

IVCO 2022 Think Piece

**RETHINKING THE IDEA OF  
PROSPERITY (AS FLOURISHING)  
AND WHAT IT MEANS IN THE  
CONTEXT OF V4D AND THE  
PROMOTION OF THE SDGS.**

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The SDGs (or Global Goals) are [“a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity”](#). While the 17 SDGs that make up the Global Goals provide detailed information about the [169 SDG targets and tracking across 232 unique indicators](#), these commitments also warrant closer attention to what prosperity means, to whom, and how it can be measured within the volunteering for development (V4D) sector.

## PROSPERITY AS ECONOMIC GROWTH VERSUS PROSPERITY AS FLOURISHING

Prosperity is often simplified to mean economic growth, and while financial and material stability *can* promote poverty reduction, equating economic growth with prosperity tells us little about the distribution of wealth, offers limited knowledge about how people around the world define wealth or experience wellbeing, and provides insufficient indicators of sustainable development for measuring the ‘whole human experience’. So, what might sustainable development mean when a more comprehensive lens of prosperity – understood as flourishing - is used?

Proponents of the [Harvard University Human Flourishing Program](#) use the term *flourishing* to measure prosperity along these six domains: happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, social relationships, and financial and material stability. At its most simplistic level, we can understand flourishing as [“a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good”](#). Aristotle considers flourishing and the ‘good life’ as the achievement of bodily goods such as health, external goods such as food, and ‘goods of the soul’ including love, friendship, self-esteem, etc. If prosperity and flourishing contribute to our understanding of “living the good life”, what role does the V4D sector play in promoting flourishing?

## V4D CONTRIBUTIONS TO FLOURISHING

Previous research on V4D documents the important role this sector plays in the development of social relationships. V4D promotes the ‘human face of development’ and [moves beyond the technical and narrow economic models of sustainable development](#). V4D also creates new spaces for “equitable and sustainable partnerships” where solidarity and [“alliances are forged”](#), facilitating [“social symbiosis”](#). Additional research, however, is still needed to more fully unpack the ways that social relationships promote flourishing and sustainable development outcomes, including greater attention to the way that social relationships build trust, result in friendship and promote love and meaningful social bonds. This knowledge is crucial for [understanding the ‘full complexity’ of human experiences](#). Social relationships built on love and trust can also facilitate mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, and happiness and life satisfaction, among other domains of flourishing that could be more fully incorporated into measures of sustainable development.

[Research](#) drawing from semi-structured interviews across 9 countries in the Global South with partner organisation staff shows distinct examples of the role of V4D in creating impactful relationships<sup>1</sup>. Building

friendships, developing strong connections, and enhancing social relations were important outcomes of the V4D programmes. Participants in this study referred to their friendships with volunteers as something that was valued and treasured: a relationship comprised of “affective bonds”, according to one study participant. Friendships with volunteers fostered a new sense of purpose and meaning as well as increased happiness and life satisfaction. One way that interactions with volunteers forged new social relationships included the mutual sharing of beliefs and values. As another participant noted, the relationship forged is “transcendental”, highlighting characteristics of the V4D programmes as unique, special, and meaningful. Another staff member explained how the exchange with volunteers enriched their conversations and enhanced their feelings of meaning and purpose. Several participants shared that the strong bond and expanded social network they forged with volunteers eventually resulted in a visit to the international volunteers’ home countries years later. This outcome illustrates how V4D has the power to build reciprocal and meaningful relationships that are maintained over a sustained period of time, and contribute to a sense of prosperity or flourishing outside the scope of normal indicators of wellbeing.

These findings reinforce the importance of broadening research on the SDGs and the measurement of prosperity to consider how flourishing is defined and understood within local contexts and across diverse domains beyond economic growth. Future research documenting the distinctive contributions of V4D could more fully consider the characteristics of flourishing that arise from the social relationships developed in V4D programmes. This information would expand our knowledge of prosperity to include indicators of happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and social relationships (with greater attention to the characteristics that define those relationships, including trust, love, bonds, friendship, spirituality, etc.)

## POTENTIAL AREAS OF FOCUS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH COULD INCLUDE:

- How has V4D contributed to flourishing or wellbeing in your work and/or your personal life?
- What have you learned through the V4D experience that has helped to:
  - Expand your friendships and other relationships and networks?
  - Reflect on the meaning, purpose, happiness, or satisfaction of your work and life?
  - Reflect on the value of character and virtue to your life?
  - Enhance your own mental and physical health, or promote mental and physical wellbeing in your work?
  - Consider how loving relationships, bonds and friendships are formed and sustained over time?
  - Understand sustainable development as a ‘whole human’ experience that goes beyond economic growth to include psychological, social, spiritual, and emotional wellbeing, as well as relationships to land, the environment, to other humans, to other species, and in your spiritual life?