



3.1 Interpreting the Index | Developing narratives on selected results

“Is Canada’s agri-food sector sustainable?” is a question being asked across Canada and worldwide. (A similar question is relevant to all nations.) The answer is not a simple one. Sustainability has neither an agreed-to definition nor a set of metrics that can be used to measure it – here or abroad.

Meanwhile, the bar is rising. The entire food sector is increasingly being benchmarked, such as on reaching net-zero emissions targets. Broadly speaking, it’s about both reporting on areas of leadership and the shortcomings.

This is why an unprecedented coalition of 129 partners came together for the first time to build a framework to define sustainability, including metrics that can be used to measure it. The result is Canada’s National Index on Agri-Food Performance.

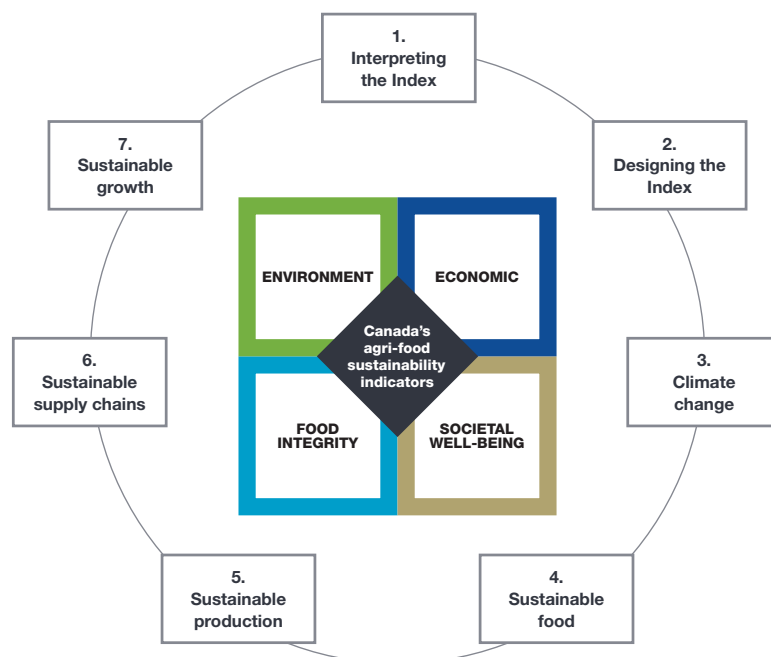


Figure 1: Seven narratives of Index results as measured across four blocks of sustainability

The partners also offer an interpretation of some selected results that receive a lot of attention.¹ This summary paper frames this response along with six other papers (“narratives”) to elaborate (Figure 1).

The initiative reveals several important hallmarks about a sustainable food sector (for Canada) and how it ought to be measured:

■ It has often been said that being sustainable is about meeting society’s current food needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. But, “being sustainable” today involves demonstrating it and broadening what is being measured. In this regard, the Index expresses sustainability holistically, across four essential building blocks:

- The environment (including matters important to being resilient and responding to climate change), food integrity (including food safety), economic (including profitable producers and companies), and societal well-being priorities (including matters relating to the workforce, food security and farm animal care).
- These blocks are further fractioned into 20 indicators and over 130 metrics. A series of short narrative papers (Papers 3 through 7, pictured in Figure 1) offer perspectives on a handful of selected Index findings.

¹ Index measures are found in a separate document: Final Report of Phase 3, Part 2: Index Indicators and Metrics: agrifoodindex.ca

■ **Responding to rising expectations on sustainability and new requirements requires working differently. Building greater societal trust in how food is produced and supplied necessitates stepping up collaborations and adopting a new type of governance.**

- Paper 2 – *Designing the Index*, explains how a diverse coalition of partners defined and measured sustainability from production to retail for the first time. Not only is this a Canadian-first, but it is also one of only a handful of such initiatives worldwide.

■ **Being sustainable requires confronting serious planetary threats to food production.**

- The most compelling environmental issue facing the planet today, climate change, drives much attention to Canada's agri-food system. The sector, from food producers to retail, is a climate change contributor and a solution provider and it is impacted by it. Paper 3 – *Climate change: GHG emissions*, provides an overview of emissions from agriculture and changes over time.
- Biodiversity is essential to the well-being of the planet. Paper 5 – *Sustainable production*, looks at relevant metrics, which show a complex, changing landscape, revealing pressures on biodiversity as well as retention of farmland.

■ **The definition of sustainability is changing and extends beyond the environment. “Social sustainability” involves equitable access to safe and nutritious foods and providing meaningful and inclusive working opportunities for people.**

- The Index includes 10 indicators and many more metrics that measure the social sustainability of food. Indigenous Nations have unique considerations for sustainable food, including a relationship with traditional food systems. Paper 4 – *Sustainable food*, focuses on one key theme, food insecurity.

■ **While each farm, fisher and company need to define their own sustainability journey, being sustainable requires a greater degree of supply chains alignment. Not only is this increasingly needed to show that ingredients are sustainably sourced, but it is required to ensure food safety.**

- Responsibility for food safety spans supply chain players, including producers, processors, retailers, governments, and other stakeholders. Paper 6 – *Sustainable supply chains*, shows that Canada's food supply is safe, as evidenced by compliance with government regulatory requirements, although food safety cannot be taken for granted.

■ **Being sustainable requires harnessing all the tools, dollars, and processes to speed up the response, be more effective and more competitive.**

- Innovation is fundamental to improving sustainability across all four pillars. Paper 7 – *Sustainable growth*, addresses the challenge of measuring innovation but underscores the importance of tracking key metrics, such as R&D, to position Canada's agri-food sector to be more successful and sustainable.

The National Index on Agri-Food Performance is a first-of-its-kind Canadian initiative to define and report on a comprehensive and consolidated picture of sustainability from food production to retail.

Complete Index results along with references to global practices are available at agrifoodindex.ca. All information in this paper is sourced from the Index (Part 2) unless otherwise stated. This paper is one of seven published together as Part 3 of the Phase 3 Final Report, May 2023.