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Beyond Economic Indicators: Integrating Psychological Reflective Functioning into Human Development and Well-Being Frameworks



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Beyond Economic Indicators: Integrating Psychological Reflective Functioning into Human Development and Well-Being Frameworks



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Abstract

Purpose: This article examines the need to broaden human development frameworks beyond economic participation, institutional access, and capability expansion by incorporating psychological and socioemotional capacities. It argues that reflective functioning, self-awareness, emotional regulation, and moral reasoning are essential to individual empowerment, meaningful participation, and human flourishing.

Methodology: The article adopts a conceptual and interdisciplinary approach, drawing on the capabilities approach, well-being scholarship, developmental psychology, and adolescent development literature. It critically reviews GDP-centered development models and examines how families, schools, and social institutions contribute to the cultivation of internal developmental capacities across the lifespan.

Findings: The discussion shows that external opportunities alone cannot fully explain human flourishing unless individuals possess the psychological capacities required to use those opportunities meaningfully. Adolescence is identified as a critical developmental stage in which reflective functioning, identity formation, prosocial orientation, and civic engagement can be strengthened through supportive parenting, education, and social environments.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: The article contributes to human development theory by integrating psychological reflective functioning into capability-based and well-being frameworks. For policy, it supports multidimensional development models that include psychological and relational indicators. For practice, it highlights the importance of parenting, schools, and community institutions in cultivating reflective capacities that promote empowerment, resilience, and sustainable social development.

Keywords: *Human Development, Reflective Functioning, Well-Being, Capability Approach, Adolescence, Psychological Empowerment, Human Flourishing, Socioemotional Development*

JEL Codes: *I31, I38, O15, D63, J13*

1. Introduction

Human development has increasingly emerged as a multidimensional framework for understanding social progress beyond traditional measures of economic growth. Earlier approaches to development largely emphasized industrial productivity, national income, and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the principal indicators of societal advancement. However, contemporary scholarship argues that economic expansion alone cannot adequately explain the quality of people's lives, their freedoms, or their opportunities to flourish (Sen, 1999; Fleurbaey & Blanchet, 2013). Human development perspectives instead emphasize the importance of expanding the substantive freedoms and capabilities that enable individuals to participate meaningfully in society and shape their own futures (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022).

The capabilities approach advanced by Amartya Sen and later expanded by Martha Nussbaum significantly influenced this shift in development thinking. Within this perspective, development is understood not simply as economic accumulation, but as the expansion of people's opportunities to live lives they value (Sen, 1999). Access to education, healthcare, political participation, and social protection are therefore viewed as central components of human progress because they increase individuals' ability to exercise agency and improve their well-being. The Human Development Reports issued by the United Nations Development Programme further reinforced this position by arguing that people constitute the true wealth of nations and that societal advancement should be evaluated through broader measures of human flourishing rather than income alone (UNDP, 2024).

At the same time, growing critiques of GDP-centered development models have contributed to broader interdisciplinary discussions concerning the meaning of well-being and societal progress. Scholars increasingly argue that economic indicators alone fail to capture psychosocial conditions such as emotional health, belonging, social trust, empowerment, and relational stability (Costanza et al., 2014; Stiglitz et al., 2009). Recent global challenges, including widening inequality, mental health concerns, climate instability, and the long-term social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, have further intensified calls for more holistic approaches to human development that incorporate both structural and psychological dimensions of well-being (World Health Organization, 2022; Marmot, 2020).

Despite these advances, much of the existing human development literature continues to focus primarily on external opportunity structures while giving comparatively limited attention to the internal capacities that allow individuals to make meaningful use of those opportunities. Psychological capacities such as reflective functioning, emotional regulation, self-awareness, empathy, and moral reasoning may significantly influence how individuals exercise freedom, form relationships, and participate in social life (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Müller et al., 2022). From this perspective, human flourishing depends not only on access to resources and institutional support

but also on the development of internal psychosocial capacities that sustain resilience, purpose, and reflective agency across the lifespan.

This article argues that human development frameworks should integrate psychological reflective functioning as a central dimension of human capability and well-being. Drawing upon scholarship from developmental psychology, well-being research, and human development theory, the discussion examines how reflective capacities contribute to empowerment, social participation, and long-term flourishing. Particular attention is given to adolescence as a critical developmental period in which self-awareness, identity formation, and prosocial orientation can be cultivated through parenting, schools, and social institutions. By integrating psychological development with broader human development frameworks, the article proposes a more holistic understanding of societal progress, linking external freedoms to the internal capacities needed to exercise them meaningfully.

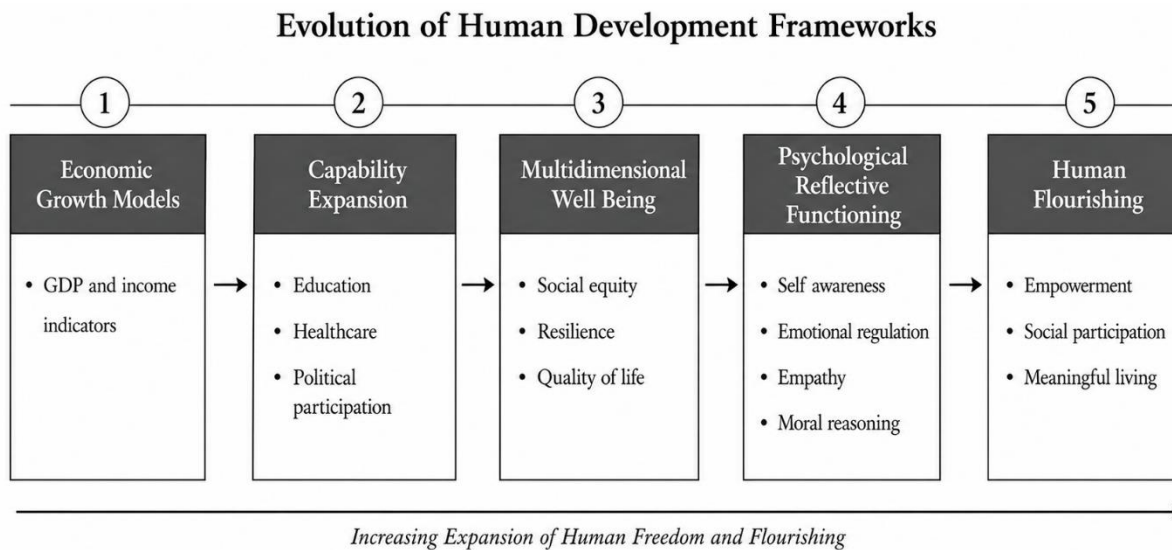


Fig. 1. The evolution of human development frameworks from economic growth models to human flourishing

2. Human Development beyond GDP

The emergence of human development theory marked a significant departure from earlier economic models that equated national progress primarily with industrial growth and income generation. For much of the twentieth century, GDP served as the dominant indicator of societal advancement and economic success. Although GDP remains useful for measuring market productivity and aggregate economic activity, scholars increasingly argue that it provides only a limited account of human well-being and social progress (Fleurbaey & Blanchet, 2013). Economic growth alone cannot adequately reflect inequality, access to opportunity, social cohesion, health outcomes, or the quality of people's lived experiences.

Human development approaches emerged in response to these limitations by placing individuals rather than economic systems at the center of development discourse. Sen's capabilities framework significantly shaped this transition by defining development as the expansion of substantive freedoms that enable people to pursue lives they value (Sen, 1999). Within this framework, education, healthcare, social protection, and political participation are viewed not merely as economic investments but as conditions that expand human capability and agency. The Human Development Reports produced by the United Nations Development Programme institutionalized this perspective through multidimensional indicators that assess well-being beyond monetary income (UNDP, 2022).

The growing critique of GDP-based measurement gained further international attention through the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, commonly known as the Sarkozy Commission. The commission argued that traditional economic indicators fail to capture important dimensions of societal well-being, including emotional health, relational stability, environmental sustainability, and quality of life (Stiglitz et al., 2009). The report emphasized that national progress should include attention to how individuals experience their lives and whether societies create conditions that support long-term flourishing. This shift contributed to the broader "Beyond GDP" movement, which advocates multidimensional approaches to development that integrate social, psychological, and environmental dimensions of human experience (Costanza et al., 2014).

Contemporary well-being scholarship increasingly supports the argument that societal progress depends on more than economic productivity. Research from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development highlights that well-being includes both objective living conditions and subjective dimensions such as belonging, empowerment, social trust, and mental health (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). Similarly, public health and social equity scholars continue to demonstrate that disparities in education, housing, healthcare access, and community stability significantly shape long-term developmental outcomes and quality of life (Marmot, 2020).

Recent global crises have further exposed the limitations of narrowly economic approaches to development. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed profound vulnerabilities related to mental health, educational disruption, social isolation, and inequality across communities worldwide (World Health Organization, 2022). These disruptions intensified scholarly attention toward resilience, psychosocial well-being, and the social conditions necessary for human flourishing. Human development frameworks increasingly recognize that institutional resources alone are insufficient unless individuals possess the internal capacities required to engage with opportunities, navigate adversity, and participate meaningfully in society.

From this perspective, human development must be understood as both structural and psychological. Expanding access to education, healthcare, and political participation remains

essential, but these opportunities are most effective when individuals are also able to develop reflective awareness, emotional regulation, and a sense of purpose. Integrating psychological capacities into human development theory, therefore, broadens the understanding of well-being from material access alone toward a more comprehensive conception of human flourishing.

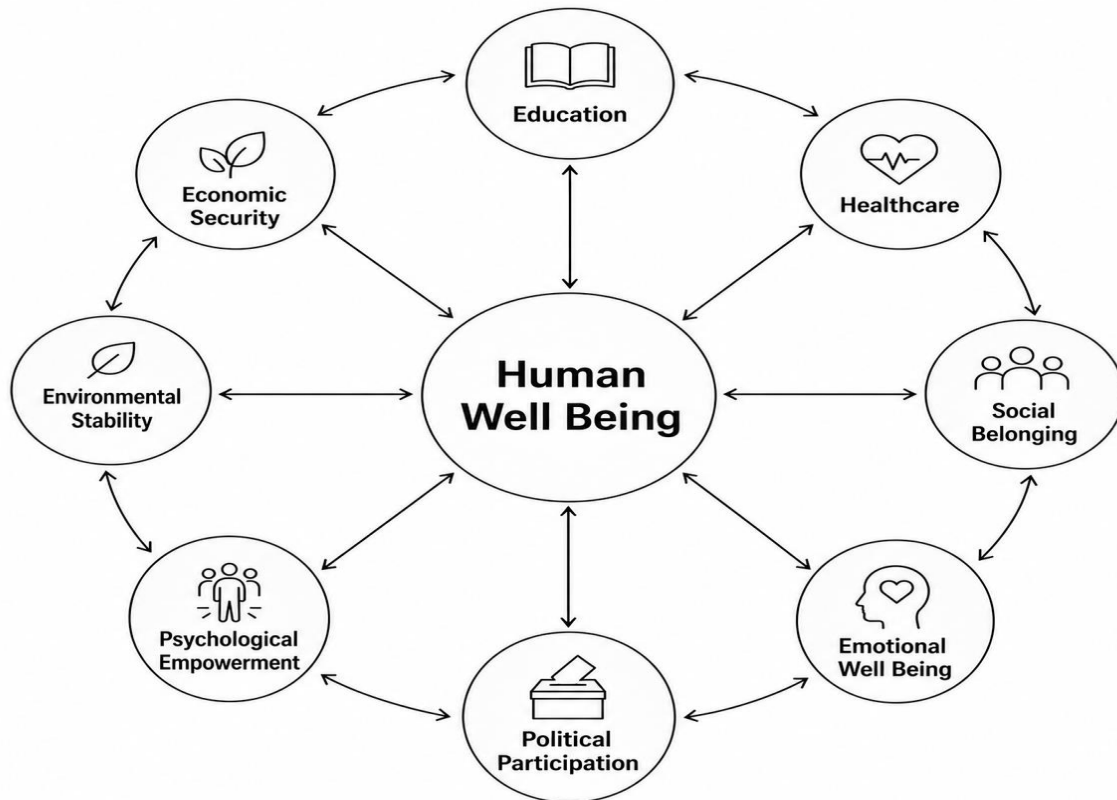


Fig. 2. Multidimensional framework illustrating the interconnected dimensions of human well-being beyond GDP.

3. Psychological Dimensions of Human Development

Human development frameworks have traditionally emphasized external conditions that improve quality of life, including education, healthcare, political participation, and economic opportunity. While these structural conditions remain essential, increasing attention has been directed toward the psychological capacities that influence how individuals engage with opportunities, relationships, and social institutions. Human flourishing depends not only on the availability of resources but also on the development of internal capacities that support self-awareness, emotional regulation, resilience, and reflective agency (Ryff & Singer, 2008).

Contemporary developmental and psychological scholarship increasingly supports the view that psychosocial capacities are central to long-term well-being and adaptive functioning. Emotional

regulation, reflective functioning, empathy, moral reasoning, and perspective taking contribute significantly to an individual's ability to form healthy relationships, navigate adversity, and participate meaningfully in society (Müller et al., 2022). These capacities shape how individuals interpret experiences, respond to social environments, and make decisions concerning their future. From this perspective, psychological development represents an important dimension of human capability because it influences the extent to which individuals are able to exercise freedom and agency in meaningful ways.

Reflective functioning occupies a particularly important place within this discussion. Reflective functioning refers to the capacity to understand one's own thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behaviors while also recognizing the internal experiences of others (Siegel, 2012). This process supports self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and social understanding, all of which contribute to psychological well-being and healthy interpersonal functioning. Reflective functioning also enables individuals to evaluate their experiences within broader moral, relational, and social contexts, thereby strengthening identity formation and personal responsibility.

Recent research suggests that reflective functioning is associated with resilience, emotional stability, and prosocial behavior across different stages of development (Losonczy & Szabó, 2023). Individuals with stronger reflective capacities are often better able to regulate stress, manage interpersonal conflict, and engage in constructive social participation. These capacities become increasingly important in contemporary societies shaped by rapid technological change, social fragmentation, and growing mental health concerns. In this sense, reflective functioning may be understood not simply as an individual psychological skill, but as a developmental capacity that contributes to social cohesion and community well-being.

This perspective also aligns with broader theories of psychological well-being that emphasize meaning, purpose, autonomy, and self-realization as essential dimensions of flourishing. Ryff and Singer (2008) argue that psychological well-being extends beyond temporary happiness or material satisfaction and includes deeper dimensions such as personal growth, self-acceptance, positive relationships, and purposeful living. Similarly, self-determination theory proposes that individuals thrive when psychological needs related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported within their environments (Deci & Ryan, 2008). These perspectives reinforce the argument that development should not be reduced to economic advancement alone, but should include the cultivation of internal capacities that sustain meaningful participation in society.

The relationship between psychological development and human capability becomes especially significant during adolescence. Developmental scholars increasingly describe adolescence as a formative period characterized by heightened neurological plasticity, identity exploration, and increased sensitivity to social and emotional experiences (Dahl et al., 2018). During this period, young people begin to develop more advanced forms of self-reflection, moral reasoning, and perspective-taking that influence future patterns of behavior and social engagement. Consequently,

investments in adolescent psychological development may have long-term implications for civic participation, resilience, and societal well-being.

Research also demonstrates that psychosocial capacities are shaped by relational environments and social institutions. Parenting practices characterized by emotional support, encouragement, and age-appropriate autonomy contribute to children's sense of competence, motivation, and self-regulation (Grolnick, 2009). Similarly, schools that foster emotionally safe learning environments, dialogue, and social-emotional learning can strengthen empathy, reflective thinking, and prosocial orientation among adolescents (Cantor et al., 2021). These findings suggest that psychological development is not solely an individual process, but one deeply influenced by families, educational systems, and broader social structures.

Viewing human development through a psychological lens, therefore, broadens existing capability frameworks by emphasizing the internal dimensions of empowerment and flourishing. Expanding opportunities remains essential, but opportunities alone may not guarantee well-being unless individuals possess the reflective and emotional capacities necessary to engage with them effectively. Human development, from this perspective, involves both the expansion of external freedoms and the cultivation of the psychological capacities required to use those freedoms meaningfully.

Table 1. Psychological Capacities and Human Development Outcomes

Psychological Capacity	Human Development Outcome
Reflective functioning	Improved decision-making and self-awareness
Emotional regulation	Greater resilience and mental well-being
Perspective taking	Enhanced social participation and empathy
Moral reasoning	Ethical engagement and civic responsibility
Self efficacy	Increased motivation and empowerment
Identity formation	Long-term psychological stability
Prosocial orientation	Community engagement and cooperation

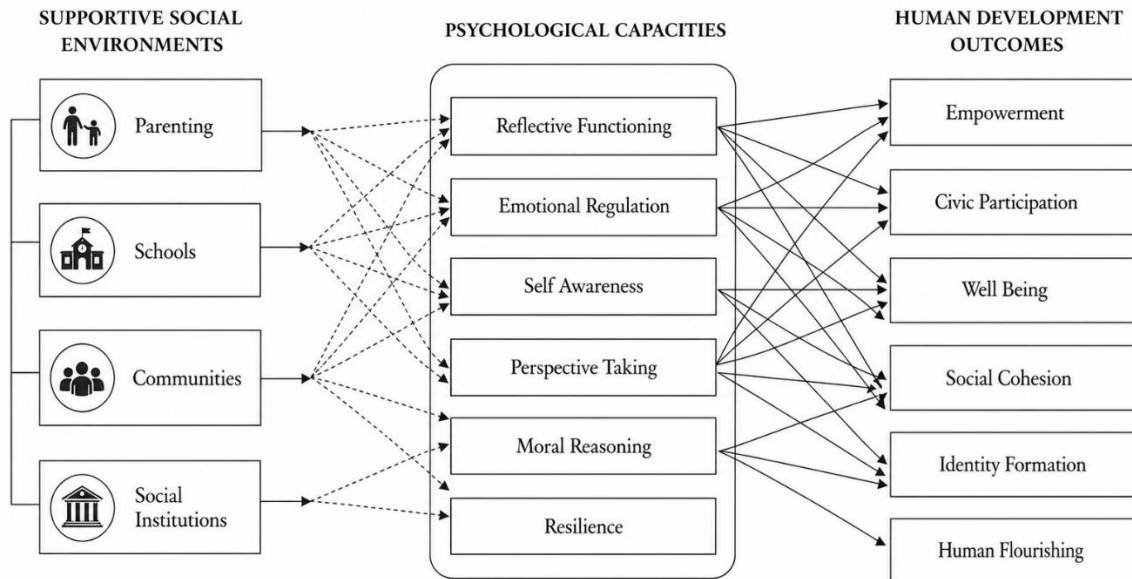


Fig. 3. Psychological dimensions of human development framework.

4. Adolescence, Parenting, and Educational Empowerment

Adolescence represents a critical developmental stage in which cognitive, emotional, and social capacities undergo substantial transformation. Contemporary developmental science increasingly recognizes adolescence not merely as a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, but as a formative stage characterized by heightened neurological plasticity, identity formation, and psychosocial growth (Dahl et al., 2018). During this period, young people begin to develop more advanced capacities for self-reflection, emotional regulation, perspective taking, and moral reasoning, all of which significantly influence long-term well-being and social participation.

From a human development perspective, adolescence constitutes an important stage for cultivating the internal capacities necessary for meaningful engagement with society. While access to education, healthcare, and social protection remains essential, adolescents also require relational and institutional environments that support empowerment, resilience, and reflective agency. Increasingly complex social environments shaped by digital media, economic uncertainty, and social fragmentation further highlight the importance of fostering psychological capacities that enable young people to navigate challenges with intentionality and self-awareness (Waters et al., 2022).

Parenting plays a central role in this developmental process. Research consistently demonstrates that supportive parenting practices contribute significantly to children's emotional regulation, self-efficacy, motivation, and social competence (Grolnick, 2009). Parenting that combines emotional responsiveness with age-appropriate autonomy allows adolescents to develop confidence, responsibility, and internal motivation rather than relying solely on external control. Such

developmental support strengthens not only emotional security but also the adolescent's capacity for reflective functioning and independent decision making.

Recent scholarship on parental reflective functioning further emphasizes the importance of caregivers helping adolescents understand their thoughts, emotions, and interpersonal experiences (Losonczy & Szabó, 2023). When parents encourage dialogue, emotional awareness, and perspective taking, adolescents are more likely to develop resilience, empathy, and relational stability. These relational experiences also support identity formation by enabling young people to situate themselves within broader personal, cultural, and moral narratives. In this sense, parenting contributes not only to protection and supervision but also to the cultivation of psychosocial capacities associated with long-term human flourishing.

Educational institutions likewise play an essential role in promoting adolescent empowerment and psychological development. Traditional educational models have often prioritized academic achievement and standardized performance indicators while giving comparatively limited attention to emotional and social development. However, contemporary educational research increasingly argues that schools should function as environments that support holistic human development through social-emotional learning, reflective dialogue, collaboration, and relational safety (Cantor et al., 2021).

Schools that foster inclusive and emotionally supportive learning environments may strengthen students' motivation, resilience, empathy, and civic engagement. Social-emotional learning initiatives, mentorship programs, collaborative learning structures, and reflective educational practices can contribute to stronger self-awareness and interpersonal competence among adolescents. Such approaches also support mental health and help students develop the psychological capacities necessary for democratic participation and responsible citizenship.

The relationship between adolescence and human development becomes particularly significant when viewed through the lens of empowerment. Empowerment involves more than expanding access to opportunities or increasing individual autonomy. It also concerns strengthening the capacity to reflect upon one's experiences, values, goals, and social responsibilities. Adolescents who develop reflective capacities are better positioned to pursue meaningful goals, navigate uncertainty, and engage constructively within their communities. These capacities may also reduce vulnerability to social isolation, impulsive decision-making, and the pressures associated with contemporary digital culture.

Human development approaches that incorporate psychological empowerment, therefore, recognize adolescents as active participants in their own developmental trajectories rather than passive recipients of institutional support. Families, schools, and communities collectively shape the environments through which reflective functioning, emotional resilience, and prosocial orientation are cultivated. Investments in adolescent psychosocial development may consequently

contribute not only to individual well-being but also to broader social cohesion and sustainable societal progress.

This perspective reinforces the broader argument that human development requires integration between external opportunity structures and internal psychological capacities. Educational access, healthcare systems, and social protections remain indispensable components of development policy, yet their effectiveness may be limited when individuals lack the reflective and emotional capacities necessary to engage with opportunities meaningfully. Supporting adolescents through psychologically informed parenting, educational reform, and relationally supportive institutions, therefore, represents an important strategy for advancing human flourishing across the lifespan.

Table 2. Institutional Contributions to Adolescent Human Development

Developmental Institution	Psychological Contribution	Human Development Outcome
Family and Parenting	Emotional support, reflective dialogue, and autonomy development	Self-awareness and resilience
Schools	Social emotional learning, collaboration, mentorship	Civic participation and empowerment
Communities	Social belonging and relational stability	Social cohesion and inclusion
Social Institutions	Access to supportive resources and opportunities	Capability expansion and well-being

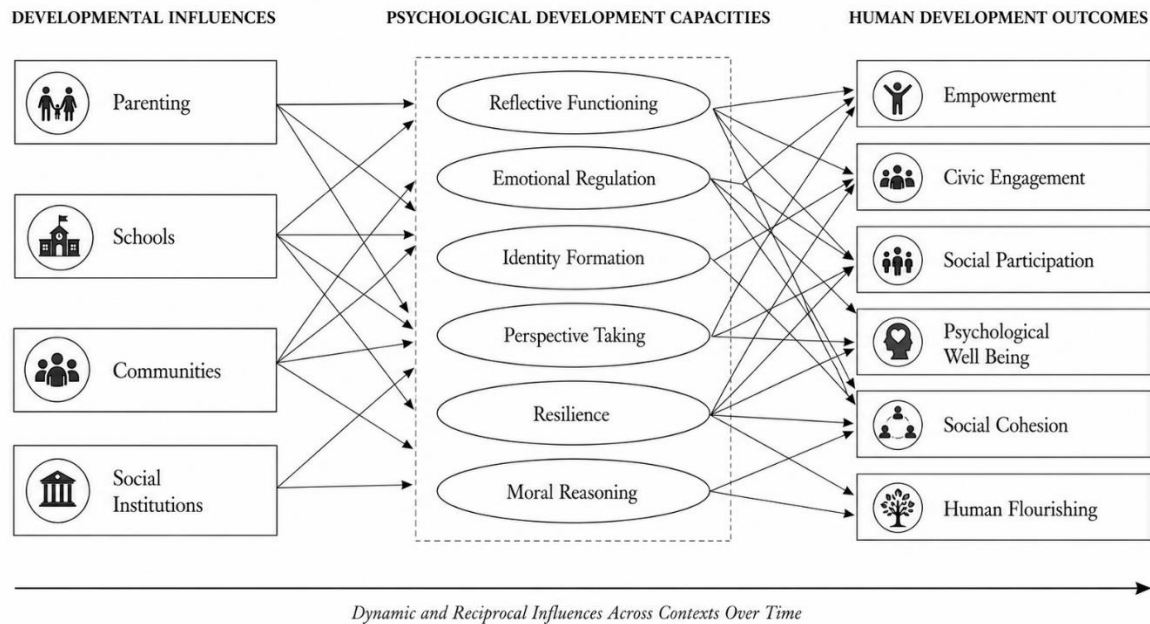


Fig. 4. *Integrated adolescent human development framework.*

5. Toward an Integrated Human Development Framework

The preceding discussion demonstrates that human development cannot be fully understood through economic indicators or structural opportunities alone. Although access to education, healthcare, employment, and political participation remains fundamental to societal progress, these conditions do not automatically guarantee human flourishing. Individuals must also possess the psychological capacities necessary to engage with opportunities, exercise agency, and participate meaningfully in social life. Human development, therefore, requires a more integrated framework that combines external capability expansion with internal psychosocial development.

The capabilities approach significantly advanced development theory by shifting attention from economic accumulation toward the freedoms individuals possess to pursue valued ways of living (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). This perspective broadened understandings of development by emphasizing education, health, political participation, and social equity as central dimensions of human progress. However, the present discussion argues that capabilities should also include psychological and reflective capacities because the ability to use freedom meaningfully depends partly on emotional regulation, self awareness, resilience, and reflective functioning.

Reflective functioning represents a particularly important component within this broader framework because it strengthens the individual's capacity to interpret experiences, regulate emotions, and understand relationships within larger social and moral contexts (Müller et al., 2022). These capacities influence how individuals respond to adversity, form identities, engage in

civic life, and pursue long-term goals. From this perspective, reflective functioning may itself be understood as a developmental capability because it shapes the person's ability to transform opportunities into meaningful forms of participation and flourishing.

Integrating psychology with human development theory also contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of empowerment. Empowerment should not be interpreted solely as access to resources or institutional inclusion. It additionally involves cultivating the internal capacities that enable individuals to think critically, make intentional choices, and develop purposeful engagement with society. Psychological empowerment, therefore, complements structural empowerment by strengthening the individual's ability to exercise agency responsibly and constructively.

This integrated perspective has important implications for public policy and social institutions. Educational systems should move beyond narrow performance-based models toward approaches that incorporate social-emotional learning, reflective dialogue, and relationally supportive environments. Schools play an important role not only in transmitting knowledge but also in fostering emotional resilience, empathy, collaboration, and civic responsibility among adolescents (Cantor et al., 2021). Policies that support mentorship, emotional development, and inclusive educational practices may therefore contribute significantly to long-term human development outcomes.

Similarly, family and community-based interventions remain essential for strengthening psychosocial well-being and social cohesion. Parenting support programs, youth mentorship initiatives, mental health services, and community development strategies can help cultivate reflective functioning and emotional resilience across developmental stages. Public health approaches increasingly recognize that mental health and psychosocial well-being are closely connected to broader social and economic outcomes, including educational attainment, civic participation, and community stability (World Health Organization, 2022).

An integrated human development framework also provides a stronger response to contemporary global challenges. Widening inequality, social fragmentation, mental health concerns, and rapid technological change increasingly require societies to support not only economic adaptation, but also psychological resilience and social connectedness. Human flourishing in contemporary societies depends upon the ability of individuals and communities to maintain meaningful relationships, reflective awareness, and adaptive capacities in the face of uncertainty and social transformation.

Future research may further strengthen this interdisciplinary framework by examining how reflective functioning and psychosocial capacities can be incorporated into human development measurement models. Additional studies may also explore cross-cultural differences in reflective development, the role of educational systems in fostering psychological empowerment, and the long-term societal effects of adolescent psychosocial interventions. Such scholarship may

contribute to more comprehensive approaches to development policy that recognize the interconnected relationship between external freedoms and internal capacities.

Ultimately, human development should be understood as a multidimensional process that integrates structural opportunity, psychosocial growth, and meaningful participation in society. Development involves not only expanding what individuals can access, but also strengthening the reflective capacities that allow them to use those opportunities in ways that promote individual and collective flourishing.

6. Conclusion

Human development scholarship has progressively moved beyond narrow economic interpretations of societal progress toward broader multidimensional understandings of well-being, capability expansion, and human flourishing. While education, healthcare, political participation, and economic opportunity remain essential components of development, contemporary challenges increasingly reveal the limitations of approaches that focus exclusively on structural and material conditions. Human flourishing depends not only on access to opportunities but also on the psychological capacities that enable individuals to engage with those opportunities meaningfully.

This article argued that reflective functioning and related psychosocial capacities should be considered important dimensions of human development frameworks. Emotional regulation, self-awareness, resilience, empathy, and moral reasoning significantly influence how individuals exercise agency, form relationships, participate in communities, and navigate social challenges. Integrating these psychological dimensions into human development theory broadens existing capability approaches by recognizing that internal capacities are closely connected to external freedoms and social participation.

The discussion further highlighted adolescence as a critical developmental period in which reflective capacities, identity formation, and psychosocial resilience can be strengthened through supportive parenting, educational systems, and community institutions. Families and schools, therefore, represent important developmental environments that contribute not only to academic and social outcomes but also to the cultivation of empowerment, reflective awareness, and civic engagement.

An integrated human development framework offers important implications for policy, education, mental health, and social development initiatives. Development policies that incorporate psychosocial well-being alongside economic and institutional investment may contribute to more sustainable and equitable forms of societal progress. Educational reforms emphasizing social-emotional learning, youth empowerment, mentorship, and relationally supportive environments may further strengthen long-term developmental outcomes and community cohesion.

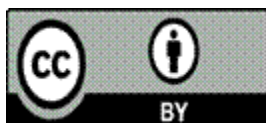
Ultimately, human development should be understood as a holistic process that integrates structural opportunity with psychological growth and meaningful participation in society.

Expanding freedoms remains essential, but the value of those freedoms depends significantly on individuals' capacities to reflect, adapt, relate, and pursue purposeful lives. A more comprehensive understanding of development, therefore, requires continued dialogue between human development scholarship, psychology, education, and public policy in order to advance conditions that support both individual and collective flourishing.

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