

Beyond GDP: Rethinking Indicators of Progress

Wednesday April 7, 2010, 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon

Alumni Hall, Victoria College Building, 91 Charles Street West, University of Toronto

Notes from Table Discussions

Question 1: What indicators of progress do you currently use in your work? What is useful about these?

- GDP is still used frequently, ie. GDP forecasts are used to set budget levels across ministries.
- Indicators are often input/output based – it is easy to measure the inputs but much harder to track the outputs or impacts.
- Jobs and unemployment are fundamental indicators of wellbeing – that's what politicians point to.
- The indicators we use are based on our values – that's a good thing, need not be ashamed of our values
- Social services use neighbourhood and household level indicators
- Economic variables, eg. employment, are also very useful for social services
- Sometimes indicators are not complementary, eg. department of fisheries policy based on an economic pillar and a conservation pillar which were at odds.

Question 2 – Are the current measures of progress available to you sufficient? Why or why not?

- The available measures are generally not *appropriate*. There is a tendency to compare Canada to the U.S. on their commonly used indicators, eg. Canadian productivity is lower than U.S., but this reflects a different value system. U.S. would do much worse on certain indicators that Canadians would consider very important.
- We need to distinguish between micro and macro level indicators – indicators for individual outcomes vs. indicators for societal outcomes – and make sure that we address both

- Indicators need context – for example there are regional disparities in Canada that have a historical basis – need to keep these in mind and not use indicators on their own to determine what is good or bad policy.
- Our indicators do not currently measure global impact (of policies), eg. whether or not we are exporting poverty or climate change impacts that do not stay in one jurisdiction.
- Our indicators tend to capture inputs but not outputs
- Often our political masters are satisfied with the answers they are getting and are not asking us for better indicators.
- In the measures we currently use, we don't include citizen satisfaction – easier instead to defer to external polling.

Question 3 – How might you use the information you have heard from the panel?

- Should use the results of various measures and indicators to communicate implied objectives – and not just to government
- The choice of indicators can be used to develop a new vision
- When using a well-being index, can't only measure inputs – for example, its not necessarily useful to measure how much is spent on healthcare. Successful policies in other areas will improve health and reduce healthcare costs.
- If we are to move towards new indicators there will certainly be some institutional roadblocks – need to think about those in advance.