Flourish Project

The Ecology of Wellbeing

INTRODUCING THE ECOSYSTEMIC FLOURISHING (ESF) FRAMEWORK

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FLOURISH PROJECT C.I.C.

Eco-Systemic Flourishing: A Meta-Framework for Human and Planetary Wellbeing

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Abstract

The converging crises of climate breakdown, social fragmentation, declining trust, and rising mental health challenges signal a deeper systemic failure in how contemporary societies conceptualise and measure wellbeing. In response to this multidimensional metacrisis, the Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework offers a transformative model that redefines flourishing as an emergent, relational, and developmentally informed process spanning individual, cultural, ecological, and economic systems. Synthesising insights from systems theory, Indigenous epistemologies, developmental psychology, and ecological ethics, the framework presents a four-domain evaluative matrix interwoven with a seven-level model of human motivation. This paper introduces the theoretical foundations of the ESF Framework, contrasts it with dominant wellbeing models, and explores its relevance for education, governance, policy design, and spiritual development. The ESF Framework positions flourishing not as a fixed end-state, but as a dynamic interplay between inner and outer systems, guided by the principle of right relationship and expressed through a unitive worldview and narrative. It positions education, governance, and economics as worldview-shaping systems, each capable of either fragmentation or coherence. By explicitly integrating interbeing, moral development, and spiritual ecology, the ESF offers a unifying developmental map for collective meaning-making and the regeneration of relational systems. In doing so, it offers a unifying compass for regenerative societal transformation and the long-term wellbeing of both people and planet.

Keywords: Flourishing, Wellbeing, Ecology, Future Generations, Cultural Regeneration, Right Relationship, Spirituality

1. Introduction: Reframing Flourishing in the 21st Century

Across the globe, rising inequality, ecological collapse, social fragmentation, and declining mental health point not merely to isolated policy failures, but to a deeper rupture in our collective understanding of what it means to thrive. Mainstream models of progress - dominated by economic indicators such as GDP and productivity - fail to account for the complexity and interdependence of human and planetary wellbeing (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009; Raworth, 2017). Despite increasing investment in wellbeing science, national frameworks often remain compartmentalised, reductionist, and anthropocentric, neglecting both developmental dynamics and systemic coherence (OECD, 2023; Prescott et al., 2023). As a result, flourishing has been largely conceived as an individual pursuit, disconnected from the relational, ecological, and spiritual dimensions that sustain life (Keltner, 2023). This narrow view has also obscured the importance of intergenerational learning—where knowledge, values, and stories are passed between generations to support belonging, moral continuity, and cultural resilience. True flourishing requires a weaving together of ancestral memory, present engagement, and future orientation (Senge, 2020)

The Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework responds to this epistemological and ontological gap by proposing a new paradigm: one that understands flourishing not as a static outcome or personal achievement, but as a systemic, emergent process shaped by nested relationships between self, society, and nature. This reorientation reflects a shift from an anthropocentric to a relational ontology of 'interbeing', recognising that flourishing is an emergent property of right relationship among all forms of life. Drawing from an interdisciplinary evidence base - encompassing systems theory (Capra & Luisi, 2014), developmental psychology (Maslow, 1971; Barrett, 2017), Indigenous knowledge (Cajete, 2000; Kimmerer, 2013), and spiritual ecology (Berry, 1988; Boff, 1997) - the ESF Framework integrates four core domains: Natural Environment, Circular & Regenerative Economics, Cultural Values & Identity, and Human

Capacities & Potential. These are combined with a seven-level model of human motivation that traces the evolution of wellbeing across the lifespan. In doing so, it reframes individual development within broader systemic patterns, centring coherence, care, and intergenerational responsibility as essential conditions for human and planetary flourishing.

The ESF therefore functions not merely as a wellbeing model but as a worldview transformation framework—one that enables societies to see, measure, and cultivate coherence across inner and outer systems. The need for such an integrative framework is increasingly urgent. The *Future Generations Report 2025* from Wales highlights the persistent fragmentation across climate, health, culture, and economics, and calls for a shift towards long-term, joined-up thinking grounded in values and wellbeing (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, 2025). In parallel, new scholarship on the *metacrisis*—from the Galileo Commission's Worldviews White Paper (Ellyatt, 2025) to articles in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Milligan, Gibbons, & Prescott, 2022) - identifies a "crisis of coherence" in which fragmented worldviews, disembodied systems, and the erosion of shared meaning are producing cascading global dysfunction. In this context, the ESF Framework offers not just another wellbeing model, but a deeper conceptual compass for reorienting systems around integration, relationality, and right relationship across all domains of life.

2. Theoretical Foundations of the ESF Framework

The Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework emerges from the convergence of multiple intellectual traditions that together point toward a regenerative, relational, and developmental model of human and planetary wellbeing. While it draws inspiration from Indigenous and spiritual worldviews, the framework also builds on systems thinking, ecological science, developmental psychology, and education for sustainability. Together, these foundations support a shift away from fragmented, anthropocentric models toward an integrated framework for coherence and flourishing.

2.1 Systems Thinking and Emergence

At its core, the framework adopts a living systems perspective, recognising that wellbeing is an emergent property of dynamic, interdependent systems rather than a linear or individual outcome (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Meadows, 2008). Inspired by the principles of autopoiesis and co-evolution (Maturana & Varela, 1992), ESF affirms that sustainable flourishing requires attention to feedback loops, pattern coherence, and multi-level system alignment. Human thriving cannot be isolated from ecological or social systems, but must be understood as nested within and responsive to them (Laszlo, 2022).

This aligns with the United Nations' call for integrated policy frameworks that recognise "the indivisibility and interlinkages of the Sustainable Development Goals" (UN DESA, 2015), as well as the World Health Organization's Health in All Policies (WHO, 2014), which frames wellbeing as a systems-level outcome requiring cross-sectoral action.

2.2 Developmental and Motivational Psychology

The ESF Framework incorporates a robust developmental lens informed by Maslow's later work on self-transcendence (Maslow, 1971), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and Barrett's model of human consciousness (Barrett, 2017). These traditions converge on the idea that flourishing involves a progression from survival-oriented needs (security, relationship) to integrative and transcendent capacities (contribution, growth). ESF's seven-level developmental model: Security, Relationship, Independence, Engagement, Fulfilment, Contribution, and Growth, is grounded in contemporary findings in neurobiology, childhood psychology, and trauma-informed practice (Narvaez, 2014; Zeedyk, 2013). It affirms the central role of early relational experiences in shaping empathy, moral reasoning, and worldview formation. This echoes the conclusions of the UN Special Rapporteur on Health (2023), which highlighted the foundational importance of early years investment in determining long-term societal outcomes.

In addition to these psychological foundations, the framework affirms that human development is profoundly shaped by embodied and energetic processes that are often pre-verbal or transpersonal in nature. Somatic coherence, subtle energy regulation, and the capacity to access expanded states of awareness are increasingly recognised as foundational to trauma integration, self-regulation, and the development of meaning and purpose (Levine, 2010; Porges, 2011; Jain et al., 2021). Embodied experiences—such as breath, movement, attuned presence, or deep relational resonance—can serve as catalysts for psychological integration and moral development (Siegel, 2010; Ogden et al., 2006). Similarly, encounters with expanded states of consciousness—whether through contemplative practice, nature immersion, or spontaneous crisis—may support rapid developmental shifts across multiple motivational levels (Miller, 2000; James, 1902; Grof, 2000). Integrating these dimensions within the ESF Framework enables a more complete account of human flourishing: one that honours the body as a site of healing, coherence, and alignment with life's deeper evolutionary impulse.

Importantly, the ESF Framework aligns with the Inner Development Goals (IDGs), a globally endorsed framework that complements the SDGs by outlining inner capacities necessary for sustainable development: being, thinking, relating, collaborating, and acting (Inner Development Goals, 2021). The ESF levels mirror and expand upon these dimensions, providing a dynamic model for integrating them across lifespan development and collective systems. It affirms that flourishing cannot be fully understood within the epistemic boundaries of Western modernity. Instead, it actively incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing that emphasise relationality, reverence, and reciprocity (Kimmerer, 2013; Cajete, 2000; Deloria Jr., 1999). Indigenous scholars and elders have long upheld principles such as "All My Relations" and "Seventh Generation Thinking" as ethical imperatives and cosmological truths. These principles are now increasingly validated by scientific disciplines such as ecology, quantum biology, and relational neuroscience (Abram, 1996; Gopnik, 2021).

Recent global frameworks, such as the IPBES Global Assessment on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (2019), echo Indigenous teachings in stating that "transformative change" must draw on diverse knowledge systems and recognise nature as a living system. The ESF Framework reflects this pluralistic approach, embedding worldviews that respect ecological sovereignty and biocultural diversity within its core architecture. This stands in contrast to many dominant wellbeing indices—including the OECD's Better Life Index, the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2023), and the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2024)—which remain rooted in individualistic, material, and often culturally homogenised definitions of progress.

2.4 Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions of Flourishing

Unlike most existing wellbeing models, the ESF Framework explicitly integrates spiritual, ethical, and cosmological dimensions. It draws from global ethical statements such as the Earth Charter (2000), the Parliament of the World's Religions' Declaration Toward a Global Ethic (1993), and the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1989), recognising that flourishing involves moral responsibility toward the more-than-human world and future generations (Boff, 1997; Berry, 1988).

Spiritual experiences—whether arising from encounters with nature, contemplative practice, or crisis—often catalyse inner realignment across motivational levels, supporting the development of altruism, purpose, and ecological consciousness (James, 1902; Pargament, 2007; Rankin, 2008). Within ESF, such experiences are understood not as anomalies but as "quantum moments" of integration (Miller, 2000), vital to the emergence of coherent worldviews and moral agency (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Ellyatt, 2025). It thus extends and complements other flourishing models—such as Harvard's Human Flourishing Program (VanderWeele, 2017)—by embedding a relational, spiritual, and ecological ontology at its core. This multidimensional grounding makes it uniquely suited to address the profound existential and systemic crises of the 21st century.

2.5 Worldview Transformation and Meta-Systemic Coherence

Building on contemporary metacrisis research (Ellyatt, 2025; Milligan et al., 2022), the ESF Framework introduces worldview literacy as a systemic lever. It recognises that all policy, education, and cultural systems express implicit worldviews, and that transformation requires the maturation of these worldviews toward integrative, relational, and ecological consciousness. This developmental progression - from separation to participation, and from control to care - constitutes the inner architecture of regenerative civilisation.

3. The Architecture of Eco-Systemic Flourishing

The ESF Framework offers a multidimensional structure for understanding and cultivating wellbeing that moves beyond individualistic or siloed approaches. Its architecture is composed of two interwoven components:

1. A four-domain systems matrix that integrates ecological, economic, cultural, and human dimensions of thriving.

2. A seven-level developmental model that shows human needs and motivations across the lifespan and that reflects the evolutionary urge towards wholeness and integration.

Together, these domains express the systemic logic of right relationship, mirroring the nested interdependencies between human motivation, culture, and ecology that underpin flourishing consciousness.

3.1 The Four Core Domains of Systemic Flourishing

Drawing on interdisciplinary insights from ecological economics (Raworth, 2017), planetary health (Whitmee et al., 2015), cultural psychology (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and human development (Narvaez, 2014), the ESF Framework identifies four interdependent domains essential to the flourishing of both people and planet:

(1) Natural Environment (NE)

This domain evaluates the health and integrity of local and planetary ecosystems. It includes biodiversity, access to green and blue spaces, ecological stewardship, and nature-based education. It aligns with IPBES (2019) recommendations on integrating ecological health into governance, and is echoed in the WHO's call to place planetary health at the core of human development (Haines & Ebi, 2019).

Key indicators include:

- Air and water quality
- Soil regeneration
- Species richness
- Ecological literacy
- Community access to nature

(2) Circular & Regenerative Economics (CRE)

This domain evaluates whether economic activity supports community wellbeing and ecological regeneration. It draws on principles from ecological economics (Costanza et al., 2014), circular design (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2015), and wellbeing economies (WEAll, 2021), and reflects a transition from extractive to regenerative systems.

Key indicators include:

- Material circularity rate
- Employment in green industries
- Local food system resilience
- Gini coefficient or wealth distribution
- Ecological footprint per capita

(3) Cultural Values & Identity (CVI)

This domain assesses how values, narratives, and shared identities shape belonging, trust, and coherence. Flourishing cultures are those that respect diversity, promote intergenerational continuity, and uphold dignity, peace, and dialogue (UNESCO, 2015).

Key indicators include:

- Cultural participation and narrative sovereignty
- Multilingual education and intercultural dialogue
- Inclusion of local and Indigenous knowledge
- Trust metrics and social cohesion
- Interfaith and intergenerational initiatives

(4) Human Capacities & Potential (HCP)

Human Capacities & Consciousness (HCC)

This domain focuses on the *inner architecture of flourishing*—the psychological, moral, and spiritual capacities that enable individuals and communities to live in right relationship with self, others, and the living world. It draws from developmental psychology, contemplative neuroscience, Indigenous wisdom, and moral philosophy, integrating spiritual ecology and systems literacy as essential aspects of human development.

Key Indicators:

- **Psychological Safety and Belonging** Feeling secure, seen, and valued within supportive relationships and communities, with an embodied sense of trust and inclusion.

- **Self-Efficacy, Autonomy, and Voice** Developing confidence, agency, and freedom of expression, while acting in alignment with personal and collective values.

- **Purpose Orientation, Creativity, and Meaning-Making** Engaging in reflective, imaginative, and purposeful activity that fosters coherence between inner motivation and outer contribution.

- **Emotional Literacy and Compassionate Awareness** Cultivating empathy, emotional regulation, and the capacity to understand and respond to the feelings of self and others with care and integrity.

- **Psychological Integration, Vitality, and Resilience** Demonstrating inner coherence, adaptability, and sustained wellbeing across changing life conditions—balancing mind, body, and spirit.

- **Participation, Collaboration, and Shared Leadership** Contributing to community and collective decision-making processes that embody fairness, cooperation, and mutual accountability.

- **Spiritual Awareness, Wonder, and Ecological Identity** Experiencing awe, gratitude, and a felt sense of interbeing with nature and the wider cosmos, recognising the sacredness of life.

- **Systems Literacy and Reflective Consciousness** Understanding interdependence across human, cultural, and ecological systems, and reflecting critically on one's worldview, assumptions, and impacts.

3.2 The Seven Levels of Human Flourishing

While the four domains address systemic conditions, the ESF Framework simultaneously integrates a developmental model of human motivation based on decades of research in psychology, neurobiology, and values theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Barrett, 2017). These seven levels represent evolving needs and capacities that must be nurtured across the lifespan to support full flourishing:

1. **Security** – Safety, stability, and trust in one's physical and emotional environment.
2. **Relationship** – Love, connection, empathy, and mutual care within families and communities.
3. **Independence** – Autonomy, agency, self-expression, and the right to develop as a unique individual.
4. **Engagement** – Purposeful involvement in learning, work, and creativity that sustains motivation.
5. **Fulfilment** – Joy, meaning, play, and inner harmony experienced through authentic living.
6. **Contribution** – Active service, social responsibility, and participation in collective wellbeing.
7. **Growth** – Reflective awareness, transformation, and integration toward greater consciousness.

Image 1: Flourish Project: ESF Framework Seven Levels

These levels are not linear stages but developmental capacities that interact dynamically. Spiritual or transcendent experiences often catalyse rapid integration across several levels at once (Miller, 2000; Pargament, 2007). Early childhood is foundational for the physical and psychological underpinning of later development, so the framework uniquely puts the young child at the centre of the system. It then nests the child within its larger social systems, further extending this to show that we exist in dynamic relationship and a state of 'interbeing' with the wider living world.

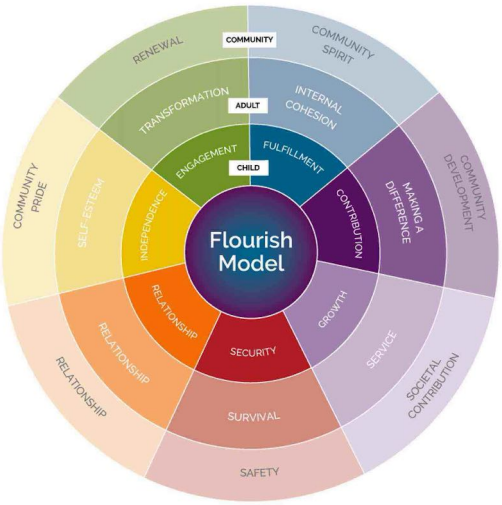

Image 2: Flourish Project: ESF Framework Nested System

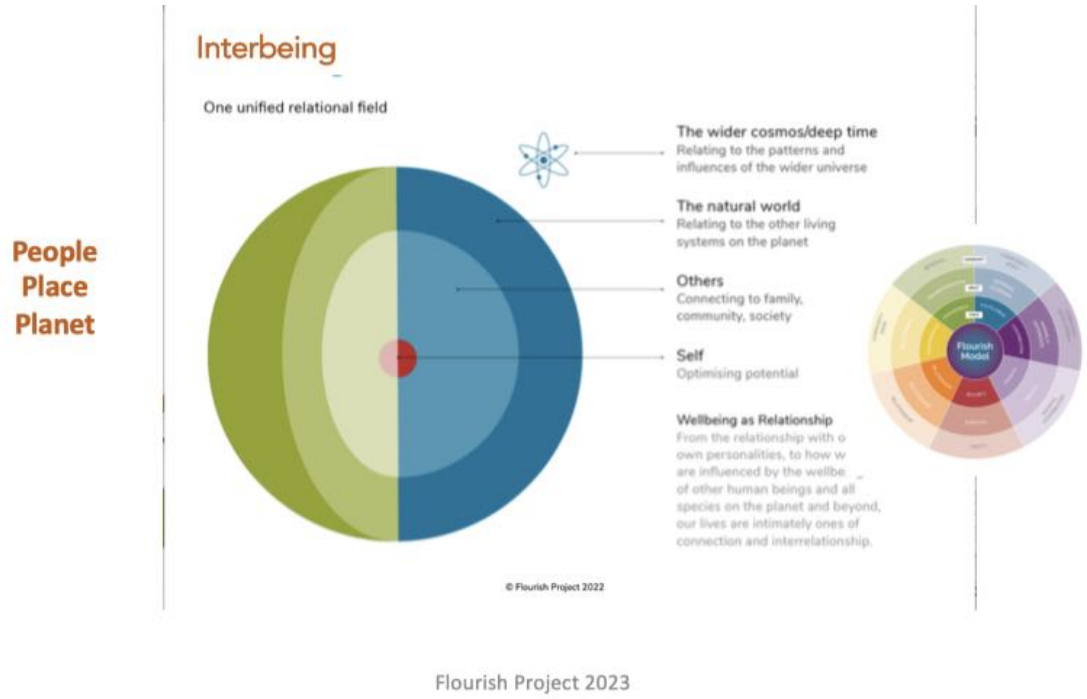

Image 3: Flourish Project: ESF Framework - Interbeing: The Ecological Self

3.3 The ESF Systems Matrix

The combination of domains and developmental levels yields a systems matrix for integrated evaluation. A national wellbeing policy, for instance, could be assessed by asking:

- Does it support ecological regeneration (NE)?
- Does it foster social equity and regenerative value creation (CRE)?
- Does it honour local heritage and intergenerational storytelling (CVI)?
- Does it nurture psychosocial health and lifelong learning (HCP)?
- And across all domains: Are security, empathy, agency, meaning, and growth being supported?

The ESF Framework thus enables coherence mapping across systems.

3.4 Comparison with Global Wellbeing Models

The ESF Framework is designed to complement and evolve these models by offering an integrated developmental and systems view of wellbeing that embraces the subjective, objective, ecological, and transcendent simultaneously (Wilber, 2000).

Table 1: ESF Framework Comparison with Global Wellbeing Models

Country/Framework	Core Features	Limitations	ESF Contribution
Bhutan – Gross National Happiness (GNH)	Holistic wellbeing including spiritual, cultural, and environmental values	Context-specific; limited adoption beyond Bhutan	Adds developmental model and ecological-systems logic

New Zealand – Living Standards Framework	Multi-dimensional wellbeing framework incorporating child wellbeing and natural capital	Still shaped by economic logic and performance indicators	Links indicators to inner motivation and spiritual ecology
Wales – Wellbeing of Future Generations Act	Legal mandate for long-term, intergenerational wellbeing and policy coherence	Strong framing but challenging in cross-departmental implementation	Provides motivational map and coherence evaluation tools
Scotland – National Performance Framework	Outcomes-based framework aligned with wellbeing and sustainability	Less emphasis on spiritual or developmental psychology	Enhances with worldview literacy and moral development layers
Iceland – Wellbeing Dashboard	Uses indicators across health, education, environment, and safety	Limited systems coherence and cultural grounding	Adds nested developmental integration and spiritual layers
OECD – Better Life Index	Cross-country subjective wellbeing and life quality metrics	Anthropocentric and lacking developmental integration	Embeds subjective wellbeing in ecological, relational systems
UNDP – Human Development Index (HDI)	Focus on health, education, and income as core development indicators	Ignores ecological, spiritual, and relational dimensions	Provides systemic developmental context and motivation map
World Happiness Report	Ranks countries by subjective wellbeing (life satisfaction)	Focuses on outcomes, not causes or systemic dynamics	Shifts from snapshot to root-cause analysis and transformation
Harvard Human Flourishing Program	Five dimensions: happiness, health, meaning, character, and relationships	Strong on individual metrics, weak systemic integration	Connects dimensions into broader societal systems and domains
Inner Development Goals (IDGs)	Five dimensions of inner development capacities: being, thinking, relating, collaborating, acting	Focuses on inner capacities but lacks outer systems mapping	Extends into systems coherence, ecology, and early years integration
Global Flourishing Goals (GFGs)	Holistic agenda combining subjective wellbeing, civic ethics, ecological stewardship, and meaning	Still conceptual; limited operational infrastructure	ESF enables integration of inner and outer dimensions; provides structural matrix and developmental mapping for realisation
Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework	Seven-level human motivation model integrated with four systemic domains	Meta-framework; requires translation into policy and practice contexts	Unifies multiple perspectives into one regenerative compass

Table 1: ESF Framework Comparison with Global Wellbeing Models

4. Developmental Dynamics: From Needs to Worldviews

While systemic conditions form the outer architecture of flourishing, they are always filtered through the inner architecture of human perception. The Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework therefore places significant emphasis on the developmental formation of needs, values, and worldviews. Flourishing is understood not as a fixed endpoint but as a relational, adaptive process shaped by lived experience across the life course. In this section, we explore how universal human needs give rise to evolving values systems, how early experiences influence moral and worldview development, and why worldviews themselves must become a focal point for societal transformation.

4.1 From Needs to Motivations

The ESF Seven Levels are not isolated stages, but overlapping patterns that emerge in context-sensitive ways. In healthy systems, these needs are progressively met and integrated. In fragmented systems—marked by trauma, neglect, or systemic injustice—these needs are often unmet, leading to compensatory behaviours or arrested development (Van der Kolk, 2014). Recent neuroscience research confirms that early caregiving relationships play a pivotal role in shaping brain architecture, emotional regulation, and later capacity for empathy and ethical reasoning (Shonkoff et al., 2012). The approach therefore emphasizes that the relational and ecological environments into which children are born—what Narvaez (2014) calls the "Evolved Nest"—are foundational to human development, and by extension, societal resilience.

4.2 The Formation of Values and Worldviews

Worldviews function as the deep operating systems of culture—shaping perception, ethics, and policy. The ESF approach treats worldview development as the primary indicator of civilisational maturity. As human needs evolve, they generate corresponding values—priorities that shape what individuals and cultures deem important, worthy, or sacred. Values become the internal compass through which people navigate moral questions, choose actions, and assign meaning (Schwartz, 2012). Over time, these values crystallise into worldviews: coherent (or incoherent) patterns of belief that answer fundamental questions such as:

- What is the nature of the world?
- Who am I, and what is my purpose?
- How should we live together?
- What counts as success or failure?
- What is sacred, and what is profane?

Worldviews are acquired implicitly through family, culture, media, and schooling, and they are rarely questioned unless dissonance arises (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). They are not simply cognitive filters but embodied patterns of attention, emotion, and motivation (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). As Ellyatt (2024) notes, "We act according to our worldviews—often without even realising we have them."

The ESF Framework, like the Galileo Commission Worldviews Report (2025), recognises worldview literacy as a critical developmental task for both individuals and societies. Mature worldviews are marked not by rigid certainty, but by integrative capacity: the ability to hold complexity, engage paradox, and empathise across difference (Commons & Ross, 2008). In this sense, the ESF's "unitive worldview and narrative" provides both a diagnostic and developmental map for right relationship—supporting cultures to evolve from dualistic fragmentation toward integrative, life-honouring coherence. This developmental orientation resonates with Wilber's (2000) integral theory and Hanzi Freinacht's (2017) value-meme frameworks, which identify levels of worldview maturity across history and cultures.

4.3 Why Early Years Matter

Early childhood is a sensitive period during which worldviews are not merely learned but embodied. Neuroscience shows that by age five, most of the neural architecture for empathy, fear response, and

trust has already been laid down (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This means that policies, parenting practices, and early education environments play a disproportionately large role in shaping later flourishing or fragmentation. Suzanne Zeedyk (2013) highlights how early experiences of disconnection, unpredictability, or violence can create "defensive worldviews" rooted in vigilance, shame, or control. By contrast, nurturing environments cultivate what Riane Eisler (2007) calls "partnership cultures"—values of care, collaboration, and shared power that lay the foundation for peaceful, flourishing societies.

The ESF Framework argues that to regenerate social systems, we must invest in the relational, narrative, and ecological conditions that allow young children to grow up with coherent, life-affirming worldviews.

These include:

- Secure attachment and emotional attunement
- Respectful communication and play-based learning
- Cultural storytelling and ethical imagination
- Contact with nature and spiritual wonder

Such environments support the activation of later-stage motivational levels (e.g. Contribution and Growth), equipping young people not only to survive but to engage purposefully in the transformation of systems.

4.4 Toward Regenerative Worldview Shaping

Worldviews, once formed, shape everything from national policy to interpersonal ethics. As Four Arrows and Narvaez (2022) note, dominant Western systems have often promoted a dualistic worldview: separating humans from nature, reason from emotion, and self from community. By contrast, Indigenous worldviews have long upheld principles of relationality, circularity, and reciprocity. These differing epistemologies have measurable consequences for ecological, social, and psychological outcomes (Deloria, 1999; Kimmerer, 2013).

In response, the ESF Framework supports the emergence of what it terms a *'unitive wordview and narrative'* - a perspective that integrates science and spirituality, individuality and collectively, inner and outer development. This does not collapse differences but instead holds them within a larger matrix of relational integrity and mutual care. UNESCO (2020) has identified intercultural understanding and worldview pluralism as key pillars for peaceful, sustainable futures.

In sum, flourishing systems are those that cultivate worldview maturity: the capacity of individuals and cultures to see their stories, heal their traumas, and reweave their meaning systems toward justice, coherence, and ecological reciprocity.

4.5 The Centrality of Moral and Ethical Development

Flourishing is not simply about happiness or wellbeing in isolation; it is deeply connected to how individuals and societies cultivate moral awareness, ethical discernment, and responsible action. Contemporary developmental psychology confirms that moral reasoning is not fixed at birth but evolves in interaction with relational, cultural, and ecological systems (Narvaez, 2014; Kohlberg, 1981). Early caregiving environments, stories, models of justice, and exposure to complexity all contribute to the shaping of a person's moral compass. When these systems are coherent and compassionate, children develop a strong sense of fairness, responsibility, and care. When fragmented, they may develop defensive or instrumental ethics rooted in fear or competition (Zeedyk, 2013; Keltner & Haidt, 2003).

The approach encourages us to move beyond individualistic notions of morality to a more *ecosystemic ethics* - one grounded in interdependence, responsibility to future generations, and right relationship with the Earth. This includes rethinking education, leadership, and policy not just as technical fields, but as

moral enterprises. As the Earth Charter (2000) reminds us, “We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace.”

In this light, optimising flourishing means optimising our moral capacities: to care, to discern, to act wisely in uncertainty, and to hold ourselves accountable to a greater whole. This moral deepening is not an abstract ideal but a necessary foundation for systemic regeneration.

5. ESF in Practice: Assessment and Evaluation Tools

For the Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework to serve as a transformative tool, it needs to be made actionable across diverse contexts - whether in communities, classrooms, cities, or national governance systems. This section outlines how the ESF model is being developed as a practical assessment tool designed to measure, reflect on, and guide integrated wellbeing. This aims to respond to the limitations of dominant metrics - such as GDP, life satisfaction indices, or isolated health outcomes - by offering a more holistic, participatory, and relational approach to evaluation.

5.1 Why We Need New Metrics

The measurement of flourishing must itself embody the principles of interbeing; thus, ESF evaluation tools privilege relational data, narrative feedback, and participatory sense-making alongside quantitative metrics. Mainstream policy frameworks often rely on aggregate indicators that neglect relational, ecological, or developmental dynamics. GDP continues to dominate global governance despite near-universal agreement that it fails to reflect human or planetary wellbeing (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi, 2009). Even newer wellbeing indicators - such as the OECD’s Better Life Index (2023), the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2023), and the World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2024) - remain largely individualistic, anthropocentric, or decontextualised from systemic causality. In response, global calls have emerged for more coherent, values-led frameworks. The Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo) initiative, the Inner Development Goals (IDGs), and the Future Generations Act in Wales all signal a shift toward integrative, intergenerational measures of progress.

The ESF Framework aligns with and extends these efforts by offering tools that map both systemic domains and human developmental levels in tandem. It encourages the use of mixed-method data: combining quantitative indicators (e.g., ecological footprint, trust levels) with qualitative insights (e.g., narrative interviews, reflective journaling). Participatory tools - including developmental self-assessments and coherence mapping - enable rich, locally embedded data collection. These approaches support relational accountability and systems literacy while avoiding reductive metrics.”

5.2 Education, Learning, and Systems Literacy

Education is one of the most powerful levers for cultural transformation. Yet most formal education systems remain narrowly focused on academic achievement and economic productivity, often failing to equip children and young people with the emotional, ecological, and ethical capacities they need to flourish in a rapidly changing world. The ESF Framework invites a profound reimagining of education as the cultivation of whole human beings—rooted in values, relationships, and planetary awareness. By integrating worldview literacy and systems thinking, the ESF reframes education as the deliberate cultivation of relational consciousness across generations.

Since its inception, the Flourish Project has been working to support this transformation across early years, primary, and community learning contexts. It has developed a series of accessible and developmentally grounded resources that bring learning to life in age-appropriate ways, while aligning with global goals. Its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Inner Development Goals (IDGs) Handbooks are already being used by schools in more than 30 countries, with an IDG Handbook for Senior Schools currently under development.

Its first international pilot study tested out the practical application of the model in senior schools. This early-stage research involved qualitative and quantitative data collection in partnership with a leading private provider, enabling participating schools to explore:

- How the ESF model supports *whole systems thinking* in school settings
- How the seven levels of wellbeing can structure meaningful, values-led dialogue
- How to create customisable wellbeing assessments rooted in developmental needs

This pilot included schools from diverse contexts and aimed to prototype an innovative digital resource for school-wide engagement. Early feedback reflected the important need for schools to have contextual flexibility, which is now core to the ESF approach in understanding the need for local value and meaning-making.

A flagship future initiative is the *Flourish Curriculum for Early Years and Primary Schools.* This will align with the International Baccalaureate and will introduce children to big ideas such as global belonging, responsibility, and sustainability - not through abstract instruction, but through experiential, nature-based, and relational exploration. The accompanying handbooks and lesson plans will support educators to “plant seeds of social awareness, solidarity and care” in developmentally appropriate ways, recognising children as capable agents of change from the earliest years.

The Flourish Project is also interested in collaborating with others to create a *scalable digital platform* to support school communities globally. The platform would enable all members of the school ecosystem—including children, teachers, leaders, and parents—to assess their own wellbeing across the seven developmental levels and to contribute to a shared understanding of what supports or inhibits flourishing in their context. Customisable surveys and reflective tools would allow schools to track holistic indicators over time, generating rich data to inform leadership decisions, teaching strategies, and pastoral care. This goes beyond “tick-box” wellbeing audits, aiming instead to support a living culture of care, purpose, and collective growth. The digital infrastructure would be co-designed with input from educators, researchers, and digital wellbeing experts. The long-term vision would be to make this platform freely available to state schools and community learning networks worldwide, offering an accessible entry point into systems literacy, relational accountability, and values-led education.

At its core, this educational work affirms that flourishing is not something to be added on to an already crowded curriculum—*it is the purpose of education itself.* By reconnecting learning to human needs, natural systems, cultural meaning, and spiritual growth, schools can become living systems that support coherence, resilience, and joy. This approach aligns closely with global movements for education transformation, including UNESCO’s *Futures of Education* report (2021), the Earth Charter’s vision for education for sustainability, and the Inner Development Goals framework.

The ESF-aligned tools developed by the Flourish Project offer both a conceptual map and practical resources for making this vision tangible in classrooms, homes, and communities.

5.3 Community-Based Applications

The **ESF Community Evaluation Guide** (Flourish Project, 2025) extends the same evaluative framework to grassroots initiatives. Questions include:

- Does this project honour local heritage, language, and tradition?
- Does it nurture emotional safety and belonging across generations?
- Does it promote circular resource use and local economic resilience?
- Does it offer opportunities for voice, participation, and co-creation?

Each item is linked to a motivational level and systemic domain, allowing local groups to map their own flourishing profiles, identify strengths, and co-design next steps. The aim is for these tools to be piloted with community networks, family support centres, youth arts programs, and intergenerational dialogues. Such participatory evaluations foster not only accountability but belonging, agency, and narrative repair—key ingredients for what Sennett (2012) calls “cooperative systems”.

5.4 Toward Policy Integration

Although the ESF tools are grounded in qualitative and relational logic, they are also designed for integration with national and municipal indicator sets. For instance:

- Wales’s Future Generations Wellbeing Goals can be mapped directly onto ESF domains.
- The European Union’s *Beyond GDP* initiative can incorporate ESF lenses to assess coherence between ecological, social, and human outcomes.
- The Inner Development Goals (IDG) tracker could expand to reflect layered human motivational development

The framework thus provides a meta-architecture for integrating subjective, objective, ecological, and spiritual data—a challenge few frameworks have yet met. This corresponds with emerging calls in global policy for “dashboard models” of flourishing that honour multiple ways of knowing (OECD, 2023; IPBES, 2019; Prescott et al., 2023).

6. Spiritual Experience, Inner Flourishing, and Systemic Ripples

While policy frameworks and educational programs have begun to embrace mental, emotional, and even social dimensions of wellbeing, few have integrated the spiritual domain as a central driver of flourishing. The Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework positions spirituality not as an optional or peripheral concern, but as a foundational element of integrated human development and systemic transformation. This section explores how spiritual experiences contribute to inner coherence, values integration, and the emergence of life-affirming worldviews, thereby catalysing broader societal ripples.

6.1 Reclaiming the Spiritual Dimension of Flourishing

The ESF Framework draws on a long lineage of philosophical, psychological, and cultural traditions that understand human flourishing as inseparable from a sense of sacred belonging and meaning. As noted by Maslow in his later writings, self-actualisation is not the peak of human development; beyond it lies *self-transcendenc*e - the capacity to connect with realities greater than the self (Maslow, 1971). Richard Barrett (2017) similarly identifies "service" and "unity" as higher stages of human consciousness, emerging only when foundational needs are sufficiently integrated.

Spiritual flourishing, in this context, is defined not by doctrinal adherence but by experiences of connection, awe, gratitude, compassion, and transcendence—experiences that activate deep coherence across the seven motivational levels of ESF. As Pargament (2007) notes, such experiences often result in “positive psychological transformation,” greater resilience, and reorientation toward intrinsic values. This understanding is increasingly recognised across diverse sectors. The World Health Organization has called for greater recognition of spiritual wellbeing in health systems (WHO, 2021), and the Inner Development Goals (2021) include “Being – Inner Compass” and “Presence” as core human capacities. The framework offers a developmental structure to contextualise and integrate such capacities into systemic design.

6.2 Catalysts for Inner Coherence

Recent research in transpersonal psychology, neuroscience, and consciousness studies has shown that peak experiences—whether through meditation, nature immersion, deep relational intimacy, ritual, or

crisis—can initiate shifts in identity and worldview (James, 1902; Miller, 2000; Siegel, 2010). These moments of "awakening" often disrupt habitual patterns and initiate a reordering of priorities. For example:

- A profound experience of awe in nature may shift a person's ecological awareness and lead to lifestyle changes (Keltner & Haidt, 2003).
- Near-death or crisis experiences frequently result in increased empathy, life purpose, and systemic consciousness (Ring, 2006).
- Contemplative practices can enhance attention, compassion, and values clarity—essential for navigating complexity (Davidson & Goleman, 2017).

Within the ESF Framework, these "quantum moments" of transformation (Miller, 2000) are viewed as accelerators of motivational integration. They tend to unify needs across the seven levels—security, love, purpose, contribution—leading to a greater sense of meaning and alignment. Such inner coherence is vital in a world increasingly marked by fragmentation, overload, and disconnection.

6.3 Childhood Spirituality and Early Awakening

Research in developmental psychology has confirmed that children possess natural capacities for wonder, reverence, and a sense of the sacred. Rebecca Nye (2009) describes children's spirituality as "relational consciousness"—an intuitive awareness of self, other, and more-than-self in relationship. This capacity often emerges through play, imagination, solitude, or contact with nature.

The framework supports environments in which these spiritual seeds can flourish. The Flourish Curriculum, for instance, encourages children to engage in gratitude circles, explore personal symbolism, and reflect on "what makes me feel most alive". These practices nourish a sense of interbeing that can lay the foundation for ethical development, ecological responsibility, and meaning-making throughout life. Spiritual experiences in childhood are not luxuries but necessities—especially in a world where consumerism and disconnection often suppress the child's natural attunement to wholeness.

6.4 From Inner Experience to Systemic Ripples

Transformational experiences may begin within, but their effects can ripple outward into wider systems of culture, policy, and economics. As Tisdell (2003) argues, spiritually grounded education often leads to increased social responsibility and cultural awareness. Ellyatt (2025) proposes that inner flourishing is a necessary precondition for coherent outer systems: "Fragmented people create fragmented systems; integrated people co-create systems of integrity."

The ESF Framework thus views spirituality as a critical missing link in systems change work. This view is supported by recent findings in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, which identify *presence, healing, and sacred space* as core elements of relational systems transformation (Milligan et al., 2022). It is also aligned with Indigenous teachings that view cosmology, ethics, and ecology as inseparable (Cajete, 2000; Kimmerer, 2013).

Finally, spiritual experience is not seen by ESF as a static attainment but as a process of lifelong *deepening and decoupling* - the decoupling of identity from egoic control and the deepening of commitment to the common good. This is not a call for religiosity, but for a regenerative spirituality that holds space for grief, gratitude, justice, and reverence for life. When integrated within collective systems, these awakenings become catalysts for cultural renewal - supporting the emergence of coherent worldviews and shifts in population level consciousness.

7. Policy Implications and Systems Application

The integration of flourishing as a guiding principle in governance and institutional design marks a profound shift away from extractive, reductionist approaches to public policy. As ecological instability, social fragmentation, and intergenerational inequity intensify, governments, cities, and communities are increasingly seeking models that prioritise long-term wellbeing over short-term gain. The systemic lens articulated in this paper offers a unifying architecture for such a transition—one that bridges inner development with outer transformation, and aligns cultural, ecological, economic, and human systems. Policy is a direct expression of worldview. Embedding the ESF Framework in governance therefore serves not only to coordinate indicators but to cultivate moral imagination and intergenerational responsibility within public institutions.

7.1 A New Compass for Governance

Contemporary governance systems remain dominated by economic indicators, especially GDP, which fails to reflect the true health of societies or ecosystems (Stiglitz et al., 2009). While countries such as New Zealand, Bhutan, and Wales have pioneered alternative approaches to wellbeing policy, many national frameworks still lack integration across domains. They often address education, health, climate, or inequality in siloes, without attending to the underlying worldviews or developmental dynamics that bind them.

What is needed is not merely more indicators, but a coherent worldview—an ethical and practical compass that supports:

- Intergenerational foresight
- Relational infrastructure
- Ecological restoration
- Cultural resilience
- Human potential and meaning-making

The integrated approach presented here provides precisely such a compass. By embedding developmental needs and systemic coherence into policy design, it offers a way to reframe governance around right relationship—with self, others, place, and planet.

7.2 Cities and Bioregions as Living Systems

Urban environments are increasingly recognised as key sites for systemic transformation. Movements such as Doughnut Economics for Cities (Raworth, 2020), C40, and the Thriving Cities Initiative view urban areas not as engines of growth but as regenerative ecosystems. In this context, applying a framework of flourishing at the city or bioregional scale allows for:

- Mapping strengths and fragmentation across neighbourhoods
- Fostering intergenerational and intercultural dialogue
- Measuring access to nature, meaning-making spaces, and creative opportunities
- Evaluating how local governance meets psychological, relational, and spiritual needs

The ESF Framework will link systems domains with human motivational levels, supporting place-based policy innovation and civic empowerment.

7.3 Education, Learning, and Systems Literacy

Formal education remains one of the most powerful tools for shaping cultural evolution and systemic transformation. As explored in Section 5.2, the ESF Framework positions education not only as a transmitter of knowledge but as a generator of whole-person, whole-system awareness. By aligning curricula with human developmental needs and ecological consciousness, schools, universities, and community learning spaces can become incubators for the worldview shift required to meet the

challenges of the 21st century. Policy strategies that embed flourishing principles into lifelong learning systems—from early years to professional development—are essential to a regenerative future.

7.4 Integration into Wellbeing Economies and National Strategy

Across the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo) alliance and the UNDP Human Development frameworks, there is a growing call for national strategies that reflect life-centric, equitable, and participatory values. The matrix introduced in this paper supports the integration of diverse wellbeing indicators—including spiritual and ecological dimensions—into national dashboards. It also enables governments to:

- Identify mismatches between policy aims and developmental impacts
- Prioritise investments in early years and family wellbeing
- Align economic incentives with regenerative outcomes
- Address underlying fragmentation in mental health and cultural identity strategies

The Future Generations Report in Wales (2025), for example, highlights the need for systems that "connect long-term vision with the developmental and relational needs of children and communities". This echoes calls from the Earth Charter, UNESCO's Futures of Education report (2021), and the Global Happiness and Wellbeing Policy Report (2019) to centre holistic flourishing in the global development agenda. Integrating the ESF Framework into national strategies supports the development of intergenerational equity audits - systemic reviews of how present policies impact the capacities and rights of future generations. This aligns with emerging legal and governance innovations including youth climate cases, the UN Declaration on Future Generations, and constitutional amendments in countries like Wales and Ecuador.

7.5 A Regenerative Paradigm for the SDGs and Beyond

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent an unprecedented global consensus on what needs to change. Yet despite their breadth and ambition, the SDGs are often critiqued for lacking a unifying theory of human development, and for overlooking the relational, emotional, moral, and spiritual foundations that underlie sustainable transformation (Prescott et al., 2023, Swain, 2018; Choudhary, 2022; Long et al., 2023). One response to this has been the *Inner Development Goals (IDGs)* initiative which introduced the significant recognition that sustainable transformation requires inner development alongside policy change (IDG Initiative, 2021; VanderWeele, 2017).

A further more recent example is the proposal for the *Global Flourishing Goals (GFGs)* – an alternative introduced by thought leaders including UNESCO MGIEP, the Harvard Human Flourishing Program, and interdisciplinary scholars of virtue ethics, systems transformation, and civic regeneration (Karthikeya et al., 2022; Mountbatten-O'Malley, 2025). The GFGs propose a *whole-systems agenda* grounded in values such as dignity, interdependence, ecological responsibility, and human potential. Their foundational premise is that flourishing must encompass:

- Subjective wellbeing, mental health, and inner coherence
- Civic engagement and ethical agency
- Environmental stewardship and regenerative practice
- Spiritual development and meaning-making
- Culturally grounded human dignity and relational accountability (UNESCO MGIEP, 2023; Antonacopoulou, 2025)

Through integrating the SDGs' structural ambition, the IDGs' developmental architecture and the GFGs' moral vision, the ESF Framework hope to provide just such a synthesis. It affirms that true flourishing arises at the intersection of inner transformation and outer regeneration. It is not enough to meet targets

or optimise wellbeing indicators in isolation. What is needed is a global paradigm that can trace the roots of ecological and social dysfunction to deeper breakdowns in relational, moral, and developmental coherence - and that offers tools for integration at every level of system. It points to a new global architecture for the 21st century—one grounded not in extractive growth or technocratic metrics, but in the cultivation of wise, compassionate, and ecologically embedded human beings who can co-create regenerative societies.

Where the SDGs track external targets, the ESF Framework invites complementary attention to internal transformation. It positions human motivation, moral awareness, and cultural meaning-making as central to sustainable development - not as soft add-ons, but as structural conditions for long-term success. It also opens space for diverse epistemologies - including Indigenous, ecological, and spiritual worldviews—to inform what progress truly means.

Ultimately, this paradigm asks not just *what kind of world do we want to create*, but *what legacy of consciousness and care will we leave behind?* It challenges us to evolve—not only our systems, but our stories—and in doing so, to create a future worthy of our children's trust.

8. Limitations and Possible Criticisms

While the Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework aspires to offer an integrative, transformative model for individual and societal wellbeing, it is important to recognise its current limitations and to anticipate potential criticisms. Engaging critically with these challenges not only strengthens the framework's theoretical integrity but also invites collaboration, dialogue, and iterative refinement.

8.1 The Challenge of Empirical Validation

One current limitation is the lack of large-scale, peer-reviewed empirical studies validating the implementation of the framework in diverse settings. While it draws on established research traditions in developmental psychology, systems thinking, and ecological ethics, as a new contributor to the field the ESF model remains primarily conceptual. Pilot initiatives, such as the SDG and IDG school handbooks, have shown early promise, but systematic evaluation across varied socio-political contexts is still needed. As such, further research is required to test the framework's efficacy, reliability, and adaptability at scale. (VanderWeele, 2017; Dodge et al., 2012).

8.2 Translational Complexity

The framework's holistic and philosophical depth may present a translational challenge for practitioners, especially in domains that demand operational clarity, such as public health, economics, and governance. Concepts such as "right relationship," or "interbeing" may be meaningful within contemplative, Indigenous, or pedagogical traditions but may be viewed as overly abstract or metaphysical in policy and scientific settings. Without clearer operational definitions and evidence-based metrics, the risk remains that the framework is perceived as inspirational but not actionable. (Midgley, 2000; Cairney & Oliver, 2017).

8.3 Spirituality in Secular Contexts

The explicit inclusion of spiritual development as a core domain of flourishing may generate resistance in secular, pluralistic, or strictly evidence-based environments. While the framework is non-denominational and grounded in universal developmental capacities (e.g., awe, meaning-making, moral imagination), its integration of spiritual language and sources could be misinterpreted as ideological or exclusionary. Ensuring that these elements are framed inclusively - as intrinsic dimensions of human experience rather than religious prescriptions – will be essential for broader adoption. (Koenig, 2012; DeSouza, 2006).

8.4 Cultural Relativity and Global Adaptation

Although the ESF Framework is intentionally universal in structure, it draws heavily from particular epistemological lineages—namely Western developmental psychology, Indigenous worldviews, and systems theory. While this synthesis offers rich cross-disciplinary potential, some may question whether the framework adequately reflects the lived realities, value systems, or priorities of marginalised, postcolonial, or non-Western communities. Adapting the ESF model to diverse cultural contexts requires careful co-creation and intercultural dialogue to avoid epistemic imposition or extractive integration of Indigenous knowledge.

8.5 Implementation Capacity

Transformative systems change is a deeply resource-intensive undertaking. Education systems, local governments, and community networks may lack the training, capacity, or political will to engage with complex, multi-layered frameworks like ESF. Without scalable, modular, and context-sensitive tools, there is a risk of conceptual overload or superficial application. Addressing this challenge requires investment in educator and policy leader capacity-building, alongside the co-development of accessible digital tools, case studies, and implementation roadmaps. (Fullan, 2011; Pritchett et al., 2013).

8.6 Risk of Idealism and Complexity Paralysis

A final criticism might centre on the potential for the ESF Framework to become overly idealistic or impractically complex. In attempting to integrate multiple systems, values, and developmental levels, there is a danger of "complexity paralysis," where users feel overwhelmed or unclear on where to begin. For this reason, the framework must continually evolve toward simplicity without reductionism - providing clear entry points, actionable templates, and domain-specific adaptations that meet users where they are. (Snowden & Boone, 2007; Meadows, 2008).

8.7 Final Point

These limitations do not undermine the value of the ESF Framework; rather, they highlight its emergent nature and the need for continuous iteration, critical engagement, and collaborative refinement. Acknowledging these tensions will help to ensure that the framework remains a living, adaptive tool - capable of evolving in dialogue with diverse communities, disciplines, and realities on the ground.

9. Conclusion: Toward a New Civilizational Compass

The converging crises of the twenty-first century represent not just environmental or economic failures but a profound worldview breakdown—a loss of coherence between what we know, feel, and value. The Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework responds to this by providing a unifying developmental architecture for regenerating right relationship across all domains of life. At this pivotal historical threshold, there is an urgent need for a new civilizational compass: one that integrates developmental psychology with ecological ethics, systemic literacy with spiritual awareness, and evidence-based policy with ancient wisdom.

The Eco-Systemic Flourishing (ESF) Framework has been developed as such a compass. Rather than offering a prescriptive model or fixed endpoint, it serves as a dynamic meta-framework for guiding regenerative transformation. By integrating the four systemic domains with seven foundational levels of human motivation, the ESF Framework provides a unified map of what it means to flourish as individuals embedded in interdependent systems.

Its emphasis on right relationship—between inner and outer, self and other, culture and ecology—sets it apart from dominant wellbeing metrics. It recognises flourishing not simply as a state of happiness or success, but as an emergent, relational process characterised by coherence, contribution, and connection

to something greater than the self.

Across the previous sections, we have demonstrated how the ESF Framework can be operationalised through educational curricula, community assessment tools, national wellbeing strategies, and spiritual development pathways. We have also shown how it complements and deepens existing global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the Inner Development Goals, and the Wellbeing Economy movement. Importantly, the framework is not limited by geography, discipline, or culture. Its structure is intentionally universal yet adaptable - rooted in shared human needs while responsive to local context. This allows it to serve as a bridge between sectors, generations, and worldviews. It invites us not only to reform institutions, but to reimagine the narratives and inner conditions from which those institutions emerge.

As a meta-framework for worldview transformation, ESF offers an integrative grammar for reconnecting knowledge, ethics, and purpose. The task ahead is profound. It is not merely to improve existing systems, but to reweave the social, ecological, and spiritual fabric of life. As Einstein wrote in 1946, “A new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move toward higher levels.” The ESF Framework offers a generative starting point towards cultivating such thinking - and for building the conditions through which all life can flourish.

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