

What would a pan-jurisdictional wellbeing-budgeting framework look like?

Chris Barrington-Leigh
McGill University
July 2020

Chris.Barrington-LeighMcGill.ca
lifesatisfaction.ca
research.wellbeing.mcgill.ca

Introduction

Wellbeing budgeting is attractive because it promises to be able to integrate accounting of benefits, and link discourse, across agencies and also across jurisdictions. A sensible conception of human wellbeing, rooted in individual experience, does not change its meaning according to which jurisdiction is asking. In the end it does not matter for wellbeing which jurisdiction was responsible for a positive change. Said differently, wellbeing outcomes of policy are inextricably linked across jurisdictional levels, as well as across traditional thematic domains of policy.

In addition: (a) Capacity and resources vary with jurisdictional level. (b) The ability to compare and benchmark with peer municipalities and provinces is an important feature when building measurement frameworks. (c) Leaving each local government to research and devise its own framework, when there would in the end be plenty of commonality, would be a costly inefficiency. And (d) no local jurisdiction can generate enough evidence or experience to provide it with the best knowledge on how policies will affect wellbeing; having some consistent indicators across the country provides a common evidence base for wellbeing budgeting.

All this is to say that the shared responsibility and funding for many factors influencing wellbeing make collaboration, coordination and even a shared vision important. An ideal wellbeing budgeting framework in Canada would be designed to serve all jurisdictional levels, while allowing local governments to choose the extent to which they adopt common structure or adapt it to their own context. Therefore, any federally-designed framework should go beyond federal government's needs, in order that it can offer all jurisdictions a toolkit (or service) for indicator measurement, and a toolkit for decision making.

This note outlines some suggested features of an integrative wellbeing budgeting framework. It also emphasizes why asking **which supports of wellbeing relate to a given level of government** is misguided. And it suggests how to use a wellbeing dashboard.

Desirable features

A pan-jurisdictional offering will offer (but not impose) a shared menu of measurable indicators, and lay the foundation for a common discourse across multiple traditional policy boundaries where commensurable measures of success were difficult. Some good features include:

1. Separation of domains of experience (and supports of wellbeing) from policy inter-

vention options

2. Ability of indicators of wellbeing to be expressed at different geographic scales
3. Peer comparability: some commonality in measures across regions
4. Common evidence base for choosing wellbeing-supporting policy: local regions can leverage experience elsewhere
5. Integration and synergy of accounting of policy benefits across jurisdictions

What jurisdictions?

- federal
- provincial/territorial
- first nations
- metro-regional and health-regional
- municipal
- community?
- corporate / organizational?

Key Principles

- There is no such thing as local wellbeing versus federal wellbeing.
- Therefore, the best indicator system will encompass wellbeing supports across all domains of individual experience.
For instance, “access to local fresh food shops” should be on federal and P/T governments’ wellbeing indicator dashboards, not just municipal governments’.
- Therefore (advice from Nancy Hey): to relate policy to a wellbeing framework, from any level of government (or even other organization):
 - do not ask how you can affect wellbeing based on the wellbeing indicator framework
 - instead, ask what powers/duties/responsibilities you have and what can you do with them? How can you get the maximum wellbeing from what you *can* do? What difference does it make to people’s lives? How do you know?

How to use a wellbeing indicator framework

The organization of an *indicator framework* does not matter too much. As long as it measures a wide breadth of outcomes, including outcomes thought to be important for experienced wellbeing, it will serve the purpose.

Given a prospective policy or powers/duties you have, consider which collection of outcomes is likely to be affected, and then appeal to available evidence to figure out how you can get the maximum wellbeing from what you can do.

In this framework, the list of indicators is largely used to:

1. compare with the past and compare with peers, to look for successes and troubles
2. provide a list of outcomes to consider when calculating likely impacts of a prospective policy

More broadly, a *wellbeing-budgeting framework* includes the additional information on how much changing a given indicator is likely to change life satisfaction.

Sample wellbeing indicator framework

A hierarchical organization of measurables, according to nested themes or domains, is appealing for communication and maybe for analysis.

The framework has only one indicator at the top of the hierarchy: Life Satisfaction. Ideally, the vast majority of other measurables are objective.

Below is just an example. It is not intended to be complete, especially at the lower levels, and it is missing a better organization into a hierarchy.

Note that this is *not* a suggestion of which indicators are relevant to each level of government (see [Key Principles](#)).

★ Life satisfaction

- Education and childhood
 - child learning
 - adult learning
 - current children’s wellbeing
 - adult mental capital: freedom from adverse childhood experiences
- Mind and body
 - health behaviour
 - non-communicable diseases
 - injury
 - disability
 - pain
 - happiness
 - worthwhile
 - mental struggle
 - * anxiety
- Productivity and opportunity
 - productivity
 - unemployment
 - job quality
 - * trust in management
 - * trust in coworkers
 - * job satisfaction
 - * meaningfulness
 - skills mismatch
 - education and skills
 - wealth/assets
 - socioeconomic mobility
 - incarceration
- Essential needs and security
 - material deprivation
 - crime
 - violence
 - safety and security
 - housing
 - food security
 - green space
 - recreation
 - trusted information sources
 - connectivity
- Social relationships, community, culture, and inclusion
 - close support
 - * visits/interactions with family
 - * visits/interactions with friends
 - * family structure
 - generalised trust
 - trust in institutions
 - personal relationships
 - physical touch
 - community cohesion
 - group activities
 - culture
 - justice
 - discrimination
 - belonging
 - positive vision of the future
 - cultural continuity and identity
 - civic participation
 - * trust in government
 - * voting

What is the role of life satisfaction?

A wellbeing dashboard that addresses measurement needs of all levels of government may be long. The example list above might sound like the start of a laundry list, i.e., long and seemingly exhaustive. Below I explain how life satisfaction (SWL) can eventually bring discipline to such a long list, no matter how it starts out. For instance, starting from the 60 original CIW component indicators, or the >200 SDG indicators, or another more considered indicator list for Canada, one may organize the indicators into any heuristic hierarchy. If SWL is included in the dashboard, it sensibly sits at the top of the hierarchy, above everything else.

In this position, SWL can play one of its key roles:

Headline indicator: SWL helps to communicate the overall intent, provides a single focal measure to act as a summary of wellbeing, and suggests that the point of a wellbeing metric system is ultimately accountable to human, subjective experience — i.e., the experienced quality of life.

However, with a transition towards wellbeing budgeting in mind, there are two other roles for SWL.

Guide to composition of dashboard: Life satisfaction can provide accountability to the choice of indicators in an entire dashboard of indicators, avoiding the need for the dashboard designers to impose judgment about which policies, government departments, or domains of life define wellbeing. More pertinently, this accountability **relieves the pressure of getting the dashboard perfectly correct** at the outset. New evidence can inform additions and even deletions from the indicator framework.

Quantitative guide to ROI: As described earlier, if a given policy is likely to affect certain indicators in the dashboard in a predictable way, their importance for SWL can be used to describe the total impact (return on investment) of the intervention.

Interestingly, neither the second nor third function above (unlike the first) explicitly require having SWL present in the indicator dashboard. Instead, they rely on the broader life satisfaction research literature to provide guides on impacts of life circumstances on SWL. That evidence is a gradually-improving body of knowledge, ultimately with some chicken-and-egg development in relation to what gets measured in a gradually-evolving indicator dashboard. All three roles for SWL are described by **Barrington-Leigh-DRAFT2020-budgeting-for-happiness**, including for cases when policy impacts on SWL happen over time.

References

What Works Centre for Wellbeing (Mar. 2018). *Wellbeing in policy analysis*. URL: <http://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Overview-incorporating-wellbeing-in-policy-analysis-vMarch2018.pdf>.

Briefs in this series

BRIEFING NOTE (V. 2021-06-21, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

What would a pan-jurisdictional wellbeing-budgeting framework look like?

Chris Barrington-Lough, McGill University, July 2020

Introduction
Wellbeing budgeting is attractive because it promises to be able to integrate accounting of benefits, and link decisions across agencies and also across jurisdictions. A wellbeing account of human wellbeing, rooted in individual experiences, does not change its meaning according to which jurisdiction is asking it.

Desirable features
A pan-jurisdictional offering will offer (but not impose) a shared menu of measurable indicators, and the foundation for a common discourse across multiple traditional policy boundaries where commensurable measures of success are difficult.

Integrating a wellbeing budgeting framework with existing priorities and commitments

Chris Barrington-Lough, McGill University, July 2020

Introduction
Adopting policy under an overall quality of life framework is attractive for several reasons. It should help to correct from long-standing policy bias towards a market growth orientation. It should help to align work across agencies and to build more integrative policies.

Table with 2 columns: Contents and SDGs. Lists various policy areas like Poverty Reduction Strategy, Sustainable Development Goals, and their corresponding SDG numbers.

Has COVID changed everything? Opportunities and priorities in the pandemic and recovery

Chris Barrington-Lough, McGill University, August 2020

Introduction
What decision confront governments when it comes to COVID-19? How to trade off among income, unemployment, mental health, physical health, public confidence, and other factors?

Table with 2 columns: Contents and What's been learned?. Lists topics like What's been learned?, Costs to business of wellbeing, and Decisions: necessity.

How can sustainability enter a budgeting framework for human wellbeing?

Chris Barrington-Lough, McGill University, August 2020

Introduction
Facing a choice of "the economy as the environment" is a poisonous false dichotomy. It is politically divisive and represents a debilitating source of cognitive dissonance for the general public.

Why life satisfaction?
The "vision of wellbeing" offers a new to compare costs and benefits across a wide variety of domains and policy outcomes, creating synergies across traditional policy silos.

BRIEFING NOTE (V. 2021-06-21, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

How does the science of wellbeing inform an education strategy across the life course?

Chris Barrington-Lough, McGill University, March 2021

Introduction
Under a life satisfaction lens, the purpose of educating children should be to produce happy children and happy future adults, and to benefit society more broadly through spillover effects.

Table with 2 columns: Contents and The world has changed. Lists topics like The world has changed, Different stages (career progression, retirement), and Impacts from ageism.

Why might we have a changed "education" in Canada?
State skills are insufficient, lifelong learning is essential, educational transformations are ahead.

BRIEFING NOTE (V. 2021-06-21, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

Review of Department of Finance Canada's "Toward a Quality of Life Strategy for Canada"

Chris Barrington-Lough, McGill University, May 2021

Introduction
In April 2021, in response to the request by the House of Commons, the Department of Finance published the "Toward a Quality of Life Strategy for Canada."

Table with 2 columns: Contents and Previous efforts. Lists topics like Previous efforts, Introduction, and Contents.

Previous efforts
A wellbeing strategy for Canada is the first wellbeing measurement framework and together a coordinated effort by the Canadian federal government, for example, the team: Towards State of Canada, Quality of Life Indicators, 2014-2018.

BRIEFING NOTE (V. 2021-06-21, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1