

A roundtable:

# Integrating wellbeing into the business of government:

*The feasibility of innovative legal and policy measures  
to achieve sustainable development in Victoria*

## Roundtable communiqué

October 2021

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## Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the lands of the First Peoples upon which this report was written and pay our respects to Elders past, present and future.

## Report Team

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## Introduction

The events of 2020–21, including the catastrophic Australian bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic, are a prescient reminder that the world is rapidly changing. These changes have consequences for human and planetary health and the wellbeing of current and future generations. Social, environmental and economic imbalances pose a threat to all, but particularly people living on low incomes or experiencing disadvantage. The imperative to build back better creates opportunities for governments to consider new ways of working to better support community wellbeing, now and into the future.

In 2020, VicHealth commissioned The George Institute for Global Health to draw on international case studies and analyse the potential for a wellbeing economy in Victoria. This work drew lessons from Wales' Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 and New Zealand's Wellbeing Budget to highlight barriers to and opportunities for adopting similar policies at a national or state government level in Australia.

In July 2021, The George Institute for Global Health, VicHealth and the Victorian Council of Social Service co-hosted a Roundtable to disseminate the findings of the report, titled [\*Integrating wellbeing into the business of government: The feasibility of innovative legal and policy measures to achieve sustainable development in Australia\*](#). At the Roundtable, stakeholders and potential champions from around the country explored the feasibility of such a policy mechanism in Victoria.

Stakeholders heard from national and international experts on the benefits of and challenges to a wellbeing economy and workshopped what the implementation of a wellbeing economy in Victoria might look like.

This communiqué summarises key aspects of a wellbeing economy, reflects discussions from the July 2021 Roundtable and seeks to inspire action towards the development of a wellbeing economy in Victoria.



**Dr Alexandra Jones**

Research Fellow, Food Policy and Law,  
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Chief Executive Officer  
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## The Roundtable

In July 2021, The George Institute for Global Health, VicHealth and the Victorian Council of Social Service co-hosted a Roundtable to disseminate the findings of the [\*Integrating wellbeing into the business of government: The feasibility of innovative legal and policy measures to achieve sustainable development in Australia\*](#) report. At the Roundtable, stakeholders from around Australia explored the feasibility of adopting a wellbeing approach in Victoria.

Roundtable participants (participants) first heard from international and national experts on the benefits of and challenges to a wellbeing economy. Participants then workshopped the concept of wellbeing and what the implementation of a wellbeing economy in Victoria might look like in practice, *focusing on the following specific discussion points:*

- How would a wellbeing economy make a difference for people, government, institutions and organisations?
- What would government need to change?
- What should a wellbeing economy measure?
- What stakeholders need to be engaged for this to be successful?
- What could go wrong in the implementation?
- What are the possible barriers or misconceptions we might come up against?
- What are the practical steps towards achieving real change?
- What research is needed to bolster evidence?

The following summarises the participants' ideas, priorities and ambitions. It does not represent a group consensus but, rather, participants' diverse views based on their respective expertise and interests.

Participants and the host organisations acknowledged that a broader and more diverse group of stakeholders should be engaged in future discussions—experts in fields such as policymaking, economics, the environment and climate change; Elders and communities who can share First Nations knowledge; and underserved communities that are impacted by the inequitable distribution of resources who can share their lived experience, such as children and young people and people with disability.

Participants also acknowledged that ensuring wellbeing approaches have fair and equitable outcomes means we need to consider how the drivers of wellbeing intersect with factors such as socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity and religion, Indigeneity, disability, gender, sexuality, age, occupation and educational levels. First Nations, Traditional Knowledges and principles of self-determination must also be recognised to build consensus and ensure equity in wellbeing approaches.

**'Countries like Wales and New Zealand have shown us what is possible. Similar policies are legally feasible in Australia; the challenge is one of political will.'**

Dr Alexandra Jones  
Research Fellow, Food Policy  
The George Institute for Global Health.



## Wellbeing in context

During the twentieth century, economic output became the dominant way countries measured and compared progress. More recently, concepts such as gross domestic product (GDP) have been challenged, with calls for new ways to think about and measure social progress that are underpinned by wellbeing. Although described in various ways, the key idea of holistic wellbeing is familiar the world over: quality of life and flourishing for all people and sustainability for the planet.

A number of movements in past decades have sought to enshrine wellbeing as a core aspiration of community, organisational and government action. Examples include the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, a Health in All Policies approach and the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda. A wide range of local, state, national and global organisations have been leading the way in creating structural, social, cultural, environmental and economic change to ensure the planet's sustainability and quality of life for current and future generations. There is much to learn from the successes of these movements and the challenges they have experienced in generating political will and gaining community, stakeholder and industry support.

**'The idea of the wellbeing economy at its heart is saying we need to have the economy designed purposefully and concertedly to deliver collective and multi-dimensional wellbeing.'**

Dr Katherine Trebeck  
Senior Strategic Advisor, Wellbeing  
Economy Alliance.<sup>3</sup>



A wellbeing approach builds on these learnings and aims to frame them within a holistic understanding of a good life and healthy planet. It reorients economic and business practices to focus on equitable distribution of resources and wellbeing while protecting the planet's resources for future generations and other species. By reorienting goals and expectations for business, politics and society, we can build a wellbeing economy that serves people and the planet.

Wellbeing policies implement a social investment approach by evaluating long-term return on investment in social services and using this information to drive community empowerment and target future spending. A wellbeing approach includes measures to promote health for all, reduction of emissions, emergency and disaster preparedness, education and capacity building, and a sustainable and climate-resilient health sector. The challenge for governments has been how to translate new ways of thinking about wellbeing into implementable policies.

Countries like Wales and New Zealand are now part of an increasing network of countries exploring innovative policy reforms to promote societal wellbeing for current and future generations and their environment.<sup>1</sup>

During discussions around the 2021–22 State Budget, the Victorian Treasurer indicated a desire to work towards an economic framework that prioritises long-term wellbeing benefits by investing in early intervention and prevention rather than acute interventions.<sup>2</sup> Champions for a wellbeing approach are now needed to inspire action in Victoria and join the growing global movement towards wellbeing economies.



## What a wellbeing economy can do for the people of Victoria

Reflecting on the potential to address health, climate and social inequity issues through a wellbeing economy, participants explored how a wellbeing economy could make a difference for people, government, institutions and organisations in Victoria.

### *Participants identified that a wellbeing economy can:*

- create government mechanisms to align with and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and their principles, incorporating a decolonising approach to policy development and communities' self-determination
- enable governments to reorient their focus to supporting communities over purely economic outcomes that may benefit corporations over people consider and prevent potential fallout and systems shocks that may result from future intergenerational issues such as climate change
- facilitate an evidence-based approach to policymaking in pursuit of long-term objectives, combined with accountability mechanisms for governments' pursuit of long-term goals
- address social and economic inequities, particularly those impacting groups who commonly experience barriers to wellbeing.

Participants reflected that a wellbeing economy should be solutions focused and give visibility to identified intergenerational measures of wellbeing. A wellbeing economy should also have an integrated approach that promotes individual, community and societal wellbeing. While conversations mainly focused on the advantages and



positives of a wellbeing economy, participants acknowledged that such a policy shift would involve complexities.

Participants discussed that for a wellbeing economy to be implemented, government agencies and civil society would need to change entrenched structures of governance and organisation, which may be met with resistance.

In considering the benefits of a wellbeing economy and the numerous areas of need a wellbeing economy could address, participants discussed potential wellbeing indicators. In countries with existing wellbeing policies, these indicators form part of policy frameworks to measure and track progress towards holistic wellbeing.

*Potential indicators identified by participants include:*

- holistic health outcomes, including physical, mental, spiritual, cultural and social health
- community participation, including volunteering, loneliness and social inclusion
- economic security, including job security
- educational outcomes
- other social determinants of health and health inequities
- environmental sustainability, including air quality and pollution
- fairness and equity
- child welfare throughout the life course, including early childhood development
- freedom from poverty and disadvantage
- First Nations wellbeing
- governance and democracy.

Participants reflected that there should be an emphasis on inclusivity and diverse groups in determining what matters to people and communities. There were suggestions to draw on the [Australian National Development Index](#) and [Australian Youth Development Index](#).



## How governments can facilitate a wellbeing economy

Government has a crucial role in facilitating the successful development and roll-out of a wellbeing economy in Victoria. A genuine commitment to community and societal wellbeing as a priority in policy decisions and reform was identified as central to success.

To facilitate community buy-in and build political will, participants recognised the need for broad and diverse engagement, including with those who do not traditionally engage in government processes or are prevented from doing so due to structural and cultural barriers, particularly First Nations. Participants also identified that government needs to develop and engage with champions across sectors, including those beyond the health sphere.

### *Groups identified by participants include:*

- environmental groups
- children, young people and the 'average layperson'
- excluded groups
- business leaders and industry groups
- community group members and local activists, local councils, schools and tertiary education
- economists and the banking and finance sector
- champions within large corporations and industry, including the agriculture sector
- First Nations and Traditional Knowledges.

Participants advised that community engagement be embedded throughout the policy cycle. Participants recommended that governments draw on international examples of successful engagement strategies—such as those used in New Zealand and Wales—to develop and tailor locally relevant policy and maximise the use of local policy windows.

## Barriers to a wellbeing economy

Establishment of a wellbeing economy is a complex process, requiring the cooperation of several layers across multiple government portfolios and departments, in addition to civil society. It requires structural changes to systems that will reshape fundamental ways of operating and organising, including defining the roles and responsibilities of government and stakeholders in wellbeing. Participants discussed the potential barriers to a wellbeing economy and identified several areas of disruption.

Participants acknowledged that misconceptions among stakeholders may present a challenge to progressing towards a wellbeing economy. This includes individuals and policymakers viewing wellbeing and economic outcomes as mutually exclusive, particularly in the discussion around post-COVID-19 economic recovery. There is also a risk that governments will fund siloed programs that focus on individual wellbeing, rather than driving broader systemic and societal change.

Participants discussed the potential 'short-termism of the Australian political mindset' and the disconnect between individual and collective responsibilities and long-term societal challenges like obesity and climate change. Participants were concerned that the focus on individuals and general reluctance to make economic sacrifices for broader systems and societal change has been exacerbated during COVID-19 restrictions. Participants also acknowledged that media personalities, political parties and individual politicians could create confusion and mistrust among the community about a wellbeing economy agenda.



## The role of further research

Participants discussed the role of research in this area. It was noted that there is already a significant body of work globally to support action in this area and that lack of research is not the primary barrier to political action. At the same time, there is potential to tap into and build on existing research agendas and networks to provide further supporting evidence in this area.

*Some suggestions for areas of future research include:*

- ramifications of not acting now, such as predicted long-term economic, environmental and health impacts of inaction
- further dissemination of examples of successful policy (e.g., lessons from Scotland, building back better after COVID-19) and specific recommendations for application in the Australian context
- collating and analysing evidence as to whether policy silos have been successfully broken down in other contexts
- comparison of wellbeing data and indicators from other contexts.

**'It has been clear for a long time to many of us that GDP is not an accurate measure of how we're doing as a society and cannot indicate what life will be like for future Victorians. The concept of "wellbeing" is far more useful for understanding how all of us are doing, and how the planet around us and future generations will do as well.'**

Dr Sandro Demaio  
CEO, VicHealth.

## Practical steps towards achieving a wellbeing economy in Victoria

Participants concluded discussions by workshopping what the practical steps might be towards achieving a wellbeing economy in Victoria.

### *Potential steps identified by participants include:*

- creating and/or supporting opportunities for consultation and listening to community needs, including by adapting international approaches (e.g., [The Wales We Want](#)) to inform the establishment of wellbeing indicators
- generating political will for wellbeing approaches by increasing understanding among policymakers about the benefits and communicating the urgency for action (e.g., by leveraging lessons from COVID-19)
- fostering community support for a wellbeing economy from diverse groups, including developing language meaningful for community members
- creating solutions for deeper structural problems within the narrative of wellbeing and sustainable development
- building advocacy coalitions across sectors to promote a united advocacy and policy agenda
- strengthening opportunities in the Victorian policy landscape that can then help overcome barriers at the Federal level
- hosting a national summit with diverse stakeholders to establish a roadmap for wellbeing economies.

Based on the Roundtable discussions and the findings of the [Integrating wellbeing into the business of government: The feasibility of innovative legal and policy measures to achieve sustainable development in Australia](#) report, The George Institute for Global Health, VicHealth and the Victorian Council of Social Service developed a list of guiding principles to underpin future action to develop and embed a wellbeing economy agenda in Victoria.

We invite participants and interested stakeholders to use these principles to guide their activity going forward and to continue the strong momentum built at the Roundtable and by the work of diverse stakeholders across Victoria, Australia and internationally.





## Principles for moving the wellbeing economy agenda forward

### ***1. Base the wellbeing economy agenda on principles of equity and sustainable development***

Sustainable development and equity should be fundamental principles underpinning the wellbeing economy agenda. This includes decolonising approaches to definitions of wellbeing and associated indicators. Sustainable development ensures that present-day decision-making meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Equity prioritises action to ensure everyone has a fair opportunity to attain their full wellbeing potential and that no one is disadvantaged in achieving this potential if it can be avoided.

### ***2. Advocate for transformation of the structural drivers that underpin a wellbeing economy***

Case studies from New Zealand and Wales demonstrate the importance of structural change to drive meaningful change in the way governments operate to support wellbeing. Action within Australia should seek to institute policy mechanisms focused on reorienting government action for future generations. These should aim to address the structural drivers of wellbeing and equity. Legislation can promote long-term change that can endure beyond political cycles. Legislation should be supported by appropriate implementation, monitoring and accountability mechanisms to promote ongoing evaluation and strengthening. Local-level action and momentum is essential but is unlikely to achieve meaningful change without government-led initiatives to shift power and systems in a way that supports the achievement of wellbeing goals.

### ***3. Engage widely and strategically with diverse stakeholders in the development of the wellbeing economy agenda***

The drivers of wellbeing encompass a wide range of social, health, economic and environmental domains. They include healthcare and preventive health, community services, work and employment, housing, education, early childhood development, the environment and planetary health, the economy/finance, agriculture and industry, planning, the physical environment, and the arts and sport, to name just a few. Ensuring wellbeing approaches have fair and equitable outcomes means we need to consider how these drivers intersect with factors such as socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity and religion, Indigeneity, disability, gender, sexuality, age, occupation and educational levels. Wellbeing approaches must also recognise First Nations, Traditional Knowledges and principles of self-determination to build consensus and ensure equity.

Therefore, it is essential that any action to develop and implement a wellbeing economy agenda brings together representatives from a broad range of sectors and population groups to build commitment and widespread consensus and ensure all voices are being heard. Doing so will create a comprehensive agenda and meaningful indicators that have widespread support and result in equitable and sustainable outcomes. Given the focus of this approach on future generations, children and young people should be prioritised in this work, as well as Victorians experiencing disadvantage.

#### ***4. Build a coalition of community, sector and political champions around a coherent advocacy agenda***

To move the wellbeing agenda forward, champions from a range of sectors and communities will be needed to guide action within their areas and advocate to government. Political leadership will also be crucial to success, and potential champions from various political parties should be identified and supported throughout the process.

#### ***5. Embed diversity and community voices in campaigns***

Gaining widespread community engagement and ‘buy-in’—particularly from those who have historically been under-represented or deprioritised in policymaking—will help develop the agenda and ensure governments retain public support during the transition to the new approach. Communicating the approach to members of the public and ensuring community champions are front and centre in that communication will increase buy-in, build understanding and ensure that communities benefit from a wellbeing approach. Principles of self-determination should be embedded in efforts to ensure First Nations’ voices are prioritised.

#### ***6. Employ qualitative and quantitative methods to find appropriate indicators for wellbeing priorities***

Based on the priorities identified by the community, experts and researchers in public health, environment, community and related fields should use qualitative and quantitative methods to identify indicators and potential data sources to measure changes in those areas. Where needed, new indicators should be identified and funding provided to establish them.

***7. Move beyond traditional cost–benefit analysis to assess policies in terms of their contribution to current and future wellbeing***

Integration of a wellbeing approaches into government decision-making and monitoring should seek to shift the analysis of the value of investment from traditional cost–benefit to one that values wellbeing of Victorians now and into the future, in line with the priorities they have been identified. This should include a clear, robust and timely assessment of how the approach is being implemented, and its outcomes.

***8. Strengthen collaboration with existing networks working in this space in Australia and globally***

There is a wealth of work being undertaken across Australia and internationally to promote a wellbeing agenda. For example, in the health sector, lessons can be drawn from work in areas such as Health in All Policies approaches and the concept of the social determinants of health. Advocates and researchers in other areas, such as the environment, justice and social services sectors, are also generating action. Working with supportive governments, organisations, researchers and communities will allow us to learn from their experiences and align our efforts where possible to ensure the greatest benefit for Victorians and across the world.

## References

- 1 Jones, A, Morelli, G, Pettigrew, S & Neal, B 2021, Integrating wellbeing into the business of government: The feasibility of innovative legal and policy measures to achieve sustainable development in Australia, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation by The George Institute for Global Health, Melbourne.
- 2 Victorian Council of Social Service 2021, Treasurer's Breakfast with Victorian Treasurer Tim Pallas, viewed 1 September 2021, <https://vcoss.org.au/sector-hub/breakfast>
- 3 Wellbeing Economy Alliance 2021, Wellbeing Economy Alliance, viewed 1 September 2021, <https://wellbeingeconomy.org/about>.



## Host organisations

### *About The George Institute for Global Health*

The George Institute is a leading independent global medical research institute established and headquartered in Sydney. It has major centres in China, India and the UK, and an international network of experts and collaborators. Our mission is to improve the health of millions of people worldwide by using innovative approaches to prevent and treat the world's biggest killers: non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and injury. Our work aims to generate effective, evidence-based and affordable solutions to the world's biggest health challenges. We research the chronic and critical conditions that cause the greatest loss of life and quality of life, and the most substantial economic burden, particularly in resource-poor settings. Our food policy team works in Australia and overseas to reduce death and disease caused by diets high in salt, harmful fats, added sugars and excess energy. The team conducts multi-disciplinary research with a focus on generating outputs that will help government and industry deliver a healthier food environment for all.



### *About VicHealth*

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) is a pioneer in health promotion – the process of enabling people to increase control over and improve their health. Our primary focus is promoting good health and preventing chronic disease. We create and fund world-class interventions. We conduct vital research to advance Victoria's population health. We produce and support public campaigns to promote a healthier Victoria. We provide transformational expertise and insights to government. Of all the things we do, above all we seek to make health gains among Victorians by pre-empting and targeting improvements in health across our population, fostered within the day-to-day spaces where people spend their time, and with benefits to be enjoyed by all.



### *About Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS)*

VCOSS is the peak body for the community service sector in Victoria. Through advocacy, policy development and capacity building activities we work to eliminate poverty and disadvantage and achieve wellbeing for all Victorians and communities. We advocate for a fair and equitable society by supporting the social service industry and representing the interests of Victorians living in poverty or facing disadvantage.



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