Flourish Project

The Ecology of Wellbeing

ESF 2026 REPORT

EVALUATING NATIONAL AND CITY WELLBEING FRAMEWORKS

TOWARD AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF ECOSYSTEMIC FLOURISHING

www.flourishproject.net

About the Flourish Project

The Flourish Project emerged from a simple but urgent recognition: that our prevailing models of progress are no longer sufficient to meet the complexity of the world we now face.

Across the globe, new approaches to wellbeing have begun to take shape - yet too often in isolation from one another. The Ecosystemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework was developed to bring these strands together, connecting the health of the natural environment, the design of economic systems, the strength of culture and identity, and the development of human potential. At its heart lies a clear insight: flourishing does not arise from single interventions, but from the alignment of systems.

The Project is now entering a full prototyping phase, working with partners across the world to translate this integrated vision into practical tools, metrics, and real-world applications across cities, communities, and institutions.

This report is a first attempt to evaluate existing frameworks through the ESF lens - and to share with potential partners the kind of things that we are looking at.

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Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, the global movement to move beyond GDP has accelerated significantly. Governments, international organisations, and cities have increasingly recognised that economic output alone cannot capture the true quality of human life, social cohesion, or ecological sustainability. In response, a diverse ecosystem of wellbeing frameworks has emerged, each attempting to measure and guide progress in more holistic ways.

This report provides a detailed analysis of these developments through the lens of the Ecosystemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework. It introduces a critical distinction between national and city-level wellbeing frameworks, arguing that while both are essential, they perform fundamentally different roles within a wider system of flourishing. It also identifies

The analysis demonstrates that:

- National frameworks primarily define structural conditions and policy architecture
- City frameworks shape lived experience and real-world integration
- Most existing frameworks are strong within specific domains but lack systemic coherence
- No current framework, at either level, achieves full ESF integration across ecological, economic, cultural, and human dimensions

The central conclusion of this report is that:

Flourishing is not the product of isolated frameworks, but of alignment across system levels. The future of wellbeing lies in the integration of national and city systems into a coherent, living architecture of human and ecological flourishing.

Introduction: The Evolution of Wellbeing Thinking

The dominance of GDP as the primary measure of progress has long been challenged by economists, psychologists, and policymakers. Early critiques highlighted that GDP fails to account for inequality, environmental degradation, social cohesion, and subjective wellbeing. More recent work has further emphasised that human flourishing is a multidimensional and relational phenomenon, shaped by interactions between individuals, communities, economies, and ecosystems.

In response, a new generation of frameworks has emerged, including:

- **national wellbeing dashboards**
- **alternative economic models**
- **social progress indicators**
- **subjective wellbeing surveys**
- **sustainability frameworks**

While these represent significant progress, they have largely developed in parallel, often reflecting different disciplinary origins and priorities. As a result, the global landscape of wellbeing measurement is characterised not by coherence, but by plurality and fragmentation.

The ESF Framework was developed to address this fragmentation by providing a unifying structure that recognises the interdependence of four core domains:

- **Natural Environment**
- **Circular and Regenerative Economics**
- **Cultural Values and Identity**
- **Human Capacities and Potential**

This report applies that lens to both national and city frameworks, revealing not only their strengths, but also the structural gaps that currently prevent the emergence of fully integrated systems of flourishing.

The ESF Evaluation Model

The ESF Framework is not another competing wellbeing model. It is best understood as an integrative architecture, capable of holding and aligning multiple existing approaches. Each framework assessed in this report is evaluated across four domains:

Natural Environment

This domain considers whether a framework recognises the foundational role of ecological systems, including biodiversity, climate stability, and access to nature. It also assesses whether environmental considerations are embedded within broader systems, rather than treated as separate policy areas.

Circular and Regenerative Economics

This domain evaluates how frameworks address economic systems, including inequality, livelihoods, resource use, and long-term sustainability. It distinguishes between traditional economic measurement and more advanced models that incorporate circularity, regeneration, and wellbeing-based economics.

Cultural Values and Identity

This domain focuses on belonging, meaning, shared values, identity, and social cohesion. It also considers whether frameworks engage with deeper cultural and worldview dimensions, including spirituality, creativity, and intergenerational continuity.

Human Capacities and Potential

This domain assesses how frameworks support human development across the life course, including health, relationships, learning, agency, and growth. It also considers whether developmental pathways, early childhood, and inner life are recognised as central to flourishing.

Each framework is scored out of 20, enabling a comparative understanding of integration across domains.

Section A: National Wellbeing Frameworks

The Role of National Frameworks

National wellbeing frameworks operate at the level of policy architecture and systemic conditions. They shape:

- fiscal priorities
- economic systems
- regulatory environments
- national indicators and reporting systems

They also play a critical role i**n signalling what a society values**, influencing both public discourse and institutional behaviour. However, their strength at the macro level often comes with a limitation: they tend to operate at a level of abstraction that can obscure lived experience. While they define conditions for wellbeing, **they do not necessarily ensure that wellbeing is experienced in practice.**

The Strengths of National Frameworks

National frameworks demonstrate several important strengths:

- First, **they provide system-level coherence.** By operating at scale, they can align economic, environmental, and social policies in ways that are not possible at smaller levels.
- Second, **they enable comparability and benchmarking**, allowing countries to assess progress over time and relative to others.
- Third, **they influence resource allocation,** shaping how public investment is directed across sectors such as health, education, and infrastructure.
- Fourth, many national frameworks now include environmental indicators and inequality measures, **representing a critical shift away from purely economic model**s.

The Limitations of National Frameworks

Despite these strengths, several limitations persist:

- National frameworks often **struggle to capture lived experience**, particularly at the level of neighbourhoods and communities.
- They tend to treat culture as a secondary or implicit domain, **rather than a central driver of behaviour and wellbeing.**
- Inner development, meaning, and spirituality are rarely measured explicitly, **despite their importance in shaping human experience.**
- Early childhood development, while recognised in some frameworks, **is not consistently integrated as a foundational system priority.**
- Finally, the relationships between domains are often weakly articulated, **leading to siloed policy approaches.**

Image 1: Top Ten National Frameworks - ESF 2026 Initial Prototype Ranking

Rank	Framework	Score	Category
1	Gross National Happiness (Bhutan)	**17**	Highly Integrated
2	Wellbeing Economy Frameworks (WEAll-aligned)	**16–17**	Highly Integrated
3	Doughnut Economics (National)	**16**	Highly Integrated
4	WISE (Wellbeing in Sustainable Economies)	**15–16**	Highly Integrated
5	European Wellbeing Frameworks (EU)	**14–15**	Moderately–Highly Integrated
6	OECD Wellbeing Framework	**14**	Moderately Integrated
7	Iceland Wellbeing Indicators	**14**	Moderately Integrated
8	New Zealand Living Standards Framework	**14**	Moderately Integrated
9	Scotland National Performance Framework	**14**	Moderately Integrated
10	Wales Future Generations Framework	**14**	Moderately Integrated

Regional and Provincial Wellbeing Frameworks

Between national frameworks and city-level implementation sits a critical but often overlooked layer of governance: regional and provincial systems. These operate at a scale that is both systemically meaningful and experientially grounded, enabling integration across sectors while remaining close to lived reality.

From an Eco-Systemic Flourishing perspective, this “missing middle” may represent one of the most important leverage points for achieving fully integrated wellbeing systems. The **Nova Scotia Quality of Life Framework** currently provides a compelling example of how this level can bridge national ambition and local experience.

Research, Enabling and Diagnostic Frameworks

The global wellbeing movement is also currently shaped by two complementary but often disconnected domains: **research and diagnostic frameworks** that define and measure wellbeing, and **enabling frameworks** that develop the human capacities required to realise it. The absence of integration between these domains remains one of the primary barriers to achieving true systemic flourishing.

Research frameworks operate at the level of understanding and measurement, shaping how wellbeing is defined, evidenced, and prioritised across societies. Enabling frameworks, by contrast, operate at the level of human consciousness and capability, influencing the values, behaviours, and decisions that ultimately determine whether systems succeed. Leading examples across these domains include the **Harvard Human Flourishing Program and Global Flourishing Study**, the **Inner Development Goals (IDGs)** and the **Inner Key Diagnostic.**

Section B: City Wellbeing Frameworks

The Role of City Frameworks

City frameworks operate at the level of implementation and lived reality. They shape:

- daily environments
- access to services
- community relationships
- local economies

Cities are where:

- policies are experienced
- systems interact
- trade-offs become visible

As such, they represent the most important arena **for integrating the four ESF domains in practice.**

The Strengths of City Frameworks

City frameworks are distinguished by their ability to capture:

- lived experience
- relational dynamics
- place-based variation

They are often more innovative, incorporating:

- participatory approaches
- youth voice
- local context

They also provide opportunities for real-time feedback and adaptation, **allowing policies to evolve in response to changing conditions.**

The Limitations of City Frameworks

However, city frameworks face structural constraints:

- They often lack control over macro-economic systems, **limiting their ability to address inequality or resource distribution at scale.**
- They may **depend heavily on national policy frameworks**, which can either enable or constrain local innovation.
- Measurement approaches **can be fragmented or inconsistent**, particularly when multiple initiatives operate in parallel.
- Finally, while strong in lived experience, **they may lack the system-level coherence needed to align across domains.**

Image 2: Top Ten City Frameworks - ESF 2026 Initial Prototype Ranking

Rank	Framework	Example City	Score	Category
1	GNH (City Application)	Thimphu	**17**	Highly Integrated
2	Doughnut Economics (City Model)	Amsterdam	**16**	Highly Integrated
3	Wellbeing Economy City Approaches	Wellington	**15–17**	Highly Integrated
4	Iceland Wellbeing Indicators (City Use)	Reykjavík	**14**	Moderately Integrated
5	OECD Local Wellbeing Framework	Multiple	**14**	Moderately Integrated
6	New Zealand Living Standards (City)	Auckland	**14**	Moderately Integrated
7	Social Progress Index (City)	Multiple	**12**	Moderately Integrated
8	BeeWell (Youth Wellbeing Model)	Manchester	**12**	Moderately Integrated
9	Thriving Places Index (UK city regions)	Multiple UK cities	**12–13**	Moderately Integrated
10	Melbourne Metrics	Melbourne	**10**	Partially Integrated

Section C: The National–City Integration Gap

A Systemic Misalignment

The most significant finding of this report **is the existence of a structural gap between national and city frameworks.**

National systems define:

- what is measured
- what is funded
- what is prioritised

City systems determine:

- what is experienced
- what is implemented
- what actually works

When these are not aligned, the result is: fragmented policy, inconsistent outcomes, and reduced impact

The ESF Insight: Nested Systems

From an ESF perspective, national and city frameworks should be understood as nested layers within a single system: National level sets the enabling conditions, City level integrates and expresses those conditions, and **Flourishing emerges only when these layers are aligned and mutually reinforcing.**

At present national frameworks are relatively strong in structure but weak in lived relevance; whereas city frameworks are strong in experience but weak in systemic power. **And this imbalance prevents the emergence of fully integrated systems of flourishing.**

Toward a Fully Integrated Model

A fully integrated ESF-aligned system would:

- balance all four domains equally
- integrate inner and outer dimensions
- prioritise early development
- embed culture and creativity
- align policy and lived experience

The Integration Opportunity

The components already exist - for example:

- **National frameworks → direction**
- **Regional frameworks → integration**
- **City frameworks → implementation**
- **Research frameworks → understanding and measurement**
- **Enabling frameworks → human capacity and behaviour**

The next step is not to create new frameworks, **but to integrate these into a coherent whole.**

Concluding Assessment

The global wellbeing movement has reached a pivotal moment. The limitations of GDP are widely recognised, and a rich ecosystem of alternative frameworks has emerged. However, these frameworks remain fragmented across domains, divided across system levels and insufficiently integrated. A concise conclusion of this report is that Flourishing is not achieved through isolated frameworks, but through the alignment of systems across scales. **The future of wellbeing lies in integration.**

Final Strategic Insight: The next evolution of wellbeing is not better measurement alone, but the creation of a multi-level, integrated architecture that connects policy, place, and human experience into a single system of flourishing.

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The Flourish Project is a UK-based Non-Profit Community Interest Company (C.I.C.)

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