626) was one of the earliest European thinkers to advance this view.

In the European Age of Enlightenment (17th-18th centuries) the belief in progress as a rational process and a universal aspiration developed. By force of reason and intellect, mankind could bring about a better world for all: social progress would be produced from the combination of good values and enlightened government with greater prosperity and the development of science and technology.

The impact of political revolutions in Britain, France and America was to associate progress more firmly with political rights, democracy and citizenship. In England, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill spoke of progress and wellbeing in terms of "utility", with

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[1] This section draws extensively from: WikiProgress, Giovannini, Salvadori and Bury, as cited below.

happiness of the greatest number the ultimate goal of humankind: Bentham (1748 – 1832) stressing the significance of government promotion of social well-being and Mill (1806 – 1873) that happiness was associated with excellence in virtuous activities (ethical, intellectual and political). But importantly, Enlightenment thinkers did not assert that progress was a historical destiny, rather they saw it as a possibility, vulnerable to human vagaries and resistance to change. (Salvadori 2006)

The Industrial Revolution (18th to 19th centuries) with its optimism and the seemingly endless growth of science, industry and trade, led to a new direction in thinking about social progress. Progress began to be seen much more as a kind of inevitable evolution (a view partly influenced by Darwin's discoveries in biology) and subject to 'laws of organic progress'. This position, 'an almost scientistic-religious faith in the objective forces of history' (Salvadori, 2006), was shared by both social and political thinkers, but with very different consequences. For example, both the new "positivist" sociologists such as Comte (1798- 1857) and Spencer (1820 – 1903) and revolutionary socialists such as Marx, argued that the history had reached a point where the progress of man has become an irresistible law (Bury, 1920).

How did our thinking about progress change in the 20th Century? Certainly, this tumultuous era brought very mixed results for the idea of progress as a universal and unstoppable force. Against great leaps in science, technology, health, economic growth, social development and human rights, could be set the experience of two world wars, murderous on a previously inconceivable scale, genocide, nuclear holocaust, cruel and oppressive political regimes, a global economic depression and, towards the century's end,  a global environmental crisis that scientists believe threatens not merely the progress but the survival of human societies. And in this century, the idea of the inevitability of progress, and of its technology, had been perversely applied as the justification for the oppression of one race, class, or nation by another. (Salvadori, 2006)

For much of the 20th Century, the dominant idea of progress had been the notion of economic development, and especially the expansion of market economies,  as the necessary vector for social development. After the experience of the Great Depression and World War Two, many came to see "national accounting, [as] an instrument which was meant to go hand in hand with reconstruction, and viewed a nation's productive capacity as the key to its power" (Meda, 2009). These factors were seen as the main way of measuring social progress, although this was not the purpose for which accounting measures were originally designed.

This is not to assert that there were no other ways of defining and measuring progress – because in fact for much of the last half-century there has been a rich international debate about alternative ideas of progress and its measurement. In the late 20th century, for example, one influential contribution was Indian economist Amartya Sen's "capabilities approach", which stresses the primacy of freedom and democracy as the basis for people to make choices about their own lives and to achieve valuable functioning. In Sen's model, wellbeing requires not just material possessions, but relationships, political freedom and a supportive work environment; and progress is multidimensional, and

includes both material and non-material dimensions: good health, personal safety, education and knowledge all increase our capability to achieve wellbeing.

The movement towards sustainable development in the 1980s and the UNDP's effort to measure human development have also sought to restore balance by portraying economic growth as a supporting pillar of human wellbeing rather than as its sole goal.

From a broader perspective, too, it can be said that the second half of the 20th century gave birth to the most systematic and widely agreed codification in history of the idea of societal progress, and the key principles, goals and strategies for achieving it: through the plethora of international agreements and standards that make up the United Nations system and especially its human rights framework. However, despite its detail and its authority, this framework has been less influential in practice within most governments and communities as the basis for debating or implementing actual social progress.

In the 21st century, however, there are encouraging signs of change. A new global debate is under way to rethink the meaning of progress, and it encompasses related concepts such as well-being, human development and especially environmental sustainability. This debate may have had its origins in negative developments – such as perceived environmental and financial crises, or the need to move 'beyond GDP' in our thinking about progress – and its protagonists may have come from many diverse sources - environmentalists, community developers, feminists, development economists, human rights bodies -  but it has now assumed the form of a genuine global movement and is increasingly beginning to converge around key agreed themes. The current global project of the OECD entitled *Measuring the progress of societies*,  with its emphasis on the need to promote a debate about the meaning of progress in different communities, has been a powerful global stimulus and coordinator for this movement.

**What have we learnt?**

So, looking back over millennia of debate and conflict around the idea of progress, and especially the developments of the past 50 years, what are the lessons?  Can we draw out a definition of social progress, a model, a set of principles and components, which might be accepted as a basis for debating and measuring progress in Australia?

The *UN Declaration on Social Progress and Development* in 1969 attempted to document the  international consensus on the meaning of progress of that time. It sets out in detail the rationale, principles, objectives and means to achieve societal progress and there is little in it which we might disagree with today, except perhaps its limited coverage of the environmental issues of progress.

If we were to try to list some of the most important ideas about progress that have emerged in its long journey to the 21st century, we would find that most still have relevance – and resonance - today. Some ideas such as sustainability, are relative late comers but even they have their precursor:  for example, in earlier ideas about harmony, moderation and respect for nature. The list below is by no means exhaustive:

- Progress is a possibility for human society, not an inevitability
- What progress is relates to our goals and values as a society
- In democratic societies the task of determining the priorities and goals of progress is necessarily a responsibility of citizens as of governments
- Progress is a universal aspiration, inclusive of all members of society
- It is multi faceted and necessarily includes social, economic, environmental, cultural and democratic dimensions of life
- It includes improvement in both material well being (health, housing, education, income, leisure, work life, etc) and in ethical, moral and spiritual wellbeing
- Progress requires the full development of human capacity
- Progress necessarily means giving priority to the reduction of acute social disadvantage such as poverty, malnutrition, disease, and violence
- Improvements in education, culture, civilisation, and the arts are critical components of societal progress
- The progress of societies encompasses the healthy functioning of social institutions and systems and the broad qualities of the society (such as fairness, creativity etc) as well as the wellbeing of individuals
- Democracy, human rights, active and informed citizens and good governance are necessary ingredients of social progress
- Social progress is not possible in the absence of peace, security and good international relations
- Progress requires harmony and balance: in the life of people, and between people and nature
- Conservation and stewardship of natural resources and ecological systems is a precondition for human progress
- True progress is progress that can be sustained for future generations and the future of our planet

In a recent article reviewing the history of progress, the OECD concluded with a phrase that many may feel aptly summarises the key elements of the new paradigm of societal progress (and some older ones).

> While notions of progress differ, they are united in the philosophy that "progress" comprises both material and non-material components. Many people are working to define and measure concepts such as wellbeing, quality of life, life satisfaction and sustainable development. All these concepts are related to each other, but they have different connotations … We consider that societal progress occurs when there is *an improvement in the sustainable and equitable wellbeing of a society*. (This) concept is broad enough to encompass most of the alternative views above mentioned and is coherent with the aim of the Global Project on "Measuring the Progress of Societies", whose objective is not to impose a single definition of progress worldwide, but, as the *Istanbul Declaration* advocates, to "encourage communities to consider for themselves what 'progress' means in the 21st century". (WikiProgress)

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## Tasmania Together: State goals and key progress indicators

Progress is reported annually by the Tasmania Together Progress Board, a statutory body set up for this purpose, which reports to Parliament. The Board reports progress on each of the below goals using a headline indicator and around 12 benchmarks for each goal (a benchmark is "comprised of a standard, an indicator with baseline data and targets set at 5-year intervals").

**Vision:** "Tasmania is an island community, unique for its natural and cultural environment, where people enjoy a prosperous lifestyle based on quality, creativity and opportunity."

| | Goal | Headline indicator |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | A reasonable lifestyle and standard of living for all | Cost of living |
| 2 | Confident, friendly and safe communities | Feeling safe |
| 3 | High quality education and training for lifelong learning and a skilled workforce | Literacy and numeracy |
| 4 | Active, healthy Tasmanians with access to quality and affordable health care services | Avoidable mortality |
| 5 | Vibrant, inclusive and growing communities where people feel valued and connected | Urban/regional population |
| 6 | Dynamic, creative and internationally recognised arts community and culture | Attendance at cultural heritage sites |
| 7 | Acknowledgement of the right of Aboriginal people to own and preserve their culture, and share with non-Aboriginal people the richness and value of that culture | Cultural interpretation at visitor centres |
| 8 | Open and accountable government that listens and plans for a shared future | Local Government elections |
| 9 | Increased work opportunities for all Tasmanians | Workforce participation rate |
| 10 | Thriving and innovative industries driven by a high level of business confidence | Investment growth |
| 11 | Built and natural heritage that is valued and protected | Land protection |
| 12 | Sustainable management of our natural resources | Greenhouse gas emissions |

Source: Tasmania Together Progress Board, 2006. 'Tasmanian Together: Report to Parliament'.