



# Evidence in Uncertain Times

The Role of Data and Evidence in Canada's Economic  
Recovery from COVID-19

Pre-Budget Submission

Blueprint ADE

August 2020

# Recommendations:

- **Recommendation #1:** That the federal government commit to directing at least 1% of economic-recovery investments towards funding evidence-generation activities to make these investments as effective and efficient as possible.
- **Recommendation #2:** That the government commit to measuring, monitoring and reporting on the outcomes of policy actions related to Canada's economic recovery to ensure that they lead to a more resilient, inclusive, equitable and sustainable economy.
- **Recommendation #3:** That all federal government investments in recovery-focused programs and services delivered by third-party providers include evidence-generation requirements to learn what is working and support continuous improvement and adaptations.

# Introduction

To restart Canada's economy and shape an inclusive and equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, swift and large-scale investments are being made in a context of disruption and uncertainty about the future. To ensure these investments have a real impact on people's lives, on businesses and on the economy, we need to ask ourselves critical questions about how well these responses are working. We recommend making investments in evidence generation that are commensurate with the scale of Canada's recovery needs and ambition. We recommend that these investments focus on monitoring progress against defined economic recovery goals, and on evaluating the effectiveness of programs and services designed to help individuals, families, firms and communities impacted by COVID-19.

## Our recommendations

**Recommendation #1: That the federal government commit to directing at least 1% of economic recovery investments towards funding evidence-generation activities to make these investments as effective and efficient as possible.**

As part of the proposed recovery responses, government leaders have rightly signaled a commitment to investing in an economy that is more resilient, greener and with prosperity that is more widely shared. This will require new policies, programs and partnerships, and it will be no small feat to get these right. In the context of ambition twinned with the uncertainty associated with this unprecedented time, we must ensure that a proportion of this investment goes towards generating evidence on what is working, where we are falling short and when we need to pivot. A "data-driven mindset" will ensure that our bold ideas for the future are effectively translated into impact.

We recognize that investing in evidence to understand how well responses are working may not be top of mind. Responding to the new and complex problems presented by COVID-19 requires urgency and a willingness to try what has not been tried before. Generating and using evidence about what works, on the other hand, can be seen as a lengthy, resource-intensive process.

We believe evidence should, in fact, become part of the DNA of our recovery efforts. Creative, agile and pragmatic approaches to generating evidence exist and can be integrated into policies and programs to allow us to learn what is happening, how needs are changing, what is or is not working, and to adapt rapidly to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of responses to COVID-19. Timely, meaningful and actionable evidence will accelerate and increase the impact of recovery

efforts. Given the challenges we are facing we cannot afford not to know whether what we are doing is working.

**Recommendation #2: That the government commit to measuring, monitoring and reporting on the outcomes of policy actions related to Canada's economic recovery to ensure that they lead to a more resilient, inclusive, equitable and sustainable economy.**

We recommend that the federal government set concrete, ambitious goals for Canada's recovery, monitor progress and adjust investment as needed to achieve these goals.

Canada should not aim to return to normal. The pandemic has highlighted cracks in our economic and social policy landscape that are limiting the potential of many to participate in and benefit from economic activity. Risks, opportunities, harms and benefits are not distributed evenly among individuals, families, firms and communities. This uneven distribution is in turn hampering Canada's economic potential. A successful recovery should lead to a more resilient, inclusive, equitable and sustainable economy.

To ensure that recovery investments align with this vision for the future, a clear picture of Canada's performance with respect to economic, inclusion, equity and environmental-sustainability indicators is required, as is a commitment to track progress against these indicators. This should build on existing tools, including the federal government's [Sustainable Development Goals Data Hub](#) and the Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship's [Inclusive Innovation Monitor](#) (due for release in Fall 2020). Regular monitoring would allow government leaders to understand how Canada's economic recovery is performing relative to defined goals and to peer countries. It would also direct attention to where Canada's progress is lagging, and inform decisions about how to adjust existing investments, whether new policy initiatives are needed and how to effectively target these initiatives.

**Recommendation #3: That all federal government investments in recovery-focused programs and services delivered by third-party providers include evidence-generation requirements to learn what is working and support continuous improvement and adaptations.**

We recommend attaching evidence-generation requirements to all programs and services focused on recovery from COVID-19 delivered by third-party providers. Traditional approaches to evaluating programs and services generally focus on measuring the extent to which they have achieved a predefined set of outputs and outcomes. In the context of COVID-19, we need to complement outcomes measurement with more flexible, agile and participatory approaches to evidence generation that foster experimentation and continuous learning. These approaches should focus on collecting the information that service-delivery practitioners want and need, when they need it, to ensure they are serving participants effectively. This approach will build a virtuous

cycle of testing, learning and adapting — ensuring program responses are both agile and evidence-informed.

Specifically, we recommend that the federal government:

- *Incorporate funding and requirements for evidence collection and use into all services and programs aimed at supporting Canada's economic recovery.* Requirements and appropriate budget allowances should be embedded in departmental plans prior to securing Treasury Board approval, and in grant and contribution agreements and other contracts with third-party service providers.
- *Provide flexibility in program design and evaluation requirements.* Instead of requiring service providers to participate in rigidly prescribed output- and outcomes-focused evaluations (for example, specifying how many program participants must be in full-time employment after one year), providers should be supported in developing an evidence and learning plan that outlines what they want to learn about a program or service and how they will use the findings to inform further developments. These plans could include measurement of outcomes that align with the ultimate goals and objectives of the program. In addition, to allow for rapid learning and improvement, they should also include other evidence-generation activities such as: ongoing, real-time monitoring of participants' experiences in the program; rapid-cycle evaluation to test improvements to a program model; and measurement of how effectively a program or service is being implemented. Project agreements should have the flexibility for programs and services to be adjusted based on what practitioners learn as they implement.
- *Invest in capacity-building.* To ensure providers are empowered to ask and answer the right questions about how well their program is working, we recommend that the government invest in coaching and capacity-building supports for practitioners. This could involve matching service providers with technical experts who can support them in developing an evaluation and learning plan for an intervention. Experts could also help providers build their capacity to use data to support rapid learning about how well their programs and services are working.
- *Prioritize the user voice.* Evidence-generation requirements should include a strong emphasis on collecting data about the needs, experiences and perspectives of target populations. COVID-19 has exacerbated inequalities and had an outsized impact on already vulnerable groups including those that face systemic oppression and racism. In developing evidence and learning plans, practitioners should be required to include a strategy for how they will meaningfully and continuously engage users, ensure they have opportunities to



co-design and participate in the implementation of evidence-generation activities, and ensure their voices are reflected in the design, implementation and adaptation of the program or service.

- *Align decision-making with evidence.* Strong feedback loops should connect the evidence generated about programs and services to ongoing government decision-making. Specific teams within the federal government could be tasked with synthesizing findings generated by service providers about what is working, and translating these findings into adjustments to program design and allocation of resources, ensuring that resources are directed towards the most promising solutions. Service providers should also be encouraged to share findings and insights with each other, building strong communities of practice and accelerating the adoption of evidence-informed insights in program delivery. Feedback loops between evidence generation and decision-making will ensure that government resources are allocated effectively and efficiently, and that service providers are empowered to apply evidence to their day-to-day practices.

## Conclusion

The impacts of COVID-19 on the social and economic well-being of Canadians are drastic and far-reaching, and governments have already responded swiftly to mitigate these effects. As we shift into long-term recovery mode — and the opportunity to build back better than before — evidence and rapid learning can and should play an important role in enhancing the impact of these efforts. The recommendations outlined here will ensure we have the evidence needed to shape recovery efforts in real time and ensure meaningful impacts for those most affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

*Prepared in collaboration with the Brookfield Institute for Innovation + Entrepreneurship (BII+E).*

---

### For more information, please contact:

Karen Myers, President and CEO

[kmyers@blueprint-ade.ca](mailto:kmyers@blueprint-ade.ca)

Kelly Pasolli, Director of Policy and Program Design

[kpasolli@blueprint-ade.ca](mailto:kpasolli@blueprint-ade.ca)

Sarah Doyle, Director of Policy and Research, BII+E

[sarah.doyle@ryerson.ca](mailto:sarah.doyle@ryerson.ca)