

# Communities and Health

**Researcher:** Ronald Coleman, GPI Atlantic, Nova Scotia  
**Policy Discussant:** Michael Goldberg, Social Planning and Research Council of BC  
**Provocateur:** John Malcom, Cape Breton District Health Authority

**Ronald Coleman** explained that GPI Atlantic is a non-profit research group, which was founded in 1997 to develop an index of sustainable development and well-being for Nova Scotia — the Genuine Progress Index (GPI). GPI Atlantic is funded by and works with CPHI, Statistics Canada, National Crime Prevention Committee, universities and community health boards, public health authorities, and community development groups. At the local level, GPI Atlantic works with communities to help them define well-being and to translate that knowledge into concrete practical action to build healthier communities.

The GPI measures 22 social, economic and environmental components or “natural and social capital elements,” such as natural resource wealth and environmental quality; paid and unpaid (voluntary and household) work; stress, leisure time and community development; and health status, behaviours and knowledge. According to Coleman, “the GPI provides a practical, policy-relevant measure of progress that is more comprehensive and accurate than current measures based on the Gross Domestic Product.” He noted that Statistics Canada is monitoring the results of the Nova Scotia GPI as a potential pilot project for Canada, and provides ongoing assistance, advice, and access to data sources.

Among the questions GPI uses to engage communities are: *What kind of world are we leaving our children? Are we better off than we were 40 years ago?* Coleman believes that, materially speaking, we are better off today than in the past, however there are disturbing and worrying signs. For example, he notes an increase in stress rates, obesity, childhood asthmas, economic, environmental and personal insecurity, greater inequality and more child poverty, a decline of volunteerism, depletion of natural resources, species loss, global warming, and so on.

Coleman argued the need to challenge the assumption that a growing economy is a healthier economy, and that a healthy economy equals a healthy society. The source of growth, he said, is also important — resource depletion, increased crime, sickness, and pollution all can contribute to raising the GDP. For Coleman, the current preoccupation with economic-based indicators needs to be challenged.

Coleman concluded by stating that “indicators are powerful. What is measured reflects the values of a society, determines what makes it onto the policy agenda, and influences behaviour. A good set of indicators can help communities foster a common vision and purpose; identify strengths and weaknesses; change public behaviour; hold leaders accountable at election time and initiate actions to promote well-being.”

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