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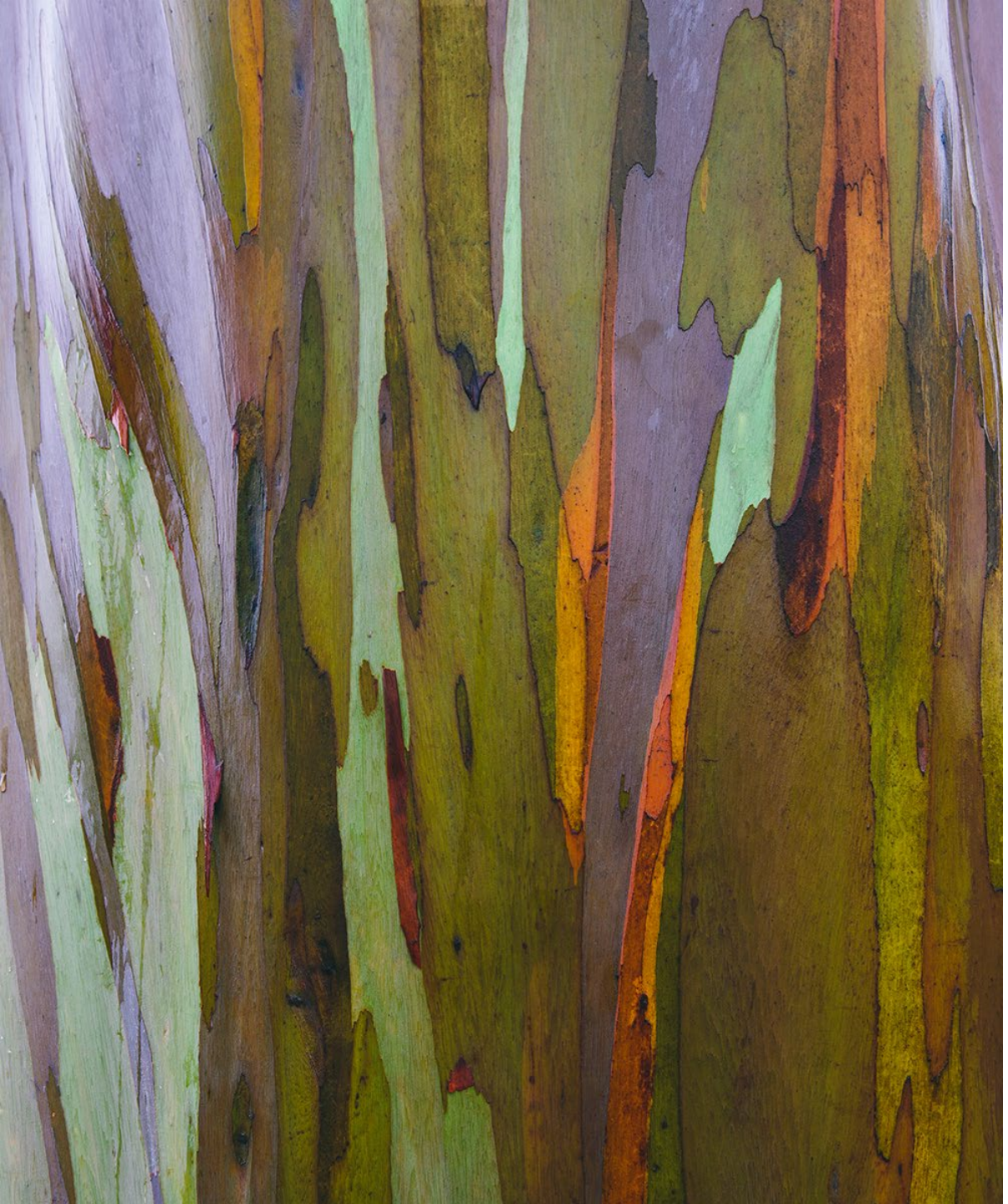
Evaluating what matters

Public value as a framework for assessing impact

Dr Danielle Thornton & Dr Stephen Cuttriss

AES Conference 2026, Garramilla/ Darwin, 14 -18 September





Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Larrakia people as the Traditional Owners of the Country we are on today, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the Custodians of the lands on which this paper was written, and the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present, who carry the memories, traditions, cultures and aspirations of First Peoples, and who forge the path ahead for emerging leaders.

The Social Research Centre is committed to honouring First Nations peoples' ongoing unique cultural and spiritual connections to the land, water and seas and their rich contribution to society. Working respectfully and in allyship, we extend our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.

Life in Australia™

What's our plan

01 How do we understand value in terms of public investment?

02 What challenges we've faced with economic assessments of value

03 How else can we provide decision makers with a sense of a program's value?

04 How you might adopt a public value framework

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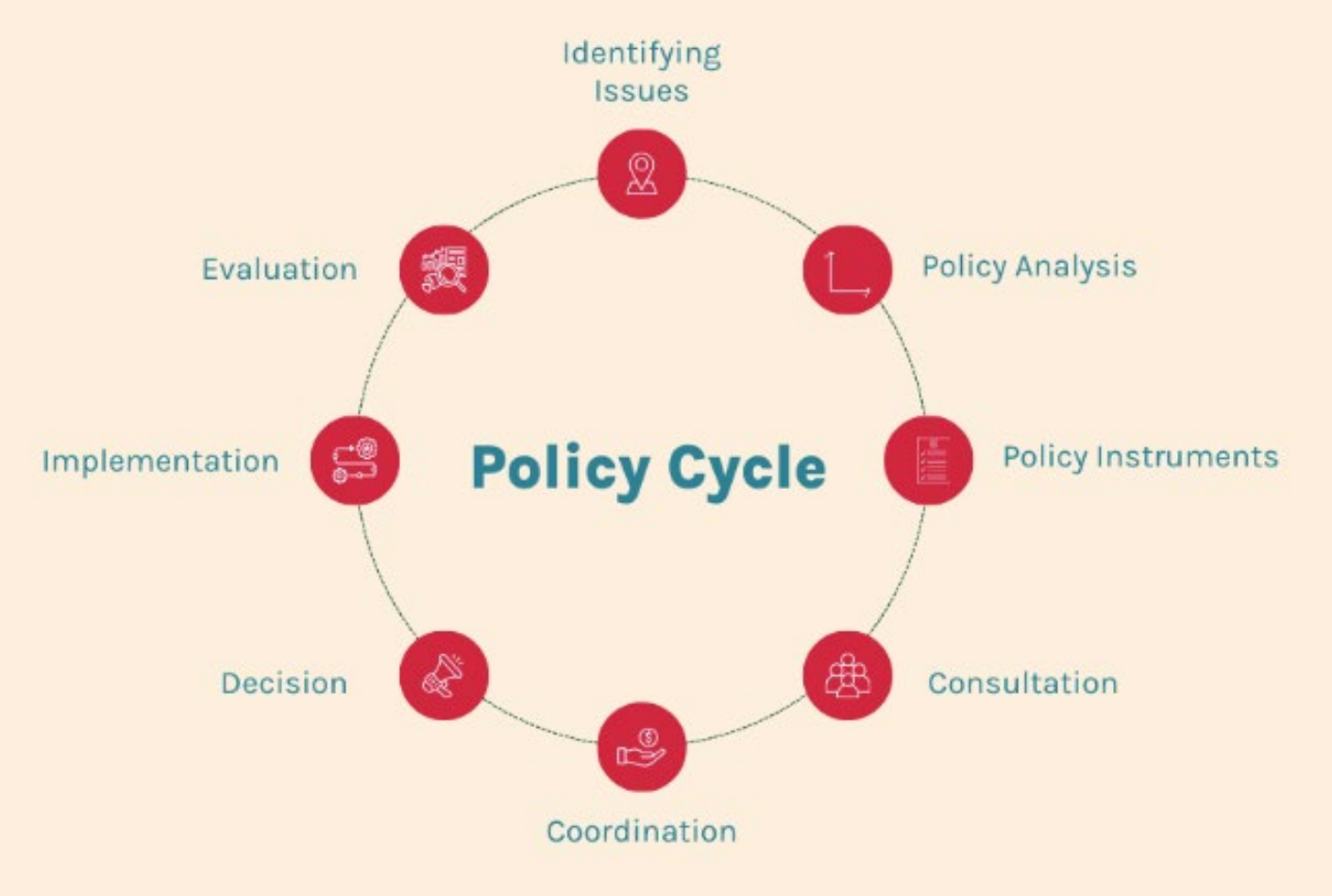


Evaluation and public investment

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Program evaluation helps underpin trust in government

In healthy democracies, program evaluation is an important component of the policy cycle.



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Public trust in government is declining

Part of the problem is that policy feels disconnected from everyday lived experience

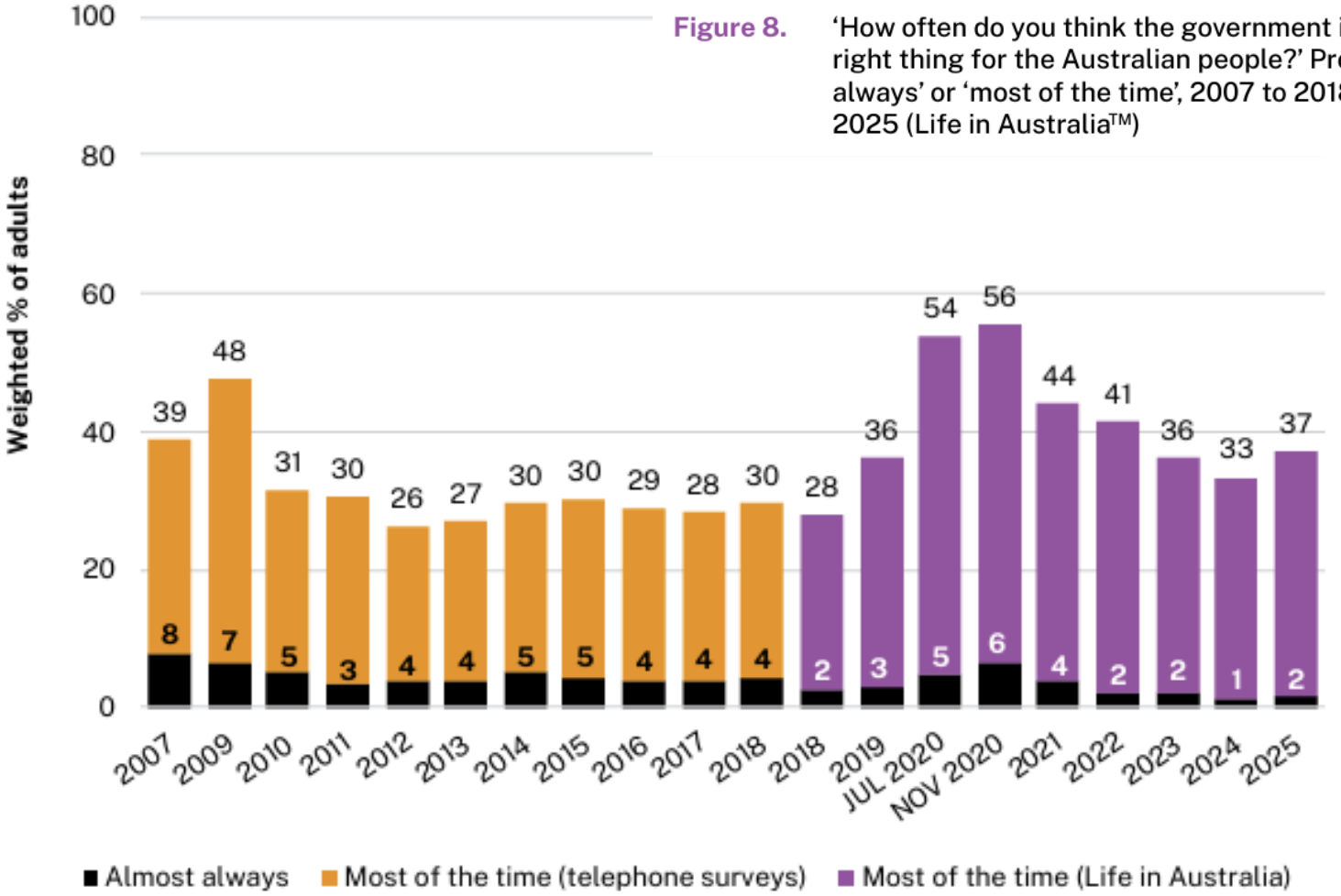


Figure 8. 'How often do you think the government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people?' Proportion of adults who say 'almost always' or 'most of the time', 2007 to 2018 (telephone surveys) and 2018 to 2025 (Life in Australia™)

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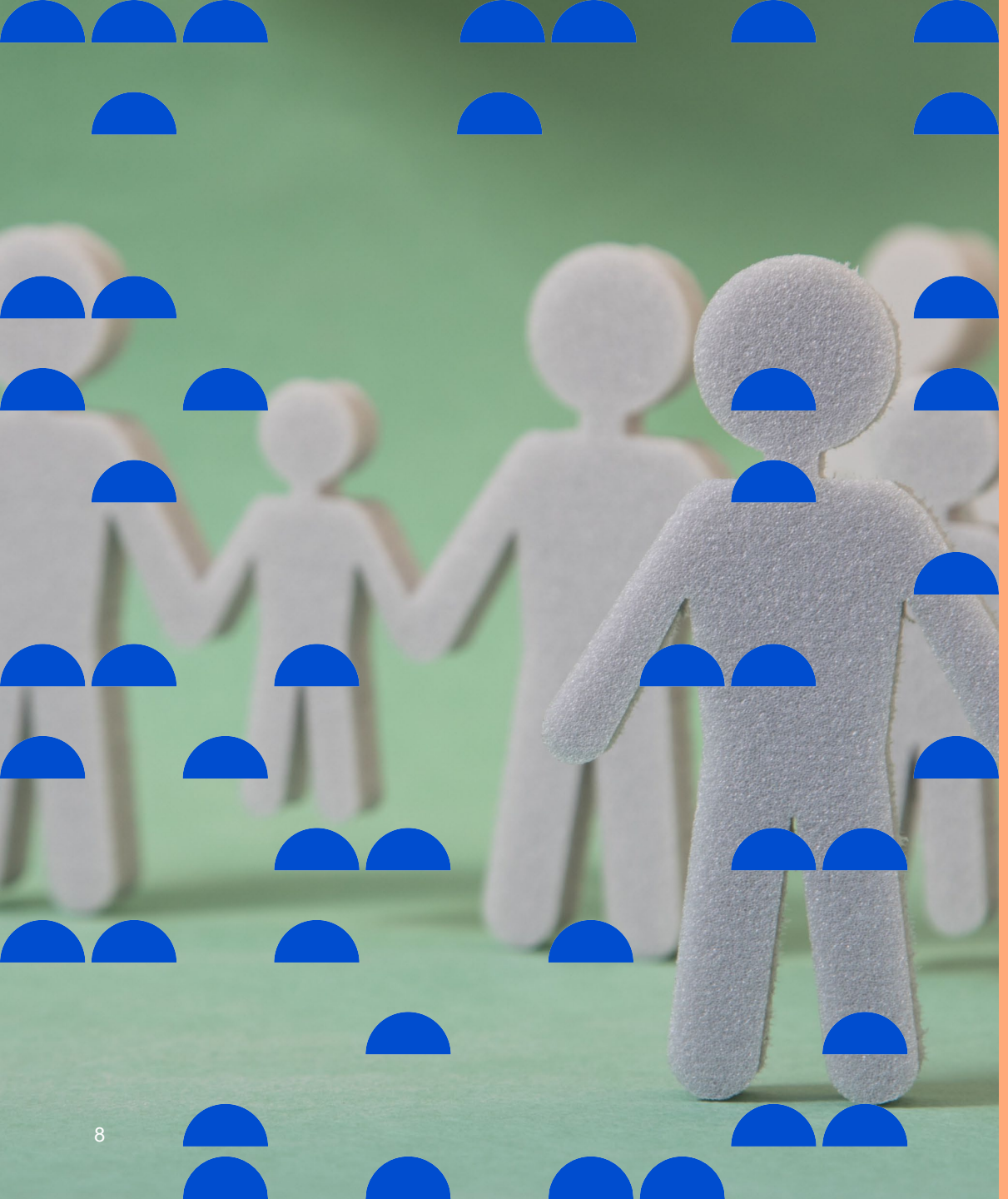
What does this mean for evaluators?

How can evaluation bridge the disconnect between policy and the things people value?



Nearly one in two Australians (48%) think the best way to make political decisions in a democracy is through dialogue with citizens and affected groups, while **only 9%** believe decisions should be left to elected representatives without public input.	**More than half (54%)** of Australians view deliberative forums as a sign that politicians are **responsive** – that they value input and ideas of ordinary people.
People who are **dissatisfied with democracy and distrusting of government** support a **deliberative model** of democracy **(49%)** followed by a **direct model** including more referendums **(28%)**. **Only 5%** support decision-making by elected officials without public input.	**A majority (56%)** report they **would be likely to participate in a deliberative forum if invited**, indicating an unmet demand for more direct, participatory engagement.
Despite limited public familiarity with such mechanisms, **36%** of Australians say they would trust a **deliberative forum of everyday citizens** to produce sound recommendations on their behalf.	This desire for more participatory channels is **strongest among the disaffected: 63%** of those dissatisfied and **59%** of those distrusting say they would be willing to take part in a deliberative forum.

Webb et al 2025, p.24



Valuing in social programs

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Program context and challenge:

Assessing the value of the Supporting Young People to Understand Consent Affirmative Program

















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The challenge of econometric measures of value

How do innovative social programs complicate value for money evaluations?

Innovative programs often are testing:

- whether a new idea is feasible;
- which components are effective;
- for whom the model works;
- how it should be adapted to different contexts;
- what implementation capability is required;
- whether it can eventually be sustained or scaled.

Some common challenges with value for money assessments:

- Program model is not yet stable
- Early-stage costs are structurally high. Innovative programs incur costs that mature programs do not.
- Requires outcomes that can be operationalised and observed
- May prioritise short-term measurable outcomes
- ‘Failure’ to achieve outcomes is ambiguous in innovative contexts

$$\text{Value for money} = \frac{\text{Benefits or outcomes produced}}{\text{Resources used}}$$

What we saw in our evaluation

Prolonged implementation and design phase

Slow project maturation

Heterogeneity of project approaches/ outcomes

Emergent outcomes misaligned

Countable outcomes limited

Greater reliance on qualitative data

Iterative program design

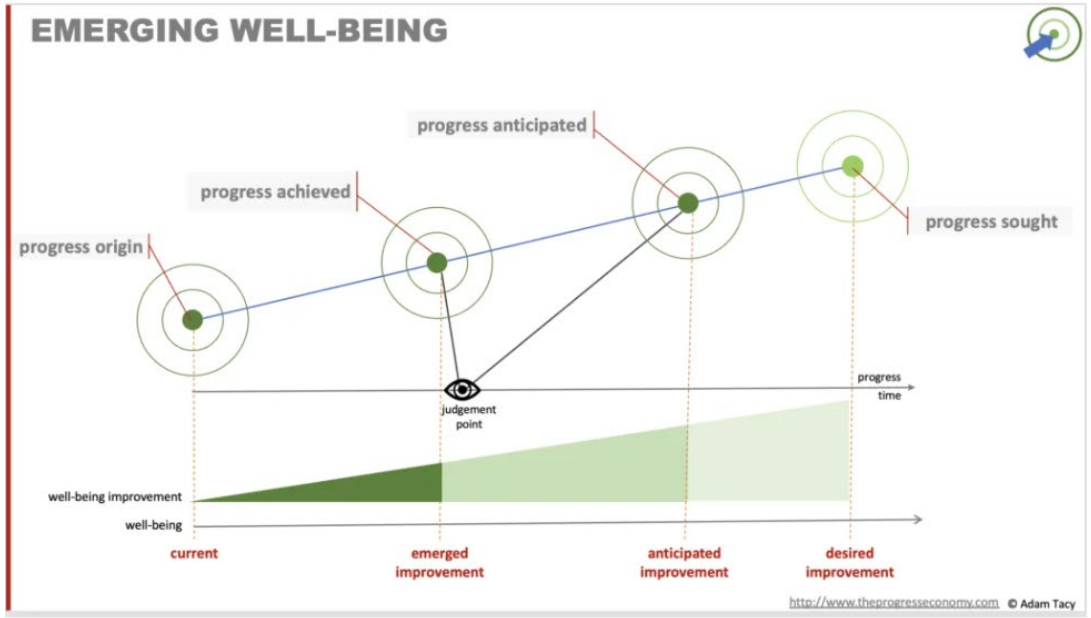


How do we still provide government with a sense of the value the program?

One tool that may help is a public value assessment:

Public value is the sum of benefits generated by governments when they act in the public interest

Objective is not to assess 'value for money', but to be able to say something substantive about the 'value generated for the public'.



Value creation as a process, based on Vargo & Lausch 2016

Public value type	Description
Value-in-production	Value created in the process of production e.g. from the experience of being involved in co-design/co-production of a public service, independent of outcomes
Value-in-use	Value derived by an individual from the experience of using a public service either in the short to medium term, or impact on wellbeing over the course of a lifetime.
Value-in-context	Value derived by an individual in relation to others, within a particular social context e.g. a collectively experienced social benefit, improved social relationships
Value-in-society	Value created when public services enable the expression or fulfilment of civic virtues or bestow benefits that can be enjoyed collectively e.g. increased social cohesion and trust, respectful civil discourse, reduction in harms

Adapted from Osborne et al. 2022, p.641

What we did:

Public value assessment methodology

1. Identified the probable impacts we expected at each level of the public service ecosystem.
2. Data collection: focus groups, interviews and online community
3. Coded qualitative data and mapped according to beneficiary group/type of value for which we had evidence.
4. Triangulated evidence to make a judgement about strength of contribution to value type.

Program beneficiaries	Public value generated through the Program
Young people (value-in-context)	Young empowered to lead conversation and culture change around consent Increased capability to navigate consent in intimate relationships, healthier relationships and improved wellbeing. Young people are able to talk openly with trusted adults and feel supported. Reduced lifetime vulnerability to perpetrating/experiencing coercion and abuse in intimate relationships
Key influencers (value-in-context)	Increased capability to talk about consent with young people, family and community Increased capability to provide appropriate advice and support to others Increased capability to reflect on and process previous personal experiences
Key workers (value-in-use)	Increased professional capability to provide appropriate advice and support and refer to specialist services as necessary Access to high-quality specialist resources Increased professional capability to identify abuse/assault and intervene appropriately Increased professional capability in teams through sharing of Program resources
Community sector organisations/ providers (value-in-production)	Specialist resources that can be deployed in training and delivery across organisation and broader sector Reduced organisational risk from poor-handling of disclosures or failure to identify sexual abuse or coercion. Increased organisational networks and relational capital
Broader society (value-in-society)	Affirmative consent is normalised in social discourse and youth culture. Service-systems support young people to understand consent and recognise abuse or assault and respond appropriately when it is suspected or disclosed. Incidence of sexual assault declines at population level

What we learned:

Benefits and limitations of using public value in this way



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Benefits

- Effective as a method for comprehensively mapping types of social value generated
- Complemented a ‘realist’ approach
- Good for recognising the benefits that mattered to research participants and feeding this up to government

Limitations:

- Did not meet DTF criteria for VFM
- Not suitable for quantifying scale of impact, only strength of convergence



Your turn!

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Activity: Value created at AES 2026

Technically not *public* value, but what types of value do you see this conference as generating?

Value type	Description
Economic value	Economic benefits generated through the activity
Value-in-production	Value created in the process of production e.g. from the experience of being involved in co-design/co-production of a public service, independent of outcomes
Value-in-use	Value derived by an individual from the experience of using a public service either in the short to medium term, or impact on wellbeing over the course of a lifetime.
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Value created at AES 26

Did you come up with any of the following? Any we didn't think of?

Value type	Description
Economic value	• Benefits for local hotels, restaurants and conference facilities
Value-in-production *(AES organisers)*	• Practical event organisation 'know how' • Deepening of relationships and networks (social capital) between members of organising committee, members and event sponsors
Value-in-use *(individual attendees)*	• Increased knowledge and understanding of issues in contemporary evaluation grows enhanced professional capability • Enjoyment of conference and visit to Darwin
Value-in-context	• Expanded professional and social networks, enabling mutually beneficial collaboration and business development • Strengthened social identity as members of a community of independent evaluators
Value-in-society	• Conference participation and learning grow the capability of the evaluation sector to help drive continuous improvement of programs and services. • Strong independent evaluation sector helps hold government to account

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