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## PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

# Mandatory Vaccination in Australia: Towards a More Transparent, Accountable, and Participatory Approach to Policymaking

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## Introduction

United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) is broad in scope, concerned with promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, providing access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. While key focal points of SDG 16 are based in issues of armed conflict, violence and crime, persecution and discrimination, the goal also encompasses issues of institutional trust, enhancing social cohesion, and promoting access to information and formal processes institutions. As such, it is important that Australia does not become complacent on our progress towards SDG 16 targets.[1]

To highlight this, we focus on targets 16.6 (develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels), and 16.7 (ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels). We do so with reference to mandatory vaccination policy, drawing on findings from studies we are undertaking as part of MandEval, a multi-disciplinary project exploring the impacts of COVID-19 vaccine mandates to better inform future policy in both pandemic and routine vaccination contexts.

## Vaccine mandates and COVID-19

Vaccine mandates are policies that impose consequences for choosing not to accept recommended or required vaccines, e.g., financial penalties or limited access to public spaces. During the COVID-19 pandemic, mandates were put into place by many countries as part of a suite of measures such as wearing masks, social distancing, lockdowns, and border closures. These policies had multifaceted goals, including protecting individual and public health, mitigating burden on health systems, preserving economies, and maintaining state capacity to continue to deliver essential services. Vaccine mandates specifically were employed with the aims to drive vaccination uptake and regulate how the unvaccinated could engage with the community in order to limit the spread of disease.

Such pandemic management policy decisions were made by governments at a time of intense global crisis, where problems and information were ever evolving. This necessarily meant that policymaking efforts to manage the crisis had to be dynamic and were often both proactive and reactive in nature. Experts warn that future global pandemics are

inevitable; in the words of the WHO Director-General, "It could happen in 20 years or more, or it could happen tomorrow. But it will happen, and either way, we must be ready. This is not a theoretical risk; it is an epidemiological certainty."[2] Consequently, it is vital to understand how vaccine mandates affected the community and what we can learn from the experiences of the pandemic more broadly as we move forward.

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## Mandates: Public opinion and policy frameworks

Despite being a common feature of governments' pandemic responses, mandates are controversial for several reasons: (a) they function by removing or restricting choice and individual liberty,[3] (b) evidence for their effectiveness is mixed, [4][5] and (c) they can have unintended effects, including reactance or anger,[6] in turn reducing trust in government and vaccination and contributing to social polarisation.[7]

Our current research indicates that public opinion about vaccine mandates remains mixed and complex in post-pandemic Australia. In a recent survey of over 1000 Australians on their beliefs about mandates, less than a third of respondents thought that the government should have the power to require people to be vaccinated (32%), or could ethically require it (27%). However, despite these ethical qualms almost two thirds of respondents still trusted that the government would implement a future pandemic mandate in a reasonable way (66%), make sure a vaccine was safe before implementing a mandate (66%), and keep a mandate in place only as long as necessary (65%). Ultimately, a majority were in favour of mandatory vaccination policies, not only in another pandemic (58%), but also for the flu (51%) and other vaccines officially recommended by the government (55%).

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Such examples paint a complicated picture of tensions between ethics, trust, protection, and pragmatism in public attitudes towards vaccination mandates. It is critical that policymakers understand these concerns, and, moreover, the obligation of governments to actively develop policies that seek to reflect public priorities, are demonstrably effective, and minimally infringe on individual freedom.

To be prepared for future pandemic scenarios, and to develop effective routine vaccination policy, Australian policymakers need to not only understand the effects of mandates and public attitudes to them, but to have a clear protocol for effective, justifiable, yet minimally intrusive policy intervention. Adopting such a framework would facilitate efficient and effective decision-making; codify minimum conditions for the justifiability of mandates; and create transparency in how and why these policy decisions are made.

Such guidelines have been developed and recommended, both by the UN through the WHO,[8] and by independent researchers,[9] but have yet to be implemented in Australia. The adaptation and implementation of such a framework, through incorporating new Australian-specific research, public consultation findings, and participatory policy feedback, would create a framework for mandatory vaccination policies that is not only a transparent and effective tool for policymakers, but is also representative of public priorities (SDG indicators 16.6.2 & 16.7.2). Policy that embodies community perspectives and experiences ultimately contributes to better informed policy, improved institutional accountability and processes, greater community representation, and builds public trust in governance.

# Compensation for vaccine injury

To ensure accountability for mandate policy decisions and to preserve public trust, governments must also implement mechanisms to manage potential unintended negative consequences of vaccination. Specifically, where vaccines are recommended or required, governments should also enact no-fault compensation (NFC) schemes to assist and support those who experience a serious adverse reaction.[10] Schemes of this type align with SDG target 16.6 by contributing to institutional accountability on occasions where harm is suffered by an individual complying with government policy. NFC for vaccine adverse events is further advocated as a mechanism to upholding the social contract created when an individual contributes to the public health by accepting a vaccination. NFC for these cases is a matter of justice and fairness.

Many countries around the world have ongoing NFC schemes, however Australia does not. The pandemic response appeared to be an impetus for policy reform on this matter; Australia did introduce a COVID vaccine claims scheme, allowing claims dating back to February 2021 when the COVID vaccination commenced. This appeared to be a step in the right direction, however, submissions to the COVID-19 response inquiry highlighted that the scheme was administratively burdensome for many who sought to submit a claim, while its narrow, inflexible, and technical criteria meant individuals who experienced serious adverse events following COVID-19 vaccines were often excluded from receiving compensation.[11] It is argued that the restrictive scheme design and heavy burdens could be considered as administrative exclusion, with the scheme being constructed in such a way as to be seen to be providing a safety net and accountability, but not actually delivering meaningful action or accountability.[12]

Moreover, the scheme ceased in September 2024, and no further steps towards NFC have been made in Australia. While COVID-19 vaccination is no longer mandated, this policy gap means that individuals who accept COVID boosters, or other recommended vaccinations (including children who are required to complete the national scheme to comply with federal and state 'No Jab, No Pay', and 'No Jab, No Play' policies) do not have access to redress in cases where a serious adverse event occurs.

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To ensure population satisfaction with vaccination policy (SDG target 16.6.2), meaningful representation for those who suffer a serious adverse event (SDG indicator 16.7.2), sufficient institutional responsiveness and accountability for the small number of cases that occur, and community trust in systems, the Australian government should enact a permanent, general (i.e. not vaccine specific) NFC scheme.

# Policy Proposals/ Recommendations

In light of the above considerations, we recommend that the following policies concerning mandatory vaccination be implemented in Australia to ensure progress on the SDG 16 targets, developing effective, accountable and transparent institutions, and ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making in our nation.

**1** **Adopt a transparent framework of decision making criteria** for the ethical use of vaccination mandates in routine vaccination and pandemic contexts.

**2** **Implement a comprehensive and ongoing no-fault compensation scheme** to ensure accountability for injury from officially recommended vaccines and to foster community trust in robust vaccination policy and systems.

**3** **Establish a feasible and inclusive framework** for participatory policymaking and public co-creation in the design of routine and crisis context vaccination policies and pandemic protocols, to ensure they are representative of public priorities and responsive to key concerns.

**4** **Fund further research** into the effectiveness and (side)effects of vaccination mandates to better inform future decision-making.

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# Amplifying Youth Voices: Building Inclusive Institutions for SDG 16

**Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA)**

## Introduction

Effective, inclusive, and accessible institutions are the cornerstone of a peaceful and inclusive society. Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) for Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, outlines 12 targets that address various aspects of violence, justice, and corruption.[1] Target 16.7 emphasises the importance of representative and participatory governance to enable sustainable development and peace.

Children's and young people's disempowerment dominates most countries—including Australia—political climate.[2] Only 17% of young people in Western Australia (WA) felt they had the opportunity to give insight into their local council or electorate.[3] Despite this, an overwhelming majority of young people want the government to value their perspectives in decision-making processes.[4] Considering that young people represent almost one fifth of West Australia's population, mechanisms for supporting young people's participation are vital to ensure government decision-making is representative of all members of a society.

The Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA) is the peak non-government youth organisation in WA. YACWA advocates for the needs of young people, the youth sector, and their communities, ensuring all young people are represented in Government decision-making. YACWA creates systemic change through youth leadership, youth sector development, and policy work. Through their advocacy efforts, YACWA offers accessible pathways for young people in WA to be directly involved with policy and decision-making.[5]

## YACtivate: Building connections and new skills for young people

YACtivate is an event organised by YACWA to bring youth advisory groups (YAGs) and councils from across WA to learn new advocacy skills and connect with like-minded young people.[6] YAGs are vital for the inclusion of young people in decision-making governance, giving them a platform to connect directly with each other, governments and sector bodies.[7] YACtivate 2025 was a statewide event that reignited youth engagement by bringing together 80 young people and 25 staff from 30 YAGs across WA to connect, learn, and lead collective action. Young people provided crucial insights to improve the effectiveness of YAGs (and similar initiatives), in empowering young people and ensuring government and community institutions are inclusive of, and responsive to, young people's needs. YACtivate

provides a meaningful forum through which young people voice what matters to them and improve the advocacy pathways in their communities. This serves as a catalyst for continued youth-led engagement across WA.

## The Youth Pride Network

The Youth Pride Network (YPN) is a group of young people between the ages of 12-25 who are passionate about creating change in WA for young LGBTQIA+ people.[8] Auspiced by YACWA and funded by the WA State Government, YPN provides young LGBTQIA+ people with the opportunity to create change through educating others, working with the community, and systemic advocacy. YPN provides a valuable platform for LGBTQIA+ young people to connect directly with ministers and policymakers to influence government decisions.[5]

Recently, YPN contributed to the development of Western Australia's first whole-of-government LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Strategy, capturing the perspectives of more than 600 LGBTQIA+ young people across WA.[10] Facilitating and supporting numerous engagement activities with young people, YPN heard what young people believed would create more inclusive community spaces and how the Inclusion Strategy can improve the lives of young people. They shared ways in which the WA government can meaningfully engage with young people to create long-term change for LGBTQIA+ youth. YPN's contribution to the LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Strategy enabled LGBTQIA+ youth, a historically under-represented cohort, to directly inform future government policies that influence their lives.

## Policy Proposals/ Recommendations

**1** **Expand the number of youth advisory groups** to include young people in all aspects of government decision-making. Make available adequate resourcing to enable young people to engage with all levels of government, particularly at regional and local levels, to deliver place-based youth initiatives. Youth advisory groups must be informed by the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations, and their work must centre the perspectives of young people.

**2** **Commit ongoing funding to youth-led lived experience programs.** Co-design mechanisms that incorporate young people's lived experience into the development of plans, policies and services. Programs that have young people's lived experiences at the forefront, such as YPN and the Youth Homelessness Advisory Council (YHAC), are invaluable to enabling inclusive and responsive decision-making that affects young people from marginalised communities or those experiencing complex or compounding challenges.

**3** **Lower the voting age to 16 years.** The current voting age limit of 18 years excludes many young people from participating in formal democratic processes, limiting the representation of children and young people.[11] Lowering the voting age to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to vote voluntarily not only offers immediate benefits to the enfranchisement of young people, but it is an investment into the representation and inclusion of young people in political decision-making, encouraging continued civic engagement through the establishment of long-term civic and political engagement at an early age.[12] A similar commitment has occurred in the UK recently.

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