



Erik Fernholm: Addressing the Root Cause, Not the Symptoms – Why We Started the Inner Development Goals

2025-02-08

Erik Fernholm, Co-founder of the Inner Development Goals (IDG). Photo: Press Image.

We already have all the knowledge we need to tackle the climate crisis and the challenges facing democracy and peace—yet we continue to focus on marginal changes. That’s why we started the Inner Development Goals, writes founder Erik Fernholm in response to this week’s debate.

We're facing crises on multiple fronts: the climate crisis has become a lived reality, inequality is deepening, authoritarian movements are gaining ground and we have escalating wars in Europe and the world. Despite this, we're not responding rationally to the threats against democracy, to the IPCC reports, or to the messages from scientists like Johan Rockström.

We keep discussing minor changes—like paper straws and recycling—instead of dealing with the uncomfortable but necessary systemic changes required upstream.

We prefer a frictionless narrative where the market, politicians, and impact companies will solve everything—while the root causes remain untouched and political and market-based rivalry continues to foster short-termism, self-interest, and narrow goals.

The problem is that - what feels good to us is not always good for us.

We founded the Inner Development Goals (IDG) initiative to address a blind spot in today's change efforts: we have all the knowledge, models, and warning signs—but we lack the inner and collective capacity to truly act.

Understanding is not enough. Policies are not enough. We need to develop our ability to navigate complexity, build new relationships, and address the root causes of our problems. IDG is not *the* answer and far from perfect, as our critics have pointed out. But it's a gathering point and emerging ecosystem where individuals, organizations, and nations can learn from one another to strengthen their capacity to face reality—not hide from it.

A Discomfortable Yet Meaningful Starting Point

The Inner Development Goals is not a method or a ready-made solution. It is an initiative to increase understanding of how inner development—both individual and collective—is connected to the global systemic transformations we need. We don't claim that inner development is sufficient to solve these challenges, but we do argue that it is a necessary part of the whole.

Examples include how generational thinking among individuals or psychological safety within a group can contribute to systemic change over time. Without addressing how we think, relate, and collaborate, we won't be able to solve the problems we've created.

The “Goals” of the initiative are to put the inner dimension on the map. We will have succeeded if:

- Inner development becomes a natural part of the conversation about sustainability and societal development.
- More actors—from governments to companies to civil society—integrate inner development into their change efforts.

- More networks and collaborative spaces emerge where both systems thinkers and practitioners can meet for collective action.

The challenge is that the most important research and methods for real transformation have, until now, remained behind a high threshold of academic and complex language—reaching too few people. IDG was created to change that—to build a shared narrative and bridge the gap between knowledge and action.

When systems thinkers, researchers, leadership developers, and decision-makers meet with the understanding that the crisis we face is created by our own actions, it's not just about creating a feel-good atmosphere. On the contrary. But by using self-responsibility and development as a starting point, the result is not overwhelming, denying, apathetic, or blame-filled.

The diversity of perspectives, the willingness to act, and evidence-based methods create conditions for responsibility, action, and realistic hope—something many people lack today.

Why the Initiative Has Spread Rapidly

This is one reason the initiative has spread quickly: from the UN and the White House to COP meetings and Davos. There are now over 700 IDG hubs in more than 90 countries, involving hundreds of companies and even national governments. More than 800 researchers are involved, and in 2024 alone, there were over 700 mentions of IDG in scientific publications.

The IDG Framework – A Starting Point, Not a Dogma

Just a few years ago, the general view was that personal, leadership, and group development was mainly about becoming happier or more efficient—not as a vital part of understanding, caring about, and acting on complex challenges.

The IDG framework was developed by crowdsourcing insights from over a thousand experts about what inner perspectives and capabilities were lacking to achieve the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The result was five dimensions of development and 23 skills that help us understand how individuals and collectives can grow in response to today's challenges:

- **Being** – How we relate to ourselves
- **Thinking** – Our way of understanding and handling complexity
- **Relating** – How we interact and build relationships

- **Collaborating** – The ability to create change together
- **Acting** – Turning insights into action

The framework is open-source and is therefore used in tens of thousands of contexts. In some cases, unfortunately, it is used without capturing its full complexity.

Why Do We Simplify?

IDG is sometimes criticized for simplifying complex issues. That's true—we do simplify. But not to ignore the complexity. We simplify to enable broader conversations. If we only speak in academic or internal terms, we can't have the wide-ranging discussions that are essential in a democracy.

However, we do not deny the depth of these issues. On the contrary. But if the language becomes exclusive, inaccessible, or stuck in internal debates, it doesn't lead to action. And we consider that far more dangerous than simplifications that enable understanding and engagement.

Response to Criticism

In the article and in LinkedIn discussions, some have claimed that IDG places people into boxes and colors, measures development, and promotes linear and hierarchical development models.

None of these claims are true—they are caricatures of the initiative.

Others have claimed that the initiative reinforces colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist structures and lacks power analysis and representation. Our response is simple: of course we work with these issues. How could anyone working with system transformation today not analyze social structures and cultural assumptions? These are fundamental to any meaningful change.

Still, we understand why the question is raised. IDG started in the Nordics and reflects the context in which it was born—something we've always seen as a challenge. Only last year was IDG formalized as its own foundation with a wide range of international organizations as co-founders. For over 12 months, we've been working to build a global board and advisory board to ensure representation and diversity—not just in gender and geography, but also across perspectives:

Indigenous/Scientific, Corporate/Movement, Global North/Global South, and many more. It's a process that takes time—but one that's too important to rush.

From Insight to Action – A Movement Already Underway

We see how inner shifts complement and drive external change all over the world. Networks of women in the Amazon leading resilience transformation processes. A small network with systematic, long-term perspectives that has led Sweden to have 38 times more impact companies than the global average.

Activists and corporate coalitions forcing Danish politicians to regulate their own markets in line with the Paris Agreement. Companies in Southern Europe building initiatives based on a seven-generation perspective. Inner development plays a critical role in outer development—something the Ekskåret Foundation, co-founder of IDG, has pioneered since 2008.

Now, more and more international actors are reaching the same conclusion. The EU has released **GreenComp**, closely mirroring the IDG framework. The **Royal Society for Arts (RSA)** launched **Capabilities for Life**. The **U.S. climate agency NOAA** drew similar conclusions. The latest report from **IPBES** (the UN's biodiversity science panel), after three years of work? The inner dimension is crucial and has been underestimated in the transformation we face.

A Call to Act

IDG is just a small part of this broader movement—but in a short time, it has become a hub for those who want to take responsibility beyond rhetoric. But we need to grow.

At the same time, the initiative is severely underfunded for its ambition and runs primarily on volunteer contributions. The resources society allocates to building inner capacity are a tiny fraction of what is spent on managing the consequences of our inability to act.

We welcome critique and we're learning—but the most important question right now is not about the shortcomings of IDG. It's about how we, as a society, build the capacity to respond to our challenges in an entirely different way than we are doing today. Because without a shift in thinking, feeling, and acting—we won't succeed.