



Dec 2020

## Confronting inequalities by focusing on wellbeing

**Bryan Smale, Ph.D.**

Director, Canadian Index of Wellbeing  
University of Waterloo

When we chat with friends about the everyday issues we face, we do not talk about the country's economic productivity. We express concerns about our health, our jobs, or our kids' education, especially as we stumble our way through the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of us might be worrying about piecing together enough part-time work to make ends meet or how changes in our communities will affect our and our neighbours' lives. When we extend our gaze and look to our communities, our country, or even internationally as a whole, we fret about climate change, racism, and growing inequality.

We understand intuitively that many of these issues are connected and comprise an interconnected system of systems – as changes occur in one system, like the environment or the economy, they have repercussions for other systems. And yet, our political responses to these issues have tended to be limited both by a focus on each issue in isolation and by the priority placed on the importance of the economy. There is abundant evidence that “trickle-down” or “economy-first” approaches do not necessarily reduce income inequality or result in greater quality of life for all.

We must look beyond a solitary focus on the economy and envision how our broader wellbeing is influenced by a complex interplay of factors in people's lives. This is the approach taken by the [Canadian Index of Wellbeing \(CIW\)](#). Since its inception and throughout its development, the CIW has been designed to ensure everyday Canadians see themselves and their lives reflected in its perspective and measurement approach. The CIW is the result of the combined input of national leaders and organisations, community groups, research experts, indicator users, and importantly, the Canadian public. Through several rounds of public consultations, Canadians candidly expressed what really matters to their wellbeing. The process culminated in the identification of core Canadian values (including diversity, equity, inclusion, economic security, and sustainability) and eight domains of life that contribute to and affect the wellbeing of Canadians: Community Vitality, Democratic Engagement, Education, Environment, Healthy Populations, Leisure and Culture, Living Standards, and Time Use. The CIW framework shifts the focus solely from the economy to what matters most to Canadians, of which economic security is an integral part. It essentially strives for a more comprehensive and integrative approach to addressing the complex issues – including inequality – Canadians face as they aspire for enhanced wellbeing.

The CIW found that while Canada's GDP per capita grew by 38% between 1994 and 2014, Canadian's wellbeing increased by less than 10%, and the gap between them has continued to increase. In [Saskatchewan](#), residents' wellbeing improved more than elsewhere in Canada, rising by over 13% since 1994, but when contrasted with an increase in GDP per capita of over 44%, the gap is even more pronounced. So even though economic growth in Saskatchewan distinguishes the province as a top performer in Canada, that growth has not translated into narrowing the gap between it and the wellbeing of its people, which suggests that inequality is growing between those doing well and those faring less well. Indeed, a closer look at many of the indicators of wellbeing reveal ongoing inequalities, especially for Indigenous populations and people living outside larger urban areas.

## Focus first on wellbeing

Pursuing a higher quality of life is worthwhile in and of itself, and an important lever for addressing inequality and improvements throughout the system. When we place wellbeing, rather than the “problem” or the economy at the centre of decision-making, we are better able to recognise leverage points and see possibilities for solutions that cut across systems and create positive change. If we focus first on the wellbeing of Canadians, reducing inequality, as one of the many benefits, will follow.

With the release of the CIW’s national report, “[How are Canadians really doing?](#)”, the following policy directions were included based on the recommendations from a diverse group of experts invited to review the trends in wellbeing. These recommendations are illustrative of the potential for placing wellbeing at the centre of debate and seeing social progress and inequality reduction in a more holistic and inter-connected way.

### Provide a universal basic income

The federal government has essentially implemented basic income for families with young children and for seniors with its Canada Child Benefit and Old Age Security. Extending the concept of a guaranteed minimum income for working Canadians would lift many more Canadians out of poverty, reduce inequalities by increasing their participation in all aspects of civil society, and recognise the value of unpaid work such as eldercare, childcare, and volunteering. The provision of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) during COVID-19 has re-invigorated discussions about creating a universal basic income as we recover and “build back better”. And critically, Canadians would achieve these outcomes with dignity.

### Extend benefits to low- and modest-income Canadians

As part-time and precarious work become more prevalent, fewer Canadians have access to employment-based benefits like health and dental care, pensions, and other benefits. Those most at risk are women, single parents, Indigenous peoples, racialized groups, and people with disabilities.<sup>1</sup> Extending benefits to low-income Canadians would not only help vulnerable people, it would help them participate more fully in all aspects of their lives.

### Embrace a proactive and preventative approach to health care

When they are not healthy, Canadians are not at their best at work, at home, or in the community. Among the most critical factors associated with poor health are living in poverty and limited access to education. In addition to investments in physical and mental health, collaborative efforts involving governments at all levels are needed to ensure a proactive and preventative approach to health care – an upstream approach<sup>2</sup> – that addresses social, environmental, and economic factors contributing to poor health.

### Support universal access to leisure and culture

Time spent in leisure and culture enriches and enhances our lives. Free time engagement builds relationships, strengthens community bonds, facilitates learning, enhances physical and mental health, and alleviates stress and feelings of time crunch. Indeed, the United Nations<sup>3</sup> has identified leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay, as a basic human right.

There is an indication that the federal government is moving in a direction that encourages such comprehensive, innovative, and evidence-based policy development. Indeed, the Prime Minister has directed the Minister for Middle Class Prosperity and Associate Minister for Finance to “lead work within the Department of Finance, with the support of the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development and the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry as the Minister responsible for Statistics Canada, to better incorporate quality of life measurements into government decision-making and budgeting.”<sup>4</sup> If realised, this shift would represent a significant step towards wellbeing-centred policy development and action.

## Creating the kind of country we want for ourselves and future generations

If we are serious about wanting a future where all Canadians enjoy a higher quality of life, then we must recognise the perils of growing inequality and move towards creating a country that is both wealthier and equitable.

By focusing on wellbeing, we begin to see the possibilities for solutions that cut across the complex system of interconnected systems. For example, addressing inequality creates greater access to education, health, leisure and culture, democracy, and all aspects of civil society – especially for marginalised people – not simply for the sake of economic growth, but for human dignity and the value of full participation.

A thriving society should be the end-goal of good public policy and the investments we make to support it. By using wellbeing as the lens for decision-making, more innovative social policy will emerge that benefits all Canadians in multiple ways. It is a way forward for creating a country that better responds to our needs and values.

*More information on the Canadian Index of Wellbeing: [uwaterloo.ca/canadian-index-wellbeing](http://uwaterloo.ca/canadian-index-wellbeing)*

*More information on the Saskatchewan Index of Wellbeing: [saskwellbeing.ca](http://saskwellbeing.ca)*

---

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Granofsky, T., Corak, M., Johal, S., & Zon, N. (2015). Renewing Canada’s social architecture. Framing paper. Toronto, ON: Mowat Centre. Available at: <https://mowatcentre.ca/renewing-canadas-social-architecture/>
- <sup>2</sup> Upstream was started in Saskatchewan by Ryan Meili and is now based at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (<https://www.thinkupstream.ca/>)
- <sup>3</sup> United Nations. (1948). Article 24. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, A/RES/3/217A. Paris, FR. Available at: <http://www.un-documents.net/a3r217a.htm>
- <sup>4</sup> Office of the Prime Minister. (PMO). (2019). Minister of Middle Class Prosperity and Associate Minister of Finance Mandate Letter. Ottawa, ON: Government of Canada. Available at: <https://pm.gc.ca/en/mandate-letters/2019/12/13/minister-middle-class-prosperity-and-associate-minister-finance-mandate>

