



Building Wellbeing Societies & Communities 2025 Public Health Summer Institute

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Virtual



Think Piece

Authored by Dr. Trevor Hancock in collaboration with Dr. Lindsay McLaren

#PHSI25



Land Acknowledgement

PHABC is a provincial organization and acknowledges that our work goes beyond the places we live and impacts the lives of nations across British Columbia and Turtle Island.



The Wellbeing Society Public Health in the 21st Century

Public health is a social science, and politics but public health writ large

As a discipline committed to keeping people healthy and preventing injury, illness and premature death, public health necessarily has to move beyond the health sector and, in doing so, look upstream to the broader determinants of the health of the population.

This can be, understandably, a contentious area of work, and there is nothing new in that. Cipolla (1976) described the conflicts between public health officers and merchants in the Renaissance city states in Italy, while 19th century public health practitioners struggled against the health harming impacts of industrialisation and urbanisation and the powerful commercial and political forces driving those changes.

This can perhaps best be seen in the words of the famed pathologist and medical reformer Rudolf Virchow in Prussia. His 1848 report on the social, economic and political factors underlying a typhus epidemic in Upper Silesia was not well received by the Prussian government, which accused him of writing a political report, not a medical report (Brown and Fee, 2006). To this he famously responded: “Medicine is a social science, and politics but medicine writ large” (Virchow, 1848).

Today, of course, and in the current context, we should say instead that

“Public health is a social science, and politics – or more broadly, how we organize our society – is but public health writ large.”

Public Health and the Polycrisis

With that as background, let us consider the challenges to the public's health that we face in the 21st century, and the public health and societal response that is needed.

There is a pervasive sense that as a society – and as part of a global civilisation – we are in trouble.

- **Ecologically**, we have crossed six of nine planetary boundaries – one of which is climate change – and are approaching a seventh (Planetary 2024 – Caesar, Sakschewski, Andersen et al., 2024). As UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has stated, “Humanity is waging war on nature. This is suicidal” (Guterres, 2020).
- **Socially**, despite being in ecological overshoot, many people still lack the social foundations needed to be well (McGibbon, 2025). Moreover, we are more socially disconnected and isolated than we have ever been, and this is showing up especially in the mental wellbeing of young people; happiness in youth aged 15 – 24 has fallen sharply since 2006 – 10 in North America, and (less sharply) in Western Europe (Helliwell, Layard, Sachs et al, 2024).
- **Digitally**, the UN Environment Program states in a 2024 global foresight report that misinformation, declining trust and polarization is one of eight critical global shifts with the “potential to significantly disrupt different sectors and hence affect planetary health and human wellbeing”. Indeed, the report notes:
 - “Misinformation and disinformation, increasingly powered by AI, is identified as the most severe global risk over the next two years in the latest Global Risk Report of the World Economic Forum (2024), undermining social cohesion, trust in institutions and fuelling political divides.”

- **Economically**, neoliberal capitalist economics has caused “Income and wealth inequalities [to be] on the rise nearly everywhere since the 1980s” (World Inequality Report, 2022 - Chancel, Piketty, Saez, Zucman et al, 2022). The concentration of income and wealth among a tiny minority undermines the collectivity required to sustain a society.
- **Culturally**, we are driven by a set of core values, such as individualism and materialism and continual growth in wealth and consumption, that are worsening the crisis and that are not fit for purpose in the 21st century.
- **Politically**, we are seeing the rise of the populist radical right with overlays of misogyny, xenophobia, and white supremacy; and perhaps the end of liberal democracy (McLaren, Green, & Labonté, forthcoming)

In the 2022 report on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Liu Zhenmin, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, stated:

“The world is facing a confluence of crises that threaten the very survival of humanity . . . We ignore them at our own peril.” (Zhenmin, 2022)

Those crises include war, ecological destruction, widening inequalities, political polarization, and the pernicious impacts of social media in normalizing these trends. They threaten the health of the population as a whole, and particularly the health of those already marginalized by intersecting systems of oppression, including capitalism, colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy, both here in Canada and around the world.

The combination and synergistic nature of these and other crises has been called a ‘polycrisis’: “any combination of three or more interacting systemic risks with the potential to cause a cascading, runaway failure of Earth’s natural and social systems that irreversibly and catastrophically degrades humanity’s prospects” (Janzwood and Homer-Dixon, 2022).

A common driver behind many of these crises is the focus on economic growth at the expense of the wellbeing of the planet, people and communities. Behind this economic focus lies a set of core values that are not fit for purpose in the 21st century:

- We are separate from and superior to nature;
- The individual is paramount and the community and the collective are secondary;
- Short-term benefits matter most;
- Success is determined by how much wealth and ‘stuff’ you have.

A ‘business as usual’ approach will not get us out of these crises; indeed, it will only make things worse; we cannot grow our way out of a set of problems rooted in growth. We need a new set of core values that put people and planet first, that value community and connection, that are concerned with equity now and for future generations, and that value a sense of wellbeing and quality of life over the accumulation of ‘stuff’.¹

Importantly, many of these values are inherent in Indigenous ways of knowing and acting. As UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has also noted, “it is time to heed their voices, reward their knowledge and respect their rights” (Guterres, 2020).

Recent PHABC conferences have addressed a number of these challenges, including planetary health (2022), the digital transformation (2023) and the commercial determinants of health and the economic system that is a key driver of ecological and social decline (2024). In this Summer Institute, and the later conference that will build upon it, we want to move beyond a description of the challenges we face and discuss the necessary response by public health communities and society more generally:

What if society were organised in a way that puts the wellbeing of all people and of the planet at the centre?

[1] Jeremy Lent, in his 2017 book *The Patterning Instinct*, sees three core values as foundational principles for our major decisions: an emphasis on quality of life, a sense of shared humanity and environmental sustainability. Or as the Great Transition Initiative puts it: We need to develop “a constellation of values – human solidarity, quality of life, and ecological sensibility” that will get us to the future we need.

Public health in the 21st century: Towards a Wellbeing Society

Key to improving the health of the population in the face of the polycrisis is a new approach to organising our whole society, putting the wellbeing of people and the planet – not the performance of the economy – at the heart of governance.

The concept of wellbeing is hardly new: The WHO defined health almost 80 years ago as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing”. Current thinking on wellbeing is epitomised by the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, which defines wellbeing as:

“The presence of the highest possible quality of life in its full breadth of expression focused on but not necessarily exclusive to: good living standards, robust health, a sustainable environment, vital communities, an educated populace, balanced time use, high levels of democratic participation, and access to and participation in leisure and culture.”

Missing from this definition of wellbeing, it should be noted, is the concept of equity; achieving a well-being society requires recognizing and redressing the fact of unequal starting points.

In its Geneva Charter for Well-being, the WHO (2022) proposes the creation of wellbeing societies

“committed to achieving equitable health now and for future generations without breaching ecological limits”.

There are several key points in this definition that are, in effect, **the core principles of such a society.**

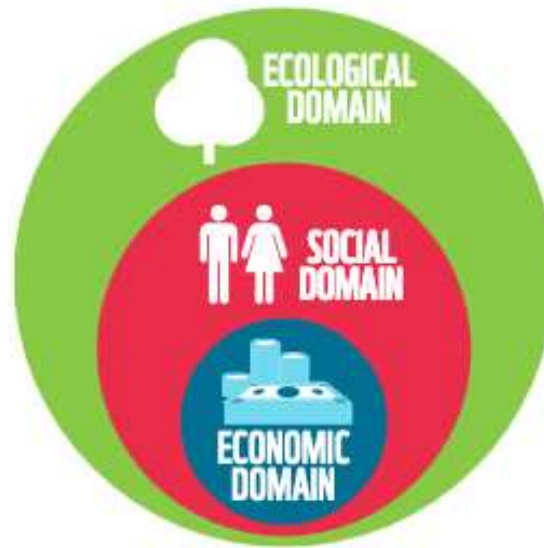


Figure 1: Ecosystems sustain societies that create economies. Source: Living Planet Report 2014: species and spaces, people and place. ©World Wide Fund for Nature.

- First, it is about **making the wellbeing of all people, all living things, and the planet the central focus and purpose of society**. In particular, it means designing an economy to serve people and the planet, not the other way around. As the World Wide Fund for Nature (2014) has noted:
 - “Ecosystems sustain societies that create economies. It does not work any other way around” (see Figure 1). The economy, in other words, must be redesigned to be in service to the wellbeing of people and the planet.
- Second, it is about **equity**, including **social and environmental justice**.
- Third, it is about **extending the principle of equity to future generations**, ensuring that our actions today do not deny the ability of future generations to meet their needs, which is in effect the definition of sustainable development proposed by the Brundtland Commission in 1987.
- Fourth, it is about **doing all this within the Earth’s planetary boundaries**, its ecological limits, which also means respecting the rights and needs of ecosystems and other species.

- Finally, it is about re-imagining a system and process of governance that is consistent with these intents, where governance is “the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, plan and manage the common affairs of the city” (UN Habitat, 2002) – or in this case, the society. In particular, this includes ensuring legitimacy, space, and support for civil society, for an accountable private sector, and for reinvestment in the value of collective action (WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, 2008).

In the Canadian context, these principles must be applied to governance at the provincial/ territorial and local levels, as well as at the national level.

This involves coordinated action in five key areas, according to the WHO’s Geneva Charter:

- Value, respect and nurture planet Earth and its ecosystems.
- Design an equitable economy that serves human development within planetary and local ecological boundaries.
- Develop healthy public policy for the common good.
- Achieve universal health coverage.
- Address the impacts of digital transformation.

This is the basis for an agenda for public health in its wider societal role of contributing to a healthy future for all.

Of particular note, what is essentially a 19th century system of governance, in which different issues are siloed and dealt with separately, is increasingly at odds with addressing an interconnected polycrisis. This is true not only for national and provincial governments, but for local governments, and it also extends into other key institutions such as universities.

Figure 2 illustrates these ideas with respect to the community, but also applies at a societal level. The health of a community or society results from getting the right balance between nature (the environment), people (the community or society) and the economy. Note the economy both underpins and is subservient to/ in service to environment and community/ society, and that there are six qualities of a community or society that are needed to make it healthy and in balance: equity, sustainability, viability, conviviality, livability and adequate prosperity.

Increasingly, there are calls for holistic, intersectoral and trans-disciplinary approaches in which both Earth systems and human societies are understood as complex adaptive systems. In essence, we can't fix 21st century problems with 19th or even 20th century governance tools. Which is why we have to re-imagine a system and process of governance that is consistent with the intent of creating a wellbeing society.

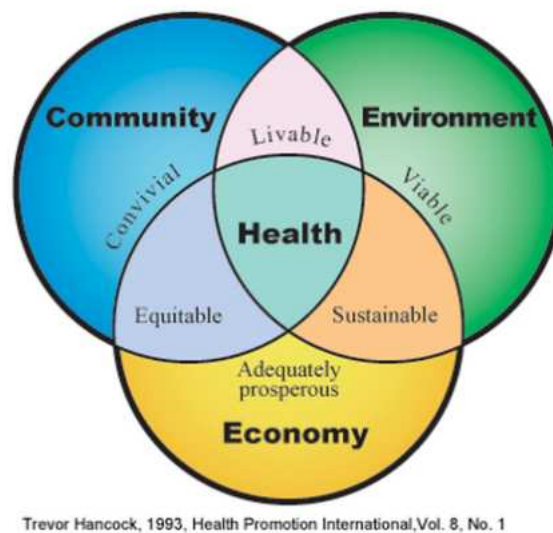


Figure 2: A model of health and the community ecosystem. Source: Hancock, 1993.

Listen and Learn: Podcasts from the NCCDH

To deepen your understanding of the themes explored in the Summer Institute, tune into these insightful podcast episodes from the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health (NCCDH):

- [Disrupting for well-being with Engage Nova Scotia \(Part 1\)](#)
- [Disrupting for well-being with Engage Nova Scotia \(Part 2\)](#)
- [Disrupting for well-being with Recover Edmonton](#)



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