

**GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS AS A RECTOR ELEMENT OF  
THE KINGDOM OF BHUTAN**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Through rigorous research on academic resources it is possible to state that nowadays, a new and fresh contribution to the conceptions of development that so far have permeated the international context. The emergence of an index of Gross National Happiness (GNH) in the small kingdom of Bhutan has been the subject of extensive discussions, uncertainties, reservations and skepticism as questioning ¿can happiness be a gross national product? And yet, if so, Can this be a catalyst for progress? Bhutan conceives happiness as a practice of both detachment and compassion. The kingdom aims to balance economic development with social welfare, and uses Buddhism as national guidance that provides the tools to avoid wasteful consumption and unhappiness. Happiness itself can become an interesting GDP- a very subjective, yes - but that can bring development in a kingdom, however, it should be reflected in indicators of satisfaction of the basic needs of the population, declining infant mortality rates and increased life expectancy. Bhutan's interest in developing a GNH index reflects not only a respectable sense of knowledge and innovation, but also a continuous search for a more accurate measure of welfare that GDP cannot show.*

**Key Words:** Bhutan, Gross National Happiness (GNH), Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Environment, Meditation, Innovation, Wisdom

## **INTRODUCTION**

Bhutan is a Himalayan kingdom nestled between India and China that has no outlet to the sea. It is surrounded by mountains on which the construction of roads and infrastructure in general is expensive and complex. When it comes to the demography is difficult to be certain about the current population density, however, it is stated that there are currently about 800,000 people (Thomson, 2006), whose life expectancy does not exceed 54 years and have some of the highest infant mortality rates in the world.

Bhutan has been a kingdom that has not experienced high development trends. Its economy is one of the smallest and least developed in the world that relies almost exclusively on agriculture and forestry; industry is still largely backward and until 1960 the kingdom still had no schools, hospitals or roads paved moderately acceptable (Heeks, 2012). Similarly, the first radio station was only allowed since the 1980s, and television was introduced in the kingdom until 1999, however, this does not mean that Bhutan wants to stay in the past and as we shall see, economic development will play an important role in the new Bhutanese project.

Subsequently today, Bhutan is trying to build its own path to national development. Thus it has become a pioneer of a new form of measurement: Gross National Happiness (GNH), whose quest for progress, wealth and welfare no longer is framed by standard indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The GNH is so, a new concept originated in the 1990s when the King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wanchuck expressed his concern about the effects of globalization and development on the conventional western culture. The King looked for a way of protection in quantifiable terms and with the hope that the world could understand and respect the identity of Bhutan.

## **THE HARMFULNESS OF THE WESTERN SYSTEM?**

For decades, the western economic systems have generated undoubted improvements when it comes to medicine, technology for provision of goods, and services of all kinds. However, despite this, these same systems have been forgetting that they are also growing in a finite world with limited resources for which, it is now possible to see an overall negative impact reflected in the inefficient use of resources, high levels of pollution and social problems resulting from industrialization than have created an unsustainable present. It is from this limited perspective that modern economies and business theories have been developed, confirming itself as a non-relevant perspective on survival and prosperity.

## **THE FALLACIES OF GDP**

To understand the reasoning of this new concept, it is necessary to think like this society does and this allows us to see various problems encountered by the traditional GDP, problems that don't fully let the development of a total prosperity. It then becomes clear that GDP was never thought to be a measure of general welfare; in contrast, this is only a measure of economic growth that is based on the western assumption that economic growth *will* improve social welfare. Regarding this, if it is true that economic growth can generate advantages for the development of a population, we need to understand that social welfare is a complex measure that consists of many tangible and intangible

factors, so that measuring social welfare cannot be reduced to a quantitative monetized number.

GDP can cover within its measures negative elements such as imprisonment, medical expenses, use of antidepressants and related environmental damage, and forget important aspects to human level as parenting, mentoring and volunteer work, it doesn't analyze either intangible elements such as peace and happiness (factors that may be regarded as the ultimate goal of life) (Dixon, Improving Unsustainable Western Economic Systems, 2004). It is in this context that the GNH emerges, as an alternative that allows society to achieve the measuring of the condition of their life support systems as well as the happiness of people, items that are not a priority at the present time.

### **HOW CAN GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS BE UNDERSTOOD?**

From the fallacies that the western system presents, Bhutan has shifted from an isolated to a modern state which is actively involved in the international system. In this context, its development path embraces the concept of GNH, a political and philosophical instrument that seeks to promote human development and manage the conservation of the environment in a sustainable strategy guided by Buddhist ethics (Zurick, 2006), which furthermore than production and material consumption promote inner happiness.

Therefore, it is possible to say that the fundamental principle of the GNH is based on the fact that development should not be limited to an increase in consumption and the accumulation of wealth, but that it should try to maximize happiness responding to the needs of humanity. Indeed, this principle poses certain challenges due to its subjectivity; however, it has four strong main components<sup>1</sup>: *sustainable and equitable economic development, environmental protection, promotion of cultural diversity and identity preservation of the values and the establishment of good governance*. These elements have been tightly integrated into the national project to promote the capabilities of the population as the center of developmental purposes through freedom of choice, aspiration and creativity of Bhutan, raising a balanced and holistic approach to development based on the belief that man is bound by nature to seek happiness (Thomson, 2006), which is the ultimate goal and greatest desire of citizens.

Finally, it is possible to say that this project has synchronized on a remarkable way in the last ten years with the global trend of increasing interest in happiness, positive psychology, welfare and other related aspects, in such a way that it has already captured the imagination of economists and politicians from Brazil, England, Tokyo, Taiwan and others, who begin to seek a new path to prosperity of free market that seeks to diminish the damage to the environment, social equity and family life. Certainly, even Maryland-USA has begun to use a Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) to measure whether economic progress truly leads to sustainable prosperity (Jyoti, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> The 4 pillars of the concept were introduced in 1998 by the Minister of Interior Lyonpo Jigmi Thinley

## **BUDDHISM AS A NATIONAL PROJECT GUIDE**

The state religion of Bhutan is Vajrayana Buddhism. Having a predominantly Buddhist population, it is not a secret that the principles that from here arise are critical to understand and strengthen the Bhutanese project of the Gross National Happiness. In this context, for Bhutan, the GDP is an essentially western notion that ignores the uniqueness of their kingdom and the practices of Buddhism that are part of everyday life. Thus, and as Zeppa mentioned:

“In the most essential form of Buddhism, happiness comes through realizing the truth about unhappiness: that we cause ourselves to suffer by wanting the things that cannot make us happy and by clinging to the things that do. Happiness, then, comes from the practice of nonattachment” (Zeppa, 2006, pág. 20).

This is how for Bhutan, based on its religious principles, is not enough to free itself from suffering; beyond it, happiness comes from the practice of both detachment and compassion. This is why understanding the growth in the terms in which it is understood in the west is not appropriate or relevant to their context, and it is not a fundament of their intrinsic foundation.

This is evidence that the philosophical substance of life in Bhutan is justified by the Buddhist precepts that emphasize the pursuit of emotional and spiritual fulfillment, prosperity to satisfy basic material needs, and respect for the natural order (Zurick, 2006). These afflictions are the ones that are evident in the approach of Bhutan to development, focusing on enriching the lives of people by accomplishing basic needs, amplification of economic and social alternatives, preservation of cultural traditions and promoting conservation of the environment.

However, Buddhism in Bhutan has a strangely elastic quality: it is esoteric, extremely pragmatic and it opens an important meditation space. There is room for the teachings of the Buddha as well as all kinds of divination: oracles, horoscopes issued by state astrologers, amulets, etc., (Zeppa, 2006). This is why for a western territory, that distinguishes Buddhism primarily as a philosophy, Buddhism in Bhutan can seem full of beliefs and practices that have nothing to do with the Four Noble Truths, and yet, all this makes part of the common practice in the kingdom. It is also important to highlight that with all these features, and in the pursuing of balance of economic development with social welfare, Buddhist practice does provide the right tools to avoid the unhappiness of wasteful consumption.

## **THE EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS OF GNH, WISE DECISION?**

Regarding the educational field, it is necessary to understand that according to the philosophy of GNH, along with math and science, children are taught basic farming techniques and environmental protection (Kelly, 2013). New national programs for waste management also ensure that every piece of material used in the school can be recycled, not to mention that the infusion of GNH in education also meant that daily meditation sessions and traditional soothing music has replaced the sonar traditional bell

in schools. "Education does not only mean getting good grades, it also means preparing students to be good people"<sup>2</sup>.

Regarding technology, many argue that there is a disconnection between technology and happiness. However presently, only few connections have been given between ICTs and happiness to take a stand against it. On this point it may be mentioned that the internet and mobile phones were allowed only from the beginning of the XXI century (but its use has grown rapidly since then). Statistics from the International Telecommunication Union indicate that there are already about 400,000 registered mobile services with annual growth rates of over 50%, and 14 Internet users per 100 inhabitants (Heeks, 2012) , growths that have been possible especially since 2004 with the BIPS<sup>3</sup>, even though they still cannot generate a direct relation between new technologies and happiness and welfare.

However, it is worth remembering that economic programs take into account the government's desire to protect the kingdom's environment and cultural traditions, but detailed controls and uncertain policies in areas like industrial licensing, trade, labor and finance continue to be a limiting factor for foreign investment.

### **THE CHALLENGES IN BHUTAN'S VIEW**

Despite its focus on national welfare, Bhutan faces enormous challenges and an increasingly uncertain future. Even representatives of the kingdom and many academics have warned that the GNH model could crumble before the increasing social and environmental pressures and climate change (Kelly, 2013). Bhutan must then develop effective and sustainable models of negotiation merging with the philosophy of the GNH. The kingdom should implement models that are intended to serve society rather than dominate it (Dixon, Gross National Happiness - Measuring What Matters, 2004), models that should be fully responsible for the negative environmental and social impacts, and the optimum size seek to become more efficient over time.

Other guidelines for development in Bhutan are related to infrastructure, employment, and exchange (Dixon, Gross National Happiness - Measuring What Matters, 2004). The western model of development often includes development projects such as roads and railways that despite benefit society should be studied in depth in terms of cost. And to continue in line with the vision of the kingdom, these projects may include restoration and environmental protection, infrastructure development, sustainable agriculture and housing.

Moreover, Bhutan's agricultural policy sets a goal of food self-sufficiency of 75% (Zurick, 2006), however, this goal framed in expanding horticulture, population growth and competition between livestock and forest conservation suggest significant challenges for the agricultural sector. Consequently, and in a context in which this sector is essential and where rural livelihoods connected to monastic centers are the basis of cultural traditions, illustrates that agriculture should become a very important link in front of the kingdom's efforts to improve the GNH and the environmental conservation.

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<sup>2</sup> Sir Mingbo Dukpa. Minister of Education and Chairman of the National Commission for UNESCO

<sup>3</sup> Bhutan Information and communication technology Policy and Strategies

An increase in the income of farmers in poverty can generate a remarkable increase in happiness, the reason why, ICT's can be introduced to support agricultural labor through the provision of information for better methods of planting, promotion of cultivation and animal husbandry to promote increases in yields and market prices and allow the sector inputs to be sold at the best possible price.

Finally, while it is true that the concept of the GNH has a fundamental component from Buddhist traditions, it is necessary to note that not all Bhutan's population is Buddhist, in fact, Hinduism is the religion of 25% of the population (Zurick, 2006), so there is no notion of a unique cultural identity and therefore, a measure of happiness based on assumptions derived exclusively from this notion is erroneous and problematic. Bhutan should so, start working on adding a branch of integration and fostering to those populations who do not practice the state religion in order not to generate a decay of their project in the long term.

## **CONCLUSION**

In summary, it can be stated that indeed, happiness may itself become a GDP –a very subjective one- but that certainly, it can bring development and progress in a territory. However, it is considered that this measure should be translated into indicators of satisfaction of the basic needs of the population. In this context, the interest of Bhutan to develop a GNH index reflects not only a respectable sense of wisdom, but also a continuous search for a more accurate measure of welfare that GDP cannot show by itself.

Nevertheless, it cannot be forgotten that beyond the borders of the monasteries and the great elite, Bhutan has the same problems and fears that the people of other countries. This is why implementing western elements should be thought. Life is hard for many Bhutanese, and western technology, products and expertise could help optimize current conditions and better achievement of the basic needs in many contexts of everyday life.

Finally, the implementation of a development strategy where the notion of happiness is the main reference is not just something innovative, but also presents an inherent appeal, that despite having very complex databases, it is generating a *soft power* that has been remarkably forging its image as a rising and active player in the international system environment.

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