

# Engagement of Unrepresented Voices

## Feedback and Recommendations

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## Introduction

Social Development Centre Waterloo Region is a social planning and social justice organization dedicated to supporting lived experience experts in all aspects of social, economic, and political life in Waterloo Region. For the [collection and sense-making of the 2018 Wellbeing WR survey data](#), we mobilized five community connectors with lived experience. This yielded 144 responses from populations hard to reach (homeless and precariously housed, low-no income, persons with disabilities, immigrants, etc.) whose voices remained underrepresented. We shared several recommendations to improve future region-wide surveys in terms of collecting relevant data to inform service delivery to marginalized populations, funding and support for the community connectors who worked without pay, increased compensation for low/no income participants, as well as adequate funding of convening and coordinating organizations such as the Social Development Centre Waterloo Region (SDCWR).

At that time, the most significant concerns regarding the process expressed by the community connectors were the following:

- The use of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) survey does not allow for adequate representation of the life experiences of the most underserved groups needing the greatest focus and investment (income supports inadequacy, housing unaffordability, inaccessible transportation and health services, food insecurity, lack of belonging, criminalization, inadequate definitions of work/labor that render their daily struggles to ensure livelihoods invisible and not valued, etc.)
- Lack of clarity and follow-up on how the data collected about the needs of the most marginalized will be used and how the impact on the underrepresented populations will be monitored and measured based on the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the underserved and underrepresented populations.

With the onset of the 2022 (Mini) Wellbeing Survey process, SDCWR joined other partner organizations in mobilizing their staff and community connectors to take part in:

- planning of the engagement strategies for the hardest to reach populations
- improving the CIW tool to better reflect more underrepresented demographics
- participating in the Advisory Group and supporting lived experience members in the process.

Most of the 2018 recommendations regarding the engagement approach, compensation for community connectors and participants in the survey, and funding for the SDCWR role were adopted in 2022.

However, the questions about the use and impact of the data on the service delivery across the municipalities could not be answered due to the lack of data collection and the monitoring process.

The Advisory Group that worked on making the survey shorter, more accessible and with more relevant questions added for underrepresented groups, were disappointed in the results, despite having spent eight weeks on the process.

In October and November 2022, ten SDCWR community connectors collected over 280 surveys, reaching out to low income, homeless and precariously housed, persons with disabilities, BIPOC, immigrants, seniors and youth.

One of the points in the agreement in 2022 was that the qualitative data (comments and feedback from participants and community connectors) collected by SDCWR would find its way into the broader data analysis, or that survey data collected by SDCWR team would be shared back with SDCWR for further analysis.

SDCWR offers this report to further the conversations on the remaining questions:

- How will the recommendations put forward by the community connectors be followed up regarding the need to continue culturally and socially appropriate engagement with unrepresented voices in order to meaningfully inform improvements in services?
- How will both the quantitative and qualitative data be used in dissemination of the results, and specifically, how will the data be shared with service providers and municipalities?
- How will the impact of the data in general be tracked to ensure improvement of supports and services for the most underserved populations, and shared with these underserved populations?

# Feedback Gathering Process

The feedback gathering process from the community connectors working with homeless, Indigenous youth, seniors, persons with disabilities, low/no income residents, immigrants, etc. started at the outset of the survey administration process.

First, we held sessions to talk to community connectors about the survey, its purpose, contents, engagement and feedback recording as they support people filling in the survey. As the connectors took the survey themselves, we asked them to share their experiences. Some decided not to administer the survey as it does not speak to their life situations or the people in their communities. Others decided to administer the survey, but shared critical remarks regarding the questions. The connectors who agreed to administer the survey in their networks were doing so in order to ensure the presence of unrepresented voices, for the learning working in the team or for the compensation offered, and with expectations that the report SDCWR would submit to the Wellbeing WR and regional staff might result in improvement of similar information gathering and engagement initiatives in the future.

Second, we instructed the connectors to record the feedback they received as they administered the surveys. In many cases, residents needed assistance in understanding the questions, terms used, scales to fill in, and how the survey would be used. As they read and considered the questions, people shared comments, impressions, and thoughts about the survey, their life situation, and the engagement process. The connectors took notepads or took notes on their cell phones as they assisted their peers. Those records provided us with specific insights shared by the participants.

Third, once the survey was closed, we hosted a group feedback session as well as one on one sessions with the connectors and recorded their overall impressions, thoughts and recommendations. In the feedback sessions with the community connectors, we asked:

1. What was the feedback on the content of the survey?
2. What were the comments regarding the engagement of the community?
3. What could be the next steps in making sure the underrepresented voices are heard and acted upon?

# What we found

The major themes expressed by the participants and community connectors:

- 1. CIW survey does not reflect the lived experience of the marginalised communities.**
  - a) It does not have an equity lens
  - b) The focus remains on middle class, educated and employed in the traditional job market, the 'general population'
  - c) Questions have a re-traumatizing impact on individuals from marginalized groups
- 2. Surveys are not the appropriate tool to collect information from underserved and marginalized populations**
  - a) They do not capture relevant information
  - b) They are not accessible
  - c) They don't ask for solutions and are not empowering
  - d) There are alternative ways to gather data
- 3. 'Well-being' has to be defined by the communities**
- 4. Sense-making needed for particular demographics and particular applications**

# 1. Survey questions did not reflect the lived experience of the marginalized communities.

Engaging with lived experience of people requires the recognition that specific social issues and their intersectionality have had a direct and traumatic impact. The overall feel of the Survey has been that there was a distinct class bias in the questions and that the tool is outdated in a number of ways (examples given in questions not representative of broader segments of the society, not aligned with the equity and anti-oppression lens that is currently used in data gathering).

## a) Not having equity lens

Questions were phrased in a manner that does not address barriers and realities of underserved populations that were disproportionately impacted during the pandemic such as low income, BIPOC and immigrant populations. By not attending to the current requirements for data segregation and application of the equity lens to all service related data gathering, much remains lost or not captured by the Canadian Index of Wellbeing.

"...Those who framed the questions did not know we exist..." (Community connector, Homeless People)

"...questions did not represent the demographics that were surveyed..."(Community connector, Indigenous People and Senior Citizens)

"...questions on living standards made members laugh so much, they were like, we are homeless, we don't have jobs...people wanted to cancel the whole surveys because it did not speak to them...questions were ridiculous" (Community connector, Tent City)

"...questions had no relevance to people's problems..." (Community connector (Community connector, Immigrant African populations)

"...our world has a lot of greys, and the questions were expecting black and white responses..." (Community connector, unsheltered homeless)

"There is no option [to select] for homeless people. (participants)

**b) The focus remains on middle class, educated and employed in the traditional job market, the 'general population'**

**According to the community connectors and participants, the questions were more relevant for middle-class, white, privileged, educated people with jobs. For instance: questions on leisure and culture, education, employment, democratic participation and living standards were felt to be "highly inappropriate". Class disparities and social and economic implications are not recognized, nor is the value of unpaid and reproduction labour in both family and social contexts, or the exploitative and contractual nature of work with no security or safety.**

"It's not open to people who may fall short on the things that others may have.

The questions don't really hold any weight in what is going on in the world we live in

They didn't feel like...how people are or how the community is.

...people there is no options for Black African or other. " (participants)

"q19 – Which one of the following forms of transportation is the main way you get around the community: "Motor cycle, sold it after riding for 12 years." ... to calm the anguish in his eyes. yup – he regrets it."

"q20a – which one of the following categories best describes the type of household in which you live? "adults sharing accommodation; mice. I move. They pay in cheese. so its working this week."

"q21\*\* to be sure that we know in which part of waterloo region you live, please put in the six-digit postal code for your home: "ODSP is home address for me. I am embarrassed. I am displaced. disconnected this badly."

"q8 is still about paid regular jobs, no Sanguen logic". [people with lived experience volunteering for honoraria, collecting empty bottles and cans, advocating for others, etc. being work].  
(participants)

"I was excluded from that whole section of employment and it didn't even ask if I wanted to be employed." (community connectors)

“The other thing though, is we don't talk about what employment is. Drug dealing is employment. Like you are selling a product for money. You have a boss that you pay. Sex work, which bought our tents, is a form of employment. But you do the same thing in the factory, right? You have, like the hyper and extra exploited people who have to sell proper. People have to go to the beer store to collect beer bottles. So when we talk about employment, we should like, the definitions of employment shouldn't be so narrow that they're like legal definitions, or not like doing real recycling, which is growing through peoples recycling box and taking stuff.” (community connector, unsheltered populations)

“...the survey has identified very legal definitions of "work". Many of us are involved with other kinds of work like sex work, selling pot, seasonal farm labor, etc., that is not reflected in the survey questions...”(Community Connectors).

“...I get money from ODSP, but when I get some paid job, ODSP takes away the money...such situations are not represented in the survey questions...” (participant).

“...Questions on exercise were harsh...I want to swim, but I have no money to pay for entrance at the pool, but there was nothing in the Survey that asked me about it...” (participant)

### **c) Questions having re-traumatizing impact on marginalized groups**

**Also, in many ways the questions brought unease and erasure of the experiences of low/no income residents, persons with disabilities and homeless populations, particularly for members of BIPOC communities. A number of partner organizations did not want to collaborate and to open their doors to the survey explaining that the questions would be triggering or re-traumatizing for the people they serve.**

“I'm experiencing homelessness and some of the questions are very harsh.” (participant)

“And they're like, we were homeless! So half the stuff we're checking off is like, negative, negative, negative, negative, negative, negative, negative.” (Community connector, homeless populations)

“But I have to say that, um, there there were places where we wanted to do the survey, and we were told that it's not appropriate for their marginalized populations, and that they would not do it because it will trigger the people who are in those places, because they would feel lesser than.”  
(Community connectors)

“...the questions triggered people. They felt lesser than after responding to the questions on jobs and living standards...they walked away from the Survey feeling worse than when they came in...the tone of the questions was very inappropriate...” (Community connector, low income and homeless people)

“...So when we want to class analysis of Canada, we start with the hyper exploited, then we go to be exploited, then we go to, like, the middle strata, which is a unionized, you know what I mean...?” (community connector)

“...So they're [social assistance] paying me just to get that money back. So I'm doing basically the whole month's worth of work for 200 bucks, which is not going to pay my bills and those are things that are not reflected in the survey...” (community connector)

## **2. Surveys are not the right tool to use**

**A set of questions were asked of the community connectors to get a sense of the overall engagement process in collecting responses to the survey question. More specifically, if the process used, even with additional collection of participants' comments, is creating a knowledge base that will provide institutions, governments and service providers with clear directions to act and improve lives of underserved communities.**

**A couple of connectors thought that “collecting survey responses is better than not collecting them”, but the overall response from the community connectors is that other methods need to be used for underserved populations whose experiences are not considered, who lack trust in institutions due to exclusion and trauma, and who create knowledge in different, more relational, less formal and culturally diverse ways.**



“Do more than asking questions in a survey. Come into the community to ask questions and learn the "STORIES" behind these answers.” (Community Connector, Immigrant and low income populations)

“...I understand why you're conducting the survey, but I'm more eager to see what you do with the results/findings. ... Do something about the housing crisis you've known for the past 20 years.” (Community connector, immigrant and low income populations)

“...Its not open to people who may fall short on the things that others may have...”

The survey was deemed not appropriate tool for a number of reasons:

**a) Not capturing relevant information**

**The disconnect with the lives of the underserved communities required them to bend and distort their answers so they fit into the available options. Many connectors agree that the answers provided are actually of no value because misinterpretations and false or forced analogies and choices rendered most of the answers inaccurate and not usable.**

**The connectors also see the ‘opinion’ and ‘perception’ questions to be directly rendering lived experiences of marginalized groups invisible.**

...“It is more like a marketing tool to blend in all together and say we are doing well when we truly are not!” (community connector, low income and homeless populations)

“...in the case of the Survey, the indicators identified in the survey questions had little relevance to the people. So, people were trying hard to "make the survey" work, but that is not useful, right?... For instance, questions on recreation and environment were not relevant to the communities...” (Community Connector, Indigenous People and Senior Citizens')

“...I think what we should do is we should take the results of this survey, compress the results of this survey, and take the survey back. Because, we've all noticed these mistakes. People have written mistakes, or people have told us mistakes. People wanted to cancel out whole pages. ... So let's go through the survey and create another survey which will give us a chance to build our

base... have a better understanding of what is going on, so we know where to apply pressure. ”

(community connector Tent City)

“What do you mean how long I walk, I walk everywhere, every day.” (participant)

“The thing about triggering is that most of us are triggered by everything. Let's see, how was my day today? I woke up to go steal food to bring to the [people]. I get picked up right away, and I'm like, come on, come on, blah, blah, blah, let me go. I go to the pharmacy. I can't pay for my meds. The pharmacist tells me to go pan out in front, and then he calls the police. So I went to the food kitchen. They ask me my name – [as if they do not know me]. They had the bags of food ready for me. It's already been half the day. People haven't eaten yet. People are staying in their tents, freezing, waiting to \*\* eat. The night before, a male and a female, both white with guns, go from tent to tent to tent... And then there was sexual assault of someone. How are we going to deal with sexual assault... You have to deal with fucked up shit.” (community connector)

#### **b ) Not Accessible**

**First, almost unanimously, everyone was concerned about the overbearing length of the Survey for people who suffer from trauma, exhaustion, health and mental health illness, are low literacy, live with brain injury and cognitive disabilities, seniors, etc. The community connectors were of the opinion that the survey was not meant to be accessible to everyone, but rather to the higher educated, highly literate, higher socio-economic demographics.**

"...it took us 40 minutes to 1 hour to complete one survey..." (Community Connectors)

"...someone attacked me for calling it a mini survey..." (Community Connector, Immigrant populations)

"...we were at the senior housing community, and we ended up spending 6 hours on the survey with them..." (Community Connector, low income seniors).

"Font is too small. its very hard to read. Poor people don't have 20x20 vision." (community connector, seniors)

"...the design of the Survey was culturally insensitive. English is not the first language of many community members. Many read from right to left. They felt answers to the right are in the category of "Never" and to the left are "all the time. This might have skewed the responses..." (Community Connector)

"...I spoke to an indigenous woman, and they needed the survey to be read to them..." (Community Connector)

"... Survey was meant for able-bodied people. it had a very mainstream perspective..." (Community Connector, Indigenous People and Seniors).

"...community members of the A better tent city needed to be told that they werevolunteering when they were helping out with dishes or helping in meal preparations...." (Community Connector, A Better Tent City).

"...questions on the idea of the community needed to be explained to the community members..." (Community Connector).

"...And some of them, needed an explanation, like, translated to certain questions. eg: the idea all about community, how much they involve in the community, and something like that. And even when you ask questions, there are more sub questions. So it is not like a yes or no, like more details about if you have this, you have to go this this way, and you make details. They asked for many details..." (Community Connector Immigrant, African populations)

"...My wife is from a different culture, and she reads from, right to left. And so the questions are from left to right, and a good answer is on the left. I had to explain to her that the good answer, if

a high answer, a positive answer, would be on the right, not the left..." (community connector, persons with disabilities)

### **c) Not asking for solutions**

**Complex surveys do not allow much space for open ended questions, and in this case despite the suggestions made by the Advisory Group, open comment fields were not included after each domain. Allowing for comments and suggestions would have provided an opportunity to allow respondents to better describe their lives or to offer suggestions. It gives a sense of agency to be allowed to problem solve around challenges that impact our lives.**

"...Passion and commitment to solutions... not only focusing on problems. This is how community is. With a new part and a perspective they did not consider." (community connectors)

"...Being in the space with all the people. Good meeting with the region [staff] trying to make a change." (community connector)

"...Region using those points [as is is not enough]. Our speakers [advocates] are good if we failed it would be failure of the systems – meaning, we pushed in the right direction. "

"...So this is what we do in our community. There are a lot of people who need this kind of community to come together, to feel like belonging like most of the people in this community is my identity. They come from different countries. They have issues. You don't tell me there is no drug abuse and all this. That is all this involved, but it still, at least they know where to go. The guidance. And by doing that, we are helping families. Could they find it in a certain spot, and it doesn't have to break their pride or whatever, they can feel okay, because this is like home for them, you know what I mean? So this is one of the projects, and we started last year, almost now, seven months, and go fine. And it's really big now. And everybody talks about it because it starts from two people's ideas, and it becomes now known. In the beginning, when I suggested meeting with the city people and talking to them about why we don't create this kind of stuff so people can come when they need." (Community connector, immigrant families)

"...We are giving people food. We are giving people homes. We are giving people that If these steps do not work, then we put people in a place where they act. Well. If these steps do not work, what works? by getting people to speak to their experience: not only are we aiming at Google and this and this and at the people's hearts, we're actually looking at people's experiences, people's experiments, and organizations sitting together." (Community connectors, Tent City)

"...So I think that's that's the main thing, because when people are not sheltered, there's nothing about belonging." (community connector, low-income immigrants)

#### **d) Alternative ways to gather data**

**The community connectors were vocal in offering suggestions how the information gathering process could be improved, in particular for populations who do not do well on surveys, who develop their thoughts through interaction, and who respond best when in the realm of their particular cultural code.**

"...Because our problems are much more complicated than just, like, ... These check boxes mean nothing, like, come and actually talk to the people." (Community connector, unsheltered populations)

"...Usually they sit together and they can discuss the questions. And it becomes not like a survey, it becomes like a discussion. Because when they bring the questions and then everybody talks about it, people have ideas, if they misunderstand the meaning of the question, they can get it through the talk, through the conversation." (community connector, immigrant populations)

"...I have a very different idea of community than what a lot of people would and a lot of homeless people and drug users would like to be offended. In the past twelve months, have you experienced any negative impact because of the following drug use behavior? Vulnerable people that are still alive because they are using illegal drugs, and just like a million different things that aren't the way they're supposed to be. Like when we're talking about the neighborhood, the quality of the neighborhood, where it's like, I just think, fine, if we don't want to do another survey, let's do focus groups, where we have people who talk to people, and things are not black

and white, since they're not in a box, but allows for human diversity.” (Community connector, Tent City)

### **3. Well-Being has to be Defined by the Communities**

**There was a consensus among the community connectors that the idea of well-being has been pre-defined by the survey makers based on socio-economic status rather than on the development of the communities. This measure of wellness seemed limited to the participants and they struggled with the view of well-being that the questions were offering.**

“...We want to do it with our questions, with our questions. ...The question of well being, maybe be far more interesting for communities to define for themselves.” (community connectors, homeless populations)

“...I think I'm very interested to think about this whole question is about well-being, right? And it's defined as is, by a provincial, federal body, and then it's coming down to us. So rather than having defined by this institute at the university and then being funnel down across the country down to us, because that definition will include going to the opera, it was already defined.” (community connector, unsheltered populations)

“ [the survey] made me think about my wellbeing like never before.” (community connector)

“...A qualitative survey process rather than a quantitative process, to help communities define well being within those communities. And then have the advocacy piece be around, like, how does that transform that into.” (community connector, Indigenous and senior populations)

"...it appears that their wellness framework was based on assumptions about people's financial security and that's what they were measuring...not sure what the survey was trying to learn or if it was trying to promote Maclean magazine rating..." (Community Connector, Indigenous People and Senior Citizens')

"...if people are not going to be sheltered, there's nothing about belonging or well-being for them...." (Community Connectors,)

"...ODSP is my home address. I am embarrassed. There was such a big disconnect in my life and what they are trying to get from me through the Survey..." (participant)

"...Thinking about the community as a place where to live very strongly agreed, very strongly disagreed to disagree, blah, blah, blah, blah. There's no definition of what community is. So are we talking about the community of Kitchen Waterloo? Are we talking about our activist groups? Are we talking about our church communities? Which community I'm talking about specifically. This is where the people meet and discuss more." (community connectors)

"...What I mean by that is people didn't answer some questions. There were reasons for that, so we need to find out what those reasons were. ...But yeah, we can have groups of ten people have discussions, take these ideas, bring them to the other groups, and have discussions... But what is it that we want from this particular process that will supposedly inform municipal strategies and services? So if we find out from people what answer they don't know, that might be significant to ask, to find out the questions that people say they don't know, because that might be something to which they could be educated about... It might be significant to find out the ones that don't know?" (Community connector, Tent City)

"...But from what I have figured out while interacting with Heather and by listening to you guys, I have often found the idea of, um, individual stories very evocative. Waterloo has been talking a lot about lived experience, and I think somewhere, if we can bring those stories out about what, how people define communities, what is well being for them, that might be a channel for us to open up more conversation." (community conversation, homeless and low income populations)

## 4. Sense-making and use of the data

**The community connectors conveyed a lot of scepticism regarding how the data can or will be used. We never received the answers how data on marginalized group was used after the 2018 survey, and the lack of information about the use of the data collected this year is of great concern to the community connectors who put in the work and engaged their communities in ways that in their view were extractive and exploitative if there is no follow up. Regional Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan implementation was identified as one of the structures where the conversations need to continue and which must involve funding for upstream community-based solutions. Housing and homelessness initiatives were named as the priority for service and policy improvements across the regional municipalities.**

“...I understand why you're conducting the survey, but I'm more eager to see what you do with the results/findings. ... Do something about the housing crisis you've known for the past 20 years.”

(Community connector, immigrant and low income populations)

“...Need better and more mental health services in general. ...All of the places I go into are not wheel chair accessible. Sometimes there is a small step...There should be a ramp that people can put out to help people who are in wheelchairs (portable) or walkers for elderly people.You should fix the sidewalk when there is a hole. The wheels get caught and they can break and it costs a lot of money to fix.” (participants with disabilities)

“..Yeah, well, we can recommend or ask for things. That's for sure. We don't know how will it happen, or how that may happen.” (community connector, low income populations)

“...And also someone who has, like been in higher education and had to follow certain standards of data collection, was really concerned about the quality of the data, and therefore was very concerned with what this data was gonna be used for. I felt that quality was gonna be so poor, like this, that this survey would be looked at by governments or by other agencies as a reliable source of data. This was really concerning to me, and so I did not want to put people through that process and to participate in that because, it just felt like a very unethical approach to data gathering.” (community connector, Indigenous and senior populations).



“...Then people are like, okay I get why you're doing the survey, but what's really coming out of this? You are giving me a Tim Horton's card to fill the survey. But then what are you actually trying to do? Can we expect any improvements in our, life and living circles? I was honest. I said, probably not. I said, we'd fight for it.”(community connectors, low income immigrant populations)

“...Where do we go next? So we will have those surveys sent to us, we will have the answers. But then coming back, what have we really learned, because of the quality of questions and how reflective they are, and so on?”

“...My question would be, we just did the pit count a year ago, and nothing really changed. Yes, we heard feedback with other feedback, nothing happened. So then we do this one, right?”  
(community connector, homeless and low income populations)

## Recommendations

In order to address the repeated concerns and the shortcomings validated in the 2022 process about the use of the CIW as a tool to identify service gaps, and to inform future delivery, the following steps are recommended:

1. Instead of using tools such as the CIW that conform to national contexts, use tools that are more appropriate and contextual for local communities. Also, tools such as the CIW that have been used over long periods of time have become outdated and non-representative of the equity requirements that are evolving rapidly in the aftermath of the pandemic.
2. Genuinely involve different demographics, especially underrepresented and underserved groups, in the development of questions that assess their wellbeing in more appropriate ways. Allow these groups to develop specific sets of questions for particular underrepresented segments of the marginalized population and to work through respective aspects of accessibility of the questions and the engagement process.
3. Use more qualitative methods of collecting data through the community connectors from underrepresented and marginalized populations, enabling them to share values, experiences and cultural code with vulnerable participants.
4. Build up communities through the survey collection process to inform and educate but equally to build their capacity to solve the problems unique to their socio-economic positionality, cultural background, health and mental health, abilities, and create structures to allow for direct advocacy and implementation of the solutions that they put forward.
5. Follow up in a collaborative way with community connectors and advocates to set plans for monitoring the impact of service delivery changes, and a method for monitoring the use of the data across service sectors.
6. Continue and expand the investment in community-driven supports such as the Upstream Fund and Indigenous self-determination and Reconciliation funding that allow for community-based and community-led supports and services.