



Conversation with Tara Campbell

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself and tell me briefly what you do?

Tara Campbell: My name is Tara Campbell. I use she/her pronouns and I am based in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada in Treaty Six territory. I work for an environmental nonprofit called the David Suzuki Foundation (DSF), which is based here in Canada. I lead our wellbeing economies program. We are currently working to establish the [Wellbeing Economies Alliance for Canada](#).

Ashley Hopkinson: What does the phrase wellbeing economy mean to you, especially within the context of the work you do?

Tara Campbell: That's a big question. At DSF, when we talk about a wellbeing economy, we actually often pluralize it. We say wellbeing economies. We think that there are many different ways that wellbeing economies can manifest. So that's one thing I like to share off the bat. But I do think there's a lot of shared values and perspectives that would be at the heart of these different manifestations. As an environmental organization, our primary motivation for a different kind of economy is due to the environmental impacts of the current economy.

The way I see it, a wellbeing economy is going to probably be a smaller economy than the current dominant economic system. Smaller in the sense of less materially intensive, less production of goods and services and more of a circular economy where products are reused and repaired over time. The way that we think about it is that there's this downscaling of extraction. That's the environmental side but there is also the social side.

If we're downscaling extraction, that also needs to be done in a democratic way and people need to be involved in how we choose what we choose to produce as a society. So I think a wellbeing economy

also means an increase in democracy, and people are more involved in what we produce as a society. Hopefully it also means less work and more time to pursue our passions and care for each other.

Ashley Hopkinson: In other words, whatever the solution is, the solution itself has to then be equitable because otherwise, you kind of recreate another kind of social problem. Right?

Tara Campbell: Yes! We acknowledge that societal-wide wellbeing economies are far away from current reality. But how can we embed these principles that are a part of [wellbeing] in our work now as much as possible? Democracy, deliberation, fairness, equality, those are all big principles that we're trying to, in our little pockets of work, advance as much as we can as a kind of prefigurative politics. Those are also things we hope to see on a large scale.

Ashley Hopkinson: As an organization how do you connect the dots from environment to economics for people? How do you get people to see that caring for the planet is connected to all these other things and moving the needle forward on the work you do?

Tara Campbell: There's work to be done, even internally in our organization and within the environmental movement to connect the dots between the economy and the environment, and the fact that our economic system needs to change in order for us to meet environmental and climate goals. So I would say that's a longer horizon for our work: building up more of that shared messaging amongst the environmental movement. For now, our work has been focused a lot on just finding folks who are already in the landscape of working towards economic system transition. Right now we're trying to bring together people who are more-or-less already aligned but may not know each other. We haven't been as focused on bringing new folks into the movement, but when we get there I think our messaging will center on how much better life can be for all of us if we shift towards economies that are purpose-built for our collective flourishing, instead of being founded on growth, extraction, and exploitation..

Ashley Hopkinson: You've done some landscape research in this field. Did you find anything interesting that you would peg as a takeaway or insight from that research? I know you just mentioned there are people out here doing this work that should probably convene. But was there anything else that stood out as some kind of bellwether?

Tara Campbell: There are very distinct communities that we observed in the landscape that seem to be built around certain focus areas, like folks who are really interested in social enterprises, for example, as a solution for transforming the economy. Other communities are really interested in universal basic income or mutual aid, etc. So we were seeing communities that have formed based on

different kinds of interventions into the system. We were really noticing these clear communities where, oh, there's a lot of people in this community, they're highly networked within the community, but there's not a lot of relationships across them. The folks who are working on social enterprise aren't necessarily, at least as far as we could see from a public view, well-connected to the universal basic income organizers. So I think that was a big insight. It's just like, 'oh, it is actually a highly fragmented landscape, there's a lot of bubbles around these different ideas but there aren't a lot of bridges.'

Ashley Hopkinson: From the environment perspective, where literally there are parts of the world on fire, how then do you manage having conversations about other aspects that are more system-based but equally important? How in the economies space are you working to have your voice heard, to make it distinctive?

Tara Campbell: I think that's a big challenge with the work is the environmental movement, but also the social justice movement. There are a lot of crises all the time. It's really hard to focus on some of the actual root causes of crises when, as a society, we're trying to solve, 'oh, people don't have homes, people can't afford food, there are forest fires.' It can be also hard to give our attention to what it means to address these issues in a deep and lasting way. [However,] I do think there's folks who are doing a good job of narrating the link between these crises and the underpinning systems themselves, and that we do need to work on shifting that. I do find that having spaces to imagine the worlds we want, to celebrate pockets of those futures that exist right now, and to scheme about that with others can be really nourishing when so many of us are worn down from dealing with urgent crises as they come up.

Ashley Hopkinson: One of the things that I noticed in communities that face great environmental challenges like New Orleans, is that there's a lot of grassroots work that happens, and it happens around mutual aid funds and other community-led work. Is there anything happening in Canada or in the territories around that feel like a glimmer of something more system-wide taking root? Perhaps a program, an initiative?

Tara Campbell: Yes, there's a few things I can speak to there. Some of the spaces where I see organizing that's centering the need for other economic models and a balanced relationship with the planet are led by Indigenous communities. Indigenous communities are really on the frontline of seeing the impacts of extractive economies. For example, the [Just Transition Guide](#) that was recently released speaks to a lot of examples of Indigenous-led solar projects. I think they're really amazing examples of communities organizing around alternatives.

I'm a huge fan of the cooperative movement as well. To me, these are little glimmers or pockets of the future that I am really excited about. So folks who are organizing, building sustainable businesses together, participating in the governance of the business and creating work for themselves that feels meaningful. These days, I am really inspired by [Solid State Community Industries](#) which is a worker co-operative incubator based in Surrey, BC.

Ashley Hopkinson: Climate has become one of these issues that is divisive, and it wasn't always that way, but it's increasingly getting that way. Have you worked on any initiatives where you feel like it's a “bridge the gap” project? Something that tends to take the temperature down in the room where people aren't so polarized on key issues?

Tara Campbell: We're kind of focused right now on building relationships across this somewhat like-minded landscape. So that hasn't been at the center of our work. But I do think about it a lot, and I think about “why is it that climate is so divisive”? Climate action has different consequences for different people. So for people who are invested in the fossil fuels industry climate action means lots of change for them, where maybe if you work there, you lose your job, or people who are invested lose money. For other folks, climate action means changing a lifestyle, which is something that we can have deep attachments to. I find that is helpful to take a relational approach: bringing people together where they have a shared interest in a place, where they might cross paths with each other, maybe they already know each other, and focusing actually on the relationships as opposed to figuring out exactly what it is that we need to do as a society. Having a foundation of relationships is key to working and thinking across differences.

There are a lot of economic policies that advance wellbeing economies and do sort of bridge or are promoted by all sides of the political spectrum. I keep coming back to universal basic income. There are folks on both sides of the spectrum who are advancing that. So I'm curious about seeing other examples of that. I think work-time reduction programs might be another example. So that would include ideas like the four-day work weeks or shorter work days. I think these are things that aren't strongly associated with a particular political identity, so they are maybe a little bit less polarizing. They're not clearly a progressive or conservative or left or right policy. I think that there are ideas like these that allow people with diverse political ideas to have conversations.

Ashley Hopkinson: What does a better economic system look like to you? Specifically, an economic system that supports a healthy planet?

Tara Campbell: Downscaling so many different aspects of our economy: the parts that aren't sustainable or supporting human and planetary flourishing. I think that this requires other aspects of the economy to grow as well, like systems of mutual aid and care, repair and restoration economies. I think we will all be working less, and we should all have more autonomy over our time, where we can choose to spend it in ways that feel meaningful to us. That doesn't sound like it's framed around the environment or climate, but I do think that it is linked to that. In general, the way that people would choose to spend their time, are things that are usually good for the world, when we're not struggling to survive or having to work all the time. So I do think that is really linked to climate goals.

I hesitate to use the word sharing economy because it has been co-opted by the capitalist economy, but I do think sharing will be more central. It's a part of the idea of downscaling. We don't all need to own a saw we only use once a year, or a car. There's so many things that we all individually own that are just sitting idle all the time because we all feel like we need our own because we don't all have strong communities where we can necessarily feel comfortable sharing things with other folks. This is a more radical form of "sharing economy" than what some might associate with companies like Airbnb

Ashley Hopkinson: Let's explore that further. What are the actions to get us closer to that? Is it an individual action or a broad sweeping policy? What are the barriers?

Tara Campbell: There are big barriers in Canada and I'm sure that's the case for other places. Our social security system actually is dependent on economic growth. We need to grow our population, we need to grow the economy in order to, for example, provide pensions to people through the Canada Pension Plan. So these services that exist to meet people's basic needs actually depend on growth. There are also many powerful folks who have vested interests in maintaining the status quo. I think the economy is also such a big system and feels too big to change - our collective ability to imagine something else and believe that it is possible to transition feels limited right now. These are some of the barriers.

We need new radical policy coming from the government level, but we also need individuals who are experimenting, who are building co-ops, who are creating real community connections and mutual aid groups. And we need folks who are trying to change public narratives, who are doing more movement building and activism to open up people's imaginations. We still need stuff. We need enterprises to exist in order to produce the things that we need and move into a more circular, sustainable economy. All of these things have a role to play. I don't think we can imagine orchestrating the transition and

how all these different things intersect. There isn't a linear path. It's really complex. We kind of need to be trying everything.

Ashley Hopkinson: Earlier, we spoke about the great work in the Just Transition Guide and the Indigenous community. What do you think were the key ingredients that made a difference ?

Tara Campbell: I think there's a bunch of different ingredients. First of all, extractive projects are happening on Indigenous territories. So Indigenous nations and peoples are seeing their land and territories degraded. So I think there's that. If you're like me, I've pretty much always lived in a city, and there's a distance between me seeing the effects of all of the industry that needs to go into producing the stuff that I use in my day-to-day life, it's kind of something I can be ignorant of really easily if I don't choose to pay attention or look into it.

Indigenous folks are also deeply connected to their territories and land and have a relationship to place that means very different things than my relationship to place. But I think Indigenous economies are and have been very much so aligned with the values of a wellbeing economy. I think there's so much to learn from worldviews that are central to Indigenous economies, which are founded on reciprocal relationships with the earth. It is a very different relationship from the dominant global economy.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you Tara, I'll end it here.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*