



Original research article

# Application of capability approach to assess the role of ecosystem services in the well-being of Indigenous Australians



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## ABSTRACT

The well-being of Indigenous people in Australia and throughout the world is linked to the use and value of natural resources. This research analyses the current well-being approach applied to measure well-being of Indigenous Australians. It reports findings from three case studies in Queensland on Indigenous people's values and concerns and their capabilities in relation to natural systems. It applies a holistic approach based upon the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and Sen's capability approaches and proposes an integrated well-being model by incorporating intangible values such as cultural and identity values, that are linked to people's capabilities involving natural systems. It provides a novel way of understanding the role of natural resources in Indigenous well-being by associating natural resources with people's capabilities. The study suggests transforming the present concept of well-being and its measures for incorporating people's capabilities that can effectively inform future policy decision making.

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## 1. Introduction

In Australia, current Indigenous well-being measures fail to incorporate nature-related attributes, despite recognition that many Indigenous communities are well connected to natural resources for various aspects of people's living.

A significant literature suggest Indigenous social, spiritual and cultural connections with nature (for example, Aboriginal communities of the Northern Territory by Altman, 1987, 2004; Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), 1994; Bunya Mountains Elders Council and Burnett Mary Regional Group, 2010; Dodson, 1997, 2010; Dodson and McCarthy, 2005; Kaur, 2006, 2007; Keen, 2004; National Native Title Tribunal, 2012; Panelli and Tipa, 2009; Queensland Murray Darling Committee, 2008–2011; Sangha et al., 2011, 2015; Wet tropics Aboriginal Plan Project Team, 2005 and many others). Indigenous closeness with nature is evident from the intricate relationships between people's physical, spiritual and human worlds (Fig. 1; Sangha et al., 2015) and from the values that they have for their traditional system of bush food, rituals, totems and the kinship system that involved responsibility to care about different components

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of nature. In more recent times, some Indigenous people may not be fortunate to live on their land; however, about 72% of Australia's Indigenous population is still connected with land (country) for their traditions, culture and identity (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2009–2010 and 2012).

Land is of paramount significance for Indigenous people and it defines their identity for the present and future generations. Traditions, history and relationships with sites are passed from one generation to another, and are considered vital in the well-being of an Indigenous society (Rose, 1995). Dodson (1997) states “our traditional relationship to land is profoundly spiritual... it provided our ceremonial objects, sacred for people, ... the sacred names, the kinship, the subsections, the homelands, and whatever language you might speak” demonstrating that connections to land are central for the well-being of Indigenous communities. Many aspects of socio-economic living of Indigenous people fundamentally depend upon natural systems for the provision of various services (Altman, 2004, 2006; Altman et al., 2005, 2011; Sangha et al., 2011).

According to 2011 census, the Indigenous population represents 2.5% of total Australian population (548,369; ABS, 2012–13). However, there is no appropriate framework to measure well-being of Indigenous people that includes people's connections with land. As highlighted by Taylor (2008) and Grieves (2007, 2009), there is a need to recognize and interpret the elements of well-being that Indigenous people value and practice, which are beyond the general framework currently applied by the ABS (The Australian Bureau of Statistics) (2001) (which has little inclusion of indigenous connections with country).

Lack of an appropriate well-being framework and its measures further lead to in-effective and inappropriate welfare policies that contribute towards lower levels of Indigenous well-being (McCubbin et al., 2013; ABS, 2012, 2012–13 and many other such reports). For example, life expectancy at birth of Indigenous males is 69.1 years and females is 73.7 years which is about 11 years less compared to the non-Indigenous population (ABS, 2013). For education, Indigenous students are significantly behind the non-Indigenous students: Year 12 or equivalent education achievement rate is only 22% for Indigenous students compared to 54% for non-Indigenous students (in 2008; ABS, 2012). Similarly, there are many issues related to domestic violence, alcohol abuse and caring for children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2011, 2013a,b).

This paper explores what well-being means for Indigenous Australians. It examines the current well-being framework, people's links with the natural systems, and proposes an integrated model based upon empirical data from three case studies in Queensland. It explores the application of the capability approach (Sen, 1985, 1993, 1999a,b) to include people's links with nature as ‘functionings’ (i.e. people ‘can do’) into the well-being measures. The proposed integrated approach to well-being including people's values and capabilities in relation to natural resources is relatively new to the current Australian well-being approach. This research can help to develop appropriate well-being measures and welfare policies for Indigenous people in Australia as well as worldwide, in the future.

## 2. Indigenous well-being concepts and issues

In Australia, the well-being concept is presently applied from a western perspective as it was initially developed for non-Indigenous Australians and ignores many values that Indigenous people value in their well-being (McCubbin et al., 2013; Davidoff and Duhs, 2008; Garnett et al., 2008; Grieves, 2007, 2009). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2001) defines well-being as ‘a state of health or sufficiency in all aspects of life’. The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, 2011) identifies that there is no single definition of human well-being because the term includes several facets with complex interactions and the respective importance of each aspect is difficult to identify. Despite this, globally, there is a basic agreement that “well-being” includes the satisfactions of material needs, the experience of freedom, health, personal security, good social relations and healthy natural environment (Alkire, 2002; Sen, 1993, 1999a).

The non-Indigenous value system is different to the Indigenous value system where commodities or utilities matter to a greater extent (Edwards, 1988; Grieves, 2009). The current socio-economic framework, applied by the ABS (2001) is consistent with the utility values and is primarily meant to measure well-being in relation to use of various commodities as reflected from attributes such as economic resources, income, housing etc. These measures may suit non-Indigenous people but their suitability for Indigenous people is questionable. In contrast, well-being of Indigenous people is well embedded with the natural systems (Dodson, 1997, 2010). The problem in the modern economics is how to deal with the non-monetary aspects of well-being such as cultural, identity and spiritual values or the traditional knowledge that people may have. In addition to nature related values, Indigenous people's skills and knowledge are well linked with the use of natural resources, but these are not incorporated into current well-being measures. So, how to incorporate nature related values into Indigenous well-being?

The ABS Indigenous Policy and Engagement Group (ABS, 2010) developed a framework for Indigenous Australians that represented interactions of Indigenous people with their socio-cultural and economic environments. It focuses on social and cultural aspects to a greater extent than the natural aspects (in comparison to the ABS 2001 socio-economic well-being framework). However, it fails to include the depth of relationships that Indigenous people have with their natural environment/country. To date, this framework has been applied only for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth (ABS, 2012) and the main messages from culture, heritage and leisure domain (where it is expected to highlight people's connections with nature) were: 49% identified with a cultural group, such as a clan, tribal or language group; 52% recognized an area as their homeland or traditional country; 8% spoke an Indigenous language as their main language at home; 65% had attended a cultural event in the last year; and, 25% of all Indigenous youth were living in their homelands.

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