

Community Vitality Index (CVI)

Overview

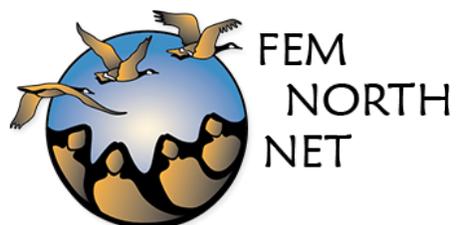


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Community Vitality Index (CVI)

The Community Vitality Index (CVI) is a tool designed to track changes to the wellbeing of diverse women in Happy Valley – Goose Bay. It was developed in partnership by a small group of women from Happy Valley – Goose Bay and a few researchers involved with the FemNorthNet project.¹

While creating the CVI, we emphasized the development of a framework that could account for and define the experiences of women with diverse social identities who live in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. In this community, women’s primary concern was their wellbeing, which is critical to gender equality.

The content of the CVI is captured in a “wellbeing framework”, depicted by an image of an inuksuk. Each section of the inuksuk represents an element of wellbeing as identified by the women of Happy Valley-Goose Bay. To evaluate women’s wellbeing in each of these areas, a long questionnaire was created using questions found in existing studies of wellbeing, as well as from women in the community. This questionnaire will be used to gather data over time so that we can see how women’s wellbeing – as defined by women – is changing in Happy Valley-Goose Bay.

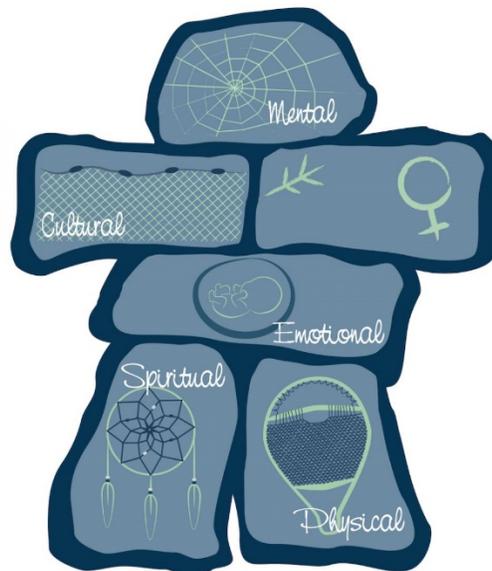


Image developed by community researchers in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, and digitized by Monica Peach

¹ The FemNorthNet project is housed at the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW-ICREF). Our work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Northern Communities CURA Program) and Status of Women Canada (Blueprint Project Funding).

The Importance of the CVI

Why is the CVI important to women in Happy Valley – Goose Bay?

Tracking changes in the wellbeing of women in Happy Valley – Goose Bay is important because of the arrival of the Lower Churchill Hydroelectric Dam.

The Joint Review Panel for the Lower Churchill Hydroelectric Dam noted that the project has “the potential for adverse effects resulting from high wage employment, including increased substance abuse, and sexual assault, family violence and [other] effects on women and children in Happy Valley-Goose Bay...” (Report of the Joint Review Panel, 2011, p. xxviii).

The Panel recommended that “the provincial Department of Health and Community Services, in consultation with Aboriginal groups, and appropriate government and community agencies from the Upper Lake Melville area, conduct a social effects needs assessment, including an appropriately resourced participatory research component, that would determine the parameters to monitor, collect baseline data, and provide recommendations for social effects mitigation measures and an approach to on-going monitoring...” (Report of the Joint Review Panel, 2011, p. 291).

The government of Newfoundland and Labrador did not follow this recommendation, so FemNorthNet did.

Important components of the CVI include:

- A description of diverse women in HV-GB developed by women in the community
- A wellbeing framework (an image representing women’s wellbeing), developed by women in the community, and developed graphically with the support of the Nunatsiavut government
- A definition of wellbeing (including five inter-connected categories of wellbeing), developed by women in the community
- A wellbeing survey to measure and track diverse women’s wellbeing over time

Defining “Wellbeing”

Workshop participants and researchers worked collectively to produce the following definition of wellbeing for women in Happy Valley-Goose Bay:

"The wellbeing of women in the north depends on having the opportunity to enjoy and develop a healthy and sustainable relationship with the environment. Having the ability to value yourself – both where you have come from and where you are going – is also important. Wellbeing requires having a sense of safety and security, and having access to appropriate food, housing, resources, finances, and support services. Having a social support network, and being free from violent relationships are critical factors that affect wellbeing for all women. Food security; having or being able to learn coping mechanisms; being able to make choices about what's best for you and your family; having access to information and resources; and social acceptance of diverse social identities as also critically important factors that affect women's wellbeing. Having a space to meet to share and learn with other women is also important. Overall wellbeing is made up of: (1) physical; (2) emotional; (3) mental/intellectual; (4) spiritual; and (5) cultural wellbeing."

Categories of Wellbeing

During the workshops in HV-GB, discussions about wellbeing were organized into 5 categories:

1. Physical
2. Emotional
3. Mental/Intellectual
4. Cultural
5. Spiritual

Each category of wellbeing has survey questions associated with it, based on the main pieces of wellbeing that are listed below. The questions were partly developed by workshop participants, and partly by other members of the research team. We have been working on them by finding some questions from existing surveys (e.g., recommendations made in other research), and using them along with questions that we made up, and that workshop participants made up.

1. Physical Wellbeing

Our body is our vehicle to get us through life. Physical wellbeing is about strength, health, endurance, and feeling well. It is not about physical beauty or ability. Being physically well means being able to have a healthy lifestyle, including being able to have a healthy diet and body. Physical wellbeing also includes having access to a safe, affordable, appropriate place to live.

Physical wellbeing includes:

- food security (access to healthy food, access to country food, enough food to feed you and your family)
- physical safety (in home, in community)
- clean drinking water
- exercise and leisure/recreation (access to exercise facilities, time for exercise, activities to reduce stress)
- safe, affordable, appropriate housing
- access to the land (being able to 'go off')
- sexual health services and information (health services in general)

2. Emotional Wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing is about inner strength. It includes valuing yourself, being able to have control over your overall wellbeing, and having a healthy image of yourself. To be emotionally well, you have to have access to social support.

Emotional wellbeing includes:

- family and friend relationships (Do you have relationships that you are satisfied with? Can you get support when you need it?)
- positive support system (people to turn to for support and advice)
- sense of purpose (feeling that your life is important/has value)
- happiness of those around you (the wellbeing of your family and your community)
- freedom of choice (in control of things that affect your life; able to make decisions for yourself)

3. Mental / Intellectual Wellbeing

Mental and intellectual wellbeing come from the knowledge and wisdom gained through family, education, elders and life experience. Mental and intellectual wellbeing mean being able to value the thoughts of people we trust, and trusting ourselves when we disagree with the people close to us. Mental wellbeing comes from being wise and capable of making life's decisions, or having someone we trust and we choose who can help us make life's decisions. It also includes how we react to other people, and how we accept, and are accepted by, others.

Mental and intellectual wellbeing includes:

- having the ability to meet your basic needs (do you worry about meeting your needs; the needs of your family?)
- feeling that your voice matters (inclusion in decisions, being able to speak out about issues that are important to you)
- relaxation time
- opportunities for self-help (access to resources)

- chance to learn new things/learn about your culture

4. Spiritual Wellbeing

Spiritual wellbeing lies within us, and comes from our connections to the land and to the people. It includes being aware of our spirituality, self-acceptance and respect for others, and being able to practice and experience the virtues of love (having compassion for others), joy (having a song in your heart), long suffering (being patient and perseverant), kindness (being thoughtful to others without seeking reward), faithfulness (a commitment to being true & loyal), gentleness (consideration for the feelings of others), self control, and energy (your hand to the world, or your aura).

Spiritual wellbeing includes:

- freedom of thoughts, belief, and expression (connection to spiritual/greater power; having someone to share your thoughts and beliefs with)
- access to land/nature
- self-acceptance (willing to accept your own/traditional teachings and beliefs)
- access to healthy natural environment
- self-actualization (being able to reach your full potential)
- connection to spiritual places

5. Cultural Wellbeing

Labrador is very diverse in its cultures, and people are very proud of Labrador's unique cultural identities. Labrador people are rooted in culture and – regardless of their particular cultural background – are passionate about the land, water and animals. Cultural wellbeing is about having the freedom to practice your own culture, and to belong to a cultural group. Cultural wellbeing helps us be who we are as individuals. Cultural wellbeing comes from being valued for the differences that define us and our beliefs, our history, and our roots. Cultural wellbeing adds to the greater good.

Cultural wellbeing includes:

- opportunity to pass on traditions/have traditions passed on (access to teachings from your community; valued for cultural knowledge)
- freedom to practice your own culture
- acceptance of cultural differences
- sense of belonging to a cultural group
- access to traditional land

The CVI Framework

Graphic designer Monica Peach, from Nunatsiavut, took the sketches produced by the women during the workshops and produced the image shown here. This visual framework symbolizes the interconnectedness of all the components of wellbeing, which the women of Happy Valley-Goose Bay felt was very important to illustrate.

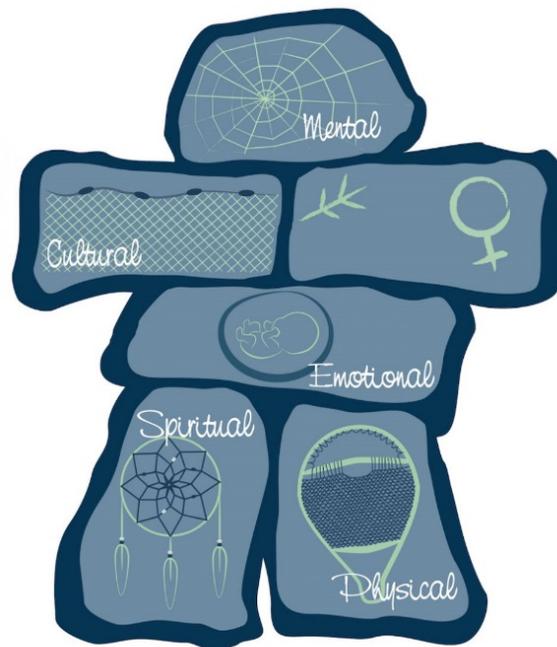


Image developed by community researchers in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, and digitized by Monica Peach

The base of the framework is an Inuksuk (inukshuk), which represents:

- Balance (all stones of our inukshuk must fit together to form a stable structure)
- Uniqueness (every inukshuk is different)
- Direction (we all benefit from collective guidance)
- Connection to the earth (the land nourishes and roots the people of HV-GB in many ways)
- The inuksuk represents everything vital to the wellbeing of women in HV-GB (and likely to people of all genders everywhere).

Within the stones of the inuksuk are five webs, or nets – the fishing net, the spider’s web, the womb, the snowshoe, and the dream catcher – which are symbolic to the women of HV-GB for many reasons:

- In the development of this CVI, we started our work together by building a web between participants. The connections in our web helped us do our work.

- Like women’s wellbeing, a net is best when all of its connections are strong. Also, a net doesn’t work properly if it has holes in it, or if strands of the net are missing.
- Social support, which comes from connections to others (networks), is essential to wellbeing. It is also important to recognize that networks full of connections that we feel trapped by can hurt our wellbeing. Nets are mostly positive but they can sometimes be negative.
- Each of the webs or nets is a component of our collective identity – as women, as Indigenous people, as fishers, as people connected to the land.
- Net(work)s help to connect us to the things that we need – people, support, services.
- Webs are strong – like women.
- Nets represent safety – they can catch you; and danger – you can get caught in them.
- Nets hold things – all of these nets or webs hold things that are important to wellbeing.

Creating the CVI

The Community Vitality Index project began in the fall of 2012. The first step in creating the CVI for Happy Valley – Goose Bay (HV-GB) was to meet with key people and women in the community to affirm support for the development of a CVI. As recommended by the Joint Review Panel for the Lower Churchill Hydroelectric Dam, the process was to be participatory—meaning women from HV-GB would be actively involved in creating and testing the CVI.

The Initial Framework

The first community workshops were held in Spring 2013 in Happy Valley – Goose Bay (HV-GB) and at the College of the North Atlantic. 26 women participated in brainstorming and discussions that contributed to the initial framework for the Community Vitality Index (CVI). The objective was to capture what wellbeing means to women in HV-GB, using their words, concepts, and ideas.

Elements of this initial framework were then tested at the Labrador Wellness Annual General Meeting in April 2013.

Creating a Survey

Based on the feedback received on the initial framework, researcher Leah Levac and a student research assistant created a draft survey. The questions included in the survey were drawn from both literature on wellbeing as well as suggestions from the women who participated in the workshops.

The overall intent was to measure women’s sense of wellbeing in each of the areas identified in the Wellbeing Framework. The experiences of wellbeing (or lack of wellbeing) shared by the women in the workshops helped with choosing questions that would be relevant to diverse women’s situations in HV-GB. Questions were also reviewed to ensure the language used was reflective of the language used by the women themselves.

Piloting the Survey

During Winter 2013 and early Spring 2014, women who participated in the CVI development workshops piloted the draft wellbeing survey with other women they knew in the community. The survey was finalized based on the feedback we received.

Designing a Wellbeing Framework

In Winter 2013, graphic designers from Nunatsiavut developed an image for the Wellbeing Framework based on drawings and ideas shared during the community workshops.

Launching the CVI

The CVI was officially launched in Happy Valley-Goose Bay on June 12, 2014. The event included an overview of the CVI process and a discussion about how the community can work to move the CVI project forward in coming months.

Understanding Community Data in Community

Leah Levac, Associate Professor, Political Science & Co-Lead, Displacement, Emergence and Change Cluster, Live Work Well Centre, University of Guelph

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Critical Community Engaged Scholarship and the Importance of Collaborative Analysis

Since 2012, Leah has been working with community organizations, academic researchers, and Indigenous governments and organizations on a community-engaged

project to better understand northern and Inuit women's² wellbeing in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador. In 2019, Laura joined the team to facilitate a series of community workshops designed to understand community-developed data in collaboration with members of the community.³

Community engaged scholarship (CES) is a theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical orientation to teaching and research grounded in a “partnership and a two-way exchange of information, ideas, and expertise as well as shared decision-making” (Jordan 2007, 3). *Critical* community engaged approaches build on these commitments by foregrounding power relations in the research process. In this way, CCES considers how intersecting forms of oppression and privilege lead to the elevation of certain voices and erasure of others, and how this needs to be taken into consideration throughout all dimensions of research, from question development through to results dissemination. The principles underlying CCES by Gordon da Cruz (2017)⁴ include:

- An explicit focus on social justice, in terms of research process and research outputs
- A reciprocal relationship between researcher and community partners that includes space for reflection, pause, and revisiting choices
- A commitment to getting research “off the shelf”: the creation of research outputs that are usable by community members and organizations contribute to community goals

Often community-engaged research processes rely on academic researchers to analyse and interpret data. In our view, trying to understand community data in collaboration with members of the community is a necessary step in living up to the principles of CCES outlined above because it centres community knowledge in the process of making meaning from the data.

Project Background

Our relationship in Happy Valley-Goose Bay was born from an earlier partnership, called FemNorthNet, a multi-year participatory action research project that investigated the impacts of economic restructuring in the north of present-day Canada using the themes of community infrastructure & economic development, community engagement & governance, community inclusions & exclusions, and migration, immigration & mobility.

² Throughout this collaboration, we have invited anyone who self-identifies as a woman to participate. Our aim has been to be trans-inclusive, and to welcome folks who identify as two spirit and/or non-binary.

³ We would like to thank our collaborators in Labrador for providing comments on earlier versions of the textual and visual elements of this post, particularly Petrina Beals, Tracey Doherty, and Patti Maloney. We also would like to thank project co-investigator, Dr. Sylvia Moore, for her feedback on earlier drafts.

⁴ Gordon da Cruz, C. (2017). Critical community-engaged scholarship: Communities and universities striving for racial justice. *Peabody Journal of Education*. 92: 363-384

Since the beginning of our new collaboration in 2012, the goal has been to better understand how northern and Indigenous women define wellbeing, and to find ways to gather information about their wellbeing and how it's changing, especially in the context of northern urbanization brought on by major resource extraction and development projects.

In the case of Happy Valley-Goose Bay, the resource project that prompted the need for data was the development of the hydroelectric dam at Muskrat Falls on the Lower Churchill river. The joint review panel that conducted the environmental assessment of the project found “the potential for adverse effects...on women and children in Happy Valley-Goose Bay...” (Report of the Joint Review Panel, 2011, p. xxviii). They determined that a social effect needs assessment, including a participatory research component, was important for monitoring and providing recommendations to mitigate negative gendered consequences (Ibid.). The government of Newfoundland and Labrador did not follow this recommendation.

Stages of the Collaboration

Our work together responded to this gap, that persists to this day. Our collaboration can be broken into six non-linear phases.

Phase 1 (2012-13): Planning. Designing a CCES collaboration is a critical stage in the process. We needed to review literature about related topics (northern women's wellbeing and political engagement, for instance), but we also needed to make sure that our work would serve women in the community. Things we did to try and stay true to the purpose of the collaboration included:

- creating a steering committee of local women who could help set the direction and questions guiding the collaboration (this group has changed membership but has been in place since we started and still exists; one of its main purposes is to make important project decisions);
- developing an ethics protocol that treated community collaborators as research partners rather than research participants; and
- collectively designing Phase 2.

Phase 2 (2013-15): Understanding Wellbeing and Collaborative Tool Development. The centrepiece of this phase was two community workshops with 26 women in the community to develop definitions and images of, and factors affecting, wellbeing. We refined these ideas through years of discussions and testing ideas with other women in the community, such as at the Labrador Wellness AGM in 2013. Through this process, we created a wellbeing framework to represent dimensions of women's wellbeing. The framework includes a definition of wellbeing developed through the community workshops and other events, a description of diverse women in HV-GB, stories about the wellbeing of women in the community, and a survey that asks questions about wellbeing in five areas: (1) spiritual wellbeing; (2) emotional wellbeing; (3) mental & intellectual wellbeing; (4) physical wellbeing; and (5) cultural wellbeing.

Phase 3 (2016-17): Data Collection Pilot. After developing the survey, women involved in the collaboration were paid to pilot and work on revising the survey to make it more user friendly. A big challenge was – and continues to be – the length of the survey. Some community members thought it was too long and would discourage people from responding. Others thought making it shorter would undermine our ability to understand the complexity of northern and Inuit women’s wellbeing. Together, we also developed a plan for distributing the survey electronically and in hard copy to make the survey accessible to as many people as possible.

Phase 4 (2018): Data Collection. To implement the survey, we hired community research assistants to support both online and face-to-face survey implementation. They took the survey to community organizations (e.g., women’s shelters, the friendship centre) to encourage wide participation, especially of those who are often invisible in community data. In the end 127 people who self-identified as women, two spirit people, or non-binary completed the survey.

Phase 5 (2019-20): Collaborative Data Analysis. After the survey closed, we created a draft report of some results, but the story the report was telling didn’t seem quite right. Women were concerned that by offering a broad summary and overview of the data, important complexities were being overlooked or masked, which had the unintentional effect of overshadowing the unique experiences of often-invisible community members.

We decided that we needed a more extensive approach to analyzing the data with the community. This included hosting two sharing circles with the Labrador Land Protectors. During these sharing circles, we talked about some of the survey data, including whether women who responded thought the community was developing in a sustainable way, and what women thought about how their community had changed since the start of the Muskrat Falls project. We also created a partnership with the Labrador Friendship Centre (LFC) to further reflect on the data with community members. Our partners at the LFC suggested combining data analysis with a crafting component. In Fall 2019, in conjunction with a sealskin purse-making workshop, we hosted a series of discussions about the data with the women’s circle at the LFC. A volunteer committee of people who attend the women’s circle supported the logistics of the workshop and received an honourarium to recognize their time and knowledge. We created overviews of findings related to three different themes that the women’s circle coordinator and other community members helped identify: 1. Caregiving and Supportive Services; 2. Spiritual, Cultural, and Physical Wellbeing; and 3. Younger Women, Older Women, and Wrap-Up. We discussed each theme (and the related data) on a different evening. We covered childcare expenses for participating women and asked questions about the overviews such as, “Did any findings surprise you?” and “What would you like decision-makers in your community to know about this data?”. Local women who are team members facilitated the discussions and took notes. These notes are now being used to expand and clarify our understanding of the survey data by giving it more context.

Phase 6 (2020-21): Results Reporting. We are now in the process of sharing the data results, including their interpretation with the community, more widely. We will host

another series of workshops with the Labrador Friendship Centre in the Fall of 2020, or as soon as in-person workshops are allowed again. We will also deliver a series of data-based webinars for healthcare professionals in the Labrador-Grenfell Regional Health Authority, also in the Fall of 2020. One of the strategies Laura developed for communicating data in the webinar was to create composite stories. Composite stories are a narrative approach where data from several respondents is combined into a story to highlight common themes (Willis, 2018).⁵ The benefit of composite stories is that they enable complex representations of data without sacrificing anonymity (Ibid). In keeping with CCES principles, composite stories can elevate voices and perspectives erased in summaries of data, and also aid in the creation of research outputs that are useful for community members. In the spring of 2021, there will be a community forum to share the results more widely using composite stories, mini-reports, infographics, and other data-sharing approaches.

Learning As We Go

While we are still thinking through the process of community data analysis, we can point to some key areas of consideration that are important for upholding the principles of CCES, especially through the practice of collaborative data analysis.

- **Timeframe:** CCES already operates according to longer timelines than many forms of academic research, to build in time for meaningful collaboration, and continuous re-orientation of projects to meet evolving needs. Collaborative data analysis adds additional time between data gathering and presenting the final results. On the one hand, this provides an important opportunity to reflect on the data, which we believe benefits the creation of meaningful and accurate research outputs. On the other hand, extended timeframes between data collection and research outputs may be frustrating for academics and partners who are eager to use these for research and advocacy, and who may fear that the hard work of the team has been forgotten.
- **Relationship building:** Something that surprised us was that many of the women who participated in the collaborative data analysis were unaware of the survey. As such, the collaborative data analysis also served as a form of creative knowledge mobilization for the project and built new relationships with community members.
- **Flexibility in approach:** Being able to leave the form, content and details of the workshops in community members' hands was helpful for ensuring strong participation. It also meant that the workshops contributed to the objective of the partner – the Labrador Friendship Centre – to offer women in Labrador meaningful and culturally appropriate opportunities for engagement. This flexibility means that other community-data analysis processes may be quite different in form.

⁵ Willis, R. (2018). The use of composite narratives to present interview findings. *Qualitative Research*. 19(4): 471-480.

- Complexity: “Community” is never a monolithic entity, and different women, two-spirit and non-binary folks have had different opinions on the data over time, often formed by diverse and contradictory lived experiences. At the same time, common themes and areas of concern have often emerged. A challenge moving forward remains providing research outputs that say something about the data, without flattening the complexity of the results.

We are eager to share our collaborative analysis results in the Fall of 2020 and through the winter and spring of 2021. These results will be necessarily messy, but true to the commitments of CCES, including that they will reflect – to the best of our abilities – the importance of creating useable research outputs that have been developed through a respectful and reciprocal process involving community and university researchers, every step of the way.

This blogpost was originally published on November 24th, 2020, [you can find it here.](#)



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