## What is Gross National Happiness?

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### Introduction

Gross National Happiness, as the guiding philosophy of Bhutan's development process, was pronounced by His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, soon after his enthronement in 1972. Over the decades, many conferences and dialogues have led to increasing elaboration of this concept as well as its practice. Thanks to gatherings like this, there is a greater shared understanding of seeds of a powerful idea that His Majesty unleashed. He was clear so long ago that happiness is the ultimate common end and everything else was means or instruments for fulfilling this wish that every human being has. Yet it is ironic that we are pervasively susceptible to confusing between ends and means, although it is a constant theme in Buddhist social and economic thought.

GNH, I hope, can become the unifying goal of development process for several reasons. First, GNH stands for holistic needs of human being - both physical and mental wellbeing. While poverty alleviation and other material development measures are consistent with physical well-being, the misery of mental conditions that is independent of material living conditions cannot be addressed by favourable material circumstances alone. Second, which is a related point to the first, GNH seeks to complement inner skills of happiness with outer circumstances. Both sources have to be harmonised to bring about happiness. Third, GNH recognises that happiness can be realised as a societal goal; it cannot be left as an individualised goal or good, as yet another individual, competitive good. Happiness may not be directly deliverable to an individual like a good or service. But it is far too important also to be left to purely individual effort and search, without collective or governmental endeavour. GNH stresses collective happiness to be addressed directly through public policies in which happiness becomes an explicit criterion in projects and programmes. The society as a whole cannot obtain happiness if individuals compete for it at all cost irresponsibly in a zero-sum game. Fourth, GNH, as it mirrors individual feeling directly, suggests that public policies based on GNH can be far less arbitrary than those based on standard economic tools.

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### Socio-cultural pre-disposition to GNH

Traditional polity in Bhutan, drawing much on the Buddhist culture, was certainly guided towards GNH. A Buddhist equivalent of a 'Social Contract' declared in Bhutan in 1675 said that happiness of sentient beings and teachings of the Buddha were mutually dependent. The 1729 legal code of Bhutan stressed that laws should promote happiness of the sentient beings. As you all know, much about what we may call Buddhist science of mind is about managing feelings and emotions, that invisible mental world which destroys all around us if we cannot manage. Thus, a great deal of cultural knowledge and education in traditional society was meant to train people's psychology towards happiness of all. And much stress was laid on making people find freedom from a kind of attitude than denies them happiness. Enlightening the troublesome inner self or human nature became a far greater task than taming nature and the outer world.

We in Bhutan are concerned as to whether we would be able to create an alternative path of development that would cater to the cultivation of the fully developed human being and society. The fully developed human being is not the same as putting human being at the centre of development.

### International Context

But, in general, models for both developed as well as developing countries do not explicitly include happiness as a development end, and contemporary measures of progress do not usually specify happiness as a dominant end: it is assumed to be the collateral result of social and economic policies. There are many noble goals and their indexes such as Human Development, Sustainable Development and Millennium Development goals. Yet, we should be open to the possibility that there could be some differences in the methodologies and outcomes between these goals and that of GNH, while we welcome the fact that HDI, MDGs, as well as Genuine Progress Index pioneered here in Nova Scotia are noteworthy measures of progress. Equally, there are many institutions and individuals, both in North America and Europe, who have pioneered indices related to happiness as their mission. Through these international efforts and coalescence of interests, all of us here will agree that we can contribute to the promotion of happiness as an official responsibility of states, so that it is not considered utopian and ideological.

It is to our advantage that the media and academia's interest on the subject of happiness has grown substantially in recent decades. Evidences on desirability and feasibility of happiness as the dominant

goal of a society has been bolstered by findings of and upsurge in contemporary happiness research. If the media and academia reflect public concerns, one may ask why there are such growing popular concerns and interests? It may give us a clue as to what needs changing, and how change needs to be managed positively.

First concern, corroborated by data, is that in many countries surveyed, there has been greater wealth as measured by GDP, but there is not more happiness, especially in very wealthy countries. While there is improvement that can be made to what and how we measure both wealth and happiness, their relationship, or the lack of their relationship after certain levels of wealth, points to the unpromising journey towards happiness on the route of unlimited wealth.

This brings me to the second concern, which is the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of market-led happiness. Although the market has been the driver of efficiency and productivity, the same values threaten to undermine the factors that lead to happiness. As has been documented by numerous scholars, demanding and grinding work life that is necessary for efficiency and productivity is difficult to be balanced with leisure and social life that gives us satisfaction. Mobility and job-changes imposed by the market is difficult to be balanced with the need of sustained community life. Our physical needs may be addressed by the market and consumerism, but what about these social and communal bases of emotional wellbeing that are diminished by market economics.

Related to mobility and locational changes over our professional lives is our attempt, at the same time, to stay connected through better virtual and real communications. Yet there is a third concern, which is, that people are living ever more apart despite getting ever more connected. We only have to remind ourselves of the higher rates of divorce, single parenting, and single parent upbringing that had been discovered to be factors of unhappiness. If upbringing with single parents is an increasing aspect of modern life, aging alone is also a rising prospect as families have no time to look after the elderly. We have fortunately attained longer life, but this success is not crowned equally by happy quality-long life that living socially and mentally fulfilling old age can provide.

Last and the fourth concern is about the rise in mental illness, alcoholism and suicide, which is symptomatic of the loss of hope for any happiness in the lives of numerous people. Depression rates seem to be substantial in many societies, although most of these societies do not have medical and financial resources to help those affected.

All these are popular concerns that the academia and media have brought into sharper focus. Given socio-cultural impulses from within

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and evidences from without, it was with no little consideration or conviction that we in Bhutan opted for a development process that some say offers a new paradigm.

Policy Response in Bhutan: Four Pillars of GNH. It is more profound in its implication than conveyed by the current set of policy-bundle priorities as represented by the metaphor of pillars in Bhutan. Within Bhutan, the four priorities areas of GNH is perceived as a normatively defined means towards GNH but these policy bundle may not necessarily apply universally. Also, I must admit that the idea of measuring it was dismissed with the remark "look at the faces of the people and measure the breadth of their smile". Rather, we focused on the broad policy priorities that were assumed to be macro-conditions of collective happiness.

What is certain is that in a state bearing responsibility for collective happiness, GNH must be a serious arbitrator of most of its public policies. And GNH as a programme for social and economic change to remove obstacles to happiness must focus on the nature of public policies. If happiness is the main value a GNH state tries to promote, the institutional structures and processes of a society must reflect this value. Yet it is very challenging to even envision what a GNH state would be like. The nature and theoretical foundations of a modern development state or libertarian democratic state are well-known. But the structures and processes of a GNH state are yet to be defined clearly, if it is at all distinct from either the ascendant liberal state or retreating socialist state. What will be the nature of GNH political economy? What will be appropriate social welfare, legal and constitutional foundations for GNH? What will be its educational and health policies? What will be its polity? And so forth. There are many questions that require examination from first principles. I certainly do not suggest at this moment that Bhutan is a GNH state though it aspires to be one. We seek through conferences like these and researches on happiness what lessons we can learn while crafting public policies consistent with GNH.

At this stage in Bhutan, an enabling environment for GNH is being created through a set of policies in four key areas of GNH. These are (1) *sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, (2) conservation of environment, (3) preservation and promotion of culture (4) promotion of good governance.* I must admit that devoid of discussing the particularistic contents, all of these thematic areas appear abstract. Moreover, they may very well be an incomplete catalogue of policy areas for good development, but I hope that they encompass the important areas of concentration to create enabling environment for GNH. The four pillars correspond to only certain sectors of interventions by the Bhutanese

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government. Unlike sectoral fragmentation, however, we must at once see inter-dependence of social, economic, and environmental realities, as indeed the reality is to attempt at holistic development. I should also emphasize that polity, environment, culture, and economy are not in different realms but interwoven in reality. Only with such a holistic perspective, the externalities cannot disappear from view in one sector and reappear as cost in another. Other kinds of policy framework for GNH are certainly conceivable. I look forward to the conference's contributions to our collective formulation.

### Bhutan's contingent choice of four policy areas of GNH and challenges

*Sustainable and equitable socio-economic development:* The necessity for materialistic development is obvious from the scale of economic suffering faced by majority of global population. But the need for spiritual development is no less obvious from the scale of spiritual suffering in terms of anxiety, insecurity, stress, and pain also in the affluent North. Economic aspect of development emphasizes economic growth so that employment and livelihood is secured. As it has been said, it is easier to identify and alleviate misery than to maximise happiness. At low levels of income, bordering on poverty, income policies are same as happiness policies, but not otherwise. Economic growth is vitally important to resolve poverty. Yet here too, there are three differences for a GNH driven economic development.

First, in a GNH economy, the means and nature of economic activities chosen are as important as their result in terms of economic growth. As GPI work has shown, a GNH economy must make qualitative distinctions in the mix of economic activities for the same level of growth and size of economy.

Second, the measurement system for a GNH economy must necessarily be different from conventional measurement of GDP, because the measurement system must value social and economic services of households and families, free time and leisure given the roles of these factors in happiness. The measurement system must not be biased towards consumption against conservation of social, environmental, and human capitals. At the same time, happiness cannot be found in ever increasing consumption. Detachment from proliferation of wants can contribute to happiness. It leads logically to the possibility of considering steady state economy as a sign of progress. Current economies are, however, biased towards proliferation of wants and consumption.

Third, a GNH economy must concentrate on redistribution of happiness by income redistribution far more seriously. This is ethical on its own, but also because inequality sets in, as far as collective happiness

is concerned, a self-defeating, vicious spiral of catching up process in a world where people derive satisfaction from relative, not absolute consumption, contrary to an axiom of economics. Of course, the distortion of our perception and choices which make us derive satisfaction from relative rather than absolute consumption itself needs enormous re-education in a GNH economy.

*Conservation of Environment:* Moving on to policy priority on environment, it would first seem from happiness researches that environment and biodiversity are not strong correlate of happiness. Partly this is because it seems that no one has measured happiness against environmental variables. Nevertheless, no one would argue against the value of environment in everyday life and hence our happiness, given that our health and aesthetic experiences depend on the quality of physical environment around us. Among farming communities, such as majority of Bhutanese, living not only close to, but in, nature, livelihood depends directly on richness of their immediate natural environment which bestows on them truly free, wholesome, natural, forest foods, fruits and medicines that man need not labour and sweat to cultivate. I contend that even the elevation of our aesthetic senses depend on our regular, if not daily, access to great natural environment. Thus, I would argue that there is a demonstrable relationship between happiness and natural environment. From this point of view, however, what I am underlining is a pattern of deep relationship between environment and Man. So a relationship of access to quality natural environment on regular, if not daily, basis is crucially important. Let me illustrate it. If a substantial population in a country live without access to quality natural environment, although the nation as a whole has substantial natural environment, a close pattern of relationship between Man and Nature cannot be fostered. Thus, it would be a case of existence of Man apart from natural environment that I believe could result in a narrower basis of happiness.

Given our intuition about environment and happiness, Bhutan launched vigorous greening and biodiversity preservation policies, whose implementation of course have not been without costs in terms of foregone food self-sufficiency. But our country is greener than it has been in living memory, with 26 percent of it turned into protected areas and 72 percent forest coverage. Someone called Bhutan an acupuncture point in the leviathan body of our ailing planet! It is an appropriate metaphor given the unthinkable consequences of environmental disasters in Bhutan and in the Himalayas on its own inhabitants and billions living on either side of the Himalayas.

*Preservation and Promotion of Culture:* Let me begin the priority area of culture for GNH by pointing out that culture received a rare global attention last year through the UNDP's Human Development Report titled "Cultural Diversity in Today's World." Free choice is equated with cultural liberty and as being central to human rights and human development. Throughout, the report resonates with the message that an individuals must be have the right to choose, change, and revise various elements of his multiple cultural identities.

While there should be all the space for choice, we should distinguish situations where individuals change their identities voluntarily from situations where powerless individuals are changed by profoundly pervasive forces such as open-sky and free trade regimes which spawn cultural hybridization, creolization, and displacement of vernacular economies, even before one realizes. This is specially true in highly asymmetric situations like Bhutan involving massive outside cultures encountering small scale Bhutanese culture when the border opens wide open, and hence the need to have a vigorous promotion of indigenous cultures as a context of individuals choice. Rich cultural heritage itself provides options and choices for us to select life plans. So not having a rich and intact culture is a diminishment of choices. A state which does not preserve cultural richness is thus one where the choices and well-being of its citizens are constrained.

It is however true that there is also a difficulty in reconciling human rights with cultural rights which are group-based rights. As it has been pointed out, group-based rights do not sit easily with the concept of individuals as autonomous choosers. But what we can say in favour of group-based traits implied by culture is that choice is instrumental for pursuit of well-being and happiness but as is well known well-being and happiness are largely a shared pursuit. I find it rather difficult to accept that human development should be seen only from the point of view of individual liberty and as being concerned with 'widening choices to be and do what one values' (should I say, pleases?) without relating to any larger societal good.

But the matter about human rights and cultural liberty seems to be more complex in reality. Let me take one point. We need to be attentive to human beings not only as bearers of the same set of universal rights, but also as far more complex individuals with cultural and social particularities that define them. We need to adhere to human rights and liberty as basic universal minimum standard to mediate individuals' claims against each other or between individuals and the state. But we could explore further the view that completely meaningful interdependence can arise only when and if we do not see ourselves as

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just independent and separate bearers of rights, but as irreducibly relational beings. As one scholar put it, suffering and unhappiness at the end arise not so much from factual conditions of loss or misfortunate, but when the flow of meaningful relationships is blocked or interrupted.

I also find the emphasis on rule of law to regulate human interrelationships intriguing. There is a paradox in preaching against conformity and promoting rule of law at the same time. Excessive emphasis on the rule of law to the extent of regulating most forms of human relationships and conduct by the state at the cost of social and customary norms and practices is, in my opinion, state coercion to conform. It undermines the virtue and the indispensability of social and voluntary responsibility arising from respect for and belief in society and its values. I have often wondered whether diminishing community life along with its imperatives is the result of our voluminous laws. It seems sensible to strengthen those customs and traditions which require married people to be good to their spouses and children because they see virtue in it and want to enjoy the happiness that it generates rather than to be seen doing so because the law requires it with threat of retribution.

*Good Governance:* In one sense, securing any public good, such as collective happiness, depends on realising governance oriented to it. Logically, if a government should reflect the ultimate democratic desire or opinion of the people, which is happiness, then the nature of governance should also be attuned to it. But I must admit that both theoretically and practically, we are far from grounding GNH in any contemporary system of government and political structures, of which the most well-established is liberal democratic system. So far in my country, our scholars seem to have reflected more on cultivating values of liberating leadership, such as epitomizing His Majesty the King rather than sharpening external institutions of check and balances. However, in keeping with times, we in Bhutan are about to formally take up parliamentary democracy. His Majesty the King, the fountainhead of all positive changes, has recently placed the Draft Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan that opts for liberal democratic institutions before the people. For us too, we take liberal democratic system as an institutional arrangement possibly as a best path for securing any public good and good governance. But we should not yet be ready to forgo seeking any better system by betraying ourselves that liberal democratic system is the climax in a linear and convergent evolution of political institutions, as some scholars have supposed.

All the distinguished participants are well aware that even in the best of the great democratic nation states, the signal values of democracies like freedom and equality that Man has struggled to attain

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seems set at one moment but unsteady at another. You are well aware of the tension between freedom and equality and the shifting boundary between them. You are, furthermore, well aware of the shifting boundaries between the private and public domain, and between secularism and politics.

All human institutions are system of relationships between actors; in themselves they have no inherent nature. We can always attempt to move in a direction of improving our shared situations or 'relationalities', which are where happiness arises and dissolves, depending on their qualities, and so we can improve any institutional arrangement. For example, even alleviating poverty, which is a primary objective of most governments and international agencies, is only partly a matter of alleviating objective material circumstances. As I understand, poverty results from failure of relationship which can be revived by better values and intentions in the heart of institutions.

What seems to demand attention even among democratic states is the question about motivational values that drive the institutions holding power instead of the form of institutions themselves. We can always ask the question whether values and intentions that drive institutions and processes of governance, whether national or international, are aligned with searching for happiness for all, where each person's happiness, regardless of nationality, counts equally. Furthermore, as we are in a stage in history when there are more mutual relations between any national governance and international relations than ever, and one is rarely independent of the other in a globalized world, we need to explore possible revision in aims and nature of international relations and global institutions as to whether focusing on happiness can lead us to a better turn towards a normative goal for global common centred on happiness.

To sum up, GNH is a balanced and holistic approach to development. It is based on the conviction that man is bound by nature to search for happiness, and that it is the single most desire of every citizen. The only difference between Bhutan and others is that we do not dismiss it as a Utopian quest.

We also hope to learn from the ongoing discourse on the subject. More and more articles and books are beginning to appear on the subject. Many research scholars on the subject have visited Bhutan since the first international conference on GNH. It is our hope that as more thoughts are given to this common quest in life, there will be more ideas and reasons why GNH should guide development of responsible human beings. And this conference outside Bhutan, will guide us further.

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