



CAPTURING QUALITY OF LIFE WITH THE CANADIAN INDEX OF WELLBEING

BRYAN SMALE, CANADIAN INDEX OF WELLBEING AND
DOMINIQUE O'ROURKE, ACCOLADE COMMUNICATIONS

For millennia, philosophers have pondered the question: What is the good life? How can we define it and how will we know when we have it? These are questions that community leaders also struggle with as they strive to make their communities better for their residents. Most importantly, they want to know the best way to create, maintain, and enhance the quality of life in their communities. In a world of inequality, “fake news,” climate change, and uncertainty, this age-old quest for wellbeing may be the most important issue – and solution – of our time.

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For decades, economic productivity, especially as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), was regarded as the best reflection of our wellbeing. More recently, however, a growing global consensus has emerged that recognizes that unchecked economic growth is not the path to greater wellbeing and that GDP cannot – and was never intended to – measure *social* progress. At the same time, we have never had more evidence that better health, more education, greater civic engagement, a cleaner environment, and a host of other factors contribute to more productive, creative, and vibrant societies. Consequently, the world is searching for a better way to define and measure prosperity, to reduce inequality, and to bolster wellbeing.

For the past 25 years, the United Nations, the European Union, the OECD, Nobel Prize winners, progressive countries – even the private sector – and others have been trying to define and measure quality of life. Some of the more well-known international efforts include the Human Development Index (HDI), *Beyond GDP*, the OECD’s Better Life Index, the Bhutan Gross National Happiness Index, and the World Happiness Report. At the national level, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW), based at the University of Waterloo, has been cited by the OECD as a global pioneer.

The internationally-recognized Canadian Index of Wellbeing not only measures quality of life, but also provides a powerful policy tool. Increasingly, provinces, municipalities, and organizations are using the CIW to benchmark, to set priorities, to measure progress, and to dig deeper into key aspects of quality of life as a pathway to inform strategic planning and policy development.

I. HOW CANADIANS DEFINE WELLBEING

During extensive consultation with experts, policy makers and, most importantly, Canadians from across the entire country, the CIW identified what Canadians believe are essential elements of their quality of life. Top priorities were: good primary and secondary education, access to quality health care, a sustainable environment, supportive social programs, responsible taxation, greater public safety and security, enhanced economic and housing security including, employment opportunities, a living wage, greater civic engagement, and more work-life balance.

Based on these priorities and a comprehensive scan of quality of life research, the CIW defined wellbeing as:

The presence of the highest possible quality of life in its full breadth of expression focused on, but not necessarily exclusive to: good living standards, robust health, a sustainable environment, vital communities, an educated population, balanced time use, high levels of democratic engagement, and participation in leisure and culture.

II. MEASURING WHAT MATTERS MOST

Once wellbeing was defined, experts in each domain reviewed academic literature and proposed the most appropriate indicators. The indicators had to meet several criteria such as; being valid measures directly affecting wellbeing, gathered reliably over time for all of Canada; being reasonably, publicly available; and later on, also being available provincially. The indicators were intended to provide multiple insights into Canadians' conditions, behaviours and perceptions over time. They were peer-reviewed, vetted by a national working group, and are regularly validated by Canadians to ensure they are relevant and easy to understand.

The result is a holistic, comprehensive, valid, and consistent model that uses eight indicators for each of the eight equally-weighted domains of the framework: community vitality, democratic engagement, education, environment, healthy populations, leisure and culture, living standards, and time use (see Figure 1). The 64 indicators draw from over 200 unique data sources – primarily from Statistics Canada – from 1994 to today.

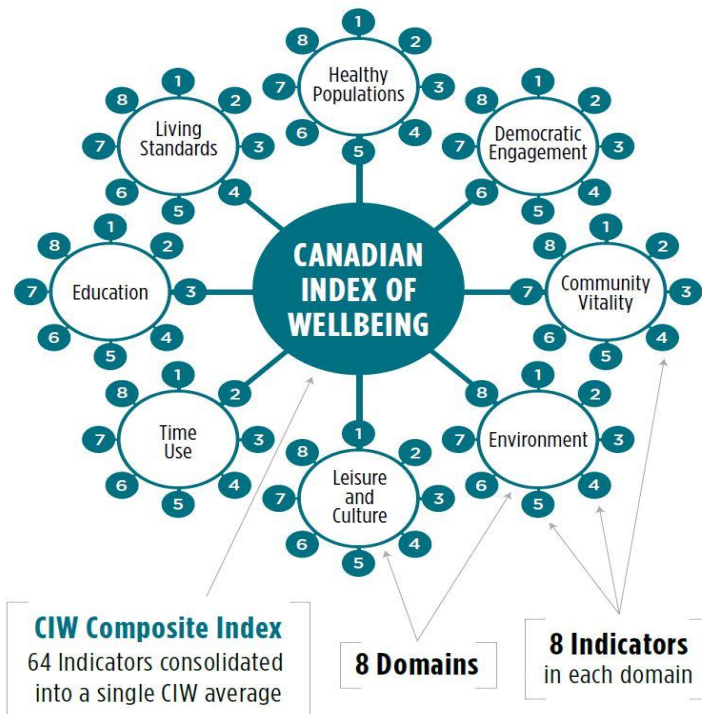


Figure 1. The Canadian Index of Wellbeing Framework

III. THE ULTIMATE POLICY TOOL

Not only does the CIW framework measure changes in overall wellbeing – allowing national and provincial policy-makers to track and compare progress – it breaks down trends by domain, identifies relationships among indicators across domains, and provides evidence-based policy direction. By placing wellbeing rather than a problem at the heart of public policy, innovative solutions emerge to address some of our most complex problems.

“It’s the ultimate policy multi-tool,” according to Mike Salvaris, Project Manager for the Australian National Development Index (ANDI) and Research Fellow at Melbourne University.

Importantly, the CIW captures what GDP cannot. It distinguishes between positive factors like health and clean air, and negative factors like illness and pollution. It counts volunteer work and unpaid caregiving as social goods while overwork and stress are treated as deficits. It values educational achievement, health, economic and personal security. It emphasizes a better balance between investment in health promotion and spending on illness and treatment. It measures what matters most to Canadians and reveals a growing gap between economic growth and wellbeing.

IV. TRACKING THE GAP BETWEEN GROWTH AND WELLBEING

The evidence is clear. Since 1994, Canada’s wellbeing has been lagging far behind our economic growth and, even though the economy bounced back after the 2008 recession, wellbeing suffered a set-back from which it is barely recovering (see Figure 2). Indeed, the CIW’s 2016 national report, “How are Canadians *really* doing?”,¹ confirmed what Canadians were feeling, but could not quantify – the gap between growth in GDP and wellbeing is growing. In 2008, the gap was 21 percent. By 2010, it grew to 24.5 per cent. Four years later, it stood at 28.1 percent. Simply put, economic growth has not translated into greater wellbeing.

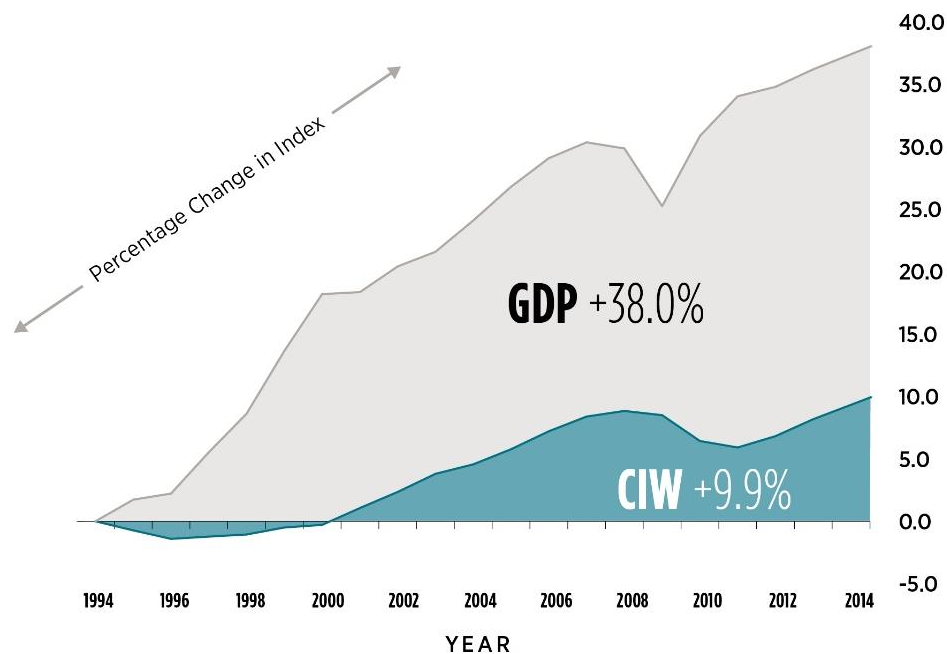


Figure 2. Trends in the Canadian Index of Wellbeing and GDP per capita in Canada, 1994-2014 show the gap between economic growth and wellbeing is growing.

However, the data also show that proactive public policy interventions, like the creation of childcare spaces or increases in arts and culture participation, can significantly improve

wellbeing. Domain and indicator trends can also give stakeholders the information they need to turn strengths into competitive advantages and to tackle weaker areas with renewed focus.

V. POWERFUL DATA AND INSIGHTS FOR ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

As a comprehensive, evidence-based model, the CIW uses data to provide powerful insights for all levels of government. Beyond providing a lens for an understanding of wellbeing at the national level, the CIW can also provide insight at the provincial, regional, and community level.

For example, an Ontario index report has already drawn attention to the province's strengths and areas where it lags behind the national average. Saskatchewan will release its provincial index report in the fall of 2018. The CIW was also commissioned by Engage Nova Scotia to help stakeholders see issues in their province from a new perspective and to imagine new partnerships that focus on common leverage points.



CIW Consultations in Oxford County, ON (left) and Wood Buffalo, AB (right)

At the community level, the CIW model has been embraced by municipalities that are interested in an integrated and connected approach for long-term sustainability. Working with the community – often a consortium of local organizations including local government – the CIW shifts from existing population-level data to gather survey data on the perceptions and behaviours of a representative sample of citizens. By asking the same wellbeing questions in each community, comparisons can be made and learning drawn from other communities and regions. The survey yields a much richer data set than anything previously available, especially in terms of social and environmental data.

The CIW works with its community partners to identify factors that are most closely related to the wellbeing of different areas or subgroups within the population. For example, the City of Guelph looked at how wellbeing differed by income level and across its Wards. Kingston explored civic engagement by age, income, and geography and found that more engaged residents reported higher levels of wellbeing. The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo focused on the positive effect on wellbeing of sense of belonging, length of residency, and household type in its 2013 survey.

Communities are also starting to explore trends over time. In 2013, Waterloo Region looked at the effect of community belonging and income level on wellbeing. This work evolved into the Wellbeing Waterloo Region initiative, making it the first community to conduct a second survey – a key to understanding trends over time. More recently, Ontario’s Oxford County aligned the CIW framework with its long-term sustainability plan and results from the CIW survey provided benchmarks for the plan with the intent to measure progress every five years. In the interim, a broad community consortium is mining the data and engaging the community around key leverage points to address root causes of complex issues.

VI. TRANSFORMING ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Addressing root causes by adopting a holistic, long-term, evidence-based framework is why organizations are also adopting the CIW approach.

The Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF), an agency of the provincial government and one of Canada’s largest granting foundations, not only commissioned the CIW to produce provincial and regional reports, it adopted the framework in its 10-year strategic plan to guide granting decisions and to measure the impact of its grants. In a news release at the time, former CEO Andrea Barrack Cohen explained that a rigorous approach to measurement would help OTF generate the greatest impact with investments.

Intrigued by the CIW’s ability to connect the dots between social determinants of health and important community outcomes, the Association of Ontario Health Centres (AOHC) encouraged its members to use the framework to assess community needs, build partnerships, develop strategies, evaluate and advocate for change. Today, more than 31 sites across Ontario use the *Be Well Survey*, a derivative of the CIW’s community wellbeing survey. Improved health and more efficient use of resources are anticipated outcomes of this shift in emphasis.

UNICEF Canada is also currently collaborating with the CIW and an extensive group of advisors to develop a Canadian Index of Child and Youth Wellbeing. The beta version will be released later in 2018.

VII. ENABLING AN IMPORTANT SHIFT IN CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

As governments, organizations, and stakeholders gather to explore CIW findings, set priorities and develop new plans, the importance of conversations and collaborations that emerge cannot be overstated. In a recent interview with the *Washington Post*,² David Pilling, a *Financial Times* editor and author of *The Growth Delusion: Wealth, Poverty, and the Well-Being of Nations*, identified the Canadian Index of Wellbeing as his preferred model for measuring wellbeing and identified its ability to start conversations as a key benefit. By placing wellbeing at the heart of policy conversations, a common vision is created and solutions that cut across silos emerge. Rather than relying solely on government to lead, cross-sector collaborations are forming to build consensus, set priorities, and empower communities to tackle the issues they care about most.

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According to Mike Salvaris, “developing a new progress paradigm and new measures is, in part, a civic and democratic task that requires the engagement of citizens, working with academics, scientists and policy makers.”³ Far beyond just providing a companion to GDP, the CIW is an opportunity to enhance our democratic processes.

VIII. SHIFTING THE CONVERSATION

In a world of big data and systems thinking, we can see why GDP is insufficient. By highlighting interactions among domains, benchmarking current levels of wellbeing, helping to set priorities, engaging stakeholders, and measuring the impact of policies, Canada’s globally-recognized CIW provides a robust and valid framework to capture quality of life.

It’s time to apply a broader, more holistic, longer term lens that puts people and their wellbeing at the heart of the conversation. The CIW can help policy makers do just that.

BRYAN SMALE, PH.D., is the Director of the *Canadian Index of Wellbeing* housed in the Faculty of Applied Health Sciences at the University of Waterloo (UW), a Professor in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies with a cross-appointment to the Department of Geography and Environmental Management at UW, and a Research Faculty Associate in the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience.

DOMINIQUE O’ROURKE, M.A., is the principal of Accolade Communications which provides strategic communications planning and execution for national non-profit, private and public sector organizations.

¹ Canadian Index of Wellbeing. (2016). *How are Canadians Really Doing?* The 2016 CIW National Report. Waterloo, ON: Canadian Index of Wellbeing and University of Waterloo. Available at: <https://uwaterloo.ca/canadian-index-wellbeing/>.

² Bernstein, J. (2018, February). The Growth Delusion: An Interview with David Pilling. *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2018. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/postevery-thing/wp/2018/02/28/the-growth-delusion-an-interview-with-david-pilling/?utm_term=.a1ff8bb4836d

³ Salvaris, M. (2013). Measuring the kind of Australia we want: The Australian National Development Index, Gross Domestic Product and the global movement to redefine progress. *The Australian Economic Review*, 46, 1, 78-91.