

Intelligence MEMOS



From: Peter Hicks

To: The Office of the Prime Minister

Date: October 9, 2020

Re: **THE PANDEMIC OPPORTUNITY FOR BETTER WELL-BEING DATA**

The federal government agenda during this parliamentary session will be focused on managing the pandemic and putting ‘new normal’ programs in place. There should also be a place for lower profile action to strengthen the evidence base for policies.

In particular, the pandemic provides the opportunity to enhance our understanding of how the myriad income support and service programs provincially and federally can work together more harmoniously to further overall Canadian well-being and among the many diverse groups that comprise Canada.

As well, the time is ripe to start exploiting current information technologies and new data sources in order to calculate ‘what is likely to work best’ statistical information that can support individuals as they make big decisions in the social dimensions of their lives. These largely unexplored applications hold huge longer-term promise for improving the operation of labour markets, education, healthcare and other social programs, as well as establishing new and more positive direct relationships between individuals and governments.

In a recent [article](#), I discussed how COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of addressing the big gaps that exist in today’s system of social statistics, the progress made to date, and outline further steps to consolidate recent gains and make a milestone shift towards supporting more effective social policies in the future.

A first step could be direction to ministers in mandate letters. Indeed, the last set of mandate letters did ask key ministers to incorporate quality of life measurements into government decision-making. The next set of mandate letters could build on that initiative and take some bold, but practical, steps forward.

For example, Statistics Canada could be instructed to develop a capacity for publishing national well-being indicators that are current, comparative, authoritative and that facilitate in-depth follow-up analysis. The most recent data in any particular social or health area would be released in a context that shows how those data fit into the larger picture. This could include implications for different parts of the country and for different groups within the middle class, as well as groups such as Indigenous people and groups who face greater labour market, housing and health risks. Statistics Canada is best suited for this function since it has the mandate and expertise to develop the standards and common definitions needed to ensure consistency across the various social areas.

Indeed, it might be useful to highlight Statistics Canada’s role in setting standards by specifically mandating it to establish a broadly based consultative network to develop a set of standard concepts, definitions and protocols that could be consistently used across the entire social statistics system, replacing today’s focus on specific surveys or administrative sources of data. The creation of this network of users and experts would, in turn, help break down the silos that now impede policy action that crosses professional and jurisdictional boundaries.

Statistics Canada could also be mandated to begin work with other departments and with provinces to develop a database that describes, using consistent definitions, the operation of all social programs in Canada, including service programs. We already have reasonably good data about programs and tax measures that provide income support to Canadians. However, we have surprisingly little consistent information about programs from all orders of government that provide employment, health, educational and social services.

As another example, in many social and health areas it will take considerable time to develop reliable ‘what is likely to work best’ information directed to individual users based on what has worked best in similar circumstances in the past. However, much of that development work has already taken place in labour market programming. The shift to this model could be launched by giving Employment and Social Development Canada the mandate to work with Statistics Canada and interested provinces in developing pilot studies and demonstrations.

And as various departments undertake their review of lessons learned from dealing with the pandemic, they should be required to have common definitions, concepts and protocols. This will allow for better sharing of lessons learned across the whole country on pandemic spread, risk factors for vulnerable populations, outbreak prediction and prevention, and evaluating how preventative and treatment measures are working.

These steps may appear small, but taken together, they would represent a transformational shift towards more effective social policies in Canada – towards the creation of evidence that will gradually allow the social programs of all orders of government to work together efficiently and harmoniously, empowering Canadians to make the best use of the opportunities and supports that are open to them.

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