

Invitation to SIGN-ON.

Recommendations for Foundational Changes that will Result in Long-lasting Improvements in Human Health and an Inclusive, Equitable and Resilient Canada

The Foundation for Resilient Health and the Canadian Network for Human Health and the Environment

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Goal:

To advocate for, and support changes in, Canadian laws, regulations and policies that will improve the foundations for resilient health.

The Foundation for Resilient Health and the Canadian Network for Human Health and the Environment are inviting Canadian NGOs to join us in a campaign for foundational changes to improve human health. This campaign has grown out of the Covid-19 pandemic that has demonstrated the ability of the world to work together to protect our health, has demonstrated the weaknesses in our systems that make us vulnerable and has stimulated global campaigns for change. We have undertaken consultations with Canadian experts in four key areas to define the priority changes needed to create the foundation for resilient health in Canada. This White Paper summarizes the recommendations and will be used as a basis for campaigns for the adoption of these recommendations. We are inviting like-minded organizations to support these recommendations by sign-on either to the whole document or to individual pillars.

The Four Pillars for recommended foundational changes for an inclusive, equitable and resilient Canada are:

**Public Health and
Wellness**

**Our Natural
Environment**

Climate Change

Economic Equality

About us

The Foundation for Resilient Health and the Canadian Network for Human Health and the Environment specialize in knowledge mobilization for issues related to the environmental and social determinants of health. We create science-based resources, engage Canadians and press for policy changes that will: 1.) reduce impacts from environmental hazards that have been caused by humans and 2.) increase Canadians' appreciation of, and time spent in, our natural environment. Our overall goal is to improve health resiliency by having a healthier environment. Our Network includes over 470 members including civil society organizations, researchers, healthcare professionals, policy makers and individuals who are interested in the connections between human health and the environment.

Since 2007, we have worked to increase co-operation between the Government of Canada and the environmental health NGO sector, to increase the opportunity for dialogue among all stakeholder groups in the network throughout the entire public policy process, to provide an NGO lens for policy development, and to provide information that is readily available and accessible.

In line with the Government of Canada's commitments to foster enhanced citizen participation and collaboration with stakeholders, we offer these recommendations for public policy reform. These evidence-based recommendations are reinforced by our hands-on experience in communities across the country.

The health of Canadians is inextricably linked to social policies and programs, economic drivers and the health of the natural environment. For the past century, inequity in financial resources and social and environmental determinants of health has been a root cause of poor health and has limited the wellbeing of Canadians. Creating equity will improve health and increase the resilience of Canadians.

Now is the time to engage Canadians and our federal government to make key foundational changes to increase human health resiliency. Increased resiliency will enable all Canadians to live better lives, contribute to our country, and be adaptable to future challenges.

Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility and vulnerabilities of our health and other social systems, our economy, and our relationship with our environment. For many decades the health and wellbeing of Canadians have been compromised by the pursuit of economic growth over social and environmental support systems. We have prioritized material prosperity over ecosystem balance. The pandemic has shown us that we can act in a unified collaborative way and it has mobilized the willingness for change around the world. Now is the time to make foundation changes that can result in greater equity and wellbeing. Canada can be a global leader in delivering on this vision.

Human health is reliant on supportive social, economic and environmental systems¹. We recognize the need for urgent Government action to lead our country out of the COVID-19 crisis, to make changes that will leave a lasting legacy for an inclusive, equitable and resilient Canada.

The following recommendations outline foundational changes for an inclusive, equitable and resilient Canada that will create sustainable health for generations to come. These recommended changes place equal value on social, environmental and financial outcomes, where wealth is shared among Canadians. Human health, our economy, and our environment are inextricably linked. For practical purposes, we present our recommendations under four separate pillars, recognizing that improvements in one pillar may result in positive outcomes in other pillars.

Public Health and Wellness

Canada is a world leader in many aspects of healthcare. However many aspects of our healthcare system are not equally accessible for all Canadians. Preventable diseases, hospitalizations, and healthcare costs are higher in First Nations and lower-income Canadian populationsⁱⁱ. Many Canadians cannot afford appropriate medications. To achieve resilient health and wellness in Canada we must provide the greatest help to the most vulnerable.

In order to promote true wellness, Canada must improve Federal/ Provincial and Territorial public health systems. Studies conducted in the United States provide evidence that investments in primary prevention and public health can reduce health care expenditures up to 27 timesⁱⁱⁱ over the long term. Prevention actions reduce the burden of chronic diseases. Chronic diseases cost Canada about \$190 billion per year in treatment and lost productivity^{iv}.

Disease prevention requires better coordination and funding to improve all of the Determinants of Health. Housing the homeless is foundational to resolving inequities in Canada, creating a net positive impact on individual wellbeing and reducing costs to the economy. The National Housing Strategy had a positive impact but more needs to be done^v. For the National Housing Strategy to be effective, it needs to prioritize preventing and ending homelessness^{vi}.

A clean environment is essential to human health. Both indoor and outdoor environments contain toxins. Over 14,000 Canadians die prematurely each year from air pollution, and associated healthcare costs exceed \$144 billion^{vii}. Although the Chemicals Management Program has been conducting a systemic review and implementing risk management plans, over 600 priority chemicals are currently on the market despite not being assessed for risk. Assessments do not effectively take into consideration vulnerable populations more susceptible to negative health effects, nor does it effectively consider “hazard” (versus “risk”) from toxins that have neuro-endocrine impacts even at low doses. Over 30% of federally owned properties are contaminated or suspected to be contaminated^{viii}. Reviews for pesticides do not adequately balance the risks with the true need for the pesticide and do not consider emerging literature for impacts on biodiversity.

Strategies for Strengthening Public Health and Wellness in Canada

Shift the focus to wellness and illness prevention:

- Engage all levels of government, researchers and civil society organizations in the delivery of a public health strategy to improve wellness in Canada.
- Urgent action is needed to increase quality of life to marginalized communities such as Indigenous peoples and the homeless, with a priority on the provision of basic needs including clean water, safe food, adequate housing and access to health care.
 - The Government of Canada should adopt a national goal of ending homelessness with clear and measurable outcomes, milestones and criteria.
- Implement Pharmacare
- All legislation that seeks to protect Canadians from environmental risk should protect vulnerable populations and promote the use of the Precautionary Principle. Specifically, the Chemicals Management Plan should create risk management plans that protect vulnerable populations and should manage toxins that have neuro-endocrine impacts based on the hazard of the chemical even when exposures are low. Adopt the recommendations to strengthen CEPA provided by the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development.

WELLNESS:
Shift the health care focus to wellness and illness prevention

Our Natural Environment

A healthy biodiverse environment is foundational to the resilient health of Canadians. Pollinators and soil microbiota are essential to our food supply. Wetlands cleanse water. Plants release oxygen. A biodiverse ecosystem is resilient against the effects of climate change^{ix}.

There is a growing body of evidence to support that spending time in nature benefits our mental and physical health, increasing energy, improving immunity, fitness, and weight control, increasing Vitamin D production, and reducing the risk of diabetes, heart attacks, and cancer^x. Spending time in nature has been shown to be as effective in treating mild cases of depression as taking an antidepressant^{xi}.

Biodiversity in Canada is at great risk, with just over 12% of our land and freshwater protected as natural areas^{xii}. Canada has committed to protect 17% of our land and water by the end of 2020. Protected areas, including parks, wildlife refuges, and marine protected areas will play an important role in the conservation of biodiversity by providing “refuge” or migration corridors for native species^{xiii} and help maintain biodiversity. It has been estimated that restoring 350 million hectares of degraded or deforested ecosystems by 2030 could sequester between one and three billion tonnes of CO₂ per year^{xiv}.

Strategies to Protect Nature and Improve Biodiversity

Protect our natural support system:

- Expand parks and protected areas to improve biodiversity and to improve the ecological foundations upon which human life is based. Implement Canada’s aspirational goal to conserve a quarter of our land and a quarter of our oceans by 2025, and 30% of each by 2030. Lead globally to protect key ecosystems in other countries.
- Strengthen biodiversity considerations in pollution prevention laws (for both chemical and material manufacturing), in the management of contaminated sites, in pesticide management, and in mining, forestry, aquaculture and agricultural practices.
- Strengthen the ethical lens in decision making, based on the questions: “Do we truly need this product that results in pollution?” “Is it of benefit to all of society, rather than only a benefit to the manufacturer and retailers?”
- Adopt the recommendations provided by the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development to strengthen CEPA.

**NATURAL ENVIRONMENT:
Protect our natural
support system**

Climate Change

While COVID-19 has been a significant public health crisis worldwide, climate change is the biggest threat to public health of the 21st Century^{xv}. The health of hundreds of millions of people around the world are already impacted by climate change, and ecosystems, upon which we all rely for food, housing, and clothing are being destroyed.

In Canada, climate change impacts are putting our health and safety at risk: we are experiencing flooding, sea level rise, more frequent and intense storms, longer heatwaves, forest fires, and more disease carrying insects^{xvi}.

Canada has one of the highest per capita CO₂ emissions rates in the world^{xvii}. Canada is falling short on commitments under the Paris Agreement. The oil and gas sector and transportation sector emit 26% and 25% of national greenhouse gas emissions, respectively^{xviii}. Canada is disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and is currently experiencing temperature increases that are twice as high as the global average.

Canadians need timely, meaningful, and impactful action on greenhouse gas emissions. The cost of actions to mitigate climate change will be far less than the predicted costs of climate impacts that could be avoided if action is taken now. Mitigation actions will create employment in the clean technology sectors.

Strategies for Immediate, Meaningful Action on Climate Change

Recognize the existential threat posed by climate change and take immediate action:

- Go beyond the targets agreed to under the Paris Agreement. Costs to mitigate climate change are far less than the cost of avoidable impacts^{xix}.
- Urgently develop and implement a transition plan that moves Canada away from the extraction and use of fossil fuels. Such a plan must include a just transition for those employed in the sector.
- Stop government subsidies for the fossil fuel industries and switch subsidies to renewable (wind, solar, geothermal) innovative and clean technologies. Transition all sources of power to clean sources. Limit the use of biomass for energy; an increased use of wood biomass for energy is not sustainable and produces air pollutants.
- Enable Canadian homeowners and business owners to lower their individual energy consumption by providing financial incentives for retrofitting existing (or building new) structures with the best available energy efficient technology. This technology is well known and creates jobs.
- Increase funding to support low carbon transportation such as community and inter-community bus systems, electric vehicle charging infrastructure and purchase incentives, active transportation infrastructure, and personal incentives to purchase low carbon transportation options.

**CLIMATE CHANGE:
Recognize the
existential threat
posed by climate
change and take
immediate action**

Economic Equality

The current neo-liberal economic system measures the country's success in terms of economic growth (Gross Domestic Product, GDP) and this contributes to inequality. Although Canada has one of the highest GDPs in the world^{xx}, the wealthiest 1% of our population have a disproportionate share of capital and 1 in 7 Canadians are living in poverty^{xxi}. These inequities result in the significant social and healthcare costs (estimated \$72 - \$84 billion ^{xxii}) borne by the Provincial and Federal governments each year.

As we rebuild the post-COVID economy we must resolve economic inequities through strategic investment in individual and population wellbeing. The Public Health Agency of Canada indicates that \$1 invested in the first few years of a low-income person's life can save up to \$9 in future costs ^v.

Strategies to Create an Equitable Economy that Supports Resilient Health

Improve financial equity in Canada:

- Transition Canadian progress goals away from the prioritization of economic growth, to prioritize health, social and environmental progress supported by economic stability. Adopt triple bottom line progress indicators and practices similar to other countries such as New Zealand, Scotland and Iceland which have adopted wellbeing economies.
- Strengthen laws for essential service corporations to ensure that wealth generated is for the benefit of all Canadians (not limited to shareholders and board members), and prevent monopolies. Look to the future to ensure corporations producing new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, benefit all Canadians.
- Undertake benefit/cost analyses of *universal income* and *livable minimum wage* and implement those policies that will reduce inequities in Canada.
- Focus the Post-COVID economic recovery on the green economy. Employment in the clean, green, renewable sectors provides excellent return on investment^{xxiii} and is one of the fastest growing employment sectors in Canada.
- Improve data collection for relevant metrics such as precarious employment and homelessness to inform future policies. Standardized definitions that accurately reflect the wide range of conditions of precarious employment and homelessness are imperative to better understand how many Canadians are affected ^{xxiv, xxv}.
- Proactively strengthen essential systems, services and research capacity to create resilient, reliable, essential services and systems that can operate in times of upheaval. Weaknesses in these systems disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.

**ECONOMY:
Improve
financial equity
in Canada**

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