

Measuring what counts to society

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Around the world, a consensus is growing about the need for a more holistic way to measure societal progress – one that accounts for more than just economic indicators such as the Gross Domestic Product and takes into account the full range of social, environmental and economic concerns of citizens.

This emerging global consensus is being driven by a sense that public policy seems to be losing its ability to connect with people's core values.

Whether in Toronto, Paris, Istanbul, Tokyo or Sydney, ordinary citizens are grappling with a natural environment that is becoming depleted, a growing gap between the rich and poor, skyrocketing chronic disease and heightened stress. Is it any wonder that the rosy economic picture people see in the news often seems disconnected from their everyday reality?

In response to this challenge, international organizations, public servants, statistical agencies,

academics, leaders of civil society and business and media, recently gathered in Istanbul at the OECD's World Forum on Measuring and Fostering the Progress of Societies. Their purpose was to shine the world's spotlight on how societies can better use evidence to benefit democracy, build a stronger civil society, empower citizens and stimulate a richer global debate on what progress really means.

At the closing session this past weekend, participants affirmed their commitment to measuring and fostering the progress of societies in all their dimensions. They urged all involved to work alongside representatives of their communities to produce high-quality, evidence-based information that can be used to form a shared view of societal well-being and its improvement over time.

Moving forward, it is notable that one of the pioneering projects trying to "connect the dots" between social aspirations, public policy and hard evidence is unfolding right here in

Canada. Called the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, or CIW, this partnership of national and international experts working together with leaders, organizations and grassroots Canadians is based on the simple premise that "what we count matters."

Why? What we count, measure, and report often drives our understanding of whether we are better off than we used to be, whether we are creating a better world for ourselves and future generations, and what we need to change.

Today, the most influential lens that we use to measure progress tends to be confined to a narrow set of economic indicators: rising and falling stocks, shifts in the GDP. However, we haven't had a clear, coherent and compelling alternative to balance the dominance of economic measures.

What would happen if every time we heard about the GDP, we also heard the results of the CIW, thereby linking economic reality to the social, health and environmental conditions that define our quality of life?

The CIW, still under construction but making significant progress, seeks to chart and report on how our lives are getting better – or worse – in areas that matter to us: health, standard of living, environmental quality, the way we use our time, education and skill levels, the vitality of our communities, participation in the democratic process, the state of our arts and culture.

Most importantly, the CIW seeks to spotlight connections among those important areas: how, for example, changes in income are linked to changes in health, or how community

engagement and living standards are intertwined.

To say this is an ambitious project is to understate it. And although there is still much work to be done, the good news is that the CIW is already contributing powerful lessons about the way forward. Lessons such as the value of multi-sectoral collaboration. The importance of solid evidence based on the best available data. The crucial aspect of continuous public engagement and effective communications. And, underpinning all this work, the need to stay grounded to the core shared values of citizens.

Many hurdles block the path to creating new and innovative measures of progress. But there is a great need for new tools such as the CIW to refocus political discourse, reshape public policy and hold decision-makers to account.

With the leadership of Canadians on this project and with the exciting international relationships for measuring progress that are emerging, success for this worthwhile goal is within our reach.

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