

Build Back Better: Wellbeing Budgets for a Post COVID-19 Recovery?

August 2021

Introduction

The health and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have left governments at all levels thinking about promising paths to recovery in a post-pandemic context. In the midst of health, social, and economic uncertainty, many, including in Canada, have called for a recovery that puts people and their wellbeing at the heart of these efforts (Büchs et al., 2020; Cohen, 2020; Smith, 2020). Survey data in Canada and elsewhere suggest that, more than ever before, wellbeing is a top concern of citizens (Department of Finance Canada, 2021; Harvey, 2020). Indeed, this concern for wellbeing has been building internationally for decades and many central governments, including those in New Zealand, Finland, Scotland, Wales, and elsewhere, have made it a priority in recent years. Some jurisdictions in Canada are involved in discussions or have made known their plans to make themselves accountable for the wellbeing of the population.¹ For example, in his mandate letter to the Minister of Middle Class Prosperity and Associate Minister of Finance, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau included as a top priority the directive 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, drawing on lessons from other jurisdictions such as New Zealand and Scotland” (Office of the Prime Minister of Canada, 2019). It remains to be seen if making wellbeing a goal of central governments will be embraced as a possible option for recovery in Canada and elsewhere, but there seems to be a commitment to ensuring that post-pandemic governments do not just build back, but that they build back better. Indeed, Build Back Better is the name given to the economic recovery plan that current United States President, Joe Biden, campaigned on (Furman & Dollar, 2020).

In addition, Chapter 3 of Canada’s Fall Economic Statement is entitled, “Building Back Better: A Plan to Conquer the COVID-19 Recession” (Department of Finance Canada, 2020). Canada’s interest in pursuing this goal is evident in its recent publication of the document *Measuring What Matters: Toward a Quality of Life Strategy for Canada* (Department of Finance Canada, 2021). In the various approaches to building back better and to including quality of life or wellbeing factors in policy, many have highlighted the importance of including the input of the public and of specific population groups (Durand, 2018; McKinlay, 2019). Indeed, Indigenous scholars and organizations, in Canada and elsewhere, have suggested the importance of integrating situated and culturally appropriate considerations of wellbeing (British Columbia Assembly of First Nations, 2020; Panelli & Tipa, 2007) and the Strategy falls in line with these calls. It notes that: “while international frameworks are helpful for identifying universally relevant domains, the framework should also reflect the issues that are of special importance in Canada such as our connection to the land, bilingualism, diversity, and Indigenous culture and languages” (Department of Finance Canada, 2021, p. 12). Thus, while the movement to include wellbeing as a measure of success is growing internationally, most recognize that such policies need to be anchored in their local, regional, and national contexts.

In this fact sheet, we look at how wellbeing has developed as a policy focus for governments and how it might be related to public health concerns such as the social determinants of physical and mental health and health inequalities. We consider whether wellbeing approaches to central government policies may advance the goals of healthy public policy. As part of the National Collaborating Centre on Healthy Public Policy (NCCHPP)’s project on wellbeing policy

¹ For an example of discussions at the provincial level in Canada, see the opinion piece written by Iain Rankin, the Premier of Nova Scotia at: <https://www.thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/local-perspectives/iain-rankin-faring-well-in-nova-scotia-a-re-evaluation-of-our-wealth-health-562404/>.



approaches and wellbeing budgeting,² we outline here what wellbeing budgeting is and its promise in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada.

Wellbeing and wellbeing budgets

The wellbeing of people within states and nations as well as internationally has long been a concern of governments and organizations. The United Nation (UN)'s *World Happiness Report* (Helliwell et al., 2021) or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's *Better Life Index* (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], n.d.) are examples of international attempts to measure and improve the wellbeing of populations. Closer to home, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing project at the University of Waterloo has been working since the early 2000s to “enable all Canadians to share in the highest wellbeing status by identifying, developing and publicizing statistical measures that offer clear, valid and regular reporting on progress toward wellbeing goals and outcomes” (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, n.d.). In the wake of the 2008 global recession and increased concern about growing socioeconomic inequalities, this work has received significant attention and many governments, at all levels, have shown an interest in incorporating increased wellbeing and quality of life measures and goals into their policies.

Although many of these initiatives focused on wellbeing as a social policy goal, by the end of the 2010s, a significant number of countries had begun to actively put wellbeing at the centre of economic and fiscal policies in what have come to be called wellbeing budgets (Durand & Exton, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has led many to further efforts to seek a recovery that includes lessons learned about the health and social inequalities the crisis has laid bare. Although wellbeing has been considered an important measure of international development, the move to integrate wellbeing or quality of life indicators into central government policies is more recent and may present a promising way forward for a health, social, and economic recovery and a post-COVID-19 context.

Beyond GDP

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been used as a measure of economic welfare and growth since the 1930s. Although even its earliest proponents warned that it measured economic activity and not social or economic wellbeing, GDP has been used as a way of measuring and describing just that (Costanza, Kubiszewski, et al., 2014). Even today, GDP is very often used to describe growth, progress, and economic health without noting its shortfalls. GDP counts all economic production equally without regard for the cultural, health, or social value that is produced. Production of cigarettes, firearms, or fast food, for example, is counted in the same way as production of books for school children, fresh fruit and vegetables, or exercise equipment. In 1968, U.S. Senator Bobby Kennedy noted of Gross National Product (GNP) – which includes the economic production of a country's citizens abroad as well as domestically – it measures “everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile” (Kennedy, 1968, as cited in Costanza, Hart, et al., 2014, p. 191). Adding wellbeing as a measure of how well a population is doing offers a dimension beyond GDP and makes governments accountable for it.

Over the past several decades, economists have also identified the limitations of using GDP as a measure of social and economic progress, specifically noting that it does not adequately capture quality of life elements or reflect inequalities, nor does it consider how changes to economic production may affect the resources that sustain wellbeing (Durand, 2018). Ideas that have emerged in the call for governments to go “beyond GDP” in measuring the state of their populations have included developing frameworks to report on key indicators that reflect wellbeing in populations, using policy tools to assess wellbeing in decision-making, and conducting research into correlates of happiness and best practices for wellbeing measurement. Some countries have put forth visions for an economy of wellbeing, defined as a governance approach that puts people and their wellbeing at the core of policy development and decision-making, including in the areas of resource allocation, and performance and accountability outcomes (Council

² We use the terms wellbeing budgets and wellbeing budgeting here to refer to a variety of policy approaches that emphasize the importance of making wellbeing and quality of life a policy goal of central governments. Although not all of the policies that are being considered or have been adopted use these terms, it is increasingly common to see it used as an umbrella term for a variety of others – quality of life; wellbeing economy; economy of wellbeing; wellbeing policy; etc. – that have grown out of the perceived need to measure progress by going beyond its economic indicators.

of the European Union, 2019). The European Union, for example, has stated that the economy of wellbeing would involve investments in equitable policy measures and structures that improve access to public services and balance economic growth with population wellbeing (Council of the European Union, 2019). Similar initiatives fall into the category of wellbeing budgeting, which involves measuring economic performance and quality of life in ways that do not rely on GDP alone, but also consider who benefits from economic growth, whether it is sustainable now and for future generations, and how people feel about their lives (Stiglitz et al., 2018).

A number of central governments, including but not limited to those of Iceland, Scotland, Finland, Australia, and Wales, have shown interest in, or made statements about and taken steps toward, including wellbeing as a measure integral to policy. One prime example of this is the *Wellbeing Budget* adopted by New Zealand in 2019 (Government of New Zealand, 2019). In the introduction to their first ever *Wellbeing Budget*, the government of New Zealand states: “Sustainable economic growth is an important contributor, but many factors determine people’s wellbeing. Just because a country is doing well economically does not mean all of its people are” (Government of New Zealand, 2019, p.5).

As a means of implementing and evaluating its *Wellbeing Budget*, New Zealand uses the *Living Standards Framework* which includes measures of wellbeing in several domains (The Treasury, n.d.). This approach to measuring wellbeing is one that is common and mobilizes new and existing quality of life or wellbeing data with the advantage of not having to “start from scratch” when integrating wellbeing into policy initiatives. Importantly, New Zealand’s approach includes perspectives on wellbeing produced by the Te Puni Kōkiri (Ministry of Māori Development) that might offer guidelines for policy goals in Canada. As part of a series of discussion papers produced for the Treasury, the paper, *Indigenous Approach to the Living Standards Framework* (Te Puni Kōkiri & The Treasury, 2019) notes that “wellbeing considered from an indigenous perspective moves the public policy discourse beyond Western constructs of wellbeing and enables an improved lived experience of wellbeing for everyone” (Te Puni Kōkiri & The Treasury, 2019, p. i).

Measuring wellbeing

Although there is increasing interest in wellbeing as a measure of how populations are doing, there is no apparent consensus on a definition for wellbeing. The What Works Centre for Wellbeing in the United Kingdom, for example, summarizes the situation as follows: “Part of the value of wellbeing as a concept is that wherever you are and whatever your cultural background or personal circumstances, people intuitively understand the value of happiness and wellbeing. But this universality that adapts to so many different contexts and perspectives, can sometimes make it difficult to share a common understanding of what exactly wellbeing is” (What Works Centre for Wellbeing, n.d., What is wellbeing? para. 5). The elusive nature of a definitive agreement on the meaning of wellbeing has led many organizations to conduct consultations about what elements of wellbeing are meaningful to communities and populations and to use these to construct an amalgam of areas or dimensions of wellbeing when constructing indicators to be measured.

Often, a number of indicators are used to measure wellbeing. These usually fall into one of three categories:

- Objective measures, sometimes collected as “quality of life” data, such as educational attainment, income, environmental conditions, or political stability.
- Subjective measures, such as a sense of belonging, of personal safety, or of trust in public offices. One significant subjective measure of wellbeing is that of “life satisfaction” (Barrington-Leigh & Wollenberg, 2019), which asks respondents to rate their level of satisfaction with their lives at a given moment in time.
- A combination of objective and subjective measures. In many of these cases, a number of measures are combined as a dashboard or index of wellbeing (Government of New Zealand, 2019; World Health Organization [WHO], 2012).

One possible benefit of using a combination of subjective and objective measures of wellbeing is that they can be taken from existing survey or other data and combined, or used in conjunction with additional information, to get a picture of wellbeing in a jurisdiction. It has been argued that public consultation is crucial in arriving at the use of indicators in order that they reflect what counts as

wellbeing within populations. The British Columbia Assembly of First Nations, for example, recently published a report on the need to consider Indigenous understandings of wellbeing in that province as a way of moving beyond GDP and including measures of wellbeing (British Columbia Assembly of First Nations, 2020). Using existing measures of wellbeing, where available, can significantly mitigate the prohibitive cost of gathering new data. The use of a combination of measures is something familiar in public health where objective health measures, such as rates of morbidity or mortality, are often used in conjunction with subjective measures such as self-rated health status. However, it might be said that using multiple indicators could lead to competition between priority areas for action and make it difficult to weigh the balance of indicators.

Wellbeing and public health

Public health has defined health as much more than the absence of disease. Indeed, the World Health Organization (WHO) has defined health as a “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” since 1948 (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d., para. 1). Thus, the overlap between health and wellbeing is vast and the current interest in integrating wellbeing into policy might be seen as a way of integrating the social determinants of health, including mental health, into policy at the highest possible level to foster healthy public policies. Public health has long argued that the greatest benefit to health can be achieved through investing in prevention, by bolstering social, environmental/ecological, physical, and structural factors which have the largest impacts on the health of populations and shape the conditions in which they live, grow, work, play, and age (World Health Organization [WHO], 2008). Such arguments most prominently trace back to observations made by the physicians and social reformers of the 19th Century who connected the causes of diseases with social and environmental conditions in industrialized societies, and advocated for radical changes to urban planning, welfare, and other upstream influences (e.g., Edwin Chadwick in England, Louis René Villermé in France, and Rudolf Virchow in Germany) (Morley, 2007; Tulchinsky & Varavikova, 2014). Today, public health actors still have much to contribute to this work by, among other things, working toward developing appropriate indicators for

wellbeing, promoting intersectoral collaboration, as well as highlighting how wellbeing and wellbeing budgeting align with healthy public policy goals. In future work, the NCCHPP will explore this aspect of wellbeing and wellbeing budgeting, but suffice to say for now that there appear to be significant common interests and the opportunity for cross-disciplinary and intersectoral collaboration.

Wellbeing for COVID-19 recovery?

Alongside its many devastating health, social, and economic consequences, the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the effects of social and economic inequalities on the health of marginalized populations. Although the knowledge that those who occupy the lower socioeconomic ranks are more likely to suffer ill health and early death is not new to public health actors (WHO, 2008), given the global impacts of COVID-19, this knowledge became more widespread and visible in 2020 as the public witnessed the precarious social and economic positions experienced by people on the front lines, as essential workers, and the resulting devastating health, social, and economic effects in poorer, racialized, and socially marginalized populations. Indeed, as the report of Canada’s Chief Public Health officer states, “Reports from around the globe have demonstrated that there are real differences in who is more likely to contract COVID-19 and the severity of their illness. Importantly, these differences are not random, but fall along the lines of populations that have historically experienced health and social inequities” (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020, p. 21). Adopting a policy focus on wellbeing may offer promise as a way of ensuring that reducing health, social, and economic inequalities is central to a just recovery.

Conclusion

This fact sheet is meant to provide a brief outline of how wellbeing is being considered or has been integrated into policy in national jurisdictions.³ It outlines the wellbeing approach to policy, including its relationship to the “beyond GDP” movement, discusses some of the ways that wellbeing is and can be measured, and considers how it might be useful for a COVID-19 recovery. In light of recent developments in Canada, including the publication of a federal strategy for quality of life in Canada, we hope to have provided readers with an introduction to this trend. In future work, the NCCHPP will delve deeper into wellbeing and wellbeing budgets by considering how they fit with other approaches to public health, and by providing a comparative analysis of existing examples of wellbeing budgets and approaches.

³ Although, here, we only discuss wellbeing and quality of life measures and policies at the national level, there are a number of initiatives that look to measure and improve wellbeing at municipal and regional levels as well, and these will be explored in future work.

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