

## **Sustainability and Happiness — The Vital Link**

### ***GNH: Towards a holistic approach to development***

Thirty years ago, the Fourth King of Bhutan famously proclaimed that “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product,” thereby setting Bhutan on a holistic development path that seeks to integrate sustainable and equitable socio-economic development with environmental conservation, cultural promotion, and good governance.

This “happiness” has nothing to do with the common use of that word to denote an ephemeral, passing mood — happy today or unhappy tomorrow due to some temporary external condition like praise or blame, gain or loss. Rather, it refers to the deep, abiding happiness that comes from living life in full harmony with the natural world, with our communities and fellow beings, and with our culture and spiritual heritage, — in short from feeling totally connected with our world.

And yet our modern world, and particularly its economic system, promote precisely the reverse — a profound sense of alienation from the natural world and from each other. Cherishing self-interest and material gain, we destroy nature, degrade our natural and cultural heritage, disrespect indigenous knowledge, overwork, get stressed out, and no longer have time to enjoy each other’s company, let alone to contemplate and meditate on life’s deeper meaning. Myriad scholarly studies now show that massive gains in GDP and income have not made us happier. On the contrary, respected economists have demonstrated empirically that deep social networks are a far better predictor of satisfaction and wellbeing than income and material gain.

It is significant that the term Gross National Happiness was first coined in direct contrast with Gross National Product — literally as a sharp critique of our current materialist obsession and growth-based economic system. And it is even more significant that the statement was not made in relation to Bhutan alone, but as a universal proclamation — true for the world and for all beings. The universal chord it struck explains why 68 nations joined Bhutan in co-sponsoring its UN General Assembly resolution in July 2011 on “Happiness: Towards a Holistic Approach to Development” that was passed by consensus, without dissenting vote, by the 193-member United Nations.

To the best of its capacity, the Kingdom of Bhutan is trying to put Gross National Happiness into practice at home. We have a long way to go. But we do try to place the natural environment at the centre of all our development policies. Our Constitution mandates that at least 60% of the Kingdom of Bhutan remain under forest cover in perpetuity. More than 50% of our country is under full environmental protection in national parks and wilderness areas. We vowed at Copenhagen always to remain a net carbon sink. Our stated policy and intention is to go 100% organic in our agricultural production.

And we don’t view these policies as coming at the expense of human and social development. On the contrary, they have supported our increased wellbeing. Life expectancy has literally doubled in the last two generations. Health care and education

are free, and rural health clinics and schools are sprouting throughout the country, with 99% of primary-aged children now in school. The core focus of our Tenth Five-Year Plan is to reduce poverty.

And in the midst of this rapid development, we are doing our best to maintain the values, principles, and practices of our dynamic, evolving culture and ancient wisdom traditions, which reflect in our deep respect for all life and in our strong family and community bonds. And the good governance pillar of Gross National Happiness could not be better demonstrated than in our Fourth King's effort to build constitutional democracy, including his own voluntary abdication from the Throne.

In all this, we are acutely aware that what we measure is what gets policy attention, and that what we count signifies what we value. And so, we now assess progress in the Kingdom of Bhutan according to nine domains — living standards, health, education, culture, ecological integrity, community vitality, time use, good governance, and psychological wellbeing. From those results, we create a GNH Index, and we use these indicators actively as a policy screening tool. Indeed, no major policy is implemented in Bhutan if it fails the GNH indicator test. Since 2007, we have administered two national GNH surveys, and these measures now guide our policy.

But we have also learned that, to measure progress accurately and properly, indicators are not enough. GDP, after all, is not an indicator, but an accounting system. To challenge the continued dominance of narrow GDP-based measures, we are therefore building a new holistic accounting system that properly accounts for the value of our nation's natural, human, social, and cultural capital — and not only the manufactured and financial capital currently counted.

Globally, most of our true wealth as nations is currently invisible and ignored, and that is a dangerous illusion that leads to dangerous policies. So in February this year we released the first natural, human, and social capital results of our new National Accounts, which will be the foundation of the new economy we need to build. We found, for example, that our forests provide more than 14 billion dollars a year worth of ecosystem services – four times more than our whole GDP. And here our little country performs a huge service to the world, because 53% of that value accrues to those beyond our borders. Why? Because our forests regulate the climate, store carbon, and protect watersheds from which others benefit.

And yet, despite valiant efforts made by individuals, communities, and certain nations, human society will continue to hurtle itself towards self-annihilation unless we come together and act in concert. The time has come for global action to build a new world economic system that is no longer based on the illusion that limitless growth is possible on our precious and finite planet or that endless material gain promotes wellbeing. Instead, it will be a system that promotes harmony and respect for nature and for each other, that respects our ancient wisdom traditions and protects our most vulnerable people as our own family, and that gives us time to live and enjoy our lives and to appreciate rather than destroy our world. It will be an economic system, in short, that is fully sustainable and that is rooted in true, abiding wellbeing and happiness.

Sustainability is the essential basis and pre-condition of such a sane economic system. But an economy exists not for mere survival but to provide the enabling conditions for human happiness and the wellbeing of all life forms. The new economy will be an economy based on a genuine vision of life's ultimate meaning and purpose — an economy that does not cut us off from nature and community but fosters true human potential, fulfilment, and happiness.