

# Handpicked: Stories from the Field

Season 3, Episode 6 - "Will the Pursuit of Limitless Growth Make Us Better Off?":  
Redefining Progress in the Canadian Food System

Featuring Naomi Robert

## Transcript

### Speakers

Amanda Di Battista: **AD**

Laine Young: **LY**

Naomi Robert: **NR**

**LY:** Growing a tomato in your garden from seed you saved contributes nothing to Gross Domestic Product (or GDP), but the plastic wrapper and fuel spent getting a tomato from, say Mexico to your local grocery store, well those contribute to GDP...but are those expenditures helpful or harmful for society?

For many years, Western economics has taught us that the best way to increase prosperity is through ever increasing economic growth, measured in terms of GDP. However, humanity's appetite for growth is exceeding ecological limits, causing climate change and biodiversity loss. Communities and governments are beginning to ask questions about the purpose and sustainability of growth. Who is benefitting from economic growth and what is it costing society? Is exponential growth a reasonable or effective way to meet humanity's needs for dignified and healthy lives? Should our economies be targeting a different goal, and if so, what?

The food system is great place to ask these questions. The food system is more productive and profitable than ever. Every year we grow more and more food- enough to feed everyone on the planet. Yet, hunger persists. And agriculture has come with costs for our ecosystems. So, what is the purpose of economic growth in the food system? And is there a better vision of progress and success?

On today's episode, we will talk about the history of GDP in food system policy in Canada, and some alternative ways of measuring progress in our society.

{[Intro music]}

**LY:** Hello and welcome to another episode of *Handpicked: Stories from the Field*, a podcast from the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems.

I'm Laine Young ...

**AD:** And I'm Amanda Di Battista.

In this episode we'll be talking to Naomi Robert, a Research Associate at the Institute for Sustainable Food Systems at Kwantlen Polytechnique University and a PhD candidate at Simon Fraser University who works on a new project called, "Beyond GDP: Lessons for Redefining Progress in Canadian Food System Policy".

**LY:** Gross Domestic Product (GDP), was created to measure economic activity but has become the most often used indicator for societal progress and wellbeing. There is a whole body of scholarly literature that looks at ways of measuring wellbeing that go beyond GDP.

**AD:** In her work, Naomi brings a food system lens to the beyond GDP critiques to advance research that centers well-being in Canadian agriculture and food policy.

**LY:** I sat down with Naomi to ask about her early research to get a better sense of how a food systems lens might add to the Beyond GDP critique. She gave me a quick primer on the links between GDP scholarship and sustainable food system policy.

Take a listen.

{[Musical Interlude]}

**NR:** My name is Naomi Robert. I am a Research Associate at the Institute for Sustainable Food Systems at KPU and a Ph.D. candidate at SFU

**LY:** Your PhD has to do with the GDP, the gross domestic product. Yeah. Can you tell us what GDP is, in your words?

**NR:** Absolutely. So, GDP, Gross Domestic Product is a measure of the total monetary value of everything produced in a country's economy. So, all goods and services over a period of time, which is usually a year. So, it's a measure of the size of an economy. And compared over time, it's used as an indicator of economic growth.

**LY:** So, I think a part of your PhD is sort of exploring how the concept of GDP might be misused in policy. So, do you want to just give us a little bit of a backgrounder on how it's used or misused in policy?

**NR:** Yeah, for sure. So, this is not something new. It's kind of widely accepted that GDP is misused in a lot of ways in our policymaking. But I'm really interested in putting a food system lens on that and increasing the attention that we that we give to this sort of privileging of GDP in the food system.

So, I think that a lot of people would agree that GDP is really privileged in our policymaking across the board and at a high level. A lot of people would say it's sort of the single most

desirable outcome for policy is to increase GDP. And it's seen as this measure of progress and used as a proxy for well-being in society. It comes from this idea or this assumption that if we pursue economic growth, we'll be advancing well-being in society. But GDP is not a measure of well-being. And it was never intended to be a measure of well-being. Our contemporary understanding or use of GDP is often traced back to the 1930s when an American economist, Simon Kuznets, was tasked with developing an indicator to track the impacts and the recovery from the Great Depression. But it's since been solidified in our economic playbook and our economic ways of doing things, that growth is really a priority and we're quite dependent on pursuing that priority.

**LY:** For sure. And that's globally, right? Like, that's not just in Canada?

**NR:** Absolutely. Yeah, it is. It is a shared playbook.

**LY:** Okay. Do you want to maybe just share some of these limitations you're talking about of using GDP as a measure of well-being?

**NR:** For sure. Yeah. So, I think there are three really important and substantial limitations of GDP that are widely recognized that I'll just run through. So the first one is what GDP includes. So, GDP doesn't distinguish between harmful expenditures and beneficial expenditures. All spending counts as a positive contribution, even if it reflects negative impacts on well-being as a whole.

So, some examples would be if a government spends money to address freshwater pollution from agricultural runoff, that is a positive contribution to GDP. Or if households are spending more on highly processed foods or farmers have to spend extra money to protect from extreme heat waves that are increasing more frequently from climate change. All this shows up as positive contributions to GDP so that distinction isn't made within the accounting.

The second part, I'd say, is what GDP leaves out. So, GDP leaves out a lot of important things, which I think we can easily imagine are non-monetary. So, if it's not exchanged on the market for a price, it isn't included in GDP. So, parenting and household labour, life satisfaction, all these things that are critical for well-being are overlooked by GDP. And really importantly, ecological values are also left out. So, I think we can also think of economic activities that degrade ecosystems that we depend on or contribute to climate change, and those impacts are also overlooked by GDP.

And then I'd also say that GDP doesn't account for inequality. It's an aggregate statistic. It shows economic growth, but it doesn't indicate who is benefiting from that growth. So, there's a lot of activity or implications under the hood. You know, you can have poverty increase, but also GDP increasing because that inequality is not part of the equation.

**LY:** Yeah, that makes sense. You were talking about it with the food system. So, I imagine, like, you know, successful monoculture, large-scale agriculture is seen as a positive in the GDP measure. But it's not taking into account some of the ecological issues with that type of agriculture.

**NR:** Absolutely. Yeah. There are a lot of examples in the food system across the board, like from all of these three categories. You know, the equity piece is also a really big one where, you know, farmers have, given an incredibly productive food system, produces a lot of value. But, you know, farmers have been experiencing an income crisis since the 1980s. So, who's benefiting from that value is overlooked.

**LY:** So, do you want to maybe tell us a little bit more of about how using GDP, like maybe misusing GDP as a measure of wellbeing impacts wellbeing specifically in the food system in Canada?

**NR:** Yeah, for sure. So, increasing GDP like we've talked about is this often a primary goal and exists as a primary goal in food and agriculture as well, as this key measure of success among policymakers. And in Canada, we're very good at meeting and setting goals for growth and export targets in what we call the agrifood system. But we're perhaps less diligent about setting and meeting goals related to well-being in the food system and enabling growth... if you look at the policy and meeting export targets, these are a really big priority because we're assuming that if we pursue economic growth and we grow the economy, that's sort of sufficient to deliver the rest of what we want.

But from the limitations we talked about earlier, that's not the case. There's a lot happening in the food system. You can have food security increasing, food insecurity, increasing- excuse me, while also losing biodiversity and topsoil while you increase GDP.

**LY:** Okay. Do you have any more examples of that, like what that looks like? Is there any other realms of the food system where GDP impacts the well-being?

**NR:** Yeah. For sure. So, we're dependent on a lot of I'd say, you know, unjust labor practices in the food system and that's very much overlooked by GDP. We have a lot of- you know, the migrant labor programs and we're dependent on a lot of often unsafe working conditions for food workers and that those types of social issues are very much overlooked by GDP.

Issues related to people's health and diets and access, and food security... those things, those values aren't necessarily exchanged on the market for a market price. So, they would be overlooked by GDP as well. If someone is, a household buys only pop for a year and increases spending on that, that would contribute positively to that GDP measure of household expenditure. But I think we can easily understand that that's not contributing positively to well-being.

**LY:** So, all of that being said, I guess, like, what could we be doing differently? Is there other metrics that work better? Is it maybe like using a more holistic look at not, maybe not just GDP, but other things as well? What does that look like?

**NR:** Yeah, for sure. There's a lot of work that's been done around rethinking GDP. So, like, just there's like the metric piece and then there's also this larger economic assumption piece. And for, for the metric piece, there's been work looking at for, for a number of decades, adjusting GDP to give a better indication of progress. So, the Genuine Progress Indicator adjusts for things like environmental degradation and won't count that as a positive. It'll deduct it from the GDP value,

but still communicates things, or communicates progress in economic value and looks at sort of how GDP and GPI (genuine progress indicators) sort of converge and diverge.

There's also a lot of work supporting, you know, that says a single aggregate statistic and monetary value doesn't capture well-being, which is, you know, there's a lot of validity to that idea as well. So, supporting a dashboard of indicators that aren't necessarily monetary to target and track societal well-being and that work is being done as well in Canada.

There's the Canadian Index of Wellbeing- that work has been specifically developed in the Canadian context and that reports on the quality of life for Canadians. I think it's hosted at Waterloo University at the moment. There's also, that came out relatively recently in 2021, the Department of Finance released like a Quality of Life Framework for Canada that is really recognizing the limitations of GDP as a policy metric. And that's sort of an initial look into how to apply wellbeing to policymaking.

And then like with the food systems lens, there's a huge amount of indicator work out there that we can really draw from to help measure progress. And things like food security- is our food system adequately feeding people and providing for nutritious and healthy diets? What are the working conditions for those in the food system that we rely on for our sustenance? What is the ability of local businesses to thrive, or farmers make a decent living? Ecological indicators...I think all of those play up have an important role to play. It's and there's the question of how do we enable a system that looks at those indicators and pursues them with the same high dedication that that we are currently pursuing growth?

**LY:** And so, is this work is looking at other types of metrics? Is it mostly outside of the government system this, the sort of call for change?

**NR:** I would say that a lot of the call for change is sort of initiated outside of the government system because understandably, there's a certain framework that that policymakers are working in and a certain playbook and set of assumptions that we're working with. But as we see, for example, with that Quality of Life Framework, there is this recognition that there's a need to look at things differently. And the recognition and sort of the how to do it is, you know... permeating government and at an international level after the financial crash, I believe it was the French government sort of initiated a commission, the Stiglitz commission, to look at reforms for measuring progress in economic indicators. So, there's this there is this broad recognition. I think we don't have a great idea of how to fully embed it given our current economic thinking. But it's a hybrid of both. But I think a lot of the calls for action were initiated outside of a government being, like, hey, hold on a second- pursuing limitless growth is unsustainable.

**LY:** Okay. And I think some of your work talks about something, a term called the “wellbeing economy”. You want to tell us a little bit about that?

**NR:** Yeah, for sure. So, the wellbeing economy is some of again, an example of this this work that recognizes that, you know, pursuing growth limitlessly as a sort of primary policy goal is, is unsustainable and not delivering the outcomes that we really are looking for from society. So, it's a concept for an alternative to this growth focused economic system, recognizing that GDP is

insufficient. So the proposition is instead of focusing on economic growth and sort of assuming the rest is going to sort itself out when we have more, more income nationally, it's changing the goal of our economies to meeting the needs of people for dignified and healthy lives within the capacity of the planet to, you know, respecting planetary boundaries. So, I'm really interested in what this could look like for the food system, and the wellbeing economy kind of exists on a few different fronts. Like, there's the research part, you know, is this possible? What are the economic implications, what does it mean for employment, etc.? You know, how can we meet our climate change goals using this idea?

And then there's also a really significant like civil society and networking piece as well, and a lot of coalitions being built around the wellbeing economy, the Wellbeing Economy Alliance being one of them, which is like a collection of organizations and governments that are committed to looking into this work. There's Doughnut Economics, which is another name for a different type of a similar framework. That's like, how do we shift the goal from growth to meeting people's needs within planetary capacity?

**LY:** That sounds exciting. And that's the focus of your PhD?

**NR:** Yeah. So, I'm looking in the Canadian context, within our food system, what are we, what are the assumptions that are built into our policymaking and how can we focus on well-being? When we're making policy, what does that look like as an alternative to growth?

**LY:** How has the pandemic and, and COVID 19 in general sort of affected this idea of GDP as a measure of well-being?

**NR:** For a lot of people what really came to the forefront was the amount of inequality in our society in general, but particularly in the food system. And I think we felt immediately in the pandemic, how reliant we all are on food workers to feed us, grocery store workers, meat processors, farm labourers... all of this workforce that we deemed is essential is largely underpaid, under-appreciated, and often quite marginalized. So, while grocery retail makes a huge amount of profit, the workers supporting that supply chain really don't. There's a lot of inequality in that system.

I think it also made it obvious how farmers wear a huge amount of risk in the food system, as well. When things shut down, farmers had some tough decisions to make, were forced to dump milk, destroy crops, absorb a lot of financial hardship and lose that upfront investment. Farmers really take on a disproportionate amount of risk in the food system and often have to pay the price when things don't work out as planned. So, there's a lot of inequality in our food system, and there are other examples as well, but I think we make all of that inequality invisible when we report out on the GDP of agri-food or the annual values of our food exports and we really need a better system to measure progress and to target policy.

{[Outro Music Starts]}

**LY:** Thanks so much for tuning in for this episode of *Handpicked: Stories from the Field*.

Special thanks to Naomi Robert for working with us on this episode.

This episode was hosted and produced by us: Laine Young [**AD:** and Amanda Di Battista], produced by Charlie Spring and edited by Narayan Subramoniam.

This episode also features music from Keenan Reimer-Watts.

**AD:** *Handpicked* is produced with support from the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems, Wilfrid Laurier University and the Balsille School of International Affairs.

**LY:** Please check out our show notes for a bibliography, teaching tools, and links to other relevant information that we used to produce this episode. Make sure you check out our website for other ways to engage with us.

**AD:** This episode produced on the lands of the Neutral, Anishaanabe and Haudenosaunee people and recorded with Naomi on the Unceded Traditional Territory of the K'ómoks First Nation. We encourage you all to check the land acknowledgement link in the show notes to learn more.

As always, I'm Amanda Di Battista

**LY:** and I'm Laine Young, and this has been an episode of the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems' podcast, *Handpicked*.

**AD:** Make sure to tune in next time, for more freshly picked stories from the field.

{[Music Increases]}