

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

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June 2021

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Introduction

In April 2021 in conjunction with the Federal Budget release, the Department of Finance published its work on a Quality of Life Strategy for Canada (Department of Finance, 2021). It is an excellent start down a long road. Below I offer some feedback for the Ministry to consider.

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Previous efforts

It is worthwhile noting that this is not the first wellbeing measurement framework put together, at considerable effort, by the Canadian federal government. For example, we have:

- Treasury Board of Canada, Quality of Life Indicators, 2004–2010
- HRSDC indicators of Well-being in Canada (2009–2014) (used to be at <http://well-being.esdc.gc.ca>)
- First Nations Community well being index (2004–)
- Monitoring the Well-being of Veterans: A Veteran Well-being Surveillance Framework (2017–)

The latter two are still around, yet were apparently not deemed appropriate to play the role of a broad quality of life (QoL) framework. The others turned into 404 pages with the changing of governments. So what makes, or could make, the current effort different, better, or **more likely to survive**?

Why this one may last

The April 2021 QoL Framework report is a joy to read, and is thoughtful, transparent, and committed to evolution of the framework in light of accumulating evidence.

It clearly highlights insights — derived from life satisfaction research — about which circumstances ultimately contribute to making life good. It recognizes the potential that monitoring and reporting on the things that really matter could have for ensuring more coordinated and evidence-based and accountable policies and investments. Unlike prior approaches, it does not rely on expert consultation to specify a set of metrics defining “quality” or “wellbeing” but instead commits to an ongoing evidence-informed approach to updating them. It also eschews building indices with unsubstantiated weights. There is a clear intent to keep separate the agenda of the current government from the content of a framework. Lastly, the framework promises to be trans-jurisdictional, i.e., “holistic about what is important to quality of life and agnostic about jurisdictional issues that may arise in Canada’s uniquely decentralized federal system.”

These features are all necessary for a lasting and ultimately transformational initiative.

Limitations

Development of the framework is, however, at an early stage. The report “lays the foundation for a dialogue” and lists, among the questions still to be determined, “How is the framework to be used and by whom?” Yet this question is critical at the outset if form is to follow function and if the result is to have some bite in policy making and budgeting. **A new framework must do more than group desirable outcomes together by theme.**

While the framework and indicator structure are not yet clear, it seems important to have a vision of the functionality, objective, and criteria for success for the framework. To reiterate some of my earlier feedback: it would be nice to publish clear design principles which can convince the interested reader (the public) how the framework could conceivably nudge us, gradually, in a very different direction from what we are doing now, or alternatively, steer us to make relatively minor reallocations. It has to be capable of both, if it is to add value, if it is to transcend preexisting policy priorities, in particular of the current government.

I suspect there is an internal roadmap for getting from a measurement and classification system to something that permeates and synergizes other departments and gives structure and insight to numerous procedures and government functions. However, it would be nice to know something about that vision and path when reading about the details laid out so far.

Internally, there should also be explicit **risk analysis of what possible futures (“failure modes”) could lead to the QoL Framework being used superficially or not at all** by future governments.

I have tried (C. Barrington-Leigh, 2021) to separate the institutions of (1) a well-being measurement and analytic framework from (2) infrastructure to evaluate future (“intermediate”) outcomes from potential government investments. Since the latter is not novel, i.e., government departments and agencies already evaluate and revise prospective policies in terms of desirable outcomes, a new framework must offer more than thematically labeling and grouping desirable outcomes.

Distributions

Placing issues of “distributions” and “sustainability” as separate “lenses” orthogonal to the thematic content of an indicator system is an enormous strength of this proposal, notwithstanding the need still for a clearer distinction between the role of “environment” in a wellbeing framework, and the importance of something else, called sustainability (see below). In fact, these two topics of distributions and sustainability are the two dimensions I explain in a 10-minute talk (lifesatisfaction.ca/vid/?v=LSALimitations) as reasons why a wellbeing budgeting framework could never mechanically produce policy recommendations.

These two lenses relate to traditionally partisan policy priorities, and to explicit priorities of the current government. Therefore, the more these lenses can be separated from the core framework, and left open, the better for longevity of this work.

I continue to suggest avoiding divisive language related to distributions, in favour of the positive outcomes that we are after. It's inclusion and dignity and mutual trust which matter most to life experience, so we can **avoid emphasizing particular income-focused markers** such as (page 12) “bottom 10 percent versus top 10 percent” and focus on allocation (including redistribution) of resources and attention as an opportunity to improve wellbeing, and build a feeling for more people of being part of society and the available opportunities. In addition, in introducing any mention of distributions, it would be most natural for the Framework to mention the concept of the *distribution of QoL* itself.

Since the framework eschews building indices, most indicators mentioned can be reported, presented, and — over time — increasingly conceived, as distributions rather than averages. This would **give everything an equity lens by default**. More broadly, habits of presenting these kind of data should change; this may be particularly relevant for Statistics Canada to consider. When an actual dashboard emerges from the Framework, Statistics Canada and other agencies could simply make a somewhat-revolutionary new habit of not reporting these indicators as averages. Instead, the world is ready to deal whenever possible with distributions over time as the fundamental object of interest. This would change the message and discourse, and this “style” could be built into the Framework. In fact, nothing else makes sense for measures closely tied to a wellbeing approach: the unit of experience of life quality is individuals. Averages over individuals do not correspond to any experience, while distributions over all individuals correctly reflect lived experience.¹

The environment

The rationale given for including “Environment” in the Basic Architecture sounds undeniable in its language but may present problems downstream when more details of the implementation and role of the Framework are to be specified and realised.

As I have tried to articulate in a policy brief (C. Barrington-Leigh, 2020), a short video (lifesatisfaction.ca/media/?v=sustainability2021), and a longer paper (C. Barrington-Leigh, 2021)², asking a wellbeing budgeting framework to take care of sustainability and conservation puts the framework at risk. Overwhelming a decision-making tool with the uncertainty inherent to far-future or complex

¹For some outcomes, everyone in a given community experiences the same condition. In this case the weighted distribution of those community-level values is the distribution of individual experience.

²As well as earlier work touching on this theme (Hall, C. P. Barrington-Leigh, and Helliwell, 2011; C. Barrington-Leigh, 2016; C. Barrington-Leigh and Escande, 2018)

dynamics will render it both incapable and confusing. At the same time as undermining the wellbeing framework, conflating conservation priorities with the science of human wellbeing (or evidence-informed wellbeing goals) will continue to catastrophically undermine conservation and the sustainability agenda.

The report's assertion that "A well-being approach to recovery can underpin a focus on sustainability" represents precisely the framing that I consider a serious danger. The research evidence around life satisfaction shows the importance of noise pollution, certain local air pollution, access to some green space, and so on. However, **life satisfaction could never be expected to fully take into account complex biodiversity threats or systemic ecological risks or nonlinear dynamics and tipping points or unseen threats encroachment.** In addition, the long-run impacts of these complex risks on far-future human quality of life will always be too uncertain a basis for either a convincing advocacy or a quantitative cost/benefit analysis. **A precautionary principle celebrating conservation** is, instead, a natural policy rationale for long-run, complex risks.

Instead of nesting sustainability under a quality of life framework that is otherwise accountable to evidence on what makes for a good life, they should remain conceptually distinct. A wellbeing budgeting framework gives governments, and societies more generally, the opportunity to separate — in rhetoric and in rationale — necessary conservation actions from the goal of making lives better in foreseeable and tangible ways.

One key way to signal and implement this distinction is for the "Census of the Environment," mentioned in the report, not to be associated with the QoL framework, even though some subset of measures from it will be relevant to and part of the Framework Indicators.

The report mentions that "Work underway concurrently in the government to develop an approach to measuring climate impacts of government policy ('climate lens') will be an important element of progress on this (sustainability) lens." Once again, I would caution that while this certainly will be interesting material, it also sounds like a conceptual and political trap. There is no wellbeing rationale underlying "carbon neutrality by 2045" (or etc). Carbon neutrality (as opposed to something more ambitious, or less) is an arbitrary goal, and it is not clear how it would be optimal for human wellbeing. And **no one is asking**, or not on that basis. That is, those objecting are not evaluating wellbeing benefits of our climate mitigation in the far future. It is simply a *moral* goal and is easily understood, digested, accepted, and internalized by the public on that basis. The same is true of other conservation imperatives.

Disaggregation

As mentioned above, a first-order strength of the proposed approach is that the measurement framework should be useful for assessing quality of life at all geographies and jurisdictions, reflecting a critical need under Canada's decentralized federal system. It would be nice to see explicit mention of how this will be reflected in the measurement framework or its top-level design criteria. If many of these measures could be calculated at the level of province and of municipality, it would immediately solve half the problem of having a cross-jurisdiction-integrated wellbeing framework (i.e., the measurement part but not the policy integration part).

And if those which could be measured at the neighbourhood level were also reported that way, it would save any municipality who wants to buy in to this framework an even greater amount of time — both in the conceptual design, and the operational work of measuring and reporting.

Clarity on role of SWB and cost-benefit frameworks

The report does not go far in embracing the possibility of doing wellbeing accounting.

It says that subjective wellbeing can “support cost-benefit analysis, by providing an additional measure of benefit to be considered against program costs.” Additional to what? Is there a way to add SWB to other beneficial outcomes? I think not a sensible one. Ultimately, I believe the right direction is to fully embrace the fact that life satisfaction permits a cost-benefit accounting in which costs and benefits are in the same terms (though cost-effectiveness of wellbeing improvements is another approach). **Recognizing that this possibility exists implies no commitment** to saying that it is ready to go now, nor that it will be complete when it is first available, nor **that such analyses will ever mechanically determine a policy decision**. Nevertheless, this kind of cost/benefit expresses many key insights about human lives that are the only reason to promote a new framework for wellbeing-driven policy.

“Overall quality of life”

Another curiosity to me is that “eudaimonia” be considered alongside life satisfaction as providing a “summary measure of overall experienced quality of life”. **What could be more important than a “sense of meaning and purpose” to someone’s life satisfaction?** Regardless of whether the answer is “not much” or something in particular, the point is that it surely plays a prominent, but appropriately proportional role. Meanwhile, life satisfaction is expected to reflect and integrate people’s “sense of meaning” at the same time as their “physical pain”, and everything else.

Sticking with one headline indicator does a better job of communicating the idea that there is a deeply democratic aspect to the framework, i.e., that reports of overall life experience from each Canadian are, at least conceptually, what the government considers the goal of policy. By contrast, specifying two of the many possible other kinds of SWB **may come across as the government telling people what they should be seeking in life** — e.g., some deep sense of purpose, rather than letting them choose for themselves. As the report states, “Self-reported life satisfaction is a measure of SWB that directly gauges overall, experienced quality of life, providing information that cannot be gathered in any other way.”

Measurement

In order to cement this approach in a publicly-clear and trans-partisan committing way, it would be appropriate for the next round of development of the Framework to have Statistics Canada put the life satisfaction question, or possibly the ONS4 questions, into the **long form of the 2026 Census**.

Also related to measurement, more explicit design criteria and plans would be useful as soon as possible with regards to **higher-frequency and community-level geographic resolution** (in addition to the dimensions of disaggregation discussed) of metrics in the framework (including subjective wellbeing).

Capitals and dynamics and policy

The “Next Steps” section is somewhat timid and does not emphasize the big-picture priorities: how “to progress implementation of the framework and deepen its integration into various aspects of policy development.” What is the long-term vision for transforming how certain things in government are done? What is the destination? Are the political waters still being tested on these issues? This initial report is focused on choosing themes, but as mentioned above, themes can be used simply (and forgettably) to label line items in a government platform. While the report mentions that the use of the framework in the 2021 budget went beyond passive labeling, what is needed to ensure that the next administration will benefit from it, and what more information could be released with a future budget to begin to **sow demand from the public that future governments always make use of the Framework?**

A “more sophisticated intervention logic” is mentioned under “Treatment of Determinants of Well-being.” It helped me in my thinking (C. Barrington-Leigh, 2021) to be clear about the relationship between insights about dynamics (returns over time on investments in various capitals, and especially models of the human life course) and the relationship between current outcomes and current wellbeing. This could be more clearly articulated because it is presumably crucial to who needs to buy in to the Framework.³

Ultimately, **policy must become more experimental over time** in order to learn what is best. This means integrating measurement into policy rollout; a federating organization to organize experience from local communities; and new mechanisms for non-uniform rollout of new federal policies. The Framework can be key to guiding all three of these innovations, but its long-run success will also depend on learning from such policy experimentation.

Minor details on the report or the framework

- On page 5: “total value of all goods and services”: much less wrong would be to write “... all *market* goods and services ...”. The phrase “in an economy” does not help here.
- “Time Use” stands out as the one sub-domain that is not clearly a good or a bad.
- In Annex 1 under “Social Cohesion and Connections”, why only “local” in “sense of belonging to local community”? We find that a feeling of belonging to each geographic scale independently boosts life satisfaction.

Conclusion

The last words in this response to the report must be a reiteration that it admirably sets an auspicious tone for building a robust and meaningful wellbeing agenda for Canada. Many countries are now likely looking to Canada for continued leadership on this coming social and governance transformation.

³It is also critical to make clearer the relationship between lifetime scales and the multi-generational scales of some sustainability considerations.

