

Beyond GDP: Towards a Framework for Human and Planetary Flourishing

A Contribution to the United Nations Intergovernmental Process on Beyond GDP

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Executive Summary

The growing international movement to move beyond Gross Domestic Product (GDP) represents one of the most significant developments in global public policy since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals. Across governments, international organisations and civil society, there is increasing recognition that economic output alone provides an incomplete account of societal progress. While GDP remains an important measure of market activity, it does not adequately reflect the health of ecosystems, the resilience of communities, the quality of relationships, the development of human capabilities, or the conditions that enable present and future generations to flourish.

The Beyond GDP agenda has already generated a rich landscape of complementary initiatives, including wellbeing frameworks, natural capital accounting, multidimensional poverty measures, inclusive wealth, social progress indicators and broader approaches to sustainable development. Together these represent an important advance in understanding what should be valued. Yet the proliferation of indicators also reveals a deeper challenge. The next stage of the Beyond GDP movement is not simply to develop more comprehensive measures of progress, but to establish a coherent understanding of the conditions that those measures are intended to promote.

This paper argues that flourishing provides that unifying purpose. Flourishing is understood not as a single outcome to be maximised, nor as an individual state of wellbeing alone, but as an emergent property of healthy, adaptive and mutually enhancing relationships within and between living systems. Human flourishing, social flourishing and ecological flourishing are therefore inseparable expressions of the same underlying reality. Progress cannot be understood solely through the accumulation of economic, social or environmental assets; it must also be understood through the quality of the relationships that sustain life itself.

From this perspective, the principal contribution of the Beyond GDP agenda is not simply to replace one indicator with another, but to support a broader transition in how progress is conceived, governed and evaluated. This requires a shift from measuring isolated outcomes towards understanding the dynamic relationships that generate those outcomes. It also requires recognising that the capacities needed to cultivate flourishing - such as trust, cooperation, systems thinking, stewardship, imagination and ethical discernment - are themselves fundamental public goods that deserve explicit attention within policy and governance.

To support this transition, the paper introduces **the Ecosystemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework** as an integrating conceptual architecture. Rather than proposing a new competing framework, it offers a way of bringing together existing advances across wellbeing economics, systems science, ecological economics, public health, developmental psychology, Indigenous and relational knowledge traditions,

and sustainability science. It suggests that flourishing emerges where four interdependent dimensions of societal life are cultivated together: healthy natural environments, regenerative and inclusive economies, cultures that nurture meaning, belonging and identity, and the development of human capacities that enable wise participation in living systems.

Building on this architecture, the paper proposes two complementary concepts that may strengthen the international Beyond GDP agenda. The first is **Relational Wealth**, referring to the quality of relationships that sustain individuals, communities, institutions, economies and ecosystems. While conventional measures distinguish between financial, human, social and natural capital, relational wealth recognises that these forms of capital generate enduring value only when held within healthy patterns of relationship. The second is **Relational Intelligence**, understood as the human capacity to perceive, cultivate and participate wisely within those relationships. Together these concepts extend the Beyond GDP conversation from measuring societal assets towards strengthening the relational conditions through which flourishing becomes possible.

The paper concludes that the future success of the Beyond GDP movement will depend not only on developing better indicators, but on articulating a shared understanding of the purpose those indicators are intended to serve. Flourishing offers such a purpose because it provides a common orientation capable of integrating economic prosperity, ecological integrity, cultural vitality, social cohesion and human development within a single conceptual horizon. An ecosystemic understanding of flourishing does not replace existing measurement initiatives; rather, it provides a coherent framework within which they can be understood as complementary contributions to a larger endeavour.

Ultimately, the challenge before the international community is no longer simply to ask **how progress should be measured**, but **what conditions enable people, communities and the living Earth to flourish together**. Responding to that question has the potential to move the Beyond GDP agenda beyond the refinement of indicators towards a more profound reimagining of development itself.

1. Introduction: Beyond GDP and the Search for a New Understanding of Progress

For much of the twentieth century, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) served as the dominant measure of national progress. Developed to quantify economic activity during periods of reconstruction and industrial expansion, GDP became an indispensable tool for understanding production, consumption and economic growth. It has undoubtedly contributed to improved economic management and remains an important indicator of market performance. Yet, as many governments, international organisations and scholars now acknowledge, it was never intended to measure the broader conditions that enable societies to prosper.

The limitations of GDP have become increasingly evident in an era characterised by accelerating ecological degradation, widening inequalities, declining social trust, growing mental ill-health and increasing uncertainty about humanity's collective future. Economic growth may coincide with improvements in human wellbeing, but it may equally accompany the depletion of natural systems, the fragmentation of communities and the erosion of the social and cultural foundations upon which flourishing depends. Equally, investments that strengthen families, regenerate ecosystems, build community resilience or enhance psychological wellbeing often remain largely invisible within conventional economic accounting despite their profound contribution to long-term societal prosperity.

These limitations have stimulated an unprecedented international conversation about how progress should be understood and measured. The Beyond GDP movement represents the convergence of numerous complementary initiatives, including wellbeing economies, inclusive wealth accounting, natural capital approaches, multidimensional measures of poverty, sustainable development indicators

and broader frameworks for human flourishing. Although differing in emphasis and methodology, these initiatives share a common recognition that the success of societies cannot be reduced to economic output alone.

This growing consensus represents an important historical transition. Increasingly, the question is no longer whether GDP should be complemented by broader measures, but how those measures can be brought together within a coherent understanding of societal progress. The challenge has shifted from identifying what should be measured towards understanding why these different dimensions matter and how they relate to one another.

This distinction is more significant than it may first appear. The expansion of indicators, however valuable, cannot by itself resolve the deeper conceptual challenge. Without a shared understanding of the purpose that measurement is intended to serve, there remains a risk that new metrics simply become an increasingly complex collection of disconnected variables. Policymakers may find themselves navigating ever more sophisticated dashboards without a clear sense of the destination towards which they are travelling.

The Beyond GDP agenda therefore invites not only methodological innovation but conceptual renewal. It asks whether contemporary societies possess an adequate understanding of what progress ultimately seeks to achieve. This is not merely a technical question of statistical design, but a philosophical and practical question concerning the aims of development itself. Throughout history, measures have reflected underlying assumptions about what societies value. Consequently, any attempt to move beyond GDP necessarily involves re-examining those assumptions and considering whether they remain adequate for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

At the same time, important developments across many disciplines suggest that such a renewal is already underway. Systems science increasingly understands resilience and adaptation as emerging from the quality of relationships within complex living systems. Ecology demonstrates the interdependence of human and planetary wellbeing. Public health recognises that health is shaped not only by healthcare, but by the social, economic and environmental conditions within which people live. Developmental psychology highlights the importance of secure relationships, meaning and participation throughout the life course. Indigenous knowledge traditions have long understood wellbeing as arising through reciprocal relationships between people, place and the more-than-human world. Together, these diverse perspectives point towards a common insight: flourishing emerges through patterns of relationship rather than through isolated variables considered independently.

This convergence suggests that the Beyond GDP movement may represent something more profound than an improvement in measurement. It may signal the gradual emergence of a new understanding of development itself - one that recognises economies as embedded within societies, societies as embedded within the living Earth, and human wellbeing as inseparable from the health of the wider systems upon which life depends.

It is from this perspective that this paper makes its contribution. It argues that the next stage of the Beyond GDP agenda requires a conceptual architecture capable of integrating these diverse developments without replacing them. Such an architecture should not privilege one disciplinary perspective over another, nor seek to establish yet another competing framework. Rather, it should provide a coherent way of understanding how the various dimensions of progress relate to one another and why they matter collectively.

The central proposition advanced throughout this paper is therefore both simple and far-reaching:

The challenge before the Beyond GDP movement is no longer simply to develop better indicators of progress, but to cultivate a coherent understanding of the conditions that enable human and planetary flourishing to emerge.

The following sections explore how an ecosystemic understanding of flourishing may provide one contribution towards meeting that challenge. Rather than offering a replacement for existing approaches, it seeks to illuminate the relationships that connect them, providing a shared conceptual horizon within which economic prosperity, ecological integrity, cultural vitality and human development can be understood as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a flourishing world.

2. Why Flourishing Must Become the Purpose of Development

The search for alternatives to GDP has often focused on identifying what conventional economic measures fail to capture. This has generated a growing family of complementary indicators relating to health, education, environmental sustainability, inequality, subjective wellbeing, social cohesion and democratic participation. Collectively, these initiatives have significantly enriched our understanding of societal progress. Yet they also raise a more fundamental question: **what is the overarching purpose that these diverse measures are intended to serve?**

This question lies at the heart of the Beyond GDP agenda. Indicators are not ends in themselves; they are tools that help societies pursue what they value. Throughout history, systems of measurement have reflected prevailing assumptions about the nature of progress. Industrial economies prioritised production because increasing material prosperity was rightly understood as a prerequisite for improving human lives. Today, however, the challenges confronting humanity have become more complex. Climate change, biodiversity loss, social fragmentation, declining trust, demographic transitions and rapid technological transformation reveal that material prosperity, while essential, is no longer sufficient to secure long-term human wellbeing.

The task before the international community is therefore not simply to measure more dimensions of development, but to clarify the purpose towards which development itself is directed. Without such clarity, the proliferation of indicators risks producing increasingly sophisticated descriptions of reality without offering a coherent account of what constitutes genuine progress.

This paper proposes that **flourishing** provides that unifying purpose.

Flourishing has deep philosophical, cultural and scientific roots. Although interpreted differently across traditions, it consistently refers to conditions in which life is able to develop its inherent potential through healthy relationships with its surrounding environment. Rather than describing a fixed endpoint, flourishing denotes an ongoing process of growth, adaptation and participation. It encompasses material security while extending beyond it to include meaning, belonging, creativity, contribution, justice, ecological integrity and the capacity of future generations to thrive.

Importantly, flourishing cannot be reduced to subjective wellbeing alone. Individuals may report high levels of personal satisfaction while living within societies that are environmentally unsustainable, socially fragmented or economically unjust. Equally, objective improvements in material conditions do not necessarily lead to stronger communities, healthier ecosystems or greater resilience. Flourishing therefore requires attention to both subjective experience and the objective conditions that make such experiences sustainable over time. The Harvard Human Flourishing Program, together with related international research, has demonstrated that flourishing extends beyond economic prosperity or subjective wellbeing to encompass the multidimensional conditions that enable individuals and communities to thrive across the life course

An ecosystemic understanding of flourishing recognises that these dimensions are inseparable. Human beings exist within nested systems of relationship: families, communities, institutions, economies, cultures and ecosystems. Each shapes and is shaped by the others. Flourishing emerges not from optimising individual parts in isolation, but from nurturing the quality of relationships across the whole. Healthy ecosystems support healthy societies; healthy societies create conditions in which individuals can develop their capacities; individuals, in turn, contribute to the resilience and vitality of the communities and environments of which they are part.

This understanding represents a significant departure from more mechanistic conceptions of development. Conventional policy has often assumed that societal progress can be achieved by maximising individual variables independently - economic growth, educational attainment, healthcare provision or technological innovation - before addressing their interactions. Living systems operate differently. They derive their resilience not from the optimisation of isolated components, but from the dynamic relationships that connect them. Diversity, reciprocity, adaptation and mutual dependence are not peripheral characteristics of living systems; they are the conditions that enable them to endure.

Recognising flourishing as the purpose of development therefore does not diminish the importance of economic prosperity. Rather, it places economic activity within a broader understanding of what economies ultimately exist to achieve. Economies become means through which societies cultivate the conditions that enable people and the living world to flourish together. Economic growth remains valuable where it strengthens those conditions; it becomes problematic where it undermines them.

This shift has important implications for public policy. It suggests that governments should evaluate success not only through the quantity of resources produced or consumed, but through their contribution to the long-term vitality of interconnected social and ecological systems. Policies relating to education, health, employment, housing, environmental stewardship and technological innovation can no longer be understood as separate domains pursuing independent objectives. They become complementary expressions of a shared commitment to creating the conditions in which flourishing can emerge across society as a whole.

From this perspective, the Beyond GDP movement is not simply expanding the range of what is measured. It is participating in a broader transformation in how development itself is understood. The question is no longer merely "**How can we measure more accurately?**" but "**What kind of future are our systems of measurement intended to help create?**"

The remainder of this paper argues that answering this question requires more than an expanded set of indicators. It requires an integrating conceptual architecture capable of understanding how the many dimensions of flourishing interact within living systems. It is to this ecosystemic perspective that we now turn.

3. An Ecosystemic Approach to Human and Planetary Flourishing

If flourishing is to become the organising purpose of development, a further question immediately arises: **what are the conditions that enable flourishing to emerge?** Answering this question requires more than an expanded list of desirable outcomes. It requires an understanding of how those outcomes are generated within the dynamic relationships that characterise living systems.

This is where an ecosystemic perspective offers an important contribution. Rather than viewing society as a collection of separate sectors, institutions or policy domains, an ecosystemic approach understands human communities as living systems whose health depends upon the quality of relationships both within and between their constituent parts. Individuals, families, communities, economies, cultures and ecosystems are not independent units that occasionally interact; they are mutually constitutive dimensions of an interconnected whole. Each both influences and is influenced by the others.

Such an understanding reflects a profound shift in scientific thinking that has emerged across the past century. Advances in ecology, systems science, complexity theory, developmental biology and Earth system science have increasingly challenged mechanistic models that explain complex phenomena by reducing them to isolated components. Living systems cannot be fully understood simply by analysing their individual parts. Their distinctive properties emerge through patterns of interaction, adaptation and self-organisation. Resilience, creativity and innovation arise not from control imposed upon systems, but from the quality of relationships that enable them to evolve.

Human societies exhibit the same characteristics. Economic resilience depends upon healthy ecological systems. Educational achievement is shaped by family stability, community relationships and physical and mental health. Democratic participation relies upon trust, shared purpose and social cohesion. Environmental stewardship is influenced by cultural values, economic incentives and moral imagination. Each domain both supports and depends upon the others.

The implication for public policy is significant. Many contemporary challenges - including climate change, declining biodiversity, persistent inequality, mental ill-health and social fragmentation - are often addressed through separate institutional structures despite being deeply interconnected. An ecosystemic perspective does not dissolve these distinctions, but it recognises that durable solutions require coordinated attention to the relationships that connect them. The effectiveness of policy increasingly depends upon understanding interactions rather than managing isolated sectors.

From this perspective, flourishing may be understood as an emergent property of healthy relationships operating across multiple scales simultaneously. It is not created by any single intervention, institution or policy. Rather, it emerges when the wider conditions that support life become mutually reinforcing. Flourishing is therefore less a destination to be reached than an ongoing capacity of living systems to adapt, regenerate and realise their potential through reciprocal relationship.

To support this understanding, the ecosystemic flourishing approach proposes four interdependent dimensions through which the conditions for flourishing may be considered. These dimensions are not separate pillars competing for attention, nor independent policy domains to be optimised individually. They represent complementary aspects of one living system.

Natural Environment

The natural environment provides the ecological foundations upon which all forms of life depend. Healthy soils, stable climates, biodiversity, clean water, resilient ecosystems and the regenerative capacity of the biosphere are not external constraints upon development; they are the conditions that make development possible. Human flourishing cannot ultimately be separated from the flourishing of the living Earth.

Circular and Regenerative Economies

Economic systems exist to support life by enabling societies to meet human needs, allocate resources wisely and create opportunities for participation and contribution. An ecosystemic perspective recognises the economy not as an autonomous system, but as embedded within society and ultimately within the biosphere. Long-term prosperity therefore depends upon economic arrangements that regenerate rather than deplete the natural and social systems upon which they rely.

Cultural Values and Identity

Cultures shape the stories through which societies understand themselves, define success and orient collective action. Shared values influence patterns of trust, belonging, responsibility and cooperation. They also determine how societies relate to future generations and to the wider living world. Flourishing

therefore depends not only upon material conditions but upon cultural narratives that cultivate meaning, reciprocity, dignity and care.

Human Capacities and Potential

Perhaps the most frequently overlooked dimension of development concerns the capacities that enable individuals and communities to participate wisely within living systems. Qualities such as empathy, curiosity, ethical judgement, systems thinking, imagination, resilience, cooperation and stewardship are not simply personal attributes; they are societal capabilities that influence the effectiveness of every institution. The development of these capacities throughout life represents one of the most significant long-term investments any society can make.

Taken together, these four dimensions provide an organising architecture through which many existing Beyond GDP initiatives may be understood as complementary rather than competing. Measures relating to biodiversity, climate resilience, education, health, social trust, economic inclusion, democratic participation and subjective wellbeing each illuminate important aspects of the wider conditions that enable flourishing. Their value lies not only in what they measure individually, but in the relationships they reveal collectively.

This perspective also helps explain why attempts to improve one dimension of development while neglecting others often produce unintended consequences. Economic growth achieved through ecological degradation ultimately undermines future prosperity. Technological innovation without ethical reflection may increase capability while weakening social cohesion. Educational attainment disconnected from purpose or belonging may enhance technical competence without strengthening resilience or civic participation. The challenge is therefore not to maximise isolated indicators, but to cultivate coherence across the whole system.

Importantly, the ecosystemic flourishing approach does not seek to replace the many valuable frameworks already informing international policy. Rather, it offers a conceptual architecture within which these diverse approaches can be situated and understood in relation to one another. It is intentionally integrative rather than competitive, recognising that no single discipline or framework can adequately capture the complexity of flourishing itself.

This has particular significance for the Beyond GDP agenda. As the international community develops increasingly sophisticated systems of measurement, there is a corresponding need for an organising perspective capable of interpreting what those measures collectively reveal. Without such a perspective, there is a risk that policy becomes overwhelmed by complexity. With it, diverse indicators begin to tell a coherent story about the conditions that enable societies - and the living systems of which they are part—to flourish.

The next step is to consider one dimension of this story that remains largely absent from contemporary systems of measurement: the quality of relationships themselves. It is to this concept of **Relational Wealth** that the paper now turns.

4. Relational Wealth: Reframing What Societies Value

If flourishing emerges through the quality of relationships within living systems, an important implication follows. Contemporary approaches to measuring progress may still overlook one of the most fundamental dimensions of societal wellbeing - not because relationships are absent from existing frameworks, but because they are rarely recognised as a form of wealth in their own right.

Economic thinking has evolved considerably over recent decades. Alongside financial capital, increasing attention has been given to human capital, social capital, natural capital and cultural capital. This

represents an important advance, recognising that long-term prosperity depends upon a much richer portfolio of assets than those captured by markets alone. Yet these different forms of capital continue to be treated largely as distinct categories, each measured through its own indicators and institutional arrangements.

An ecosystemic perspective suggests a further step.

The enduring value of every form of capital depends not only upon its quantity but upon the quality of the relationships through which it is generated, maintained and shared. A forest possesses ecological value because of the intricate relationships that sustain its biodiversity. An economy generates prosperity through networks of trust, exchange and cooperation. Knowledge becomes socially valuable when it is shared across communities and generations. Families, neighbourhoods and institutions derive their resilience from relationships characterised by reciprocity, care and mutual responsibility.

This relational dimension is not simply another category of capital alongside existing forms of wealth. It is the condition that enables them to create enduring value.

The concept of **Relational Wealth** is proposed here to describe this foundational dimension.

Relational Wealth refers to the quality of the relationships that sustain life across individuals, communities, institutions, economies and ecosystems. It encompasses trust between citizens and public institutions; reciprocity within communities; intergenerational solidarity; social cohesion across cultural difference; respectful relationships between humanity and the natural world; and the capacity of societies to cooperate in addressing shared challenges. It also includes less tangible qualities such as belonging, mutual recognition, civic responsibility, cultural continuity and shared purpose, all of which contribute profoundly to the resilience of living systems.

Importantly, relational wealth is neither purely social nor purely economic. It exists across every domain of society. Healthy ecosystems depend upon reciprocal ecological relationships. Regenerative economies depend upon trust, fairness and long-term stewardship. Democratic governance depends upon legitimacy, participation and constructive dialogue. Educational systems depend upon relationships of care, curiosity and mutual learning. Public health depends upon social connection as much as medical intervention. In each case, relationships are not secondary consequences of successful systems; they are among the primary conditions that enable those systems to function effectively.

This perspective helps explain why societies possessing comparable levels of material wealth often experience markedly different levels of resilience and wellbeing. Economic resources undoubtedly matter, but they are mediated by the relational environments within which they operate. Communities characterised by trust, cooperation and shared purpose are frequently better able to respond to crises, adapt to change and support vulnerable members than those possessing greater financial resources but weaker social relationships. Similarly, ecological restoration depends not solely upon technical interventions but upon rebuilding respectful relationships between human societies and the wider living world.

Recognising relational wealth also broadens conventional understandings of productivity. Activities such as parenting, caregiving, volunteering, mentoring, community leadership and ecological stewardship frequently generate substantial long-term societal value while remaining largely invisible within economic accounting systems. Their contribution lies not only in the services they provide but in the relationships they cultivate. These relationships strengthen the adaptive capacity of communities and create conditions in which other forms of wealth can flourish.

From a policy perspective, this insight carries significant implications. Governments have traditionally focused on managing financial resources, physical infrastructure and human capital. An ecosystemic

understanding suggests that they also have a legitimate role in cultivating the relational conditions upon which these assets depend. Policies affecting housing, education, healthcare, employment, urban design, environmental management and democratic participation all influence the quality of relationships within society. Their success should therefore be evaluated not only through immediate outputs but through their contribution to strengthening the relational fabric of communities and institutions.

This does not imply that relationships should be reduced to simplistic metrics. Some dimensions of relational life resist precise quantification and are better understood through a combination of quantitative indicators and qualitative assessment. Nevertheless, important aspects of relational wealth can already be observed through measures of social trust, civic participation, loneliness, community resilience, institutional confidence, intergenerational mobility, ecological restoration and perceptions of belonging. Rather than replacing existing indicators, the concept of relational wealth provides a way of understanding why these diverse measures matter collectively.

Relational wealth also offers a valuable bridge between the economic and ethical dimensions of the Beyond GDP agenda. It recognises that prosperity is ultimately sustained not simply by efficient markets or effective institutions, but by relationships characterised by trust, reciprocity, justice and care. These qualities have often been regarded as desirable social outcomes. An ecosystemic perspective suggests they are also essential societal assets.

Seen in this way, the task of public policy extends beyond the management of material resources towards the stewardship of the relationships that enable societies to flourish over time. Such stewardship requires new forms of leadership and governance, but it also depends upon the capacities of citizens themselves to participate wisely within increasingly complex and interconnected systems.

This brings us to perhaps the most important question of all. If flourishing depends upon the quality of relationships, **what capacities enable individuals, communities and institutions to cultivate those relationships wisely?**

It is this question that leads naturally to the concept of **Relational Intelligence**, which may represent one of the most important, yet least recognised, public capabilities required for the twenty-first century.

5. Relational Intelligence: Developing the Capacities that Enable Flourishing

If the concept of **Relational Wealth** draws attention to the quality of relationships that sustain flourishing, an equally important question follows: **what enables individuals, communities and institutions to cultivate those relationships well?** Relationships do not become healthy simply because they are recognised as valuable. They require human capacities that allow people to perceive interdependence, respond wisely to complexity and participate constructively within living systems. These capacities are collectively described here as **Relational Intelligence**.

The concept of intelligence has traditionally been associated with the ability to reason, solve problems and process information. More recently, understandings of intelligence have expanded to include emotional, social, practical and creative dimensions, recognising that human capability extends far beyond analytical cognition alone. Yet many of the challenges confronting contemporary societies suggest the need for a further development. Climate change, ecological degradation, democratic polarisation, technological transformation and global inequality are not simply technical problems awaiting technical solutions. They are fundamentally relational challenges arising from increasingly complex interactions between people, institutions, technologies and the living world.

Relational Intelligence may therefore be understood as **the human capacity to perceive, understand and participate wisely within the relationships that sustain life**. It is the capacity to recognise patterns of interdependence, appreciate multiple perspectives, navigate complexity with discernment and act in

ways that strengthen rather than diminish the resilience of living systems. It is simultaneously cognitive, emotional, ethical, imaginative and practical. Above all, it is participatory. Rather than standing outside systems in an attempt to control them, Relational Intelligence recognises that human beings are themselves participants within the systems they seek to understand.

This understanding reflects an important shift in the role of human development within public policy. Conventional models have often focused on preparing individuals to participate successfully within existing economic systems through the acquisition of knowledge and technical skills. These remain essential. However, the accelerating complexity of the twenty-first century requires additional capacities that enable people not merely to function within systems but to contribute to their continual adaptation and renewal.

Among these capacities are empathy, perspective-taking, systems thinking, ethical reasoning, imagination, collaboration, dialogue, resilience, ecological literacy, reflective judgement and the ability to learn across disciplinary and cultural boundaries. These qualities enable individuals to navigate uncertainty, work constructively with difference and respond creatively to emerging challenges. They also strengthen the adaptive capacity of institutions by fostering trust, innovation and collective learning.

Importantly, Relational Intelligence is not confined to individuals. Institutions, organisations and governments may also exhibit greater or lesser degrees of relational intelligence through the ways in which they design policy, engage citizens and coordinate action across complex systems. A relationally intelligent institution recognises that durable solutions emerge through collaboration rather than fragmentation, through learning rather than rigid control, and through long-term stewardship rather than short-term optimisation. Governance itself becomes an exercise in cultivating healthy relationships between multiple actors whose wellbeing is ultimately interdependent.

This perspective has significant implications for education. If flourishing becomes the purpose of development, then education cannot be understood solely as preparation for employment or economic productivity. Its deeper purpose becomes the lifelong development of the capacities that enable people to participate wisely within families, communities, economies, democratic societies and the living Earth. Knowledge remains indispensable, but knowledge alone is insufficient. The cultivation of judgement, responsibility, compassion, creativity and ecological awareness becomes equally central to human development.

The implications also extend well beyond education. Health systems increasingly recognise the importance of social connection, belonging and purpose in supporting long-term wellbeing. Economic policy depends upon trust, cooperation and ethical behaviour as much as financial incentives. Environmental stewardship requires citizens capable of recognising humanity's reciprocal relationship with the natural world. Democratic governance depends upon dialogue, mutual respect and the capacity to engage constructively with complexity and disagreement. Across each of these domains, the effectiveness of institutions ultimately rests upon the relational capacities of the people who inhabit them.

The rapid development of artificial intelligence further reinforces the importance of these human capabilities. AI systems are likely to assume an increasing role in information processing, analysis and routine decision support. Their growing capabilities make the distinctively human dimensions of intelligence not less important but more significant. As technical competence becomes increasingly augmented by machines, capacities such as ethical discernment, wisdom, imagination, compassion, moral responsibility and the ability to cultivate trusting relationships become defining characteristics of human contribution. The future comparative advantage of humanity may therefore lie not primarily in competing with artificial intelligence, but in developing those relational capacities through which technology can be guided towards the common good.

This perspective also invites a reconsideration of public investment. Governments routinely invest in physical infrastructure because it supports economic and social development. They increasingly invest in natural capital because ecological systems underpin long-term prosperity. An ecosystemic understanding suggests that investment in the relational capacities of citizens deserves similar recognition. Early childhood development, education, lifelong learning, community participation, cultural life, civic dialogue and opportunities for intergenerational collaboration all contribute to the development of Relational Intelligence. These are not peripheral social programmes; they are strategic investments in the adaptive capacity of society itself.

Seen in this way, Relational Wealth and Relational Intelligence become mutually reinforcing. Healthy relationships create environments within which relational capacities can develop. In turn, individuals and institutions possessing greater relational intelligence strengthen the relationships upon which flourishing depends. Together they form a virtuous cycle through which societies become increasingly resilient, adaptive and capable of responding to complexity.

This insight has profound implications for the Beyond GDP agenda. Measuring progress is essential, but measurement alone cannot create flourishing. Flourishing ultimately depends upon the capacities of people and institutions to understand what the indicators reveal and to act wisely in response. The development of Relational Intelligence is therefore not an optional complement to better measurement; it is one of the fundamental conditions that allows improved measurement to translate into wiser policy and more flourishing societies.

The challenge before governments is consequently twofold. They must develop indicators capable of illuminating the conditions that support flourishing, while simultaneously cultivating the human capacities needed to interpret those indicators and respond creatively to the complex realities they reveal. This recognition points towards a new understanding of governance itself—one that is less concerned with managing isolated sectors and increasingly focused on stewarding the health of interconnected living systems.

6. From Indicators to Living Systems: Implications for Governance and Policy

If flourishing is understood as an emergent property of healthy relationships within living systems, then the implications extend well beyond measurement. They invite a fundamental reconsideration of how governance itself is conceived. The Beyond GDP agenda has rightly focused attention on developing more comprehensive indicators of progress. Yet indicators alone cannot transform societies. Their influence ultimately depends upon the conceptual assumptions, institutional structures and human capacities through which they are interpreted and acted upon.

This distinction is critical. Measurement is an indispensable instrument of public policy, but it is not the purpose of policy. Indicators illuminate reality; they do not determine how societies choose to respond. Throughout history, advances in measurement have been most transformative when accompanied by corresponding changes in how people understood the systems they were seeking to govern. The challenge before the Beyond GDP movement is therefore not simply statistical innovation, but institutional and cultural adaptation.

An ecosystemic perspective suggests that governance itself should increasingly be understood as the stewardship of living systems rather than the management of isolated sectors. Contemporary public administration remains largely organised around departmental structures - health, education, finance, environment, housing, transport and social care - each operating with its own objectives, budgets and performance indicators. While such structures provide administrative clarity, they often struggle to address challenges whose causes and consequences extend across multiple domains simultaneously.

Climate change illustrates this complexity. It is simultaneously an environmental, economic, technological, social, educational, cultural and ethical challenge. Mental health is influenced not only by healthcare provision but also by housing, employment, education, social relationships, environmental quality and community life. Similarly, educational outcomes depend upon early childhood development, family stability, nutrition, mental wellbeing, neighbourhood safety and broader cultural expectations. In each case, policy effectiveness depends less upon the optimisation of individual sectors than upon the quality of coordination across the wider system.

The Beyond GDP agenda therefore presents an opportunity not merely to improve measurement but to encourage more integrated approaches to governance. Better indicators can reveal interactions that previously remained hidden, helping governments understand how policies in one domain influence outcomes in another. This shift from sectoral optimisation towards systemic coherence represents one of the most significant opportunities arising from the current international conversation.

At the heart of this transition lies a subtle but important change in perspective. Traditional governance often asks: *How can we improve the performance of individual systems?* An ecosystemic approach asks instead: *How can we strengthen the conditions through which healthy systems continually regenerate themselves?* The first seeks greater efficiency within existing structures. The second seeks greater resilience, adaptability and long-term flourishing across the relationships that connect them.

This distinction becomes particularly important in an era of accelerating uncertainty. The twenty-first century is characterised by increasing ecological volatility, technological disruption, demographic change and geopolitical complexity. Under such conditions, governance cannot rely solely upon prediction and control. It must also cultivate the capacity to learn, adapt and respond to emerging realities. Flourishing therefore becomes not simply an aspiration but an indicator of societal resilience: the capacity of communities, institutions and ecosystems to continue generating wellbeing despite changing circumstances.

An ecosystemic approach also encourages a longer temporal horizon for public policy. Conventional political and economic systems frequently privilege short-term performance, reflecting electoral cycles, annual budgets and immediate economic returns. Living systems, however, evolve over decades and generations. Forests mature slowly, cultures develop over centuries, trust accumulates gradually and educational investments often bear fruit across lifetimes. A flourishing perspective therefore places greater emphasis upon stewardship, recognising that today's decisions shape the conditions inherited by future generations.

This intergenerational perspective aligns closely with many Indigenous knowledge traditions, which have long emphasised reciprocal relationships between ancestors, present communities, future generations and the more-than-human world. Increasingly, contemporary sustainability science reaches similar conclusions through different intellectual pathways. Both recognise that enduring prosperity depends upon maintaining the regenerative capacity of the systems upon which life depends. In this respect, the Beyond GDP movement offers an opportunity not only to integrate multiple indicators but also to encourage dialogue between diverse ways of knowing that illuminate different dimensions of flourishing.

The implications for democratic governance are equally significant. A flourishing society cannot be created through central planning alone. It depends upon the active participation of citizens, communities, civil society organisations, businesses, educational institutions and local governments. Public policy therefore becomes less about directing change from above and more about creating the enabling conditions through which flourishing can emerge throughout society. Governments remain essential, but they increasingly act as convenors, facilitators and stewards of collective capability rather than sole providers of solutions.

This participatory understanding of governance also reflects an important shift in how success is evaluated. Rather than measuring only the outputs of public services, governments might increasingly ask whether policies strengthen the long-term capacity of communities to flourish independently. Do educational systems cultivate lifelong curiosity and civic responsibility? Do healthcare systems promote resilience and prevention as well as treatment? Do economic policies encourage innovation while regenerating natural and social systems? Do democratic institutions build trust and shared responsibility? These questions move evaluation beyond service delivery towards the cultivation of enduring societal capability.

Importantly, this approach does not imply abandoning quantitative measurement. On the contrary, robust indicators remain essential for accountability, transparency and evidence-informed decision-making. However, indicators are understood as part of a wider learning system rather than as ends in themselves. Quantitative measures, qualitative insights, participatory dialogue and contextual understanding each contribute to a richer appreciation of societal progress. Together they support governance that is both evidence-informed and responsive to the complexity of living systems.

From this perspective, the Beyond GDP movement may represent the beginning of a broader transformation in public governance. Just as GDP helped shape the institutions of the industrial era, an ecosystemic understanding of flourishing has the potential to inform governance appropriate to an interconnected, ecologically constrained and rapidly changing world. The objective is not simply to govern more efficiently, but to cultivate the conditions under which people, communities, economies and ecosystems can flourish together over the long term.

The recommendations that follow build upon this understanding. They are intended not as a prescriptive blueprint, but as practical principles that may help guide the continuing evolution of the international Beyond GDP agenda towards a more coherent, integrated and flourishing-centred conception of development.

7. Recommendations for the Beyond GDP Agenda

The international movement to move beyond GDP has reached an important moment in its evolution. Significant progress has already been made in recognising the limitations of economic output as the dominant measure of societal success and in developing more comprehensive indicators of wellbeing, sustainability and inclusive prosperity. The next stage is not to replace these valuable initiatives, but to strengthen the conceptual coherence that connects them.

The following recommendations are therefore offered as principles to support the continuing evolution of the Beyond GDP agenda. They are intended to complement existing international efforts while contributing an ecosystemic perspective on the conditions that enable human and planetary flourishing.

1. Adopt flourishing as the overarching purpose of development

The Beyond GDP agenda should be guided by a clear normative purpose. Indicators gain meaning only in relation to the outcomes they are intended to support. Positioning flourishing as the overarching purpose of development provides a unifying orientation capable of integrating economic prosperity, ecological integrity, cultural vitality and human development within a single conceptual horizon.

Importantly, flourishing should be understood not as an individual aspiration alone, but as the shared capacity of people, communities and the living Earth to thrive together across generations.

2. Develop a shared conceptual architecture alongside new indicators

The continuing expansion of measurement frameworks is both necessary and welcome. However, increasing complexity also creates the need for an organising perspective capable of explaining how different indicators relate to one another.

Rather than developing additional competing frameworks, the international community should work towards a shared conceptual architecture that enables diverse approaches—including wellbeing frameworks, natural capital accounting, inclusive wealth, sustainable development indicators and human development measures—to be understood as complementary expressions of a common endeavour.

Such an architecture would strengthen coherence while preserving methodological diversity.

3. Recognise relationships as a foundational dimension of societal wealth

Future approaches to measuring progress should give greater attention to the quality of relationships that sustain resilient societies.

Alongside financial, human, social and natural capital, policymakers should increasingly recognise **Relational Wealth** as a foundational dimension of long-term prosperity. Trust, reciprocity, belonging, civic participation, intergenerational solidarity and ecological stewardship are not simply desirable social outcomes; they are enduring assets that influence the effectiveness of every other form of capital.

Strengthening relational wealth should therefore become an explicit objective of public policy.

4. Invest in the development of Relational Intelligence

The challenges facing contemporary societies require more than technical expertise. They demand citizens, leaders and institutions capable of understanding complexity, navigating uncertainty and working constructively across diverse perspectives.

Investment in **Relational Intelligence** should therefore be recognised as a strategic public priority. Education, lifelong learning, leadership development, community participation and civic dialogue all contribute to the cultivation of capacities such as systems thinking, empathy, ethical judgement, collaboration, imagination and ecological awareness.

These capacities strengthen the adaptive capability of societies and enhance the effectiveness of public institutions.

5. Encourage governance that reflects the interconnected nature of living systems

Many contemporary policy challenges transcend conventional institutional boundaries. Governments should therefore continue developing mechanisms that encourage cross-sector collaboration, integrated policymaking and long-term stewardship.

An ecosystemic perspective invites a gradual shift from governing isolated policy domains towards governing the relationships that connect them. This does not require dismantling existing institutions but strengthening their capacity to work coherently across shared societal objectives.

6. Combine quantitative indicators with qualitative and participatory approaches

Not every aspect of flourishing can be captured through numerical measurement alone. Quantitative indicators should therefore be complemented by qualitative evidence, participatory dialogue and locally grounded knowledge.

This plural approach recognises that flourishing is experienced differently across cultures and contexts while maintaining the value of rigorous evidence and international comparability.

7. Respect multiple knowledge traditions

The Beyond GDP movement provides an opportunity to bring diverse intellectual traditions into constructive dialogue.

Scientific research, public policy, Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural traditions and lived experience each illuminate different dimensions of flourishing. An ecosystemic perspective recognises that no single discipline or worldview possesses a complete understanding of the complexity of living systems.

Greater epistemic plurality can therefore strengthen both policy innovation and democratic legitimacy.

8. Foster long-term stewardship for future generations

Finally, the Beyond GDP agenda should encourage governance that explicitly recognises humanity's responsibilities to future generations.

Policies should be evaluated not only according to their immediate economic or political benefits but also according to their contribution to the long-term resilience of ecological, social and cultural systems. Stewardship becomes a defining characteristic of flourishing societies because it recognises that prosperity is not inherited automatically but continually renewed through wise participation in the living systems upon which all life depends.

Taken together, these recommendations suggest that the future development of the Beyond GDP agenda depends upon more than improved statistical techniques. It requires a corresponding evolution in how societies understand development itself. Better indicators remain indispensable, but their greatest value lies in helping governments, institutions and citizens cultivate the conditions through which flourishing becomes increasingly possible.

An ecosystemic understanding of flourishing offers one contribution towards this wider endeavour. It does not seek to replace existing approaches, but to provide a shared conceptual horizon within which they may be understood as complementary expressions of a common purpose: enabling people and the living Earth to flourish together, now and into the future.

8. Conclusion: Towards a Flourishing Civilisation

The movement to move beyond Gross Domestic Product represents far more than an effort to improve economic statistics. It reflects a growing recognition that the questions facing humanity have changed. The central challenge is no longer simply how to increase production, but how to cultivate societies that are capable of flourishing within the ecological limits of a finite planet while ensuring dignity, opportunity and wellbeing for present and future generations.

The achievements of the Beyond GDP movement should not be underestimated. Over recent decades it has fundamentally broadened international understanding of progress by demonstrating that economic output alone cannot adequately represent societal success. Wellbeing, health, education, environmental integrity, equity, democratic participation and cultural vitality have increasingly become recognised as essential dimensions of development. This represents one of the most important conceptual advances in international public policy in recent history.

Yet the very success of this movement now presents a new challenge. As the number and sophistication of indicators continue to grow, so too does the need for a coherent understanding of what those indicators collectively reveal. The next stage of the Beyond GDP agenda is therefore not simply methodological but conceptual. It requires moving beyond the important question of **what should be measured** towards the deeper question of **what kind of future those measurements are intended to help create**.

This paper has argued that flourishing offers a compelling response to that question. Flourishing provides a shared orientation capable of integrating economic prosperity, ecological integrity, social cohesion, cultural vitality and human development without reducing any of them to a single metric. It recognises that these dimensions are not competing priorities requiring continual trade-offs, but interconnected expressions of the health of living systems.

From this perspective, the ecosystemic flourishing approach is offered not as another framework competing for international attention, but as an integrating conceptual architecture. Its purpose is to illuminate the relationships that connect existing approaches, enabling wellbeing economics, natural capital, inclusive wealth, sustainable development, public health, systems science and Indigenous knowledge traditions to be understood as complementary contributions to a common endeavour. In doing so, it seeks to shift attention from isolated indicators towards the conditions through which flourishing emerges across society as a whole.

Two ideas have been proposed as particular contributions to this evolving conversation.

The first is **Relational Wealth**: the recognition that the quality of relationships within and between individuals, communities, institutions, economies and ecosystems constitutes one of the most fundamental forms of societal wealth. Financial, human, social and natural capital derive much of their enduring value from the relationships through which they are created, sustained and renewed. Strengthening those relationships therefore becomes an essential objective of public policy.

The second is **Relational Intelligence**: the capacity of individuals and institutions to perceive, understand and participate wisely within those relationships. In an increasingly interconnected and technologically sophisticated world, the ability to cultivate trust, navigate complexity, integrate diverse perspectives and exercise ethical judgement may become among the most important capabilities societies can develop. Measurement informs wise action, but wisdom remains indispensable in determining how that information is interpreted and applied.

Together, these concepts suggest that the future evolution of the Beyond GDP agenda lies not simply in refining indicators, but in strengthening the relational conditions that allow those indicators to improve the lived experience of individuals, communities and the living Earth.

Ultimately, every civilisation is shaped by the questions it chooses to ask. The industrial era asked how production could be expanded. The sustainability movement asked how development could be achieved within planetary boundaries. The Beyond GDP movement now invites an equally profound question:

What conditions enable life itself to flourish?

Answering this question requires more than new metrics. It calls for a renewed understanding of development, governance and human purpose that reflects the interconnected reality of the living world. If the twentieth century taught humanity how to measure economic production, the twenty-first century has the opportunity to become the era in which we learn to recognise, cultivate and steward the conditions through which people, communities and the Earth may flourish together.

As the international community begins to consider the evolution of the global development agenda

beyond 2030, there is an opportunity not simply to define a new set of goals, but to develop a more coherent understanding of the conditions that enable human and planetary flourishing.

That is the opportunity before the Beyond GDP movement. More importantly, it is the opportunity before humanity itself.

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The Flourish Project is a global initiative dedicated to advancing an integrative approach to wellbeing that recognises the deep interdependence between human development, cultural values, regenerative economies, and the natural world. Rooted in systems thinking, relational practice, and emerging research on flourishing, the project seeks to support the development of compassionate, resilient, and ecologically conscious individuals and communities through education, policy innovation, research, and cross-sector collaboration.