

Exchanges

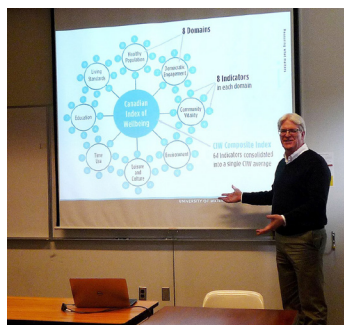
In the *Exchanges*, we present conversations with scholars and practitioners of community engagement, responses to previously published material, and other reflections on various aspects of community-engaged scholarship meant to provoke further dialogue and discussion. We invite our readers to offer in this section their own thoughts and ideas on the meanings and understandings of engaged scholarship, as practiced in local or faraway communities, diverse cultural settings, and various disciplinary contexts. We especially welcome community-based scholars' views and opinions on their collaboration with university-based partners in particular and on engaged scholarship in general.

In this issue, **Nazeem Muhajarine** talks with **Dr. Bryan Smale** about his work on the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. Dr. Smale is Professor, Recreation and Leisure Studies, Faculty of Applied Health Science, University of Waterloo, and Director of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing.

Conversation with Bryan Smale, University of Waterloo

Nazeem Muhajarine: So, to start off, Bryan, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing—what is it and how has it come to be?

Bryan Smale: The Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) started with the Atkinson Charitable Foundation, Toronto, in early 2000s. It really originated with a simple question: the challenge to measure the wellbeing of Canadians, due to the frustration of Gross Domestic Product typically being used to measure social progress. We know the inadequacies of doing that. So the CIW was developed to complement the gross domestic product (GDP), and to challenge the predominantly economic discourse that prevailed in policy discussions as to how we are doing as a nation, as a society. Initially a series of focus groups was held across the country with everyday people, experts, government, policy people asking the simple question, what matters to you, what makes life good? Two things emerged from those conversations: first, they affirmed the values that many Canadians hold dear, such as equity, diversity, social justice, and second, they gave a clear understanding of



Bryan Smale

those aspects of people's lives that contributed to their wellbeing and quality of life. From that we identified eight domains that now comprise the Canadian Index of Wellbeing: Community Vitality, Democratic Engagement, Education, Environment, Healthy Populations, Living Standards, Leisure and Culture, and Time Use. These domains formed the conceptual framework that comprised the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. After that, research teams from across Canada were engaged to dig deeper into each of the domains, asking what are the indicators that consistently show either positive or negative associations with wellbeing; in other words, what contributed to or detracted from wellbeing. The evidence supporting these indicators is overwhelming; however, a challenge for us was what data were available that we could use to track these indicators to say how well are we progressing on specific aspects within each domain, and ultimately, how the domains themselves were progressing over time. We set 1994 as a benchmark for a variety of reasons and changes were tracked for each of the indicators— eight within each domain, so sixty-four indicators in all—over time. We created an overall index, much like the GDP, that indicates, here is how we are doing overall.

Canadian Index of Wellbeing evolved into a three-level statement about our wellbeing: at the uppermost level, the index level, we are reporting at the national level, and more recently at the regional level as well, to show how we are doing and how it is tracking against the GDP. At second level, which is like a dashboard approach, we can report on the progress for each domain level. So how is Healthy Population doing? Is it increasing or decreasing at a rate we might expect across the country. At the third level, at the indicator level, we are dealing with specific type of issues, so for example, within Healthy Populations, there is a measure of self-reported diabetes incidence; within Leisure and Culture, a measure of expenditures people make on leisure, sports, and culture; within Community Vitality, feelings of safety within neighbourhoods, sense of belonging to the community. Those are the type of things that are probably most immediately actionable by community groups.

Nazeem: As Canadians we like to think we are at or among the top countries for wellbeing in international rankings. From the CIW perspective how are we doing right now, and how have we been doing in the last 15 years?

Bryan: Yes, there are many international ranking indices...overall, we consistently rank among the top 10 countries. One of the differences with the index is that we focus on what is happening within the country, rather than compare ourselves to international indices. Compared to some of the other international indices, Canadian Index of Wellbeing is much more comprehensive. We have discovered since 1994 GDP has grown by almost 30% whereas Canadians' overall quality of

life has increased by less than 6%. What is troubling is not only the gap between the two, when you expect a prosperous country like Canada to do much better given the growth in GDP, but there are a couple of other things are of concern as well. During the prosperous years in late 1990s and early 2000s wellbeing flat-lined, so we were not investing in things that matter to Canadians when we had the resources to do so. The other troubling trend we saw was that post-recession we saw a decline in GDP, but it has since begun to recover, but wellbeing has not. It has continued to track downwards. It is probably most evident in the Living standards domain, which gets at things like economic security, housing affordability, the income gap--indicators that reflect more about the day-to-day lives of Canadians and how they are struggling to recover from the recession. We also see that trend in some of the provinces, particularly the ones that are heavily manufacturing-based such as Ontario. Some of the trends we see are particularly troubling given that the impression that GDP should be an indicator of the progress we are making, but certainly it does not reflect that. Within the index itself, even though none of the domains is doing as well as the GDP in terms of growth and progress, we are doing reasonably well in Education, Community vitality, but we are not doing so well in Time use, Environment, and Leisure and culture. In fact in those three domains we have seen a decrease since 1994. So that is worrisome. It suggests we are not placing our priorities where we should in resource allocation, policy development and so forth.

Nazeem: What messages are we sending out to people who can make a difference on these issues? In government, in communities?

Bryan: In early days we were relatively politically naïve, thinking that if we released national reports and tried to engage the media and other organizations that shared our perspective that we could begin to shift the discourse, particularly at the governmental levels in terms of where to place policy priorities. While I think the national index certainly keeps that conversation alive, it does not affect the change that we might expect. But as we continue, we have seen more progress being made when we adapt the national index to the provincial level. In part, the reason for that is, of course, when you take a look at our domains, there are general equivalents to ministries at the provincial level that have jurisdiction to change policies. So in our first provincial report, “How Are Ontarians Really Doing?”, we were able to address issues that pertain to labour, education, health, environment—areas that the provincial government ministries have jurisdictional responsibility for. By comparing the results of the province to the nation as a whole, Ontario can identify areas that they need to give more attention to because they are falling farther behind compared to the rest of the nation. In years alternating with the release of our national reports, we now hope to release provincial reports so that they can stimulate policy conversations that may be

more effective. Continuing along that line of thought, the other impact of the provincial reports, as well as the national report, is that a number of regions and communities have contacted us and said, “can you do the same thing for us, because we want to affect change at the community level”. One of the limitations we face, however, is that we use a lot of national or provincial data that cannot be easily disaggregated to the local level, like a county, township, or community. Beyond the largest Census Metropolitan Areas (CMA) in the country, we really do not have data at the local level. What that has prompted us to do is to develop a community wellbeing survey, designed based on our framework, so residents of communities respond to questions pertaining to each of the eight domains, and permitting some comparability to national data. It gives community a lot of evidence as to what their community members are feeling about quality of life across all eight domains. This has allowed us to report at a local level very comprehensively, showing how your community is doing, where there are things that you can act on specifically to change residents’ lives for the better. We never do the survey, however, without partners at the community level. Our mandate is not only to do rigorous research, but it is not going to be meaningful unless we have community partners for knowledge mobilization. Knowledge mobilization is critically important but, for us, unless it translates into action, I don’t think we have done our job. Partnering with community organizations, municipal governments, non-for-profits, and through them, effecting change based on the evidence that has been generated is very important to us.

Nazeem: So local communities knowing about their wellbeing and being able to act on it is very important—that is what I am hearing.

Bryan: Yes, absolutely. We have been in a half dozen communities so far with our wellbeing survey and what we are hearing is that some provinces, in particular, are beginning to pay attention now because the communities see the value of this and beginning to make changes. We have a two-prong approach now, from the top-down with our national report, but from the grassroots level where we can really see positive change and that sends the message up to the government. Now they have tangible evidence that could make a difference at the local level.

Nazeem: One of the other things that Canadians care about is inequities; inequities of all types, whether they be gender, generations, regions, cultural groups. Is there something that CIW can say about inequities and how to close these inequities?

Bryan: Actually I am glad you ask me about that. Certainly, on our aspiration list, moving forward, is to do more targeted reports on groups that are seen to be marginalized with respect to their quality of life. Where we are seeing that happening now is at the community level, because when we partner with community organizations

we work with them to identify issues of local concern. Very often that speaks to particular groups that these organizations are interested in helping to have the same degree of access to opportunities as the rest of the population. For example, in the city of Guelph, Ontario, they were quite concerned about the growing income gap, although they are a relatively affluent, mid-size community. We took the wellbeing data, and working with them, we said, let's separate the upper quintile and the lower quintile respondents and see how they are faring in all of the different domains and related aspects. This analysis allowed the city to target lower income populations, so it can focus on allocating different types of resources and locations and services to be more accessible to people. We were also able break the data down spatially to show what parts of the city are more of a concern. When we were in the city of Kingston, Ontario, they were quite concerned with community engagement, such as volunteerism, and how it can be a pathway to wellbeing. They wanted to know if everybody had the same degree of access to engagement in the community. We were able to demonstrate which group had more or less access to opportunities to engage with their city; so as a consequence, without exception, those who were more engaged exhibited higher levels of quality of life in all respects. At a political level, the results helped show where they should focus their energies and welcome citizen participation in the democratic process. In the city of Guelph, when residents were asked about the quality of health services and the degree to which they were accessible, they said that the quality of services is quite good, but had concerns about having access to them. Again, this showed that some groups had difficulty accessing services by virtue of either where they lived or by the nature of the group of which they were a part. The local health services response was, we have been spending too much time trying to convince people we are still providing quality services, whereas what we should be focusing on is enabling access to them. So it changed their perspective of how they delivered services to the community, and I like to think that it had an effect on quality of life overall, by changing that perspective.

Nazeem: Has there been any surprises in this work, either in terms of findings or actions.

Bryan: One of the things that I hadn't anticipated is that—it is a pleasant surprise—the framework more than the indicators has been embraced as a guiding philosophy for a lot of organizations. Let me give you two specific examples. The Association for Ontario Health Centres had traditionally adopted a primary care model, but when they came to know about our project, they adopted our framework as a new philosophy for provision of health support through their health centres. Now they encourage all of their health centres across the province to think more holistically about people who come for their services and to think about all aspects of their lives. They now offer them support beyond

primary health care or repair of the injuries, and help them better integrate into their communities, including their families, and help them acquire the tools to better access opportunities. Second, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, which has a mandate to grant money for projects in communities to improve quality of life, was challenged to assess the impact of their granting and they have adopted our framework and integrated it into their strategic planning. They are using it in two ways—in assessing grant applications for their adherence to the quality of life framework, and in evaluating the impact of their granting on improving the quality of life in community. We continue to partner with both of these organizations.

Nazeem: What is next for the Canadian Index of Wellbeing?

Bryan: We are committed to continue releasing our national index of wellbeing, because it keeps the wellbeing agenda on the national consciousness. Our intention is to release the national index every two years and the next one is to be released early next year. In the intervening years, using the national index as a platform, we hope to release provincial indexes. Because of data availability, releasing these reports in a two-year cycle seems appropriate. At the community level, we are doing projects largely by invitation. We are in a half a dozen communities already, and are about to initiate wellbeing surveys with two more communities. This is the evolving direction of our program that I think is going to lead ultimately to having a database that grows from the grassroots level and allows us to make comparisons amongst communities. Communities are very interested in knowing how they are doing relative to other communities of similar size and structure. I think it will provide us with potential for growth with respect to having an impact on the ground and that requires working with community-based partners. I don't want CIW to be seen as a rating scheme, but rather remind people and organizations that when we step back it is about: what is your vision, what is your mission for your community? Everyone has some vision related to quality of life for their community and that is the unifying force that brings these organizations together. It is part of our mission as well. We bring researchers together with communities for action on the ground, all guided towards quality of life. These comparisons are really good, not for rating, but for striving towards excellence, getting better. So we can learn from another community in an area that we are not doing so well, and see the way they are providing services and programs that we can adapt to improve in a particular aspect of wellbeing. Similarly for the provincial level—it is not about comparing the provinces, it is about adopting policies that have shown to be effective in one province that can be adopted in another to raise wellbeing within those provinces as well. This is why we would like to develop a database at the community level that begins the grassroots seeding of ideas and comparisons that people can

learn from. Jumping back to the national level, I sit on the Advisory Committee on Social Conditions for Statistics Canada, and played a small part in advising on the structure of their next General Social Survey cycle, to be released next year, called “Canadians at Home and at Work”. It is effectively a wellbeing survey and it touches on aspects of all eight of our domains. I think there is some sense that what is happening at the local level is being recognized as part of the national level agenda, to see how we are doing as a nation.

Nazeem: Those are great examples. Hopefully the new government will take note of the survey release and recognize the change in the land in terms of the importance of evidence driving policy, and do something about it. We can hope that, can’t we?

Bryan: Yes, as we heard recently in an acceptance speech, ‘sunny ways, sunny ways.’

Nazeem: On that note, I would really like to thank you for sitting down with us this morning and talking about the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. We look forward to hearing from you and from the project. All the best!

Bryan: Thank you; it was a pleasure chatting with you.

About the Contributors

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. He is currently a member of Statistics Canada’s Advisory Group on Social Conditions, on the Steering Committee of Research Data Canada, and Editor in Chief of *Leisure/Loisir*. He was elected as a Fellow to the Academy of Leisure Sciences in 2012. His research focuses on the role of leisure in the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities, the spatial distribution and analysis of leisure in communities, time use allocation, and social indicators research.

Nazeem Muhajarine, Ph.D., is a Professor in the Department of Community Health and Epidemiology, University of Saskatchewan, and the Director, Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Research Unit. In 2000, he was a member of a small group of University-Community leaders in Saskatoon who co-founded the Community-University Institute for Social Research (CUISR). Since 2003, he has been

part of a national expert group contributing to the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. He developed and co-wrote (along with Ron Labonte) the Healthy Populations domain of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. He is currently a research associate of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing.