



WIYI YANI U THANGANI INSTITUTE

FOR FIRST NATIONS GENDER JUSTICE

SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON MEASURING OUTCOMES FOR FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

February 2025

Submission Terms of Reference

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We acknowledge and pay respects to all First Nations peoples, lands, waters, and skies across the continent, as Institute staff work remotely from city, coast and bush.

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Introduction

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute for First Nations Gender Justice (the Institute) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Select Committee on Measuring Outcomes for First Nations Communities.

Our submission focuses on sections e, f and g of the Terms of Reference, and draws on thousands of conversations with First Nations women, girls and gender-diverse peoples. The Institute has designed dedicated engagement processes to explore how outcomes can be determined and measured in ways that reflect First Nations women's lived experiences, knowledges and understanding of success and effective change processes (henceforth, "First Nations women" will also be inclusive of girls and gender-diverse peoples). It is important that measuring change includes qualitative metrics that go beyond statistics, to better reflect and appreciate the fullness and strengths of First Nations women lives, their families and communities. It is the Institute's belief that the absence of such an approach, narrows the nature of the work designed and invested in to achieve outcomes, often unintentionally excluding women's holistic initiatives vital to the safety, care and health of communities.

This submission draws primarily on the *Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice* (Change Agenda, attached) and the Measurement, Evaluation & Learning (MEL) framework embedded within. The *Change Agenda* was shaped by many diverse voices to create the first national outcomes framework for First Nations gender justice. Although the Change Agenda is for First Nations women, the culturally grounded gender lens it provides can be used by all people and could be applied across all Closing the Gap targets and measurement approaches. This submission recommends deepening gendered approaches to measurement to more effectively capture the views of women. But it should be noted that the approach put forward in the Change Agenda is relevant to all genders and can benefit the lives of everyone.

The Institute recommends that the Select Committee, in supporting the outcomes of Closing the Gap:

1. Capture measurement approaches that centre First Nations women's lived realities, deepening understanding of what drives effective change and creates sustainable outcomes for women, children, families and communities
2. Embed culturally-grounded MEL frameworks that incorporate qualitative alongside quantitative measures to provide richer, more accurate understanding of outcomes, including using "signals".
3. Foreground Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance principles as central to measurement approaches, ensuring First Nations women control their information.
4. Use an intersectional lens throughout measurement to capture diverse experiences, solutions, strengths and needs.



5. Take a systems change approach to the collection, use and evaluation of data, and draw on this evidence to identify priorities for policy change and funding.

First Nations Gender Just Measurement, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

First Nations peoples have long been evaluators and systems thinkers, with a deep understanding of interconnected systems across Country, waterways, plants, animals, and people. This profound knowledge of patterns and needs should be central to the Measurement, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) processes.

Current approaches to measuring outcomes for First Nations communities often fail to capture the full picture of First Nations women's lives, strengths and challenges. As June Oscar AO, Chair of the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute, articulated:

"I wanted to get below the statistics of deficit and open a window on who our women and girls are and how their lives matter to the forming of healthy societies. I want Australia to see us. For us to be humanised not numerated."

This perspective highlights the necessity for a shift from traditional, Western linear measurement and data collection approaches to culturally grounded, purpose-driven evaluation approaches that more accurately reflect the needs of First Nations communities:

"Measurement and data does not need to be all about numbers—it is about our heart and spirits, it is about voice, story, emotion—it is about truth. Numbers can tell us all sorts of lies." - June Oscar AO

The MEL approach presented in the Change Agenda can be applied at many scales and in many ways, including being adapted to CtG, particularly in response to sections e, f, and g. Whilst the approach outlined in this submission does not address specific targets, it focuses on how MEL can be done more effectively, grounded in self-determination and community voice.

The MEL framework is also inherently linked to funding decisions, bringing forward what communities value and prioritise. By centring First Nations women's perspectives, this approach could significantly transform how resources are allocated and support is provided.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty

As we recontextualise data to reflect First Nations women's lived realities, it is crucial that measurement and data collection align with the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) and Indigenous Data Governance (IDG). In creating the *Change Agenda*, we have drawn on a national submissions process, where the importance of IDS and IDG were consistently emphasised. As Djirra articulates,



"Aboriginal data sovereignty is a key tenet of respecting First Peoples' cultural rights and right to self-determination. Djirra - and other specialist ACCOs - have insufficient funding to collect the data needed to inform systemic change."

When community organisations have adequate resourcing to collect, control and use their data, they are empowered to make decisions that benefit the whole community. Data can be collected in ways that reflect the values and cultural protocols and practices of communities, drawing a holistic picture that reflects lived realities and experiences, and can create meaningful responses using this knowledge. This is in contrast to mainstream data collection and use which decontextualises data which can lead to assumptions and often the portrayal of communities through a deficit lens. This is also often why solutions garnered through mainstream data act as band aid solutions rather than lead to meaningful and sustainable change. To strengthen Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance, submissions outlined the following key recommendations:

1. Strengthen Community Control: Governments must invest in ACCO's monitoring and evaluation capacity and community-led data governance structures.
2. Develop Digital Infrastructure: Invest in local evaluation capacity, including digital infrastructure to enable effective collection and localised storage of data.
3. Enable Meaningful Engagement: Ensure reciprocity with First Nations women in data creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination, and reuse.

Informed by these submissions, the Change Agenda: **Take a systems mapping and systems change approach to supporting the full spectrum of care services and provision, from early intervention and prevention through to acute and crisis response forms of care**

has formed a set of IDS principles which state that women:

- have living data which comprise their lives, stories, knowledges, paintings and artefacts
- own, control and can use their data for purposes determined by them
- use their own methods of evaluation to analyse their data, to decide the change they want to see in their lives
- determine collective priorities based on their data and collaborate with others to make change happen.

Indigenous data sovereignty creates systems change

When Indigenous communities are resourced to collect, own, use and evaluate data on their own terms, they are able to use and understand data in a much richer way. As discussed, communities contextualise their data with their existing knowledge of



cultural protocols, behaviours, relationship and power dynamics, enabling them to understand actions, institutional settings and community needs through a systems change lens. By understanding these core influences, provides an avenue to challenge aspects of the system that are not working effectively or respond at the source of problems.

Case Study: The Care and Carer System

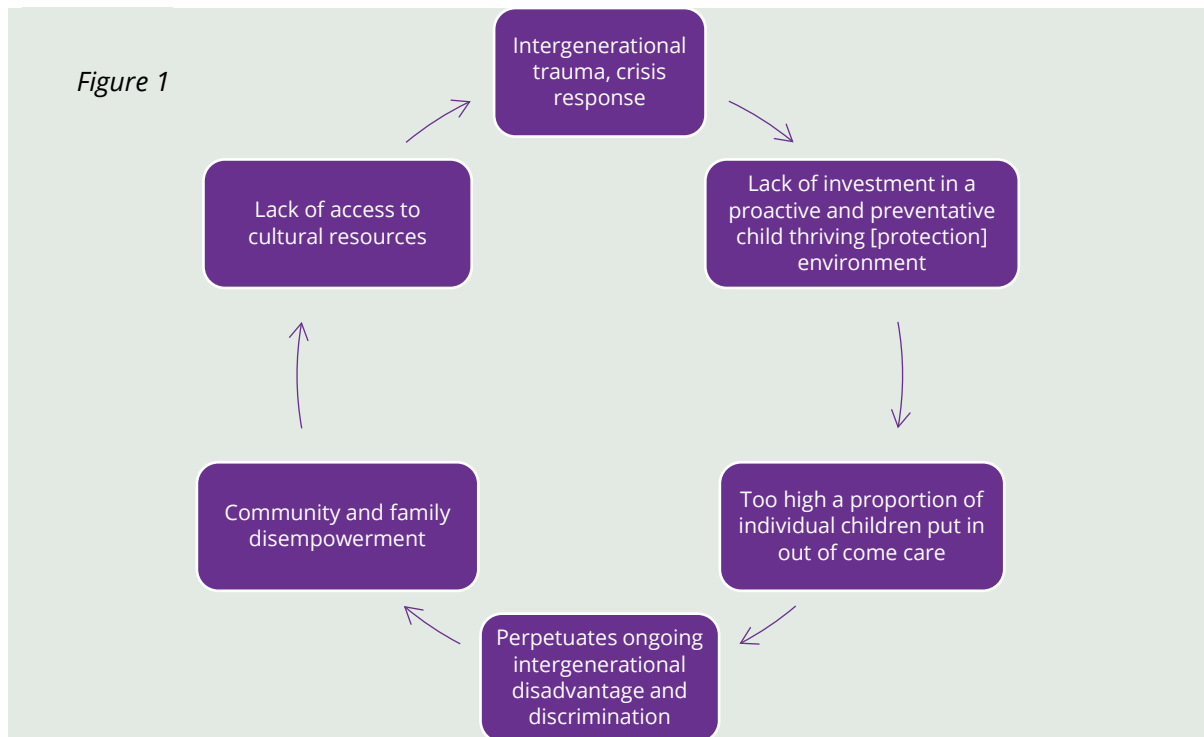
Exploring how the care economy disenfranchises and marginalises First Nations peoples provides a useful example of how contextualised data and a systems change lens can reveal key challenges and barriers that lead to harm, and how intervention in the system can create sustainable positive impact.

The experiences shared by First Nations peoples described in the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report (WYUT Report) and the Caring about Care report, garnered findings consistent with other research, which show that despite millennia of functional care systems in First Nations communities, colonisation and discriminatory and unjust policies in Australia have led to intergenerational trauma and entrenched poverty. In addition, punitive welfare, incarceration and child protection systems have compounded care requirements and placed strains on carers.ⁱⁱ

Decades of exclusion from the mainstream economy, overcrowding, poor income support and unemployment, have left First Nations peoples more likely to experience poor health and wellbeing outcomes, mental health issues, addiction, and unemployment. These experiences are creating a 'poverty trap' for First Nations women and their families, as insufficient income for carers and their families creates the risk of further harm to health and wellbeing, which redoubles the load of care and thus further exacerbates the vulnerability of carers and their families. These conditions make First Nations women vulnerable to violenceⁱⁱⁱ and, consistent with other research, emphasise how the system is structured to reinforce harm by becoming more difficult to navigate and less adaptable to individual needs:^{iv}

A visual representation of this context is illustrated by The Orange Compass and Early Years Catalyst systems mapping project providing 31 intersecting feedback loops reflecting the 'current state' of the child and family system.^v An example of how this system compounds First Nations trauma is provided in Figure 1.

This mapping offers a useful way forward. Mapping the relevant issues and identifying these feedback loops where they occur is key to identifying the best interventions to break these cycles. A holistic understanding of how the care and support economy functions, acknowledging the full spectrum of care, and the value placed upon care by communities, provides an opportunity to break cycles of harm and create the necessary conditions for a caring and sustainable economy.



Mainstream data, however, often does not look at systems interconnections and feedback loops which reproduce harm. More often, narratives drawn from macro data contribute to negative and reactive assumptions about First Nations peoples and communities that place them at blame for their experiences.

Addressing the gaps and dysfunction in present systems and policy requires systemic analysis, followed by reform. While also putting the supports in place for First Nations communities to heal from the damages of these systems. When First Nations women are invested in, and their lives, roles and knowledges are recognised and reflected in surrounding systems, children thrive, economies grow, communities are cohesive, harms and violence are minimised, and CtG targets can be met.

As IDS is a key commitment of Closing the Gap, to ensure meaningful data can be collected and used to understand the systemic context, it is essential that First Nations communities are adequately resourced in grants and funding schemes to support their data capacity. Where data about, or which impacts, First Nations peoples is collected and used by the government and other non-Indigenous actors, data tools must be co-designed and governed by First Nations peoples. This provides an opportunity to listen and respect the views of First Nations peoples to develop trust and accountability in systems that have historically marginalised First Nations peoples.

A systems change approach to data collection

The Change Agenda outlines the Institute's MEL approach. This framework, designed collectively with First Nations women, identifies outcomes that enhance women's wellbeing across all aspects of life. The Change Agenda places storytelling at the centre

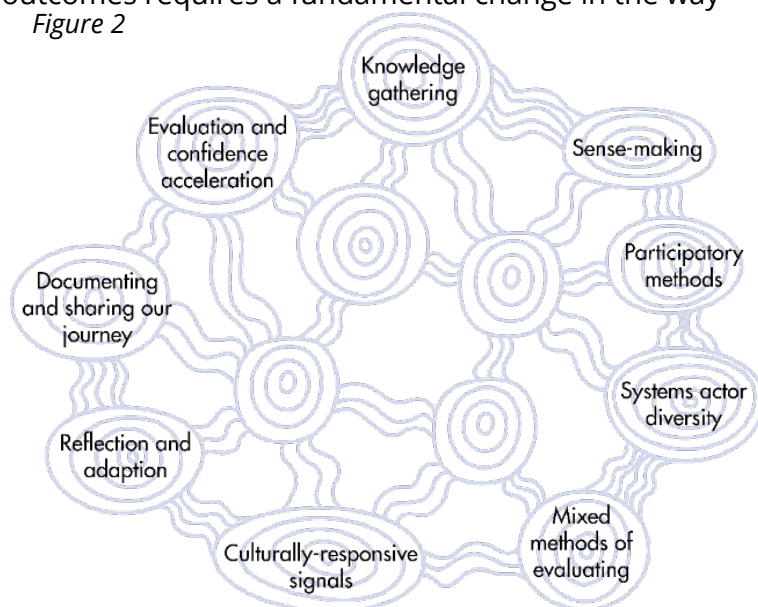


of MEL processes, which can complement and expand understandings of baseline statistics. In doing so, it makes visible the realities, hopes, challenges, values, and aspirations of First Nations women, helping to highlight the systemic changes required to support their wellbeing.

Achieving long-term, society-wide outcomes requires a fundamental change in the way we evaluate and make decisions

Figure 2

about investments and support. Systems change requires a cyclical feedback process that integrates community engagement, practice, evaluation, learning, and evidence-building to create positive change. This process involves continual sense-checking and adjustments based on new learnings, ensuring that initiatives remain relevant and effective (Figure 2: MEL processes and activities).



Culturally-Responsive Signals

Integral to the Change Agenda MEL approach is the use of culturally-responsive signals. These signals reflect the lived experiences of First Nations women and should be developed in consultation with them. By ensuring that outcomes are determined and measured in ways that are meaningful to the women they aim to benefit, this approach ensures that the MEL process is community-led and can help develop evidence which can contribute to meaningful change.

For example, in the context of the Closing the Gap target on out-of-home care, potential signals of change may include:

- Families are feeling safe and happy in our homes
- We are seeing more children going to school
- We are hearing children laugh and play in the community
- We are seeing children have nutritious food and adequate clothes and toys
- Families are spending more time with children

These signals reflect on the health and wellbeing of families, safety, housing, food security, economic security, and education, while building a larger picture of what it looks like for children to stay within their families and out of care. In doing so, it humanises the experiences that numerical data cannot show.



The challenge is to work with communities to establish signals, develop mechanisms to track their occurrence and to deepen evaluative analysis of signals within interconnected systems. This will help assess how initiatives and programmes can have immediate and longer-term ripple effects, and how to improve investments and recognise and fill gaps within current systems.

As outlined by June Oscar AO:

"But too frequently, these numbers alone, without the rich evidence of our cultures and ways of being on the ground, can be cruelly miss-portrayed as us failing the State. ... [referring to punitive policies in the Northern Territory] we are seen as a burden on resources and the solution is punishment—lock our kids up and slash welfare supports, and no matter what we are experiencing, just get our kids into mainstream schools. These are the doomed to fail responses to numbers extracted out of context. They are free from the thinking we desperately need, which must consider the myriad ways in which systems need to change to embrace us. So, numbers and how we interpret them really do matter. They tell us something about who we are, and they have a prophetic way of dictating our futures."

Signals are interconnected, rich, and grounded in lived realities. They offer insight into when change is occurring and what is working—or not working—in the system. Ultimately, signals are the things First Nations women already see, feel, do, or sense. They are knowledges and cultural practices in action and how First Nations women organise and make decisions about what their families and communities need every day and into the future. They are also critical in informing the creation of policy, legislation, program, contract settings, and resource flows that shape the structural conditions surrounding First Nations women's lives.

Key Recommendations

The Institute recommends that the Select Committee, in supporting the outcomes of Closing the Gap:

1. Capture measurement approaches that centre First Nations women's lived realities, deepening understanding of what drives effective change and creates sustainable outcomes for women, children, families and communities.
2. Embed culturally-grounded MEL frameworks that incorporate qualitative alongside quantitative measures to provide richer, more accurate understanding of outcomes, including using "signals".
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5. Take a systems change approach to the collection, use and evaluation of data, and draw on this evidence to identify priorities for policy change and funding.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice (2024) – Attached

We encourage the Select Committee to read the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Change Agenda as a useful resource providing an alternative approach to measuring and responding to the Closing the Gap targets, and to understand the priorities of First Nations women.

Appendix 2: First Nations Women's Voices

The Productivity Commission's Closing the Gap Review noted that there are limited understandings of what First Nations women need.^{vi} Some First Nations women have spoken to the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute about the lack of progress on the Closing the Gap targets and an absence of culturally-informed mechanisms and investments alongside the targets that can drive meaningful outcomes. It is fundamental that targets and measuring change are co-created and nurtured within First Nations communities.

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani approach helps to nurture this understanding. As articulated in the *Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report* (2020) and reflected across the *Implementation Framework* (2021) and *Change Agenda* (2024, attached), when First Nations women describe their lived experiences and the change they want to see, their experiences, challenges and aspirations are all interconnected and interdependent.^{vii} This means that creating change must be holistic and not siloed and fragmented across portfolios and services.

First Nations women have diverse identities and experiences, requiring an intersectional approach to measurement. This is especially true for those with diverse abilities, Elders, individuals living in remote regions, and incarcerated individuals, who face unique harms due to marginalising structures. Measurement frameworks must consider these intersecting identities as central to their lived realities.

ⁱ Submission 34 to development of Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice: Djirra

ⁱⁱ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices): Securing our Rights, Securing our Future* (Report, 2020); Karen Menzies, 'Understanding the Australian Aboriginal experience of collective, historical and intergenerational trauma' (2019) 62(6) *International Social Work*, 1522; Klein, E. et al. 'Caring about Care' (Report 2024).

ⁱⁱⁱ Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Violence against indigenous women and girls, Human Rights Council A/HRC/50/26 (2022) <<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G22/323/90/PDF/G2232390.pdf?OpenElement>>.

^{iv} Productivity Commission, *Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory* (Report, 8 April 2020) <<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/nt-children/report>>; Megan Davis, *Family is Culture*,



Independent Review of Children and Young People in OOHC in NSW (Report, November 2019) <https://www.familyisculture.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/726329/Family-Is-Culture-Review-Report.pdf>; Productivity Commission, *Mental Health Inquiry Report* (Report, 16 November 2020) <<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health.pdf>>.

^v Early Years Catalyst and Orange Compass, *Systems Mapping Report* (Report, August 2022) 26 <<https://www.earlyyearscatalyst.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/EYC-Document-System-Mapping-Report-Aug-2022.pdf>>.

^{vi} Productivity Commission. (2024). *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, Study report, set. ISBN 978-1-74037-780-5. Canberra.

^{vii} Australian Human Rights Commission. (2024). *Wiyi Yani U Thangani Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice*. ISBN 978-1-925917-92-5. Sydney.