

Voluntās

**Beyond
Basic
Needs**

Redefining Social Impact
for the Realization of
Human Potential.

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About the Author

Niklas Kabel is Senior Partner & Chief Operating Officer at Voluntās. He is globally responsible for the delivery of value and impact to Voluntās' partners through meaningful fact-based and innovative organizational, policy, and programmatic advisory. Voluntās has a global team of professionals with offices in Beirut, Copenhagen, Oslo, Kyiv, Munich, Mumbai, Nairobi, and Tunis.

Over the past 15 years, Niklas has led teams globally as state-building and political process management expert with a specific focus on the Middle East and North Africa region. Currently based in Copenhagen, he leads Voluntās' growth in impact and presence globally while overseeing projects focused on supporting meaningful societies.

Before joining Voluntās in 2020, Niklas served as Country Director for the International Foundation for Electoral System where he was responsible for supporting the implementation of IFES' multi donor program in Libya focused on public participation. Based in Denmark, he was responsible for the overall management of the MENA activities of the Danish Institute for Human Rights - including Egypt, Iran, Libya, Tunis, Jordan, and Yemen. Based in Amman, Jordan, he worked on projects in Jordan, Yemen, and in Turkey with the Syrian opposition – all revolving around processes allowing for people to be given a voice. Prior to this, Niklas Kabel was posted in Libya as IFES Senior Elections and Operations Manager where supported the implementation of the first post-revolution elections in the country.

Before Libya, Niklas Kabel served as Deputy Director for the Carter Center in Khartoum, Sudan, where he oversaw the international observation mission and led the Center's political analysis of the country's elections and popular consultations. In Sudan, Niklas Kabel also worked for IFES providing support to South Sudan's referendum on secession.

Niklas Kabel is rostered with the UN, a member of The Danish Peace and Stabilization Unit, a rapid response roster for the Danish MoFA and International Development Agency, and a cultural advisor on Middle Eastern affairs for the Danish armed forces. He has received training from USAID in Electoral Security and received his master's in political science from the University of Copenhagen. Niklas Kabel is fluent in Arabic, Danish and English.



"At Voluntās, we call it "meaningful societies". However, in reality it is our commitment to having a positive impact on the meaning people feel in their lives by upholding the fundamental dignity and rights of every individual, regardless of their circumstances."

Niklas Kabel Pedersen



Moving Beyond Basic Needs

The international development sector has long prioritized addressing the immediate needs of crisis-affected populations. Providing lifesaving assistance is undeniably crucial, but this focus has much too often led to an underlying assumption that impact of programs and projects can be measured almost solely on progress related to physical well-being, thus overlooking more subjective factors that contribute to individuals living meaningful lives. At Voluntās, we argue that understanding, providing for, and measuring these subjective needs is not only as important, but should be considered a fundamental right.

Recognition of this broader perspective has gained momentum in recent years. UN Secretary-General António Guterres recently highlighted the need for a paradigm shift in how we measure progress, “so that we can capture data on the activities and outcomes that societies truly value, and then use the data to better inform our policy and financial decisions.”¹

Having lived and worked in some of the most challenging and fragile contexts over the past 15 years, I have witnessed firsthand the need to rethink our approaches. Human beings have a fundamental need to feel hope and dignity in their lives. My experiences in Iran, Jordan, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Ukraine, and Yemen have shaped my belief in the importance of ensuring that crisis-affected populations have a voice in decisions shaping their future. This inclusion is essential because it fosters feelings of agency and meaning.



*"GDP reflects a harmful anachronism at the heart of global policymaking; **our economic models and measurements overlook many aspects that sustain life and contribute to human well-being**".¹*

UN Secretary General, António Guterres

DIGNITY, HOPE AND MEANING

Evolving Metrics of Well-being

The measurement of societal progress, welfare, and quality of life has evolved significantly over time. Initially centered on economic, financial, or material well-being, Simon Kuznets introduced Gross Domestic Product (GDP) between the Great Depression and World War II to comprehensively capture economic production². In the 1970s, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen criticized GDP's limitations, advocating for a measure of societal welfare based on the freedom to pursue what individuals value, known as the capabilities approach.³

This perspective led to the creation of the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI) and the Global Happiness Index, which attempt to capture a broader spectrum of human-centered well-being. However, these measures face conceptual and methodological challenges. Happiness is a transient state and not something that can be sustained perpetually.

Furthermore, the capabilities approach does not always account for internal barriers to freedom – i.e., it doesn't fully acknowledge psychological limitations of human beings. Recent indices, such as the Human Flourishing Index and the Subjective Well-Being Index, focus on evaluative and affective dimensions but often overlook eudaimonic aspects such as feelings of purpose and meaning.⁴

According to these existing indices, globally, we have unprecedented levels of wealth and material prosperity. While not evenly distributed, since 2010, global GDP has increased by nearly 70 percent⁵. Simultaneously, human development as measured by the UN has reached new heights across most societies⁶.

Despite this, significant levels of conflict and war persist, and numerous studies document the severe and increasing impact of stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders on societies. Depression is one of the leading causes of disability, and suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds⁷. In conflict and adverse humanitarian settings, this is even more pronounced⁸.

These statistics highlight the shortcomings of conventional measures of societal well-being, which often overlook less tangible yet crucial aspects of development. Addressing these gaps requires a more holistic approach to measuring what truly matters for humans, incorporating elements of dignity, hope, and meaning into our understanding of societal progress.



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PURPOSE, LEADERSHIP, BELONGING AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Measuring Impact Through Meaning

For the past decade, Voluntās has been dedicated to creating human-centered, meaning-driven metrics that offer a more comprehensive measure of impact. Initially, our focus was on assessing the sense of meaning felt by employees within organizations and corporations. Based on collaboration with academic institutions and research involving input from hundreds of thousands of individuals, we saw that the primary drivers of meaning can be defined as feelings of purpose, leadership, belonging, and personal growth⁹.

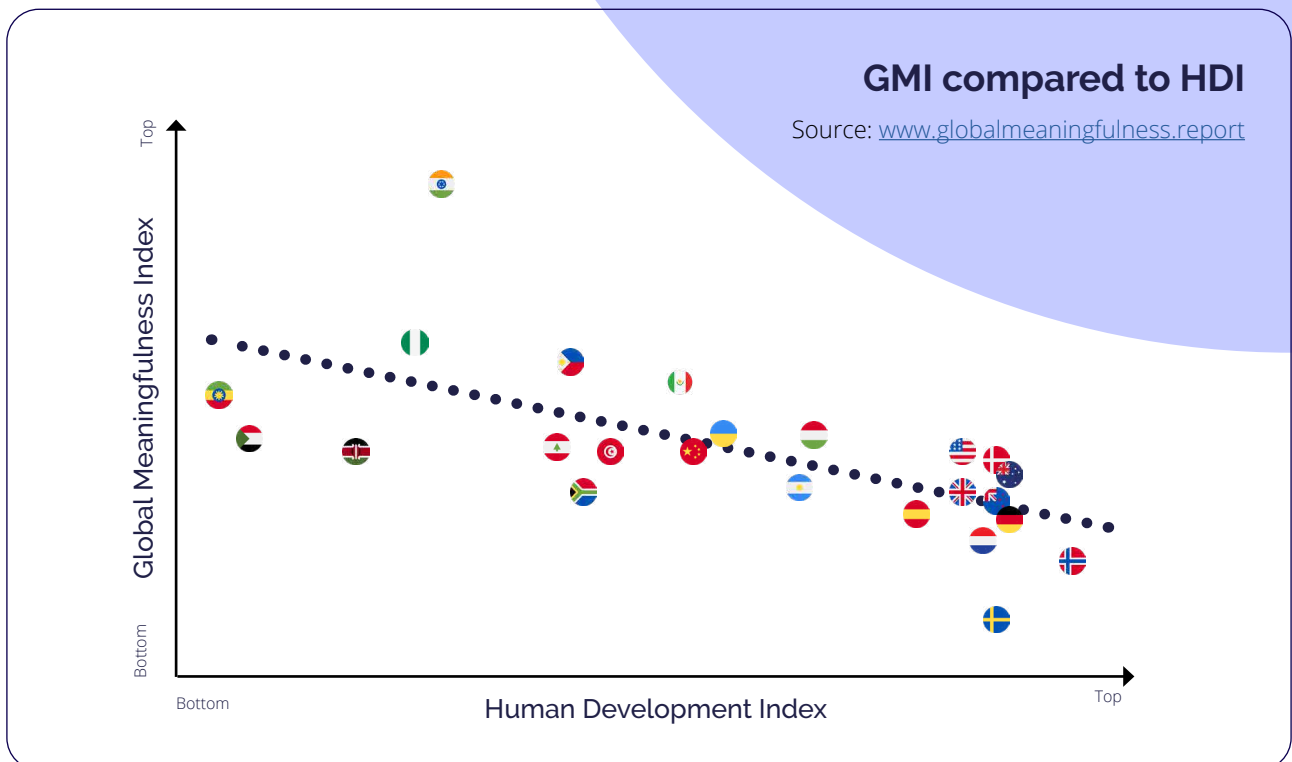
This focus has since evolved to measuring levels of meaningfulness within societies and communities at large. In 2023, we published the world's first Global Meaningfulness Index (GMI) report¹⁰, which surveyed 20,000 respondents across 24 countries on how they experience meaning in their lives. Understanding this sense of meaning will provide insights to inform policies on both micro and macro levels.

In 2024, the GMI will be even bigger as we reach more than 30 countries. In fact, our data shows an inverse correlation between the general sense of meaning in life of a country's citizens and the Human Development Index (HDI) score of that same country. In other words, as a country's HDI score increases, the average level of meaning felt is likely to decrease. This challenges our common assumptions about societal well-being.

Similarly, we developed the [Youth Meaningfulness Index \(YMI\)](#) – a tool which examines how children and youth experience meaning in their lives – based on data collected from over 7,000 children in Denmark, India, and Norway. The tool has subsequently been applied among youth in war-torn Ukraine¹¹.

Research has demonstrated that youth and adolescents who report their lives as meaningful tend to have better psychological health markers, higher life satisfaction, and overall emotional well-being. Finding meaning in daily activities and corresponding purpose in life is associated with greater emotional well-being¹², academic success, and resilience¹³.

As a result, meaningfulness is a metric that better reflects human well-being and societal progress for youth. Such innovative metrics should also be applied to programmatic activities to ensure that impact is measured and accounted for comprehensively.



THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

The Pursuit of Meaning Beyond Survival

Human beings strive not just to exist but to live lives filled with dignity and hope. This pursuit is as vital during crises as it is in times of stability. To live meaningful lives, people require something more than basic needs – something related to an individual sense of inherent value and the ability to aspire and dream.

Eudaimonia, an ancient Greek concept often translated as “human flourishing,” emphasizes a certain quality of life. For Aristotle, this concept embraces the notion of “meaning” – a concept that transcends the temporality of individual moments of satisfaction or happiness. To flourish, one must be able to reflect on one’s life as a whole – the past, present, and future – and feel dignified and hopeful.

In more recent times, Viktor Frankl argued that humans are driven by a “will to meaning”¹⁴ – a deep-rooted need to find purpose and significance in their lives. Frankl’s experiences in concentration camps during World War II taught him that even in the most brutal conditions, those who found meaning in their suffering were better equipped to endure and find a reason to live.

Meaning as a driver for resilience is something I have also witnessed firsthand. Most significantly following an all-to-real experience of hiding in a corner of a state agency office in Libya in 2018, hoping not to be found by terrorists attacking the building¹⁵.

While being only minutes away from being executed, I ended up as fortunate survivor. The meaning found in the work I carried out with an ambition of supporting the implementation of free and credible elections for a historically disenfranchised population in Libya had me continue my work on even after the near-death experience. While anecdotal and personal in nature, these experiences underscore that beyond immediate necessities, people require a sense of meaning to be resilient in adversity.

Measuring meaning involves understanding individual feelings, however, making it challenging to capture in a fast-paced operational environment. Understanding social impact, therefore, necessitates the deployment of new metrics in humanitarian and development assistance.

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REALIZATION OF HUMAN POTENTIAL

Unpacking Meaningfulness in Development

Meaningfulness

Meaningfulness goes beyond the single moments in time that other traditional impact measures – such as happiness, satisfaction, or the mere fulfilment of needs – are tied to. That is, you are happy or satisfied at a point in time, but it is not possible to be happy or satisfied all the time.

Furthermore, unlike these metrics, meaningfulness caters to both individual and communal resilience by creating an acceptance of the presence of a diversity of feelings. For example, one can be unhappy or dissatisfied with something while still finding it meaningful – my experience of being in a terrorist attack exemplifies this. Conversely, it is impossible to simultaneously be satisfied and dissatisfied with the same experience.

Self-awareness

Self-awareness, as opposed to self-confidence and self-doubt, is instrumental for humans, as it is a precondition for feeling self-worth. While self-confidence or self-doubt is linked to our actions and results, self-worth is rooted in our identity. The self-aware experience of having inherent value as a human being generates a profound feeling of dignity¹⁶.

Agency

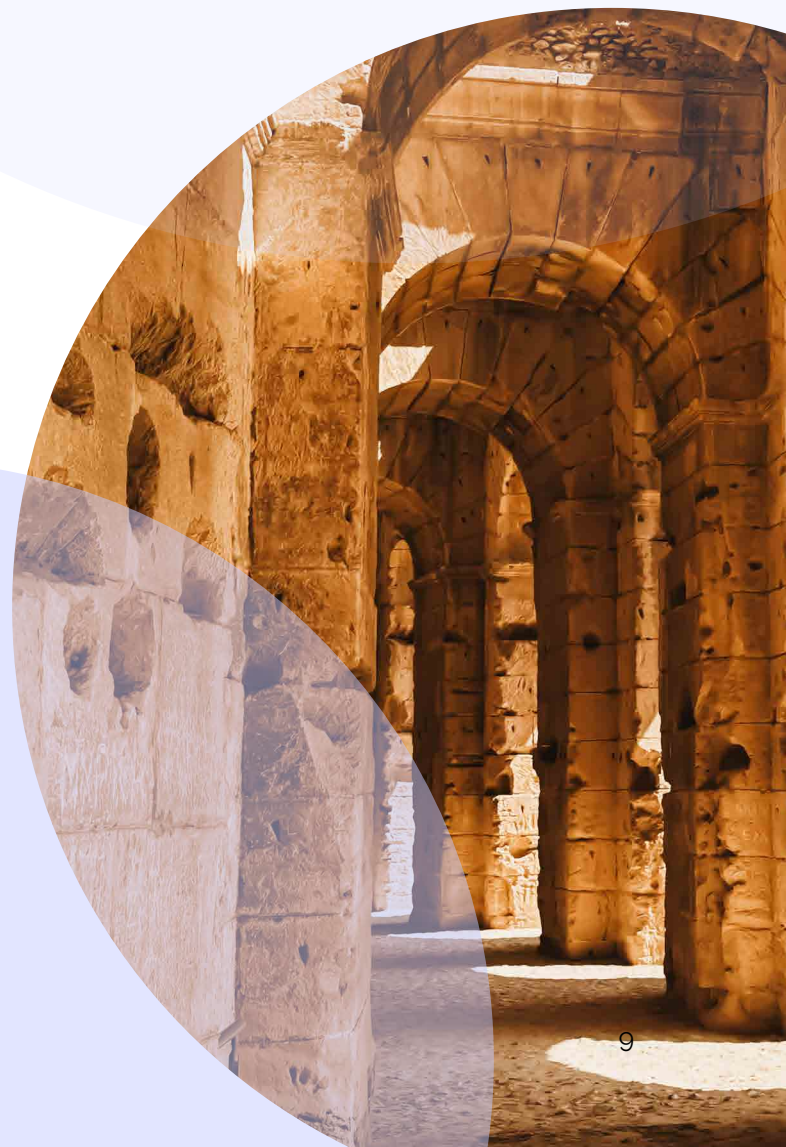
Agency, on the other hand, is crucial in developing a sense of self-worth. Only when individuals feel capable of and empowered to make choices, take actions, and influence their own lives can they feel their inherent value as human beings.

Hope & Dignity

Thus, self-awareness is a precondition for knowing your own aspirations and potential, while agency allows you to act on this awareness. Agency and self-awareness therefore lead to hope and dignity, which in turn are preconditions for feeling meaning in life.

Human Potential

If we are to support the realization of human potential, we must focus on cultivating meaning. This calls for a new approach to how we measure social impact in the development sector, one that emphasizes measuring meaning to augment traditional metrics.



REDEFINING RESPONSES:

From pure effectiveness to meaningful impact

As an international community, we must prioritize genuine engagement with affected populations, ensuring transparency and inclusivity in decision-making. We need to amplify the voices of those we aim to support. Developing Key Purpose Indicators (KPIs) for programming can help us to direct focus towards the impact of our programming on the meaning felt by the individuals we engage.

At Voluntās, our mission is to realize human potential by ensuring that the search for meaning is not a luxury reserved for times of peace and prosperity but an inherent right, even amidst crises¹⁷. By embracing this thinking, we can create a more holistic and human-centered measure of impact, one that goes beyond material assistance focused on basic needs.

To make our engagement in crisis-affected contexts socially sustainable, humanitarian systems must evolve. Clinging to outdated methods with a narrow focus on objectively verifiable outcomes will not achieve the development and progress we seek. Instead, we must integrate the subjective notions of meaning in life experienced by the people we aim to support.

These concepts should permeate all aspects of humanitarian and development strategies and practices. To accomplish this, we need to be deliberate about the metrics we use to capture and document our impact.

A commitment to having a positive impact on the meaning people feel in their lives is not just about improving the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions; it is about upholding the fundamental dignity and rights of every individual, regardless of their circumstances. Only by using such metrics can we ensure the genuine social sustainability of our engagements.

This paper kicks off a Voluntās series about how meaningfulness and human potential should be at the center of how we measure social impact. The first paper looks at why we need to change our current approaches. **Future papers will dive into how we can actually make these changes happen.**

About us

Voluntās was created from the fundamental belief that all human beings have the inherent right to live a meaningful life. That is why we exist: To realize human potential in all corridors of life – making every workplace, community, and country on the planet full of hope and dignity.

Founded in Denmark in 2015, Voluntās is the first company in the world to systematically explore and measure meaningfulness. For us, the value of money and impact depends on how it is earned and achieved. We strive to pave the way for a humanistic capitalism where every economic, societal, or technological gain equals greater freedom for humans to pursue their potential. To democratize this philosophy, we want to build a new, human-centered metric. A global meaningfulness baseline to constantly challenge the truths about what constitutes a good life and a viable civilization.

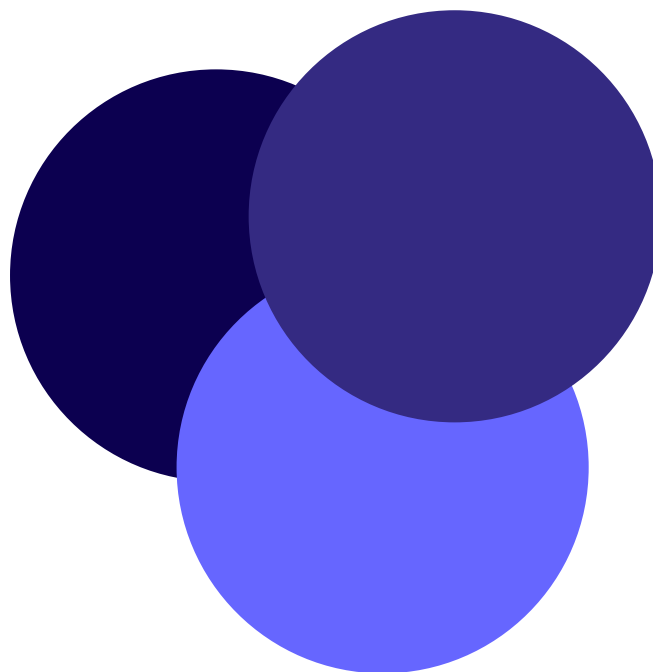
Philosophers by heart and advisors by profession, we use our insights to provide evidence-based inspiration, tools, and recommendations for our partners around the world. We advise international organizations, companies, investors, foundations, and NGOs on how to drive a meaningful change in societies and organizations. We study social cohesion and peacebuilding in fragile states. We assess leadership and ethics in modern corporations. We facilitate private-public partnerships and collaboration in every sector. All to understand humans and what drives meaning in their lives.

Voluntās builds on a track record of more than 200 projects in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia with a strong focus on post-conflict environments for more than 60 clients. Our field of expertise is providing fact-based recommendations and policy options grounded in extensive research and data collection in volatile regions. We aim to inform our partners through close cooperation, a strong network, and results-based consulting. Our goal is to have a positive impact on populations affected by the crisis to improve their living standards and rights. We collect data, conduct analysis, and generate insights for both the private and public sectors. We seek to provide a transparent, data-driven, and comprehensive picture, whether on humanitarian, economic, or political subjects. We use our insights and analytics to work with governments, international organizations, EU institutions, and NGOs, providing support to strategic thinking through evidence-based advice tailored to increase the impact and sustainability of our partners' efforts.

We have conducted multiple studies globally, including large-scale quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses, using surveys, focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews. This access to data in the region gives us the capacity to bridge the gap between the development and public worlds at a policy-making level. We offer holistic consultancy services within a set framework of principles: meaningfulness, diversity, and sustainability. We deliver on all aspects of the program lifecycle, from the inception to the follow-up stages. As a part of this engagement, we use data, analysis, and insights to develop fact-based programming, strategies, and policies.

Voluntās is a signatory to the UN Global Compact and the Women's Empowerment Principles.





Notes

1 [Valuing What Counts: Framework to Progress Beyond Gross Domestic Product](#) | [LinkedIn](#)

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5 GDP (current US\$) | [Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)

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