



# Gross National Happiness

*The Himalayan nation of Bhutan has been a leader in devising and promoting an alternative development paradigm called gross national happiness. The king's statement "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product" arose from Buddhism, which recognizes the transitory nature of material satisfactions. This view, together with the findings of positive psychology, is encouraging Western nations to measure the full spectrum of human well-being.*

**I**n 1972, the fourth king of the Himalayan nation of Bhutan, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, proclaimed, "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product"—a statement that challenged prevailing economic development theories around the world.

The proclamation was especially bold because tiny, mountainous Bhutan, wedged between India and China, was—at that time—one of the world's least-developed and most-isolated nations. Even today, it is among the least-developed countries in the world, according to the Office of the High Representative for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS) at the United Nations (UN DESA and OHRLLS 2011). Extreme topography and self-imposed isolationism kept Bhutan cut off from most visitors from beyond the Himalayan region until 1974, when foreign dignitaries arrived for the king's coronation. In the 1970s, more than 90 percent of Bhutan's populace lived in rural areas. Fewer than 1,200 kilometers of roads facilitated movement about the country. Villagers eked out subsistence livelihoods on the steep hillsides, without electricity, running water, or mechanized means of tilling their fields. How could a nation that sorely needed infrastructure and economic

development decide to put something as ephemeral as happiness first?

The king's statement signaled that Bhutan's development process would grow out of its own cultural context, including its ancient Vajrayana Buddhist traditions, rather than being imposed by foreign experts. Development would need to support the Buddhist quest for enlightenment for the good of all sentient beings—a quest associated with the development of enduring equanimity, compassion, and spiritual inspiration at the individual and collective levels.

## Buddhist Roots

In articulating gross national happiness (GNH), the king drew on Bhutan's deep well of compassion for and non-violence toward all sentient beings, based in its 1,200-year history of Buddhism. His statement connected with previous policies, also grounded in Buddhism. A 1675 Buddhist equivalent of a social contract declared that happiness of all sentient beings and the teachings of the Buddha are mutually dependent. In 1729, a Bhutanese legal code required that laws promote happiness of sentient beings.

Among the tenets of Buddhism are the ideas that all beings want to be happy, and that, while life is full of suffering, the cessation of suffering through guidance, practice, and attention is possible, leading to the achievement of enlightenment. Interdependent co-arising—the concept that there are no independently existing causes, identities, or egos—creates the impetus to protect life. The doctrine of karma teaches that one always reaps the benefits or harms of one's actions, which provides further incentive to treat other living beings compassionately and considerately. Within Vajrayana Buddhism, the figure of the bodhisattva (one who attains enlightenment but

remains on the earthly plane to assist other sentient beings in their efforts toward enlightenment) is revered, indicating a cultural imperative to generate boundless compassion.

## GNH and Gross Domestic Product

During the 1980s and 1990s, the king further elaborated on the concept of GNH as Bhutan's guiding development policy. He criticized standard socioeconomic development indicators for measuring means rather than ends, and indicated that happiness would be the goal of development in Bhutan. The king proclaimed that Bhutanese development would recognize the social, spiritual, and emotional needs, as well as the material needs, of the individual, instead of being based solely on economic measures and consumption. He recast "development" to mean the enlightenment of the individual through the creation a harmonious psychological, social, and economic environment that could lead to the blossoming of happiness. Measuring the country's consumption of goods and services would not reflect the paramount goal of spiritual development.

The king and his advisors further defined GNH as standing on four "pillars": sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development, environmental conservation, preservation and promotion of culture, and good governance, which guided development efforts in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These four pillars make it clear that socioeconomic development represents only one-quarter of the necessary conditions for the promotion of GNH. Economic development, rather than being a central metric for measuring progress, is part of a constellation of metrics.

In articulating this vision, the king and his advisors pointed out a well-recognized difficulty with standard measures of a country's development or success, such as gross domestic product (GDP). This measure reflects the economic value of all production of goods and services in a country during a given period and is typically seen as a proxy for standard of living, such that greater consumption of goods and services implies a higher material standard of living. As the Bhutanese have noted, however, after certain basic material needs are met, greater consumption of material goods does not guarantee greater happiness. Further, as ecological economists point out, the correlation between GDP and standard of living breaks down when a country increases its spending to combat social problems (see, for example, Daly and Cobb 1994; Norgaard 1994; Planning Commission, Royal Government of Bhutan 1999). In that scenario, GDP continues to rise, even as greater shares of resources are used to ameliorate drains on society, such as crime,

natural disasters, chemical leaks, epidemics, or drug addiction. The GDP measures also ignore the externalities of industrial production, such as pollution, environmental degradation, and toxic waste, which have negative health and ecological effects over large areas. A more accurate accounting of the costs of production would subtract these social costs and make GDP more meaningful.

Table 1, on the next page, summarizes the primary concepts of GNH compared to established development measurement approaches.

Because GDP measures production, consumption must continually increase in order to raise production rates. Through increasing production, a nation may rapidly deplete its natural resources, which registers as an increase in GDP even as it drives down natural capital, the stock of resources available for the future. GDP thus can have an inverse relationship to GNH: as circumstances get worse, the economic standing of a nation rises. In contrast, GNH is inherently predisposed toward sustainability because it recognizes that material development is not the only valid measure of human progress, and it understands that declining natural resources are a drain rather than a boon to GDP.

## GNH and Global Policy

With the introduction of GNH onto the global stage in 1998 at the Millennium Meeting for Asia and the Pacific in Seoul, South Korea, the concept began to gain international currency. *Gross National Happiness*, a book of discussion papers, was published in Bhutan on the occasion of the king's Silver Jubilee in 1999. In 2001, the Centre for Bhutan Studies co-hosted a seminar entitled "GNH—As Challenged by the Concept of Decent Society" in the Netherlands, with which Bhutan has a close aid relationship. In 2002, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) planning and economic ministers embraced GNH as a strategy for poverty reduction in southern Asia.

A series of conferences, begun in 2004 in Bhutan, has helped spread awareness of GNH, while supporting the Bhutanese government in creating tools to operationalize and eventually measure GNH. International experts in economics, psychology, policy, and other aspects of development were invited to deliberate on how Bhutan might use its development paradigm to guide international engagement and material improvements in the lives of local people. The conferences also introduced academics and policy experts from around the world to an alternative development paradigm, which many have worked to implement at various scales in their home countries. Conferences on GNH have since been held in

TABLE I. Comparison of GNH and Traditional Development Paradigms

	<b>GNH</b>	<b>UN Millennium Development Goals</b>	<b>Traditional Development</b>
<b>Seeks to maximize</b>	Individual and national happiness	Social welfare	Strong economies (as measured by gross national product and gross domestic product)
<b>Needs to be met</b>	Material, spiritual, and emotional	Peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development, primarily through provision of education, health, and equality	Material, through international economic cooperation
<b>Seeks to transform</b>	Individual, within society	Society, global North–South relations	Economies
<b>Success defined as</b>	High level of happiness nationwide	Elimination of poverty, universal primary education, improvement of health indicators	Strong, stable economies, leading to high levels of material well-being
<b>Based in</b>	Buddhism	Humanitarianism	Economics
<b>Societal sectors of concern</b>	Human development, culture and heritage, balanced and equitable development, governance, and environmental conservation	Poverty and hunger, universal primary education, gender equality, health care, children, relation of rich and poor nations	Economy, trade, infrastructure, poverty eradication, employment, official development assistance, debt, global politics
<b>Key institutions</b>	Government of Bhutan, SAARC* nations	United Nations Development Programme and UN member states	World Bank, IMF,** WTO,*** individual national governments
<b>Paradigm propounded</b>	Since 1972	Since 2000	Since 1944

Source: Author

\*South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

\*\*International Monetary Fund

\*\*\*World Trade Organization

Canada (2005), Thailand (2007), Bhutan (2008), and Brazil (2009). Bhutan organized a small international conference on Happiness and Economic Development in August 2011, with Bhutanese prime minister Jigme Thinley and Jeffrey Sachs, professor and director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, as co-hosts.

Having generated global interest in the concept, Bhutanese officials then turned to efforts to incorporate GNH into international planning and policy. In July 2011, after ten months of lobbying by the Bhutanese delegation, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a nonbinding resolution calling on member nations to incorporate happiness into their development objectives. The resolution encourages UN member states to develop

their own happiness indicators and contribute them to the UN's development agenda, framed as the Millennium Development Goals. The United Kingdom, one of the sixty-six co-sponsors of the UN resolution, is a leader in the effort to measure happiness and well-being through an initiative of its Office for National Statistics. Preliminary results are expected in July 2012.

## Measuring Happiness

The Bhutanese concluded that they would need to measure GNH to ensure its improvement. The Centre for Bhutan Studies, a think tank, devised a series of nine

GNH variables, or “domains,” comprising ecology, culture, good governance, education, health, community vitality, time use, psychological well-being, and living standards, each of which is further divided into numerous indicators that include everything from the amount of sleep last night to “frequency of feeling of compassion” and “freedom from discrimination.” The indicators were developed from lengthy pilot surveys conducted around the nation in 2006–2007. A second, streamlined survey of 950 respondents was conducted in 2007–2008. Raw data from this survey is available on the website of the Centre for Bhutan Studies (2008a).

With the variables and indicators in place, all new projects and policies must pass muster with the GNH screening tool, developed by the Centre for Bhutan Studies, and the GNH Commission, formerly the Planning Commission of the Bhutanese government. As Bhutan works to implement GNH, other nations and communities have taken up the vision and its offer of an alternative to the unchecked consumption.

## International Adoption of GNH Philosophy

Countries around the world, including the United States, have begun experimenting with their own ideas about GNH. While GNH arose from Buddhist roots in Bhutan, it aligns closely with the science of well-being, as well as recent studies of positive psychology and the economics of happiness.

Western European countries have led the international movement toward adopting GNH. In 2009, French president Nicolas Sarkozy announced a plan to make happiness a key indicator of growth, and requested that Nobel Prize–winning economists Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen develop measures to incorporate well-being into national assessments. Following France’s lead, British prime minister David Cameron called on economists and policy makers to focus on “GWB,” or “general well-being,” by polling 200,000 people about the state of their happiness. The results of this poll are scheduled for release in mid-2012.

In the Americas, GPL*Atlantic* of Nova Scotia, Canada, has been a leader since 1997 in identifying new measures of sustainability, well-being, and quality of life—called “genuine progress indicators”—that go beyond the unidimensional measures of GDP. Founder and executive director Ronald Colman attended the first two GNH conferences to advise the Bhutanese on developing GNH indicators.

Growing interest in GNH prompted Brazil to host the fifth GNH conference and establish diplomatic relations with Bhutan in 2009. Brazilian policy makers introduced

a bill to amend Brazil’s Constitution, making the quest for happiness an inalienable right, in early 2011.

Six residents of the US state of Vermont attended the fourth GNH conference in Bhutan and were inspired to launch Gross National Happiness USA (GNHUSA) in spring 2009. The group’s initial work focused on raising awareness of GNH, gathering information, and connecting interested people. To kick off the national movement, GNHUSA held a conference in Vermont entitled “GNH 2010: Changing What We Measure from Wealth to Well-Being.”

## GNH: Values-Based Development Paradigm

Gross national happiness offers a way to understand national progress that incorporates an ethical function and values the intangible aspects of human life that are much of what provides vitality and well-being. It shifts consciousness away from the continual pursuit of more, bigger, and better—goals that are now well-known to be unsustainable and highly destructive to the surrounding environment—and toward goals that can satisfy human cravings for meaning, connection, value, and worth. In suggesting that happiness is more important than any product, GNH helps us consider what material goods might be enough, and what sufficiency rather than overabundance might mean for our lives, our homes, and our ecosystems.

As sustainability becomes an ever greater concern for citizens, nations, and the planet, GNH provides an important alternative to GDP as a measure of individual and national well-being. With the groundswell of interest in GNH that had built up by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is likely that more countries and institutions will seek to incorporate the promotion and measurement of happiness into their measures of well-being. The measurement of GNH may even prove to be a tool for sustainability, in that it will reveal the social, psychological, and emotional difficulties that led to unsustainable craving and overconsumption. If these difficulties can be identified and addressed, GNH may lead to a happier and more sustainable world.

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*See also* Community and Stakeholder Input; Development Indicators; Environmental Justice Indicators; Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI); Gross Domestic Product, Green; Human Development Index (HDI);  $I = P \times A \times T$  Equation; *The Limits to Growth*; Millennium Development Goals; National Environmental Accounting; Population Indicators; Social Network Analysis (SNA); Taxation Indicators, Green; Weak vs. Strong Sustainability Debate

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