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# Frameworks of Community Well-being Applied by Community Foundations

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## INTRODUCTION

Within Manitoba and across Canada, community foundations (CFs) are philanthropic organizations that strive to enhance community well-being through granting and local community leadership. Over time, this spirit of community philanthropy has evolved in response to community expectations due in part to declining government investments in rural communities and municipalities [1]. While a CF's impact can be significant, one obstacle the Manitoba CF network faces while striving to meet the growing and changing priorities of the community is the considerable range of leadership experiences and capacities within the organization [2] and the significant diversity of available financial assets. As acknowledged by Endow Manitoba, a program of The Winnipeg Foundation dedicated to enhancing the sustainability, growth, and impact of Manitoba CFs [3], few CFs operate with professional staff, with many relying on volunteers to manage the governance, administrative processes, stewardship of donors, grant making practices, communication, and community engagement and collaboration opportunities. The challenge for many CFs is developing their organizational and operational capacities to maximize social and economic impacts that enhance community well-being (See companion Brief – Rural-based Community Foundations: Understanding Their Organizational Capacity and Development). This brief explores a key finding of the project researching Manitoba CFs' capacity: the critical role a shared understanding of community well-being has in supporting CFs in achieving their mission. This finding drew attention to the central question: What is community well-being? For CFs, understanding community well-being is critical since enhancing community well-being is the cornerstone of CFs' operations and mandate, as well as rural communities' goals and priorities.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

When seeking to understand better the capacity required by CFs to achieve their mission, Endow Manitoba consulted with the majority of Manitoba CFs and key stakeholders within the sector. The research team asked two questions: How do you define success for your Community Foundation? And what are the main contributors to your Community Foundation's success?

These efforts identified over 70 exemplary practices categorized into five core, inter-connected functions of CF operations: Governance, Finance & Administration, Fund Development, Grant Making, and Strategic Initiatives. Endow Manitoba mapped these functions against a management maturation model [4] to separate these functions along a three-stage continuum of growing CF capacity: Emerging, Developing, and Accelerating. This maturation model provided a framework for recognizing CFs' different levels of organizational capacity for each of the core functions. This framework is called the Endow Manitoba Community Foundation Sustainability, Growth, and Impact Model. This model serves as a roadmap to designing Endow Manitoba services, programs, and supports to ensure each aids Manitoba CFs to move through the stages of development.

Following the development of this model, Endow Manitoba undertook a research project with the Rural Development Institute at Brandon University in 2020 - 2021 to scan the literature related to the specific attributes and best practices of the five core functions of CF operations. This research project aimed to understand better how to support a CF's development and expand the organization's capacity to enhance community well-being. The literature scan involved five steps leading to the final report, commencing with identifying six major databases and selecting key search terms, followed by an iteration of 3 scans to isolate 162 articles and a systematic review of a final 93.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The scan highlighted the importance of grant making and determining the impact of these grants and identified the significance of community engagement and research as crucial activities to understand a community's goals and priorities. The scan revealed that CFs' activities are often described in terms of enhancing community well-being. However, other terms are also often used interchangeably, such as quality of life, life satisfaction, community competence, resilience, sustainability, and vitality. [5, 6] This variation in the literature points out that these ideas or concepts go in and out of fashion depending on the particular emphasis stressed in the definition and the development of the conversations around community well-being.

In this respect, while the literature scan did not lead to any agreed-upon definition for the concept of community well-being, it did resolve that well-being should not be understood too narrowly. For instance, the scholarship has moved beyond understanding and assessing well-being strictly in economic terms. According to economic measures of well-being, such as GDP, a well-being is principally defined by the production of goods and the growth of national income. Though economic measurements are important, this one-dimensional definition lacks reference to the actual quality of life experienced by employed people [7, 8]. For instance, counting jobs is helpful, but more is needed to touch on work satisfaction, opportunities for employment advancement, or work-life balance.

Another consistent finding was that most definitions of well-being involve a combination or interaction between a community's economic, social, and environmental conditions or realities.[9, 10] To account for this multi-dimensional view of well-being, many national governments and other non-governmental organizations have turned to more specific indicators that can be used to measure well-being.

Launched in 2011, the OECD Better Life Index (OECD BLI) analyzes 11 indicators: housing, jobs, income, community, education, environment, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety, and work-life balance. [11]

Now in its 4th edition, this index offers a macro – big picture – perspective of well-being from a national perspective, comparing countries against one another. Currently, only 41 countries are included, which gives a limited view of well-being worldwide. Also, at present, the OECD BLI does not incorporate data that could offer a picture of well-being at the regional level within countries, nor does it address data regarding social groups such as gender or age. Recent research on the OECD BLI focuses on the types of data and analysis used to rank countries to enhance the index's scope and reliability. [12, 13, 14] The issue for Manitoba's CFs in considering using this framework is whether or not they have access to local community-level data that could meaningfully guide their grant making decisions on community development projects.

A contrasting index on well-being is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), developed in 2015. [15]. The expanded set of 17 guidelines, which overlap significantly with the 11 OECD BLI indicators, identify more specific benchmarks for improving well-being but with an important focus on sustainability, making the world a better place for the future while recognizing the importance of present needs and desires. The UN SDGs underscore the guiding principle that development efforts can undermine well-being when undertaken regardless of the consequences. The significance of the UN SDGs is that the goals apply not primarily to OECD member countries in the "developed world." Instead, sustainable development is a worldwide agenda applicable at the country, regional and community levels. The challenge for community developers is determining whether projects to impact well-being must align with the UN SDGs and, if so, how these projects will be practicable and achievable. [16, 17, 18] These issues are pertinent to Manitoba's CFs. The question is whether sustainability must be the overarching principle of a CF's understanding of community well-being. This stance may be at odds with other local community members and leaders.

In the Canadian context, two well-being frameworks have emerged recently that showcase critical alignment and opportunity to play a critical role in this research focused on CFs. The first is the Vital Signs project delivered by Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) in 2001. [19] Intended as a national program, Vital Signs is an indicator system used for identifying and tracking indicators that speak to a community's well-being or vitality. In 2017, CFC revised its indicators to align more directly with the UN SDGs. The CFC Vital Signs tracks and reports on a set of ten core indicators that reflect local priorities and issues: the gap between rich and poor, safety, health and wellness, learning, housing, getting started on community issues, arts and culture, environment, work, and belonging and leadership. [20] It provides a report on a community's progress based on indicators and data, typically drawn from accessible secondary sources such as Statistics Canada, that assess key areas of the community such as the economy, health and well-being, and environment. [21] In this respect, Vital Signs is a reporting tool used to improve knowledge about a community [22] and provide information about past and current trends in terms of a community's overall health as well as programs that are working well and others that have been more challenging. [23] This community research is critical to successful CF core activities.

The second is the Canadian Index of Well-being (CIW), now hosted at the University of Waterloo, measures how well the society is doing. Built by Canadians for Canadians, the CIW reflects Canadian values. In contrast to the CFC Vital Signs, the CIW includes eight domains, each featuring eight distinct indicators. [24, 25] The eight domains include education, community vitality, democratic engagement, environment, healthy populations, leisure and culture, living standards, and time use. These domains reflect a comprehensive view of community well-being that aligns with the core mission of a CF. As a composite index, the CIW provides a holistic measure of

the community and a snapshot of each of the eight domains. However, the CIW can also be simplified to reveal well-being at differing geographical scales from a regional to a community level or for different groups within the population. [26] This provides insight into how groups, such as youths, seniors or newcomers, differ regarding well-being. Understanding well-being at this level is essential to CFs because it supports knowledge generation, information sharing, social interaction, power sharing, means to address needs and problems, responsive grant awarding and active and intentional measurement of grant performance that supports progress toward enhancing well-being.

The literature review did not produce a definitive definition of community well-being. However, consistencies and core elements that constitute well-being were identified in several definitions. From this, a composite definition of well-being has been defined. For this report, wellbeing can be thought of as a community's ability to maintain a healthy and thriving economy, society, and environment, its level of strong, safe, and inclusive social networks, leisure and cultural activities, healthy and thriving populations, and the capacity to make collective decisions and solve community issues. [10, 24]

This definition and system of indicators for assessing well-being in Manitoba will support the functions and activities outlined in Endow Manitoba's Community Foundation Sustainability, Growth, and Impact Model in the following ways:

- Purposeful engagement and community convening will generate knowledge that will inform CF policies and practices.
- Understanding community priorities will generate collective action between the CF, community stakeholders, and the community at large.
- Transparent and targeted grant awarding that is responsive and aligned to community-identified priorities.
- Active and intentional measurement of grant performance that supports progress toward enhanced well-being.

In applying these findings throughout the Manitoba CF network, Endow Manitoba has found that the CIW is an accessible framework that can provide connection and relevancy to communities, regardless of the community's geographic location, size, and population demographics. In practice, the CIW provides a framework that can collect meaningful community insight required to generate collective action and measurable impact on well-being.

## FUTURE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What tools and analytic methods are central for applying the CIW?
- How does a CF's organizational and operational capacity and resources impact its use of the CIW?
- How can the CIW be modified to fit Manitoba CFs' capacity and stage of development?

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## Rural Development Institute

Brandon University established the Rural Development Institute in 1989 as an academic research centre and a leading source of information on issues affecting rural communities in Western Canada and elsewhere.

RDI functions as a not-for-profit research and development organization designed to promote, facilitate, coordinate, initiate and conduct multi-disciplinary academic and applied research on rural issues. The Institute provides an interface between academic research efforts and the community by acting as a conduit of rural research information and by facilitating community involvement in rural development. RDI projects are characterized by cooperative and collaborative efforts of multi-stakeholders.

The Institute has diverse research affiliations, and multiple community and government linkages related to its rural development mandate. RDI disseminates information to a variety of constituents and stakeholders and makes research information and results widely available to the public either in printed form or by means of public lectures, seminars, workshops and conferences.

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