

Bhutan and Gross National Happiness: An Attempt at a Shift in Global Development Paradigm

By

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Recently, after the conclusion of a high-level meeting on “Happiness and Well-being: Defining a New Economic Paradigm”, held at the United Nations headquarters in New York on April 2, 2012, Jigme Y. Thinley, the Prime Minister of Bhutan stressed upon the importance of Bhutan’s eternal policy of Gross National Happiness.ⁱ Thinley further stated that he wanted the international community to realise that a paradigm shift in addressing the issue of sustainability in both the areas of environment and global development is of urgent need. The Prime Minister explained that in his country, “gross national happiness” is a development paradigm that has guided Bhutan’s advancement for several decades. He hoped that the world community would embrace a similar model in the near future.ⁱⁱ

The phrase “gross national happiness” was initially coined in 1971 by the fourth king of Bhutan, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who declared that “Gross national happiness (GNH) is more important than gross domestic product.” The

concept implies that sustainable development should not depend solely on economic aspects of well-being as it addresses the notion of progress. Since then, the idea of GNH has influenced Bhutan's economic and social policy and has also captured the imagination of other countries far beyond its borders. According to Bhutanese officials, their country has created a system of measurement that would not only be useful for policymaking but would also create policy incentives for the government, non-governmental organisations and businesses to increase their respective GNH.ⁱⁱⁱ

The GNH index incorporates traditional areas of socio-economic concern, such as living standards, health and education, as well as less traditional aspects of culture and psychological well-being. Bhutan has developed nine domains^{iv} – psychological well-being, standard of living and happiness, good governance, health, education, community vitality, cultural diversity and resilience, and time use and happiness – that help measure GNH.^v

In accordance with the 2010 GNH index, 41 percent of Bhutanese qualified as “happy”. The remaining 59 percent ranged from “narrowly happy” to “unhappy”, with 47.8 percent of the total population characterised as “narrowly happy”. Happy people have sufficiency in six out of the nine domains.^{vi} “Deeply happy” people – about eight percent – enjoyed sufficiency in seven or more of the nine domains. A measure of GNH might be presumed to comprise a single psychological question on happiness such as, “Taking all things together, would you say you are: very happy, rather happy, not very happy, or not at all happy?”^{vii}

According to Jigme Y. Thinley, “It is a holistic reflection of the general wellbeing of the Bhutanese population rather than a subjective psychological ranking of ‘happiness’ alone.”^{viii}

In 2011, the U.N. unanimously adopted a General Assembly resolution, introduced by Bhutan with support from 68 member states, calling for a “holistic approach to development” aimed at promoting sustainable happiness and wellbeing.^{ix} In early April 2012, a high-level meeting on “Happiness and Wellbeing” brought together world leaders, development experts and civil society representatives to develop a new economic paradigm based on sustainability and well-being. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated that gross domestic product (GDP)^x has long been “a yard stick by which economies and politicians have been measured. Yet it fails to take into account the social and environmental costs of so-called progress.”^{xi}

The President of the General Assembly, Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser emphasised a similar position stating that “today’s unprecedented ecological, economic and social challenges have made the achievement of happiness and well-being an unachievable goal for many,” adding that a new economic paradigm that takes into account not only economic growth but environmental protection and social development is needed.^{xii}

“It is imperative that we build a new, creative guiding vision for sustainability and our future,” Mr. Al-Nasser said. “One that will bring a more inclusive, equitable and balanced approach that will promote sustainability, eradicate poverty and enhance well-being and happiness.”^{xiii}

It thus remains to be seen whether in accordance with the hopes and wishes of the Bhutanese government, as well in consonance with the various initiatives taken by the UN, the international community will adopted a sustainability-based economic paradigm, committed to promoting true human well-being and happiness by the year 2015, as envisioned by the Prime Minister of Bhutan.

ⁱ Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, *Remarks at High Level Meeting on "Happiness and Well-Being: Defining a New Economic Paradigm"* UNHQ, UN News Centre, April 2, 2012, accessed electronically at

http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/statments_full.asp?statID=1493, on April 4, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Rizvi, Haidar, "Measure Progress in Happiness, Not Money, Bhutan Urges," *Nation of Change*, April 9, 2012, accessed electronically at <http://www.nationofchange.org/measure-progress-happiness-not-money-bhutan-urges-1333548769>, on April 10, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} For details refer to "Nine Domains of Gross National Happiness," *Gross National Happiness*, accessed electronically at <http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/9-domains/>, on April 10, 2012.

^v The Royal Government of Bhutan in 2005 made the decision to develop GNH indicators in order to move the concept of GNH from the point of academic discourse to a measurable one. The indicators aim to check whether programmes and policies are consistent with the values of GNH. The government intends to create conditions for situations to be better-assessed and for policy-makers to be better-informed in taking appropriate measures for actual implementation of GNH policy & programmes. So, since the beginning of 2005 the Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) involved nine researchers in developing the GNH indicators. In carrying out their responsibility to develop the indicators, apart from literature reviews CBS has had a continuous process of consultations at various levels ranging from academics to secretaries and directors of RGOB to Bhutanese citizens. In order to set up the baseline indicators, the centre developed a detailed questionnaire covering the nine key areas considered crucial for reflecting the values and principles of GNH. These key areas of GNH fall within the domains of psychological wellbeing, health, time use, education, culture, good governance, ecology, community vitality and living standards.

^{vi} For a detailed discussion on GNH refer to the Results of the Second Nationwide 2010 Survey on Gross National Happiness, at <http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/>

^{vii} *Ibid.*

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} Plett, Barbara, "Bhutan Spreads Happiness to UN," *BBC News*, July 21, 2011, accessed electronically at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-14243512>, on April 10, 2012.

^x Gross national product, or GNP, is often contrasted with Gross Domestic Product (GDP). While GNP measures the output generated by a country's enterprises (whether physically located domestically or abroad) GDP measures the total output produced within a country's borders - whether produced by that country's own firms or not, according to the government of Bhutan. When a country's capital or labour resources are employed outside its borders, or when a foreign firm is operating in its territory, GDP and GNP can produce different amounts of total output.

^{xi} Ban Ki-moon, *op. cit.*

^{xii} Ban: new economic paradigm needed, including social and environmental progress, UN News Centre, April 2, 2012, at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=41685>

^{xiii} *Ibid.*