

palgrave▶pivot

**POLITICS OF GROSS
NATIONAL HAPPINESS**

Governance and
Development
in Bhutan

Kent Schroeder



Gross National Happiness

Abstract This chapter outlines the multidimensional and integrated nature of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and explores its roots in a foundation of Buddhist-inspired cultural values. It argues that GNH is not only a national multidimensional development model for Bhutan but also a defining component of the image of the Bhutanese state itself, portraying an autonomous and coherent entity leading the pursuit of national happiness in partnership with Bhutanese society. Despite this image, the implementation of GNH policies is subject to the competing priorities and practices of the fragmented state and non-state governance actors involved.

Keywords Bhutan · Buddhism · Cultural values · Gross National Happiness · State image

Bhutan has increasingly seeped into western consciousness. This is perhaps best reflected in the growing number of popular non-fiction works about the country written in recent years. Their titles are instructive: *A Splendid Isolation*; *Bhutan: Hidden Lands of Happiness*; *Beneath Blossom Rain*; *Married to Bhutan*; and *A Field Guide to Happiness: What I learned in Bhutan About Living, Loving and Waking up*. Collectively these works celebrate Bhutan's rugged geographic isolation, its mystical eastern spirituality, and the rural lifestyle that dominates much of its population. Bhutan, for many, is the last remaining Shangri-La. Paralleling

operationalizing GNH in Bhutan, developed a definition of GNH that incorporates each of these components. According to Karma Tshiteem, former Secretary of the Gross National Happiness Commission, GNH is a development approach that “seeks a balance between material well-being and the spiritual, emotional and cultural needs of society” (Royal Government of Bhutan [RGoB] 2012, pp. 40–41).

All of this sounds intriguing but what does it really mean? What is the nature of the balance described by the GNH Commission? The key to understanding the nature of happiness within GNH is found in its Buddhist foundation. According to *Bhutan 2020*, the country’s long-term development plan:

[O]ur approach to development has been shaped by the beliefs and values of the faith we have held for more than 1000 years. Firmly rooted in our rich tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, the approach stresses not material rewards, but individual development, sanctity of life, compassion for others, respect for nature, social harmony, and the importance of compromise. (Planning Commission 1999a, p. 19)

This Buddhist notion of happiness distinguishes between two forms of consciousness, *dukkha* and *sukha*, which have different implications for happiness. *Dukkha* represents the notion of suffering, ranging from extreme distress to minor discomfort. Suffering may occur in the face of change where immediate and external stimulation—good food, good fun, good sex—generate short-lived feelings of satisfaction that ultimately lead to frustration due to their impermanence. This is a form of temporary pleasure that is self-centred and superficial; it is not happiness at all (McDonald 2009; Ricard 2011). *Sukha*, on the other hand, is a stable and foundational form of happiness. Human fulfilment requires the cultivation of internal spiritual, mental, and emotional components rather than reliance on external stimulation. Adequate material necessities are important to avoid dissatisfaction but true happiness requires moving from dependence on such material sources to the harmonization of the material and non-material (Ricard 2011). Happiness in this Buddhist sense is not the smile that accompanies a new purchase at the local shopping mall; it is the deep-seated contentment that accompanies realizing one’s full human potential as an individual interconnected with society and the environment. It is towards this kind of happiness that Gross National Happiness is directed (Lokamitra 2004; Thinley 1999).

elaborate the four original pillars into more specific dimensions including health, education, living standard, ecological diversity and resilience, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, time use, and psychological well-being. The nine domains are the foundation for measuring GNH but the four pillars have been the broad development framework that operationally structures the implementation of GNH, including in the country's current five year plan for 2013–2018 (GNH Commission 2013). At the same time, GNH is portrayed as a strategy that is dynamic and open to evolution (GNH Commission 2009, p. 18; Planning Commission 1999b, p. 12). Indeed, the guidelines for the development of the 2018–2023 five year plan position the nine domains as the updated organizing framework (GNH Commission 2016).

While the four pillars exist alongside the expanded nine dimensions, understanding the nature of GNH best draws on the four pillars. The pillars have been assessed in the literature in greater detail as they have been around longer. Moreover, respondents in this study almost always identified with the four pillars rather than the nine domains. The nature of the pillars, and to a lesser extent the domains, and the values at their foundation are described in a range of official documents, speeches, and scholarly studies (see, for example, Givel 2015; GNH Commission/UNDP 2011, pp. 15–17; Priesner 2004; Rinzin 2006; Rinzin et al. 2007; RGoB 2005; Thinley 1999). The first pillar, sustainable and equitable social and economic development, is based on the assumption that economic growth is important but not an end in itself. Equitable economic growth that enables people to live in dignity while not being overcome by a spirit of overconsumption is critical for promoting happiness. Further, growth in the economy is an important vehicle to promote improved education, health, and other social conditions in a manner that is equitable in the present and across generations. The values of balance, dignity, egalitarianism, and sustainable consumption form the core of the pillar.

The second pillar, environmental conservation, recognizes that humans are intimately interconnected with the natural environment and all sentient beings. A healthy environment is inherently interlinked with human happiness. Pollution and overconsumption of natural resources must be avoided and conservation pursued. This does not mean environmental conservation should be pursued at all costs. As natural resources impact people's livelihoods, balance and harmonization are required

(GNH Commission 2009, p. 17; RGoB 2005, p. 15; Thinley 2007, p. 7). The interdependence of the pillars requires attention be paid to their interactions or what has been termed the “meticulous orchestration” of the pillars (Rinzin 2006, p. 30). Such orchestration requires that the notion of balance across the dimensions be at the core of the Gross National Happiness approach. Indeed, Bhutan’s GNH strategy is often referred to as “the middle path”.

Rinzin (2006) clearly connects this notion of GNH as the middle path to Buddhist values and principles. The values underlying the individual pillars of GNH are defined as distinctly Buddhist values and these are often linked to Bhutanese culture (Givel 2015; Dessallien 2005, pp. 38–39; Priesner 2004; Rinzin et al. 2007; Ura and Kinga 2004, p. 42; Tashi 2004, Tideman 2011). Subsuming religion within culture is not without its conceptual challenges (Dugbazah 2009; pp. 12–17; Geertz 1993, Chap. 4). Nonetheless, GNH constructs Buddhism as the core of the cultural values of the country. They provide the foundation upon which GNH rests. The pillars of GNH act as a strategic framework rooted in Buddhist cultural values intended to foster the achievement of happiness as the end goal of development. What is often less clear is exactly *how* the pillars do so. Popular perceptions of GNH often assume a direct link between the implementation of the framework and the creation of happiness. The reality is more subtle. The Bhutanese state’s official construction of the GNH framework emphasizes the role of the framework in promoting the material and non-material conditions necessary for pursuing foundational happiness; the framework itself does not directly lead to happiness (GNH Commission 2009, p. 17; GNH Commission/UNDP 2011, p. 16; RGoB 2005, p. 18). According to Karma Tshiteem, former Secretary of the Gross National Happiness Commission: “Happiness still remains an individual responsibility, but the State makes sure that the necessary conditions are there for people to pursue the path they choose” (in Braun 2009: 34). This is a critical distinction. GNH does not create happiness for individuals and society. Similar to the human development paradigm, the GNH framework creates enabling conditions that provide people with the ability to choose to live happy lives within their national context, where happiness is understood as fulfilling one’s deepest human potential. Such human potential is self-regarding and other-regarding where both are interconnected with the environment. Accordingly, development policies and programs that

actual practices of its component parts on the other. The characterization of Bhutan as an aspiring GNH state illustrates that Gross National Happiness is a critical component of the image of the Bhutanese state. GNH is officially constructed as part of the foundation of the state that promotes the multidimensional conditions for its citizens' happiness and undergirds the sovereignty and unity of the state as a coherent entity. According to a former Bhutanese cabinet minister, "The good thing is that GNH is the image of our country. It is our North Star. We sail our ship in faith and hope" (Powdyel 2007, p. 75). But this image of the state can be precisely that, an image only. As the state-in-society approach argues, it is distinguished from the actual practices of the state's various parts as they engage with one another and with society. The Bhutanese state may be an avatar of the Bhutanese population, officially guiding the country towards the creation of the conditions for happiness, but this image can be acted upon in different ways by the actions of state and society actors. The multiple levels of government, emerging private sector, growing civil society sector, international donors, and a non-Buddhist minority of ethnic Nepalese who, in the 1990s, were at the centre of an ethnic conflict, all hold the potential to pursue a range of priorities in the process of implementing GNH. These priorities may subvert the image and outcomes of a coherent GNH state. The official construction of an image of a GNH state does not necessarily make it a GNH state in practice. The GNH governance framework seeks to address this challenge.

REFERENCES

- Braun, A. A. (2009). *Gross National Happiness in Bhutan: A living example of an alternative approach to progress*. University of Pennsylvania. <http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=sire>. Accessed 27 Apr 2017.
- Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research. (2016). *A compass towards a just and harmonious society* (The 2015 GNH Survey Report). Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- Dessallien, R. L. (2005). *Democracy, good governance and happiness: Some views from the Kingdom of Bhutan*. Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- Dugbazah, J. (2009). *The relationship between values, religious teaching and development concepts and practices: A preliminary literature review* (Religions and Development Research Programme Working Paper 33 – 2009). Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham.

- Ricard, M. (2011). The Dalai Lama: Happiness from within. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 1(2), 274–290.
- Rinzin, C. (2006). *On the middle path: The social basis for sustainable development in Bhutan*. Netherlands Geographical Studies #352. Utrecht, NL: Copernicus Institute for Sustainable Development and Innovation.
- Rinzin, C., Vermeulen, W., & Glasbergen, P. (2007). Public perceptions of Bhutan's approach to sustainable development in practice. *Sustainable Development*, 15(1), 52–68.
- Royal Government of Bhutan. (2005). *Bhutan national human development report 2005*. Thimphu: Royal Government of Bhutan.
- Royal Government of Bhutan. (2012). *The report of the high-level meeting on well-being and happiness: Defining a new economic paradigm*. Thimphu: Office of the Prime Minister.
- Tashi, K. P. (2004). The role of Buddhism in achieving Gross National Happiness. In K. Ura & K. Galay (Eds.), *Gross National Happiness and development: Proceedings of the first international seminar on operationalizing Gross National Happiness* (pp. 483–495). Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- Thinley, J. Y. (1999). Values and development: Gross National Happiness. In S. Kinga, K. Galay, & A. Pain (Eds.), *Gross National Happiness: A set of discussion papers* (pp. 12–23). Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- Thinley, J. Y. (2007). What is Gross National Happiness? In *Rethinking Development: Proceedings of Second International Conference on Gross National Happiness* (pp. 3–11). Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- Tideman, S. (2011). Gross National Happiness. In L. Zsolnai (Ed.), *Ethical principles and economic transformation—A Buddhist approach. Issues in business* (Vol. 33, pp.133–153). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Netherlands.
- Ura, K. (2007). Culture, liberty, and happiness. *Media and public culture: Proceedings of the second international seminar on Bhutan studies* (pp. 40–69). Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- Ura, K., & Kinga, S. (2004). Bhutan—Sustainable development through good governance. A case study. *World Bank*. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/880451468743944567/pdf/308210BHU0Governance01sec0aIso0307591.pdf>. Accessed 12 Mar 2017.