

## Measures of Concern:

### Governing Indigenous Subjects Through Canada’s Community Well-Being Index



**Fig. 1:** Everyday spaces where the Community Well-Being Index (CWB) is elaborated at Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) headquarters, Gatineau Quebec. From left to right, (a) the INAC building from Promenade du Portage, (b) tribute to Robin P. Armstrong, author of CWB precursor, in meeting room named after him, (c) INAC library meeting room, Photo credit: Noah Cannon.

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**Abstract:** Set against the conventional wisdom that development indices provide objective assessments of the human condition, in this research, I demonstrate that indices are deeply political and emerge from specific and embodied histories and geographies. This study traces the emergence and politics of the “Community Well Being Index,” hereafter the CWB, an index designed by scientists at the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. As its name suggests, the CWB was designed to measure the conditions of indigenous communities in Canada. Following postcolonial and science studies scholars (Latour, 2005; Mitchell, 2002; TallBear, 2013), my research traces how the index as a historically, socially, technologically contingent product actually constitutes the world it seeks to measure. Through analysis of semi-structured interviews with designers of the index, observation of its presentation, and a review of official documents, I show how the CWB constitutes Indigenous subjects as responsible for improving the socio-economic conditions of their communities—conditions established in large part through historical and ongoing colonial processes. Further, the index obscures well-entrenched power



relations, narrows the scope of potential development “solutions”, and circumscribes Indigenous self-determination, even while the Canadian government claims to prioritize “new relations” with Indigenous peoples. These results have implications for other development contexts where indices guide decisions about aid policies and reconstruction interventions, as well as for scholars studying the politics of knowledge production surrounding performance measures and predictive models in post-disaster efforts.



**Fig. 2:** An early map of indigenous community well-being hanging in the INAC headquarters in Gatineau, Quebec. Maps like this one have played an important role in normalizing particular understandings and geographies of indigeneity on which the CWB depends for its intelligibility. Photo credit: Noah Cannon

Theory Problem	While the CWB is represented by the Canadian government as a tool to advocate for better services for Indigenous communities, it routinely allocates responsibility for development to Indigenous communities. To make sense of this dynamic, my research analyzes the processes and practices involved in the index’s construction, including its underpinning assumptions and exclusions.
Practical Problem	The authors (and many users) of the CWB frame it as an objective tool that provides universal knowledge, unbound by specific contexts or interests, and free of politics. My work situates the index: first, within a history of the Canadian state’s assimilationist interventions enacted in the name of Indigenous peoples’ well-being, and second, in the context of neoliberal governance in which indicators have come to play an important role.
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine the cultures, politics and practices of knowledge production surrounding the development, maintenance and circulation of the Community Well-Being Index</li> <li>• Explore how, why and to whom the Community Well-being Index has come to matter</li> <li>• Better understand the politics of expertise in the shaping of Indigenous-specific development-based indicator knowledge production</li> </ul>



**Theoretical Background:** Recent scholarship interrogates the ways in which social indicators act as a “technology of governance”, guiding the conduct of indicator “targets” at a distance (Davis et al., 2012; Merry 2016). Allocating responsibility through the “naming and shaming” of indicator targets, as well as using indicators to guide decisions about aid policies and funding allocations are some of the ways that such dynamics play out (Uribe, 2015). The increasing adoption of indicators by nongovernmental and human rights organizations can be seen as a dissemination of corporate and neoliberal modes of governance into the broader social sphere, wherein political decisions are translated into technical exercises for expertise (see Merry, 2011). Within Canadian settler colonial conditions, such practices obscure well-entrenched power relations, narrowing the scope of potential “solutions”, and circumscribing Indigenous self-determination, despite the Canadian government’s claim to prioritize “new relations” with Indigenous peoples.

**Methodology:** My methodology follows postcolonial and feminist science and technologies studies scholars who understand representations, including quantitative representations such as indices, as culturally and politically produced (Haraway, 1999; Latour, 2005; TallBear, 2013). In my research, I track and analyze power relations in processes of indicator knowledge production as well as processes through which indicators become incorporated into development projects of various sorts in the wider world. To make sense of the relationship between indices and governance/power specifically, I traced the role of various actors (social scientists, technicians, institutions, data sets and theories) involved in producing and disseminating the CWB. During 8 months of fieldwork between December 2015 and July 2016, I visited sites where the index is produced, maintained and circulated. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the authors and technicians who elaborated the index. I also observed presentations of studies that deploy the index to better understand some of the ways in which it circulates. Finally, I analyzed a suite of well-being indicator studies, research briefs, meeting minutes, and official reports.

Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The index allocates responsibility to communities and seeks to guide their conduct in accordance with the state’s development agenda. Hierarchical identities are produced through a well-being “score”. Index “targets” that achieve the standards set by the index become models for other communities to aspire to. Indigenous communities are understood as deficient against the yardstick of settler society.</li><li>• Technical demands and the department’s development-based policy agenda dominate the index’s methodological design. Indigenous engagement in index creation was largely aspirational, or occurred once the index was constructed. This resulted in a research agenda and index design largely driven by state imperatives.</li><li>• While the index authors set out to bridge cultural barriers between academia and bureaucratic (policy) work, they simultaneously develop strategies to emphasize the distance between the two institutions to minimize scepticism about the state’s role in the research design and findings and secure legitimacy for their academic labour.</li><li>• Extensive resources and powerful allies are required to ensure the index’s stability and ability to gain traction as an authoritative voice within a competitive arena of knowledge production. This raises questions about whose visions of well-being get amplified within an uneven terrain of knowledge production.</li></ul>
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Practical Implications	In some instances, the CWB shows potential to serve as a tool to advocate for First Nations. However, given its structure and orientations, the index is more routinely used to allocate responsibility to Indigenous communities for the improvement of conditions that stem from historical and ongoing colonial dispossession. This has implications for understanding the role of indicators in shaping power relations in Indigenous-specific development contexts, but also where indices influence decisions and political debates in broader development contexts including post-disaster reconstruction.
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Theoretical  
Implications

Scholars of governmentality have worked extensively to make sense of modes and techniques of governance in neo/liberal as well as colonial contexts (see Nelson, 2005; Scott, 2005). My work provides an example of how indices can serve as a technology of governance in these different forms. This research also contributes to a body of work examining contemporary colonial governmentality in the global north.

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