

THE CASE FOR A CANADIAN URBAN POLICY OBSERVATORY

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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic brings into focus a long-standing need to establish a Canadian Urban Policy Observatory, a “one-stop-shop” for comprehensive, comparable, and actionable information on the state of Canada’s cities and city-regions. Part repository, aggregator, clearing house, and knowledge broker, the observatory would collect, standardize, analyze, and publish qualitative and quantitative data on Canadian cities and, crucially, the political systems and policy frameworks that govern them. Most importantly, the observatory would serve as a building block toward greater intergovernmental dialogue on urban priorities, bringing local challenges to the attention of upper-level governments, and highlighting opportunities for shared problem solving. As a starting point for discussion, we propose several institutional models governments could follow to realize these aims.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a massive health, social, and economic shock to Canadian society. Nowhere is this more visible than in our cities, where social distancing measures to contain the virus have temporarily upended the vitality of urban life. Even in crisis, though, cities remain dynamic spaces of collective innovation and community resilience.¹ Across Canada, mayors and city councillors, public servants, community organizations, and engaged residents and businesses are finding ways to save lives, reinvent human connection, protect their most vulnerable, and sustain local economies.² To support these efforts, we must ensure that decision makers and community leaders have timely access to the information required to lead our cities through this crisis and prepare for recovery and renewal.

This paper makes the case that the time is right to establish a Canadian Urban Policy Observatory, a “one-stop-shop” for comprehensive, comparable, and actionable information on the state of Canada’s cities and city-regions. Part repository, aggregator, clearing house, and knowledge broker, the observatory would collect, standardize, analyze, and publish qualitative and quantitative data on Canadian cities and, crucially, the political systems and policy frameworks that govern them. Most importantly, the observatory would serve as a building block toward greater intergovernmental dialogue on urban priorities, bringing local challenges to the attention of upper-level governments, and highlighting opportunities for shared problem solving.

A national urban policy observatory would serve as a building block toward greater intergovernmental dialogue on urban priorities.

¹ See the OECD’s collection of city-level policy responses to COVID-19: www.oecd.org/coronavirus

² The Canadian Urban Institute has created www.citysharecanada.ca to crowdsource and compile these resources, tools, and stories.

The COVID emergency will no doubt require rapid knowledge sharing to ensure our cities rebound as quickly as possible. Several jurisdictions, such as the European Union, benefit from urban policy observatories that help align national policy objectives with local conditions on the ground. These focal points for interdisciplinary research and policy learning create the knowledge infrastructure necessary to power collective action and respond to complex policy problems facing cities. Canada is not yet equipped for such concerted urban policy making.

We begin by situating our proposal in the broad policy context, framed on the one hand by COVID-19, and on the other hand, by increasing calls to respond to the “cities agenda,” both globally and here at home. We argue that now is the opportune moment for Canada to make its “implicit” system of urban policies more coherent through institutionalized knowledge sharing.³ Next, we outline the observatory’s proposed mandate and functions, and how it could add value to existing practices. Finally, as a starting point for discussion, we propose several institutional models governments could follow to realize these aims.

³ This paper builds on arguments and recommendations set out in *A National Urban Policy for Canada? The Implicit Federal Agenda* (Bradford, 2018).

PART 1:

Why a Canadian Urban Policy Observatory Now?

Well before the onset of COVID-19, a consensus had emerged among experts and practitioners that the economic, social, and environmental significance of cities requires applying an urban lens across all policy domains. As a result, cities have moved back onto the Canadian public policy agenda. Addressing the June 2019 Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) convention, four federal party leaders affirmed their commitment to a “new federal-municipal partnership” promising local governments a national policy voice and bringing a municipal lens to federal programming (Meyer, 2019). This “local turn” responds to growing awareness that today’s major public policy challenges converge most profoundly in cities.

Monitoring these urbanizing dynamics around the world, UN-Habitat, the OECD, and the Cities Alliance have called on all countries to implement a “national urban policy” over the next two decades, which they term an “essential instrument” in achieving sustainable development goals” (OECD and UN-Habitat, 2016). The global challenge for national governments, whether federal or unitary, is to support their cities with “a coherent set of decisions derived through a deliberate government-led process of coordinating and rallying various actors for a common vision and goal that will promote more transformative, productive, inclusive and resilient urban development for the long term.”

Canada remains one of only a handful of countries “where the urban policy landscape does not show any evidence of a National Urban Policy adoption” (OECD and UN-Habitat, 2016). Yet, this assessment is not the whole story. Over the past 20 years, the federal and several provincial governments have implemented various “new deals” devolving legal responsibilities, enhancing municipal revenue tools, and testing multi-level policy partnerships in cities (Friendly, 2016). More recently, the Trudeau government has been

an active participant in international negotiations on the new urban agenda, observing that the principles “closely align” with federal economic, social, and environmental plans and launching a public consultation on “key challenges, opportunities and trends in urbanization” (Duclos, 2016).

Taken together, these activities speak to Canada’s “implicit” urban policy framework (Bradford, 2018). Different from the integrated visions, centralized plans, and targeted policies celebrated by the UN-Habitat and the OECD, Canadian support for cities is diffuse in design and dispersed in delivery, often the by-product of policies “that are not specifically designed for cities but could have a major impact on them” (Van Den Berg, 2007). Operating with and through the institutions of a highly decentralized federation, the implicit approach works as “implementation light,” testing various multi-level governance mechanisms to advance different parts of an agenda at the intersection of long-standing regional policy and time-limited urban experiments.

Canada lacks an institutional locus where social scientists, policy makers, local practitioners, and citizen activists might come together in dialogue, accessing the best available information to tackle urban policy challenges.

Based on our unique institutional tradition, it follows that Canada’s urban policy future lies not in waiting for a European-style explicit strategy to materialize, but to bring greater coherence to the existing system. As the OECD (2014) recommends, policy makers in Canada need to become more *intentional* about their implicit urbanism, beginning with a more systematic approach to knowledge creation and translation. Canada lacks an institutional locus where social scientists, policy makers, local practitioners, and citizen activists might come together in dialogue, accessing the best available information to tackle urban policy challenges.

The right conditions are now in place to correct this shortcoming, as homegrown Canadian research capacity grows, multilevel policy experimentation continues, a new

city-regionalism emerges, and the COVID-19 crisis demands more concerted social learning and intergovernmental cooperation.

Canadian Urban Research Capacity is Growing

Canadian researchers – academics, think tanks, business networks, community practitioners – have together produced a significant body of policy-relevant knowledge about why and how cities matter in a global age (Moos et al., 2020). In so doing, they have helped reorient the way policy makers think about issues of national consequence, such as poverty reduction, economic growth, and environmental protection. Once seen as the exclusive domain of upper-level governments, these challenges are increasingly finding localized expression in cities.

Poverty and inequality are now viewed through a wider lens of social exclusion shaped by an array of local contextual factors, not only a lack of income support (Bourne and Hulchanski, 2020). “Neighbourhood effects” influence individual life chances beyond personal attributes or family circumstances, requiring targeted, community-driven strategies to address root causes. Similarly, economic prosperity is now understood to be driven by localized knowledge clusters of producers, suppliers, and customers (Wolfe, 2019). More than low taxes and cheap land, business productivity depends on geographically proximate firms, technology researchers, educational institutes, and venture capitalists pooling their resources in cities to spur innovation. Utilizing the same local lens, Canadian researchers have highlighted how city governments are helping combat global climate change (Gordon and Johnson, 2017). Simply put, Canadian governments now have home-grown, leading-edge insight into the spatial dynamics of major national issues as well as evidence-based guidance on appropriate interventions.

Canadian Cities are Experimenting

Many Canadian cities are rich sites of experimentation in public problem-solving and multi-level governance (Evergreen, 2018). Since the early 2000s, a host of devolutionary strategies, from formal city charters to legislative realignments, have been road-tested to discover the optimal distribution of powers and resources among local, provincial, and

federal governments. For example, pilot programs to address homelessness, immigrant settlement, and neighbourhood revitalization have been launched by the federal government, with provincial agreement, and implemented by local stakeholders through governance models tailored to community settings. These time-limited projects are widely recognized for their creativity in policy collaboration (Bradford, 2018).

Similarly, the federal Gas Tax Fund began as a “bridge financing” transfer to municipalities, simultaneously advancing national environmental goals while respecting local priorities. Managed by representative municipal associations and customized through locally integrated community sustainability plans, the fund was described by the OECD as “an excellent example of an inter-governmental agreement that utilizes contractual design to optimize the effectiveness of the relationship between all levels of government” (OECD, 2007). In 2008, the Gas Tax fund became permanent, and in 2019, the federal allocation was doubled.

A third example is the 2018 federal Innovation Superclusters Initiative, which funds industry-led consortia in five city-regions from Halifax to Vancouver to promote knowledge-intensive economic clustering. The \$180-billion, 12-year *Investing in Canada* program proposes tri-level government investment in urban transportation and transit, housing and homelessness, and smart city data applications. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities and its Big City Mayors’ Caucus have welcomed these “historic federal investments for local priorities” as a demonstration of creative intergovernmental collaboration (FCM, 2017).

A New City-Regionalism is Emerging

Regionalism in the Canadian context has long been expressed through provincial identities and priorities (e.g., Quebec vs. the rest of Canada, Western alienation). However, Canadian regional policy now increasingly encompasses urban centres and builds functional relations between cities and rural communities. Indeed, Canadian regional policy is taking its place at the forefront of the “place-based” discourse that effectively underpins the UN-Habitat and OECD case for National Urban Policy.

Moving beyond its initial emphasis on top-down, one-size-fits-all support to lagging areas, regional policy in Canada operates through a sophisticated multi-level network of subnational governments and consortia partnered with six federal Regional Development Agencies. Where international research communities continue to debate the relative merits of investing in “growing agglomerations” or “less favoured regions,” the evolving Canadian place-based framework nurtures innovation at multiple territorial scales and geographic spaces irrespective of political or administrative boundaries. Working on a case-by-case basis, regional development increasingly “brings cities in,” becoming an important vehicle for implicit urban policy (Bradford, 2017).

COVID-19 Demands Learning from the Local

Cities are where the battle with COVID-19 will be won or lost, in three key ways (OECD, 2020). Most obviously, cities are where people gather in greatest numbers. Physical distancing measures, contact tracing, and testing efforts must therefore focus in cities. Second, cities typically exhibit higher concentrations of pollution and poverty, producing health vulnerabilities such as respiratory illness and heart disease that lower individual resistance to the virus. Finally, these at-risk populations tend to concentrate in distressed neighbourhoods where access to emergency and health services is limited, and conditions of homelessness or high occupancy dwellings make social distancing near impossible.

City leaders and residents with lived experience know where these vulnerabilities are most pronounced, and what interventions have the greatest potential to make a difference at the local level. The COVID-19 crisis thus supplies clear opportunities for cities to test ideas, share knowledge, scale innovations, and communicate experiences of local solidarity to lift spirits and inspire collective effort. Ensuring such social learning and intergovernmental cooperation is especially important given the lessons learned from previous health emergencies, most notably the 2003 SARS epidemic (McDougall, 2009).

Urban Policy Makers Lack Cumulative Knowledge

Despite these realities, Canadian urban policy makers lack *cumulative* knowledge about “what works where and how.” A Canadian Urban Policy Observatory would help fill the void, institutionalizing a systematic, pan-Canadian account of urban affairs while nurturing a culture of policy learning. Canadian city-builders at all levels of government and from different sectors could use the observatory to access the frontier of urban knowledge – scientific, administrative, and experiential – and translate these insights into relevant progress indicators and capacity-building tools.

As Michael Prince (2002) observes, the Canadian approach to policy innovation typically follows a path of “directed incrementalism,” where policy departures result not from imposition of grand visions but

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rather evolve gradually over decades, with aspirational goals advanced step-by-step through separate interventions across related policy fields. Shared policy knowledge is foundational to this process of change, helping build consensus among diverse stakeholders and encouraging “laboratories of democracy” to test ideas that eventually produce national frameworks, as we see in healthcare and income security.

Such directed incrementalism travels across policy fields and over time. Transposed to urban policy in the 21st century – when, as Meric Gertler (2001) puts it, “all of the great social policy questions of the day – education, health, poverty, housing and immigration – become urban policy questions” – a national urban policy observatory would help Canada’s cities become today’s laboratories of democracy.

PART 2:

What Would a Canadian Urban Policy Observatory Do?

As the country's definitive source for comprehensive, comparable, and actionable urban data and analysis, a national urban policy observatory would serve five related functions and objectives:

- construct consistent classification schemes to determine what constitutes a city in Canada;
- produce an atlas of local government that summarizes the roles and responsibilities of city governments across the country;
- aggregate available urban indicators and benchmarking programs to monitor the extent of Canada's urban policy challenges;
- develop a repository of intergovernmental urban policy frameworks as a foundation for joint problem solving; and, as a result,
- set the stage for a national dialogue between governments on urban issues that is informed by local knowledge.

Construct Nationally Consistent Classifications

There is so much we don't know about cities in Canada, beginning with what actually qualifies as a city by Canadian standards. Administrative classifications schemes vary from province to province, complicated by legal and linguistic idiosyncrasies, such that a City (capital C) looks entirely different in one part of the country versus another. For example, the City of Greenwood, British Columbia, population 665, shares most of the legislative powers granted to a city one-thousand times its size, the City of Vancouver, population 675,000, despite the latter's special "charter city" status. While in Quebec, cities (or *cités*) are not even considered a distinct form of local government, referred to

instead as municipalities (*municipalités*) or towns (*villes*), among other designations, each with varying powers, electoral structures, and responsibilities.⁴

Statistics Canada estimates that there are more than 5,162 municipalities across the country, as defined by census subdivisions. But this figure includes several subcategories, such as Indian reserves (still the legal term) as well as unincorporated/unorganized districts, that obscure the term.⁵ Moreover, administrative boundaries, however defined, rarely match the functional economic and social geographies of metropolitan centres — what you might call a city’s “urban footprint.”⁶ To account for this reality, Statistics Canada uses the term census metropolitan areas (CMAs) to refer to urban areas with higher concentrations of population and economic activity — bringing us closer to the common sense notion of a city, and a more manageable list of 35 urban centres, comprised of 117 distinct census agglomerations.

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From a policy making perspective, however, relying solely on Statistics Canada classifications to understand our cities creates a practical problem: statistical constructs rarely align with political decision-making structures.⁷ A national urban policy observatory could help reconcile this conundrum by helping to develop a common lexicon of

⁴ Some Quebec municipalities belong to an even broader set of administrative structures known as regional county municipalities (*municipalités régionales de comté*) and metropolitan communities (*communautés métropolitaines*).

⁵ See Statistics Canada’s census dictionary entry for “census subdivision,” <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/geo012-eng.cfm>. StatCan’s Public Sector Universe database provides an alternative definition based on institutional units, totalling 4,510 municipal governments. See <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/68-516-X>

⁶ Some cities even span multiple provincial boundaries, such as Lloydminster, which straddles the Saskatchewan/Alberta border.

⁷ For example, the Toronto CMA excludes Hamilton, despite the fact that the Province of Ontario has included the city in its regional transportation and land use plans for the Toronto-centred region since the 1960s.

nationally consistent classifications so that governments, civil society groups, researchers, and the general public have a shared understanding of what it means to live or work in, say, an “urban” vs. “rural” area, an “inner” vs. “outer” suburb, or a “large” vs. “small” city based on empirically sound, yet functional, definitions.

Produce an Atlas of Local Government

We know little about how Canadian local authorities are structured, how they operate, what policies area they are responsible for, and how they deliver local services. The best available information on the basic structures of local government in Canada is typically found in academic volumes, in the form of province-by-province case studies (see Young and Sancton, 2009), or in undergraduate textbooks (see Sancton 2015, Tindal & Tindal 2017). Yet the slow pace of academic publishing means that, in many cases, the information presented in these studies is already out of date before their release.

Researchers at Western University’s Centre for Urban Policy and Local Governance have begun compiling a more dynamic online inventory of local governments.⁸ Similarly, a pan-Canadian research team recently launched the Canadian Municipal Barometer, an annual survey of mayors and councillors in over 400 municipalities, which will collect crucial descriptive data about municipal governance.⁹ Both of these projects, however, are still only at a nascent stage.

Statistics Canada has recently begun applying an international reporting standard developed by the United Nations, known as the Classification of Functions of Government (COFOG), to municipal service delivery. But this only tracks local spending on public services, not how these services are delivered (e.g., to what extent local governments rely on special purpose bodies, or private contractors, to deliver services). Important contextual information, such as each municipality’s relative fiscal autonomy,

⁸ The inventory will include institutional profiles that detail, for example, an individual municipality’s electoral rules, the powers of the mayor and council, and the role and functions of local special purpose bodies.

⁹ See <https://www.cmb-bmc.ca> for more information.

revenue and borrowing capacity, financial accountability mechanisms, or locally defined service targets is beyond the scope of the program.

A national urban policy observatory would accelerate and augment these efforts, helping to “democratize” our understanding of Canadian cities, by serving as a central knowledge hub for similar data collection projects across the country, including “open data” and “open government” initiatives, such as the Open Cities Index.¹⁰ Coordinating disparate research objectives and streamlining methodologies for maximum comparability, the observatory would enable the creation of a comprehensive atlas of local government. The atlas would aggregate data pertaining to local:

- Governance structures: e.g., summaries of each unit’s council structure, legislative process, administrative machinery, relationship to regional/metropolitan authorities
- Political representation: e.g., profiles of local electoral systems, per capita representation, citizen engagement practices
- Jurisdiction: e.g., a catalogue of legislative and regulatory frameworks that define the powers and authority of local and regional governments in each province, including the division of municipal/provincial policy responsibilities
- Budgets: datasets detailing the fiscal health of municipalities, such as revenues and tax rates, asset portfolios, and borrowing capacity

Together, these datasets would amount to the country’s first and only comprehensive source of descriptive information detailing the basic features of all local governments in Canada.

Aggregate Performance Indicators and Benchmarking Programs

Working from a common typology of Canadian cities, and an inventory of local government structures and policy responsibilities, the observatory could then help develop standardized performance metrics that would allow apples-to-apples

¹⁰ See <https://publicsectordigest.com/open-cities-index-oci> for more information.

comparisons across service areas and local/metropolitan geographies. Benchmarking is not a new idea; multiple local, national, and global benchmarking initiatives have been applied to Canadian cities using service and quality of life indicators (see below). However, none of these initiatives can thus far be considered both comprehensive in scope and universal in coverage.

International benchmarking schemes are typically too broad to be useful for local policy practitioners in Canada, or cover only a handful of Canadian jurisdictions. The OECD Metropolitan Database, for instance, compiles data for only 16 of Canada's 35 census metropolitan areas. Coverage is also an issue for "made-in-Canada" benchmarking projects. Municipal Benchmarking Network Canada, for example, tracks performance across 37 municipal service areas, following detailed technical definitions, but for only 16 participating municipalities. The World Council on City Data (WCCD), which has both local and international dimensions – although based at the University of Toronto, it includes member cities from around the world – has developed ISO-certified indicators for 100 different service areas. However, only 43 Canadian municipalities have adopted the reporting standard to date.¹¹

¹¹ See full list at <https://www.dataforcities.org/global-cities-registry>. Notably, in July 2019, the federal government announced the creation of the Data for Canadian Cities Pilot Project, which approved \$3 million in funding for the WCCD to work with 15 municipalities across Canada to help them become certified under ISO 37120, and better plan and implement public infrastructure investments (Infrastructure Canada, 2019).

A Sample of Benchmarking and Urban Indicator Programs

Municipal Initiatives

- **Municipal Benchmarking Network Canada:** a voluntary partnership of sixteen municipalities that tracks performance across 37 municipal service areas.
- **Partners for Climate Protection:** a voluntary program created by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and ICLEI (International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives) that publishes emissions inventories and carbon emissions reductions plans and targets for 350+ Canadian municipalities.

Federal Initiatives

- **Canada's Core Public Infrastructure Survey:** a national survey of municipal, regional, provincial and territorial governments, launched by Statistics Canada and Infrastructure Canada in 2017, that takes stock of public infrastructure across Canada, such as roads and bridges, water and wastewater facilities, and public transit.
- **Housing in Canada Online:** housing market information collected by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation for all census divisions, metropolitan areas, and agglomerations.

International Initiatives

- **City Prosperity Index:** a composite index developed by UN-Habitat applied to 400 cities around the world that tracks 72 indicators intended to measure a city's achievements across six dimensions of socio-economic prosperity and well-being.
- **OECD Metropolitan Database:** an international database of demographic, economic, social, environmental, and labour market indicators for 649 metropolitan areas around the world with 250,000 or more inhabitants
- **World Council on City Data:** an international non-profit organization housed at the University of Toronto's Global Cities Institute that developed ISO 37120, a measurement and certification standard for measuring city services and quality of life.

A national urban policy observatory would aggregate, rather than replace, these useful initiatives. By providing one-stop access to the universe of available indicators – whether

related to economic productivity, employment, mobility, housing, sustainability, affordability, transparency, administrative efficiency, or democratic inclusion — a national urban policy observatory would help boost the reach and uptake of all benchmarking programs, and help translate these indicators into actionable knowledge, particularly as cities rebuild from the damage inflicted by COVID.

Develop a Repository of Intergovernmental Policy Frameworks

Urban policy is about more than local government. Most of the policy challenges facing Canada's cities — housing affordability, traffic congestion, climate change, etc. — cannot be meaningfully addressed by local governments alone, either because they don't have the necessary authority, resources, or administrative capacity to act. Rather, urban policy is best understood as a series of decisions made by *all* levels of governments to address public problems that affect, or

arise from, life in cities. Yet the full extent of intergovernmental relations related to urban policy making has never been catalogued.

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A national urban policy observatory would serve as a central repository of intergovernmental policy frameworks, transfers programs, and agreements that make up Canada's multilevel governance system as it relates to cities, including:

- Bilateral (federal-provincial/territorial) agreements, transfer programs, and policy frameworks, e.g., bilateral agreements to implement the 2018 National Housing Strategy;
- Bilateral (provincial-municipal) agreements and policy frameworks, e.g., Memorandum of Understanding between the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and the Province of Ontario;
- Bilateral (federal-municipal) funding programs, e.g., Municipalities for Climate Innovation Program;

- Trilateral (federal-provincial-municipal) agreements, transfer programs, and policy frameworks, e.g., 2018 Canada-Ontario-Toronto Memorandum of Understanding on Immigration;
- Inter-municipal collaboration and regional coordination initiatives, e.g., shared service agreements.¹²

Compiling these foundational components of Canada’s urban policy landscape into one central database would help researchers, practitioners, and decision makers better understand the institutional gaps in our system, and inform a more productive dialogue between governments in areas of shared jurisdiction and mutual interest.

Basic Questions a Canadian Urban Policy Observatory Would Help Answer

How well are Canadian cities...

- supporting economic clusters?
- fostering vibrant downtowns and strong neighbourhoods?
- employing smart city technologies?
- adapting to climate change?
- promoting civic engagement and democratic inclusion?
- integrating newcomers?
- reducing poverty?
- responding to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Which Canadian cities...

- have the most fiscal capacity?
- have the most political/legal autonomy?
- are most vulnerable to flooding?
- have the most inequality?
- are the least affordable?
- spend the least on social services?
- are the least congested?
- receive the least funding from other levels of government?

¹² See <http://interlocalcooperation.ca> for a sample inventory.

Set the Stage for a National Dialogue

Each element of the observatory's mandate, as envisioned above, builds on the other. Creating an atlas of local governments demands clear, uniform definition(s) of Canadian cities. Benchmarking initiatives depend on standard units of analysis to distinguish leaders from laggards. Solutions to the problems revealed by urban indicators require cooperation among multiple governments, and thus sensitivity to policy frameworks and institutional context.

By collecting these different sets of information “under one roof,” a national urban policy observatory would enable a more holistic understanding of urban policy in Canada. In short, it would serve as a “knowledge intermediary,” or broker, helping set the stage for regular dialogue between governments about the health of Canada's cities that is deliberately informed by local knowledge.

By collecting these different sets of information ‘under one roof,’ a national urban policy observatory would enable a more holistic understanding of urban policy in Canada.

Knowledge intermediaries operate at the interface of research and policy, enabling ongoing dialogue and mutual learning among different knowledge producers and users through various processes:

- *bridging* different types of policy knowledge, such as community-generated observations and multi-disciplinary social scientific data and trend analysis;
- *integrating* evidence when policy problems cross government departments, sectors, or populations;
- *contextualizing* big data within the place-specific priorities of local communities; and

- *transferring* knowledge from successful innovations in other jurisdictions.¹³

As Jane Jacobs long ago argued, cities are the ideal spaces to generate multiple ways of knowing and integrate different types of knowledge. Residents possess fine-grained appreciation of what makes their neighbourhoods work and, equally important, what interrupts or destroys community rhythm that is particular to a place. Respect for localized, tacit knowledge is increasingly recognized as critical in the formulation of policy and plans for cities (Corburn, 2005).

A national urban policy observatory could serve as a focal point for the plethora of civil society organizations in Canadian cities attuned to tacit knowledge – community foundations, charitable organizations such as the United Way, research centres such as Evergreen, Tamarack Institute, and the Maytree Foundation – to help define the conversations governments have about cities and urban policy making and ensure gender, racial, and class-based equity concerns are front and centre.

¹³ Policy observatories around the world – not only those focused on cities, but across fields and jurisdictions – have utilized various strategies to achieve these ends (OAS, 2015). For example, toolkits have become increasingly popular for public reporting and facilitating community data access or applications. More ambitiously, the European Network of Living Labs oversees “urban experimentation” where “new ideas can be designed, implemented, measured and, if successful, scaled-up and transferred to other locales” (Karvonen and van Heur, 2014).

PART 3:

How Would a Canadian Urban Policy Observatory Work?

How could a national urban policy observatory be designed to make existing data accessible and actionable for multiple audiences, while also gathering new data to fill apparent knowledge gaps? We offer at least four institutional design models as a starting point for constructive discussion. The observatory could be:

- housed within Statistics Canada, either as a new research centre, or by expanding the agency's existing research programs;
- constituted as a government research network comprised of participating governments;
- designed as an academic network of university researchers, with financial support from governments;
- or established as an independent, non-profit organization with representation and support from federal, provincial, and municipal governments.

Each approach brings its own potential benefits and drawbacks, as well as trade-offs that require thoughtful consideration. Any new organization would require: a degree of independence, so that it would not depend on, nor be directly influenced by, one government or another; technical capacity, meaning core staff capable of collecting, analyzing, and translating available data for policy purposes; and, naturally, sufficient financial resources to ensure its long-term sustainability.

Statistics Canada Research Centre/Program

The narrowest functions of a new national urban policy observatory would be predominantly statistical, and therefore, the prospective domain of Statistics Canada. Although dozens, if not hundreds, of datasets pertaining to cities exist within the national

statistical system, the agency does not currently collect this information in any centralized or coordinated fashion. Statistics Canada has only a few formal partnerships or data sharing agreements with municipal governments, and regional offices are not currently focused on gathering city-level data. However, it could realize many of the data collection objectives suggested above by either expanding or coordinating existing statistical programs — an idea currently being explored as part of the agency’s modernization agenda.

Drawing on work by the Dutch Bureau of Statistics, Statistics Canada is pilot testing the creation of an Urban Data Centre that would strengthen the relationship between the National Statistical Office and Canada’s large cities. This includes consolidating and maintaining an integrated set of comparable indicators for Canada’s large cities, and creating an online portal for easy access to data products, such as visualization and mapping tools.

There are certain benefits to housing a national urban policy observatory within Statistics Canada. Despite recent concerns about the agency’s political independence, by international standards, the agency remains a respected and trusted source of high-quality, reliable official statistics (Mason, 2018). Its staff have the technical expertise to develop standardized methodologies and analyze large datasets, and its data releases include detailed technical documentation and metadata that make it easy for users to access, apply, and verify available information.

That said, gathering statistical information about cities only achieves part of the observatory’s true potential. No matter how well-equipped Statistics Canada is to report urban indicators, it is not particularly well suited to documenting the various legislative arrangements, policy frameworks, and funding programs that contextualize the raw data. A national urban policy observatory would benefit most by adopting both quantitative *and* qualitative research methodologies.

Government Research Network

A second approach involves creating a government-sponsored research network or secretariat, comprised of representatives from all federal, provincial, and territorial

governments, as well as municipalities — perhaps nominated by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities — to share relevant datasets, documents, and policies, and distribute regular reports to member governments.

The European Union (EU) is an example of governmental leadership in urban policy knowledge creation and management over the past decade.¹⁴ Two government research networks have been pivotal to the EU's urban accomplishments: the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON), and the European Urban Knowledge Network (EUKN). Serving all EU member states, the ESPON is notable for the range of studies it produces (thematic, policy-oriented, scientific, capacity-building) and types of data it collects (statistics, analyses, and maps). Its work focuses on identifying and comparing the development potential of regions and cities in formats that are accessible and understandable to local policy makers. Complementing ESPON, the EUKN, supported by a group of eight member states, specializes in tailor made research and specific practical assistance to governments. It houses policy labs where stakeholders and experts discuss topical issues and policy priorities, and an e-library containing selected documents on best practices and up-to-date research.

These European examples show how governmental leadership and support for policy observatories can institutionalize collaboration attuned to specific jurisdictional data needs while also aggregating and disseminating community-wide knowledge. Of course, translating this model to the Canadian federal system, in which policy making is far less centralized than in the EU, particularly on matters related to cities, seems fraught with political challenges.

¹⁴ For example, the European Commission recently commissioned and disseminated a major study of place-based regional and urban development (the “Barca Report”), mandated key policy directorates to take-up the ideas, mobilized scholars to refine specific themes, and presented recommendations to high level meetings of member state representatives. Several EU member states implemented numerous urban frameworks and place-based tools as a direct result of these efforts (see Mendez, 2013).

Academic Research Network

A third approach would be to create a collaborative research network of interested academic researchers. A useful template is the recently established North American Observatory on Health Systems and Policies (NAO), modelled on the European and Asia Pacific equivalents by the same name.¹⁵ The NAO functions as a partnership of academic researchers across jurisdictions who work together to collect, analyze, and disseminate information and analysis on health care policy and systems, particularly at the subnational level – which, much like urban governance systems in Canada, are highly decentralized. The NAO’s research secretariats, housed at major universities in Canada, the US, and Mexico, publish in-depth systems profiles, comparative datasets, and literature reviews, as well as “rapid response” environmental scans, policy briefs, and decision-maker summaries, at the request of governments, to inform policy making.

Situating the observatory in the academic sector, outside government, would provide a greater degree of independence without compromising technical expertise or empirical rigour. The NAO receives diverse funding from more than twenty public, private, and third sector partners. It may also encourage a more robust, interdisciplinary approach to the data collection process, and even inspire complementary educational programming. Even so, academic research is typically more laborious and time-consuming, rarely makes it into the hands of decision makers, and crucially, depends on contingent funding (whether grant-based or contracts) that may limit the observatory’s long-term viability.

Independent Not-for-profit Organization

The final approach would involve establishing an independent not-for-profit organization with financial support and oversight from governments at all three levels. An intriguing model to emulate is the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI). Created in 1994 by the federal, provincial and territorial ministers of health, CIHI’s mandate is to develop

¹⁵ See <https://ihpme.utoronto.ca/research/research-centres-initiatives/nao/>

a common approach to the collection of health care data, and generate comparable, unbiased information that can be used by governments, health authorities, and hospital boards across Canada to measure themselves against national and international benchmarks.

CIHI took over data collection efforts previously led by Health Canada and Statistics Canada. Over the past twenty-five years, its standardized methodologies have “become a foundational part of the country's health-care infrastructure” (Forest and Martin, 2018). As a trusted source of high-quality, comparative health information and measurement standards, such as wait times, health outcomes, and hospital expenditures, CIHI’s findings help policy makers track and target system improvements by avoiding duplication and facilitating cooperation and information sharing among governments.

Legally, CIHI operates as an independent, self-governing not-for-profit organization, incorporated under the Canada Corporations Act, with more than 700 employees. In practice, however, it does not operate entirely free from political considerations. Its \$113 million annual budget is almost entirely funded by grants from Canada’s fourteen federal, provincial, and territorial governments, and controlled by a 16-member board of directors with strong provincial oversight (CIHI, 2019). This close connection to its government funders has certainly helped ensure CIHI’s long-term durability. But it has also impacted the nature of its work.

CIHI’s research is highly relevant to policy makers in the health care field, no doubt informing decision making. Yet its influence is largely a product of its general unwillingness to collect non-statistical data – anything that could be misinterpreted as partisan or political in nature. To avoid perceptions of bias, CIHI typically sticks to the facts (standardized performance indicators), and avoids reporting on policy frameworks or governance systems. It does not, for example, collect information or comment on federal-provincial health care agreements, or other qualitative elements of the Canadian health care system, and thus does not perfectly align with the prospective goals of a national urban policy observatory.

Conclusion

It is time to instill a more systematic approach to urban policy making in Canada, and set in motion a national dialogue on cities by all orders of government. The COVID-19 pandemic brings into stark relief the need for robust knowledge to guide urban policy interventions. We have made the case for the creation of a Canadian Urban Policy Observatory as a one-stop shop for state-of-the art information about Canada's cities and city-regions, and a foundation for policy learning and intergovernmental collaboration. We have also identified a menu of core functions and knowledge deliverables that would add value to existing practices, and considered several possible institutional designs and delivery vehicles.

With international knowledge powerhouses like UN-Habitat and the OECD exhorting countries around the world to implement national urban policies in pursuit of global sustainable development goals, and the COVID-19 pandemic demanding rapid knowledge

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sharing, Canadian governments cannot remain on the sidelines. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Canada's distinct tradition of urban policy incrementalism, though less explicit and centralized than the European ideal, is well suited to translating the global cities agenda into a coherent urban policy framework, so long as we build the knowledge base to enable collective action. A new Canadian Urban Policy Observatory would be a crucial first step.

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