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**Making Measurements Matter:
Barriers and Opportunities for Institutionalizing Wellbeing
Metrics**

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Abstract

This project investigates the barriers and opportunities of institutionalizing wellbeing metrics by examining how actors across different scales understand and use wellbeing data generated through the Nova Scotia Quality of Life (NSQoL) Survey. The NSQoL Survey is administered by a non-profit organization, Engage Nova Scotia, and includes 200+ questions measuring a broad range of wellbeing dimensions. When administered in 2019, nearly 13,000 Nova Scotians participated, making it one of the largest and most comprehensive quality of life datasets of its kind. Despite the richness of this dataset and international recognition, substantive uptake within provincial and municipal governments has remained limited. This gap between data availability and institutional use reveals barriers that shape whether and how wellbeing metrics are mobilized in regional governance.

This thesis draws on 24 semi-structured interviews with individuals in government and community leadership roles, to investigate the factors that influence the uptake, interpretation, and use of wellbeing data in Nova Scotia, Canada. In doing so, the thesis also examines the extent to which wellbeing metrics contribute to a shift away from growth-oriented development frameworks, and the broader role of wellbeing data in shaping public policy and post-growth transitions. This study found that wellbeing metrics are mobilized by regional actors in different ways across scales. At the municipal level, capacity for data analysis and resources are limited, but actors appear to be more responsive to the broader wellbeing narrative as it aligns with existing ideas of economic development. While at the provincial level, analytical capacity is stronger, but bureaucratic fragmentation and political short-termism limit implementation. This study found broad support for wellbeing metrics but minimal instrumental use of the NSQoL data, suggesting that the main barrier in practice is not normative opposition but weak institutional pathways through which wellbeing metrics can take root. Findings suggest that framing wellbeing metrics through an economic lens might offer a foothold for indicators to find their place in regional institutions, along with the need for building organizational capacity such that wellbeing indicators have institutional 'homes' where they can meaningfully inform decision-making.

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1. Introduction

On May 6th, 2026, the United Nations High-Level Expert Group published a report titled *Counting What Counts: A Compass of Progress for People and Planet*, outlining an international framework for measuring social and ecological progress 'beyond GDP' (United Nations, 2026). In it, authors highlight the shortcomings of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the "number by which the world judges itself" (United Nations, 2026, p. 1 para. 1), and consequently present a set of universally applicable indicators centred on wellbeing. The proposed framework is intended to serve as the post-2030 successor to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with all nations expected to begin measurement by 2027 (United Nations, 2026).

The report states that earlier attempts to mainstream more holistic wellbeing indicators have had limited political uptake despite broad recognition of the limitations of GDP (United Nations, 2026). The authors emphasize that successful examples of 'beyond GDP' initiatives around the world demonstrate that "durable traction occurs when wellbeing metrics are *institutionalized* within traditional government operations" (United Nations, 2026, p. 25, para. 62. *Emphasis added*). Thus, the impact of beyond-GDP metrics depends on more than statistical reform (Battaglia, 2025). Meaningful uptake requires embedding wellbeing metrics within institutions, so that they become a central instrument of policymaking and not just 'for show' (Hayden, 2021).

Later in the *Counting What Counts* report, a reference is made to a small organization on the edge of Canada's east coast, Engage Nova Scotia, as a leading example of how data analysis tools can drive uptake and translate metrics into action (United Nations, 2026, p.25, para. 63). Engage Nova Scotia (henceforth referred to as Engage) is a Halifax-based non-profit organization that administers a 200+ question Quality of Life Survey, which is said to be one of the largest datasets of its kind (Engage Nova Scotia, n.d.). Although the Nova Scotia Quality of Life (NSQoL) Survey provides a strong evidence base to inform policy decisions, its uptake in regional policymaking to drive concrete action is unclear. The lack of meaningful integration of 'beyond GDP' indicators in general (Hayden, 2021) threatens the efficacy, credibility, and transformative potential of wellbeing metrics to deliver on the promise of an 'economy designed to serve people and the planet' (Wellbeing Economy Alliance, n.d.).

This thesis is about Engage's Quality of Life Survey, and the variable uptake of wellbeing metrics in municipal and provincial governments, despite public enthusiasm for the initiative and international recognition. The rise of 'beyond GDP' indicators signals a timely moment to explore what barriers, opportunities, and tensions emerge as wellbeing metrics try to enter established governance systems. A regional focus is important because while these frameworks proliferate (inter)nationally, operationalizing them requires local actors and place-based policies (Tomaney, 2017). Thus, the question of interest is not only whether wellbeing metrics are institutionalized in Nova Scotia, but also how, why, and under what conditions they are integrated in regional institutions, across different scales.

Simultaneous to this global shift 'beyond GDP', a similar reorientation is occurring in the scholarly community of regional development. This field has historically been concerned with growth, prosperity, and spatial inequalities, but recently there has been a normative and empirical turn towards more multidimensional understandings of human and ecological wellbeing as measures of regional progress (Binz and Castaldi, 2024; Castellacci, 2022; Fudge et al., 2021.). Increasingly, regional development scholars call for research to account for and address societal grand challenges rather than economic outcomes alone (Trippel et al., 2024; Castellacci et al. 2025). This normative shift highlights an important tension between moving beyond GDP in theory, and ways that regional economies and governance systems remain materially dependent on growth for fiscal stability and service provisionment.

Amidst this shift, there also remains a tension between traditional economic growth and social-ecological wellbeing in practice. Providing social services continues to be framed as dependent on further economic growth, justifying resource exploitation and growing GDP. An illustrative example is found in a recent Facebook post by the current Premier of Nova Scotia, Tim Houston, where he quoted former New Brunswick Premier, Frank McKenna saying, “we cannot refuse to exploit our resources and continue to believe that we can balance our budgets, pay our doctors, and social workers and other civil servants and continue to fund a social safety net” (Houston, 2026). The dominance of a growth paradigm, in which extractive economic development is treated as necessary to secure regional fiscal stability, evidently, continues to prevail in practice.

This tension between growth-oriented development and calls to center wellbeing is the backdrop of this project. While ‘beyond GDP’ measures are gaining traction globally, wellbeing and economic growth remain materially and cognitively coupled (Kallis et al., 2025). The wellbeing movement calls for greater discernment about which economic activities enhance or deplete quality of life, prompting economic restructuring to better support wellbeing outcomes, now and for the future (Fioramonti et al., 2022). Consequently, a primary aim of wellbeing metrics is to clarify how the benefits and costs of economic growth are distributed by providing a more holistic system of account. For many proponents, ‘beyond GDP’ indicators are representative of a more ambitious project of challenging the growth paradigm, and transforming the institutions that uphold it (Hayden, 2021). Yet institutions built to prioritize economic growth and respond to changes in GDP will not be transformed by simply introducing different metrics. If measurement reform is insufficient on its own, this raises the question of what conditions enable wellbeing metrics to reshape institutional priorities and decision-making.

The case of Engage and their Quality of Life Initiative provides fertile ground to explore how wellbeing metrics take root at the regional level. This study draws on 24 semi-structured interviews with individuals with political and community decision-making authority, to identify factors that influence uptake of wellbeing data generated by the 2019 Nova Scotia Quality of Life (NSQoL) Survey. In doing so, we might better predict and address the challenges that lie ahead, as the world shifts from measuring GDP to wellbeing, and the dilemma of operationalizing wellbeing in a growth-oriented system. As such, this thesis answers the following research questions:

RQ1) How are wellbeing metrics from the Nova Scotia Quality of Life (NSQoL) Survey understood and used by decision-makers at local and regional levels?

RQ2) What factors enable or constrain the integration of wellbeing metrics in policymaking and regional development in Nova Scotia?

RQ2a) How do these factors vary by scale of governance?

Answers to these questions build on the growing body of regional development literature that strives to bring wellbeing to the core of development. Section 2 reviews existing literature on the evolution of regional development and the wellbeing movement, along with current debates relating to wellbeing metrics in public policy, and then proceeds to introduce the analytical framework for this study. Section 3 provides background information about Nova Scotia and the NSQoL Survey, along with a description of the qualitative research design and methodology featuring 24 semi-structured interviews. Section 4 presents the results of the study, organized by the research questions outlined above. A discussion of key findings is provided in Section 5, followed by brief concluding remarks and recommendations for future research and policy in Section 6.

2. Literature Review

Regional development has broadened its scope over the last two decades, moving beyond growth ambitions to engage with social and environmental concerns (see Sedita et al., 2024; Trippel et al., 2024; Castellacci et al., 2025). In doing so, it has drawn on adjacent literatures, such as sustainability transitions and post-growth. Meanwhile, the wellbeing movement (with a lineage of its own) is nested within a broader post-growth umbrella, and has recently made its way into regional studies; however, its reach extends far beyond the field of geography. In this section I will review literature related to this juncture between wellbeing in regional development and the broader wellbeing movement. I then present key methodological debates surrounding wellbeing measurement, before discussing the use of data in policymaking generally, and uptake of wellbeing indicators specifically. Finally, I will introduce the analytical framework for this study, which builds on these intersecting strands of literature.

2.1 Beyond Growth and GDP in Regional Development

A well-established multi-disciplinary body of work has critiqued neoclassical economic paradigms neoliberal capitalism for decades (for example, see the work of Harvey (1982) and Gibson-Graham (1996)). While these topics are not new, there is a noticeable shift in regional development scholarship more recently, to broaden its scope to explicitly address the environmental and social shortcomings of growth-centred models. The traditional idea of increasing consumption possibilities, through economic growth, to improve wellbeing is shifting to a more holistic understanding of progress, where people become the focus of development, “not as a means of production but as an end.” (von Borries et al., 2026, p. 2). This reorienting of development around wellbeing is commonly referred to as the “normative turn” in regional development (Binz and Castaldi, 2024).

Regional development¹ seeks to understand that which drives regional growth and prosperity, as well as socio-economic inequalities between regions (Hansen, 2020). Although social welfare² has long been considered the distant goal, traditional streams of regional development, economic geography, and geographies of innovation tend to treat economic growth as a proxy for wellbeing (Binz and Castaldi, 2024). The supporting rationale is that innovation provides jobs and rising incomes, which increases consumption capabilities, leading to greater choice and material wellbeing (Castellacci, 2022). This economic view also (mistakenly) assumes that the benefits of innovation in a particular place are well distributed and that indicators such as GDP/GDP per capita are trustworthy assessments of wellbeing (Castellacci, 2022).

However, these assumptions have been increasingly challenged on both normative and empirical grounds. Early normative reorientations in regional development questioned its basis and who it was meant to serve (Pike et al., 2007). Nearly two decades ago, Pike and colleagues criticised the “socially uneven and geographical differentiated” outcomes of growth-oriented regional development, and called for a more progressive, holistic, and sustainable approach (Pike et al., 2007, p.1253). Empirically, the Easterlink paradox is widely cited to demonstrate that once basic material needs have been met, increases in income do not necessarily lead to increased happiness or life satisfaction, suggesting that

¹ I am fond of this definition of development by Pike et al., as it is quite aligned with the capabilities approach described by Sen (2001): “Development is defined as the establishment of conditions and institutions that foster the realization of the potential of the capacities and faculties of the human mind in people, communities and, in turn, in places” (Pike et al., 2007, p. 1263)

² Castellacci (2022) makes the distinction between social welfare and wellbeing; describing social welfare as wellbeing in aggregate. In other words, social welfare is an aggregate concept referring to the basic needs and wellness of an entire population, whereas wellbeing refers to the quality of life of individuals in that population. Thus, in order to understand how innovation affects aggregate welfare, you need to understand how it affects individual wellbeing through disaggregated data.

increasing a country's wealth over the long term does not necessarily raise its citizens' average happiness (Easterlin, 1974)³. Furthermore, the climate crisis underscores the urgent need to align economic activities and material throughput within planetary boundaries (Hickel, 2022). This has also prompted scholars to reevaluate the role of growth, development, and innovation in light of ecological concerns (Sedita et al., 2025). As such, there is an amplified call for regional development to respond to societal grand challenges (Isaksen et al., 2022; Castellacci et al. 2025; Binz and Castaldi, 2024) and pursue a problem-oriented (Trippl et al., 2024; Flanagan et al., 2023) research agenda that takes a more holistic sustainable development focus (Binz et al., 2025; Fudge et al., 2021). These normative and empirical examples underscore just some of the work that has contributed to a broader evolution of regional development.

Moreover, regional development scholars have increasingly turned to wellbeing indicators to understand sub-national patterns of inequality and to situate 'beyond GDP' frameworks in place-specific contexts (Tomaney, 2017). This regional focus is important for several reasons. Firstly, wellbeing is experienced locally, as Atkinson et al. (2012) write, "whether of enjoying a balance of positive over negative effects, of fulfilling potential and expressing autonomy or of mobilizing a range of material, social and psychological resources are necessarily emergent in place" (Atkinson et al., 2012, p.3). Secondly, wellbeing issues, like access to healthcare or experiences of safety, become tangible at the local level, as it is the scale where many wellbeing-relevant policies are delivered (Wallace & Schmuecker, 2012), and where values underpinning what wellbeing is understood to mean, can be negotiated (Pike et al., 2007). Third, regional innovation studies demonstrates, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to policy intervention (Tödtling & Trippl, 2005) and best practices are increasingly understood as place-based (Giest, 2023). The same logic applies to wellbeing policy in that effective interventions must be rooted in regional contexts and local priorities.

One final thread to draw from regional development literature is the role of institutions in enabling or constraining the use of wellbeing indicators and the emergence of the Wellbeing Economy. Institutions are broadly defined by Borsekova et al. as "the formal and informal rules governing economic and social interactions" (2026, p. 2). High-quality institutions are characterized by transparent, accountable, and fair governance and well-functioning public services (Borsekova et al., 2026). While institutional quality has been recognized as fundamental to regional competitiveness (Borsekova et al., 2026), Binz and Castaldi (2024) argue that the role of institutions may become even more relevant in a Wellbeing Economy because they shape what kinds of innovation are implemented and how the wellbeing-related benefits and costs of innovation are distributed. In fact, government quality has been found to substantially improve wellbeing (Peiró-Palomino et al., 2020). It is understood that sufficient administrative and institutional capacity is needed to better support the foundational elements of societies that contribute to wellbeing, rather than leaving them up to the free-market (Hansen, 2020; Giest, 2023). Furthermore, as Grillitsch et al. (2019) emphasize, system-wide transformation demands institutional change and institutional entrepreneurship. Thus, this thesis responds to this call for institutional emphasis, by centring state actors, to better understand the barriers and opportunities of institutionalizing wellbeing metrics in provincial and municipal governments. In this thesis, I understand 'institutionalizing' to refer to the process of establishing a norm or functional system within an institution.

2.2 The Wellbeing Movement

From similar critiques of growth-centred models, the rise of alternative economic approaches have emerged in the last decade or two, including degrowth (Hickel, 2022), the Foundational Economy

³ However, the Easterlin paradox is the subject of much debate, and it is likely to be context-dependent and variable based on how it is measured (Kallis et al., 2025). See also Grashof (2025) for a recent empirical example.

(Bentham et al., 2013), the Doughnut Economy (Raworth, 2017), and the Wellbeing Economy (Wellbeing Economy Alliance, n.d.). These approaches fall under the wider post-growth umbrella, which is characterized by qualitatively improving social and ecological conditions without relying on quantitative growth, by “selectively decreasing the production of less necessary and more damaging goods and services, while increasing beneficial ones” (Kallis et al., 2025, p.62). Post-growth is considered to be ‘plural’, and open to different manifestations that call for the transformation of economies to deliver on more than economic growth (Kallis et al., 2025); although these alternatives sit on a spectrum of moderate/progressive to more radical approaches (Schmid, 2025). Within post-growth scholarship, the Wellbeing Economy tends toward the moderate end, relative to more radical models such as degrowth (McCartney et al., 2023; Schmid, 2025). However there are divergent perspectives within the wellbeing movement itself about whether the Wellbeing Economy vision is one of transformation or reform (Hayden, 2021).

Partly thanks to its palatability, the Wellbeing Economy is considered by some to be a uniquely promising framework to “mainstream post-growth policies at the national and global level” (Fioramonti et al., p. 1, 2022). The Wellbeing Economy has several strengths, including its cross-cultural applicability, multidimensionality, and positively framed vision (Fioramonti et al., 2022). Although it lacks a strict and clear definition, the Wellbeing Economy essentially encompasses the satisfaction of human needs and high standards of quality of life within planetary boundaries (Kallis et al., 2025). The Wellbeing Economy pursues social and ecological wellbeing instead of only GDP growth by applying discernment about what industries and types of production should grow and what industries should shrink, so that the economy becomes more efficient at producing things that contribute to a sustainable quality of life (Fioramonti et al., 2022)⁴.

Since the Wellbeing Economy is broadly defined, it lends itself to local interpretation and implementation (McCartney et al., 2023). The structural and political arrangement of a Wellbeing Economy is typically unspecified, partly because of its commitment to democratic economic design (rather than by experts) and partly because it needs to vary by context (McCartney et al., 2023). The growing emphasis on place-based regional development (Giest, 2023) and the role of bottom-up and local agency in shaping regional development paths (e.g., Grillitsch et al., 2025), therefore offers promising pre-conditions for the introduction and implementation of wellbeing practices.

The Wellbeing Economy, wellbeing movement, and the wellbeing agenda, are used relatively interchangeably, but generally refer to slightly different things. In this thesis, I will use the term Wellbeing Economy to refer to the specific goal: an economy designed for people and the planet (McCartney et al., 2023); while referring to the wellbeing movement as the broader grassroots and global movement advocating for some form of a Wellbeing Economy (World Wellbeing Movement, n.d.). I consider ‘beyond GDP’ indicators a part of the wellbeing movement, even if any given ‘beyond GDP’ proponent does not explicitly name the Wellbeing Economy as the end goal. The wellbeing agenda will not be used in this text, but typically refers to the specific roadmaps to advance towards a Wellbeing Economy.

It is apparent that wellbeing and measurement approaches ‘beyond GDP’ are gaining attention: within post-growth discourses, on the international stage, and among regional development scholarship. The following sections of this literature review outlines current methodological debates about how to measure wellbeing, what is known about conditions shaping evidence-uptake in government, and the transformative potential of the wellbeing movement.

⁴ This is consistent with the concept of ‘exnovation’ to phase out unsustainable industries (i.e., smart failures) in order to decrease harms to wellbeing (Binz and Castaldi, 2024).

2.3 Wellbeing: Can we measure what matters?

The normative turn from growth to wellbeing comes with an empirical conundrum. Wellbeing must be measurable if it is to be considered governable (Schwanen & Atkinson, 2015). Thus, in order for there to be institutional uptake of metrics 'beyond GDP', we must first understand if measuring population-level wellbeing is possible. There remains a lively methodological debate about how wellbeing should be measured (Schwanen & Atkinson, 2015). Typically this debate is between subjective and objective perspectives.

Subjective wellbeing (SWB) refers to how people assess their own quality of life, usually measured through a single question asking self-reported life satisfaction. The case for using SWB is based on the idea that wellbeing is a personal experience, shaped by individual values and feelings (Frijters and Krekel, 2021). The argument for using SWB is also a pragmatic one, given that it is typically cheap to collect, easy to answer, historically documented, and does not rely on large datasets and sophisticated analysis tools to be able to interpret⁵ (Frijters and Krekel, 2021). Critics of using SWB in public policy point to several limitations, most significantly the problem of adaptive preferences (otherwise known as the hedonic treadmill, or hedonic adaptation) (Austin, 2015). This well-documented phenomenon shows that people adapt their expectations to improve their own subjective states (Austin, 2015). It means that people in unjust conditions may report high life satisfaction despite lacking basic material needs and opportunities.

The alternative to subjective measures of wellbeing are objective accounts whereby wellbeing is evaluated based on an established set of standards. In theory, consumption or income is an objective measure of wellbeing because they increase consumption capabilities— providing the freedom and resources to pursue life plans (Austin, 2015). This poses problems because resources can be argued to be *means*, rather than *ends* (Austin, 2015). As Sen (2001) points out, it is not the resources themselves, but what those resources enable a person to do, that makes them meaningful. Additionally, the ability to transform resources to wellbeing outcomes is variable, and the kinds of resources needed is likely different between individuals. For example, a person who has been systematically discriminated against may be limited in their ability to transform their education to their preferred occupation, compared to someone with more privileges (Austin, 2015).

Sen's (2001) capabilities approach is thought to account for the limitations of both objective and subjective measures. This approach centres what a person is able to do given their personal characteristics, resources available to them, and their structural environment⁶. The capabilities approach has been a widely adopted measure of wellbeing, because it avoids the pitfalls of SWB— specifically adaptive preferences— while emphasising the significance of ends, such as a decent living standard, over the means to achieve them, like income (Forgeard et al., 2011). A key feature of the capabilities approach is seeing each person as the unit of moral responsibility in public policy (Nussbaum, 2011), underscoring the normative goal of public policy to expand each person's set of capabilities. For example, raising productivity or improving transportation infrastructure must clearly articulate how those contribute to the expansion of each person's capabilities (not just the "average person") (Abreu et al., 2024). This is why disaggregated data and local differences are relevant: rather

⁵ Frijters and Krekel (2021) propose a WELLBY scale whereby governments can assess decisions based on the effect it has on people's life satisfaction— signified using a single number on a 0-10 scale, collected per person per year. They make the argument that having a single metric is the most strategic way for wellbeing to be institutionalized, and for decision-makers to truly assess tradeoffs against GDP and other economic metrics (Frijters and Krekel, 2021).

⁶ In practice, the capabilities approach underpins the Human Development Index developed by the United Nations Development Program (Forgeard et al., 2011), and has been deployed in regional development literature (for example, von Borries et al., 2026; Grillitsch et al., 2025; Abreu et al., 2024; Ozdemir and Gul, 2019).

than folding data into one aggregate measure, it requires the distribution of wellbeing to be made legible⁷.

The debate about subjective and objective measures is animated, and some scholars highlight the need for both metrics. Forgeard et al. (2011) clarify,

we want citizens to have both decent objective standards of living and feel subjectively satisfied with their lives. Researchers should therefore concentrate their efforts on the methods needed to collect and combine both objective and subjective data, rather than striving to establish the superiority of one type of data over the other (p. 99).

Understanding wellbeing as a multifaceted phenomenon may require using a breadth of constructs. Yet even methodologically robust, multidimensional indicators do not automatically translate into policy action. The disconnect between measurement and action is addressed in the following section.

2.4 Making Measurement Matter: Translating data to policy

Strategies for advancing the wellbeing movement tend to gravitate towards measurement. Slogans such as “measuring what matters” are abundant in both practitioner and scholarly worlds, and proponents see measurement as an effective strategy for moving beyond economic growth (Stiglitz et al., 2009; Tomany et al., 2017). However measuring something and acting on it are distinct processes. Even the most methodologically sound indicators do not guarantee policy action (Hayden & Wilson, 2018). The surge of sustainability and wellbeing indicators in recent decades reflects a belief that improving the evidence base for policymaking will correspond with improvements in analysis and action, however the extent to which these indicators have delivered on this promise is underwhelming (Sébastien et al., 2014). This section reviews literature on evidence-use in public policymaking and then introduces the analytical framework used to analyze the Nova Scotia case.

2.4.1 Evidence Informed Policy Making

Evidence use in the public sector is shaped by multiple factors. This study builds on prevailing frameworks for understanding evidence uptake *generally* (Nelson et al., 2023), and along with categorizations commonly used to analyze wellbeing indicator use, *specifically* (Hayden and Wilson, 2018; Bleys and Whitby, 2015). In a systematic review, Nelson et al. (2023), compiled a list of factors that have been found to influence the uptake of evidence in policy, including characteristics of the practitioner, the scholar, the relationship between them, and characteristics of the research itself (see also Nutley et al. (2007), and Raymaekers et al. (2023)). Similarly, a frequently used categorical grouping of barriers for wellbeing indicator uptake include *context (or policy)*, *indicator*, and *user* factors (Hayden and Wilson, 2018; Bleys and Whitby, 2015).

⁷ The capabilities approach does not come without critiques. Firstly, objective measures of wellbeing may be considered paternalistic and undermine people’s agency and autonomy to define for themselves what a good and worthwhile life looks like (Austin, 2015). Furthermore, the assumption that there are universal values that underpin wellbeing is debated and it is argued that experiences of a good life are diverse and thus unable to be universally defined (Austin, 2015). Nussbaum (2011) counters this critique by highlighting that the focus of the capabilities approach is the freedom to achieve valuable outcomes, rather than establishing outcomes as the normative target. Proponents argue that universal values (like freedom) are subject to “multiple realizability”, and thus preserve both the individual’s agency to choose what constitutes a good life, and honours the diverse manifestations of values (Nussbaum 2011).

Building from both of these strands of work, I have labelled the categories of analysis for this study as 1) individual; 2) organisational; 3) empirical; 4) translational; and 5) contextual. These categories are expanded on in Table 2.1.

Furthermore, this study identifies patterns that not only shape *if* evidence is used, but also whether there are patterns in the *type of use* according to particular conditions (such as scale). Nelson et al. (2023) found strong academic agreement that research is used in different ways in policy and public administration, and typologies defining this research use tend to overlap. This thesis draws on prominent work by Amara et al., (2004) – adapted from Carol H. Weiss– to distinguish between three types of use: *instrumental use* of research which is direct application to the decision-making or policy design processes; *conceptual use* which refers to a broader shaping of policy thought and discourse; and *symbolic use*, which uses evidence to support predetermined decisions⁸. Some scholars have come to use the term *political use* instead of symbolic use, to describe the ways that knowledge creation is a substitute for action or used to justify predetermined positions and legitimize political agendas (Sébastien et al., 2014). Since many interviewees in this study were civil servants and non-governmental actors rather than elected officials, 'symbolic' better describes evidence-use that preemptively validates existing positions for political ends or otherwise (e.g., symbolic use includes both using data for the to aid in grant applications, and promoting a political agenda). Hence I retain Amara et al.'s, (2004) three categories for analysis.

Finally, work by Giest (2023) on policy capacity, also helps to further untangle factors shaping evidence use. Giest defines policy capacity as “the analytical skills for assessing current performance and future policy options as well as capacities to undertake medium- and long-term planning and strategic goal-setting” (Giest, 2023, p. 5). According to this framework, policy capacity is composed of three dimensions: political capacity, analytical capacity, and operational capacity; and mapped onto individual, organizational, and system levels (Giest, 2023). This culminates in a nested view of place-based policymaking, which can be used to understand some of the barriers institutions encounter when confronted with the challenge of using wellbeing indicators to inform policy (Giest, 2023). Although Giest’s framework is not explicitly used as the analytical lens of this study, policy capacity, and its composite dimensions are referred to in discussing the results in Section 5.

2.4.2 From Indicators to Action

The “indicators fantasy” is the idea that simply producing indicators is a sufficient response to the issues they measure, creating an illusion of progress without corresponding policy change or tangible improvements in outcomes (Hayden, 2021). The indicator fantasy appears to be alive and well in the ‘beyond GDP’ world, and evidence suggests that the use and impact of sustainability and wellbeing indicators is modest at best (e.g., Cassar et al., 2013; Hayden, 2021; Battaglia, 2024). Developing indicators are too often seen to be an exercise in and of themselves, rather than one linked to their eventual utility in policy making and implementation (Cassar et al., 2013).

Hayden (2021) describes the spectrum of evidence use ranging from the “indicators fantasy”, to transformative change, referring to a process of fundamental shifts in institutional priorities and functions. Between the poles of fantasy and transformation are intermediate forms of use, including: *symbolic use* of data for political ends; *conceptual use* that shapes new understandings and ways of

⁸ Interestingly, some scholars have traced the type of evidence used to the political context and research features. For example, in cases where symbolic use of evidence is dominant, scholars have attributed this to an underdeveloped, ambiguous, and semi-relevant ocean of research (Stevens, 2011; Boaz & Pawson, 2005). In other cases, scholars found that research is used symbolically where issues are heavily politicized, and instrumental use is only possible where “political battle lines” are less established (Bogenschneider et al., 2019).

thinking; and *instrumental use* where indicators are integrated into the policymaking cycle to directly inform decisions (Hayden, 2021). Thus, how evidence is used is more or less understood on a continuum of 'transformative-ness' (with symbolic use offering the least transformative potential, and instrumental use having the most).

2.5 Analytical Framework

As mentioned above, there is an abundance of literature investigating the uptake of research and evidence in policymaking, however there is no well-agreed-upon set of relevant variables, even within each of those sets of literature (Nelson et al. 2023). Therefore, the following framework (outlined in Table 2.1) pulls from these various literatures to investigate the individual, organizational, empirical, translational, and contextual factors that influence wellbeing metric uptake in policymaking. The categories in this framework are described as follows:

- 1) **Individual factors** refer to the capacities, orientations, and characteristics of potential indicator-users themselves. Factors that have been empirically studied, and shown to have an effect on evidence use (generally) include degree attainment, disciplinary background, research skills, public sector working experience, and policy analytical capacities (Nelson et al., 2023; Raymaekers et al., 2024). This category explored the extent to which actors experienced the use of wellbeing metrics as a function of individual (their own, or others) abilities, experiences, motivations, values, or position.
- 2) **Organizational factors** encompass the structural and cultural characteristics of the establishments in which users operate. I have included organizational characteristics of the producers of indicators (i.e., Engage) in this category as well. Previous research points to the organizational culture of policy innovation, organizational resources, and access to research, as factors shaping evidence-use (Giest, 2023; Raymaekers et al., 2024). While some literature includes national context and politicisation in this category (Nelson et al. 2023; Raymaekers et al., 2024), I opted to view broader political and institutional structures in the contextual category, given they seem to transcend the container of government.⁹
- 3) **Empirical factors** are that which characterizes the indicators themselves, such as its methods and data quality. Previous research references the robustness and methodology of alternative indicators in this category (Bleys & Whitby, 2015). Empirical factors describe the extent to which wellbeing indicators are seen as a trusted, valid, usable, and relevant source for policymaking.
- 4) **Translational factors** address how evidence reaches and is communicated to its potential users. This is sometimes referred to as relational factors, describing the relevance and timeliness of research, as well as the adaptation, presentation, and accessibility of data (Nelson et al., 2023). The lineage of Caplan's (1979) "two communities" thesis is present here, which attributes difficulties in communication as the result of researchers and practitioners effectively speaking different languages.
- 5) **Contextual factors** capture the broader milieu of political, economic, social, and cultural conditions within which indicators are embedded. This includes features of time and space, such as an economic crisis, the dominance of economic indicators, or public opinion (Bleys & Whitby, 2015; Hayden and Wilson, 2018). Contextual factors pertain to the characteristics of the environment in which all the other factors operate.¹⁰

⁹ In the context of the Nova Scotia government, I refer to characteristics of departments themselves, as well as the provincial government as a whole, as organizational (denoted by departmental and whole-of-government, respectively).

¹⁰ For example, Migone et al. (2024) argue that policymaking in Canada uses a "weak evidentiary style" rather than a strong one, thanks to Canada's vast geography and Westminster government structure that has privileged

Table 2.1: Factors Influencing Data Use

Category	Description	Examples of barriers from the literature	Relevant literature
Individual	User capacities, motivations, and orientations towards wellbeing data.	Data literacy, disciplinary background, policy analytical skills, beliefs about evidence role, time constraints.	Raymaekers et al., 2024 Nelson et al., 2023 Nutley et al., 2007
Organizational	Structures, cultures, and processes shaping data integration within municipal councils, NGOs, departments, and whole-of-government.	Innovation culture, resources, cross-departmental coordination, policy autonomy, mandated evidence lenses.	Raymaekers et al., 2024 Nelson et al., 2023 Nutley et al., 2007 Angresius et al., 2025
Empirical	Characteristics and (perceived) quality of wellbeing data.	Methodological robustness, sample representativeness, credibility, ability to reliably measure relevant features of wellbeing.	Bache et al., 2016 Frijters & Krekel, 2021 Nelson et al., 2023
Translational	How wellbeing data is communicated to users and adapted for policy making.	Accessibility of tools, tailored reporting, relationships between data “producers” and “users”, alignment and timeliness to key policy questions.	Nelson et al., 2023 Nutley et al., 2007 Angresius et al., 2025 Bammer et al., 2010
Contextual	Broader political-economic conditions shaping the landscape of wellbeing use.	Public sentiment, fiscal pressures, election cycles, dominant paradigms (e.g., GDP), economic crises.	Bleys and Whitby, 2015 Hayden and Wilson, 2018 Bammer et al., 2010 Angresius et al., 2025

“high-level bargaining processes” among provincial and federal actors, resulting in a system where “evidence is often secondary to political posturing and short-term electioneering in program creation and execution” (p. 1). This suggests that lack of evidence of use is a cultural and political issue, rather than a technical or structural one (Migone et al., 2024). The “contextual” category of the analytical framework for this study accounts for these political, cultural, historical and geographical dimensions of policy uptake.

3. Methodology

This study examines how and under what conditions Nova Scotia Quality of Life (NSQoL) data is used through 24 semi-structured interviews with actors with political and community decision-making authority. The following section begins with some background information about Engage and the NSQoL Initiative. Section 3.2 outlines the critical realist ontological foundation of the project, followed by a rationale of the methodological design and description of the data collection and analysis process (Section 3.3).

3.1 Case Background

Nova Scotia is a small, relatively peripheral province on Canada's eastern coast, and is home to Halifax: the largest urban centre in the Maritime region. Despite its modest size, efforts made by Engage to measure wellbeing have gained international recognition. This somewhat outsized place the NSQoL Initiative has on the international stage, related to its otherwise peripheral position, provides a compelling case for examining what enables or constrains indicator use in non-metropolitan regions.

3.1.1 About the NSQoL Initiative

The NSQoL Initiative is a grassroots project aimed at improving resident wellbeing through measurement and action. The Initiative's main component is the NSQoL Survey, and is supported by data tools, community engagement, and knowledge mobilization efforts (Engage Nova Scotia, n.d.). The Survey is organized around the Eight Domains of Wellbeing¹¹, coined by the Canadian Index of Wellbeing and is led by a research group at the University of Waterloo (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, n.d.-a). Notably, this framework was developed based on public consultations with Canadians about national values in the early 2000s, which underpins the framework used today (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, n.d.,-b).

Engage uses the Eight Domains of Wellbeing, but has revised some of the indicators over the years. The NSQoL Survey collects subjective data (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, n.d.-c) involving self-reported experiences of life satisfaction and loneliness, and also quantifiable questions, like 'do you have a regular family doctor' and 'how many hours per week do you usually spend working at your main job?' (Engage Nova Scotia, personal communication, March 3, 2026). While it is considered a subjective source, the 200+ question Survey entails a multi-dimensional view, combined with some quantitative questions, which potentially buffers against some of the limitations of subjective measures. However, as is explored later in this thesis, the methodology of the NSQoL study is not immune to critique, and its methods have implications for how uptake occurs in practice.

Engage conducted the first province-wide Survey in 2019 in partnership with the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, featuring over 200 questions and reaching over 12,000 people (Engage Nova Scotia, 2022). In spring of 2026, Engage administered the second NSQoL Survey of a similar size, which was distributed to every household in Nova Scotia– the results of which are expected to become available in fall 2026 (Engage Nova Scotia, n.d.). Therefore, this thesis primarily investigates the use of the 2019 NSQoL dataset. Because of the number of questions, and its wide reach, the Survey is said to be the largest dataset of its kind in the world (Engage Nova Scotia, n.d.).¹²

¹¹ The Eight Domains are: community vitality, democratic engagement, education, environment, healthy populations, leisure and culture, living standards, and time use (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, n.d.-a).

¹² Engage is funded by all three levels of government along with private donors.

Engage presents its work as offering metrics of success beyond GDP, positioning itself somewhere between an alternative and a complement to economic growth. On its website and in public presentations, it often references public polling on how success should be measured. The website states:

In the past, policy decisions were mainly based on economic data. While those data are important, they are incomplete on their own. So we asked Nova Scotia residents the following: How should we measure success on a scale from 1 to 10?

The results (August 2024):

58% said: By growing the economy.

82% said: By improving our quality of life (Engage Nova Scotia, n.d.).

While Engage does not explicitly state that economic transformation is the ultimate goal, its alignment with the Wellbeing Economy and broader wellbeing movement is implied.

3.1.2 Governance in Nova Scotia

Canada's government has three levels: federal, provincial, and municipal. Relative power resides with provinces, who are responsible for healthcare, education, social services, justice, large infrastructure, and natural resources; while municipalities have jurisdiction over parks and recreation, waste, water, emergency services (police and fire), public transportation, land use, and residential and commercial property tax (Legal Information Society of Nova Scotia, 2023). Nova Scotia is the most populated Atlantic province in Canada, and with just over one million people (Province of Nova Scotia, 2025), it is home to the economic hub in Canada's Maritime provinces, Halifax. However, it remains a relatively rural and sparsely populated region, with a history of being a "have not" province that relies on equalization payments from the federal government to provide core services (Eisen & Whalen, 2026). Politically, it is currently led by the Progressive Conservative government under Premier Tim Houston.

Nova Scotia's municipalities are non-partisan and relatively provincially dependent. There are 49 municipalities, including four regional municipalities, 25 towns, and 20 county or district municipalities, all of which operate under the Municipal Government Act (Nova Scotia Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing (2022)). The province retains significant authority over municipal affairs and can shape the scope of municipal action through legislation, funding, and policy direction. See Appendix A for a list of municipalities.

3.2 Positionality

I moved to Nova Scotia in 2017 and have come to call it home. I am grateful to have found a strong sense of community, belonging, and connection-to-place in Nova Scotia, which underpins my desire to better understand the systems that shape life there. I am a settler on Turtle Island, and specifically in Mi'kma'ki (what is now known as Nova Scotia), the traditional and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq people. As a white Canadian, coming from an upper middle class and highly educated background, my understanding of issues of welfare and wellbeing come from a place of having experienced relative safety, security, and a high quality of life. Issues of not having those things are relatively abstracted rather than lived for me.¹³ Rather than claiming to be an objective observer of the system "out there", I see myself in the research,

¹³ As an international student living and studying in Sweden, this study is also implicitly informed by my experience living in a socially democratic, welfare state. My sense of what is possible and points of reference are informed by viewing the Nova Scotian and Canadian systems from 'the other side' of the Atlantic ocean, in relation to Sweden where I perceive standards of wellbeing and welfare to be higher (albeit still complicated and flawed). This has also fueled my critical stance, and has meant that I do not take structures for granted. I see them as malleable, culturally/historically/ geographically contingent, and constantly (re)negotiated. This has made me both critical of the system, but also fueled my curiosity and a sense of optimism about what is possible.

and acknowledge how my own lens has shaped this study (Haraway, 1988). I worked for Engage for 2 years, from 2022-2024, which sparked my curiosity about the potential for the wellbeing movement and wellbeing surveys to improve people's lives and offer a legitimate way to strengthen economic and governance systems. My time working at Engage has inevitably informed every step of the research processes, from what questions I asked and what information I saw as more or less significant. However, I did not come to this research as an unwavering advocate; rather, my work experience prompted me to question the extent to which the NSQoL Initiative could influence policymaking and shape governance landscapes.

My previous associations with Engage likely influenced the data generated through study. I disclosed my employment history with Engage to participants in the participant consent form (see Appendix B) and some participants knew me in that role. While I tried to present myself as neutral and open to all perspectives (including criticism) about the NSQoL Survey, I got the sense that I was sometimes perceived as an advocate of the Survey and Engage's work generally. I suspect that this may have nudged some people to frame their answers in a positive light, or be tentative about sharing critiques. In other instances, I sensed that people were very forthcoming with criticisms in part because I was familiar with the organization and actors involved, and was perceived to understand their references. These examples demonstrate the inherently social nature of the research process (known as "sociality") and emphasise that I had a role in the "data generation" process (Moore & Kelly, 2022).

Throughout the research process, I aimed to practice reflexivity (understood as "ongoing self awareness" (Moore & Kelly, 2022)), by taking notes, reflecting on my reactions to the data, and in conversation with my supervisor and peers. I probed my own inclinations and aimed to apply a critical lens to my own thinking and writing- returning to the data often to check for accuracy, intent, and prevalence of certain insights (Knott et al., 2022). That said, I also do not necessarily seek to represent the data as neutrally as possible. Based on my own understanding of the issues and actors involved, I have privileged some participants' insights over others, or treated certain findings more or less significant according to my own knowledge and perspectives. I have balanced this by striving for transparency and indicating the prevalence of certain findings- providing numbers when possible.

3.3 Ontology and Epistemology

The ontological foundation for this study is aligned with critical realism, in that I see governance structures, growth paradigms, and institutional constraints as ontologically real and having causal power (Fletcher, 2017). I understand this to mean that institutional structures can produce specific effects in the world, such as poverty or wellbeing, even if that power is not always activated, exercised, or visible (Fletcher, 2017). From a critical realist perspective, structures emerge through social relations, which has implications for how transformation can occur. In work on agential and structural power in the wellbeing economy, Bärnthaler et al., (2024) emphasize that actor coalitions operate within pre-existing structures, but also have the ability to reproduce or transform those same structures. However, authors describe these structures as 'strategically selective' in that they favour some actors, strategies, interests, and spatial temporal horizons over others (Bärnthaler et al., 2024). This provides an ontological backdrop for understanding how the wellbeing movement arises both within existing (growth-oriented) structures, and has the ability to both reproduce and transform them.

Following the critical realist tradition, epistemological relativism suggests that structures are understood through actors' interpretations of them, and thus knowledge of social reality is constructed and fallible (Fletcher, 2017). However, some interpretations are closer to reality than others, and can be assessed on the basis of judgement rationality (Fletcher, 2017). This epistemological stance supports the use of interviews as a way to deepen our understanding about underlying 'real' structures, without adopting a purely constructivist view in which all accounts are treated as equally true.

Although this ontological framing provides an important foundation for this study, it is not the focus and further application of these concepts are hereby indirect.

3.4 Methodology and Methods

This project uses qualitative methods to investigate the factors that enable and constrain the uptake of wellbeing metrics in Nova Scotia. I choose to use qualitative methods to investigate mechanisms and logics that enable or limit wellbeing metric institutionalization by exploring actor's accounts of governance ecosystems, with special attention to differences in scale.

3.4.1 Methods Justification

The primary data collection method consisted of semi-structured interviews with 24 mid-to-senior level practitioners involved in municipal or provincial government, or non-governmental organizations. Semi-structured interviews were an appropriate method of data collection because it promoted a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the experiences and perspectives of participants. Using a conversational interview style allowed me to surface issues and insights I might not otherwise have anticipated, and to understand wellbeing, growth, and governance from the respondent's perspective, producing a more granular understanding of these topics (Valentine, 2005). Semi-structured interviews also enabled me to understand participant's responses in context, ask probing and follow-up questions, and supported a careful application of judgement rationality that helped contextualize the results (Fletcher, 2017).

3.4.2 Sampling Strategy

Interview participants were identified mainly through a gatekeeper (Valentine, 2005): a well-connected representative from Engage. I generated an initial first list of potential interviewees, based on a scan of municipal and provincial elected officials and staff, as well as non-governmental organizations of interest. The gatekeeper reviewed the initial list, added additional names, and provided contact information for people when needed. I also 'cold emailed' several potential interviewees, and the final list of people I reached out to involved a mix of gatekeeper referrals, and participants identified by my own research and knowledge of the sector. A few participants were also identified through snowball sampling. This sampling method was never designed to be representative, but rather purposive, striving for depth and richness by seeking to interview relevant actors (Knott et al., 2022).

Ultimately, 61 people were contacted via email, with a brief description of the study and an invitation to participate. Given part of my research inquiry was related to differences in uptake according to scale, an effort was made to have a wide geographical distribution in that sample, with a mix of rural and urban representation. A breakdown of the response rate and geographical representation of the study can be viewed in Table 3.1 and 3.2, respectively.

Table 3.1: Participant Response Rate

<i>Prospective participants contacted</i>	61 (representing 31 of 57 municipalities, districts and towns in Nova Scotia)
<i>Agreed to participate</i>	24 (40%)
<i>Declined to participate</i>	3 (5%)
<i>Did not respond</i>	34 (57%)

Table 3.2: Municipal Geographical Representation

Functional Economic Region	# of Primary Perspectives
South-Western (Yarmouth/Digby)	2
Shelburne County	0
Valley Region	2
Lunenburg-Queens	1
Halifax Region	3
Colchester Region	1
Cumberland Region	0
Pictou Region	0
Antigonish-Guysborough Region	1
Straight-Western Cape Breton	0
Cape Breton Regional Municipality	4

The limitations of sampling through gatekeeper referrals is that the majority of participants were aware of Engage and had relatively positive associations with it. I tried to mitigate this by doing outreach to a variety of actors in addition to those recommended by the gatekeeper, but as predicted, the majority of people who agreed to participate in an interview were those who had a connection to the NSQoL Initiative. This means that the data generated by this study is likely biased towards awareness and enthusiasm for the Initiative.

Additionally, although several provincially elected officials (Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs)) were contacted with requests for an interview, only one responded and declined given that they were in session. I suspect the lack of response from MLAs generally to be partly due to budget deliberations occurring during the time of request. The absence of perspectives from provincially elected officials is a significant limitation of this study, as a whole-of-government and political perspective is lacking. However, a handful of the participants that were interviewed had proximity and knowledge of the workings of the Nova Scotia Cabinet. Their perspectives were helpful in filling in some of the gaps created by the absence of provincially elected officials in this study. Table 3.3 describes the professional make up of the people represented in the study.

Another eight participants worked for the government of Nova Scotia, as civil servants across six different departments, including departments related to: health, communities and culture, housing, environment and climate change, accessibility, priorities and planning, and economic development. The remaining two participants, primarily contributed based on their experience working with provincial governments and municipalities, either as a consultant or through a federation.

Table 3.3: Participant Primary Perspectives

	Municipal			Provincial	Non-governmental	Total
	Staff	Councillor	Mayor	Civil Servant	Including representatives from consulting firms, social enterprises, economic development initiatives, associations, federations, and charitable organizations.	
Former*	1	0	3	4	2	
Current**	1	4	3	6	10	
Primary Perspective***	2	4	6	8	4	24

* Former indicates that the participant has previous experience in a particular role. This is not comprehensive, but is only included in this table if the participant mentioned previous work experience in a relevant and meaningful way during the interview.

** Current indicates that the participant works in a particular role at the time of the interview.

*** Primary perspective denotes what role the participant primarily spoke from. For instance, if someone was a former Mayor, but now works as a leader of a social enterprise but they mainly spoke about their experience and insights from being Mayor during the interview, their primary perspective would be Mayor. Each participant is only assigned one primary perspective despite many people having multi-dimensional perspectives.

3.4.3 Interview Guide Design

The interview guide was designed to collect responses according to the identified research questions, outlined in Table 3.4. The guide was divided into seven sections (Appendix C), starting from easiest to answer questions, to more broad and complex questions, following best practices for semi-structured interviews (Knott et al., 2022). Some questions were reworded or skipped, depending on the interviewee. Additional and probing questions were asked, allowing me to follow insights that I found interesting or relevant. This flexibility was particularly important given the breadth of actors interviewed and the varying scope and scale of their work.

Table 3.4: Summary of Interview Guide

Section	Category	Purpose and description
1	Background and role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rapport building - Gaining general context and shared understanding
2	Awareness and understanding of wellbeing and the NSQoL Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assessing level of awareness and understanding of NSQoL Survey, wellbeing, and wellbeing measurement
3	Use (or non-use) of wellbeing and social indicator data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding general data use and use of wellbeing metrics
4	Integration, barriers, and opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding the barriers and enablers of wellbeing metric use according to the framework outlined in Section 2.5 - Explored what effective integration does or could look like
5	Wellbeing data and policymaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exploring what aspirational wellbeing metric use looks like - Gathering perspectives on how wellbeing considerations interact with economic growth
6	Scale and governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gauging how people understand government responsibility/feasibility of data use - Understanding differences in scale of government
7	Future directions and closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Summarizing key insights by identifying a next step for better integrating wellbeing metrics - Inviting final reflections

3.4.4 Data Analysis

Interviews were conducted through Zoom, and lasted 50 minutes on average (min = 22 mins, max = 75 mins). Interviews were audio recorded using Zoom. Audio recordings were then transcribed using AI transcription software, Turboscribe. Implications of third party transcription related to data security are discussed in Section 3.4.5 below.

Transcripts were coded systematically and iteratively, broadly following a theoretical thematic analysis approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006), where only data relevant to the study’s analytical framework and research questions were coded. Thematic analysis was conducted at the latent level, whereby underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations were identified (rather than at the semantic level, where participant’s words were taken only at face-value).¹⁴

¹⁴ For example, if a municipal councillor said that their staff were responsible for data analysis, and they did not use data often, I took that to say something about the roles of elected officials and staff members, as well as the role of data in decision- making. I assumed, based on that statement, that direction and agenda setting at the municipal level was separate from data use, and that the role of the staff was to use data in a predetermined (i.e., symbolic) way.

The analysis approach loosely followed Braun and Clarke's (2006), 'six phases of thematic analysis', summarized in Appendix D. Before conducting the interviews, I created a spreadsheet that listed categories of information that I wished to explore, based on my research questions, interview guide, and analytical framework. This approach aligned with the "framework method" described by Gale and colleagues (2013). After each interview was transcribed, I identified relevant insights and transferred them into the spreadsheet (see Appendix E for an example of what this looked like).

Once information from all the interviews were inserted in the spreadsheet, I transferred those to digital sticky notes using the software Miro. Each cell of data was put on one sticky note, colour coded according to each person, and spatially organized according to similar predefined categories as the spreadsheet.¹⁵ Then, I reviewed each category, and grouped similar sticky notes within that category together, to create themes and subthemes (see Appendix F for an example of what this looked like)¹⁶.

A first draft of results was written based on these themes, and described in relation to each other. I referred back to the sticky notes, spreadsheet, and transcripts throughout the writing process, checking for accuracy and depth. A few adjustments were made. For example, themes related to political resistance to data use and the avoidance of uncomfortable truths originally spanned individual, organizational, and contextual categories. During revision, I consolidated these into a single organizational category and integrated aspects of them into other themes.

3.4.5 Ethics, Consent, and Anonymity

This study underwent review and received approval by Acadia University's Research Ethics Board, in Nova Scotia, and is on file as REB26-16. Participants who agreed to participate in an interview were provided with a digital consent form prior to the interview (Appendix B). If participants had not provided written consent digitally, I asked for their verbal consent prior to starting the interview. The consent form stated that participants may request a copy of their transcript to review, revise, or retract statements, which two participants requested to ensure they were comfortable with their comments being published. Interview recordings were stored on a password-protected laptop and Google Drive account accessible only to me. Recordings were processed using transcription software, Turboscribe, which involved automated processing and temporary storage on external servers. While these services use encryption and privacy safeguards, there is a small risk of data breach associated with any online platform—which participants are made aware of in the consent form.

Participants are not named in this study, rather they are referenced only by the scale at which they work (i.e., *P* denoting a provincial actor, and *M* denoting a municipal actor) and a number (i.e., for example M4 or P10). In a few cases, more context was given about at what level they worked (i.e., senior leadership), but identifying information was removed from the final manuscript. Direct quotes were anonymized with personal identifiers removed, and I took care to review the content of direct quotes in relation to each other, to protect respondents' identities (Wilson, 2020). In one case, I checked with a participant before using their quotes and removed one quote at their request.

3.4.6 Considerations

In addition to limitations about the sampling strategy and my positionality as discussed in previous sections, the timing of the interviews likely impacted the results. Interviews were held shortly after the 2026-27 Nova Scotia provincial budget was tabled, which included \$130 million worth of cuts to 287

¹⁵ E.g., the sticky notes that related to barriers to using wellbeing metrics were grouped together.

¹⁶ E.g., the sticky notes about "time as a barrier", were placed beside each other in the "barriers: individual" section. I created new sticky notes and titled the themes by placing my grey sticky note next to the group of sticky notes that comprised a common theme.

grants, impacting an estimated 7,500 non profits and community organisations. (Cerdas Sandí & Saulnier, 2026). The budget received immense public backlash, which prompted some reversals (particularly to programs related to seniors and those with disabilities), but the majority of cuts remained, and was passed in March 2026 (Henderson, 2026). Almost every interview participant mentioned the budget and the current Progressive Conservative (PC) provincial government during the interview, most frequently with a critical stance. Having this controversial budget as the backdrop for this study may have strengthened people's understanding of topics related to wellbeing, governments, and economic growth, but also likely coloured their responses.

4. Findings

The findings from this study are organized according to the research questions. Section 4.1 presents findings related to RQ1: how are wellbeing metrics from the Nova Scotia Quality of Life (NSQoL) Survey understood and used by decision-makers at local and regional levels? Section 4.2 presents findings related to RQ2: what factors enable or constrain the integration of wellbeing metrics in policy-making and regional development in Nova Scotia? Section 4.3 presents findings related to RQ2a: how do these factors vary by scale of governance? Additionally, Section 4.4 discusses how participants see growth and wellbeing in their work, in line with the overarching theme of this thesis.

4.1 Awareness, Understanding, and Use of NSQoL Data

Overall, there was a high level of awareness, enthusiasm, and a clear and consistent understanding of the NSQoL Survey and the NSQoL Initiative. However, this awareness did not translate to a consistent or institutionalized use. Rather, participants described a spectrum of uptake, most commonly citing not using the NSQoL data to more ambitious but fragile attempts to embed wellbeing data into governance systems.

Every interview participant was aware of the NSQoL Survey and Engage, which is not surprising given the sampling method. Many people emphasised the importance of Engage's work, and expressed their support for the Survey. Participants generally described the NSQoL Survey as a tool for understanding how people are doing in the communities they serve. Provincial actors tended to highlight the Survey's ability to reveal regional disparities, while municipal participants focused more on its value for understanding and responding to local community needs. Many (eleven participants) emphasized its theoretical purpose in informing policy direction and identifying priority areas (i.e., instrumental use), although participants understood this as aspirational and did not see much policy translation happening in practice. Three participants saw it as an alternative measure to GDP, while two municipal representatives described how it served as a helpful prompt for political deliberation and decision-making, in addition to traditional inputs like community feedback. One person highlighted its function as a longitudinal database to help understand wellbeing changes over time. Overall there was a strong awareness, coherent understanding, and general enthusiasm for the NSQoL Initiative, but again, this should be understood in the context of this study where the sampling method skewed towards people with awareness of and support for Engage and their work.

There was a range of uses of the 2019 NSQoL data as described by participants, which are outlined in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 : Use Typologies*

<u>Type of use</u>	Extent of use**				
	No Use	Informally or abstractly	Somewhat substantially	Very substantially	Attempted institutionalization (no longer existent)
No Use	n=8 (M1, M2, M6, M10, M12, P2, P8, P9)				
Symbolic		n=4 (M5, M9, M13, P7)	n=1 (P11)		
Conceptual		n=3 (M11, M7, M8)	n=1 (P4)	n=2 (P5, M4)	n=1 (M3)
Instrumental				n=2 (P1, P10)	n=2 (6P, 3P)

***Note:** Amara et al.'s (2004) categories are used here as descriptors, however some participants' uses of the data are more accurately described in between or outside of these categories. Because the NSQoL Initiative is not just a data source- it is a 10+ year initiative embedded in a larger movement, the question of if and how people "used it" becomes blurry. Some people used it for different purposes at different times, some used it years ago but have not referred to it since, two people from the same organization described their department not using it at all and using it substantially. I tended to lean on my interpretation of what people said in relation to others, as well as my own knowledge of particular use-cases- striving to be consistent and reflexive. However, participants themselves might not place themselves in the category I have placed them.

****Note:** "Extent of use" is adapted from Amara et al. 2004, who used the terms "very important or decisive impact"; "moderately important"; and "negligible or some-what negligible". However I did not ask interviewees explicitly about the extent of use, rather extent to use is categorized based on my own interpretation.

4.1.1 Examples of Use

Most commonly, participants described no use, or informal/symbolic-conceptual use of the NSQoL data. This kind of use was especially common municipally, where councillors described how NSQoL data insights shaped their thinking, validated community concerns, or informed deliberation without being formally incorporated into decision-making processes. As one councillor explained, "so, are we sitting down and looking at the data and then saying 'oh, well, based on the data, then I think we...' no, but it's informing me all the time" (M8).

More substantive uses were less common and tended to be project-based at the provincial level, and conceptually transformative at the municipal level. One municipal representative shared an example of the data showing a gap in childcare and as a result, the first licensed daycare was opened in their municipality. A member of a different council described how they partnered with Engage to present

findings from the Survey to council alongside lived-experience testimonies which catalyzed the formation of working groups and the development of recommendations to inform strategic planning.

In contrast, substantive work was more conceptual/instrumental provincially. In cases of substantive use, significant analysis was done to align the NSQoL data with other data sources (either statistically or conceptually), making the result relevant, contextualized, and defensible. The first example was in the Accessibility Directorate where the NSQoL data was used to show the disproportionate wellbeing-related challenges people with disabilities experience on an everyday basis. It was used extensively by the Nova Scotia League of Opportunities in the Quality of Life Index for Persons with Disabilities and a corresponding review of the Nova Scotia Accessibility Act. The second example was in the Department of Environment and Climate Change, where they used the NSQoL data to inform their Climate Risk Assessment through a wellbeing lens– an innovative approach for conducting environmental risk assessments. Extensive statistical analysis was completed to align the NSQoL data with environmental risk indicators to establish the wellbeing framework for this report. These examples do not fit neatly into Amara et al.'s (2004) three categories, as the NSQoL data informed a report that was itself a deliverable intended to guide future work. However, to reflect the substantive nature of these cases, I have classified them within the instrumental category.

The most ambitious uses were attempts to embed wellbeing data into ongoing governance systems with a long-term vision for meaningful integration. These efforts were rare and highly dependent on mid-to-senior level champions. In instances where attempts were made to institutionalize wellbeing metrics into planning, everyday decision-making, and cross-departmental priority-setting, the work stalled or dissolved with the departure of key individuals, election cycles, and leadership changes. Because of my sampling method, I have reason to believe that there are very few– if any– additional cases of substantive use in government not represented in this study.

4.1.2 Differences in Use

Use of the NSQoL data tended to differ by the scope and scale of people's work. Municipal use of the data tended towards informal, conceptual, and symbolic use (as illustrated in Table 4.1), which might be due to the limited capacity and resources for robust data analysis, and the more relational nature of decision-making in the municipal council structure. In both cases of substantive use, there was buy-in and guidance from the Mayor to take the results seriously. Conversely, when there was meaningful use of the data at the provincial level, it was more systematic and analytical. In these cases, the data was used for a specific purpose, and with an intentional wellbeing lens. Significant analytical work was done to align the NSQoL data with other data (either statistically or conceptually), making the result relevant, contextualized, and defensible. In these cases, there was often a specific purpose and one-time need for using the data, again with leadership buy-in. In cases where attempts were made to institutionalize wellbeing data more deeply, those efforts were driven by champions at a mid-to-senior level, and progress was lost when those champions left their roles, pointing towards the importance of leadership buy-in and the barrier posed by four-year election cycles.

4.2 Factors Shaping Uptake

A variety of barriers and opportunities were identified in the interviews, providing insight into why the NSQoL data has limited uptake and what factors enabled its use when it did occur. These are organized according to the framework described in Section 2.5, which provided an initial coding structure, however these factors rarely operated in isolation, and as such, are treated as flexible and overlapping rather than mutually exclusive. For example, concerns about the NSQoL methodology were not only empirical, but also organizational and contextual because credibility shaped whether government actors

trusted externally generated data. Therefore, the findings below highlight the most important patterns in each category, while also noting where the barriers cut across categories. Table 4.2 provides an overview of key barriers according to this framework.

Table 4.2: Barriers to Uptake

✓ = identified by fewer than six participants ✓✓ = identified by six or more participants			
CATEGORY	BARRIER	Barrier identified by municipal actors	Barrier identified by provincial actors
Individual	Lack of motivation and interest	✓	✓
	Skills gap	✓	
	Time and attention poor	✓✓	✓✓
Organizational	Politics and uncomfortable truths	✓	✓✓
	Distrust of external sources	✓	✓
	Administrative and operational disfunction	✓	✓
	Lack of mandated wellbeing lens	✓	✓✓
	Limited resources	✓✓	
Empirical	Outdated dataset		✓
	Large dataset	✓	✓
	Methodological credibility		✓
	Area sample size and demographic representation	✓	✓
Translational	Wellbeing as nebulous and difficult to action	✓	✓
	Insufficient data analysis tools	✓	✓✓
	The messenger effect	✓	✓
	Animating data	✓	✓
Contextual	Managing public opinion	✓	✓✓
	Turbulent times	✓	✓✓
	Institutional inertia		✓
	Political short-termism	✓	✓✓

4.2.1 Individual Barriers

Participants described personal barriers to using the data, including a lack of time and attention, as well as a lack of interest and capacity in others as reasons for not using wellbeing data. Generally, elected officials at all levels were described to have little time and attention to dedicate to wellbeing data, alongside having to manage competing priorities and field public feedback, compared to staff members for whom data use was considered within their scope of work.

Several participants described other people as lacking interest to use wellbeing data, but described a high willingness to use data themselves. At the municipal level, people noted that since councillors do not need training or expertise to be elected, some lack data literacy skills and underappreciate the importance of evidence-informed decision-making, as illustrated by this participant, *"it's not been my experience that people in municipal government, at the elected level, or at at community organization levels, get as excited about data and how it can be used."* (M2). At the provincial level people described a more abstracted sense that some senior politicians are more guided by politics, ideology, and reactivity than evidence. In describing how data sometimes illuminates politically unsavoury information, this participant said, *"depending on the type of politician, they're accepting of that and can manage it, or they aren't, and they want to figure other ways to like, either suppress the information or not have to make it as highlight"* (P4). However, that participant noted that this describes the minority of politicians and senior civil servants. Additionally, all but one person described generally high data use in their department. Overall, people described a strong appetite for wellbeing and social indicator data themselves, and in their team.

Time and attention were more significant barriers. Because municipal officials are 'closest to the people', they were described to be constantly bombarded with issues and perspectives, and had difficulty distinguishing between broadly experienced issues from that of the vocal few. They also typically work part-time, and frequently reported time being a barrier to use. Similarly so at the provincial level, but the dynamic was a dilution of nuance as information moved upward. In the words of one participant, *"as you go up to the more senior management, ... it goes from like a one pager to five bullets to like one sentence and a pretty picture"* (P4). Seven provincial representatives described a lack of time to consider wellbeing data more generally, given the work required to use the data meaningfully, and that sometimes governments have to move quickly and do not have time to consider a wellbeing lens.

These barriers also point to potential opportunities. Municipally, there is an opportunity for the NSQoL Survey to help check and correct for bias, and in the words of one participant, help to make sure council is not *"governing towards the vocal minority"* (M11). A few participants pointed out that municipal councils in Nova Scotia, especially in rural areas, tend to be rather homogenous- with overrepresentation of white, older men- which makes information that represents potentially underheard voices particularly important.

4.2.2 Organizational Barriers

Organizational barriers posed one of the biggest challenges to uptake because even when there was interest in using the data, stable institutional pathways to decision-making were limited by governmental structural and cultural constraints. Ultimately, uptake is limited when there is no process or institutional home for it to be embedded in. As a result, its use depends on individual champions, political receptivity, one-off projects, and administrative capacity.

Firstly, at both the municipal and provincial level, people described resistance to data that counters cognitive bias or political agendas. Many people noted that politicians resist hearing bad news, and will ignore data that highlights a government failure as it is more politically attractive or expedient to do so (i.e., “uncomfortable truths”). At the municipal level, five people described the politicization of some wellbeing issues and small town politics as getting in the way of evidence-informed decision-making. Provincially, seven people described the political apparatus of government and concentration of power in the Premier's Office as being a barrier to using wellbeing data more systematically. In the words of one participant, “[Politicians] want the data that fits the narrative. They don't want a narrative that necessarily reflects the data” (P5).

Secondly, organisational barriers were also shaped by questions of ownership and trust. Several participants suggested that governments are more comfortable using data that they have collected themselves or directly oversee. Having external NSQoL data created a legitimacy issue, some viewing it as less authoritative, duplicative, or administratively difficult to use. At the same time, a few people highlighted the importance of the Survey belonging to an organization outside of government because it allows the data to be shared in a different way, enables flexibility in the way they work with partners, and garners the trust of the public and other organizations.

Thirdly, provincial actors described a lack of cross-departmental coordination, strategic planning, or systematic way to integrate data towards whole-of-government priorities. Many participants expressed that NSQoL data use would increase substantially if there was a government-wide mandate to use a wellbeing lens or social indicator data. However, no such lens exists, and participants described a lack of cross-departmental alignment, strategic planning, and collaborative structures in general. Some even said these structures are viewed as “bureaucratic red tape” (P6). One participant said, “*in an ideal world, we would have some shared outcomes across departments that we're all working towards. Data would help us understand if we're meeting those*” (P2). Participants described limited institutional infrastructure for embedding long-term strategic data use in the provincial government. This lack of coordination played out logistically, as provincial staff described administrative pathways to transfer and access the 2019 NSQoL data as weak and “clunky”. Things as basic as inter-departmental data sharing agreements are a challenge, and the actual process of accessing the 2019 data was incredibly convoluted: “*it was an uphill battle to use the data in government from the very beginning. [...] And there are all these like hoops and barriers.*” (P2). While there was individual support for using evidence-based decision-making and wellbeing data from senior leadership, there lacked structures to meaningfully operationalize data, especially cross-departmentally: “*and yet for some reason, the collection of individuals is insufficient to overcome the structural barriers that exist. Some are as basic as legal frameworks that are required to share data between one department and another, which is a significant barrier*” (P3).

However there have been attempts over the years to reduce fragmentation and implement data-driven cross-departmental strategic priority setting in the provincial government, such as the Office of Strategy Management, regular meetings among Deputies, and quarterly (data-driven) Cabinet meetings. Proving that while these structures are possible to build, there has been limited success in sufficiently institutionalizing them to sustain leadership changes. Many interviewees speculated that the current Premier and to some extent, his Cabinet do not have a coherent strategy or desire to create organizational synergy: “*I have not found yet a department that had a set of priorities or a five-year plan. Like it just feels like whatever is coming down from the Premier to the Minister that month is what the Deputy Minister is asking the rest of the civil service to implement*” (P11).

Finally, at the municipal scale, organizational barriers were less bureaucratic, and more about limited resources. Most municipal representatives identified a lack of financial and human resources to take on additional work, dive into data analysis, or action responses that would take away from their operational

costs. Different approaches require not only skill, but human, financial, and political capital with which some municipalities are constrained. Additionally, the functionality of councils in Nova Scotia is wide-ranging and in flux following elections. Higher-functioning councils are seemingly more able to automate day-to-day operations, enabling a focus on strategic processes. Council members who described stronger internal functionality were also more likely to describe long-term wellbeing considerations as already integrated into strategic planning. Moreover, at the municipal level, strategic planning is common practice, which enabled the consideration of long-term priorities and provided an avenue to embed wellbeing considerations. A few municipalities currently have wellbeing or quality of life listed as a strategic priority, while others emphasized the importance of embedding it as a lens, by adding wellbeing as a standard decision-making criteria.

4.2.3 Empirical Barriers

The nature of the data itself poses some barriers and opportunities for the type of uptake—specifically whether the data is seen as timely, representative, credible, and sufficiently actionable for policy use. The same features that made the NSQoL data valuable—breadth, granularity, and local specificity—also made it difficult to interpret, validate, and operationalize.

Several participants mentioned that the 2019 NSQoL data is outdated. Not only is this a barrier to use generally, it may point to why analytical uses are confined to moment-in-time reports rather than operationalized as tools for priority-setting, decision-making, and evaluation. A few people wondered if there was a way to collect data at more frequent intervals, or conducting “mini surveys” in between the larger five-year Survey, to provide a more up-to-date resource.

Furthermore, two provincial representatives relayed concerns they have encountered about the methodological soundness of the dataset, specifically related to the sampling methodology and weighting of respondents. These methodological concerns both reflect and reinforce the broader organizational distrust of externally generated data described in Section 4.2.2. One participant described that there were concerns within health institutions, because Engage's “*sampling methodology oversampled elderly individuals from rural areas and then didn't appropriately weight their responses. [...] What you were really seeing was a disproportionate response of small groups of people in a very specific demography that were now being cast as the general population*” (P3). However, several people described the NSQoL data as trustworthy, noting that it is blessed by Statistics Canada, and that it has been vetted by universities and a multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral Board of Directors.

Relatedly, the size of the dataset was described as both a barrier and a strength for uptake. The number of questions on the NSQoL Survey was questioned by a few individuals, both because it makes it analytically complex and that it poses a barrier to participation, especially for vulnerable and time-poor people, which has counter-productive implications for representation. One person who works in housing explained that “*the ability of folks experiencing homelessness to complete a 230 question survey is really low*” (P9). These concerns about the size of the dataset are complicated by other perspectives that see the granularity, breadth, and depth of the data as a unique strength. Because the Survey is one of the few, if only, sources of granular, district-level data, municipalities see it as valuable. The quantity of questions also, in theory, enables the results to be actioned and attributed through statistical analysis, rather than just descriptive of subjective wellbeing. Some view the potential to run statistical analysis to identify patterns and attribute certain variables to low life satisfaction in a particular area, for instance, is what has the potential to make the data actionable.

Some participants emphasized that empirical limitations did not mean that the NSQoL data lacked value, but that it should be interpreted alongside other sources. In this view, the NSQoL is strongest when

combined with demographic, administrative, or Statistics Canada data, as this participant describes, *we find the picture feels woefully incomplete if we just look at one or we just look at the other because the Statistics Canada data doesn't capture the real lived impact of things like poverty and just on its own quality of life data isn't going to capture things like the disproportionate depth and breadth of poverty* (P11).

This suggests that the dataset's utility may depend less on being a standalone evidence source and more on being viewed alongside other evidence-sources.

4.2.4 Translational Barriers

Translational barriers were among the most important constraints to uptake because the NSQoL data did not become policy-relevant by simply being available. Participants emphasised that data had to be interpreted, animated, packaged, and delivered by a credible source before it could meaningfully inform work.

Firstly, several people noted that wellbeing data can be difficult to translate to actionable solutions, and is sometimes viewed as "intangible" (M6), "soft" (M8; M13), "fluffy" (M1; M6) or "up in the clouds" (M6). Whereas there are well established levers to impact GDP or economic indicators, it is unclear the direct mechanisms that influence belonging or subjective wellbeing, for example. Because it is not always obvious 'what to do' with wellbeing data, some participants noted that there is a limitation to not having predictive wellbeing data for decision-making (like we do for finance, or even for climate modelling, for example) and pointed to predictive modeling as an opportunity to drive uptake. Some participants highlighted the opportunity of the 2026 NSQoL Survey to provide longitudinal analysis to help identify trends, or suggested viewing the data through alternative lenses to make it *"easier for people to grasp or chew"* (P10).

Secondly, the importance of animating data was highlighted by several people who pointed to the opportunity for Engage to continue to tell a story with the data, and help lead decision-makers to the evidence-based decision, rather than being the messenger of raw data. Many people described this as a strength of Engage, but emphasized it as a key feature of effective data translation. One participant described that *"one of the biggest system barriers" is that data specialists "are not able to tell either a compelling or clear or coherent story about why it matters and what it tells us. And often over-engineer the methodologies or the assumptions baked into it rather than actually telling the story of what it means and why it's important"* (P8).

Thirdly, Engage's relational and community-facing strengths were described both as an asset and limitation to uptake. Several participants valued Engage's ability to build relationships, convene communities, and animate data while others questioned the analytical capacity and political neutrality of the organization. Four people noted that the leader of Engage has a political association that poses a barrier to the movement being seen as politically neutral and credible, especially in more data-driven provincial departments. Additionally, the Engage staff team were said to lack data skills as a whole, which impacts both the ability for data analysis support and the credibility of the data. Another person said that some of the engagement work Engage was doing, such as community dinners and speaking events was diluting the NSQoL Initiative; *"the perception is that it was more of an ideological thing"* (P4).

Finally, a major barrier identified by both provincial and municipal levels is that the NSQoL data is not translated in an intuitive and easily accessible way. Although some people agreed that the current tools that Engage has developed are *"going in the right direction"* (P4), several people noted that versions of data tools were really hard to understand. In the words of one participant, *"it feels like mental gymnastics*

to like, understand what the thing is actually trying to tell me" (P2). The Wellbeing Mapping Tool, which is the only publicly available data tool, was described as unactionable for policy making. Although Engage has a more sophisticated data analysis tool, the government does not have access to it. Not only was this described as a big barrier for uptake, one participant highlighted that it threatens the sustainability of the initiative if the provincial government does not see a return on their investment.

The provincial actors who did use the data substantially accessed the raw data and conducted their own analysis, rather than use Engage's data analysis tools. At the municipal level, councils reported benefiting from presentations of locally meaningful findings. No actors reported using Engage's public facing tools as sufficient, on their own, to support formal policy uptake. This suggests that different tools require different translational support, and points to an opportunity to improve data analysis tools to match the needs of end users. Provincial actors may need more convenient access to raw data, technical support, and analytical tools, while municipal actors may need tailored reports, presentations, and compelling local narratives. Several people, including those from non-governmental organizations, noted the need for a searchable, sortable, and user-friendly database or dashboard so that they can access relevant information at any time. Across scales, uptake depended less on the mere availability of the NSQoL data, than on how it was packaged to match decision-makers' capacities and policy questions.

4.2.5 Contextual Barriers

The final barrier participants emphasized included broader political, fiscal, and societal conditions that make long-term wellbeing work difficult to prioritise. Both provincial and municipal representatives pointed to political structures disincentivizing long-term thinking and data use. At the municipal level, council turnover makes it difficult to institutionalize wellbeing metrics over time. Provincially, four-year election cycles, fiscal responsibilities, and centralized decision-making were described as barriers to uptake. Since wellbeing outcomes often unfold over longer time horizons, governments are not necessarily incentivized to use wellbeing data to implement policies where benefits may not be visible within an electoral mandate. As one participant said, *"you can't run complex systems with a couple of paid political staff and a Premier who's thinking about his re-election"* (P6).

At the same time, election cycles also create periodic openings for change, as described by this participant: *"I find like elections are a moment to recalibrate in public conversation. What matters to us? What do we want for the next five years?"* (P11). In the meantime, political advocacy, lobbying, leadership buy-in, and engaging the public were seen as effective political leverage. One participant suggested that, *there needs to be a focused lobbying effort to demonstrate and convince the most senior decision-makers that wellness data isn't a nice to have. [...] The lobbying effort has to show the politicians and senior civil service that the investment today is worth it, even if they lose power in three years. That is where it is so hard to manage, that you are taking a political gambit or gamble that what you do today may be the accolades for the next government* (P3).

Political risk was also highlighted by a participant, who argued that limited uptake was less about explicit resistance to wellbeing and more about policy inertia and risk aversion. In this view, most public spending is already committed to core systems such as health, education, and infrastructure, leaving governments to *"nibble around the edges"* (P4) with innovative changes, rather than risk major reform and inducing fragility into a high-stakes system. There is a sense in government that the system is *"not perfect, but it ain't completely broken. It could be a lot worse. So let's just keep going and tweak it where we can"* (P4). The wellbeing movement, in its more ambitious form, may therefore struggle to gain traction unless crisis creates an opening for change. The saying, *"never let a good crisis go to waste"* (P6) was mentioned, highlighting the opportunity of irregular events to shake up the system.

Most participants (at all levels) referenced recent provincial budget cuts that dominated news in Nova Scotia, particularly because it affected programs and initiatives related to arts, environment, higher education, and recreation. The financial squeeze is being felt by all levels of government; *“the whole chain is constrained by resources right now.”* (P10). Some participants also saw fiscal constraint as an argument for greater use of wellbeing data. In this view, austerity increases the need to understand which public investments produce social value, rather than relying only on expenditure or service-use measures. Generally, eight participants alluded to these unprecedented times as also one of opportunities for the wellbeing movement, in part because metrics help resource-squeezed governments make tax dollars go further. Regardless, elements of luck and readiness were present in successful cases where participants tended to talk about *“good timing”* being a feature of success (P1).

Finally, seven participants emphasized that there are barriers related to public opinion and sentiment to acting on wellbeing metrics. Firstly, because the NSQoL dataset is premised on spatial equity, redirecting resources from one place to another can be a particularly sensitive topic. As one participant put it, *“nobody wants to be in the de-invest column”* (P3). Using wellbeing data to redistribute resources therefore requires not only evidence, but *“a more sophisticated social conscience that understands A) the fiscal constraints that we’re living within and B) the truly systemic decision-making that has caused the inequities to exist, and then an acceptance that there does need to be a balancing.”* (P3). However, it is hard to engage the public in nuanced policy debates because *“people have to worry about getting food on the table and getting to work and taking care of their family and getting their kid to hockey. People don’t have time to be policy analysts, as well as the regular jobs”* (P7).

For this reason, many participants argued that public discourse itself is an opportunity for engagement and uptake. Putting the data in the hands of community groups, non-governmental organizations, and local actors may help build the public understanding and pressure needed to shift policy, without the institutional and bureaucratic barriers of government. This final quote captures this sentiment,

the question is not only how [Engage] continues to produce strong data, but how they help translate that data into widespread public understanding of the issues, their implications, options for action, and the imperative for these actions. Good data alone rarely shifts policy. Decision-makers are inundated with competing priorities, and issues rise only when the public clearly understands both their urgency and their potential payoff (M2).

4.3 Scale and Responsibility

Participants generally described wellbeing as a shared public responsibility, but differed on which scale of governance was best positioned to institutionalize wellbeing data.

Most participants (about 10 people) saw all levels of government as having some responsibility and several people described wellbeing as core to their mandate and “what it’s all about”. Others emphasized municipalities (four people), the province (three people), or community organizations (three people) as more feasible or impactful sites of uptake. However, as participants described, different scales hold different forms of jurisdiction, legitimacy, and capacity to integrate wellbeing into policy platforms and governance processes.

Municipal governments were described as the closest to lived wellbeing, given they are closest to the ground, and are directly incentivized to attend to the wellbeing of their constituents, in order to secure a “vibrant taxbase” (M8). This proximity made municipalities promising sites for using NSQoL data to understand local needs, correct for the “vocal minority”, and inform strategic planning. Wellbeing was often framed not as an abstract moral agenda, but as part of sustaining a viable community by attracting

residents, maintaining a tax base, and funding the programs, amenities, and services that make people want to stay. This municipal council member explains,

the recognition that quality of life cannot be separated from all of the nuts and bolts that we think of as our first priority in running a municipal government. (...) [W]e as a municipal council have the capacity to set the environment that will either nurture and support people's lives or create barriers that have them thinking if they have the opportunity of going somewhere else or not coming here to start with. And that our future relies on finding that balance (M8).

However, municipalities were also constrained by limited jurisdiction, staff and council capacity, financial resources, and variable council functionality.

The province, by contrast, was seen as having stronger jurisdiction over policy areas most directly connected to wellbeing, including health, housing, education, and social services. Yet participants also described the province as facing stronger institutional and political barriers than municipalities, such as centralized decision-making, short election cycles, bureaucratic fragmentation, and the absence of a mandated wellbeing lens. In this sense, the province had more formal authority, but weaker pathways for NSQoL data to shape decisions beyond departmental project-based work. One participant described this tension: *"the provincial government is, of the three levels, most responsible for funding social services and programs that should be the place in theory where wellbeing data is most embedded. But I think that four-year election cycles and politicized senior civil servants make that difficult."* (P11).

A smaller group of participants pointed to community organizations, NGOs, community finance initiatives, and informal networks as promising sites for uptake. One participant argued that *"collaboration at the community level might be a more realistic place for quality of life data to become more institutionalized. And then it would hopefully filter up rather than kind of be handed down"* (P6). Community actors are seen as potentially better positioned to animate the data and build public pressure for policy change, without being beholden to taxpayers or bureaucratic processes. However, they often lack formal authority and resources, and may not be a substitute for government action.

4.4 Wellbeing Metrics and Post-Growth Transformation

Many participants did not treat wellbeing and growth as a simple binary; several saw economic growth, taxbase, service provision, and quality of life as intertwined. Participants largely framed wellbeing as compatible with, dependent on, or strategically useful to economic growth, rather than an alternative to it. However, there was tension in this as well, as participants criticized trickle-down assumptions, questioned whether economic development actually benefits local communities, and critiqued financial systems as dominant in governance. The following section unpacks some of these narratives.

4.4.1 A Necessary(?) Growth Imperative

Growth, in terms of population size and economic prosperity, remained a central political concern. Many participants (about half) shared the perspective of economic and population growth being tied to survival and basic service provisionment. In this way, wellbeing and economic growth were seen as mutually reinforcing. In the words of one participant *"I do believe growth is a good thing. And if you think that the problems of growth are bad, the problems of no growth are even worse. But growth, if you do it right, gives you the opportunity to invest in housing, to invest in green space, to invest in transit and all those things"* (M13).

The interviews revealed some notable differences between the municipal and the provincial scale, where at the municipal level, five people described the dominant governing paradigm as less about

endless growth, and more about survival and fiscal responsibility. For instance, one municipal leader expressed that decisions are more about *"spending our money wisely on the right things at the right time"* (M5). Furthermore, growing a vibrant taxbase is seen as core to providing municipal services, thus advancing wellbeing for the communities they serve. For some rural municipalities with opportunities for industry attraction due to their resource availability, economic development and quality of life go hand-in-hand; not only because they want to increase their taxbase by attracting residents but also because increasing a commercial taxbase allows residential taxes to be kept lower, enabling more services, which in turns attracts more people to live there.

The imperative to secure a stable taxbase at the municipal level was not expressed as acutely at the provincial level. Although similar sentiments were shared about limited budgets and wanting to attract people to live and stay in Nova Scotia, however, with the exceptions of a few voices, the story about the need for population growth seemed more abstracted and less relevant, relative to municipal leaders, who confront population decline much more intimately. A provincial representative criticised the notion of the wellbeing-economic growth binary in itself, describing how it creates a sense of false division and in reality social welfare is a common goal of both: *"you know, they're not seen as two different things in the conversations for spaces that I'm in. [...] Like it's not an either or, and I don't think it's beneficial to talk about it as an either or because it just becomes more divisive and then people can't find their place in the conversation"* (P9).

4.4.2 What Kind of Growth?

Many participants highlighted that even if wellbeing and economic growth go hand-in-hand, they are not always synergistic. There are tradeoffs and tensions regarding what is prioritised, but as one participant emphasized, that is the nature of politics and governance: *"but that's just constant part of life and constant part of governing and policymaking is those sorts of trade-offs."* (P7). That negotiation involves the need to be specific and intentional about the kind of growth being pursued and for whose benefit. The term 'inclusive growth' and 'sustainable growth' was mentioned to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' growth, however one participant argued that those terms do not necessitate anything quantifiably different from "regular growth" (P7). These terms are often symbolic and wellbeing can be (and is) used in a similar symbolic vein.

This tension was especially visible in critiques of trickle-down economic development, and highlighted that growth can support wellbeing if it is well distributed, locally beneficial, and aligned with community needs:

I think it's completely possible to do economic development, for community benefit, but you have to have that as your intention. The current provincial government would say that's far too socialist: we're here to set the table for corporations, to have certain regulations in place and Nova Scotians benefit through the collection of corporate taxes that pay for some of our social services. But the wealthy keep getting wealthier. The billionaires are greater in number and people at the bottom of the income spectrum are struggling (P11).

This participant drew attention to a number of cases in Nova Scotia where economic development projects failed to benefit the communities they were meant to serve. In describing mining developments in low-income communities that were framed as helping communities "get back on their feet" (P11), this participant explained that due to imported labour and exported profits, local communities experienced minimal economic benefit. They summarized these cases within the broader global context: *"because of globalization, economic development projects don't increase local wealth the way they might have in the 60s and 70s [...] their impact is even less"* (P11).

About a third of participants described the dominance of economic growth and financial systems in public governance. In talking about GDP, one participant said, "*despite everyone knowing it's the wrong measure, it's still the [...] proxy for success. That government will pat themselves on the back with or will suffer at the polls, because they failed to achieve economic growth. So it is the dominant paradigm*" (P6). People seemed to describe this domination in terms of ideology and in terms of structures. This participant describes the problem of ideology: "*I think people generally think that you got to focus on the economic development side, and then once that's good, wellbeing is good. And I think the opposite*" (M3). At the provincial level, this participant described the structural limitations of a system built on financial cycles:

the dominance of finance and financial related decision-making, and the way in which decisions are structured, based on spending, and communicated based on spending and the dominance of the budget process annually. I see that as a big barrier, because there's only so many hours in the day, public servants are all busy. And if the one big event per year is to put together your budget [...]. The dominance of fiscal and financial thinking in public policy is a problem (P6).

4.4.3 Pragmatic Ways Forward

Participants often describe pragmatic rather than oppositional pathways for the wellbeing movement. Baring the caveats of the examples above, wellbeing and economic outcomes were generally seen as linked and broadly viewed as congruent with the goals of existing institutions.

Firstly, about six participants emphasized the strategic opportunity to frame wellbeing data using economic outputs. As this participant explains, promoting wellbeing is "*not just [a] moral imperative. It's the right thing to do because we should protect human beings*" there is also an "*economic imperative. Healthy, happy people are highly productive people. Sad, sick people are highly unproductive people. Direct correlation. I think folks in the wellbeing business need to do a better job of drawing that connection because that's what government wants to hear.*" (P8) Secondly, people spoke about strategic approaches to systems change being incremental and attuned to current realities. One participant noted that a failure for the wellbeing movement to attune to the prevailing system risks it being "*easily marginalized as a utopian vision that doesn't recognize the current reality.*" (P6) Another participant underscored the need to work within the system that exists: "*this is not a 'break the system from the outside' approach. It is [important to] understand the system with extreme detail and work within the systems that exist to change how people view their primary endpoints*" (P3). Thirdly, many participants expressed support for wellbeing data and movements, demonstrating that conceptual buy-in is not necessarily the problem. One participant described wellbeing as a palatable concept for most people, "*so in theory, everybody, I think, gets quality of life and well-being. It's not a wild concept, right? Like, it's not super 'out there'. And then you have a big gap between that and application*" (P10).

In summary, wellbeing is not seen as a radical departure from the current system, and people generally express support for integrating wellbeing lenses in public governance. Figuring out how to close the gap between knowing and doing seems to be the crux of the lack of uptake here, and framing the NSQoL data in economic terms might be one strategy for creating openings within existing governance systems.

5. Discussion

This study investigated the Nova Scotia Quality of Life (NSQoL) Initiative as a unique example of efforts to institutionalize regional wellbeing metrics in policy and governance. The results demonstrate limited uptake of the NSQoL data, along with differences in how wellbeing data was used at the municipal and provincial levels. The lack of substantive use was attributed to barriers that spanned individual, organizational, empirical, translational, and contextual domains. In this section, I discuss the scalar differences in uptake in light of factors that shape these differences, alongside relevant literature.

5.1 (Non)use of Wellbeing Data

RQ1) How are wellbeing metrics from the Nova Scotia Quality of Life Survey (NSQoL) understood and used by decision-makers at local and regional levels in Nova Scotia?

Use of the NSQoL metrics was weak and fragmented. As the results show, there was limited use of the data, despite respondents describing that a primary purpose of collecting wellbeing data is so that public officials use it to 'make better decisions.' Following Amara et al.'s, (2004) typology, participants explained that in an ideal policy environment, wellbeing data would be used to shape regular decisions and used to evaluate impact (i.e., instrumental use) as well as to inform and transform what is prioritized vis-à-vis economic growth, social wellbeing, and sustainability (i.e., conceptual use). However, in reality, regional actors most commonly used the NSQoL data symbolically and conceptually, with more strategic and semi-instrumental use happening on a project-basis at the provincial level. The extent of use varied at different scales, where municipal actors tended to use the data informally compared to the provincial level where substantial uptake was more analytical, based on specific projects or policy-files, and complemented by other data sources in the development of a report or review. Further details explaining differences between municipal and provincial use are discussed in the following paragraphs.

5.1.1 Municipal Use

Municipal actors were more likely to describe keeping the NSQoL data in mind when making decisions, compared to provincial actors. For example, some municipal actors shared how insights from the NSQoL Initiative shifted how they understood the challenges, inequalities, and assets in their community. Here, building a narrative around the data seemed particularly resonant, as some councillors recalled a few key takeaways from presentations about the data– such as disparities between men and women in their community, or how their community had the highest rates of sense of belonging in the province. Council members (and councils as a whole) seemed to latch onto particular narratives about their community, and bring those stories with them into decision-making processes. Because decision-making in municipalities was generally described to be more deliberative than evidence-informed (especially in smaller municipalities), the nature of evidence-use at that level might be more suited to conceptual and symbolic uses, rather than instrumental. This suggests that building a narrative about wellbeing data might be an especially effective mechanism for informal uptake (compared to more intensive empirical or analytical methods).

Furthermore, a few municipalities had integrated a wellbeing lens into their strategic plans, however, respondents did not give the impression that it was the NSQoL data in particular that provided an essential precondition for adopting a wellbeing lens and focus on quality of life in public policy. Instead the focus of wellbeing developed more organically. This raises questions about the need for wellbeing metrics to make progress towards the wellbeing movement, and points to the utility of wellbeing metrics being more narratively useful than empirically relevant on a municipal scale.

5.1.2 Provincial Use

When the NSQoL data was used in the provincial government, it was at a sub-departmental level (i.e., a team within a department) to support the creation of a report or review, alongside other data sources. These provincial actors conducted a thorough data analysis using the raw NSQoL data themselves, which signals a capacity and desire for more intensive data analysis than at the municipal level.

Furthermore, in order to make the results applicable to a particular departmental portfolio, data had to be translated into another framework and alongside other data sources. As described in Section 4.1.2, the Accessibility Directorate and the Department of Environment and Climate Change used the NSQoL

data alongside other sources, pointing to the limitations of subjective wellbeing (SWB) data to inform decisions on its own, echoing the critiques of SWB as a measurement for policy use (Austin, 2015). The examples of provincial actors using the NSQoL data alongside other data sources is aligned with Forgeard et al. (2011)'s claim that both subjective and objective measures are needed in wellbeing policy applications.

The type of use at the provincial level can also be interpreted as relatively second-order, meaning the NSQoL data– alongside other data– was used to create a report, and that report was either a deliverable in itself, or created as a resource to inform non-specific policy decisions and actions. The NSQoL data themselves did not appear to directly drive a concrete policy, but rather results were repackaged into another format as an additional information-source. At risk of downplaying the genuine importance of these efforts, there is little evidence to support that the NSQoL data has contributed to concrete policy development or decisively informed decision-making.

One final note is that NSQoL data is not currently used at government-wide or cross-departmental scale. This poses a problem for the wellbeing indicators if their impact is limited to the existing mandate and scope-of-work of departments, rather than using wellbeing data to identify issues, set priorities, and develop new solutions and coordinated responses across departments.

Overall, the use of NSQoL data was found to be limited and fragmented. At the municipal level it was conceptually more present but informally used compared to the provincial level, where it was analytically transformed and applied to department-specific reports in three cases. The divergence in how actors used and understood the NSQoL data suggests that opportunities to increase use of wellbeing metrics might also differ by scale. Promotion of uptake at the municipal-level might involve animating community data through narratives and synthesising key insights, while provincial actors might require easy ways to access the raw or analytically relevant data.

The lack of uptake and differences of use can be better understood alongside patterns of barriers and enablers that were identified during the interviews. These factors that shape if and how the NSQoL is used are further expanded on in the following section.

5.2 Barriers for Institutionalizing Wellbeing Metrics

RQ2) What factors enable or constrain the integration of NSQoL data into policy-making and regional development in Nova Scotia?

RQ2a) How do these factors vary by scale of governance?

Participants identified about 20 barriers (outlined in Table 4.2) that influenced if and how NSQoL data was used. The most significant barriers (selected based on how frequently they were mentioned and how significant they were in relation to other themes) are (listed categorically):

- a lack of time, attention, and resources (*individual/organizational*);
- the political apparatus of government and resistance to uncomfortable truths (*organizational*);
- organizational dysfunction and a lack of a wellbeing lens (*organizational*);
- data availability: frequency (*empirical*);
- insufficient data analysis tools (*translational*);
- managing public opinion (*contextual*);
- political short-termism/inertia amidst turbulent times (*contextual*).

These barriers, although organized into the original five categories (individual, organizational, empirical, translational, contextual), are interconnected and often conditional on one another, yet, a few stand out

as more prominent and conditional than others. The biggest barriers for uptake seemed to transcend that of individual will (there was much enthusiasm for the wellbeing data), and were more institutional in nature¹⁷. While time, attention (at the level of elected officials), and resources (at the municipal level), pose major barriers to uptake individually and organizationally, the more contextual features of short-term political cycles and the tumultuous political and economic moment, shape experiences and perceptions of time, resources, and politicization. Although individual champions and leadership buy-in were common features of successful uptake, the efforts of individuals did not lead to the institutionalization of the data– as demonstrated by instances where attempts to integrate wellbeing data were stalled or dissolved when key actors transitioned out of the organization. Although individual proclivity for evidence use is likely part of the story, it is clear that individual interest alone does not explain the lack of uptake. The majority of people pointed to organizational, translational, and contextual barriers that shaped the conditions for use.

An illuminating example of the ways that these barriers are compounding and conditional on each other relate to data frequency (*empirical*), the lack of operational capacity in the provincial government (*organizational*), and inertia/political short-termism (*contextual*). One could argue that the NSQoL data is by nature not suited to be used for day-to-day decision-making, because data is only collected every five-to-seven years. Its ability to be integrated as a real time data source or an evaluative tool (i.e., instrumental use) is limited, and therefore it might be better suited for long-term strategic planning, exposing spatial inequities, and informing collective goals. However, long-term and cross-departmental strategic planning appears to be absent in the provincial government in general, and they are not necessarily incentivised to adopt long time horizons (partly because of election cycles, but also a lack of time and capacity to think beyond the urgent and important issues of the here and now). While the need to improve fit-for-use data tools and translation strategies were prominent themes (i.e., *translational*), if there is no place for these tools to be embedded, or existing processes to act on them, their utility will likely be limited. Thus, limited policy capacity (as defined by Giest (2023)) amidst broader institutional structures of inertia emerge as prominent barriers for uptake. The following section described this limited capacity in more detail, followed by a discussion on the dynamics of growth and wellbeing that emerged in the interviews.

5.2.1 Limited Capacity and Resources for Change

The findings of this study suggest that at the provincial level, analytical and operational capacity (Giest, 2023) appears to be weak, as illustrated by the cumbersome and awkward processes for sharing data between departments, the lack of forums and structures for facilitated cross-departmental coordination, and absence of long-term strategic planning. Furthermore, departmental silos and lack of pathways to collectively set directions posed challenges to coordinating a government-wide process of wellbeing adoption. If it is the case that the provincial government lacks coordinated processes to address long-term objectives currently (as evidence from this study suggests), it is unreasonable to assume that these capacities will magically emerge by introducing wellbeing metrics into the mix. This underscores the criticality of building policy capacity in order for wellbeing metrics to meaningfully take root.

¹⁷ Municipally, people described *others* lacking motivation and interest to use the NSQoL data, while underscoring an enthusiasm for its use themselves or explaining their own lack of use due to them forgetting to reference it. Provincially a similar critique was cast on politicians: participants described some (not all) elected officials as more interested in progressing their political agenda, and less interested in using evidence. Since all participants shared enthusiasm for using the wellbeing data themselves, I question the extent to which fundamental attribution error is at play– where people underemphasize the situational and environmental factors shaping the behavior of others, while overemphasizing dispositional factors (Gilbert and Malone, 1995).

At the municipal level, it seemed to be the case that better functioning councils (characterised by strong leadership, generative and respectful deliberations, and automated operational processes) were more apt to embrace wellbeing into their strategic plans and organizational ethos. In other words, when day-to-day operations are well managed, it frees space to “focus on more strategic work, [such as] creating council committees on bigger issues of the day” (M6). Furthermore, many municipal actors mentioned strategic planning as a helpful vehicle through which a wellbeing lens is applied, and data is transformed into governable actions. When there is a strategic planning process that wellbeing metrics can plug into, it provides an institutional pathway for wellbeing data to be used to identify priorities and inform long-term goal setting.

No equivalent strategic planning process was believed to exist at the provincial level, although it is likely that some departments have conducted varying degrees of strategic goal setting. To clarify, capacity at the municipal level likely differs from capacity at the provincial level, given the nature, scale, and scope of these levels of government. Building policy capacity at the municipal level might look like strengthening deliberative processes, investing in strategic planning efforts, and cultivating strong leadership that orients a diverse council around a shared vision (Grillitsch et al., 2019); whereas policy capacity at the provincial scale might involve a larger challenge of establishing organization-wide analytical, operational, and political capacity (Giest, 2023).

Regional scholars have paid increasing attention to the role of institutions in the normative turn towards wellbeing-oriented development (Binz & Castaldi, 2024). The success of institutions has historically been evaluated against economic outcomes, and as such, most work on institutional capacity has focused on the state’s strength to deliver on economic development (Giest, 2023). However increasing attention to wellbeing outcomes prompts a reconsideration of ‘capacity for what’ (Giest, 2023). In writing about the foundational economy, Hansen (2022) also points out the role of regional institutions is amplified in post-growth transitions that are premised on reorganizing economic activities and delivering foundational activities. Thus, the importance of institutional capacity in the wellbeing movement is twofold: 1) using wellbeing metrics instrumentally requires governments to be able to make sense of wellbeing data and transform them into actionable policy (i.e., policy capacity); 2) taking wellbeing seriously implies some form of economic and governmental restructuring to prioritize sustainable and equitable wellbeing over ever-expanding production and consumption – a transformation requiring even more institutional capacity.

Results from this study show that the impact of wellbeing metrics are limited by the policy capacity (as defined by Giest (2023)) of institutions. This study found broad support for wellbeing metrics but limited instrumental use of the NSQoL data, suggesting that the main barrier is not awareness or conceptual opposition to wellbeing, but the absence of durable pathways through which wellbeing data can be embedded.

5.2.2 Growth, Post-Growth and Wellbeing

The coupling of social services to economic growth (Kallis et al., 2025; Corlet Walker et al., 2024) was discussed as a 'matter of fact' by most municipal actors and not necessarily seen as an incongruency, but rather as a synergistic relationship. These patterns of growth dependencies—defined by Corlet Walker et al. (2024) as “those conditions that require the continuation of growth in order to avoid significant physical, psychological, social, and/or economic harms” (p. 2)—were commonly described at municipal and provincial scales, presenting both opportunities and barriers for integrating wellbeing metrics in regional government.

Municipal actors simultaneously embraced wellbeing as a governing priority and framed quality of life as a means to attract residents, secure their tax base, and thus fund services that support wellbeing. The relationship between wellbeing and economic growth was tightly woven, however rather than pursuing economic growth for growth's sake, municipal actors talked about making balanced and responsible financial decisions and pursuing economic development opportunities for the purposes of keeping the lights on, limiting tax increases, and sustaining services that contribute to quality of life.

The perceived alignment between wellbeing and growth might be an asset for the wellbeing movement, because municipalities are more apt to embrace the shared vision (Grillitsch et al., 2019) and language of wellbeing, which may prompt directionality of economic activities. Directionality, for the purposes of this paper, refers to economic development and innovation with the purpose of contributing to “transformative change” (Grillitsch et al., 2019). When wellbeing and economic development are so materially linked, as they appear to be at the municipal level, the wellbeing movement’s greatest strength might be to nudge economic decisions towards that which is wellbeing enhancing. In this way transformative change in practice might be more aligned with asking “what kind of development and for who” (Pike et al., 2007), rather than a radical restructuring of local economies.

On the other hand, some post-growth scholars may consider this a diluted form of the Wellbeing Economy that risks cooptation (Schmid, 2025). Hayden and Dasilva (2022) have characterized the emerging wellbeing economy at the national level as a “weak post-growth” approach, whereby states are moving away from economic growth as the central goal, but in practice remain dependent on economic growth. They argue that “strong post-growth” entails a “much more challenging project of disentangling contemporary societies' dependence on economic growth” (Hayden & Dasilva, 2022, p.1). The problem with understanding regional development through the lens of a mutually reinforcing loop of enhancing economic development and wellbeing, is that it does not necessarily address the need for limiting production and consumption in order to stay within planetary boundaries (Kallis et al., 2025). However municipalities have limited jurisdiction and capacity to contribute to the ambitious economic transformative changes that post-growth requires. This prompts a question for post-growth scholars of what an ambitious yet pragmatic wellbeing economy might look like, for local government.

Meanwhile at the provincial level, some actors described the economic growth imperative, however staff members working at the departmental level appeared more distant from the macro-economic dynamics between growth and wellbeing. One person however raised the limitations of the Westminster model, and in particular, the use of the Finance Act as the predominant and overarching legislation in Canada, highlighting how the dominance of a yearly budget process constrains a wellbeing-led governance approach. In a growth-oriented paradigm, institutions have been designed to respond and deliver on economic measures (Giest, 2023), implying that introducing wellbeing indicators into a system built for economic measures is not necessarily compatible. Instances where individual actors made substantial efforts to operationalize wellbeing metrics, only for those efforts to render futile when those individuals left the organization, exemplify the slipperiness of institutionalizing wellbeing metrics. The challenge of implementing something new runs up against institutional pressures, related to established norms, regulations, processes, and economic logics, that pull it back to conventional routines (Grillitsch et al., 2019).

The pull of institutional stability was described as a significant factor limiting uptake of wellbeing metrics, which supports the premise that institutions generally bend towards stability and continuity, rather than change and disruption (Grillitsch et al., 2019; Strambach and Pflitsch, 2020). As is referenced in the results (Section 4.2.5), but expanded here, there is an institutional “dominant paradigm of inertia”, as explained by this participant:

I think maybe a policy paradigm is like, this is what the system is. We can make slight tweaks to it, but the bulk of where all our money and resources go, education, health, highways, roads, like pretty quickly, you're like, you're at like 85% of the budget. And then maybe we can nibble around the edges and try some innovative things in the shadows. [...] I think there's a feeling of like, we don't have the liberty to really go and try something different because the risk is too high (P4).

The provincial government is characterized by a general risk-aversion, and combined with a budget-dominated process, there seems to be little room for to embrace new systems of accounting (i.e., wellbeing accounting) into governance processes.

If wellbeing metrics are unable to fit within existing institutional pathways, its transformative potential is stifled by institutional inertia and growth dependencies. This is contrasted by the municipal level, wherein wellbeing narratives are seen as complementary to fiscal and economic responsibilities. This might explain why municipalities tended to informally adopt a wellbeing agenda, while provincially, use was fragmented and substantive use was limited to departments who saw wellbeing as complementary to their mission. These findings are consistent with results from Wallace and Schmuecker's work (2013) where across eight cases of successful application of wellbeing indicators, wellbeing was seen as a "complement to traditional metrics, such as GDP, rather than a replacement for them" (p.41). This suggests that when wellbeing data is seen to complement the already-existing ways of working, it might be more easily embraced than when disrupts conventions or requires organizational change. Perhaps a "weak post-growth" approach is also a transformative one.

5.3 Wellbeing as a Wicked Problem

The barriers associated with institutionalizing wellbeing data highlight that the NSQoL Initiative is not only a set of indicators, but characterized by a more knotty challenge of transforming dominant paradigms within a highly complex system. Regional actors see a significant role for municipal and provincial governments in advancing a Wellbeing Economy (as it is broadly defined), but the extent to which state actors can facilitate a post-growth transformation is less clear (Angresius et al., 2025).

Bache et al. (2016) purport that wellbeing is particularly difficult to institutionalize in policy, even when we value it and can measure it, because wellbeing is a "wicked problem". A wicked problem is characterised by complexity, uncertainty, and fragmentation, and cannot be definitively solved or even defined, only continuously managed and re-addressed (Bache et al., 2016). Unlike more bounded policy domains, wellbeing does not correspond to a single sector, metric, or intervention, but cuts across multiple domains of governance and competing priorities. As suggested by one representative from a municipality who had recently added QoL as a priority in their strategic plan: "*we've identified it here in our municipality as a strategic priority, quality of life. And I'm not sure that there's a fulsome understanding of what that actually means.*" (M1). Adopting a wellbeing lens is non-directive in that it does not point to clear actions and interventions, and thus hard to operationalize.

Similarly, while certain provincial departments have used wellbeing metrics in their own deliverables, institutionalizing wellbeing data to drive decisions and evaluate impact at a whole-of government level appears to be a long way off. One reason may be that wellbeing does not present a singular and clearly bounded problem that can be solved. Even addressing single issues within wellbeing frameworks– take income inequality for example– is complex, contested, and thus far has not been able to be "solved" in Nova Scotia. Coordinating action on several dozen indicators poses an even greater challenge. Rittle and Webber (1973) suggest that the search for scientific answers to most public policy issues often fail because these problems generally do not have definitive or objective answers. Understanding wellbeing as wicked elicits caution against top-down technical, expert-based solutions based on the pursuit of empirical knowledge; rather, authors argue that deliberative, democratic, and participatory processes

are more suitable ways forward (Bache et. al., 2016). From this perspective, perhaps the ‘problem of wellbeing’ is that it is not solvable by nature, suggesting that the way forward might be less outcome-focused, and more process-oriented.

Conklin (2005, p.9) suggests that the first step in dealing with a wicked problem is “to recognize its nature”. Turning to metrics offer a convenient way of navigating through this complexity, however, their ability to actualize change is limited unto themselves. Wellbeing metrics are often framed as better compasses for governance, but the relationship between measurement and action is not automatic; it must be politically and institutionally constructed. The Stiglitz–Sen–Fitoussi report (Stiglitz et al., 2009) may have sparked a wave of wellbeing measurement initiatives, but their claims that,

those attempting to guide the economy and our societies are like pilots trying to steer a course without a reliable compass. The decisions they (and we as individual citizens) make depend on what we measure, how good our measurements are and how well our measures are understood, may have overstated the impact of ‘measuring what matters’ (2009, p. 9).

The problem with the compass metaphor is that governments are not neutral pilots simply waiting for better instruments. The compass metaphor implies its own version of ‘rational man’. Turning to metrics is a compelling strategy, but they will fall short if they are expected to generate change without the political and institutional conditions that make action possible. Resisting the “indicators fantasy” (Hayden, 2021) and continuously (re)committing to the *process* of institutionalizing wellbeing offers a way of navigating through the wickedness.

6. Conclusion

The rise of ‘beyond GDP’ indicators around the world signal a timely moment to explore what barriers, opportunities, and tensions emerge as wellbeing metrics enter established governance systems. To date, much attention has been dedicated to developing wellbeing and sustainability indicators that account for more-than-economic growth. This work is often premised on the assumption that better indicators will produce better social outcomes, such as reduced inequality and more sustainable economies. However, as this study suggests, better indicators are only one step along the path of realizing the potential of a Wellbeing Economy to prioritize social-ecological wellbeing beyond growth.

By examining the case of Engage Nova Scotia’s Quality of Life Initiative, this study has identified barriers, opportunities, and tensions shaping the uptake of wellbeing metrics. Findings suggest that wellbeing metrics are mobilized by regional actors in different ways across scales: at the municipal level, capacity for data analysis and resources are limited, but actors seem to be more responsive to the broader wellbeing narrative as it aligns with existing ideas of economic development; while at the provincial level, analytical capacity is stronger, but bureaucratic fragmentation and political short-termism limit implementation. This study found broad support for wellbeing metrics but minimal instrumental use of the NSQoL data, suggesting that the main barrier in practice is not normative opposition, but weak institutional pathways through which wellbeing metrics can take root.

These results point to a few implications for research and practice. Firstly, the normative turn in regional development raises questions of if and how existing institutions can operationalize wellbeing metrics toward the Wellbeing Economy, and if so, the kind of institutional change needed to enable such a transformation. Scholars have emphasised the importance of research to explore how institutional structures shape how wellbeing is spatially distributed (Binz and Castaldi, 2024), and this thesis echoes the need that Grillitsch et al., (2019) identify for future research to focus on the institutional change and capacity necessary to actualize the transformational potential of the wellbeing movement. Viewing ‘beyond GDP’ frameworks as more than a statistical endeavour means that due attention must be given to building the capacity needed to mobilize these indicators. Secondly, although this study examined the

factors shaping use between municipal and provincial governments rather independently, future research should consider studying how inter-governmental wellbeing frameworks might align actors (including non-governmental actors) across scales. This will surely become more relevant as the international 'beyond GDP' movement continues to spread, especially to the local level. Lastly, further research examining other regional cases may help to distinguish barriers that are context-dependent, if there are certain structures constraining progress identifiable (i.e., are stronger governments less constrained by organizational capacity to integrate wellbeing metrics into governance processes?), and help to build a knowledge-base about leverage points for the wellbeing movement.

For practitioners, this study suggests that working within already-existing systems and mobilizing already-engaged actors is a strategic place to start. The Nova Scotia case reveals both the abundance of support for the wellbeing movement *and* the sizeable challenge of institutional change. Findings suggest that framing wellbeing through an economic lens might offer a foothold for indicators to find their place in complex systems, along with the need for building the organizational capacity such that wellbeing indicators have 'somewhere to go'. The work of transforming institutions from within may be essential if wellbeing metrics are to deliver on the ambition of an economy designed to serve the people and the planet.

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Appendix

Appendix A: List of Municipalities¹⁸

Municipal Statistics Annual Report

1.2 Municipal Location

Location of Municipality as of March 31, 2022			
County	Municipality	Incorporated Towns	Villages
Annapolis	Municipality of the County of Annapolis	Annapolis Royal, Middleton	Lawrencetown
Antigonish	Municipality of the County of Antigonish	Antigonish	
Cape Breton	Cape Breton Regional Municipality (CBRM)		
Colchester	Municipality of the County of Colchester	Stewiacke, Truro	Bible Hill, Tatamagouche
Cumberland	Municipality of the County of Cumberland	Amherst, Oxford	Pugwash, River Hebert
Digby	Municipality of the District of Clare Municipality of the District of Digby	Digby	Freeport, Tiverton, Westport, Weymouth
Guysborough	Municipality of the District of Guysborough Municipality of the District of St. Mary's	Mulgrave	Dover
Halifax	Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM)		
Hants	Municipality of the District of East Hants West Hants Regional Municipality		
Inverness	Municipality of the County of Inverness	Port Hawkesbury	
Kings	Municipality of the County of Kings	Berwick, Kentville, Wolfville	Aylesford, Canning, Greenwood, Kingston, New Minas, Port Williams, Cornwallis Square
Lunenburg	Municipality of the District of Chester Municipality of the District of Lunenburg	Bridgewater, Lunenburg, Mahone Bay	Chester, Hebbville
Pictou	Municipality of the County of Pictou	New Glasgow, Pictou, Trenton, Stellarton, Westville	
Queens	Region of Queens		
Richmond	Municipality of the County of Richmond		St. Peter's
Shelburne	Municipality of the District of Barrington Municipality of the District of Shelburne	Clark's Harbour, Lockeport, Shelburne	
Victoria	Municipality of the County of Victoria		Baddeck
Yarmouth	Municipality of the District of Argyle Municipality of the District of Yarmouth	Yarmouth	

¹⁸ Source: Nova Scotia Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing (2022). Municipal Statistics Annual Report 2021-2022. Government of Nova Scotia. Retrieved from <https://www.novascotia.ca/sites/default/files/documents/1-1352/municipal-statistics-annual-report-2021-2022-en.pdf>

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Exploring the Opportunities and Barriers to Institutionalizing Wellbeing Policy

Research Study

You are being invited to participate in a research study examining how wellbeing data are used in policy and decision-making in Nova Scotia. Your participation is entirely voluntary. This study seeks to understand the factors that influence whether and how wellbeing data—specifically the Nova Scotia Quality of Life Survey—are used in policy-making, planning, budgeting, and related processes at municipal and provincial scales.

This study is being conducted by Erika Bout, a Master's student in the Department of Human Geography at Lund University in Sweden. Erika has studied and worked in Nova Scotia for 8 years, and this research is being conducted as part of her Master's thesis. This project is not funded or sponsored by any external organization. As data are being collected in Canada, the project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of Acadia University and is on file as REB 26-16.

Purpose of the Study

This project investigates the opportunities and barriers of institutionalizing a wellbeing-oriented policy agenda in Nova Scotia by examining how decision makers across different scales (community, municipal, regional, and provincial) engage with and respond to wellbeing metrics generated through the Nova Scotia Quality of Life Survey (NSQoL). The research aims to explore not only whether wellbeing metrics are being integrated into policy and planning, but why, how, and under what conditions such integration occurs.

What will you be asked to do?

You have been invited to participate based on your expertise and experience in public policy, planning, or strategy. You will be asked to take part in one (1) one-on-one interview conducted online via Zoom. The interview will not exceed 60 minutes and will be audio recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed.

Participation and Withdrawal

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You will be provided with any information relevant to your decision to continue or withdraw from participation, in a timely manner. You may withdraw from the study and request removal of your data up until May 1, 2026, at which point data may have been aggregated and incorporated into analysis and it may no longer be feasible to remove individual contributions.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Only the researcher and her academic supervisors will have access to raw data. There is no anticipated duty to disclose information provided by participants unless required by law. Participants may choose a pseudonym, or one will be assigned by the researcher, which will be used in any publications or presentations. Identifying information such as job titles, workplaces, communities, colleagues' names, or political affiliations will not be made public. The researcher may describe the scale at which participants work (e.g., municipal or provincial) when relevant but will avoid details that could lead to identification.

Interviews will be conducted via Zoom and audio recorded. Recordings will be stored on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher and will be deleted once analysis is complete. Recordings may be processed using secure transcription software. This may involve automated processing or temporary storage on external servers, depending on the software used. Data may be backed up on a secure, password-protected personal cloud storage account. While these services use encryption and privacy safeguards, there is a small risk of data breach associated with any online platform. Identifying information will be removed from transcripts, and access will be limited to the researcher and her supervisors. Transcripts will be stored on a password-protected device and retained for five (5) years following completion of the study, after which they will be deleted. Participants may request a copy of their transcript to review, revise, or retract statements prior to May 1, 2026.

You will be asked to sign this consent form or provide verbal consent. The consent form will be securely stored. If relevant, data may be shared with the researcher's supervisors, who are bound by the same confidentiality obligations.

Risks and Possible Benefits

This study involves minimal risk. Potential risks include mild discomfort when discussing professional experiences or institutional challenges, as well as a small risk of indirect identification due to participants' professional roles. You may skip any questions or end the interview at any time. Potential benefits include reflection and learning associated with participation. You will receive a copy of the final thesis and are welcome to follow up at any time regarding findings relevant to your work.

Reporting of Findings

Findings will be reported in a Master's thesis, and may be presented in conference presentations, a published academic article, to an external organization, Engage Nova Scotia. All findings will be reported in aggregate form, and quotes will be fully anonymized. No participants will be identified directly or indirectly.

Funding and Conflicts of Interest

This study has no funding sources and the results of this study will not be commercialized. The researcher was previously employed by Engage Nova Scotia but is no longer affiliated with the organization. Engage Nova Scotia is not sponsoring the research and will not have access to identifiable data.

Compensation

There is no compensation or reimbursement for participation.

Additional Warnings

- Employers may have legal access to information transmitted on employer-owned equipment.
- Information sent or stored online may be accessed by domestic or foreign authorities.
- Participants' data may be accessed by designated Acadia University employees for system maintenance purposes.
- Compensated participants may be identified to Financial Services at Acadia University (not applicable).

Questions about the Study

This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of Acadia University and is on file (26-16).

For questions, contact:

Erika Bout (Researcher) – erikaebout@gmail.com | 519-841-1318

Dr. Gabrielle Donnelly (External Supervisor) – gabrielle.donnelly@acadiau.ca

Dr. Josephine Rekers (Supervisor) – Josephine.Rekers@keg.lu.se

For concerns not related to the research team, contact:

REB Chair, Dr. Stephanie Jones – stephanie.jones@acadiau.ca | 902-585-1495

I have read, understood, and agree to participate in the study. By consenting, you have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

Full Name [printed]: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Interview Guide

1. Background and Role

- A. Can you briefly describe your current role and responsibilities (i.e., what you do)?
 - a. How long have you been in this position?
 - b. Is there anything you'd like to share about relevant experience you've had in previous employment?
- B. How would you describe the primary objectives of your role and your department/organization?

2. Awareness and Understanding of the Wellbeing and the NSQoL Survey

- A. What does "quality of life" or "wellbeing" mean in the context of your work or organization?
- B. Are you familiar with the Nova Scotia Quality of Life (NSQoL) Survey that Engage NS administers?
 - a. If yes: How do you understand the survey and its purpose?
 - b. If no: What kinds of wellbeing or social indicator data are you generally aware of or exposed to in your work?

3. Use (or Non-Use) of Wellbeing and Social Indicator Data

- A. Have you ever used quality-of-life, wellbeing, or social indicator data (including NSQoL data) in your work?
 - a. If yes: In what ways, and for what purposes? Could you provide an example?
 - b. If yes: How did your organization/department come to use the data? What was that process like?
 - c. If no: Why do you think this type of data has not been used?
- B. Do you (or your department/org.) use other types of data in your work? What kind of data sources do you usually work with?
 - a. How is it used?
 - b. How would you assess the effectiveness or usefulness of that data in achieving your objectives?

4. Integration, Barriers, and Opportunities

- A. What would "meaningful integration" of wellbeing data look like to you in practice?
- B. What barriers do you encounter or foresee in using wellbeing data more effectively?
 - a. Individual [describe if needed]
 - b. Organizational [describe if needed]
 - c. Relational [describe if needed]
 - d. Wellbeing metrics [describe if needed]
 - e. Contextual
- C. In your experience, what is the biggest barrier to using wellbeing data more effectively?
- D. How could wellbeing data be better integrated in governance processes?
 - a. What opportunities or leverage points do you see?
- E. In your experience, who is best positioned or responsible for advancing the use of wellbeing metrics?

5. Wellbeing Data and Policymaking

- A. What role do wellbeing or quality-of-life metrics currently play in policy-making and governance in Nova Scotia, from your perspective?
- B. In your professional opinion, what role should wellbeing data play in an ideal or aspirational policy environment?

- C. How do wellbeing considerations interact with economic growth, fiscal priorities, or development objectives in your decision-making processes?
 - a. Are there tensions, synergies, or trade-offs?
- D. How would you describe the dominant policy paradigm influencing how public decisions are made in Nova Scotia?
 - a. Do you see wellbeing data (such as the NSQoL Survey) in opposition to, in alignment with, or complementing to existing policy paradigms?

6. Scale, Governance, and Future Directions

- A. At what level(s) of governance do you think wellbeing data like the NSQoL Survey are most impactful or most feasible to use, and why?
- B. Do you anticipate using future iterations of the NSQoL Survey (e.g., 2026 data)?
 - a. Why or why not? Under what conditions might this change?

7. Closing

- A. Looking ahead, what do you see as a realistic next step toward better integrating wellbeing considerations into decision-making in Nova Scotia?
- B. Do you think there's a need to integrate wellbeing metrics into decision-making in Nova Scotia? Is there anything else you would like to add that you feel is important for understanding how wellbeing data relate to policy and governance in Nova Scotia?
- C. Are there any documents, initiatives, or individuals you would recommend I look into as part of this research?

Appendix D: Analysis Description

Table A1: Analysis Process

Thematic analysis stage (following Braun and Clark (2006))	Braun and Clark's description (quoted directly, 2006, p. 87)	What I did
1. Familiarization with Data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Created excel spreadsheet with initial categories (i.e., broad codes), related to RQs and analytical framework 2. Reviewed transcripts
2. Generating Initial Codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Transferred relevant insights into the excel spreadsheet b. Bolded key insights in the transcript 3. Transferred excel data to digital sticky notes
4. Searching for Themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Organized sticky notes into like-groups 5. Titled each group of stickies
6. Reviewing Themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Tagged stickies by municipal or provincial tags 7. Reorganized stickies to review municipal and provincial stickies together
8. Defining and Naming Themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Continued to revise and reorganize the themes in relation to one another, and developing definitions about what they said
9. Producing the Report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Wrote first draft of results based on most relevant/interesting themes, frequency of themes, and using vivid quotes 10. Revised draft for brevity and clarity 11. Reviewed stickies to check draft for accuracy and depth while iterating the final draft of results section

Appendix E: Screenshot of Analysis Spreadsheet

Respondent Characteristics	Scale	Role of wellbeing in gov.	Well-being metrics Awareness (NSQol, specifically): Y/N, how	Purpose and Understanding of the survey	Wellbeing Metrics Use	Other kinds of data use (which data, kind of use)	Barriers affecting use of data: INDIVIDUAL	Barriers affecting use of data: ORGANIZATIONAL	Barriers affecting use of data: METRICS	Barriers affecting use of data: RELATIONAL
NGO Leader Man	Municipal	<p>Not sure if it's municipalities role... seems like it's a "nice to have".</p> <p>"In a perfect world, everyone would love to use the indicators."</p> <p>Ideally wellbeing should be a form of analysis that is widely adopted, but we're not there yet. Wellbeing should be used as a lens that is applied to work to figure out how people are really doing. Eventually we'll get there...</p>	<p>Not very familiar. Had heard about Engage Nova Scotia, and the survey, but don't really know beyond that. Have never used the survey in his work.</p>	<p>Topics are being referenced, but the survey itself isn't.</p> <p>Anecdotally have heard about municipalities using and finding the data helpful.</p>	<p>Less data and more consultation happens... the work he does is more qualitative and there aren't many numbers around them...</p>	<p>There's hundreds of issues and the municipal level gets bombarded with them all the time. Challenge is to prioritize and create alignment.</p> <p>Response to why this data hasn't been used is "government's pretty slow"... slow to adopt new ways of measuring and adopting stuff. It will take a long time for this to seep into gov. processes.</p> <p>Being a councillor is a hard job. Supposed to be part time and is often overwhelming with feedback from constituents.</p> <p>Capacity at the municipal level is the biggest barrier... lot of staff and are able to integrate these things... others are a lot smaller.</p> <p>The better functioning a council (i.e., how well they can automate the day-to-day operations) the more time they can focus on strategic work and bigger issues.</p> <p>Happiness is icing on the cake, different than the operational obligations that a municipality has to fulfill.</p>	<p>There's hundreds of issues and the municipal level gets bombarded with them all the time. Challenge is to prioritize and create alignment.</p> <p>Response to why this data hasn't been used is "government's pretty slow"... slow to adopt new ways of measuring and adopting stuff. It will take a long time for this to seep into gov. processes.</p> <p>Being a councillor is a hard job. Supposed to be part time and is often overwhelming with feedback from constituents.</p> <p>Capacity at the municipal level is the biggest barrier... lot of staff and are able to integrate these things... others are a lot smaller.</p> <p>The better functioning a council (i.e., how well they can automate the day-to-day operations) the more time they can focus on strategic work and bigger issues.</p> <p>Happiness is icing on the cake, different than the operational obligations that a municipality has to fulfill.</p>	<p>Not sure if they can come up with variables to track how their doing... Wellbeing as intangible, and hard to connect the dots to policy and solutions.</p> <p>"I think a lot of things in wellness are kind of up in the clouds. They're not very tangible, so I feel like some people might find it very difficult to, yeah, participation in your community or isolation, for example, that might be something where how do we then begin to track that and why would that matter right now? That's what some people probably say. How are we supposed to fix that, too? There are probably a lot of ways where you can try to fix it, but it's not an easy answer."</p> <p>-- what does that mean and how do we tackle that?</p>	<p>Hard to translate data to solutions. "how am I supposed to respond to this, or how do I tackle it?". Hard to connect the dots into something tangible.</p>	

