



**Australian Government**

**Australian Accounting  
Standards Board**

# **AASB Essay 2013-1**

## **Rethinking the Path from an Objective of Economic Decision Making to a Disclosure and Presentation Framework**

**Kevin M Stevenson**

**Principal author**

**August 2013**



## Principal author

Kevin M Stevenson is Chairman and CEO at the Australian Accounting Standards Board

## Publisher

Australian Accounting Standards Board  
PO Box 204  
Collins Street West, Victoria, 8007  
AUSTRALIA

Email: [publications@asb.gov.au](mailto:publications@asb.gov.au)

Telephone: +61 3 9617 7637

Facsimile: + 61 3 9617 7608

## AASB Essay Series

AASB Essays are publications of the AASB Research Centre.

The AASB Essay series is designed to provide an avenue for a wide range of financial reporting issues to be discussed and for ideas to be raised to stimulate debate and provide thought leadership in accounting standard-setting.

The views expressed in AASB Essays are those of the author(s) and those views do not necessarily coincide with the views of the Australian Accounting Standards Board.

## Citing this Essay

This Essay should be cited as: AASB Essay 2013-1 *Rethinking the Path from an Objective of Economic Decision Making to a Disclosure and Presentation Framework*, Kevin M Stevenson, AASB Research Centre, August 2013.

## COPYRIGHT

© Commonwealth of Australia 2013

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process without prior written permission. Requests and enquiries concerning reproduction and rights should be addressed to The Director of Finance and Administration, Australian Accounting Standards Board, PO Box 204, Collins Street West, Victoria 8007.

ISSN 2202-5723



# Rethinking the Path from an Objective of Economic Decision Making to a Disclosure and Presentation Framework

## Synopsis

*In this essay it is contended there is a gap in the conceptual framework that, if filled, would improve our ability to provide accounting responses to users' needs, including through the development of a better, purpose-driven disclosure and presentation framework. The thesis is that there are a limited number of generic types of information, termed stocks and flows, that characterise all types of entities to one degree or another.*

*The essay contends that the gap in the framework falls between the objective level and the lower levels. Both the objective and the stocks and flows identified are part of entities' environments. The selections of qualitative characteristics, elements, measurement bases and presentation/disclosures approaches should be seen as accounting responses aimed at satisfying users' needs for information for decision making (the "objective").*

*Specification of the relevant stocks and flows could also bring meaning to "financial position" and "performance", as well as potentially providing a way to define financial reporting, bounding it by the generic stocks and flows identified.*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Financial reporting can be characterised as a relatively young information science that aims to provide the users of financial reports with information that faithfully depicts the economic condition<sup>2</sup> of an entity and enables users to assess that condition and changes in it. In doing so, the purpose is to help those users to make decisions about the allocation of scarce resources to an entity and within an entity; that is, whether to make, or cause to be made<sup>3</sup>, new allocations, or to confirm those of the past.<sup>4</sup>

It is often contended that, for users to be able to make such decisions, they need information that helps them assess the amount, timing and uncertainty of future cash flows. Indeed, this is stated in paragraph OB3 of Chapter 1 of the IASB's revised Conceptual Framework<sup>5</sup>. It is further contended that the various types of users, in both the private and public sectors, have common information needs for such information, albeit for several types of decisions about the allocation of scarce resources.

---

<sup>1</sup> The author acknowledges the very useful input received from Robert Keys, Angus Thomson, Jim Paul and other staff of the AASB, as well as Warren McGregor, Mike Bradbury and members of the Accounting Standards Special Interest Group of the Accounting and Finance Association of Australia and New Zealand.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "economic condition" used here is purposefully broad; to be filled out by the essay as it goes. Readers please bear with me.

<sup>3</sup> This is intentionally wide, covering both the prospect of changing a party's direct interest and influencing the decision making of those governing an entity.

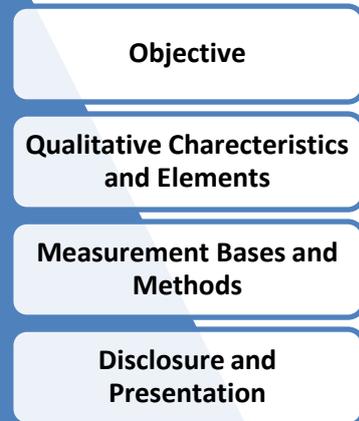
<sup>4</sup> This essay does not explore accountability as an objective of financial reporting. Rather it uses that term to mean the responsibility of preparers to provide information that is useful for economic decision making.

<sup>5</sup> IASB *Conceptual Framework for Financial Reporting*, September 2010.



We have become accustomed to a view of the resulting conceptual framework as depicted below:

### CONVENTIONAL FRAMEWORK HIERARCHY



The IASB's Framework goes on to say, in paragraph OB4, that "to assess an entity's prospects for future net cash inflows, existing and potential investors, lenders and other creditors need information about the resources of the entity, claims against the resources of the entity, and

how efficiently and effectively the entity's management and governing board have discharged their responsibilities to use the entity's resources." The connection made between users' needs and the characteristics of the entity is not explored in depth. Indeed, in this essay it is contended that there is a missing link in the Framework between the objective and the lower reaches of the Framework. This means that when the IASB or others try to provide accounting responses to satisfy users' needs they do not always have guidance from the Framework on which to depend. This doesn't bode well for determining a disclosure and presentation framework.

For much of the history of accounting standards, debates have been bound up primarily in recognition and measurement, often on a topical basis (for example, leases, revenue, financial instruments). Along the way we have accumulated a large body of required, but somewhat un-rationalised<sup>6</sup>, disclosures mostly stemming from expounding on recognised items in balance sheets, income statements and cash flow statements. In more recent times, we have seen a trend towards adding risk disclosures, consistent with the idea of conveying information about uncertainty. We have also seen a rise in the importance attached to business models, which has tended to bring new disclosures, sometimes promising increased relevance and sometimes exhibiting nervousness about depending on a less than defined notion that could mean different things to different people or perhaps be manipulated.

Our current disclosure regime might be characterised as largely, though not exclusively (for the reasons mentioned above), topically driven. Within each topic, we have, to one degree or another, increasingly tried to draw out information about cash flow implications (for example, the requirements for maturity analyses for financial and non-financial liabilities). Our approach to presentation has not been explicitly linked to a logic that might also drive disclosure. Rather, it has been characterised by minimum required line items, somewhat stilted formatting and limited ordering principles (for example, use of liquidity order).

<sup>6</sup> In the sense we have not seen a comprehensive review of disclosures based on explicitly rendered principles.

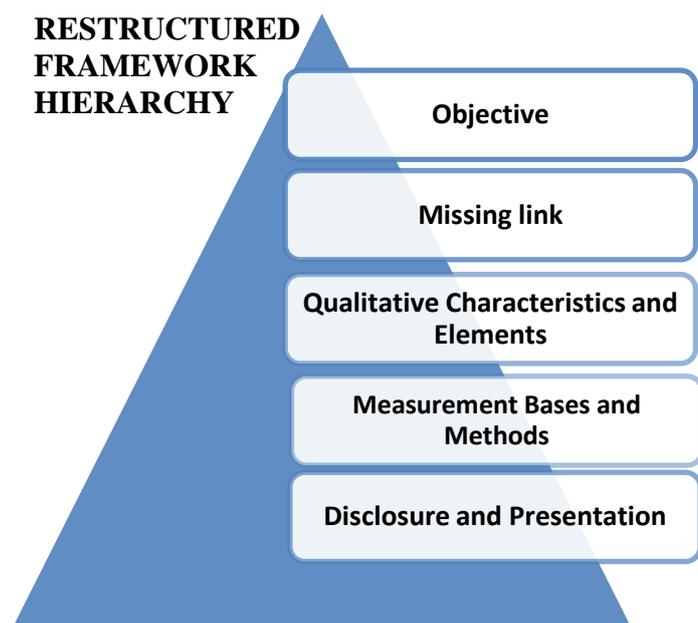


Early in its life as a workshop draft, this essay questioned whether accumulating information in that manner was appropriate and whether we would be better served to think about the possible purposes of different types of information and how those purposes might relate to the decision making of users. The essay was intended to discern the principles that might be included in the conceptual framework to cover disclosure and presentation. As time went on and various commentators raised questions, it became clear that the focal point of the essay should be the identification of the characteristics of entities with which users would need to be concerned in order to make decisions about allocating scarce resources.

This focus is about the “economics of the entity” that need to be considered before coming to any accounting constructs or responses. And it is a focus that should drive all such constructs and responses, not just disclosure and presentation. Accordingly, the essay is more about the generic characteristics of entities that should be identified before we think about qualitative characteristics, elements or measurement concepts.

In essence, the essay says we have been glib about economic decision making and too ready to accept somewhat unexplored phrases such as “the amount, timing and uncertainty of cash flows”. The essay does not decry information about the amount, timing and uncertainty of such flows. Rather, it calls for identification of the generic characteristics of entities that will enable users to understand the significance of that information at understandable levels of aggregation and classification.

The informational abstractions we do mention in relation to existing financial statements include “financial position” and “results for a period”. Sometimes we might mention amounts that are connected with financial analysis, such as “performance”, “free cash flow”, “underlying earnings” and, as indicated above, in quite recent times, exposures to various forms of risk. However, we are vague in the use of most of these terms and readers might well ask “what are you really trying to tell us?” Critically, there has been little explicit connection between the accounting constructs and responses and what might be expected to be deduced from them. Accordingly, in addition to there being a possible missing link between the objective and the rest of the Framework, the topic of disclosure and presentation needs to be handled at a much higher level in the Framework. We need to know what we are trying to convey before deciding on when and how. Therefore, the conventional framework might be re-depicted as:





Sometimes, we standard-setters have contended that financial analysis is not our business, but rather that of users. Whilst possibly correct at one level, standard-setters and preparers choose what, when and how to measure, and we use presentation, classification, and ordering, to turn data into information. To make choices, implicitly at the very least, we must have ideas about the purposes of users when they analyse.

In the case of disclosure, the existing topically driven approach has evolved into unstated or undeveloped principles as we have attempted to be more consistent in our choices. This parallels the way in which implicit conceptual frameworks for financial reporting evolve in the absence of formal frameworks. The choice, as with conceptual frameworks generally, is not about whether, for example, to have a disclosure and presentation framework, but rather between one or more implicit and ill-developed frameworks and something that is explicit, open to debate and development, and potentially much more purposeful.

The absence of a formal disclosure and presentation framework has seen unproductive arguments between competing and incompatible ideas. It has also opened us up to the risk of excessive and inconsistent disclosure requirements, building up as more and more topics are dealt with over time. It seems now to be generally recognised that this risk has been well and truly realised.

But before we get to disclosure and presentation, or indeed any other accounting responses, it is also worth stating that the definition of financial reporting – another under-developed aspect of attempts at a conceptual framework – could well benefit from the identification of the types of information about an entity that could be both useful and within the bounds of our discipline. Until now we have either depended on geographical positioning of financial reports (for example, by specifying pages in a periodic report), laws or the scoping of individual or groups of standards to determine the borders of financial reporting. And we have, wisely we hope, acknowledged that the scope of financial reporting could be expected to change as users' expectations, and even as our abilities as accountants, change. Perhaps knowing the generic characteristics of entities relevant to economic decision making can point more definitively to the borders we need.

This essay will return to the issue of defining financial reporting and other implications when the types of information that generically explain the “economics of entities” have been explored.

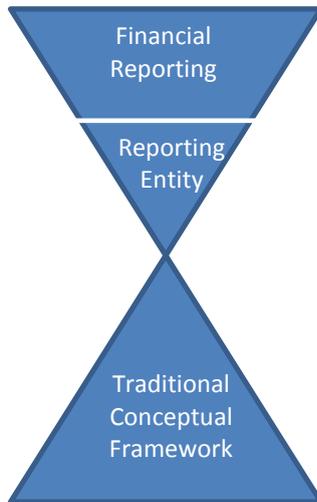
The Australian version of the Framework<sup>7</sup> showed an inverted pyramid (see below) on top of the conventional one shown above. The importance of that placement was only partially understood then. It is becoming evident that our hunches were correct and that we should have developed the notions involved further.

---

<sup>7</sup> As embodied in the Statements of Accounting Concepts issued by the Australian Accounting Research Foundation, which were issued and revised from August 1990 to March 1995 – these Statements were developed before the AASB adopted the IASB's *Framework for the Preparation and Presentation of Financial Statements*.



## VARIATION ON CONVENTIONAL HIERARCHY



### Objective-Based Development of the Conceptual Framework

When the Financial Statements Presentation project of the IASB was commenced in 2001/2002, the topic was originally titled “Performance Reporting”. There was no great distinction between disclosure and presentation and the emphasis was on connecting financial statement information with how information is used, including with reference to equity valuation approaches.

The promise of that original project could be said to have been around classifying and ordering income statements in a purposeful manner, oriented to users’ assessments. It was to be objective-driven. Further, the early papers for the project identified principles on which a performance statement might be based. An example of such principles was that, when producing income statements: expected growth rates should be the primary differentiator between performance statement components<sup>8</sup>. By differentiating between components that grow at different rates, it was argued that the user would have a better basis for predicting future events and estimating their effects.

Somewhere along the line, the IASB project became derailed as debates about such matters as recycling and matrix formats led to decisions to fragment and confine the project. The redirection of the project has seen us lose the perspective of an objective-driven approach to information, the performance reporting accent and the value of the principles discerned. And we have become somewhat preoccupied with rules-based presentation issues (for example, should an item be shown in other comprehensive income?). Arguably, presentation should just be a subset of the broader question of how to convey information, and logically should be driven by the same principles that should govern disclosure.

### Clearing the Decks of Intellectual Baggage

This essay uses the terms “stocks” and “flows” somewhat in the manner used by economists and others<sup>9</sup>, instead of the terms with which accountants are more familiar, such as financial position and results. This is an appeal to accountants to free themselves from their own jargon

<sup>8</sup> Drawn from various IASB staff papers presented to the IASB in 2002.

<sup>9</sup> I say “somewhat in the manner” because of the following comments on capacity. I am not using “stocks” in the sense used in government financial statistics in relation to measured amounts.

and trappings, so that they may think more creatively about how to develop the Framework and, among other things, consequently to devise a disclosure and presentation framework. The use of stocks and flows is not a new idea; it comes from both the economics and accounting literature over a long period.<sup>10</sup>

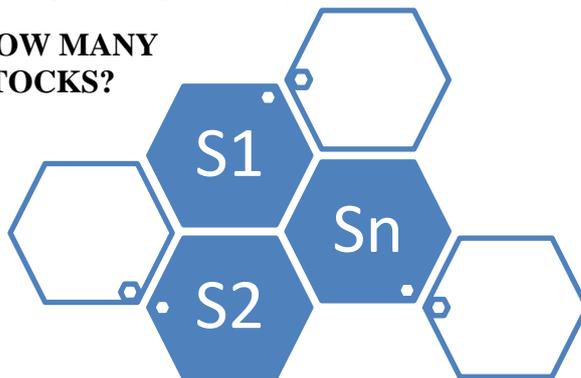
Stocks can be described as the accumulated positions, attributes or standings of an entity at any one time. Flows are the changes in those stocks during any given period.

An example of a stock would be the capacity of the entity to meet its commitments as and when they fall due. Another example would be the capacity of an entity to make new investments. Flows for these two stocks would be the change for a period in those capacities.

But entities may have thousands of stocks. What is the principle for how to discern the stocks that could, generically, be relevant to users in assessing the “economics of entities”? In the context of financial reporting, the stocks in question are all those positions, attributes or standings that are relevant to users when making decisions about allocating scarce resources. Accordingly, the objective of financial reporting must be the driver for the topic of this essay and be the broadest filter of the stocks to be considered.

I use the phrase “generically relevant stocks” – but what makes them generic and relevant?

**HOW MANY STOCKS?**



“Generic”, in this sense, means that all entities could have these stocks and they could be material to the decision making of all types of existing and potential users identified in the Framework. But individual entities may not have all of them, and they may vary in importance between entities.

The term “capacity”<sup>11</sup> is used so that thinking is not restricted by accounting conventions governing recognition and measurement. Disclosure is not just about explaining balances of recognised elements. For example, the capacity to meet commitments as and when they fall due may be influenced by the future market for the entity’s products, the availability of normal credit offerings in the market or committed plans for capital expenditure.

## Building Blocks for Developing the Objective of Economic Decision Making

Leaving aside balance sheets, income statements, accounting methods and conventions, what are the possible stocks and flows that could, generically, be used to characterise the

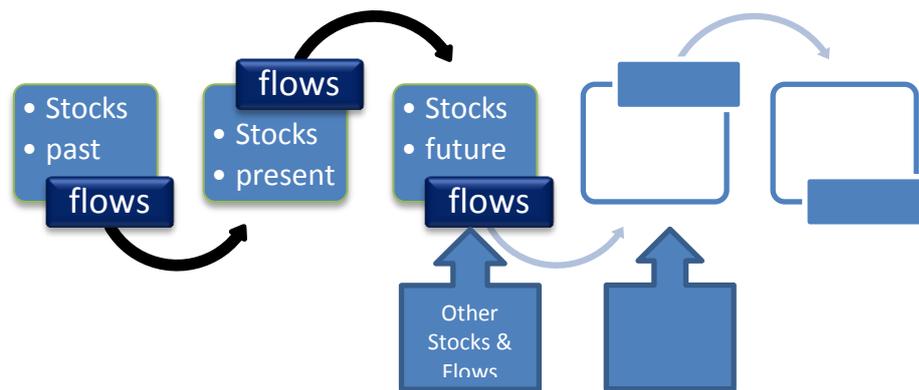
<sup>10</sup> For example, in the early 1950s economists were debating stocks and flows in the context of monetary interest theory (for example, Lawrence H Klein *Stock and Flow Analysis in Economics*, *Econometrica*, Vol. 18, No.3, July 1950). More recently, Bob Herz, the former Chair of the Financial Accounting Standards Board, indicated his preference for this form of analysis in *Accounting Changes: Chronicles of Convergence, Crisis and Complexity in Financial Reporting*, AICPA, June 2013.

<sup>11</sup> “Capacity” is introduced three paragraphs earlier and used below to describe each stock tentatively identified in this essay.

“economics of an entity”<sup>12</sup> This essay contends that there is an identifiable list of such stocks and flows and that we are actually quite familiar with the items on that list. But in the past we have not used them explicitly to directly condition the conceptual framework’s accounting constructs and responses when portraying entities and serving users’ needs.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of flows, in addition to their volumes, it will also be important to know about their timing, direction, pace of change, variability and predictability. Users will be concerned with both the past and the future flows of entities’ stocks.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ENTITY RELEVANT TO ECONOMIC DECISION MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY?



### Stocks

The stocks set out below are expressed in terms of what users would want to be able to assess, at least in part, using financial statements. They would also often want information from other sources to complement what can be deduced from those statements. The stocks identified are highly inter-related. As for the Conceptual Framework generally, the cross-cutting aspects are more difficult to document than the building blocks that comprise it. This essay does not attempt to go into the cross-cutting issues in any length. That can come after refinement and acceptance of the stocks identified.

<sup>12</sup> “Economics”, as intimated early in the essay, is used here in the broadest sense and is not intended to signify a “for-profit” oriented entity.

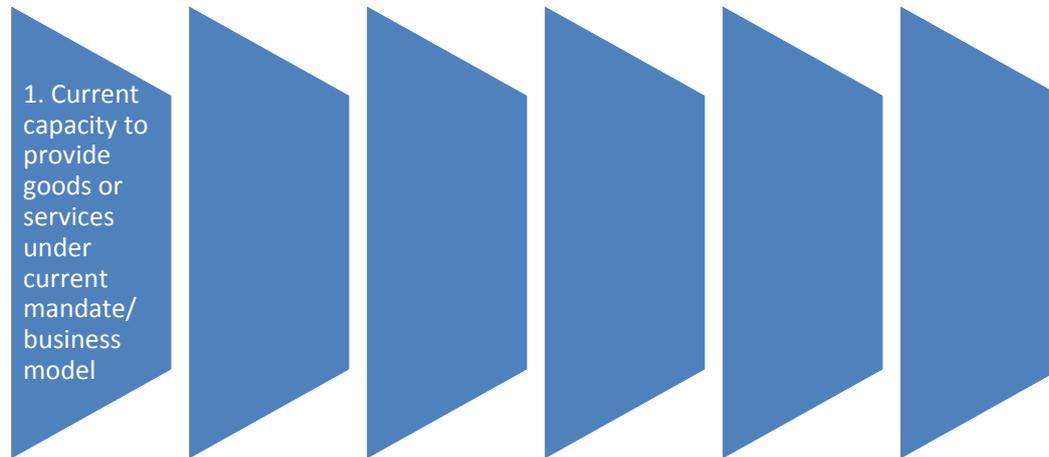
<sup>13</sup> Many participants in many debates (for example, some of those arguing for one measurement basis over another) implicitly weight different stocks and flows differently and wonder why agreement seems elusive.

## Tentatively Identified Stocks<sup>14</sup>

Six stocks are identified in this essay.

### 1. *The current capacity of the entity to provide goods or services*

#### STOCKS



This stock relates to the very essence of why the entity exists in its current state. For example, for a mining company, it might be the ability to continue to extract quantities of high grade ore, an ability that comes from a combination of controlled rights to explore, physical access to reserves, having available appropriate property, plant and equipment, employing a suitably skilled workforce and having access to viable markets that reward the scale of operations. For a not-for-profit entity, it might relate to having access to supplies of low cost materials, well-placed and adequate collection facilities or equipment, a blend of professional and volunteer staff and appropriate distribution facilities, vehicles or equipment. Essentially the question is about how well placed is the entity to actually operate as intended?

The flows in this stock come from operations (in which resources are consumed, directly or indirectly, in return for revenue<sup>15</sup>), changes in capital (injections and withdrawals) and from impairments and windfall gains.

Apart from quantification of an entity's ability to provide goods or services as intended, we also need to know its relative context or significance. For example, the size of the stock, given the entity's stage of development, might be important. Does a for-profit entity have enough stock to be successful in each of its market segments? Can a not-for-profit entity hope to meet its community responsibility given its current level of scarce resources?

And of course, we need to know about diversity in the operational capacity, with segment reporting being one manifestation of how that information need has been served to date.

For businesses that are more mature, the current ability to provide goods or services might be a strong indicator of its ability to meet its objectives in the future. For a start-up business, the current ability might be confined to a licence just acquired and say less about the future.

---

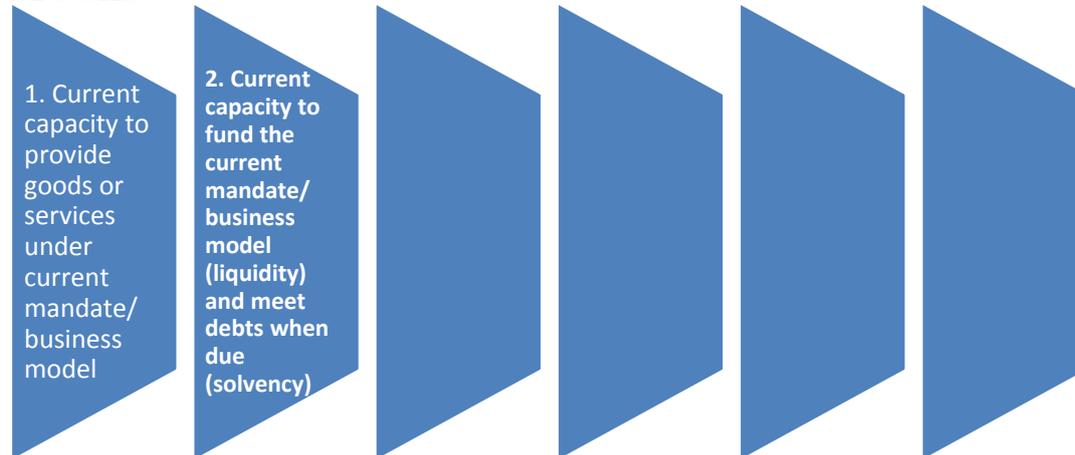
<sup>14</sup> This section draws broadly from the work of Robert L Newman, *Financial Position: Nature and Reporting*, Accounting Theory Monograph 6, Australian Accounting Research Foundation (AARF), 1988; and before that, the work of Alan D Barton, *Objectives and Basic Concepts of Accounting*, Accounting Theory Monograph 2, AARF, 1982.

<sup>15</sup> Including from appropriations, grants or donations to not-for-profit entities.

Across all stocks, users will also want to know about the current plans for changes, which will limit the relevance of historical data.

**2. *The capacity of the entity, with its current financial structure, to efficiently and effectively fund its current operations and meet its commitments as and when they fall due***

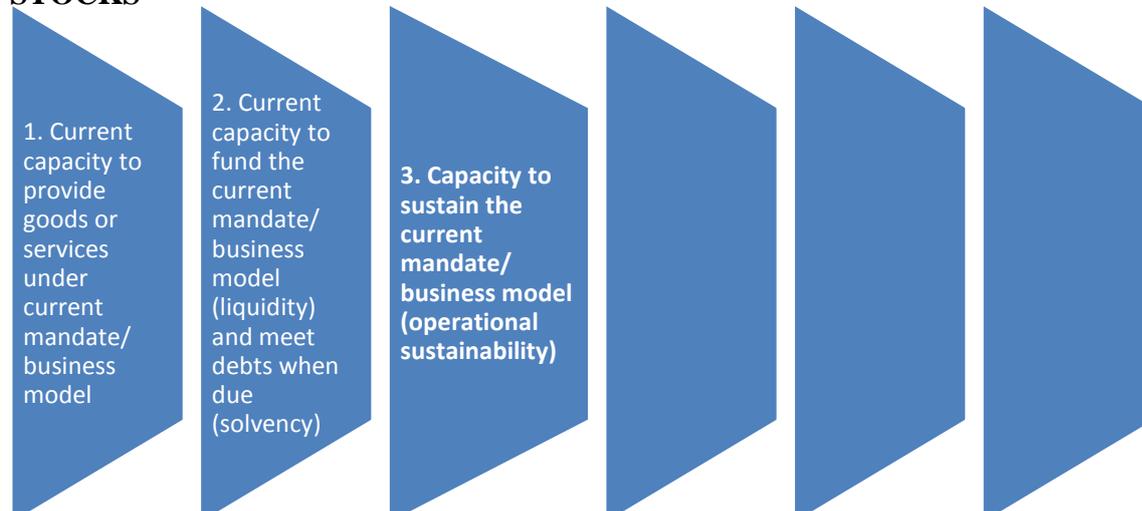
**STOCKS**



Users need information to assess an entity's capacity to meet its commitments as and when they fall due, whether the entity is fundamentally solvent and whether meeting those commitments would harm its current operations. Apart from their capacity to meet commitments, entities need also be able to take advantage of opportunities that arise in the context of normal operations. Considerations here would include the matching, in terms of amounts and timing, of operational cash inflows and outflows, the ability to refinance or roll-over debt when it falls due, the ability to adequately service debt and equity and the ability to acquire inputs efficiently and effectively. For a not-for-profit entity, it may be a question of the sources, types and amounts of donations, pledges, bequests received and promised, and recurring or long-term grants compared with one-off grants. For all sectors, it may also depend on traditional sources of funding remaining available.

**3 *The capacity of the entity to sustain current operations***

**STOCKS**





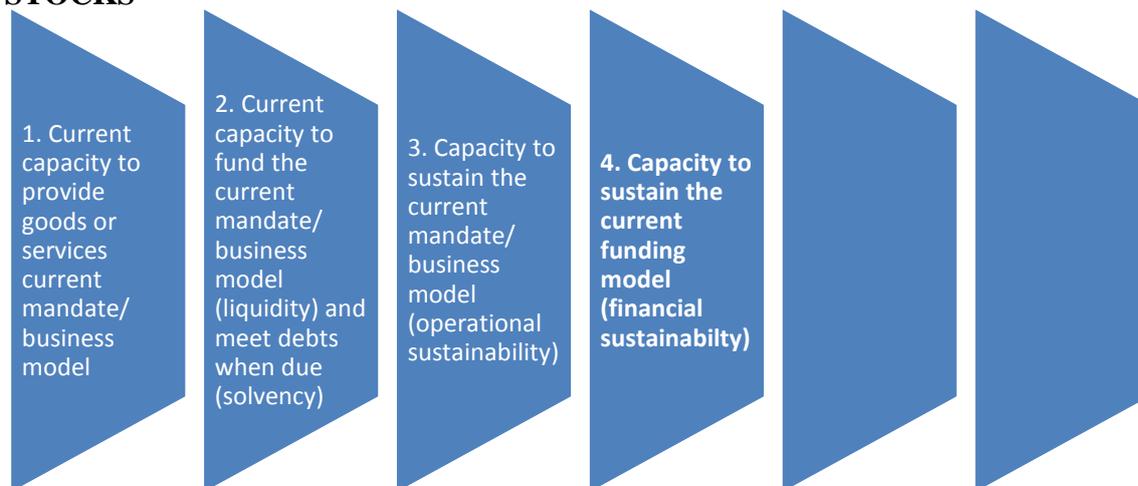
Users need to know that the entity's modes of operation are capable of being sustained. Entities can sometimes appear to be quite promising early in their existence, but fall away over time. They might depend on short-term economic circumstances or opportunistic behaviour, the benefits of which are eroded as competition enters the market, as leverage levels become unbearable, as prices return to normal or as volunteers lose enthusiasm.

The public sector recognises the notion of fiscal sustainability of governments, but the idea translates well to all reporting entities. Typically, in the public sector the topic is approached by asking what would be the consequences if it is assumed that a government maintains its current policies. This is extrapolation rather than forecasting, aimed at highlighting whether policies are sustainable. This way of approaching fiscal sustainability is not all there is to reporting on sustainability more generally, but one can see that the objective it is intended to serve need not be confined to the public sector.

Looked at more generally, are the current policies of an entity, which may appear to have been successful in the current period or in the past, really capable of being sustained over time? Some would say this is the question that the management of some financial institutions needed to seriously consider in the period leading up to the global financial crisis, when lending practices were particularly aggressive.

#### **4. The capacity to sustain the entity's current funding model**

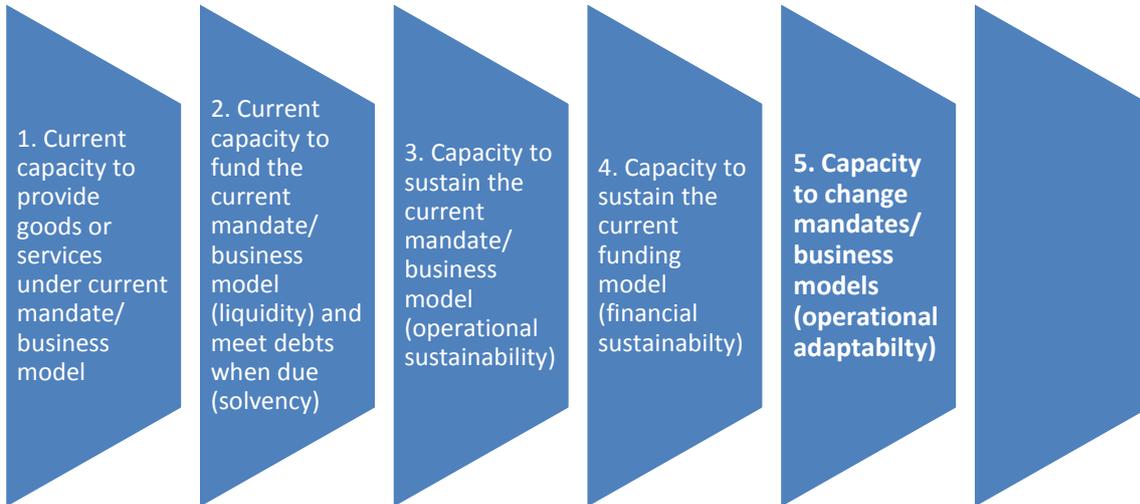
##### **STOCKS**



Though an entity's operations may seem justified on the demand side of operations, it may be employing a funding model that will work only in the current environment. An entity may be borrowing against the value of its asset holdings when market forces may be such that lending with that type of collateral dries up. A not-for-profit entity may well have growing demand for its services but may be funded in a way that can only be sustained in buoyant times or depends on a temporary arrangement between co-contributors, or may have limits placed on its capacity to raise levies or charge users for services it provides.

### 5. *The capacity of the entity to change operationally*

#### STOCKS

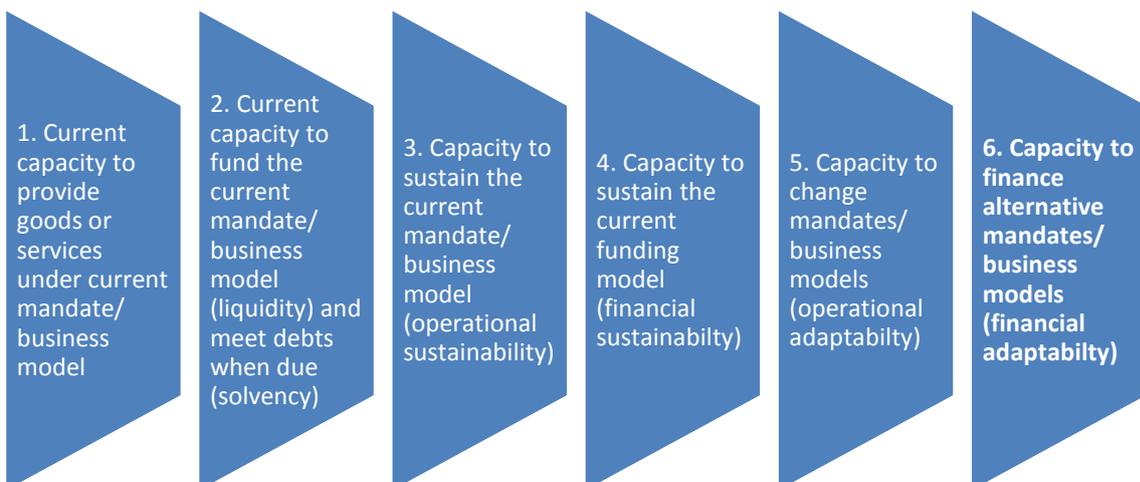


An entity might be financially solvent and financially flexible, but not necessarily be capable of adapting operationally to changes in its environment. This could be due to the nature of its specialised operations, the size of the investments required to enter the field and alternative fields, and availability of intellectual property or other inputs. The nature of an entity's investments may be such that once critical mass is reached, it is difficult to change direction quickly without severely stretching the skill sets of the entity or jeopardizing its well-being. Even with financial flexibility, the entity may not be very adaptable operationally.

The brief of an entity may limit its adaptability too. A public sector entity established for a purpose is often not free to reduce its service levels even when economic variables move against it.

### 6. *The capacity to finance material changes in operations*

#### STOCKS



If it is necessary or propitious to change the scale of the entity, to change its operations around or to cope with unexpected events, users want to know that the financial structure can



also be adapted. As with operational adaptability, information is needed about its relevance to the entity's circumstances. And it is not merely a case that the more capacity the better, as there can be a trade-off between financial flexibility and returns.

The types of information that might be relevant to financial sustainability and adaptability include lines of potentially accessible credit, the equity raising capacity, the availability of assets that might be liquidated, the scope to renegotiate debt and the status of covenant restrictions. There will be some overlap here with the types of information set out for Stock 2.

## **Listing of Stocks Comprehensive?**

It may well be that the stocks identified could be better expressed and/or added to. However, those listed are pervasive and it is unlikely that the common information needs of the users of general purpose financial reports, in relation to the "economics of an entity", will be better explained by a much longer list of characteristics with the same degree of elevation. If this contention is right, seemingly a relatively short list of stocks could be the basis of a substantial rationalisation of the seemingly infinite list of disclosures we have built.

But life is not so simple. We need also to deal with the flows and, as indicated, the interrelationships of stocks and flows.

## **Flows**

It follows from whichever way the stocks of an entity are analysed that users would be interested in both those identified stocks and material changes (flows) in the attributes of those stocks that have occurred or have some probability of occurring. This interest in changes will, as indicated previously, include an interest in volume, direction, pace of change, variability and predictability of change. Users will want to see over time how their expectations have been met, so they can refine their estimations and make decisions.

In accounting terms, we have seen the various attempts to define profit, operating profit, comprehensive income and many variants thereof. In broad terms, and ignoring opportunistic behaviour, those attempts, and the attempt of businesses to reveal "underlying profitability", are symptoms of the implicit need to find a better way to explain flows.

Criticisms of an undue focus on profits implicitly recognise some or all of the other attributes of stocks listed above. For example, measures of underlying earnings are produced, at least in some cases, because of concerns by preparers that the "bottom line" does not reveal the true changes in the operations of the business. The short-term "statutory profit" does not reflect their view of what will happen to profits in the future because of the inclusion of non-recurring items, because of the obscuring of an emerging trend in operational results or because they perceive limitations in extant accounting requirements.

Expressed much more positively, material changes (flows) in all of the attributes of key stocks need to be evident to the users of financial statements, rather than just profit, a compressed version of the change in one part of one fundamental stock. This is highlighted by the fact that improvements can be made in solvency, financial flexibility, adaptability, sustainability and even future profit prospects, without the income statement for a period being immediately affected.



## **Performance**

Just as financial position may be used to cover the aggregate of the stocks of an entity, performance can be used to describe the aggregate effect of all of the flows of an entity. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the issue of performance in more detail, but suffice to say here that performance measured in relation to the stocks identified in this essay would not equal a broad notion of performance – but rather performance in relation to those stocks relevant to economic decision making.

## **Inter-relationship of Stocks**

The above focus on stocks and flows therein is based on the perceived information needs of users. It does not follow that an entity increasing each of its capacities, if that were possible, will have necessarily performed well. For example, shareholders in a listed company may punish a management that builds up an entity lazily without paying dividends or returning capital. They may also punish an entity that improves its solvency and financial flexibility too conservatively; that is, at the price of lost operational opportunity. Not-for-profit entities making large surpluses may simply not be meeting their objectives. Users will want to assess the entity on various levels.

But it should be helpful to users to say that providing information about the stocks and flows above is what we are trying to achieve when conveying information – not thousands of seemingly unconnected pieces of data.

## **Relationship to Amount, Timing and Uncertainty of Cash Flows**

The stocks and flows identified are not inconsistent with the objective to which standard-setters generally subscribe, that is, of wanting to assist users in their assessments of the amounts, timing and uncertainty of future cash flows. Rather, they provide facets or perspectives for such cash flows, enabling differing views of them to be brought into focus.

To be told that an entity has particular probability-weighted expected cash flows ( $X_1$  to  $X_n$ ) across specified periods ( $P_1$  to  $P_n$ ), without distinguishing capital expenditure, operational revenues and expenses and the rest of the information provided in financial reports, would be of very limited use.

An entity's additional investment in its capacity to provide goods or services, prompted by new regulations (for example, environmental regulations), might not give rise to an increase in expected future cash inflows – instead, that investment is necessary to protect its pre-existing ability to generate future cash inflows. Nonetheless, information about that additional investment is relevant to users in assessing the total amount invested in that capacity and likely future rates of return on that investment.

Nor do the stocks and flows identified suffer from the implicit view, seen in some literature on disclosure, that seems to accept the methods for valuing equities must be valid proxies for users' needs. Those with experience in public sector and other not-for-profit reporting find little connection with that notion. They could, however, appreciate each of the stocks and flows listed above.

More fundamentally for standard-setters, the stocks and flows provide the basis for expanding the Framework to make it more operational over time.



## **Financial Position / Performance vis-à-vis Financial Reporting**

One of the possible consequences from identifying the generally relevant stocks and flows is that the terms “financial position” and “performance” can take on meaning. In turn, it could then be possible to define financial reporting as the discipline concerned with measuring financial position and performance as defined. This would provide guidance to standard-setters and regulators as they consider whether topics such as “integrated reporting” are within scope. This is a topic for another essay.

The other similar observation that can now be made is that when we use broad terms like the “economics of an entity” we can be more specific about what we mean. Those “economics” can be equated with the stocks of the various capacities – the scarce resources – and the flows being the changes in those resources.

## **Operationalising the Concepts of Financial Position and Performance (as defined)**

This essay contends that once the stocks and flows generically relevant to economic decision making are identified, there will be ramifications for all of the parts of the Framework below the objective level, including for disclosure and presentation.

In relation to disclosure and presentation, instead of thinking of new requirements on a topical basis (leases, revenue, etc.), standard-setters would need to think about whether disclosures adequately describe the stocks, flows in the stocks and the inter-relationships between those stocks and flows.

For example, there are many requirements in IFRS that relate to the capacity of an entity to provide goods or services, but they are not comprehensive, co-ordinated or directly attuned to whether it is sustainable and whether the entity can adapt if it is not.

Rather, much of what is required in IFRS is driven by the classification of assets (property, plant and equipment, intangibles, leased assets, etc.) and the circumstances that provoked the development of the IFRS. The opportunity for rationalisation and improved relevance is great.

## **Concluding comments**

In this essay, the proposition put is that there is a possible missing link in the Framework between the objective level and the levels of the Framework that are accounting response related. That gap reflects the failure to identify the generic types of information about an entity that should be relevant to users in order for them to make decisions about the allocation of scarce resources. The essay identifies the stocks and flows that are potentially relevant to all entities and might fill that gap. The essay contends that, among other consequences, purpose-driven disclosure and presentational approaches could flow from attempts to faithfully represent those stocks and flows. This would result in a substantial rationalisation of existing disclosures and provide a way of cutting through the unending debates about presentation that stem from multiple implicit conflicting goals.

The author is of the view that the implications of this essay could be illustrated by taking existing disclosures and presentation requirements and trying to classify them by reference to stocks and flows set out in this essay. This will prove not to be a simple task as the principles underlying those requirements are often unclearly stated or not stated at all.



The essay could also be extended to explore its ramifications for the vexed issue of measurement. For example, the current capacity of an entity to produce goods and services is a different stock from the capacity to adapt current operations. It might be argued that a different measurement attribute would be needed for each.

The straightforward contention is that once it is known what is to be faithfully represented, that is, the stocks and flows, it becomes much easier to rationalise decisions and achieve explicit purposes designed to assist the decision making of users.