

Assessment of Economic and Social Rights Fulfilment in Australia

Submission from the Human Rights Measurement Initiative to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights for its 79th Session scheduled to be held in February 2026.

I. Reporting Organisation

1. The Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI)¹ measures the human rights performance of countries around the world, including Australia. HRMI is an independent, not-for-profit NGO with its primary base of operations in New Zealand, and a second base in the United States of America at the University of Georgia's Center for the Study of Global Issues (GLOBIS).²

II. Assessment Methodology

2. HRMI uses the award-winning and peer-reviewed SERF Index methodology to measure the fulfilment of economic and social rights (ESRs).³

3. This methodology uses bellwether indicator data from international organisations—such as the WHO and UNICEF—and compares each country's achievement to what other countries at the same income level (GDP per capita) have achieved. HRMI measures progressive realisation of economic and social rights as defined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). A country's 'income adjusted' HRMI score is thus a measure of how well its government is converting its resources into good human rights outcomes for its people.

4. HRMI supplements these scores with qualitative information sourced by a secure, online survey of in-country human rights experts, such as NGO researchers, journalists, and human rights lawyers and advocates. For more details, please refer to the resources on our website.⁴

5. All HRMI's data are published annually on the Rights Tracker and are freely available for non-commercial use under a Creative Commons License.⁵ The Rights Tracker is a certified Digital Public Good with the Digital Public Good Alliance.⁶

1 Visit HRMI's website to learn more about our mission and work, <https://humanrightsmeasurement.org/>.

2 This content represents the opinions of the Human Rights Measurements Initiative. It carries no endorsement of the University of Georgia.

3 See HRMI's methodology for measuring economic and social rights: <https://humanrightsmeasurement.org/methodology> and <https://rightstracker.org/page/methodology>.

4 Ibid.

5 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/>.

6 See Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI) Digital Public Good Certificate, <https://app.digitalpublicgoods.net/a/11781>. The Digital Public Goods Alliance, endorsed by the UN Secretary General's "[Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#)", defines digital public goods as:

III. Overview of Economic and Social Rights Fulfilment in Australia

6. HRMI's most recent ESR scores for Australia measure its achievement on four main rights and some component rights as of 2022, and indicate a significant room for improvement in some areas. They are shown in the graph below.



7. Australia's scores for 2022 are as follows⁷:

- Right to education = 78.5% ('bad')
- Right to food = 78.1% ('bad')
- Right to health = 90.5% ('fair')
- Right to housing = There is insufficient international data for HRMI to produce an overall score, but the score for the component on safely managed sanitation is available.
- Right to work = 54.5% ('very bad').⁸

8. The four scores available for Australia range from 'fair' to 'very bad', with none of the four main scores reaching the 'good' performance range. This indicates Australia's underperformance in using its available resources to fulfil its immediate economic and social rights obligations.⁹

⁷ "open source software, open data, open AI models, open standards and open content that adhere to privacy and other applicable laws and best practices, do no harm, and help attain the SDGs", <https://digitalpublicgoods.net/standard/>.

⁸ HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS?qoIFdScore=hrmi&as=hi&tab=report-esr>

⁹ The labels on the country charts of good, fair, bad, and very bad are used to give a general indication of how to understand the scores. HRMI's income adjusted Quality of Life scores can be broadly interpreted as showing the percentage of the country's obligation it has met, compared to what the best performing countries have achieved at each income level. A country scoring below 75% with a label of "very bad" is either underperforming to put in place the kinds of structures and policies that help people enjoy the right, or that the structures and policies in place most likely prevent many people from claiming their rights. See HRMI's methodology for measuring human rights, <https://rightstracker.org/page/methodology>.

⁹ HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS>

9. We do not have an overall ‘Quality of Life’ score for Australia as there are some gaps in the international indicator data necessary to produce all the scores. The available scores are measured against an ‘income adjusted’ benchmark, which means that they take into consideration Australia’s resources and how well it is using them to fulfil the ‘Quality of Life’ rights of its people.¹⁰

10. These scores indicate that Australia is not achieving what ought to be possible to achieve with its current level of resources. Although some scores may indicate progress, any ‘income adjusted’ score that is less than 100% indicates that a country is underperforming and not meeting its current obligations under international human rights law. Therefore, our assessment is that while Australia is performing ‘close to average’ compared to other high-income countries, it still has some way to go to meet its immediate economic and social rights obligations.¹¹

IV. Right to Education

11. HRMI defines the right to education in accordance with ICESCR Article 13 and CESCR General Comments 11 and 13. For high-income countries such as Australia, HRMI further breaks down the right to education into four areas of measurement: secondary school enrolment, quality of education for maths, quality of education for reading, and quality of education for science.¹² This is measured using enrolment rates and PISA scores data from UNESCO and OCED databases.¹³ Our scores show underperformance across all components of this right.¹⁴



10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/metric/education>

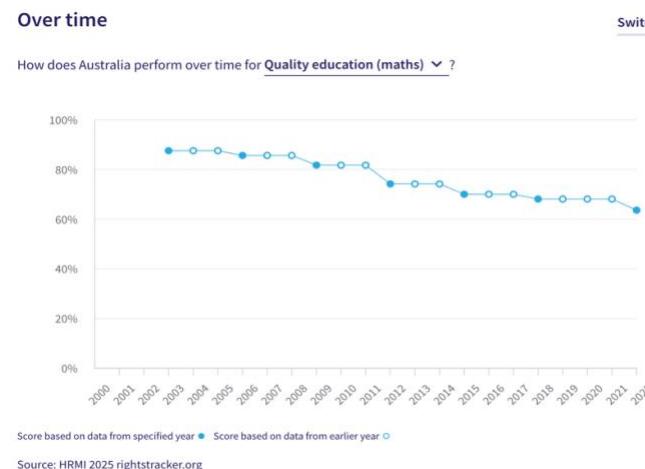
13 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/metric/education?tab=report-esr&qolFdScore=hrmi&as=hi&income=hi>

14 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS?tab=report-esr>

12. Australia's overall 'income adjusted' score for the right to education is 78.5%, which means that Australia is currently doing only 78.5% compared to what is possible for it to achieve at its current income levels. This score falls in the 'bad' performance range, and has shown a decline from 85.7% in 2015 to its current lowest score of 78.5% in 2022.¹⁵

13. Australia's HRMI score for the right to secondary education is 89.9%, and is the only component of this right that falls in the 'fair' range. According to the UNESCO database, 93.9% of upper secondary school-aged children in Australia were enrolled in school in 2022. However, this score has shown a steady decline from 98.6% in 2015 to its current score of 89.9%¹⁶

14. Australia scores an 'income adjusted' 63.7% for quality maths education,¹⁷ 67.6% on quality reading education,¹⁸ and 70.4% on quality science education,¹⁹ and all these scores lie in the 'very bad' performance range. Overtime trends for all these three areas show a concerning decline over the 2003-2022 period, indicating that immediate action is necessary to prevent further decline.²⁰



15. Based on our 2025 Expert Survey, human rights experts from Australia identified 'Indigenous people' to be at risk of having their right to education violated. They stated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children do not get culturally appropriate education and schooling in their native language.

Other groups identified to be vulnerable were 'people living in remote areas', 'children in detention centres', 'people with low socio-economic status', and 'homeless people', among others.²¹

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/metric/pisa-math?tab=report-esr&qolFdScore=indicator&sort=score&subregion=europe&income=hi>

18 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/metric/pisa-reading?tab=report-esr&qolFdScore=indicator&sort=score&subregion=europe&income=hi>

19 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/metric/pisa-science?tab=report-esr&qolFdScore=indicator&sort=score&subregion=europe&income=hi>

20 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS?tab=report-esr>

21 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS?tab=atrisk>

V. Right to Food

16. HRMI defines the right to food in accordance with ICESCR Article 11 and CESCR General Comment 12. For high-income countries such as Australia, HRMI score for the right to food is based on the percentage of individuals in the population who have not experienced food insecurity at moderate or severe levels during the reference period. This indicator value is measured on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale from FAOSTAT.²²



17. Australia achieves an ‘income adjusted’ score of 78.1% for the right to food, which falls in the ‘bad’ range. This means that Australia is doing only 78.1% of what is possible to achieve with its existing resources to ensure food security for its people. This score has fluctuated moderately over the last decade, with a decline from 82.8% in 2015 to current score of 78.1% in 2022.²³ Notably, Australia ranks 39th out of 48 high-income countries in our dataset on the right to food security.²⁴

18. In HRMI’s 2025 Expert Survey, a large number of human rights experts identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as being at risk of having their right to food violated. Other groups identified to be at risk were ‘street children’, ‘homeless people’, ‘people from particular geographic locations’, ‘people with disabilities’, and ‘people with low socio-economic status’, among others. Unemployment, high costs, and remote and inaccessible locations were identified as factors responsible for food insecurity and inadequate access to sufficient healthy food.²⁵

VI. Right to Health

19. HRMI defines the right to health in accordance with ICESCR Article 12.1 and CESCR General Comment 14. For high-income countries such as Australia, HRMI uses three indicators to measure the country’s achievement on the right to health: percentage of children surviving to age 5, senior (60-80 years old) survival rate, and percentage of babies who do not have a low birth weight.²⁶

22 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/metric/food-security>

23 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS?tab=report-esr&qolFdScore=hrmi>

24 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/metric/food-security?income=hi>

25 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS?tab=atrisk>

26 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/metric/health?tab=report-esr&pb=adjusted&qolFdScore=indicator&income=hi>

20. Australia's overall 'income adjusted' score for the right to health is 90.5%, which means that it is achieving 90.5% of what is possible with its existing income levels. While this score falls in the 'fair' range, it has not shown any significant improvement over the last two decades.²⁷



21. Australia's score for the right to child health has consistently been in the 'good' range for the last two decades, and has improved from 97.5% in 2000 to the current score of 99.1% in 2022.²⁸

22. The score for adult health in Australia has seen a steady progress over the 2000-2022 period, growing from 83.8% in 2000 to an 'income adjusted' 100% for four years from 2018 to 2021. However, there was a notable drop in this score from 100% in 2021 to 93.2% in 2022.²⁹

23. Australia's score for reproductive health—based on percentage of babies who do not have a low birth weight—has largely plateaued over the last two decades. It has in fact shown a slight decline from 83.0% in 2000 to 79.4% in 2022.³⁰

24. Notably, all human rights experts in Australia who responded to HRMI's 2025 Expert Survey identified 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' as being at risk of not being able to enjoy their right to health. Other groups that were identified were 'LGBTQIA+ people', 'homeless people', 'people in remote geographic locations', 'detainees', 'migrants', 'immigrants', 'people with disabilities', 'people with low socio-economic status', 'people without a legal identity', and 'women and girls', among others, as those being unlikely to enjoy their right to health.³¹

27 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS?tab=report-esr&qolFdScore=hrmi>

28 Ibid.

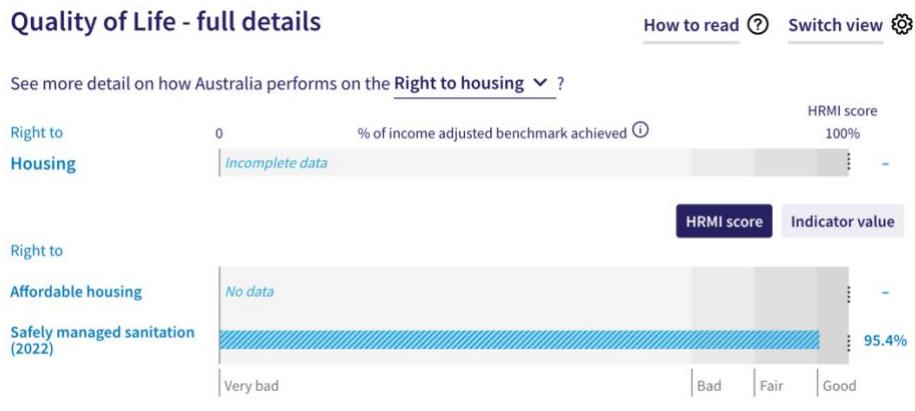
29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS?tab=atrisk>

VII. Right to Housing

25. HRMI defines the right to housing in accordance with ICESCR Article 11.1 and CESCR General Comment 4. For high-income countries such as Australia, HRMI measures this right using the two indicators: affordable housing data from Eurostats, and data on access to safely managed sanitation from the WHO UNICEF Joint Monitoring Project (JMP). The overall right to housing score for Australia is unavailable due to missing data for the component on affordable housing.³²



Source: HRMI 2025 rightstracker.org

26. Australia's HRMI score for the right to safely managed sanitation has consistently been in the 'fair' to 'good' performance range over the last two decades from 94.1% in 2000 to its current score of 95.4% in 2022. According to the WHO UNICEF Joint Monitoring Project (JMP), 95.8% of people in Australia had access to safely managed sanitation on 2022.³³

27. It is crucial to note that the raw indicator data for affordable housing in Australia has not been available in the Eurostats database for over a decade.³⁴

28. Other than 'homeless people' and 'street children', human rights experts from Australia identified 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people', 'migrants and immigrants', 'older people', 'persons with disabilities', 'people with low socio-economic status', and 'single parent families', among others, as being at risk of not being able to enjoy their right to housing. Experts also mentioned that people living in remote areas are unlikely to have access to quality housing due to overcrowding.³⁵

32 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS?tab=report-esr&qolFdScore=hrmi>

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS?tab=atrisk>

VIII. Right to Work

29. HRMI measures the right to work in accordance with ICESCR Articles 6 and 7. For high-income countries such as Australia, HRMI measures the right to work based on two indicators: ‘how many people are not relatively poor’ and ‘the percentage of people who have not been unemployed long-term’, drawing on data from the Luxembourg Income Study, the OECD, and World Bank PovcalNet. Australia has an overall HRMI score of 54.5% on the right to work, which falls in the ‘very bad’ range, and is Australia’s lowest economic and social rights score.³⁶ Among 55 high-income countries in our dataset, Australia ranks 33rd for the right to work.³⁷



Source: HRMI 2025 rightstracker.org

30. The percentage of people in Australia who were not relatively poor in 2020 was 87.4%, which translates into a HRMI score of 53.2% and falls in the ‘very bad’ performance range. For the last decade, this score has plateaued and has not shown any marked fluctuations.³⁸

31. Australia’s HRMI score for long-term employment lies in the ‘very bad’ range. Our scores and over time trends indicate that the score for this right has fluctuated over the last two decades, and has shown a concerning decline from 73.8% in 2009 to its lowest ever score of 49.6% in 2021, and then shown a slight increase to its current score of 55.8% in 2022.³⁹ This indicates that Australia still has a long way to go in ensuring the right to long-term employment for its people.

36 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS?tab=report-esr&qolFdScore=hrmi>

37 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/metric/work?income=hi>

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

32. Human rights experts in Australia identified ‘migrants and immigrants’, ‘homeless people’, ‘people with disabilities’, ‘people with less education’, ‘sex workers’, ‘detainees’, ‘LGBTQIA+ people’, among others, as being at risk of violations of their right to work. Experts further stated that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are also unlikely to realise their right to work and that they are likely to face systemic employment discrimination. They also mentioned that sex workers and agricultural workers remain at risk of being trafficked and subject to modern slavery.⁴⁰

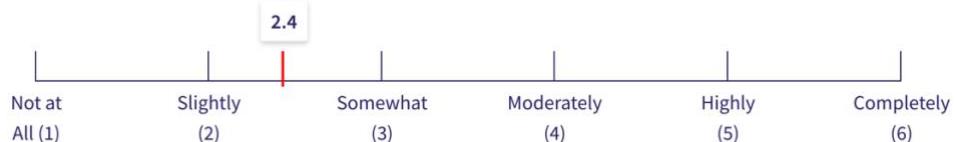
IX. Cultural rights

33. In HRMI’s Annual Human Rights Expert Survey, there is an extra set of questions for the Pacific countries about issues of particular importance in the region. This section includes questions on the enjoyment of cultural rights in the country, which is presented on HRMI’s Rights Tracker as the average response along a continuum, along with any additional information. Based on input from human rights experts in Australia, the score for enjoyment of cultural rights in the country stood at 2.4 out of 6 in 2023, which is the most recently available score of this right.⁴¹

Cultural rights

(2023)

To what extent do people in Australia enjoy their cultural rights?



Expert respondents did not provide any specific information about who is especially vulnerable to violations of this right.

X. Concluding Remarks

34. Australia’s best ‘income adjusted’ scores are for the components of the right to child health, right to adult health, and the right to safely managed sanitation, which fall in the ‘good’ and ‘fair’ ranges, and have generally shown a positive performance trend.

40 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS?tab=atrisk>

41 HRMI 2025 Rights Tracker, <https://rightstracker.org/country/AUS?tab=pacific-region-data&qolFdScore=indicator>

35. Australia's most concerning scores are for the right to food; the three areas of the right to education, i.e., quality maths education, quality reading education, and quality science education; and both components of the right to work, i.e., the right to fair (relatively) income and right to a job. All of these scores fall in the 'very bad' performance range, and they have either plateaued or shown a decline. Notably, the raw indicator data required to construct score for the right to affordable housing in Australia has not been available for over a decade.

36. Our survey findings also indicate that many vulnerable groups in Australia face compounded challenges in the enjoyment of their economic and social rights. Indigenous peoples, migrants, homeless people, people with low socio-economic background, people living in remote areas, and people with disabilities, were some groups consistently identified as being at heightened risk.

37. Our analysis is that Australia is not constrained by resources from making considerable improvements in areas with low and declining scores. Rather, it has the income available to make progress, and can prioritise to put it to use to improve the economic and social rights of its people.

38. We recommend that the Committee assure the State Party concerned that it has the available resources to make significant improvements, especially in the areas of quality of education for maths, reading and science; food security; relatively fair income; and long-term employment rates.

39. We also recommend that the following questions be asked of the State Party:

- i. What steps will the State Party take to improve quality of education at all levels?*
- ii. What measures will the State Party take to expand access to sufficient healthy food and tackle food insecurity, especially among marginalised communities?*
- iii. What steps will the State Party take to ensure access to fair income and prevent any further decline in long-term employment rates?*
- iv. What actions will the State Party take to provide updated data on affordable housing?*

40. HRMI respectfully submits its data and findings on the fulfilment of economic and social rights in Australia. We hope that this submission will serve as a useful resource to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in their review for drafting specific and pertinent questions to the State Party concerned during the CESCR's 79th Pre-Sessional Working Group.