

Looking ahead: Working group discussion outcomes



Introduction

On November 27, 2017, Maytree hosted a [conference](#) together with the Caledon Institute of Social Policy on the theme of looking ahead to the next 25 years of social policy in Canada. With Caledon winding down after 25 years of social policy research and analysis, and Maytree developing a renewed policy agenda, the conference was an opportunity to reflect on lessons from the last 25 years and gather perspectives about what will be needed for the next 25.

The broader frame for the day's conversation was working towards a social contract that safeguards economic and social rights for everyone living in Canada. That social contract includes legal rights, as well as the set of expectations and relationships between people and their governments, employers, communities, and families that ensures they can live in dignity and have opportunities to succeed. It is a system that effectively keeps many people out of poverty; but in its current state, it also leaves many behind.

The event brought together over 100 invited guests working in and around public policy across different sectors and issue areas. After hearing from a panel of emerging policy leaders and attending a conversation with a more established one (Prime Minister Trudeau), participants were asked to help chart the next 25 years in one of four themes: work, housing, income security, and care.

Maytree challenged attendees to think about where we need to repair and renew the social contract – repair the existing gaps that leave people behind and renew the contract in preparation for future needs. Participants were also asked to think about what work is needed to get more effective public policies, whether we need better evidence on the problems, more work to develop viable policy options, greater public buy-in, or more active political leadership.

This summary highlights the key themes that we heard across twelve facilitated group discussions, each of which brought together people with different experiences from different sectors. What follows is a summary of the main issues and ideas shared by participants.



Work

The big picture

- We can't look at work in isolation. The labour market relies on other systems to function well. For example, we need schools and colleges to equip the workforce with skills, businesses to provide jobs, governments to set and enforce labour standards, unions to represent workers, and financial service providers to manage pensions and insurance.
- As the labour market changes, these supporting systems need to adapt, either to accommodate the changes (for example, by providing the required skills and infrastructure), or to offset negative consequences (for example, by compensating and upskilling displaced workers). All stakeholders have a collective responsibility for the future success of the labour market.
- Participants remarked that many stakeholders' initial stance is to resist policy intervention despite the benefits that a well-functioning labour market will bring them.

Work

Existing pressure points

- To equip Canada to face future challenges, we need to repair the gaps in the current system and provide opportunities for those who face the greatest barriers to participating in the labour market. This includes:
 - Access to quality affordable child care to allow more parents to work
 - Opportunities for people whose jobs have been or are likely to be automated
 - Meaningful employment for people in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities
 - Recognition for the skills of newcomers accredited outside Canada
 - Channels for people to retire gradually if they wish
 - Channels into decent work for young people outside of undergraduate education
 - Support for working people who provide unpaid care to an adult





Work

Looking ahead

- Technology will change which jobs we do and how we do them over the next 25 years. While these forecasts are challenging by nature, poor data on the labour market in Canada compared to other OECD countries makes this particularly uncertain.
- Regardless of future uncertainties, our aging population will require us to maximize the capacity of the working-age population. This means we need to provide better access to opportunities for Canada's diverse workforce, particularly for those groups and communities most marginalized by the existing labour market.
- Along with improving routes into and within work, we need to ensure that work reinforces a good quality of life for workers now and in the future. Participants highlighted two strands to this:
 - Defining and campaigning for the right to decent work
 - Modernizing the social contract around work (such as organized labour for contract workers, pension provision, employment insurance, and health coverage)



Care

The big picture

- A large share of the population give or receive some form of care – child care, adult care, or elder care. Each of these types of care poses distinct policy challenges. While the policy responses to one can inform another, participants felt they should be dealt with separately.
- Care is an undervalued social good and its implications for other areas of social policy are overlooked – from reducing costs in the health system to the need for flexible work arrangements.



Care

Existing pressure points

- Presently, care is seen largely as the responsibility of individuals and families with publicly-funded services for adult and elder care provided as a last resort.
- Public services for adult and elder care tend to offer minimal support. Alongside the low levels of support, what is provided does not cater to a diversity of needs or appreciate the different cultural attitudes to care within the population. This is particularly the case for elder care as the existing options are heavily institutionalized rather than person-centred.
- The existing network of care supports does not meet many groups' needs, in particular: the care needs of care givers, people in remote communities, single people without a family member to help, and people with lower incomes.
- Compared to adult and elder care, there is more public and non-profit support for child care needs. Even then, there is still an acute shortage of affordable quality child care.



Care

Looking ahead

- The aging population poses two policy challenges for care:
 - Meeting the care needs of the growing senior population
 - Maximizing the working-age population by supporting child, adult, and elder care givers so they are able to work

To deal with these challenges, we need long-term planning and investment that engage a range of stakeholders.

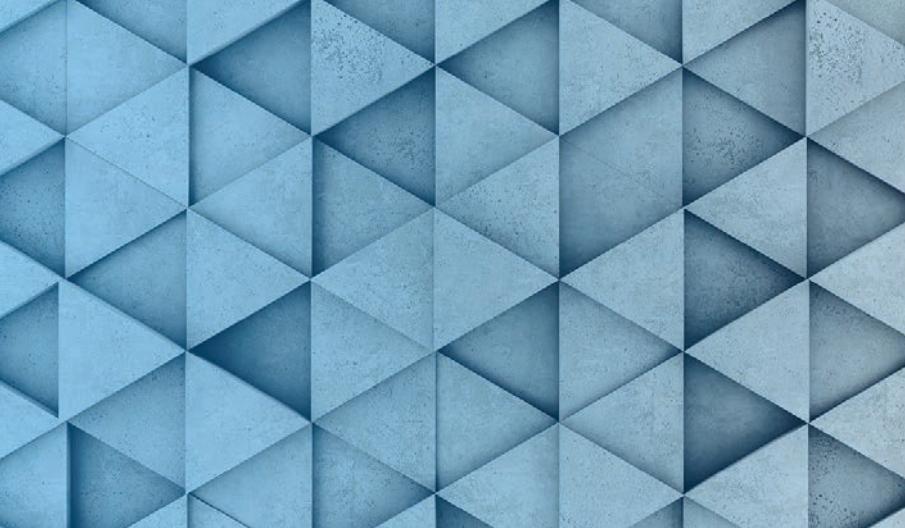
- Care givers and people with care needs should be central to this planning but lack established channels to communicate their needs and participate.
- The lack of policy infrastructure around care means there is scope to learn from other policy areas, for example, from the way the National Housing Strategy touched on all levels of government, or from the design and rollout of full-day kindergarten in Ontario.



Housing

The big picture

- Housing has a strong link to poverty but also plays an important role in the broader economy: from the impact housing affordability has on household debt, to the contribution the housing sector makes to economic output.
- Housing policy is most effective when it encompasses the entire sector, not just social housing. It also needs to be sensitive to the impact of other non-housing policies like social assistance or mental health supports.
- One of the main challenges of housing policy is its intergovernmental nature as solutions require commitment and alignment from federal, provincial, and local governments.



Housing

Existing pressure points

- Two housing issues in particular were most prominent in participants' assessment of pressure points today: affordability and suitability of housing stock.
- Demand for affordable housing vastly exceeds supply. Following years of under-investment, solutions are needed both to restore existing affordable housing and to develop new units. Alongside the designated affordable housing stock, wider interventions (such as portable housing benefits, inclusionary zoning, and rent regulations) are needed to ensure that the market offers affordable options.
- To effectively deal with the affordability problem, we need multiple responses across the sector. While a range of viable solutions have been proposed, the main barrier is the willingness and capacity of multiple stakeholders and levels of government to take the concerted action required.
- Besides cost, the existing housing stock does not match the range of needs of the population. Certain groups are particularly poorly served: low-income families, women fleeing domestic violence, people with disabilities, and remote, northern, and Indigenous communities.
- Equity in terms of who faces housing pressures and who gets a voice in decision-making is a concern across all housing issues. This is a particular challenge for housing as its intergovernmental nature tends to push conversations inwards between governments, with equity and participation issues left on the sidelines. Residents feel disconnected and disillusioned.



Housing

Looking ahead

- As we work towards meeting existing housing needs, we need to look ahead to the impact that changing demographics (immigration, changing family structures, aging) and climate change will have on our future housing needs. Even if future housing can be purpose-built towards those needs, most of the homes we will have in 25 years already exist.
- Long-term inaction on housing policy has meant that the problems associated with affordability are becoming more widespread. This is starting to cause a tension between policies dealing with the high cost of home ownership and policies dealing with those in the most severe housing need.
- The growing affordability problem highlights that the market alone will not deliver the range of housing options to meet long-term needs of complete communities. Housing issues require different players (governments, private sector, non-profits) to have a role in solutions.
- A systematic approach grounded in human rights needs to be at the centre of future policy development. The people most affected should be involved in decision-making, and possible options should be viewed through an intersectional lens.



Income

The big picture

- Income security plays a central role in ensuring our wellbeing within the broader social contract. An effective income security system should be sensitive both to wider economic and labour market shifts and to the complex realities of individuals' lives.
- The income security system is made up of universal and targeted programs. From the political perspective, programs need to be appealing to the public and fiscally viable. From the policy perspective, programs should meet the needs of the most vulnerable but avoid administrative deterrents and the welfare wall effects of means-tested benefits.
- The vulnerability of social policy to political cycles makes the transformative changes required harder to achieve. Incremental approaches may be a more politically realistic way to move things forward.



Income

Existing pressure points

- The current levels of support provided by the income security system, particularly social assistance, are inadequate. The only substantive increases to income security over the last 25 years have been geared towards seniors and children, with single adults in particular falling further behind.
- Beyond the absolute levels of support in the current system, participants identified specific problems with the way the income security system is designed, such as:
 - It is fragmented rather than person-centred. The system places the onus on individuals to navigate multiple complex systems while frontline staff are focused on policing – as a result the system penalizes those it is meant to assist.
 - It is unresponsive to changes in people's lives, particularly to the volatility that people may experience in their lives. This lack of responsiveness is compounded by the system's reliance on the tax system and CRA.
 - It discourages people with low income from building assets that could provide a buffer against shocks in their lives.
- To effectively address these flaws in the system, we need more data and understanding on who experiences income insecurity and broader financial insecurity through an intersectional lens.



Income

Looking ahead

- Expectations of the future pose multiple challenges to the income security system:
 - Supporting the increasing number of seniors who have been less able to save for retirement than previous generations
 - Supporting people to navigate a labour market of increased precarity, part-time work, and displacement due to automation
 - Supporting the growing number of single person households, the household type most overlooked by the existing income security system
- One of the main obstacles to addressing these needs is the lack of broad public support for increases in social security and, linked to that, a lack of political will. Overcoming that obstacle will require bringing more people into a national conversation about why income security is central to Canadian values, for example by:
 - Focusing on the benefits of expanding opportunity and less on the costs of poverty
 - Highlighting the impact income security has on wider wellbeing like health and education



Cross-cutting themes

In addition to the trends and opportunities raised in each of these issues, we identified some cross-cutting themes from the table discussions and other sessions in the day.

- Policy change takes a long time to achieve. We have no time to waste, but we should be prepared to make sustained long-term efforts to effect change. Perseverance prevails.
- Effective policy is informed by those it aims to serve. Policy making should systematically include the people most impacted. Some issue areas have channels for involving people that should be strengthened; in other areas, these channels need to be established.
- Our framing of each policy challenge should account for the different geographies and cultures within Canada and their distinct needs.
- Poor data should not be used as a reason to delay progress; but better data on housing, care, income, and work would make us more able to anticipate and tackle future policy challenges.



Conclusion

At Maytree, we believe it is important to step outside the pressures of political and budget cycles to think about the long-term trends shaping our world and the policy responses that will be necessary to make progress towards ending poverty in Canada.

The issues and opportunities laid out by the participants and by our speakers from the Looking Ahead conference present a considerable policy agenda for the short, medium, and long-term. As Maytree plans our own agenda for the coming years, we will be mining these opportunities to identify areas where we can work with governments, non-profits, and communities to make sure that public policies in Canada work to reduce poverty and promote opportunity. That will include convening conversations, conducting research and analysis, and working to advance promising policy options.

As we heard at the conference, creative and practical solutions will take contributions from across different sectors and communities. If you are also working in these areas and would like to discuss these ideas further, please connect with us at policy@maytree.com.

Acknowledgments

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Panelists:

- Ken Battle
- André Côté
- Kyla Kakfwi-Scott
- Michael Mendelson
- Saeed Selvam
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- Kaylie Tiessen
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