

Prioritizing Wellbeing in Saskatchewan Communities

by Heritage Saskatchewan and the Community Initiatives Fund



Our appreciation for our health, both individually and collectively, has increased dramatically over the past months. Expanding our definition of health to include wellbeing - achieved when people are physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy; are economically secure; have a strong sense of identity, belonging, and place; and have the confidence and capacity to engage as citizens – we recognize how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected many aspects of our lives beyond our physical health as we seek to balance family, work and community priorities.

Wellbeing as a Decision-Making Framework

Internationally, many jurisdictions have taken steps to incorporate quality-of-life and wellbeing measurements into their political, socio-environmental, and economic decision-making. Jurisdictions explicitly doing so at the national level include New Zealand, Iceland, Scotland, and Germany.

In both incorporating these measures and implementing cross-sectoral approaches to improve wellbeing for their citizens, these countries are equally assessing the

economic, social, cultural, and environmental contexts in which they make their political decisions.

As indicated in the German federal government's report Good Living in Germany, "wellbeing should lie at the heart of policymaking that simultaneously pursues economic, social and environmental goals."

While each country has incorporated wellbeing indicators into their decision-making differently, there are commonalities: aligning policies with the overall aspirations of citizens; increasing social equitability; focusing on mental health; improving

wellbeing for children; supporting minority and Indigenous aspirations (and related community-specific concerns); building productive nations; and transforming economies away from a dependence on fossil fuels.

Wellbeing frameworks have been adopted at a municipal level as well, including in Canada, incorporating local or regional priorities.

As one example, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo in Alberta has undertaken two community wellbeing surveys that were used to create, evaluate and update their Social Sustainability Community Plan. Several other regions in Ontario have undertaken similar surveys. Engage Nova Scotia partnered with the Canadian Index of Wellbeing to create an Index Report in 2018. They have now conducted a complementary Quality of Life Survey, the results of which will be used for regional planning and priority setting.

Most municipalities' planning and budgeting processes already incorporate elements of wellbeing, such as recreation facilities, outdoor spaces, safety and crime prevention strategies, and housing development.

By more intentionally applying a wellbeing lens which encourages municipal departments and communities to work collaboratively to address complex issues, municipal leaders can ensure their decisions are benefitting and addressing what really matters to their citizens.

The Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing (SIW)

The Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing (SIW) provides a framework for understanding wellbeing and the factors that contribute to not just individual wellbeing, but our wellbeing as a province. Heritage Saskatchewan and the Community Initiatives Fund partnered to develop the SIW based on the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) framework with the goal to promote evidence based decision-making that reflects the values and responds to the needs of Saskatchewan's citizens.

The Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing (SIW) report How are residents of Saskatchewan really doing? was released in October 2019. The report finds that while wellbeing in Saskatchewan has improved at a rate exceeding Canada as a whole, the gap between GDP and wellbeing has increased. To address this gap, leaders need to incorporate wellbeing into their policy and budgetary decision-making.

This Saskatchewan report is intended as a starting point for conversations and action that will encourage solution-oriented community engagement and actions, inform policymaking, and lead to the implementation of multi-sectoral approaches to addressing community priorities and issues.

Wellbeing Belongs to Everyone

Wellbeing belongs to all of us. As a province, we need to mobilize individuals to set wellbeing-focused priorities. The SIW framework provides us with one set of indicators that if effectively addressed through policies, programming, and resources, would benefit everyone. Reducing social and economic inequities is key to improving the overall health and wellbeing of Saskatchewan residents and we need to ensure that individuals have access to services, supports, and programming designed to nurture wellbeing. Our communities and society as a whole have a responsibility to ensure all residents of Saskatchewan receive access to and positive outcomes from quality supports and services.

SIW has helped provide insight into how Saskatchewan people are doing. Based on those insights, our municipal and provincial governments can begin to develop a wellbeing framework, which can then be utilized in their budgets and fiscal reports.

Regardless of the indicators chosen to create a framework, utilizing a wellbeing framework encourages collaborative, multi-sectoral approaches to community planning and policy development.

We all have a role in improving the quality of life and wellbeing of Saskatchewan residents, as citizens, as community leaders, and through our places of work. The sure way to solve complex problems is by making large and small scale impacts – through working together. ■