



## *Acknowledgments*

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# A call to action: People and policy for positive change

## Countless interconnected systems

Society is a hugely complex, interconnected “system of systems” — of relationships, of policies, of services, of countless visible and invisible interactions, influences, and impacts. Improving wellbeing in one system will often have positive impacts on others and on the whole. A key goal of the CIW is to identify and understand the connections between the eight domains — each of which represents a system — and the many factors that influence overall wellbeing. Using 64 indicators that reflect aspects of our everyday lives, the CIW combines data, theory, and practice to come up with new solutions to boost different aspects of wellbeing — either simultaneously or in succession.

For example, a healthier population reduces the cost of health care treatments. Reduced costs frees up funds for other domains, like education. A more educated workforce is more innovative. This boosts productivity and economic prosperity. A wealthier economy can afford better social programmes and cultural activities for everyone. Culture and leisure help build closer ties to the community. This improves community vitality and boosts democratic engagement. People who feel engaged stand up for issues that matter most to them, like the environment. Naturally, a more sustainable environment produces nutritious foods and offers a range of options for leisure, recreation, and quality family time — all of which improve health. This positive cycle amplifies what begins with improved health and is just one example of the complex interplay among domains of our wellbeing.

The CIW’s research on wellbeing and its key leverage points is also a call to action for all Ontarians. Far from a series of passive observations, it is an opportunity for all of us to make changes in our homes, at work, and in our communities. If we want to create a society that places wellbeing — in its broadest sense — at the centre of policy development and action, we need to understand the complex interplay of those factors that affect our wellbeing. Policies and actions intended to create

opportunities, build capacity, and enhance an environment where Canadians can lead fulfilling and satisfying lives recognise that wellbeing is based on more than purely economic considerations.<sup>28</sup> Policies and actions that recognise changes in one area — in one system contributing to the whole — will inevitably have implications for another area.

This is an approach that is increasingly recognised around the world as having the greatest potential to raise the quality of our lives. This is an approach that can prompt positive change.

## Ideas for positive change

To explore innovative policy options, the CIW invited experts on each of the eight domains to come together and consider the findings of the Ontario report. They were given the task of exploring the findings and looking for new insights within and especially across domains, making connections between indicators and outcomes in different domains, and identifying strategies that could facilitate the development of mutually-beneficial policies and programmes. They also discovered that making connections among issues led to making connections among public, private, and non-governmental organisations that could lead to powerful new partnerships. In this section, we present the insights and ideas that emerged that help us shift the process from *thinking* about problems to *problem-solving* for positive change.

### Reduce income inequality

The consequences of Ontario's growing inequality of income and in wealth are not confined to our living standards. Income inequality leads to larger gaps between the rich and the poor in terms of opportunities, level of educational attainment, access to leisure and cultural opportunities, and overall health.<sup>29</sup> These impacts are often felt for generations. As a society, inequality undermines our sense of common purpose, marginalises and excludes the poor, weakens community vitality, threatens our democracy, and even reduces life expectancy.

If we are serious about wanting a future where we all enjoy higher living standards, we must recognise the dangers of growing inequality. We must move towards a country that is both wealthier *and* equitable. Within Ontario and Canada we can:

- 1. Reform Canada's tax and transfer system to be fair to all income groups and especially to reduce the burden on low-income Canadians
- 2. Increase minimum wages

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<sup>28</sup> O'Donnell, G., Deaton, A., Durand, M., Halpern, D., & Layard, R. (2014). *Wellbeing and policy*. Commission on Wellbeing and Policy. London: Legatum Institute.

<sup>29</sup> Wellesley Institute. (2013). *Poverty is a health issue*. Submission on the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy. Toronto, ON: Wellesley Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/publication/poverty-is-a-health-issue/>

*Considerable research shows that a solid start in life through early childhood education increases a child’s school readiness and leads to better academic success, higher living standards, and ultimately, better health across all social and economic groups.<sup>30</sup>*

- ✔ Consider a guaranteed annual income for those most in need
- ✔ Raise corporate tax rates to levels at least similar to other developed countries
- ✔ Provide targeted assistance for the long-term unemployed and better protection for part-time workers
- ✔ Develop a “national learning agenda” that would improve access to early learning and childcare
- ✔ Make college and university tuition more affordable and alleviate student debt

### Adopt early childhood education and greater access to childcare

Considerable research shows that a solid start in life through early childhood education increases a child’s school readiness and leads to better academic success, higher living standards, and ultimately, better health across all social and economic groups.<sup>30</sup> Providing a level playing field in the formative years of children born into poverty is a key to addressing existing and future inequality.<sup>31</sup> Finally, access to early childhood education and to adequate childcare supports gender equity by offering women more equal opportunities to pursue full-time work, thereby actively building on their human capital and full engagement in the workforce. Ultimately, these actions lead to a wide array of individual, family, and societal benefits.

Building on the existing strength of Ontario and Canada’s Education domain with comprehensive, coordinated early childhood education, adequate childcare, and family support policies can further help address one of the provinces key challenges — income inequality. To achieve this, a number of options should be explored:

- ✔ Adopt a Federal-Provincial-Territorial programme of early childhood education (ECE)
- ✔ Expand the number of regulated, centre-based childcare spaces to better reflect and address the needs of families with young children, most of which have two employed parents
- ✔ Extend affordable and accessible childcare to university and college students with young children

<sup>30</sup> Evans, R.G., Hertzman, C., & Morgan, S. (2007). *Improving health outcomes in Canada*. In J. Leonard, C. Ragan, & F. St-Hilaire (Eds.), *A Canadian priorities agenda: Policy choices to improve economic and social well-being* (pp. 291-325). Montréal, QC: Institute for Research on Public Policy.

<sup>31</sup> Scott, K. (2008). *Growing up in North America: The economic wellbeing of children in Canada, United States, and Mexico*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council on Social Development, Anne E. Casey Foundation, and Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México.

<sup>32</sup> Mikkonen, J., & Raphael, D. (2010). *Social determinants of health: The Canadian facts*. Toronto, ON: York University School of Health Policy and Management. Available from [http://www.thecanadianfacts.org/The\\_Canadian\\_Facts.pdf](http://www.thecanadianfacts.org/The_Canadian_Facts.pdf)

## Expand access to Community Health Centres

Our wellbeing is shaped by a wide variety of factors, most of which occur outside of our formal health care system. The places and conditions within which we live, learn, work, and play are the most important determinants of our health.<sup>32</sup> In turn, our health is related to income inequality and education — it affects our ability to work, our ability to learn, to engage fully with our friends and in our communities. Regrettably, our current health care system was not designed to consider these. It focuses on a “downstream approach” to restore health once it has been lost, instead of an “upstream approach” that prevents illness and disease before they take hold.

Ontario’s Community Health Centres (CHCs) have shown that the most effective, efficient, and affordable means of delivering primary health care is through an “upstream approach”. CHCs partner with other agencies and with the community to fully integrate a wide range of health promotion and community development services. These services proactively help to overcome barriers to greater wellbeing attributable to health-related social and economic factors like income levels, access to shelter/housing, education, language, and geographic location. While CHCs have been very successful in meeting the health needs of vulnerable populations and in managing complex chronic disease, many parts of the province do not have access to them. Currently, Ontario’s CHCs only serve about 4% of the population. To benefit the long-term health of Ontarians, we must:

- ❶ Adopt a proactive and preventative approach to health care that addresses social and economic factors
- ❷ Expand access to Ontario’s Community Health Centres by creating a comprehensive network that enables people in all parts of the province — especially those facing barriers to better health — to access its benefits
- ❸ Provide direct and targeted funding from federal and provincial governments to support a network model of community health centres throughout the province

## Develop a public transit strategy for Ontario

Increasingly, Ontarians have to commute longer distances to work. Individually, this has a negative effect on health, is expensive, and intensifies the feeling of “time crunch.” Longer daily commutes are impeding economic productivity, putting more vehicles on the roads for longer periods of time, and ultimately, hurting the environment, and by extension, contributing to poorer health and wellbeing.

A broader and more coordinated public transit system would lighten congestion on the roads, improve air quality, and increase people’s access to work, to needed goods and services, to nutritious foods, and to leisure and culture opportunities. A viable public transit system can be especially

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important for disadvantaged and marginalised people. Such a system can be one of the key means of reducing environmental impacts, enhancing employment opportunities, and reducing health inequities.<sup>33</sup> The major challenge, however, is that Ontario municipalities have limited revenue to design and build adequate modern transit systems within and between regions. To move towards a public transit strategy for Ontario, the federal and provincial governments need to:

- ✓ Develop strategies for accessible, efficient, and affordable public transit systems as a path towards improved health, more opportunities, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions
- ✓ Emphasise *accessibility* in transit policy rather than simply mobility so wellbeing is the focus, not just moving people farther and faster
- ✓ Reinvest more of the federal tax dollars that communities send to Ottawa into new buses, subways, and commuter rail systems
- ✓ Work with municipalities, provinces, and territories to fill critical gaps in transportation networks

### Address “time crunch” through changes in infrastructure, social, and environmental policy

As noted above, feelings of “time crunch” are intensified by longer commutes and more difficult access to needed goods and services, and other opportunities. By looking at commuting — and general access — as a systems problem, we recognise that it extends beyond the individuals and groups directly involved and see broader patterns and solutions. For instance, as masses of people leave home for work, and work for home at approximately the same times each day, they overload the province’s roads, causing gridlock, spikes in carbon emissions, and generally lengthening commute times. These patterns reduce the time people have for family, for leisure, and for their communities, increase stress and anxiety, and contribute to worsening air quality.

We can address “time crunch” by looking across all CIW domains. If municipal planners, provincial officials, employers, and developers were to re-imagine both the transportation infrastructure and how it is used, we can lighten the concentration of traffic on the roads. We need to:

- ✓ Provide more opportunities for staggered work times and teleworking
- ✓ Shift urban design towards more mixed residential and commercial uses so people do not need to travel as far to work or to access goods and services

<sup>33</sup> Wray, R. (2013). *The spatial trap: Exploring equitable access to public transit as a social determinant of health*. Policy paper. Toronto, ON: Wellesley Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/The-Spatial-Trap2.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Boyd, D.R. (2001). *Canada vs. the OECD: An environmental comparison*. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria. Available at [www.environmentalindicators.com/htdocs/about.htm](http://www.environmentalindicators.com/htdocs/about.htm)

- 📌 Enhance the network of bike lanes and walkable communities so that people who work locally can improve their health and have greater choice on how to allocate their time

## Increase our daily connection with the natural environment

Whether we bike to work, walk to school, or use local parks and green spaces, our connection to the local natural environment is closely linked to our impact on the broader environment on which we rely for resources such as clean air and water. Our close connections to the natural environment enhance our quality of life and remind us of our responsibility to protect it. These connections speak to the benefits of connecting with nature in our communities, living in a clean environment, and the positive health outcomes that result.

By connecting aspects of education, time use, and leisure and culture to our concern for the environment, we can make a powerful case on how to reimagine the role it plays in our lives and how our interactions with nature can facilitate its protection and our wellbeing. We can think about how to:

- 📌 Better integrate a system of green spaces into communities through urban design so that people can experience and enjoy nature every day as we work, live, and play
- 📌 Encourage daily environmental engagement, such as walking to school or participation in community gardens, to improve health, facilitate recreational opportunities, and raise awareness of and appreciation for the environment
- 📌 Ensure public spaces, such as parks, public green spaces, and trails, are integrated into the human landscape, provide opportunities for community connections, and are maintained in environmentally-friendly ways

## Reduce our dependence on non-renewable energy reserves

By making stronger, daily connections with local natural places and spaces and acknowledging the deterioration of the broader environment in which we live, we better understand the critical role the environment plays in our lives. While GDP measures our overall economic productivity, it ignores the cost to our environment — it fails to address the depletion of our natural resources, the increased pollution of our air and water, or the reduced sustainability and health of the environment.

We must admit that our economy is borrowing heavily from the natural environment without seriously considering the long-term impact of those “loans”. Canada ranks 27th out of 29 OECD countries in energy use

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per capita<sup>34</sup> and its consumption is almost three times as much as the international average.<sup>35</sup> Over 80% of that massive energy consumption comes from non-renewable hydrocarbons (i.e., oil, gas, and coal) and an additional 10% comes from nuclear energy.<sup>36</sup> Given the impacts that such heavy reliance on these resources has on our health and environment quality, we need a society to:

- ✓ Balance immediate energy needs and economic benefits against our future wellbeing
- ✓ Find more effective ways to maintain high levels of energy production while decreasing our greenhouse gas emissions
- ✓ Invest more revenues from fossil fuels into sustainable forms of energy such as wind, solar, and biomass
- ✓ Shift energy demand through carbon tax policies or other subsidies to drive investment and separate energy production from greenhouse gas emissions

### Develop democratic engagement as a process through education and new technology — especially for youth

If we are to achieve positive change in our lives, whether it be the environment or in any domain, we must do more than make expert recommendations. We need to be committed citizens who are eager to get involved. Most parts of our lives — our education, health care, environment, workplace health, and food safety, for example — are touched by legislation and regulation. When we embrace our full democratic role — indeed, our *responsibility* — we can shape the policies that we care about most and that affect us every day. Sadly, trends in the province indicate that Ontarians are ambivalent about our democracy.

Democratic engagement is a process that involves: (1) *political knowledge* — what people learn about public affairs, (2) *political trust* — public support for the political system, and (3) *political participation* — activities that influence government and the decision-making process.<sup>37</sup> When knowledge, trust, and action grow, we can influence the world around us. We need to must excite Ontarians about the tools, the actions, and the relationships they can use to full advantage and see how they can bring about meaningful change to any domain where political debate occurs. We therefore can:

<sup>34</sup> Boyd, D.R. (2001). *Canada vs. the OECD: An environmental comparison*. Victoria, BC: University of Victoria. Available at [www.environmentalindicators.com/htdocs/about.htm](http://www.environmentalindicators.com/htdocs/about.htm)

<sup>35</sup> The World Bank. (2014). *World Data Bank: World Development Indicators — Energy use (kg of oil equivalent per capita)*. The World Bank Group. Retrieved from <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/tableview.aspx>

<sup>36</sup> Hughes, J.D. (2010). *Hydrocarbons in North America*. The Post Carbon Reader Series: Energy. Santa Rosa, CA: Post Carbon Institute. Available at [www.postcarbon.org/Reader/PCReader-Hughes-Energy.pdf](http://www.postcarbon.org/Reader/PCReader-Hughes-Energy.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Norris, P. (2001). *Digital divide: Civic engagement, information poverty, and the internet worldwide*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- ❖ Support teachers and schools to integrate democratic engagement themes into the wider curriculum
- ❖ Consider lowering the voting age to provide students still in high school with the experience of voting to enhance the link between learning and doing
- ❖ Educate and include people who may not feel welcome in the political process. For example, ensure new Canadians in English as a second language (ESL) classes understand the role that they can play in our democracy; encourage more women to enter politics; and demonstrate to youth how their engagement really does matter for their future
- ❖ Maximise the use of the internet, mobile communications, and other technologies to raise awareness, provide information, create a forum for political discussion, and to invite direct participation, particularly among youth<sup>38</sup>
- ❖ Restore confidence in our Parliament and legislatures by demanding elected and non-elected officials focus on issues of public concern, debate ideas, and behave more ethically and respectfully towards their colleagues
- ❖ Ensure that citizens feel welcome in city and town halls and legislatures, understand how they can participate in the political process, have meaningful opportunities for input, and can see their input translated into action

### Focus on the community as a place for social innovation and change

Within each domain of the CIW, data reported for Ontario as a whole hide both successes and problems. For instance, province-wide indicators for the Healthy Populations domain masks the difficulty that sub-groups of Ontarians and some regions might be facing in accessing health services. Understanding that these issues most often play out at the community level is a first step towards creating custom solutions that work for those groups affected.

To borrow from the saying “all politics is local”, communities are the ideal place to build cooperation among stakeholders, to break down the silos between domains, and to experiment with social innovation. While broad public policy can be implemented at the national or provincial levels, the community level is where meeting compelling challenges head-on and customising new ways to address them may have the most, and the fastest, impact on our wellbeing. Critically, the process of cooperation also can lead to social change and help build community vitality and encourage

*Critically, the process of cooperation also can lead to social change and help build community vitality and encourage greater democratic engagement.*

<sup>38</sup> Milner, H. (2007). *The problem of political drop-outs: Canada in comparative perspective*. In A.-G. Gagnon & A.B. Tanguay (Eds.), *Canadian parties in transition* (3rd ed., pp. 437-465). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

greater democratic engagement. In this respect, the process is just as valuable as the outcomes.

To support the process of social change, innovation, and collaboration among diverse community-based groups, we can:

- ✔ Create, fund, and support ways for people to connect with each other, with the natural environment, and with institutions meant to represent them
- ✔ Support the growth of formal and informal cooperation among organisations that serve the same citizens and have complementary missions to help them develop and deliver integrated plans
- ✔ Encourage communities to conduct wellbeing surveys to establish baseline knowledge of their residents' needs, to measure gaps in access to services that support wellbeing, and to guide local policy and initiatives
- ✔ Ensure communities can direct resources to those in need and respond quickly to emergent issues that might compromise community wellbeing
- ✔ Help communities create the conditions and build the capacity for collective action that can sustain wellbeing for all residents

### Enhance access to public spaces, leisure and culture opportunities for all citizens

Our communities are also the best places to build relationships and to rekindle participation in leisure and culture. Trust among Ontarians appears to be eroding and participation in cultural and leisure activities has dropped to a 17-year low. How are these related? Participation in culture, leisure, and recreational activities is inevitably social in nature — it brings us into regular contact with others who share similar interests and values. These connections help build social capital — trusting relationships, stronger ties to the community, and greater understanding of the diverse groups within the community. They also contribute to individual enrichment, particularly among individuals who are marginalised or disadvantaged.

There are both macro and micro approaches for building greater trust between people, for creating stronger connections to community, and for providing better access to leisure and cultural opportunities. We need to think beyond simply creating more activities and ensure that people are aware, feel included, and have the resources to participate. These include:

- ✔ Build community with a mosaic approach by creating many opportunities for informal interactions among diverse groups within the community
- ✔ Create or enhance safe and attractive public spaces where people can

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play freely, can meet and interact, and where friendship and trust can grow through daily contact

- ❖ Amend provincial legislation and community plans concerning open space and parkland dedication to ensure new and redeveloped communities include larger, integrated spaces where resident contacts, exchanges, and play can occur
- ❖ Ensure all citizens, regardless of social or economic status, have access to opportunities for leisure and culture
- ❖ Support partnerships between community groups and public agencies that identify local needs and help provide access to leisure and culture opportunities, especially for marginalised groups and new Canadians who may be unfamiliar with traditional programmes and services
- ❖ Protect or restore funding for arts, culture, and recreational programmes

## Two critical research recommendations

### Frame policy in terms of life stage, generation, and location

Increasingly, we have communities defined by the “sandwich generation” taking care of their children and their ageing parents, retirees looking after grandchildren, and multiple generations living together. We are not only individuals and members of a broader society, but also members of increasingly diverse and multi-generational families. These various roles and the responsibilities that come with them have an influence on our decisions, our work and incomes, even how we allocate our time. Further, these roles and responsibilities fluctuate continuously as we move through the different stages of our lives — as sons and daughters, as parents and grandparents, as friends and neighbours — and in the different places and conditions where we live.

We need to know more about the ways different stages of life and inter-generational relationships positively — or negatively — affect our wellbeing. Too often, policy and programmes are designed and delivered to *individuals* without consideration of the context within which they live — the family members and other people they are responsible to and for, the relationships they maintain and support, the jobs and community responsibilities they have, and where they live in the province. Therefore, we need to:

- ❖ Use data to detect trends at different stage of life, for different generations, and for different regions so policies and programmes better reflect the needs of diverse groups in the context in which they live

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*Evidence-based decision-making is critical to ensure that policy development and implementation are guided by the most current and relevant indicators of those aspects of our lives that matter most.*

- ✔ Develop social policies and programmes that reflect an understanding of the relational context; in other words, policies for families, groups, and communities rather than just individuals
- ✔ Develop policy that is informed by Canadian values and based on research evidence
- ✔ Develop policy not just for conditions today, but with an eye towards future conditions as shaped by other related policies and programmes

## Improve national data collection

Research into the wellbeing of all Canadians and the policy actions that it can facilitate is limited by data availability and access. Without adequate data, the capacity of our institutions to obtain a complete picture of our wellbeing and to respond accordingly is seriously restricted. While Canada collects an abundance of economic data, the breadth and comprehensiveness of social and environmental data are much poorer by comparison. We must place greater priority on the regular collection and publication of high quality data that can better inform the development of new policy and enforce the good policies already in place.

One of the greatest challenges to ensuring that we can assess our wellbeing effectively at both the national and provincial levels is the continued availability of reliable, valid, and timely data. Statistics Canada, Environment Canada, and other federal agencies do provide some excellent data resources, but unfortunately, there are few robust, multi-year, and fully accessible national data sets on a wide array of social and environmental aspects of our lives. Without such data, our efforts to report on changes to Canadians' quality of life are hampered.

Having access to such data is essential. Evidence-based decision-making is critical to ensure that policy development and implementation are guided by the most current and relevant indicators of those aspects of our lives that matter most. We must:

- ✔ Place greater priority on the regular collection and publication of high-quality social and environmental data to inform the development of new policy
- ✔ Ensure the continued availability and accessibility of reliable, valid, and timely data on all aspects of wellbeing
- ✔ Use sound social and environmental data to develop policy and then to enforce, monitor, and validate the effectiveness of policies to enhance the wellbeing of all Canadians

# Conclusion

*The CIW promotes constructive and informative dialogue that can lead to positive societal change. With the CIW, we can choose to stop and question the status quo and consider alternative ways to promote both a higher quality of life for all Canadians and a healthy economy.*

The divergence in the CIW and GDP tells us emphatically that we have not been making the right investments in our people and in our communities — and we have not been doing it for a long time. It is time public policy focused more on the quality of our lives. By looking at the CIW findings through a policy lens and considering how change occurs within a complex system of interconnected domains, we can make better decisions about how to improve the quality of life for everyone. We can determine how the various levels of government, the private sector, the community, and non-profit sectors can work together on improving those areas where we have lost ground since 1994, while bolstering those areas that have improved during the same period. The interrelated nature of the CIW domains requires this level of cooperation to achieve the best outcomes for all Canadians. Doing so will guide the development and implementation of good public policy and will measure progress on what really matters to Ontarians and Canadians for years to come.

The *Canadian Index of Wellbeing* conducts rigorous research related to, and regularly and publicly reports on, the quality of life of Canadians; encourages policy shapers and government leaders to make decisions based on solid evidence; and empowers Canadians to advocate for change that responds to their needs and values.

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