

Beyond GDP Colorado – An Overview

Measuring Human and Ecological Wellbeing in Colorado

A pilot project affiliated with the University of Denver's Grand Challenges Initiative¹ and partially funded by DU IMPACT 2025

Project Co-leaders: Sarah Bexell², David Carlson³, Sheila Davis⁴, Drew Mueller⁵, Dale Rothman⁶, Paul Sutton⁷, and Jacob Tucker⁸

Background: Over the past 20 years or so, states such as Maryland, Ohio, Vermont, Utah, Minnesota, Hawaii, and Washington have established and published statewide economic, environmental, and social indicators to signify “quality of life,” “progress,” “prosperity,” or “sustainability” to *go beyond GDP* (Gross Domestic Product) and other widely used measures of business and economic activity.⁹ *Beyond GDP Colorado* joins other states—and projects at the national and international level—to promote greater awareness and impact of human and ecological wellbeing measures in personal and public consciousness and decision-making.

In Colorado, the Leeds School of Business at the University of Colorado Boulder has released an annual Colorado Business Economic Outlook report at a public forum each December since 1965.¹⁰ This report contains past trends and consensus forecasts for demographics, employment, and GDP at the state level, as well as employment and various financial and output measures for 13 sectors of Colorado's economy.

Objectives: In collaboration with NGOs, government agencies, and other institutions of higher education in Colorado, Beyond GDP Colorado seeks to complement the annual assessment of business and economic trends and issues in Colorado by: (1) developing a consensus set of key statewide measurable indicators of human and ecological wellbeing (“HEW”); (2) preparing an annual/biennial report of trends and related issues; and (3) convening an annual/biennial forum to release these findings and provide an opportunity for discussing their significance. Specifically, ***we intend to develop a Beyond GDP Colorado report and convene a public Forum by spring 2021.***

Basic Approach: We consider “health” to be a fundamental proxy for “wellbeing,” both in its human and non-human (i.e., other species, environmental) sense. We seek meaningful *outcome*, or *downstream*, measures of **human health** as well as *leading*, or *upstream*, indicators of socioeconomic and environmental *determinants of health*—e.g., health systems and services, housing, employment, public safety, education, income and wealth, air and water quality, pollution, and access to nature. More specifically, we seek measures that illuminate **equity** (or the lack thereof) for Coloradans with respect to these socioeconomic and environmental drivers of health outcomes—i.e., equal access to resources and opportunities without regard to gender, race/ethnicity, economic status, etc. Similarly, we seek meaningful outcome measures of **environmental health**, or *flourishing* (including nonhuman species), coupled with key indicators of socio-economic and environmental drivers of such flourishing.

In addition to developing quantitative measures of human and ecological wellbeing, *non-quantitative* approaches for “taking the measure” of such wellbeing (or lack thereof)—such as stories, photography, and art—will be included. Measures will also include illuminating examples of inequities and non-flourishing in all species, including humans, as well as positive steps to reduce or eliminate them. 3/8/2020

¹For details, see <https://grandchallenges.du.edu/>

² **Sarah M. Bexell**, PhD – DU Visiting Clinical Associate Professor, Graduate School of Social Work, and Director of Humane Education, Institute for Human-Animal Connection; Co-Chair, Grand Challenges Sustainability Cohort.

³ **David L. Carlson**, PhD -- Convener, Ethics and Ecological Economics Forum at the Iliff School of Theology.

⁴ **Sheila Davis**, MD, MS – Health Equity Coordinator for Boulder County Health; adjunct faculty, Colorado School of Mines.

⁵ **Andrew Mueller**, PhD – DU Ass't. Professor, Real Estate & Construction Management; Co-Chair, Sustainability Cohort

⁶ **Dale Rothman**, PhD – DU Assoc. Professor, Josef Korbel School of Int'l. Studies, Sie Int'l. Relations Complex

⁷ **Paul C. Sutton**, PhD – DU Professor, Department of Geography and the Environment.

⁸ **Jacob Tucker** -- DU Master's Degree candidate in Economics and a CCESL Student Fellow.

⁹ See the New Economics Institute report, “Measuring for the Future: an Overview of Measurements of Progress and Sustainability on the State-Level” (2011). Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20150913163826/http://www.dnr.maryland.gov/mdgpi/pdfs/NEI-OtherStatesAssessment.pdf>

¹⁰ For an electronic copy of the most recent report, see <https://www.colorado.edu/business/business-research-division/brd-publications/colorado-business-economic-outlook>.

Some Guiding Principles

1. The wellbeing of persons and the physical and social environment are inseparable.

- *Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.*¹¹
– Chief Seattle, Duwamish
- *. . . everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others.*¹²
–Pope Francis
- *The Doughnut is a 21st-century compass. Between its social foundation of human well-being and ecological ceiling of planetary pressure lies the safe and just space for humanity.*¹³
– Ecological economist Kate Raworth

The Doughnut of social and planetary boundaries (2017)



2. Focus on developing measurable indicators of human and ecological wellbeing that are based upon assessments of human and environmental *needs* rather than human *wants*.

Neoclassical economics (NCE) interprets “welfare” (or “wellbeing”--the term we shall use in this project) in terms of *wants*, which are assumed to be insatiable. Moreover, NCE presumes that human wants are to be measured by the market value of goods and services to satisfy these wants.

GDP and related measures are fundamentally based upon a production/consumption framework. The shift in focus from wants to needs is necessary and urgent in light of unsustainable, and inequitable, patterns of the global production and consumption of material goods and nonrenewable resources—and their increasingly destructive effects upon global ecosystems.

We shall draw upon recent developments in human needs assessment that go well beyond Abraham Maslow’s needs hierarchy (1954) and consumption-based approaches. For example, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum focus upon *functionings* (roughly speaking, “needs”) and *capabilities* (roughly speaking, “access to satisfiers of those needs”) in characterizing human well-being.¹⁴

3. Broadly speaking, how does *Beyond GDP Colorado* move forward?

Structurally, we see DU playing an initial catalytic role in forming and sustaining a decentralized network of small working groups—composed of representatives from interested NGOs, government agencies, and other institutions of higher education (as well as DU faculty, staff, and students)—to develop meaningful measures of human and ecological wellbeing in Colorado. Such working groups shall include persons of color and persons at the margin who are directly affected by inequities. Also, DU will manage the preparation of the Beyond GDP Colorado report and Forum in 2021.

After the 2021 report and forum, all interested parties will weigh in on such questions as: *Are the Beyond GDP Colorado Report and Forum worth doing on an annual or biennial basis? If so, what modifications are needed? Are there other or additional ways to generate and share such information widely? And what is DU’s role if Beyond GDP Colorado continues in some form?*

¹¹ Available at <https://sayingimages.com/native-american-quotes/>

¹² “*Laudato Si*: On Care for Our Common Home” (¶170). Available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

¹³ Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: 7 Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2017), 38. See <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/> for a 17-minute TED talk and the doughnut model.

¹⁴ See Herman Daly and Joshua Farley, *Ecological Economics*, 2nd ed. (Washington: Island Press, 2011), 278-281.