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Canada's First Quality of Life Report Card – A Citizens' Prototype

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1. Introduction

Towards the end of the 1990s, there was a clear perception in Canada that the drastic but successful efforts throughout the decade to reduce and eliminate the country's financial/economic deficit had the unintended and unfortunate side effect of producing a considerable social deficit. The call for research to develop a prototype set of national quality of life indicators meaningful to Canadians was made in 1999, in response to a growing need on the part of policymakers and leaders from all sectors of Canadian society, to have a made-in-Canada tool to take stock of the country's quality of life. This tool was expected to offer a more comprehensive measure than that offered by the United Nations' Human Development Index and other single-focus measures, such as the Gross Domestic Product. The prototype set of national quality of life indicators was to provide objective information to decision makers and citizens alike on precisely how the country was faring, as the new century was about to begin. Following the development of the prototype set of indicators, the supporting data would be collected and reported to Canadians and thereby provide the necessary backdrop for appropriate public policy actions to be taken.

In creating a prototype set of national indicators to assess quality of life in Canada, the Quality of Life Indicators Project was designed to capture what truly mattered to Canadians. Citizens' voices and values were deemed critical for the development of the indicators. The project bridged differences in language, measures and tools being used by researchers, practitioners and policymakers in fields relevant to quality of life. The results led to a "report card" based on the indicators identified by citizens, a benchmark from which Canadians would be able to track progress over time in the nation's quality of life. Finally, CPRN anticipates that the results of the project will enable a more balanced discussion about public policy priorities.

¹The author draws on the body of knowledge created in the context of the Quality of Life Indicators Project, which is posted on CPRN's Web site (www.cprn.org) and which is listed in the reference section at the conclusion of this paper.

The prototype, published in April 2001, reflects the recommendations of 346 Canadians who participated in deliberative dialogue groups in October 2000, to answer the questions: What matters to you in terms of quality of life in Canada? What information do you need to know, to know if these aspects of quality of life are getting better, worse or staying the same? Who should collect the information and who should report it? Who should do what with the results?

The prototype served as the basis for the first *Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizens' Report Card*, released in September 2002.

This article provides details on the development of the prototype and the first report card results. It concludes with a discussion of the next steps being contemplated in this research.

2. Literature Review

Three background papers² were commissioned in the context of this research. The first one looked at the question of societal indicators and explored their evolution from the 1970s to the 1990s. The second one profiled a sample of over 20 community- and citizen-driven initiatives undertaken to develop quality of life indicators. The third one reviewed over five years of Canadian polling data relating to quality of life. These three papers served to inform the project's Steering Committee and management on technical aspects of quality of life indicators, public involvement methodologies and polls used by others in other circumstances and for other purposes than those related to the project at hand. They served to shape the project's dialogue tools, including the information kits provided to citizens in advance of and at the dialogue sessions as well as the survey questionnaires administered to citizens at the outset and at the close of each dialogue.

3. Method and Data

Approach and Method

CPRN launched a series of 40 deliberative dialogues in October 2000, designed to engage Canadians in discussions about what should be included in the national indicator system. CPRN used a public involvement process to determine citizens' views about what constitutes quality of life because it believes that citizens are "experts" in what matters in their lives. Only citi-

² Sharpe, Andrew. 2000. *A Survey of Indicators of Economic and Social Well-being*. Ottawa. Canadian Policy Research Networks; Legowski, Barbara. 2000. *A Sampling of Community- and Citizen-Driven Quality of Life/Societal Indicator Projects*. Ottawa. Canadian Policy Research Networks; Mendelsohn, Matthew. 2000. *Review of Canadian Quality of Life Survey Data*. Ottawa. Canadian Policy Research Networks and Department of Political Studies, Queen's University.

zens can articulate their values and it is their values that should guide the development of social policy.

The deliberative dialogues were supported by background papers, public opinion survey analysis, mixed citizen selection processes (random³ and purposeful⁴), a participant handbook⁵, facilitators and note-takers trained in dialogue methodology, unique and consistent dialogue protocol/agenda, exercises for setting priorities and making choices, and quantitative and qualitative instruments and analysis.

CPRN established a Steering Committee representing a broad cross-section of government, private and public organizations from across Canada to assist in the design and execution of the research.

Dialogue protocol/agenda

The half-day sessions commenced with a review of the background information, a project overview, introductions and instructions from the moderator. Participants were then asked to complete pre-dialogue questionnaires on various aspects of quality of life and requesting some demographic information. The dialogue discussions included four main parts: 1) building collective portraits of quality of life; 2) setting priorities for national quality of life indicators by having individuals vote for their top five priorities. The groups then chose one from the most frequently mentioned to explore more fully; 3) establishing responsibility for reporting on quality of life; and 4) reviewing the session and planning for follow-up activities. Participants then completed the same questionnaire they completed at the outset of the dialogues, without the demographic questions. In the first two parts of the dialogue sessions, moderators used specially designed quality of life indicator cards. These had been included in the information package participants had received in advance of the dialogues as an impetus for discussion.

The dialogues

Forty dialogue discussions, each three to four hours in length, with eight to ten citizens per group, took place between October 11-26, 2000, in 21 different towns and cities across nine provinces throughout Canada. Twenty-eight groups were held in urban settings, while 12 took place in rural areas.

³ *Random groups*: Citizens were selected according to a number of criteria for representative diversity including background, geographic location, urban/rural mix, employment status, education, gender, socio-economic status and age.

⁴ *Hard to reach groups*: It was considered important to reach people who are not often enough involved and for whom special recruiting efforts might be necessary. Such "hard to reach" groups included people of various ethnic backgrounds, Aboriginal people, seniors, young people, students, the homeless and single mothers. *Influencers*: An effort was also made to obtain input from groups of "influencers," people who were identified as decision-makers or influential in their professional lives. These groups were identified through professional contacts.

⁵ See CPRN Web site for the participant material, www.cprn.org

The dialogue discussions included 34 English-language groups and six French-language groups. Of the 40 groups, three were with youth, five involved hard-to-reach Canadians and seven gathered together public and private sector leaders and influential community representatives.

Professionally trained moderators facilitated each dialogue session and independent note-takers captured the content of the discussions, using laptop computers in most instances. The discussions were also tape-recorded as a contingency to the recording procedures and to enhance analysis capacity

Much richness and variety were derived from the work of the participants in the first two parts of the dialogues, when they were tasked to build a collective portrait of quality of life in Canada (using a mind-mapping technique), followed by the priority-setting exercise. Participants in some sessions generated as many as 75 descriptions in the form of single words or fuller expressions, which were posted on the walls and then clustered.

4. Data Analysis

Results – The prototype

In all, the multitude of themes that emerged from the dialogues encompassed literally hundreds of ideas about what contributes to quality of life in Canada. The content of the dialogue sessions was analyzed inductively based on participants' written and verbal input. Input from the session transcripts and the cards generated by each group to summarize key elements of their collective portraits were coded. The data were then subjected to a systematic thematic analysis to determine how often themes were discussed, as well as to capture the context in which the themes were discussed. In spite of the breadth and scope of the input, a number of common themes emerged when participants were invited to cluster similar or connected ideas and a further analysis and in some cases interpretation of all groups' work.

Drawing upon the analysis of the public dialogue results, CPRN held two workshops in mid-December 2000 that brought together a sample of citizens who had participated in the dialogues (indicator practitioners/experts and Steering Committee members) to develop criteria for selecting a manageable number of national quality of life indicators. The draft prototype of more than 40 indicators covering a number of themes was prepared and distributed for further validation to a sample of citizens who had participated in the October dialogues. The final prototype set of 40 national indicators, featured at the outset of this article, consists of the nine themes or elements, each reflecting the values of citizens expressed in the dialogue sessions:

Democracy
 Health
 Education/learning
 Environment
 Social conditions
 Community
 Personal well-being
 Employment/economy
 Government

Interconnected and overlapping, these elements together form a comprehensive picture of what Canadians consider important to their quality of life and which they wish to have monitored and to be reported on. As shown below, each of the elements is further defined and together the elements form a set of 40 specific indicators, again corresponding to citizens' expressions. For each indicator, the definition, which guided the identification of the data source is provided in parentheses.

I. Political/Democratic Participation and Rights (two indicators)

1. Exercising democratic rights (voter turnout for general elections⁶)
2. Tolerance of diversity (perceived discrimination against racial or cultural groups)

II. Health (four indicators)

3. Quality of health care system (public rating of overall quality of the health care system and of access to health care)
4. Status of physical health (self-rated health and disability-free life expectancy)
5. Status of mental health (risk of depression and suicide rates)
6. Lifestyle (smoking rates)

III. Education/learning (seven indicators)

7. Access to universal primary/secondary education system (pre-elementary school enrolment rate)
8. Access to post-secondary education (highest level of education attained by Canadians aged 25-54)
9. Participation rates and enrolment (full-time university enrolment rate and costs – percent of family income spent on annual student fees)
10. Access to lifelong learning (adults participating in adult education/training)

⁶ Michalski, Joseph H. 2002. *Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizens' Report Card. Background Report.* Ottawa. Canadian Policy Research Networks, pp. 5-6 [for list of all exhibits included in report card].

11. Adult literacy rates (assessment of functional literacy)
12. Child/youth literacy rates (13- and 16-year-olds' performance in mathematics, reading and science)
13. Quality of education (pupil-educator ratio in public elementary/secondary schools)

IV. Environment (five indicators)

14. Air quality (Index of air quality)
15. Water (drinking) quality (municipal populations served by wastewater treatment facilities)
16. Waste management (reused, recycled, and discarded material and non-hazardous waste disposed of per capita)
17. Resources devoted to developing renewable energy sources (domestic demand for energy met by renewable fuels)
18. Access to clean, healthy public outdoor spaces (no adequate data source available)

V. Social programs/conditions (six indicators)

19. Low income rates (Canadians living below the low income [before taxes] cut-offs – LICOs)
20. Income supports for basic needs (provincial/territorial welfare schemes and social assistance for one-parent families)
21. Child care availability and affordability (regulated child care spaces available for children aged 0-12 years)
22. Living wages (proportion of working poor families)
23. Food bank usage (accessing emergency food programs)
24. Housing affordability (problems among renters)

VI. Personal well-being (three indicators)

25. Personal time stress or control over time (Canadians experiencing the “time crunch”)
26. Degree of social interaction, intimate connections, and social isolation (access to social supports, friendships and family networks)
27. Sense of personal security (perceived adequacy of income and belief that control has been lost over personal economic future)

VII. Community (four indicators)

28. Satisfaction with police, courts, prison and parole systems (public perceptions about the quality of work that the criminal justice system is doing)
29. Sense of personal safety and changes in crime rate (violent crimes and property crime rates)
30. Level of civic involvement (donation and volunteer rates)
31. Availability of programs and services (no adequate data available)

VIII. Economy and Employment (six indicators)

32. Unemployment and employment rates (national unemployment rate)
33. Involuntary part-time work (involuntary part-time workers)
34. Job security and satisfaction (perceived likelihood of losing one's job in the next year and reported job satisfaction)
35. Commercial bankruptcies (number of commercial bankruptcies)
36. Income/wealth distribution (income inequality)
37. Consumer debt levels (consumer bankruptcies)

IX. Government (three indicators)

38. Level of public trust (trust in federal government) (poor data available)
39. Accountability/stewardship of public values and funds (satisfaction with electoral process and belief that citizens have input into what government does) (poor adequate data available)
40. Public governance (public governance in government performance) (no adequate data available)

5. Preparing the Report Card

With the framework in place, the next step in satisfying Canadian citizens' need to know if their national quality of life is getting better, worse, or staying the same was to gather data for the prototype. For most indicators, a variety of data sources was examined before selecting one that most effectively responded to the direction set by citizens. In some cases, no adequate data sources were found. Rather than removing the indicator from the prototype, this finding was included in the report card, to remain true to citizens' values.

As noted, *The Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizens' Report Card*⁷ provides snapshots of progress (or lack thereof) for each of the Prototype's nine themes and 40 indicators, by drawing upon a diverse range of sources of objective and subjective data to provide measures of each at the national level. The data are drawn from the best-known and most reliable sources and national surveys. In most cases, the indicators include at least one recent measure, as well as a comparison or baseline year from the early 1990s. The re-

⁷ *The Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizens' Report Card, Background Report*, also released in September 2002, serves as the basis for the above-mentioned shorter overview report. Both reports join a series of earlier discussion papers produced as part of CPRN's Quality of Life Indicators Project, and posted on the CPRN Web site (www.cprn.org). The shorter overview report is also available in print (*Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizens' Report Card*).

sults show clear improvements on some fronts and setbacks on others — while in some cases, the situation remains more or less unchanged.

The Overview reproduced on the next two pages (and taken from *The Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizens' Report Card, Background Report summarized in Figure 1*), indicates that the results are mixed. For **democracy**, the right to vote is highly valued but voter turnouts are declining and Canadians perceive greater discrimination towards racial and ethnic groups. On the **health** front, physical and mental health statuses have improved whereas the perceived quality of health care and fairness of waiting times have not. **Education/learning** measures reveal that performance on educational attainment and university enrolment are world class but the costs of university education are rising and there is a lack of information about the quality of education. With respect to the **environment**, the data reveal that waste management is improving but air and water quality is worse. On **social conditions and programs**, the indicators show deterioration. **Community** measures show that personal safety and crime rates have improved whereas civic involvement has not. The **personal well-being** indicators are also deteriorating whereas those on the **economy** are strong. Finally, we know that Canadians want good **government** but this is difficult to measure. Indicators in this area are sorely lacking. The statistics and details for all the indicators are available in the two reports referred to earlier.

Since the release of the first prototype *Quality of Life in Canada: A Citizens' Report Card*, several questions for further quality of life research have surfaced. These include:

1. Should we move from the prototype set of national indicators and report card to a regular reporting instrument? If yes, what are the challenges, barriers, target groups, responsibilities and timeframe for producing the next report? If not, why not?
2. Assuming a move from the prototype to a regular reporting instrument, how might we plan for effective accessibility, presentation and reach?
3. In terms of QOL reporting, how should one deal with relevancy, level of reporting, frequency and medium?
4. What are the commonalities among the many quality of life projects and reports at various jurisdiction levels and relating to particular quality of life domains, such as health, environment, and employment?
5. Does linking and integrating the various quality of life projects, indicators, measures and reports cards make sense? Is it a feasible and desirable objective?
6. Should we consider the creation of a quality of life in Canada index? What are the challenges and benefits and uses?
7. At which point should citizens be engaged again to verify the sustainability of their value choices and priorities?

CPRN's prototype of national quality of life indicators includes 40 indicators organized under nine themes. The number of indicators associated with each theme is indicated in brackets.⁸

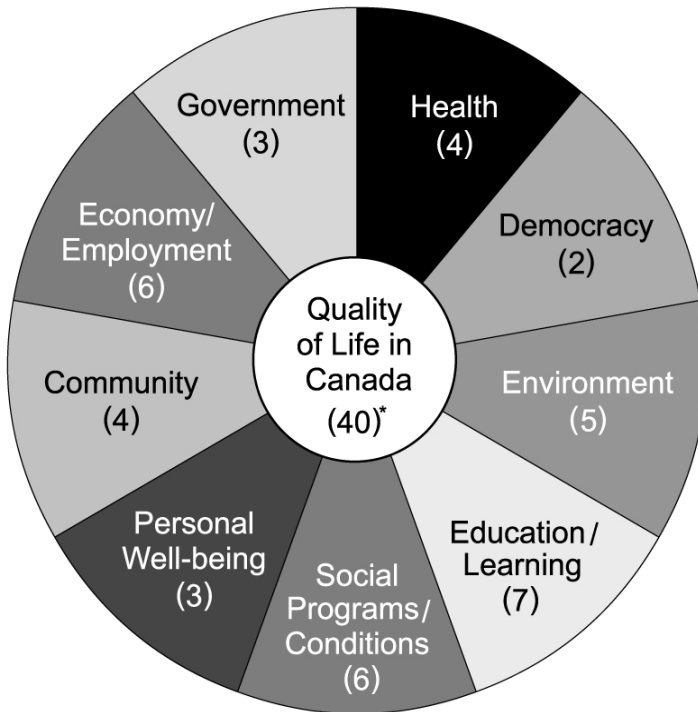


Figure 1. Quality of Life Indicators Project (QOLIP) Prototype Set of National Indicators. Graphic adapted from : Calvert-Henderson, Quality of Life Indicators: A New Tool for Assessing National Trends, Hazel Henderson, Jon Lickerman and Patricia Flynn (editors), 2000.

A group of Canadian practitioners, politicians, government officials, media representatives, indicator specialists, researchers involved with quality of life projects across the country, and citizens who participated in CPRN's deliberative dialogues on quality of life in Canada, gathered in February 2003,

⁸ CPRN is a national not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to create knowledge and lead public debate on social and economic issues important to the well-being of Canadians, in order to help build a more just, prosperous and caring society.

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in Ottawa, to begin to work on some of these questions. There was general agreement that there should be movement towards the production of a regular reporting instrument, with some conditions, including the ongoing and consistent involvement of the public. Participants identified obstacles or barriers to this future work, including the challenge related to data and comparability, to sustaining public interest and involvement, to achieving local relevance, linking national quality of life reports with community assessments, and to reaching out further to greater numbers of Canadians from all walks of society. Participants identified key elements to be respected if and when there was support to move to a regular reporting instrument, including keeping it national in focus while pertinent to local communities.

This link between quality of life at a national level and quality of life at the community level was raised by Dr. Ronald Labonte, Director of the Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Research Unit at the Universities of Regina and Saskatchewan, at a quality of life research national workshop held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, December 9-10, 2002, in a presentation on using quality of life research to mobilize community action and policy change. One of the questions he asked was whether a common set of indicators would be helpful.⁹ The answer was a resounding YES. There are already too many people using too many indicators for too many slightly different purposes. By way of solution, he suggested that:

- agreement be sought on a small core set and types of questions for survey purposes, and
- agreement be sought on a small core set of administrative data for “objective” purposes.

These solutions, amongst others offered, require national and local champions, media leadership and dedicated resources. Dr. Labonte pointed to CPRN's prototype set of national indicators as a possible model. Further quality-of-life research and dialogue in Canada involving citizens, practitioners and policymakers, will determine if this will become a reality.

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⁹ Quality of Life Research National Workshop, Halifax, Nova Scotia, December 9-10, 2002, Proceedings.

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Appendix

			Better	Mixed/No Change	Worse
Democratic Rights and Participation					
1	Voting Patterns	-Willingness to vote			v
2	Tolerance of diversity	- Awareness of discrimination			v
Health					
3	Quality of health care system	-Confidence in health care system			v
4	Physical health status	-Self-reported health -Disability-free life expectancy		v	
5	Mental health status	-Risk of depression -Suicide rates	v		
6	Lifestyle	-Smoking rates	v		
Education/Learning					
7	Participation in primary and secondary education	-Pre-elementary enrollment rate			v
8	Educational attainment	-Highest level of education achieved by adults	v		
9	Access to post-secondary education	-Full-time university enrollment rate -Costs	v		v
10	Lifelong learning	-Adults participating in education/training			v
11	Adult literacy	-Assessment of functional literacy			v
12	Youth literacy	-13-year olds performance -16-year olds performance			v
13	Quality of education system	-Pupil-educator ratio in elementary/secondary schools			v
Environment					
14	Air Quality	-Index of air quality			v
15	Water quality	-Municipal populations served by wastewater treatment facilities	v		
16	Waste management	-Reused, recycled, discarded material -Non-hazardous waste disposed of per capita	v	v	
17	Renewable energy sources	-Domestic demand for energy			v
18	Access to healthy outdoor green spaces*				
Social Programs and Conditions					
19	Low income rates	-Canadians living below the low income cut-offs			v
20	Income supports for basic needs	-Provincial/territorial welfare schemes -Social assistance for lone-parent families			v
21	Child care availability and affordability	-Regulated child care spaces	v		

*no or poor data to support this indicator.

			Better	Mixed/No Change	Worse
22	Living wages	-Proportion of working poor families			v
23	Food bank usage	-Accessing emergency food programs		v	
24	Housing affordability	-Problems among renters			v
Community					
25	Satisfaction with police, courts, prison and parole system	-Public perceptions		v	
26	Sense of personal safety and crime rates	-Violent crime and property crime rates	v		
27	Level of civic involvement	-Donation and volunteer rates		v	
28	Availability of programs and services*				
Personal Well-Being					
29	Personal time stress	-Canadians experiencing the "time crunch"			v
30	Degree of social interaction or isolation	-Access to social supports		v	
31	Sense of personal financial security	-Perceived adequacy of income -Belief that control has been lost over personal economic future	v	v	
Environment					
32	Unemployment and employment rates	-National unemployment rate	v		
33	Involuntary part-time work	-Involuntary part-time workers	v		
34	Job security and satisfaction	-Perceived likelihood of losing one's job in the next year -Job satisfaction	v v		
35	Commercial bankruptcies	-Number of commercial bankruptcies	v		
36	Income/wealth distribution	-Income inequality			v
37	Consumer debt levels	-Consumer bankruptcies			v
Government					
38	Public Trust	-Trust in federal government*	v		
39	Accountability and stewardship of public values	-Satisfaction with electoral process and belief that citizens have input into what government does*		v	
40	Public governance	-Public confidence in government performance*			

*no or poor data to support this indicator.