A FRAMEWORK FOR PERFORMANCE REPORTING AND DRIVING WELLBEING OUTCOMES IN NSW

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Submission to the NSW Public Accounts Committee Inquiry into a Framework for Performance Reporting and Driving Wellbeing Outcomes in NSW

Dear Committee Members

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. I am an Associate Professor of Geography at the University of New England in Armidale, NSW. My research has used publicly available data on social capital, social engagement and social cohesion within the Australian Disaster Resilience Index. This index is the first nationally standardised assessment of the capacity for disaster resilience across Australia, and is currently included in the Commonwealth Treasury Measuring What Matters dashboard. It is within this research and research adoption experience that I have composed my responses to address some of Part (b) of the terms of reference. I assume that this inquiry wants to investigate whether NSW Government programs and services can influence wellbeing outcomes and, if this relationship is plausible, to determine if the relationship can be measured and reported. I also assume that a NSW Framework for Measuring Wellbeing might be developed and I have made comments to support the development of such a framework should that occur.

I use the term wellbeing, noting that it can encompass associated concepts of quality of life, welfare, progress and standard of living.

B(i) *Performance information*

Attention to monitoring and evaluation can sometimes be an afterthought in Government practice. This includes the suite of design of monitoring and evaluation programs, associated program logics (that is, whether a program's efforts are having the desired outcome), collection of meaningful data on outcomes, and adequate funding for monitoring and evaluation activities. The NSW Treasury has established excellent Policy and Guidelines: Evaluation (TPG22-22), and associated workbooks and resources. Given the relative recency of these, they may require time to be operationalised into program development, and for the required resourcing to be allocated. There are many skilled niche consultancies practicing in NSW that could assist with advancing program monitoring and evaluation under the new guidelines.

Methodologies of evaluation may be empirical where causal relationships between an implemented service and an outcome are identifiable, or narrative/case study where the relationship is correlative, multidimensional or complex.

In a previous publication, Parsons and Foster (2020) suggested a reflexive learning model for monitoring and evaluation of community engagement practice to understand how it influences community disaster resilience. Based on established principles of social learning, we identified three levels that operate at timescales of months to decades and at different agency levels:
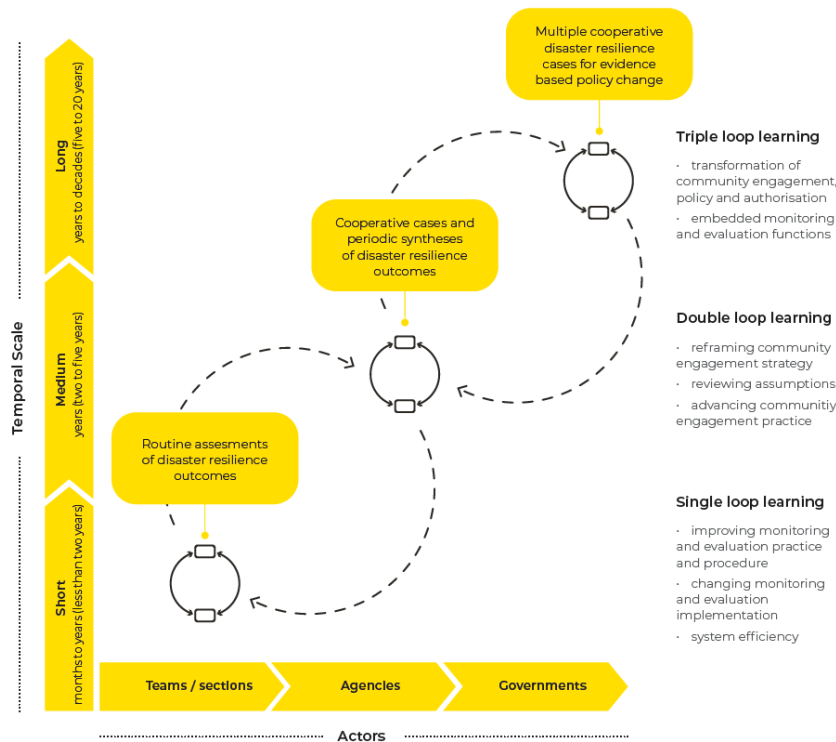
Taken from: Parsons, M & Foster, H. (2020) Reimagining program monitoring and evaluation for disaster resilience outcomes, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, Melbourne.

Applied to the concept of wellbeing, information about wellbeing can be collected at every level. How that information is used and moved from single to double to triple loop learning in an adaptive improvement and learning cycle is key to moving from 'knowing and measuring something about wellbeing' (single loop) to 'reframing the placement of wellbeing as a driver of the delivery of services' (double loop) to 'transforming commitments to wellbeing through statutes, strategies and programs' (triple loop).

B(iii) *Development of a NSW Framework for Measuring Wellbeing*

Frameworks are heuristic tools to conceptualise and communicate a system or phenomena of interest. Frameworks logically narrate, order, and organize foundational ideas to support the proposed area of endeavour, and subsequently guide the collection of meaningful empirical data. Without a clear conceptual tether, many types of empirical data can become undisciplined, or 'not measure what it purports to measure'.

I would like to see a NSW Framework for Measuring Wellbeing use the established literature and practitioner knowledge(s) to conceptualise a contemporary, inclusive and interdisciplinary heuristic of wellbeing. This framework subsequently sets the basis for the gathering of empirical data about the wellbeing of NSW residents.

Other heuristics have been published and NSW could use these as a starting point but invite advances. For example, the Commonwealth Measuring What Matters Framework frames wellbeing as a nation that is healthy, secure, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous. The OECD multi-country How's Life reporting frames individual wellbeing as a combination of quality of life and material conditions, and their sustainability over time. The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index measures personal wellbeing and national wellbeing to reflect individual and systems factors. The Regional Wellbeing Survey produced at the University of Canberra is a survey based instrument focused on rural and regional experiences and frames wellbeing through social connectedness, cohesiveness and financial wellbeing, among other things. The 2017 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's Welfare Indicator Framework tries to link wellbeing to welfare services performance although I do not know whether or how well this worked.

B(iii) *Measurements of quality of life and wellbeing in NSW*

I see the question of whether wellbeing is or is not connected to or influenced by the design and delivery of NSW Government programs to be separate to the measurement and assessment of wellbeing. In relational evaluation work, the causality between the elements of a program or service and the wellbeing of an individual or a population would need to be established through a program logic. There may not always be plausible relationships between the direct delivery of a program or service and a wellbeing outcome, unless that program is designed to achieve a specific aspect of wellbeing (health programs are the obvious example here). Indirect relationships may be established, but it could be incorrect to observe that x has led to y, because y may emerge from multiple influences outside the program. Government programs are not generally designed to achieve individual outcomes, but by their nature, enact statutory or strategic commitments in discretely fenced areas of public good. As far as I know, there is as yet no wellbeing goals or philosophies centralised as NSW Government statutes, although that might be an expected outcome of triple loop learning. Tracking wellbeing for its own sake and using that data as one piece of the decision support system guiding what is delivered, how, where and to whom is the more logical way to use wellbeing data in my opinion.

B(iii) *Measurements of quality of life and wellbeing in NSW*

There are two points I consider important in any attempts to measure and report wellbeing.

The first is the central organising idea of place, and related concept of spatial resolution. Regardless of whether it is conceptualised as an individual or system property, wellbeing is influenced by the character of place. Place is how humans are in the world and how people relate to their surroundings to generate place. Place can be a location, but also a set of circumstances, such as social, economic, cultural or environmental (built and natural)

characteristic of that place. Wellbeing is kind of an emergent property of place and the people in a place. Wellbeing will differ among places and so has a spatial heterogeneity. As such, it is important to measure wellbeing at a resolution that allows spatial heterogeneity of wellbeing to be captured. For example, the Treasury Measuring What Matters dashboard generally reports wellbeing measures by State/Territory because as a national scale tool, differences between States/Territories are seen as the target spatial heterogeneity. But reporting wellbeing as one-NSW would be meaningless.

An appropriate spatial resolution would need to be set in the framework, and used to collect data. Some units of spatial resolution might be the SA2 or SA3 levels of the ABS Australian Statistical Geography Standard as these are determined by population size, are nested and can be overlaid with remoteness classes. Local Government Areas, electorates, catchments or Public Health Units might be considered, but administrate or landscape boundaries might not be compatible with processes generating wellbeing. The spatial resolution of data is also important for tracking wellbeing and to be able to improve what is delivered where.

The second point pertains to gaps in the types of social data collected and how that might privilege certain understandings of wellbeing. There are two ways to go about measuring wellbeing: ask people using surveys which is a direct measure of wellbeing, or use secondary data to infer a latent relationship (for example using income to infer prosperity). Key surveys include the University of Canberra Regional Wellbeing Survey and the ABS General Social Survey both of which collect data about social connectedness, perceived prosperity, social cohesion, quality of life, satisfaction and trust, among other things. But these surveys are expensive to run to achieve large sample sizes and spatial coverage, and as such are chronically underfunded. NSW might benefit from using a survey approach to measuring wellbeing and might leverage direct assessment of wellbeing by funding the significant expertise in existing surveys. Using secondary data to infer latent relationships between a variable and the capacities of wellbeing is used in the Commonwealth Measuring What Matters dashboard. It is also the approach I used in the Australian Disaster Resilience Index. This method is cheaper because it relies on existing economic and social datasets, including some derived through survey approaches. In the use of secondary data it is important to avoid self-referential logics where wellbeing becomes what can be conveniently derived from existing data, rather than wellbeing originating as a defined construct that is then populated accordingly.

I look forward to hearing about the outcomes of the inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Melissa Parsons