

Title:

Is it what you measure that really matters? Alternative economic and well-being indicators in Canada

Relevant themes:

3. Development, consumption and well-being

3.1. Resource use, health and human well-being

4. Power, politics, institutions and the reality of achieving change

4.3. Getting there from here: viable frameworks for planetary problems

Extended Abstract:

Many critics of conventional approaches to economic growth have demanded alternatives to Gross Domestic Product as an economic and well-being indicator. GDP's well-known limitations include its failure to reflect environmental costs and unequitable distribution. Such limitations have led to a proliferation of efforts around the world to introduce new indicators. Some advocates of alternative indicators argue that they are key to shifting societal priorities away from economic growth and toward sustainability, equity, and well-being. Is this actually the case in practice? What role, if any, have they played in changing policy? What are the necessary conditions for alternative indicators to have a major impact? This paper examines the experience in Canada (as part of a comparative project including Britain, Bhutan, and some US states).

Canada offers a unique case study as a leader in academic and NGO work on alternative indicators. In 2003, Daly referred to Canada as a country to emulate (Daly, 2003). It was a groundbreaking time, the Atkinson foundation had recently established a national Index of Wellbeing becoming the first country to do so, there were multiple provincial GPI projects, and the federal government had commissioned a round table to establish sustainability indicators. Pioneering organizations and advocates were determined to reshape society based on a different set of ideals. Twelve years later, however, the impacts of early successes are in question (Wilson and Tyedmers, 2013). Canada lacks high level political support for new indicators and the institutionalized means to translate new statistical measures into alternative policies and priorities. The lack of political will is mirrored by a lack of public interest for a new set of measures.

The paper draws on over fifteen interviews with researchers, NGO leaders, public-sector officials, and politicians, along with analysis of relevant documents, and findings from a facilitated workshop to trace the evolution and impact of alternative indicators. Interviewees include the architects of early alternative indicator metrics, several senior politicians including a former prime minister and premiere, and several former high-ranking civil servants of Canada's statistical agency. The workshop convened a group of experts to validate findings from the interviews, debate the impact of alternative indicators and discuss what worked and what did not work as a basis to chart a path forward.

We argue that in Canada, the impact of alternative indicators has been minimal to date especially in regards to influencing public policy and defining a new economic vision. There has been minimal uptake of alternative indicators at provincial or federal levels nor any meaningful public discourse. Efforts to ‘change the water cooler conversation’ failed. Governments appear reluctant to support non-economic growth based measures worried they may convey messages that undermine economic growth and job creation or raise doubts regarding key economic priorities (Wilson and Tyedmers, 2013). Indicators have gained some prominence in the context of expanding what we measure to correct for known gaps in the GDP as a surrogate of well-being. Counting more, however, does not appear to have changed what we value. The introduction of indicators has not led to deeper questioning about the underlying structure of the economy and its imperatives. The case of Canada, and other nations, also suggests that the use of new socio-economic indicators is best seen as one product of political efforts and social movement struggles to bring other values into decision making, rather than as the transformative force that will cause a change in societal priorities.

References:

Daly, H., 2003. Keynote address. Canadian Society of Ecological Economics (CANSEE) Conference. Jasper, Alberta.

Wilson, J., Tyedmers, P., 2013. Rethinking what counts. A review of wellbeing and genuine progress indicator metrics from a Canadian Viewpoint. *Sustainability*. 5, 187-202.