

## **An Analysis of Bhutan's Gross National Happiness**

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to appraise Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) measure critically and elaborates the conception of GNH and its components, the methodology behind the calculation of the GNH Index and criticisms of and support for such an index from an ethical perspective.

### **Introduction**

The former king of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, proposed Gross National Happiness (GNH) as the guiding philosophy of Bhutan's development in 1972 (Thinley 2007). The monarch uses GNH to measure economic development, culture, governance and spiritual values (Ura and Galay, 2004). This paper seeks to appraise GNH critically and will elaborate the conception of GNH and its components, the methodology of GNH Index and criticisms and support of such an index from a moral-philosophical perspective in the following parts.

### **What is Gross National Happiness?**

In the Kingdom of Bhutan, Gross National Happiness (GNH) has been used to measure the social development since 1972. GNH was established upon the legacy of Bhutan's government, which states the government is responsible for creating happiness for its people. Otherwise its existence is meaningless (Ura, 2008). The term 'happiness', viewed as a common public good, indicates people's capacities for pursuing wellbeing in sustainable ways (Ura, 2009). However,

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‘happiness’ for Bhutan is different from ‘happiness’ in Western literature. First, Bhutanese consider ‘happiness’ in an objective way rather than a subjective and monistic way. Second, Bhutanese defined happiness internalizes responsibilities and other relevant motivations explicitly (Ura et al., 2012). For example, the conception of happiness in GNH is experienced from four main factors, equitable socio-economic development, culture, environmental conservation and good governance, (GNH Commission, 2008) to nine domains, psychological well-being, living standards, health, education, culture, time use, good governance, community and ecology (Ura et al., 2012).

‘Psychological well-being’ indicates not only people’s emotion but also spirituality. ‘Living standards’ are measured by some objective factors, such as income, assets and living burden. Health means the absence of heat-pain from the body and the absence of sorrow from the mind (Ura et al., 2012). ‘Education’ refers to not only formal schooling but also “an awareness of Bhutanese culture and law as well as an appreciation of certain moral values” (Thaddeus, 2014). ‘Culture’ reflects how people are good at arts and crafts and the extent of participation in festivals (Thaddeus, 2014). With respect to ‘time use’, there is focus on balance between billable work, non-billable work, leisure time and sleep. ‘Good governance’ is considered as the extent to which people can participate in political events and be provided with social services such as water and electricity. The issue of ‘Community’ concerns the conditions of society’s security, charity work, relationships of trust and family bonds. ‘Ecology’ means the ecological environment associated with biodiversity and pollution (Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008).

The Gross National Happiness Index is an index based on analysis of 33 indicators developed from the ‘nine domains’ and a robust multidimensional methodology known as the Alkire-Foster method. The GNH Index is established for political incentives to increase GNH, which basically reflects the extent to which people meet their different demands embodied by the 33 indicators. The 33 indicators and corresponding weight are shown in Table 1 as below.

Domain	Indicators	Weight	Domain	Indicators	Weight
Psychological wellbeing	Life satisfaction	33%	Time use	Work	50%
	Positive emotions	17%		Sleep	50%
	Negative emotions	17%	Good governance	Political participation	40%
	Spirituality	33%		Services	40%
Health	Self reported health	10%	Community vitality	Government performance	10%
	Healthy days	30%		Fundamental rights	10%
	Disability	30%	Ecological diversity & resilience	Donation (time & money)	30%
	Mental health	30%		Safety	30%
Education	Literacy	30%	Living standard	Community relationship	20%
	Schooling	30%		Family	20%
	Knowledge	20%	Ecological diversity & resilience	Wildlife damage	40%
	Value	20%		Urban issues	40%
Cultural diversity & resilience	Zorig chusum skills (Thirteen arts & crafts)	30%	Ecological diversity & resilience	Responsibility towards environment	10%
	Cultural participation	30%		Ecological issues	10%
	Speak native language	20%	Living standard	Per capita income	33%
	Driglam Namzha (Etiquette)	20%		Assets	33%
				Housing	33%

Table 1: Weights of the 33 indicators, Source: Ura et al., 2012

## Methodology

In order to collect data of the 33 indicators, people in Bhutan are surveyed with questions in light of 124 variables relating to their lives, such as age, location, occupation and so on, and some self-reporting answers to questions including questions how often people participate in social events and whether people will vote (Thaddeus, 2014).

After collecting the surveys, the measurement of GNH begins. There are two kinds of thresholds to measure how happy a person is, sufficiency thresholds and happiness thresholds (Ura et al., 2012). ‘Sufficiency thresholds’ indicate how much people need so as to enjoy sufficiency in each of the 33 indicators and ‘happiness thresholds’ show the proportion standard of being happy, which means “how many domains or in what percentage of the indicators must a person achieve sufficiency in order to be understood as happy”. First, people who are considered happy may enjoy sufficiency in terms of education and culture but not enjoy wellbeing with respect to time use. Second, for a specific domain, people who enjoy sufficient wellbeing for that domain are considered happy (Thaddeus,

2014). For example, concerning per capita income, the income which is 1.5 times as much as the poverty line in Bhutan can be viewed sufficient (Ura et al., 2012). Finally, if people enjoy sufficiency in more than two thirds of the indicators, they will be deemed 'happy' and if the figure is 77%, they will be deemed 'deeply happy'. In contrast, a figure less than 50% reflects 'unhappy' (Ura et al., 2012).

### **What makes GNH different?**

First, GNH considers psychological well-being including spirituality and GNH is based upon 'balancing material wants with spiritual needs' (Ura et al., 2012). Thinley (2005) proposes that "GNH stands for the holistic needs of the human individual - both physical and mental wellbeing. It reasons that while material development measures contribute, undeniably, to enhancing physical well-being, the state of mind which is perhaps, more important than the body, is not conditioned by material circumstances alone." For Buddhism, the major purpose of a Buddhist is to pursue enlightenment (nirvana) where the cycle of rebirth (karma) is ended and the soul is freed from attachment to the physical world (Thaddeus, 2014). Moreover, GNH asks the extent to which people pray. In addition, spirituality also covers mindfulness practice, such as meditation.

Second, the GNH index considers creativity under the heading of 'culture' enquiring into the extent to which people have acquired artisan skills such as painting and weaving (Thaddeus, 2014). Externalizing an individual's work of art by using creative imagination and sophisticated techniques is pleasing or enjoyable. This aspect of human wellbeing has been neglected by other indices, such as the Human Development Index (HDI) and the Better Life Index (BLI). Although HDI has a standard of 'decent work' (UNDP, 2010), it only focuses on the condition of the absence of child labor, formal appointment and maternity leave, instead of the content of the activity.

Third, GNH concerns community vitality including community and family relationships essential for people's lives. The BLI reduces attention to 'social connection' that covers whether people have friends or relatives to ask for help when coming across problems (OECD, 2013). HDI reduces consideration of 'community'. The community dimension in HDI relies strictly on Gallup polls, which excludes the community aspect (Gallup, 2013). However, the Bhutanese view the sense of belonging and of trusting neighbors as part of well-being (Ura et al., 2012; Boniwell, 2013).

### **What has GNH neglected?**

This section appraises GNH from a moral perspective by comparison with Martha Nussbaum's (2011) Capabilities Approach. Regardless of the overlap between GNH and Nussbaum's influential 10 key human capabilities, the GNH misses some conditions the latter includes.

First, both approaches pay attention to certain emotions when measuring happiness, but the GNH Index neglects negative emotions. Watson, Clark and Tellegen (1988) claim that negative emotions are not necessarily harmful to individuals although emotions can be categorized into positive or negative ones. Both positive and negative emotions are necessary for the full range of human experience. However, in Bhutan, the Buddhist view, as reflected in the GNH Index, is that developing positive emotions from reducing negative emotions can increase happiness and wellbeing (Ura et al. 2012; see also Tashi 2004). The argument that a best society with a low frequency of negative emotions can be shaped by gradually overcoming negative emotions is influenced by the Buddhist philosophy. The Buddhist aims for an existence free from suffering (Ura et al., 2012). People who are not Buddhist may think detachment from jealousy, anger, fear and worry, negative emotions for GNH, leads to a better and more satisfied life. However, for Nussbaum (2011), some negative emotions, such as justified anger and grief, need to be included. Western ethicists state that bad conditions result in negative emotions, such as anger and worry and good conditions lead to positive reactions, such as loving (e.g. Hurka 2001; Wolf 2010). With respect to the measurement of GNH, the domain of psychological wellbeing, would indicate negative emotions if people were unhappy in the other eight domains of GNH. Therefore, to some extent 'emotional balance' neglects the reasons for negative emotions. In this case, the government needs to address the problems in the eight domains rather the domain of psychological wellbeing (Thaddeus, 2014). Addressing the eight domains, as the origin of the issue of psychological wellbeing, is more effective.

Second, GNH also neglects the prominent role of individual freedom that Nussbaum emphasizes. The Bhutanese government strives to increase the GNH Index to ensure people enjoy sufficiency and happiness but does not ask them whether they wish to live good lives. There are two models at each end of the political spectrum. One model of government is a state that prevents citizens from selecting options in the light of a monolithic conception of how best to live. Another model is a state that allows its citizens to make their own choices on the same matter. Instead of these two extreme modes of government, there is the possibility of "a state that seeks to guide people's decision-making towards a variety of value-rich behaviors, enabling and perhaps even nudging people to take

advantage of community, creativity and the like, but with a minimal use of coercion is reasonable” (Thaddeus, 2014). Positive emotions will not accrue if the government forces people to do what they would not choose themselves. But people may have positive emotions when they can choose their own way of life even though the choice is not good in the view of the government.

Third, GNH emphasizes sufficient happiness and how people do well in the nine domains but it neglects how happiness is distributed among people and that inequalities in society may affect happiness. Based on research conducted by Wilkinson and Pickett (2009), inequalities, particularly wealth inequalities, are associated with worse health conditions and reduced levels of cohesion. Obviously, most domains of GNH do not pay attention to wealth other than the domain of living standards. Any indicator associated with inequalities of wealth that may affect people’s sufficient happiness in the other eight domains cannot be found in GNH. People who suffer from inequalities in the eight domains may not be happy. The UNDP (2010) takes inequality into consideration. Critics argue that GNH should as well. Despite emphasizing the sufficiency of happiness, GNH still ignores inequalities existing in these domains. (Thaddeus, 2014)

### **Is GNH a good alternative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP)**

GDP was created to measure “the total market value of the goods and services produced by a nation’s economy during a specific period of time” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2009). GDP has never focused on social wellbeing. Therefore, an increasing GDP does not necessarily mean everything in a society is fine because “GDP fails to capture many of the components of a true wellbeing society” (Horachaikul 2009). The indicator may be a measurement of social progress but it has some defects (Hall, 2009). For example, “even though GDP rose steadily from 1999 to 2007 in the U.S., most Americans were worse off in 2007 than in 1999. There has been a general decline in standards of living for most Americans even if GDP had been steadily rising” (Stiglitz 2009). Compared with GDP, GNH focuses on the element of wellbeing, which should not be ignored by a government. Although the social progress reflected by GDP is rising, we need to ask: what does the progress mean for citizens? Bhutan, a country that pursues the maximum GNH rather than GDP, chooses a more holistic and sustainable approach to development by paying more attention to the wellbeing and happiness of citizens.

### **Would GNH work outside Bhutan?**

Tshoki Zangmo at the Center for Bhutan Studies (CBS) in Thimphu, Bhutan, said, “The desire for happiness is universal, and sustainable happiness is multi-

dimensional, not just dependent on money. The ultimate outcome of policies should be to increase the welfare of the people, not just economic growth. And that's what we're measuring. GNH is a more holistic and completely different approach" (Zangmo, 2009). Although the current GNH index is based on the values of the Bhutanese, other countries can adjust the basis of GNH to conform to their own cultures and values. Generally, GNH reflects a kind of progress citizens care more about than just purely economic development. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to infer the GNH index can be used in other countries.

### **Conclusion**

GNH, used by Bhutan for many years, is an index to measure happiness of citizens. The measure includes some factors not present in other kinds of indices, such as the dimensions of spirituality, culture and community. On the other hand, GNH neglects some issues and can, of course, be improved. Generally, the author is in favor of using GNH. It is indeed a good supplement to GDP and is applicable and effective for other countries that wish to focus more on the happiness of the citizens.

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