



i CANADIAN
index

OF WELLBEING

Measuring what matters

Prepared by the Atkinson Charitable Foundation

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Charting the Path to Progress

Indicators are very powerful. What we count, measure, and report often drives our understanding of whether we are better off than we used to be, whether we are leaving a better world for our children, and what we need to change.

Too often however, we tend to gauge how we are doing as a society based on a narrow set of indicators of economic activity. Although the architects of national income accounting never intended for tools such as the GDP to be used as a barometer of overall wellbeing, when the economy is growing rapidly, we are led to the assumption that “we are better off.”

Such a narrow perspective on wellbeing means that we often fail to capture many of the things that matter to Canadians. As our natural environment is depleted, life for Canada’s Aboriginal peoples fails to improve, the gap between rich and poor grows, and the pressures of time stress mount, it is no wonder that a rosy economic picture is often at odds with what Canadians know to be the reality of their everyday lives.

This narrow perspective also means that we fail to seize opportunities to take action on those factors that can fundamentally improve our health and wellbeing.

This is where the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) will make a real difference. It will account honestly and accurately for how social, health, environmental and economic factors such as our living standards, how we spend our time, the health and education of our populations, the integrity and sustainability of our ecosystem, community vitality and our levels of civic engagement, are impacting on our wellbeing for better or worse.

The CIW: Connecting the Dots

When we build a new industrial plant or purchase new equipment, we recognize this as a capital investment that will depreciate over time. Eventually, we will need to repair or replace that equipment if we want to maintain or expand the value of our assets. We place great stock in the value of our capital, measuring how well off we are according to our material wealth, and even measuring our progress as a society by whether our collective wealth is growing.





But we ignore other kinds of wealth, both human and natural, that are just as valuable to our overall wellbeing. We don't pay enough attention when they depreciate, or when it's time to re-invest. Under our current way of measuring growth, we count timber cutting as economic gain, but we don't count the depreciation of our forest wealth. Fish stocks decline and soil erodes, but the national balance sheets do not track the health of natural capital, even though its depreciation can affect future production of timber, fish, and crops, as surely as if we sold off machinery.

Similarly, if the health of Canadians declines, if inequality and disparity saps our collective potential, or if our investments in early childhood development fall short, then our human capital depreciates, our economy will suffer, and the necessary reinvestments will be substantial. Yet, we don't track the health and wellbeing of our population as a vital component of our human wealth. We count spending on cigarettes and cancer treatment as contributions to economic growth, but we don't count efforts to prevent disease and improve health, or to address the debilitating impacts of poverty and expand access to education as investments in human capital.

Now imagine an index that provides a clear, valid, and regular accounting of the things that matter to the genuine progress of Canadians. Imagine a set of national accounts of wellbeing that actually links the economic reality and longer-term prosperity of our country with the social, health and environmental conditions that shape our communities.

The CIW: Connecting the Dots

Imagine an index:

-  That distinguishes between good things like health and clean air, and bad things, like sickness and pollution;
-  That promotes volunteer work and unpaid care-giving as social goods, and overwork and stress as social deficits;
-  That puts a value on educational achievement, early childhood learning, economic and personal security, a clean environment, and social and health equity;
-  That values a better balance between investment in health promotion and spending on illness treatment.

The CIW is that type of measuring stick. It is being built by a team of national and international experts, in partnership with leaders from the business, health and community sectors, around indicators that measure the extent to which we are realizing our values and goals as a society and whether we are leaving the world a better place for our children.

The CIW can become a basis for improving our performance in areas that matter to Canadians, such as how to address child poverty, how to create job opportunities for youth and new citizens, or how to ensure that we have clean air to breathe now and in the future. It will help us shine a spotlight on how the strategic allocation of economic resources ‘upstream’ will reduce the need for expensive health care and social services ‘downstream.’ In other words, it will focus on getting things right at the beginning – when the solutions are cheaper and far more effective – instead of fixing them at the end.

With the CIW we can provide a valuable and compelling public policy tool that resonates with opinion leaders, media, and decision makers, while informing the ‘water cooler chat’ of everyday Canadians about how we are really doing when it comes to what matters to all of us. To do this, we are creating a tool that is easy to communicate and simple to understand and use.

Building On a Track Record of Success

Social indicator work and efforts to measure genuine progress have been part of the Canadian landscape since the late 1960s. And yet, this field of research has received only periodic public attention, insufficient interest during economic slowdowns, and modest traction at the national level.

In the 1990s, however, there was renewed interest by academic, research and public institutions in the use of broader measures of wellbeing, especially prominent during the National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy and regional and provincial work using the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI). The GPI, used in parts of Canada, several European countries and in parts of Australia, provides us with concrete evidence about the potential success of a national set of indicators as a way to anchor community indicator initiatives.

Responding to an emerging need to highlight and grow the potential of a national voice for measuring economic, health, social and environmental progress, the Atkinson Charitable Foundation convened a cross Canada roundtable of leading indicator experts and practitioners in 2002. This roundtable included Dr. Ronald Colman, Executive Director of GPI Atlantic and a world recognized expert in measures of sustainability and quality of life, Mark Anieski, who worked with the Pembina Institute in developing GPI Alberta, and representatives from organizations like the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN).

Participants at this roundtable recognized the need to raise the profile of wellbeing measurement from local, provincial, and regional levels to a national platform where the relationship between progress and wellbeing could be central to the public and policy debate.

In May 2004, the Foundation hosted a national working conference where over sixty indicator experts, practitioners and potential users from government, academia and community met and established a pan Canadian network committed to developing the Canadian Index of Wellbeing.

The CIW team – the National Research and Development Work Group – was established to make the CIW a reality.

Measuring What Counts – The CIW Domains

The CIW team is currently developing a set of national accounts that can be disaggregated regionally and provincially to best capture wellbeing trends in Canada. In the long-term, the team is working towards an integrated or composite index. The CIW will monitor progress in seven areas, or domains. Each area of development is under the leadership of world class experts and backed by rigorous Canadian and international peer review and public consultation.

Living Standards

Secure and meaningful employment, adequate income, low-income rates, gap between rich and poor, food security, and affordable housing.

Time Allocation

Balance between paid work, unpaid work, and free time, the capacity to make choices about the use of time, and the stress of overload.

Healthy Populations

Self-rated health, disability-adjusted life expectancy (includes cancer, cardiovascular disease), physical health conditions such as low birth weight, asthma, obesity, and diabetes, rates of depression, functional health (injuries), smoking, physical activity, and overall satisfaction with health care services.

Ecosystem Health

Good air and water quality, healthy forests, soils, marine environment, greenhouse gas emissions, waste diversion, and environmental sustainability.

Educated Populace

Literacy, numeracy, indicators of educational attainment, and quality of formal and informal learning.

Community Vitality

Safe communities, cohesion, trust in people, sense of belonging and identity, social networks and social participation, diversity and inclusion, community stability, and access to community resources and services.

Civic Engagement

Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern, involvement in extra-familial activities conducted for the purpose of improving the quality of life.

Measuring What Counts – The CIW Domains

The first CIW release in October 2007 will report on the findings from Living Standards, Healthy Populations, Educated Populace, and Community Vitality and preliminary findings for Time Allocation (Use) and Ecosystem Health. The second release for March 2008 will include a full report on Time Allocation and Ecosystem Health. The third release in the series will include the Civic Engagement Report, which is scheduled for completion by mid-2008.

The CIW's 'basket' of domains will be reported regularly with clarity about trends, interrelated stories (e.g., "While X is on the rise, it is interesting to note that Y is flat, and Z is declining. Possible explanations include...")

Internationally sophisticated work on developing a composite number will continue with the potential to use a composite as a headline lead for reporting on the seven domains.

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Appendix A: The Leadership

The National Network of Experts: A Cross-Canada Check-in

The following government agencies, non-governmental organizations and universities are working together to develop the Canadian Index of Wellbeing.

