



Response to Call for Contributions to an Elements Paper for the Intergovernmental Process on Beyond GDP

Introduction

The Hot or Cool Institute is a public-interest think tank based in Berlin that works at the intersection of sustainability and societal issues. Staff at the Institute have decades of experience working on Beyond GDP, particularly in relation to wellbeing and sustainability measures. Current initiatives include co-chairing the Materials and Consumption Taskforce, the Happy Planet Index, and the piloting of deliberative mini-publics to select headline indicators at the city level (currently in Recife, Brazil; earlier this year in Kerava, Finland).

In the past, staff at Hot or Cool have played critical roles in other established indicators and initiatives, including the Ecological Footprint, Index of Sustainable Economic Wellbeing, e-Frame, and Eurostat's Quality of Life indicator set. Executive Director Dr. Lewis Akenji played a key role in the development of SDG 12 on responsible consumption and production. There is also experience in the political science of Beyond GDP, having worked on the FP7 project BRAINPOoL, which explored the barriers and opportunities to the uptake of alternative indicators in politics and policy.

We have focussed our responses on those questions where we believe we have a particularly distinctive voice and perspective.

I. Political vision, strategic direction and normative anchor

1. *What should be the overarching objective of an intergovernmental process on Beyond GDP, and what long-term vision should guide its development?*

Long-term vision: provide the statistical basis to inform and monitor progress towards good lives for all within planetary boundaries, moving away from a GDP-growth centred economy and economic policymaking.

Overarching objective: promote and refine the HLEG framework so that it becomes the standard framework across UN Member States and shapes the post-2030 UN framework. Help the adoption of a clear and small set of indicators that will support the long-term vision noted above. Support harmonisation of indicators within this framework, with mandatory requirements for data collection for Member State NSIs.

2. *How can a Beyond GDP framework better capture the multidimensional nature of sustainable development and respond to today's interconnected global challenges, including rising inequality, demographic change, environmental degradation, technological transformation and increasing vulnerability? How can it provide a coherent structure to conceptualize progress?*

The framework must draw the lesson from Herman Daly and Donna Meadows on distinguishing between ultimate ends, intermediate ends, and means (the so-called Daly-

Meadows Triangle, see Figure 1: Daly-Meadows Triangle, based on Meadows (1998)). We need a clear understanding of what our goals are and what they are not, so that we do not trade-off goals (e.g. wellbeing) in the pursuit of means (e.g. economic growth). We also need clarity on distribution and planetary limits. It should be a strong sustainability framework, which means not allowing substitution between respect for environmental limits and other goals.

Structures need to be established to ensure that the framework can be updated over time, informed by democratic processes, scientific evidence, and emerging challenges. The UN Statistical Commission could be mandated to do this.

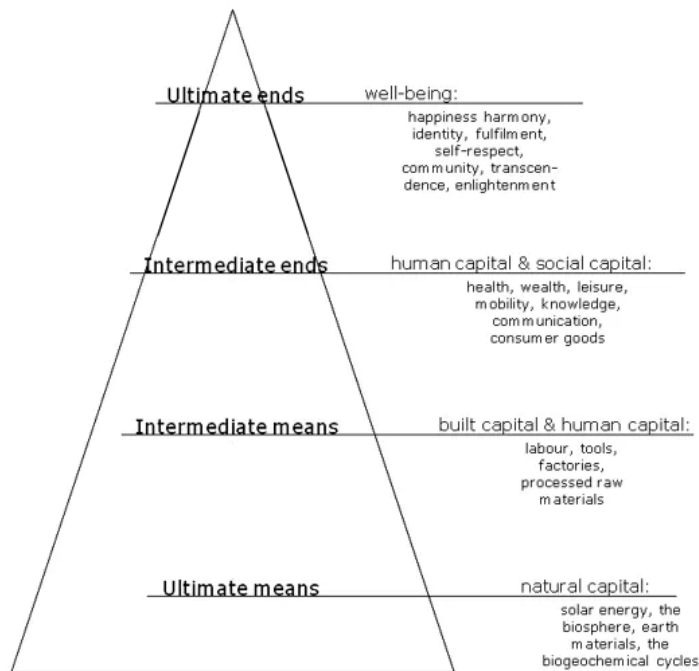


Figure 1: Daly-Meadows Triangle, based on Meadows (1998))

3. *How should a Beyond GDP framework complement—rather than duplicate or replace—existing internationally agreed frameworks, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other relevant United Nations processes ie. the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index and the Sevilla Commitment?*

It should provide the overarching framework for understanding what our goals are. In particular, as the name highlights, it should overturn the centrality of economic growth, which should only be in the service of other outcomes.

4. *What role should the United Nations, Member States, international organizations, international financial institutions, national statistical systems and other relevant stakeholders play in advancing this agenda while fully respecting national ownership and differing national circumstances?*

MERGE produced a report with guidelines on harmonisation (Abdallah et al., 2025). Among its recommendations for international organisations, were that they should:

- Agree on a common conceptual framework built on sustainability, inclusivity and wellbeing (as the HLEG framework)
- Focus harmonisation efforts on details of how to collect and produce specific indicators, rather than dictating which indicators should be collected.
- Ideally define a set of core indicators that all nations should collect

- Encourage political commitment at national level
 - Co-ordinate research, technical development, cross-country learning, exchange of best practice
 - Support communication and visibility, for example with free-to-use communication tools
5. *Which recommendations contained in the report of the High-Level Expert Group could serve as priorities for this intergovernmental process and future intergovernmental work?*

There are three aspects of the HLEG report that we in particular commend:

- The overall framework, in particular the distinction between three dimensions: current well-being, equity and inclusion, and sustainability and resilience.
- The recommendation to adopt a set of headline indicators, rather than rely on a heavy dashboard.
- The call for the UN to “fast-track”, through the UN Statistical Commission, “the development of emerging statistical methods to maturity, in particular for indicators relating to human rights, subjective well-being, planetary boundaries, social cohesion and institutional capacity”

II. Conceptual Framework, Measurement and Governance

1. *To what extent does the conceptual framework proposed by the High-Level Expert Group provide an appropriate basis for future intergovernmental discussions? Which elements warrant further consideration or refinement?*

We support the HLEG framework’s distinction between current wellbeing, sustainability and inclusion (also seen in MERGE and the JRC SIW Dashboard). This should be a key basis for future work. However, there are some idiosyncrasies in how indicators have been divided across this framework. For example, there is a measure of loneliness under the concept of social cohesion which is in current wellbeing. And then there is a measure of trust in others in social capital in sustainability and resilience. These two measures are closely related, at least conceptually. Similarly, greenhouse gas emissions are in foundational principles and not in sustainability. I suspect this is a result of setting up working groups on the different domains and then not having a good process for synthesising their proposals.

Furthermore the connections with the fourth and foundational domain (that covers peace, human rights, and respect for the planet) should be better fleshed out: show more clearly how indicators across domains connect to human rights, peace, and respect for the planet.

Lastly gender should be more central within inclusiveness and equity.

2. *How should indicators be identified, validated, periodically reviewed and updated to ensure scientific robustness, policy relevance and international comparability?*

This process needs to integrate at least four sources of expertise:

- A. Scientific expertise on reliability and validity of indicators
- B. Statistical expertise to explore correlations and dimensionality, which can help reduce redundancy and in selecting headline indicators that ‘represent’ domains
- C. Political expertise on which indicators can be policy relevant
- D. For the wellbeing dimension, citizens (through citizen assemblies or other deliberative mini-public processes) to identify what matters. A global assembly is

feasible and would be a powerful political statement (e.g. <https://globalassemblies.org>)

3. *What institutional arrangements would be appropriate to oversee the continued development of the Beyond GDP framework, including the respective roles of the United Nations Statistical Commission and intergovernmental bodies?*

As noted above, a global citizens' assembly to define wellbeing from citizens' perspective.

4. *How should the framework balance the need for a globally coherent approach with sufficient flexibility to reflect different national priorities, capacities and development pathways?*

There are three levels to consider: 1) the overall framework (with the 3 dimensions and the 3 foundational principles); 2) the domains within this; 3) the specific indicators for each domain (the forthcoming MERGE Guidelines make this distinction as well).

We would argue that 1) the overall framework should be consistent across countries, 2) domains should be considered as a menu rather than a fixed prescription. 3) Indicators to some extent are also a menu, except when you get to the level of the details of *how* to measure things (e.g. how to measure life satisfaction or loneliness, or crime statistics). At that level, it would be beneficial to have harmonisation and detailed advice, such as the OECD has produced with its guidelines on measuring subjective wellbeing.

5. *Is there a need for headline indicators and if so, what criteria should guide the selection and development of headline indicators? How should emerging dimensions and less established measures—such as subjective well-being, social cohesion, cross-country spillovers, capital/wealth measures, planet boundaries—be incorporated where appropriate?*

Yes, headline indicators are needed to communicate with audiences that are unlikely to invest the significant amount of time and energy required to understand complex dashboards. That includes the public, media and high-level politicians.

Headline indicators should statistically broadly capture the patterns for the domain or dimension they purport to measure, and they should be endorsed by citizens. Citizen Assemblies (either at national level or global) to this end could ensure that citizens are not just consulted, but actually shape the process, increasing democratic legitimacy, political relevance and public support. At Hot or Cool, we advocate for between 3-6 headline indicators overall (<https://hotorcool.org/news/going-beyond-gdp-from-dashboards-to-headline-indicators/>). It needs to be a small enough number for people to easily recall them, otherwise they will have no political traction.

Avoid creating a new index for its own sake, whichever path is chosen on headline indicators: indicators should support decision-making and accountability, not oversimplify complex realities.

III. National Implementation

1. *How could Beyond GDP measures be integrated into national policy-making processes, including planning, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation, while remaining adaptable to national circumstances and priorities?*

National statistical offices should coordinate data production, while finance and planning ministries, national human rights institutions, equality bodies, data protection authorities,

civil society and affected communities should be formally involved in indicator development, data governance, interpretation, and communication.

Embedding Beyond GDP into existing planning, budgeting, monitoring and evaluation processes so it informs real decisions rather than functioning as standalone reporting; implement incrementally, respecting national priorities while maintaining coherence through shared principles and standards.

Using “Beyond GDP evidence scans” to set overarching government priorities, use of wellbeing budgeting methods, and integrating Beyond GDP frameworks into emerging national legislation, e.g. for intergenerational wellbeing.

2. What institutional, statistical and governance arrangements would facilitate the effective use of multidimensional measures in national decision-making?

Holistic and cross-departmental decision-making processes are key.

Indicators also need teeth through explicit rules for how they feed into decisions — thresholds that trigger policy review, wellbeing impact assessments for major laws and budgets, requirements for departments to work jointly toward wellbeing goals. Involving civil society, social movements, Indigenous Peoples, local government and affected communities in adapting and interpreting indicators. Building regular, accessible public reporting — dashboards, citizen reports, visualisations, media engagement — to support electoral accountability, and using independent oversight (parliamentary committees, audit institutions, wellbeing councils or commissioners) to review progress and create a feedback loop between measurement and action.

3. What forms of international cooperation and capacity-building would be most effective in supporting countries—particularly developing countries—in strengthening data systems and implementing Beyond GDP approaches?

The aforementioned recommendations from the MERGE report on harmonisation (Abdallah et al., 2025) are relevant here. In particular, international organisations should:

- Focus harmonisation efforts on details of how to collect and produce specific indicators, rather than dictating which indicators should be collected.
- Co-ordinate research, technical development, cross-country learning, exchange of best practice
- Support communication and visibility, for example with free-to-use communication tools

4. What model of cooperation between national statistical systems and policymakers would best support the development and implementation of these measures?

The MERGE report called for “**a whole-of-governance approach** which straddles different types of public bodies, ideally with coordination across the NSI, policy-oriented independent public bodies, data owners, and departments within government. Whilst the latter is needed to ensure policy engagement and use, the former two can ensure perceived neutrality and resilience to government change. Many successful approaches have involved public bodies or government departments with cross-cutting or overarching responsibilities (for example, the Office of the Taoiseach or NESC in Ireland or the Treasury in New Zealand) that are able to develop policy mechanisms that are relevant to multiple policy areas.”

It also found that NSIs benefit from having a clear political mandate to work on Beyond GDP, but also from an arms-length relationship with political processes. When NSIs are

too close to political actors, this leads to the risk of processes being derailed by changes of government.

IV. International Policy Applications

1. *What potential role could Beyond GDP measures play in informing international policy discussions, while ensuring transparency, fairness and broad international acceptance?*

Beyond GDP measures can help reframe international policy discussions around what progress is for, making visible inequalities, multidimensional vulnerability, environmental harms, care and support work, fiscal space constraints and cross-border impacts that GDP-based approaches often obscure. To ensure transparency, fairness and broad acceptance, such measures should be grounded in internationally agreed human rights standards, developed through inclusive intergovernmental processes, and supported by clear methodologies, accessible communication, and disaggregation.