

Putting Happiness & Well-Being at the Centre of Development

Bhutan

Dr. Julia Kim, Program Director, GNH Centre Bhutan
Julia@gnhcentrebhutan.org



Objective

The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) was introduced by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth King of Bhutan, in the 1970s. GNH draws inspiration from the Buddhist “middle path” of sustaining a balanced development that recognizes both the tangible and intangible aspects of well-being. GNH is not opposed to material and economic progress—rather, it rejects the notion of pursuing economic prosperity as the only end goal. It proposes instead, an inclusive, holistic, equitable, sustainable, and balanced development for societal well-being. Thus, GNH represents an approach to development that prioritizes societal happiness and well-being rather than economic growth for its own sake.

Approach to Moving Well-Being to Action

Bhutan has defined and operationalized the advancement of well-being through several interrelated channels:

1. **National GNH Survey** – In 2010, Bhutan produced its first GNH index to monitor change and to guide government decision making. The GNH survey incorporates **nine “domains” considered important in creating the enabling conditions for societal well-being:** (1) psychological well-being, (2) health, (3) education, (4) time use, (5) cultural diversity and resilience, (6) good governance, (7) community vitality, (8) ecological diversity and resilience, and (9) living standards. Each domain includes a set of indicators (33 in total). Two nationally representative GNH surveys have been conducted in 2010 and 2015. The index uses a sufficiency methodology which assesses how many individuals attain a sufficiency threshold across different indicators. Data are analyzed across various subgroups (e.g., age, sex, occupation, geographical region, rural/urban, etc.) providing guidance on how to improve well-being through policy and action. A GNH index for businesses has also recently been piloted in Bhutan.
2. **Policy and Planning** – Bhutan has also developed a corresponding **GNH policy and project screening tool** which the **GNH Commission** uses to monitor integration into the implementation process. In addition, targets based on GNH domains are included in Bhutan’s 12th five-year development plan.
3. **GNH in Action** – In addition to these initiatives, the GNH Centre Bhutan works with local and international partners to strengthen awareness, understanding, and application of GNH principles and practices both in Bhutan and internationally.

Key Players

Key agencies/organizations include:

- **The Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research (CBS)** – Autonomous social science research institute established by the government of Bhutan and responsible for the national GNH survey and other GNH related research.
- **The GNH Commission** – Government body that applies the GNH screening tool to assess policies and projects through a GNH lens, and ensures that GNH is mainstreamed into overall development policy, planning, and implementation.
- **The GNH Centre Bhutan** – National civil society organization (CSO) that focuses on translating GNH into action through education, awareness raising, and local and international programs.

Barriers

Challenges to applying well-being measures to policy and action include:

- **In Bhutan:** Increasing understanding and ownership of GNH at the grassroots level in Bhutan, particularly among youth. As the country continues to modernize and experience the influences of globalization, it is important that ordinary Bhutanese citizens understand and value the pioneering approach of GNH. Bhutan is beginning to address this challenge by incorporating GNH in the national education system and increasing engagement of CSOs.
- **Internationally:** Misconceptions that happiness is a superficial concern, or relates simply to fleeting emotions (hedonic well-being). Also skepticism about potential role of governments in “making” people happy. These can be addressed by defining GNH or well-being clearly; illustrating how governments can be responsible for creating the enabling conditions in which people can be happy; and by showing the importance of measurement/policy in translating this to action.

Opportunities

There are a number of opportunities to advance the GNH approach:

- **Adaptability:** Growing interest in happiness and well-being and the potential of adapting values, concepts, metrics of GNH to different levels (individuals, communities, organizations, education, business).
- **Accessibility:** The nine domains are **easy for many to relate to** and relevant across diverse societies, including more “developed” countries where negative impacts on well-being are being felt despite economic growth (e.g., in time use, psychological well-being, community vitality, good governance, environment). There is also growing evidence for the importance of addressing both the **outer** conditions (systems change) and the **inner** conditions (mindfulness, compassion, emotional intelligence) for well-being.
- **A new narrative:** The power of Bhutan & GNH as an inspiring and hopeful **narrative** (not merely criticizing the status quo) and a **living experiment** (one that is being implemented at a country level).

Pivotal Pathways or Drivers for Moving Well-Being to Action in Bhutan:

Strong leadership from the top – GNH as the vision of the Kings, enshrined in the Constitution (“the state shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness”), and integrated within a national survey, and government policy and planning tools.

Pivotal Pathways or Drivers for the GNH Centre Bhutan’s International Work:

- **Adapting GNH to new contexts and countries** – Through programs focused on leadership development, action learning, and prototyping GNH across key sectors (e.g., education, business, government).
- **Transformative, experiential learning** – Designing programs that combine personal/professional dimensions of well-being, and that engage “head, heart and hands” (intellect, feeling, action) through experiential learning.
- **Institutional collaborations** – Cultivating well-being networks and projects, e.g., *The Global Wellbeing & GNH Lab* (with the Global Leadership Academy GIZ/BMZ and the Presencing Institute, USA), The GNH Practitioner Program with Schumacher College (UK), *GNH and Education initiatives* (with Ministries of Education, the Mind and Life Institute, USA) and *GNH and Business* (with private sector partners).
- **Challenges** – Balancing **authenticity** of GNH (vision, values, metrics) with **adaptation** to local contexts; capacity to provide ongoing support to new well-being prototypes, documenting lessons learned.

Equity

The GNH survey highlights areas of inequity among different groups (e.g., women vs. men, rural vs. urban, occupational groups, geographic districts) as reflected in **insufficiencies**. It also identifies which domains and indicators (e.g., excessive time spent working, insufficient schooling, lack of access to key services) contribute most to unhappiness among different groups. This information can be used to inform policy responses and district level planning and allocation of resources.

Cultural Narrative

The conditions for a common well-being narrative are supported by the largely Buddhist culture of Bhutan—however the underlying values are not unique to Buddhism, and reflect broader human values:

- **Happiness and well-being as a deep connection to self, others, and nature:** “We have now clearly distinguished the ‘happiness’ in GNH from the fleeting, pleasurable, ‘feel good’ moods so often associated with that term. We know that true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realising our innate wisdom.” – *First PM of Bhutan, Jigme Thinley*

- **Balancing material and spiritual development:** The importance of addressing both the **outer** conditions (systems change, nine domains) and the **inner** conditions (e.g., mindfulness, compassion) for well-being.
- **Interdependence with the web of life:** GNH is ecocentric rather than **anthrocentric** (human-centred)—recognizing that all beings and the natural world are interdependent and that the well-being of non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. This effectively links individual and collective well-being, as well as sustainable development.

Uptake

There has been growing international interest in GNH. In 2011, Bhutan introduced UN Resolution 65/309 “Happiness: Towards a holistic approach to development,” which was adopted by consensus. In 2012, Bhutan hosted a High-Level Meeting on “Wellbeing & Happiness: Towards a New Economic Paradigm” at UN Headquarters in New York, which was attended by over 800 distinguished guests, including the UN Secretary-General. Building on this momentum, the Royal Government of Bhutan convened an International Expert Working Group to draw out important lessons and implications of GNH for the international community, culminating in a report submitted to the UN General Assembly in 2013, “Happiness: Towards a New Development Paradigm.” The GNH Centre Bhutan has been responding to growing interest in adapting GNH values, measures, and processes to a range of contexts. Taken together, these indicate that well-being is being embraced as a guiding principle through initiatives across a range of sectors such as education, business, government (e.g., city or municipal level) and civil society.

Overarching Principles

Essential considerations that would guide others interested in moving well-being to action:

- **Start where you are:** Multiple initiatives at many levels (e.g., cities, schools, businesses) may be a more feasible starting point than a national-level approach. These can lay the foundation and build momentum for deeper systems change.
- **The importance of transformative learning:** It is not enough to simply adopt new measurements. Without a deep understanding of our current crisis of well-being and its causes, and a commitment to personal and societal change, it can remain a purely intellectual exercise, and one that is open to manipulation and political agendas.
- **Build collaborative partnerships and networks:** There is no “one size fits all” approach, and different kinds of expertise across disciplines and sectors will be required to create a shift towards prioritizing well-being.

Next Steps

- Bhutan will continue to integrate GNH into its development plans and policies, and to deepen application of GNH through various sectors, institutions, and actors. Emerging factors, such as modernization and rural-urban migration will need to be addressed, as well as new opportunities to strengthen the role of businesses and civil society in promoting GNH.
- The GNH Centre Bhutan will continue to offer international and Bhutan-based programs that focus on deepening understanding and application of GNH and well-being across different contexts. Further institutional collaboration and support are welcomed.