

REIMAGINING INDIGENOUS WELLBEING NOW AND INTO THE FUTURE

**A REPORT ON A FAMILIES AUSTRALIA
'BUILDING STRONGER AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES' POLICY
FORUM**

(DELIVERED VIA WEBINAR)

9 NOVEMBER 2020

Building Stronger Australian Families
What do they need to thrive?

AN INITIATIVE OF
Families Australia

About Families Australia

Families Australia is a national, not-for-profit, peak organisation that strives to improve the wellbeing of Australian families, especially those experiencing vulnerability and marginalisation. We do this by providing policy advice to the Australian Government and Parliament on behalf of more than 800 member organisations around Australia.

Families Australia's member organisations provide services in urban, rural and remote locations across Australia. These organisations operate in a diverse range of fields such as family support, child protection, domestic violence, disability, education, grandparent/kinship care, foster care, mental health, and youth work.

Our work is organised around three important ideas, namely, that Australia will be a fairer and more equitable and compassionate nation if we better protect and value children, if all families irrespective of their form are strengthened, and if there are genuine and lasting improvements in the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Acknowledgements

Families Australia wishes to record its appreciation to Joe Hedger for his time and generosity in leading this forum and making such a valuable contribution to the Australian public policy landscape. Families Australia also wishes to thank all forum participants.

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Background

Families Australia’s policy forums were initiated in 2015 and bring together key people from government, the community sector and the research community to consider how best to advance the wellbeing of Australian families now and into the future.

One of the fundamental principles underpinning the work of Families Australia is that Australia will be a fairer and more equitable and compassionate nation when genuine and lasting improvements are made in the wellbeing of our First Nations peoples. Families Australia works in partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled member organisations, such as SNAICC - National Voice for our Children, to advocate for improvements in the wellbeing of First Nations’ children and families. In particular, Families Australia works to highlight the needs and interests of First Nations people through the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children.

Editorial note

For the purposes of the summary provided in this report, Families Australia uses the term ‘First Nations Peoples’ for respectfully referring to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and in recognition of the various language groups as separate and unique sovereign nations. Speaker and formal references have not been changed.

Executive Summary

On 9 November 2020, Families Australia recognised NAIDOC Week by hosting an online policy forum on the theme of improving Indigenous wellbeing in Australia. This theme aligned with the theme of NAIDOC Week 2020 – *Always Was, Always Will Be* – that acknowledges First Nations’ 65,000+ year history of this country - which is Australian history. The forum was chaired by Dr Brian Babington, CEO of Families Australia. Forum participants included representatives from Federal and State and Territory governments, non-government organisations, academic institutions, private corporations and business across multiple sectors including social and community services, children’s services, health, education and disability. A number of participants attended from organisations working specifically with First Nations’ children, young people, families and communities.

Mr Joe Hedger, a Bundjalung man from the far north coast of New South Wales and Ernst & Young’s (EY) Oceania Indigenous Sector Practice Leader explored the concept of how policy can better support Indigenous wellbeing by posing the question: ‘What is it that makes Indigenous children, families and communities flourish?’ He discussed this issue in the context of the *Closing the Gap* strategy and its inability to reduce disadvantage among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with respect to life

expectancy, child mortality, access to early childhood education, educational achievement, and employment outcomes. Joe advocated for policy actors to recalibrate the indicators and target methodology built into this national policy agenda. He argued this could be achieved by incorporating the cultural perspective of 'life outcomes' within a context of 'Indigenous wellbeing' and that this should be used to enhance the *Closing the Gap* strategy.

Joe also spoke to the ongoing calls for self-determination and the failure of successive Australian governments to enable this. He described this failure as key to why *Closing the Gap* has not been able to achieve satisfactory improvement in life outcomes for Australia's First Nations people.

The criticality of defining improvements in life outcomes from an Indigenous wellbeing perspective, and elevating the role of communities themselves in defining what is important to them, was emphasised in Joe's presentation. He supported a view that this provides an opportunity for government to shift away from managing and controlling, to a new, far more effective one based on facilitating, resourcing and enabling.

Joe stressed the important role to be played by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and the need to invest more strategically in bringing their voices to the centre of conversations about wellbeing. He spoke of the importance of young people seeing themselves in actions being taken by government that will shape their futures and of leveraging their increased levels of engagement, connection and capability, particularly in relation to digital literacy and data.

The urgent need for better data about what actually works in improving life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was identified as a critical issue.

The forum concluded by discussing the practical aspects of enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait people to have a greater say in policy-making that affects them, and in raising the voice of children and young people in setting the agendas for development in their communities.

The Forum

In his welcome and opening remarks, CEO of Families Australia, Dr Brian Babington, spoke of the significance of NAIDOC Week and reiterated Families Australia's strong support for efforts to bring about early, respectful, lasting and genuine reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. He referred to the 2019 forum led by Dean Parkin on ways forward for the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* and introduced this 2020 NAIDOC Week forum as a logical follow-on from Dean's inspiring talk. Dr Babington then warmly welcomed the guest speaker, Mr Joe Hedger, a Bundjalung man from the far north coast of New South Wales. Joe is EY's Oceania Indigenous Sector Practice Leader. Previous to his current position, Joe had a long career as a senior public servant with experience in

Indigenous development, international development, national security, sport and community development.

Joe's presentation focused on a number of areas he considers critical if the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities is to be strengthened and their goals and aspirations are to be achieved. Some of the issues identified were framed around key concepts covered by Dean Parkin in his 2019 forum address [*Finding a Voice through the Uluru Statement from the Heart*](#). Central to Joe's presentation was that calls for self-determination by First Nations people are underpinned by recognition of sovereignty. He acknowledged that this means Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be represented and elected from communities, have a seat at the table and have a greater say in the policies, programs and laws that are going to affect their lives.

Joe also framed his presentation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing in the context of the recent 'recalibration' of *Closing the Gap*. He explored the limitations of the *Closing the Gap* framework in relation to empowering self-determination at the community level as well as engaging children and young people in policy to improve wellbeing, data and evidence gaps.

Wellbeing and the Uluru Statement from the Heart

Joe began by referencing the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* that asserts 'When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish.' He then posed the question, 'What will make our children flourish?' and proposed that 'community wellbeing' was key. Joe reiterated the importance of connection to culture, family, community and language as well as a strong sense of identity but emphasised that what connection and identity mean to one individual and community may well differ to an individual and community located elsewhere. He used the example of an Aboriginal young person in Broome compared with an Aboriginal young person residing in inner city Redfern. He used this example to highlight how varied their experiences, challenges and trajectories might be and how these might influence their needs and aspirations in ways that do not necessarily fit into an indicator or target designed by government.

The limitations of *Closing the Gap*

Realising and enabling self-determination at the community level

In this context, Joe examined the failure of the *Closing the Gap* strategy to achieve desired improvements in outcomes for Indigenous Australians and the apparent disconnect between national level policy settings and the perspectives and priorities identified at the community level. He expressed his view that, looking to the future, it is hard to see *Closing the Gap* as the solution to Indigenous disadvantage and as providing the right type of transformation that will enable communities to drive an agenda that speaks to their unique needs and aspirations.

Joe argued that *Closing the Gap* does not adequately speak to what is important to First Nations communities who struggle to see themselves in its high level socio-economic indicators and targets. He described the socio-economic indicators in *Closing the Gap* as important, but not sufficient alone. He

supported their role in laying the foundation upon which other indicators can emerge, indicators that are more meaningful to local communities.

On their own, these indicators don't provide the right prominence, profile and priority that reflect the wellbeing aspirations of First Nations communities.

Joe emphasised the diversity that exists across communities, particularly between those in metropolitan locations and those in regional, rural and remote locations. He stressed the importance of recognising and contextualising policy and programs that are grounded in culture, relevant and responsive to the unique needs and perspectives of individual communities. These approaches and calls for self-determination challenge the bureaucracy and other decision makers to create a space for collaboration and engagement – to realise the opportunity for the power of the bureaucracy and the power of culture to work together to achieve agreed outcomes. It is crucial that communities be allowed to decide for themselves what is important to them in relation to wellbeing and seeing their children flourish. Effort progressing through the Closing the Gap strategy must be supported by:

- community ownership and agency (self-determination);
- elevating the voices of children and young people and leveraging their capabilities; and
- local level data about what works.

Joe advocated that this approach would enable individuals and communities to engage in ways that are **culturally authentic and legitimate**, noting that when Indigenous communities define wellbeing in ways that are important to them, it grounds things in a cultural perspective. He argued that this underpinning of cultural authenticity and legitimacy supports more durable and enduring outcomes but that it is unfortunately missing from the *Closing the Gap* framework.

By prioritising the communities' role in setting their own agenda for improving outcomes, the government will no longer be solely responsible for coming up with all the answers. This is an opportunity for government to play a new, and far more effective, role in how they facilitate, resource and enable communities to thrive. It offers the government a new way to conceive and design policy and programs for communities in the future.

An example that demonstrates how these approaches are currently being applied and leveraged is [Community Wellbeing from the Ground Up – A Yawuru Example](#). This is a unique partnership between Bankwest, Curtin Economics Centre, the ANU's Centre for Aboriginal Economic, Policy Research, the Kimberley Institute, and most importantly, the Yawuru community. It ensures that the voices of Yawuru women and men are heard in conceptualising notions of Indigenous wellbeing.

[This approach] captures the essence of a research approach based on the co-production of knowledge, with Yawuru women and men articulating their own conceptions of wellbeing founded on the Yawuru concept of good life – or mabu liyan. It is the knowledge offered by Yawuru people of what it means to live well, their articulation of liyan, and their reflections

on aspects of wellbeing that relate directly to Yawuru culture, values, aspirations and feelings, that invest these research findings with such genuine power and authenticity¹.

The role of children and young people and the importance of their perspectives

Joe highlighted *Closing the Gap*'s poor track record in relation to outcomes for children and young people. He pointed to indicators such as suicides, numbers in out-of-home care and incarceration rates that continue to track in the wrong direction.

Joe stated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are struggling to navigate the complex world in which they live and it is difficult for them to see themselves in what government is shaping for their future. Historically, their voices have been marginalised in Indigenous affairs. Despite what Joe described as their high levels of engagement, connection and motivation, he expressed his view that we have not yet found a way to bring their voices into the context of how we shape the future.

There needs to be new ways of bringing the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people into the centre of discussion where they can articulate what is important to them from a wellbeing perspective. Access to good quality wellbeing data will be critical to this.

Joe pointed out that the greater involvement of 'community-based organisations' in efforts to refresh *Closing the Gap* provides an opportunity to centre the voices of children and young people into what we do; to actively enable them to articulate what is important from a wellbeing perspective. He argued for greater action to foster a culture of valuing children and young people and embedding their participation in setting the agenda – as it is their future and the futures of succeeding generations.

Data and evidence

Joe identified another significant challenge to improving the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, families and communities as the lack of data about what works. The research behind the Productivity Commission's recently released [Indigenous Evaluation Strategy](#) reinforces that data being collected by government does not allow us to understand what is actually happening at the community level and what outcomes are being achieved for the dollars spent. It is encouraging that the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy has Aboriginal and Torres Strait people at its core and recognises that their priorities and perspectives must be respected in order for outcomes to improve.

¹ Community Wellbeing from the Ground Up: A YAWURU EXAMPLE. Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) Research Report No. 3/16. (August 2016) P8. Accessible at https://www.yawuru.org.au/community/mabu-liyan-framework/?doing_wp_cron=1607922046.1218619346618652343750

That is one of the challenges [evident in] the recent Indigenous Evaluation Strategy release – we don't know what works and the reason we don't know what works is because there is a lack of data.

Joe emphasised the importance of data in driving priority-setting and planning, in demonstrating what works and in getting the best outcomes. Joe argued young people also have a pivotal role to play here - policy and program actors need to leverage the engagement and capabilities of young people with digital technologies to support their participation and to help build an evidence base in relation to their wellbeing. Young people need to be empowered to say how they want to stay connected to family, community and culture, have a say in what they want their communities to look like and contribute to decisions about what policies and programs are needed. In this way, children and young people will be placed at the centre of priority setting and planning and be empowered to act as agents of change for their communities.

Joe concluded his presentation by emphasising that the call for a cultural perspective in *Closing the Gap* is not a challenge to the current framework, but rather an opportunity to enhance it. He argued that the cultural aspects of wellbeing are not in conflict with the current indicators but that we need to find the way for the two elements to co-exist and complement each other in order to bring about the best outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

General Discussion

Dr Babington opened the discussion by noting the resonance of Joe's presentation with the [findings](#) from Families Australia's 2019 national consultations on the successor plan to the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009 – 2020*. He identified the consistent key themes as:

- the strong call to elevate the voices of children and young people in the policy making process;
- the need to look beyond the traditional bureaucratic and policy silos such as health, education, child protection, and justice and to take a holistic view of wellbeing; and
- the lack of adequate data about what works, and a strong role for Federal Government leadership in bringing together data and making it accessible.

Discussion then focused on ways to meet the challenge of changing the relationship between government and community, and how to navigate the shifting of responsibility for priority-setting from government to community.

Joe cautioned forum participants to remain aware that First Nations communities are already dealing with a huge range of challenges and there is a need for the broader non-government sector to carefully consider how best to support these communities to enact self-determination. It was noted that communities will need to have access to, and ownership of, local level data. Partnerships with trusted

researchers with the skills and experience to sit down with communities over the long term and help them shape what is important for them are also critical. These key partners must play a role in helping to develop appropriate indicators of improvement in individual communities' wellbeing.

There was broader discussion about how this approach can help to open up the conversation about what is important in *Closing the Gap*. It was noted that, despite significant government investment in policy and programs designed to improve outcomes for First Nations people over many years, as a nation we consistently fail to meet targets. This is reinforced in the recent report by the Productivity Commission, [Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage](#) that measures the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. While some indicators have improved, the report notes many have not and that these *need to be understood with reference to the personal challenges and systemic and structural barriers that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced and continue to face.* (page 1) As an example, closing the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation (by 2031) is one of the original *Closing the Gap* targets set by the Council of Australian Governments in 2008. Based on the most recent data, progress on the target is **not on track to be met.**ⁱ In recognition of the problem and the need for change, the Closing the Gap refresh and new partnership agreement must ensure policies and programs across a range of portfolio areas are brought together in a more integrated and coherent way. Further, that the voice of community is elevated into planning, monitoring of progress and in the delivery of services on the ground.

There was also discussion about the term 'wellbeing' and the apparent resistance in incorporating it into policy. Joe suggested this challenge could be met by building the evidence base and demonstrating what works, as exemplified through the [collaboration with the Yawuru people](#) in the Kimberley. He emphasised what experience tells us – that we get better results when communities, including children and young people, are in charge of the design, development and delivery of programs and policies that affect them. He concluded that, with greater community control over program design and delivery we are seeing:

1. better outcomes, such as reduced numbers of children in out-of-home care and in juvenile justice systems; and
2. reduced costs to government.

ⁱ AIHW (2020). *Indigenous life expectancy and deaths*. Accessible at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/indigenous-life-expectancy-and-deaths>