

# **Development with Values: An Analytical Report on Bhutan's Gross National Happiness**

## **Executive Summary**

This report provides an exhaustive analysis of Bhutan's philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), evaluating its effectiveness as a guiding framework for the nation's socio-economic development. Coined in the 1970s by His Majesty the Fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, GNH was conceived as a holistic alternative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), prioritizing citizen well-being and environmental sustainability over pure economic growth. The philosophy is institutionalized through a comprehensive governance structure, including its enshrinement in the 2008 Constitution, the oversight of a Gross National Happiness Commission, and the application of a GNH Policy Screening Tool to all new legislation and projects.

The report finds that the GNH framework has been remarkably effective in certain domains, most notably in environmental stewardship. Guided by a constitutional mandate to maintain at least 60% forest cover, Bhutan has become the world's first and only carbon-negative country, a status supported by its vast protected areas and a development model centered on renewable hydropower. This environmental success has been synergistically linked to a "High Value, Low Impact" tourism policy that generates revenue for conservation and community development.

In terms of citizen well-being, the impacts are measurable but uneven. GNH-guided policies have delivered significant "first-generation" development successes, including a dramatic reduction in income poverty, near-universal access to free primary healthcare and education, and the elimination of several diseases. National GNH Index scores have shown consistent improvement over the last decade. However, a disaggregated analysis of this data reveals persistent and significant disparities. A substantial well-being gap exists between urban and rural populations, between men and women, and across occupational groups, with farmers consistently reporting the lowest levels of happiness. Furthermore, Bhutan is now confronting complex "second-generation" challenges that the initial GNH framework is less equipped to

handle: ensuring the quality and equity of public services, tackling rising mental health issues, and addressing new environmental health risks.

The report critically examines the profound challenges and paradoxes that temper the GNH narrative. The philosophy's deep roots in Mahayana Buddhism, while providing cultural authenticity, raise fundamental questions about its inclusivity for ethnic and religious minorities, a concern underscored by historical and ongoing human rights issues.

Economically, the nation faces a severe crisis of youth unemployment and an unprecedented wave of emigration, suggesting that the current model is failing to meet the aspirations of its younger generation. This has prompted a pragmatic pivot in national strategy towards a "High-Income GNH Economy," an attempt to reconcile the philosophy's non-materialist ideals with pressing economic realities. This creates its own tensions, exemplified by the hydropower sector, which is a pillar of the economy but also a source of environmental and social concern, placing core GNH principles in direct conflict.

In conclusion, Gross National Happiness is far more than a slogan; it is a sophisticated and deeply integrated development framework that has yielded tangible benefits for Bhutan. Yet, it is a philosophy at a crossroads, tested by the forces of modernization, globalization, and internal social pressures. To remain relevant and effective, the GNH framework must evolve. This report puts forth strategic recommendations focused on targeted economic diversification to create youth employment, policies designed to close the well-being and equity gaps revealed by GNH data, a genuine commitment to addressing human rights and inclusivity, and a strengthening of the GNH measurement tools to better guide policy in an increasingly complex world.

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## Section 1: The Architecture of Gross National Happiness

The Kingdom of Bhutan's development trajectory is guided by a unique and comprehensive philosophy known as Gross National Happiness (GNH). This framework represents a paradigm shift from conventional development models that prioritize economic growth as the ultimate measure of national progress. Instead, GNH posits that true development is a holistic process that balances material well-being with the spiritual, cultural, social, and environmental health of the nation and its people. It is not a measure of fleeting emotion but a structured, multidimensional development architecture designed to create the enabling conditions for citizens to pursue a fulfilling life.

## 1.1 Philosophical and Historical Foundations

The genesis of GNH as a formal development concept is attributed to a declaration made in the 1970s by Bhutan's Fourth King, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who proclaimed that "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product".<sup>1</sup> This statement was a deliberate and profound challenge to the prevailing global orthodoxy of development economics, which equated national success with rising Gross National Product (GNP) or GDP.<sup>3</sup> The King suggested that the singular pursuit of economic growth had become an end in itself, often ignoring the social and environmental costs incurred in its name.<sup>4</sup> By positing GNH as the true objective, the processes of economic development would not be negated but rather refashioned to serve a more meaningful, human-centered purpose.<sup>4</sup>

While the term was coined in the 20th century, the philosophy's underpinnings are deeply embedded in Bhutan's history and culture. Its principles can be traced to the country's 1729 legal code, which asserted that "if the government cannot create happiness for its people, there is no purpose for the government to exist".<sup>5</sup> More profoundly, GNH draws inspiration from Bhutan's 1,200-year heritage of Mahayana Buddhism, which permeates every aspect of its society.<sup>1</sup> The philosophy reflects core Buddhist tenets, particularly the concept of the "Middle Way," which advocates for balance and moderation over extreme approaches, and a deep-seated tradition of compassion and non-violence toward all living beings.<sup>1</sup> This spiritual foundation frames happiness not as hedonic pleasure but as a state of contentment derived from a balanced life, inner harmony, and a connection to community and nature.<sup>9</sup>

The formal articulation of GNH in the late 20th century was also a strategic response to the pressures of modernization. As Bhutan cautiously opened to the world, there was a growing concern that its unique cultural identity and value system could be subsumed by external, purely materialist definitions of progress.<sup>4</sup> GNH was therefore conceived as a distinctively Bhutanese path to development, one that would navigate the challenges of a changing world while remaining consonant with the nation's intrinsic spiritual and cultural values.<sup>4</sup> This deliberate choice to prioritize "gakid" (happiness and peace) even at the expense of rapid economic growth underscores the philosophy's role as a protective and guiding framework for national identity.<sup>8</sup>

The very structure of GNH, with its explicit grounding in Buddhist principles, presents a foundational complexity. The framework's values are described as "distinctly Buddhist," with the religion forming the "core of the cultural values of the country" upon which GNH rests.<sup>1</sup> This provides the philosophy with immense cultural legitimacy and a coherent ethical basis within the dominant Drukpa culture. However, it simultaneously creates a potential paradox of inclusivity. By defining the national development goal through the lens of a specific religious and cultural tradition, it inherently raises critical questions about how the framework accommodates the values, beliefs, and conceptions of a "good life" held by Bhutan's

non-Buddhist ethnic and religious minorities. This suggests a potential for systemic bias, where the very definition of "National" happiness may not be universally shared within the nation's borders, an issue that reverberates through the challenges of governance and human rights.

## 1.2 The Four Pillars

The GNH philosophy is built upon a foundation of four interdependent pillars. These pillars serve as the guiding principles for all national policies and development plans, ensuring a balanced and holistic approach to progress.<sup>1</sup>

1. **Sustainable and Equitable Socio-Economic Development:** This pillar rejects the notion of growth at any cost. It seeks to balance economic activity with social and ecological considerations, ensuring that development is both sustainable for the planet and equitable for all citizens.<sup>3</sup> In practice, this translates into policies that prioritize social welfare, such as the provision of free education and healthcare, which are seen as essential services supporting equitable development.<sup>3</sup> The focus is on creating economic opportunities that enhance community and family vitality rather than undermining them, valuing free time and leisure as crucial components of a happy life.<sup>11</sup>
2. **Environmental Conservation:** This pillar is central to Bhutan's identity and the GNH framework. It recognizes the profound connection between a healthy environment and human well-being, viewing nature not merely as a resource to be exploited but as a source of aesthetic and spiritual nourishment.<sup>11</sup> This principle is operationalized through some of the world's most stringent environmental laws, including a constitutional mandate to maintain a minimum of 60% of the country under forest cover for all time.<sup>3</sup>
3. **Preservation and Promotion of Culture:** GNH posits that a strong and resilient culture is a prerequisite for a happy society. This pillar focuses on protecting and promoting Bhutan's unique cultural heritage, which is seen as a source of national identity, social cohesion, and intrinsic values.<sup>3</sup> The aim is to develop "cultural resilience"—the capacity to maintain and develop cultural identity, knowledge, and practices while navigating the challenges and influences of globalization.<sup>11</sup> This is pursued through initiatives such as integrating traditional knowledge into the education system and promoting local customs and festivals.<sup>3</sup>
4. **Good Governance:** This pillar is considered the essential enabler of the other three. Good governance, within the GNH framework, is defined by its ability to create the conditions in which citizens can pursue happiness.<sup>11</sup> It involves ensuring that public policies are aligned with GNH values, promoting transparency and accountability, and fostering citizen participation in the development process.<sup>3</sup> The 2008 Constitution mandates that all legislation must be guided by the four pillars, making good governance

the mechanism through which the philosophy is translated into state action.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.3 The Nine Domains

To move from abstract principles to a measurable and actionable framework, the four pillars of GNH are further articulated into nine specific domains. These domains form the basis of the GNH Index, the primary tool used to measure the well-being of the Bhutanese population and guide policy interventions.<sup>2</sup> The nine domains collectively represent a holistic and multidimensional view of a "good life" as defined by GNH values.<sup>14</sup>

The nine domains are<sup>1</sup>:

1. **Psychological Well-being:** Assesses life satisfaction, positive and negative emotions, and spirituality.
2. **Health:** Measures self-reported health status, healthy days, disability, and mental health.
3. **Education:** Considers literacy, schooling, knowledge, and values.
4. **Time Use:** Examines the balance between work, leisure, and sleep.
5. **Cultural Diversity and Resilience:** Measures proficiency in local languages, artisan skills, and participation in cultural events.
6. **Good Governance:** Assesses perceptions of government performance, fundamental rights, and political participation.
7. **Community Vitality:** Gauges the strength of relationships, community participation, and feelings of safety.
8. **Ecological Diversity and Resilience:** Measures perceptions of environmental pollution, wildlife damage, and individual environmental responsibility.
9. **Living Standards:** Includes household income, assets, and housing quality.

These nine domains are equally weighted in the GNH Index, signifying that each is considered intrinsically important to overall well-being.<sup>2</sup> This structure distinguishes GNH from GDP by explicitly incorporating non-economic dimensions of life—such as psychological states, community bonds, and ecological health—into the measurement of national progress.<sup>1</sup>

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## Section 2: From Philosophy to Policy: The Governance of Happiness

The enduring significance of Gross National Happiness in Bhutan lies in its successful

transition from a lofty philosophical statement to a deeply embedded principle of state governance. This integration has been achieved through a deliberate and systematic process of institutionalization, creating a unique governance architecture where the pursuit of well-being is not an afterthought but the central purpose of the state. This section analyzes the key mechanisms—constitutional mandates, specialized institutions, and policy tools—that translate the GNH philosophy into tangible government action.

## 2.1 Institutionalizing GNH

The most definitive step in formalizing GNH was its enshrinement in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, enacted in 2008. Article 9 of the Constitution explicitly states that "The State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness".<sup>16</sup> This provision elevates GNH from a guiding philosophy to a fundamental and legally binding constitutional duty of the government. This legal foundation ensures that the principles of GNH are not subject to the whims of changing political administrations but remain a permanent fixture of Bhutan's governance framework.<sup>18</sup>

To oversee the implementation of this constitutional mandate, the government transformed its central planning body. In 2008, through an executive order, the Planning Commission was officially renamed the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC).<sup>18</sup> This was more than a nominal change; it represented a fundamental reorientation of the state's planning and development apparatus. The GNHC, which is chaired by the Prime Minister and includes secretaries from all government ministries, is tasked with the dual responsibility of formulating the nation's Five-Year Plans and ensuring that the principles of GNH are "embedded firmly into policies".<sup>1</sup> The commission acts as the central coordinating body for GNH, reviewing policy decisions and resource allocations to ensure they align with the nation's holistic development goals.<sup>17</sup> This institutional structure, supported by think tanks like the Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research (CBS), creates a powerful, top-down mechanism for mainstreaming GNH across all sectors of government.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2 The GNH Policy Screening Tool

Perhaps the most practical instrument for operationalizing GNH is the Policy Screening Tool. Developed by the CBS and mandated for use by the GNHC, this tool is a compulsory checkpoint for all new proposed policies, projects, and legislation.<sup>17</sup> It functions as a systematic impact assessment framework, designed to evaluate the potential effects of a

proposed initiative on the nine domains of GNH.<sup>19</sup>

The screening process requires policymakers to analyze whether a policy will have a negative, uncertain, neutral, or positive impact on each of the 33 GNH indicators.<sup>19</sup> This forces a shift in decision-making, compelling ministries to look beyond narrow economic or sectoral benefits and consider the broader implications for citizen well-being, cultural heritage, and environmental sustainability.<sup>3</sup> For example, the tool has been used to evaluate large-scale infrastructure projects, including hydropower dams, to assess their alignment with GNH principles before approval.<sup>19</sup> By institutionalizing this pre-emptive check, the screening tool acts as a powerful filter, ensuring that development initiatives contribute positively—or at least do no harm—to the nation's overall happiness. It is the most direct procedural link between the abstract values of GNH and the concrete outputs of government, transforming the philosophy into a day-to-day administrative reality.<sup>20</sup>

### 2.3 GNH in National Planning

The GNH philosophy is the explicit guiding framework for Bhutan's national development strategy, articulated through its series of Five-Year Plans (FYPs). While the concept of GNH emerged in the 1970s, its explicit integration into planning documents began to grow in the late 1990s and became central from the Tenth FYP (2008-2013) onwards.<sup>8</sup> Since then, each FYP has been structured around the four pillars of GNH, with national key result areas and performance indicators directly mapped to GNH domains and objectives.<sup>10</sup>

The most recent plans demonstrate a significant evolution in the application of GNH. The 12th FYP (2018-2023) directly incorporated 17 targets based on GNH indicators and began using the GNH Index as a criterion in the resource allocation formula for local governments, demonstrating a move towards data-driven, well-being-focused budgeting.<sup>2</sup>

The 13th FYP (2024-2029) marks a particularly critical juncture. It serves as Bhutan's strategic framework for its transition from Least Developed Country (LDC) status and introduces the ambitious goal for Bhutan to become a "High-Income GNH Economy" by 2034.<sup>21</sup> This plan explicitly sets a conventional economic target—a GDP per capita of over USD 12,695—alongside its GNH aspirations.<sup>25</sup> This development signifies a pragmatic pivot in the GNH philosophy. The original premise of GNH was its conceptual superiority over GDP as a measure of progress. The latest national strategy, however, integrates a World Bank-defined, GDP-based metric as a central objective. This is not necessarily a capitulation to orthodox economics but rather a strategic rebalancing. It reflects a growing recognition within the government that the non-material dimensions of well-being central to GNH cannot be sustained without a robust economic foundation. Pressing modern challenges, such as high

youth unemployment and significant emigration, are themselves major sources of unhappiness and threaten the social fabric that GNH seeks to protect.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the 13th FYP represents a conscious effort to adapt the GNH framework to the material aspirations and economic pressures of the 21st century. The ultimate challenge for Bhutan will be to pursue this high-income goal

*within* the holistic and value-based constraints of the GNH framework, ensuring that economic growth serves, rather than subverts, the ultimate objective of national well-being.

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## Section 3: Measuring a Nation's Well-being: The GNH Index in Focus

To translate the philosophy of Gross National Happiness into a tool for governance and policy analysis, Bhutan developed the GNH Index. This sophisticated instrument moves beyond simple subjective surveys of happiness to provide a comprehensive, multidimensional assessment of the population's well-being. It is designed not only to provide a headline measure of national progress but also to be decomposable, allowing policymakers to identify specific areas of insufficiency and target interventions toward the least happy segments of society.

### 3.1 Methodology and Measurement

The GNH Index is constructed using the Alkire-Foster method, a robust and academically respected methodology for measuring multidimensional poverty and well-being, developed in collaboration with researchers from the University of Oxford.<sup>1</sup> This method provides a mathematically rigorous way to aggregate different dimensions of well-being into a single index value.

The index is built from data collected through extensive nationwide surveys conducted every three to five years, polling thousands of randomly selected households across all 20 districts of Bhutan.<sup>19</sup> The survey instrument is comprehensive, covering 33 distinct indicators, or "conditions," which are grouped under the nine domains of GNH.<sup>2</sup> These indicators include a mix of objective measures (e.g., income, years of schooling, access to services) and subjective, self-reported measures (e.g., life satisfaction, frequency of negative emotions, sense of belonging).<sup>1</sup> To enhance the index's reliability, the methodology assigns greater

weight to objective indicators and lighter weights to the more subjective ones.<sup>2</sup>

A core feature of the GNH Index methodology is the concept of "sufficiency thresholds." For each of the 33 indicators, a specific cutoff point is defined that represents a level of achievement considered sufficient for well-being. For example, the sufficiency threshold for sleep is set at 8 hours per day.<sup>24</sup> An individual's achievements are then assessed against these thresholds.

Based on their performance across all indicators, individuals are classified into one of four categories of happiness<sup>3</sup>:

- **Unhappy:** Achieved sufficiency in less than 50% of weighted indicators.
- **Narrowly Happy:** Achieved sufficiency in 50% to 65.9% of weighted indicators.
- **Extensively Happy:** Achieved sufficiency in 66% to 76.9% of weighted indicators.
- **Deeply Happy:** Achieved sufficiency in 77% to 100% of weighted indicators.

For policy purposes, a person is officially considered "GNH happy" if they fall into the "Extensively Happy" or "Deeply Happy" categories, meaning they have achieved sufficiency in at least two-thirds (66%) of the conditions for well-being.<sup>2</sup> The final GNH Index value, which ranges from 0 to 1, is a composite measure that combines the percentage of people who are "happy" with the average sufficiency score among those who are "not-yet-happy." This construction creates a strong policy incentive to focus on improving the conditions of the least well-off, as raising their sufficiency in any domain will directly increase the national GNH score.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.2 National Trends and Key Findings

Analysis of the three major GNH surveys conducted to date reveals a consistent and positive trend in Bhutan's overall well-being. The headline GNH Index score has steadily increased over a 12-year period, demonstrating progress even in the face of global challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic.

- In the inaugural survey of **2010**, the GNH Index was calculated at **0.743**.<sup>10</sup>
- The **2015** survey recorded a modest increase of 1.7%, with the index rising to **0.756**.<sup>10</sup>
- The most recent survey in **2022** showed an accelerated growth of 3.3%, bringing the GNH Index to **0.781**.<sup>32</sup>

This upward trajectory is also reflected in the proportion of the population classified as "GNH happy." In 2010, 40.9% of Bhutanese were either deeply or extensively happy. This figure rose to 43.4% in 2015 and reached 48.1% in 2022.<sup>2</sup> While this means that a majority of the population (51.9%) remains in the "not-yet-happy" category, the trend indicates that

GNH-guided policies are having a positive aggregate effect on the conditions for well-being across the nation.<sup>33</sup> The 2022 survey found that improvements were primarily driven by gains in housing, income, schooling, and access to services, as well as an increase in positive emotions.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.3 A Disaggregated View of Happiness

While the national average provides a useful headline figure, the true policy value of the GNH Index lies in its ability to be disaggregated to reveal the distribution of happiness across different demographic groups. This detailed view uncovers significant and persistent inequalities in well-being, highlighting areas where policy interventions are most needed.

**Table 1: GNH Index Trends and Demographic Disparities (2010–2022)**

Indicator	2010 Value	2015 Value	2022 Value	Trend
<b>Overall GNH Index Score</b>	0.743 <sup>10</sup>	0.756 <sup>10</sup>	0.781 <sup>32</sup>	<b>Increasing</b>
<b>% "Happy" Population</b>	40.9% <sup>33</sup>	43.4% <sup>10</sup>	48.1% <sup>33</sup>	<b>Increasing</b>
<b>GNH Score (Urban)</b>	N/A	0.796* <sup>33</sup>	0.796 <sup>33</sup>	<b>Stagnant</b>
<b>GNH Score (Rural)</b>	N/A	0.731 <sup>33</sup>	0.771 <sup>33</sup>	<b>Increasing</b>
<b>% "Happy" (Male)</b>	48.5% <sup>33</sup>	51.1% <sup>33</sup>	55.3% <sup>33</sup>	<b>Increasing</b>
<b>% "Happy" (Female)</b>	33.1% <sup>33</sup>	37.9% <sup>33</sup>	43.8% <sup>33</sup>	<b>Increasing</b>
*Note: The				

2015 urban GNH score from <sup>33</sup> appears to be a typo and likely refers to the 2022 score. The 2015 survey report indicated 55% of urban dwellers were happy, compared to 38% of rural dwellers. <sup>10</sup>					
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The data reveals several critical disparities:

- **Urban-Rural Divide:** There is a consistent gap in well-being between urban and rural areas. In 2015, 55% of urban residents were classified as happy, compared to only 38% of those in rural areas.<sup>10</sup> While the 2022 data shows that happiness levels in rural areas are growing at a faster rate, thereby narrowing the gap, urban centers still report a higher overall GNH score (0.796 vs. 0.771).<sup>33</sup> This highlights the ongoing challenge of extending the benefits of development to all corners of the nation.
- **Persistent Gender Gap:** Across all survey years, men have consistently reported significantly higher levels of happiness than women. In 2022, there was still a substantial 11.5-percentage-point gap, with 55.3% of men being happy compared to 43.8% of women.<sup>33</sup> Although women's happiness has been increasing at a slightly faster rate, indicating that policies may be starting to address gender inequality, the disparity remains one of the most pronounced in the GNH data.<sup>24</sup>
- **Occupational Disparity:** The surveys consistently identify farmers as the least happy occupational group in Bhutan.<sup>10</sup> This finding correlates with the higher rates of poverty in rural areas and points to the significant challenges faced by the agricultural sector, which employs a large portion of the population.<sup>26</sup>

These disaggregated findings are crucial for evidence-based policymaking. They move the conversation beyond a simplistic national average and provide a nuanced map of well-being,

allowing the government to identify vulnerable populations and design targeted programs to address the specific drivers of their "unhappiness."

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## Section 4: The Tangible Impacts on Bhutanese Society

The implementation of the Gross National Happiness framework as the guiding principle for development has produced a range of tangible and measurable impacts on the well-being of Bhutanese citizens. Over the past several decades, the nation has made remarkable strides in fundamental areas such as health, education, and poverty reduction. However, this progress has not been uniform, and the country now faces a new set of complex challenges that test the adaptability of the GNH model. This section provides a balanced assessment of these outcomes, presenting a scorecard of both significant achievements and persistent difficulties.

### 4.1 Health and Longevity

Bhutan's GNH-driven commitment to public health is one of its most notable success stories. The 2008 Constitution enshrines the state's responsibility to provide free access to basic public health services, including both modern and traditional medicine.<sup>16</sup> This principle is delivered through a comprehensive, three-tiered health system designed to reach the majority-rural population.<sup>16</sup>

#### Successes:

This sustained investment has yielded impressive public health outcomes. Bhutan has successfully eliminated diseases that were once prevalent, such as leprosy (in 1997) and iodine deficiency disorder (in 2003), and achieved universal childhood immunization as early as 1991.<sup>16</sup> The incidence of malaria was drastically reduced, falling from over 12,500 cases in 1999 to under 1,000 in 2009.<sup>16</sup> The nation has also achieved near-universal access to improved water and sanitation, a key determinant of public health.<sup>16</sup> The effectiveness of this health-centric, GNH-guided approach was starkly demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a combination of unique public health measures, strong community participation, and leveraging its primary healthcare network, Bhutan maintained a record of zero reported COVID-19 deaths for an extended period, a remarkable achievement globally.<sup>36</sup>

#### Challenges:

Despite these historic successes, Bhutan is now confronting a more complex health landscape. The 2022 GNH survey revealed a deterioration in the "healthy days" indicator, suggesting a decline in self-reported health status.<sup>32</sup> There is growing concern over

emerging public health issues, including rising mental health problems, often linked to the pressures of modernization and youth unemployment.<sup>37</sup> The country is also facing a "triple burden of malnutrition," characterized by the simultaneous presence of stunting, micronutrient deficiencies, and rising obesity.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, a 2024 national survey uncovered alarming levels of lead in the blood of 75% of children aged 1-6, pointing to significant and previously unrecognized environmental health risks that demand urgent attention.<sup>37</sup>

## 4.2 Education and Human Capital

Education is another core domain of GNH, viewed as essential for improving knowledge, skills, and values across the population.<sup>38</sup> The government's commitment to this pillar is reflected in its policy of providing free primary education to all citizens.<sup>3</sup>

### Successes:

This policy has led to high rates of school enrollment, with access to basic education reaching 91.6% and primary schooling at 93.3%.<sup>35</sup> The curriculum itself has been a focus of GNH integration, with support from international partners like UNESCO to incorporate principles of well-being and cultural values directly into the education system.<sup>3</sup> Efforts are also being made to expand access to education for children with disabilities through specialized programs and designated transition schools.<sup>35</sup>

### Challenges:

While access to education has expanded dramatically, the system is marked by profound inequities that GNH has yet to resolve. A significant gap in educational outcomes persists between children from different socio-economic backgrounds. Data reveals a staggering 32-percentage-point difference in primary school completion rates between children from the poorest quintile (55%) and those from the richest quintile (87.9%).<sup>38</sup> Children in rural areas, where poverty is concentrated, face numerous disadvantages, including longer distances to travel to school, under-resourced classrooms, and less support for learning at home.<sup>38</sup> For the poorest families, even the nominal fees associated with public education can be prohibitive, making it a leading cause for dropping out.<sup>38</sup> This indicates that while the GNH framework has successfully built the physical infrastructure for education, it has struggled to ensure that the quality of education and the opportunity to succeed are equitably distributed.

## 4.3 Economic Well-being and Poverty Reduction

The GNH pillar of "Sustainable and Equitable Socio-Economic Development" aims to ensure

that material progress contributes to the well-being of all citizens.

**Successes:**

On this front, Bhutan has achieved a sharp and sustained reduction in absolute poverty. The national income poverty rate was more than halved in a decade, falling from 23.2% in 2007 to 8.2% in 2017.<sup>3</sup> This achievement is linked to GNH-guided policies such as providing free electricity to rural farmers, which improves living standards, enhances agricultural productivity, and reduces the health and environmental burden of using fuelwood for cooking and heating.<sup>40</sup>

**Challenges:**

However, economic well-being remains unevenly distributed. Poverty is still predominantly a rural issue, with the rural poverty rate (17.5%) being more than four times higher than the urban rate (4.2%).<sup>35</sup> More fundamentally, the GNH data itself challenges the assumption that material wealth is a direct pathway to happiness. A striking finding from the GNH surveys is that a large proportion of the wealthiest Bhutanese are "not-yet-happy." Among the richest 20% of the population, 42% do not meet the sufficiency threshold to be classified as GNH happy.<sup>33</sup> This powerfully illustrates the core tenet of the GNH philosophy: that while a basic standard of living is essential, true well-being is multidimensional and cannot be achieved through income and material possessions alone.

These findings collectively point to a critical transition in Bhutan's development. The GNH framework proved highly effective in achieving "first-generation" development goals—providing widespread access to essential services like clinics, schools, and electricity. The country is now grappling with more nuanced and complex "second-generation" challenges. These include ensuring the *quality* and *equity* of those services, addressing modern ailments like mental illness and non-communicable diseases, and tackling hidden environmental threats. The original GNH policy toolkit, which focused on broad provisioning, may be insufficient for these intricate problems. The framework must now evolve to target equitable outcomes and systemic quality improvements, requiring more sophisticated and data-driven interventions.

**Table 2: Key Health and Education Outcomes in Bhutan (Selected Indicators)**

Domain	Indicator	Statistic/Value	Source Snippet
<b>Health</b>	Life Expectancy	66.1 years (in 2008)	<sup>41</sup>
	Infant Mortality Rate	49.3 per 1,000 live births (in 2008)	<sup>16</sup>
	Universal Childhood	Achieved in 1991	<sup>16</sup>

	Immunization		
	Access to Improved Sanitation	100% (Open Defecation Free status)	35
<b>Education</b>	Access to Primary Schooling	93.3%	35
	Access to Basic Education	91.6%	35
	Primary Completion Rate (Poorest Quintile)	55.0%	38
	Primary Completion Rate (Richest Quintile)	87.9%	38

## Section 5: The Green Dragon: GNH and Environmental Stewardship

Among the four pillars of Gross National Happiness, environmental conservation stands out as Bhutan's most resounding and globally celebrated success. The GNH framework's deep-seated reverence for nature has been translated into a comprehensive and legally binding system of environmental protection that is unparalleled in the region and, in many respects, the world. This commitment is not merely a policy preference but is woven into the nation's constitutional identity and its vision of a sustainable future.

### 5.1 A Constitutional Commitment to Conservation

The foundation of Bhutan's environmental policy is its 2008 Constitution, which contains an unprecedented mandate. Article 5 decrees that a minimum of 60% of Bhutan's total land area

shall be maintained under forest cover for all time.<sup>12</sup> This constitutional safeguard places the nation's ecological integrity beyond the reach of short-term political or economic pressures. Bhutan has consistently surpassed this ambitious target; current estimates place its forest cover at over 72%.<sup>44</sup>

This commitment extends to the protection of biodiversity. Bhutan has designated over 51% of its territory as protected areas, which includes five national parks, four wildlife sanctuaries, and one strict nature reserve.<sup>42</sup> This represents the largest percentage of protected land of any country in Asia.<sup>42</sup> Critically, these protected areas are not isolated islands of conservation. They are interconnected by a network of "biological corridors," which allow native wildlife—from endangered Royal Bengal tigers and elusive snow leopards to elephants and black-necked cranes—to roam freely across the country, ensuring genetic diversity and ecological resilience.<sup>42</sup>

To ensure the long-term viability of this network, Bhutan has pioneered innovative financing mechanisms. The "Bhutan for Life" initiative, launched in 2018, is a first-of-its-kind conservation fund in Asia. It combines international donor contributions with a 14-year funding commitment from the Bhutanese government to create a \$43 million transition fund that will permanently finance the management of the country's protected areas, ensuring their preservation for generations to come.<sup>42</sup>

## 5.2 The Carbon-Negative Reality

Bhutan's robust conservation policies have resulted in a remarkable environmental achievement: it is the world's first and only carbon-negative country.<sup>44</sup> This means that the nation's ecosystems absorb significantly more carbon dioxide than its economy emits. This unique status is the direct outcome of a two-pronged strategy rooted in GNH principles.

First, the vast and constitutionally protected forests act as a massive carbon sink.<sup>44</sup> The 72.3% forest cover represents an immense "carbon bank," actively sequestering carbon from the atmosphere and mitigating the effects of global climate change.<sup>44</sup> Second, Bhutan's economy is powered almost exclusively by clean, renewable energy. The nation has strategically harnessed its abundant, fast-flowing rivers to develop a powerful hydropower sector.<sup>45</sup> This provides for the country's domestic energy needs while allowing it to export surplus clean energy to neighboring countries like India, thereby offsetting millions of tons of carbon emissions in the wider region.<sup>40</sup>

### 5.3 Case Studies in Sustainability

The principles of environmental conservation and sustainable development are not confined to forestry and energy policy; they are actively integrated into other key economic sectors, creating a web of mutually reinforcing policies that collectively advance the goals of GNH.

#### Sustainable Tourism:

Bhutan has deliberately eschewed mass tourism in favor of a "High Value, Low Impact" model.<sup>48</sup> This policy is designed to maximize the economic benefits of tourism while minimizing its ecological and cultural footprint. The cornerstone of this approach is the mandatory Sustainable Development Fee (SDF), a daily tariff levied on all international tourists.<sup>48</sup> This high fee naturally limits the volume of visitors, preventing overcrowding and reducing environmental strain on the country's pristine landscapes.<sup>48</sup> The revenue generated from the SDF is a critical component of the GNH model in practice. It is directly reinvested into national priorities, including funding conservation programs, upgrading infrastructure, and supporting community welfare projects, education, and healthcare.<sup>48</sup> This creates a virtuous cycle where tourism, an economic activity, directly finances the strengthening of the environmental and social pillars of GNH.

#### Renewable Energy:

Hydropower is the engine of Bhutan's economy and a central element of its sustainable development strategy.<sup>40</sup> It accounts for a significant portion of the country's GDP and government revenue, which in turn funds the extensive social services mandated by the GNH philosophy.<sup>51</sup> The provision of free electricity to rural farmers, made possible by abundant hydropower, is a prime example of how this sector directly contributes to equitable development and well-being. It improves rural living standards while simultaneously reducing deforestation by providing a clean alternative to fuelwood.<sup>40</sup> Beyond large-scale hydropower, Bhutan has also supported smaller, community-based renewable energy projects. Initiatives like micro-hydro plants in remote villages and biogas programs provide decentralized energy access, enhance local livelihoods, and empower communities, perfectly aligning with the GNH principles of equity, sustainability, and community vitality.<sup>47</sup>

The success of Bhutan's environmental model demonstrates a powerful synergy within the GNH framework. The pillar of *Environmental Conservation* provides the natural capital (forests and rivers) that enables the country's carbon-negative status. This unique environmental brand is then leveraged through the pillar of *Sustainable Socio-Economic Development* via the "High Value, Low Impact" tourism model. The financial returns from this model are then reinvested to further strengthen the environmental and social pillars. This interconnectedness showcases the holistic power of the GNH framework when its core components are strategically aligned and mutually reinforcing.

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## Section 6: The Paradox of Happiness: A Critical Analysis of GNH's Challenges

Despite its visionary framework and undeniable successes, the Gross National Happiness philosophy is not a panacea. The narrative of a perpetually happy kingdom, often portrayed in international media, obscures a far more complex reality. Bhutan is grappling with profound challenges that stem from the pressures of modernization, globalization, and deep-seated internal contradictions. These challenges test the limits of the GNH model, revealing tensions between its idealistic principles and the pragmatic demands of a developing nation in the 21st century. This section provides a critical analysis of these paradoxes, examining the economic, social, and philosophical difficulties that confront Bhutan's unique development path.

### 6.1 The Pressures of Modernity

A significant tension exists between GNH's non-materialist ethos and the pressing economic realities facing the country. Bhutan is currently experiencing an economic and social crisis defined by two interconnected trends: high youth unemployment and mass emigration. The youth unemployment rate has been steadily rising, reaching a concerning 28.6% in 2022.<sup>26</sup> This lack of opportunity at home is driving an "unprecedented" exodus of the country's young and educated population. In 2023 alone, an estimated 1.5% of the entire Bhutanese population relocated to Australia to pursue work and study, creating a significant "brain drain" that threatens the nation's future human capital.<sup>5</sup>

The nation's economy remains vulnerable, heavily reliant on the two sectors of hydropower and tourism.<sup>51</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic exposed this fragility, bringing the tourism industry to a standstill from which it has yet to fully recover.<sup>26</sup> Compounding these issues is a decline in female workforce participation, which fell from 61.2% in 2019 to just over 50% in recent years.<sup>26</sup> These trends paint a picture of an economy that is failing to provide sufficient and meaningful livelihoods for a significant portion of its citizens. For many young Bhutanese, the "enabling conditions for happiness" are increasingly found not within Bhutan's borders, but outside them, posing a direct challenge to the efficacy of the GNH model in meeting the aspirations of a new generation.

### 6.2 The Inclusivity Question

Perhaps the most profound paradox of Gross National Happiness lies in the tension between its goal of collective well-being and its record on human rights and minority inclusion. The philosophy's strong identification with a specific ethno-linguistic and religious (Drukpa Buddhist) identity has been linked to policies that marginalize minority groups.<sup>6</sup>

The most prominent example is the treatment of the Lhotshampas, a largely Nepali-speaking Hindu population from southern Bhutan. In the early 1990s, under policies aimed at enforcing a uniform national identity, approximately one-sixth of Bhutan's population was forced to leave the country, with over 108,000 people still living in refugee camps in Nepal as of 2007.<sup>26</sup> Human rights organizations and critics argue that this pursuit of a homogenous national culture, a key aspect of the "Preservation and Promotion of Culture" pillar, came at the direct expense of the happiness and fundamental rights of a significant minority.<sup>6</sup>

These concerns are not merely historical. Human Rights Watch continues to call for the release of dozens of political prisoners, many of whom were convicted in unfair trials for political offenses related to these past events.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Bhutan's ranking in the World Press Freedom index has fallen dramatically, and the 2022 GNH survey itself found that nearly one-fifth of respondents did not feel they had the right to join a political party of their choice.<sup>26</sup> This evidence suggests a deep contradiction: a state constitutionally mandated to promote happiness for its people is simultaneously criticized for restricting the political rights and cultural expression of certain segments of its population. It raises the fundamental question of whose happiness is being measured and prioritized within the GNH framework.

### 6.3 The Development Dilemma: Hydropower and its Contradictions

The development of Bhutan's hydropower sector exemplifies the difficult trade-offs the country must navigate, often placing the pillars of GNH in direct conflict with one another. Hydropower is the backbone of the "Sustainable Socio-Economic Development" pillar. It is the country's primary source of revenue, funding the free health and education services that are cornerstones of the GNH policy, and it provides the clean energy that underpins Bhutan's carbon-negative status.<sup>40</sup>

However, the expansion of this sector has created significant environmental and social costs that challenge the "Environmental Conservation" pillar. Research has shown that hydropower development is the specific cause for all proposed "policy downgrading events" (PADD) for protected areas, where environmental protections are weakened to make way for infrastructure projects.<sup>7</sup> The industry has also faced criticism for a lack of transparency, cost inflation, and the displacement of local communities living near dam sites, raising concerns

about its impact on community vitality.<sup>50</sup> This dilemma highlights the inherent tension in Bhutan's development model: the very industry that funds its social and environmental ambitions is also a potential threat to its ecological integrity and the well-being of affected communities.

#### 6.4 The Subjectivity of a Metric

Finally, the GNH framework faces philosophical and practical challenges related to the very concept of measuring happiness. Critics argue that happiness is an inherently subjective, personal, and culturally contingent experience that is ill-suited to be a target for government policy.<sup>54</sup> A government attempting to maximize a single metric of happiness, however well-defined, risks imposing a uniform vision of the "good life" that may not align with the diverse values of its citizens.<sup>54</sup>

This complexity is reflected in the data. Studies have noted the presence of the "Easterlin Paradox" in Bhutan, where decades of rapid economic growth and rising per capita income have been only weakly associated with increases in measured well-being.<sup>10</sup> This suggests a complex and non-linear relationship between material conditions and subjective happiness. The GNH surveys have also revealed a decline in some key psychological and cultural indicators, such as spirituality, community relationships, and mental health, even as the overall GNH index has risen.<sup>10</sup>

There is also a risk that GNH can be perceived as a "gimmick" or an instrument of "soft power" used to project a positive international image that masks complex domestic problems.<sup>17</sup> This sentiment is reportedly growing among some of Bhutan's educated youth, who express cynicism about the application of GNH and view some recent policies as simply "catching up" to Western standards rather than being genuinely innovative expressions of Bhutanese values.<sup>5</sup> This points to the ongoing challenge of ensuring that GNH remains a dynamic and authentic framework for genuine development, rather than becoming a static brand that papers over the real-world challenges of a nation in transition.

**Table 3: A Synthesis of GNH's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT Analysis)**

<b>Strengths</b>	- Visionary Holistic

	<p><b>Framework:</b> A pioneering and comprehensive alternative to GDP-centric development. -</p> <p><b>World-Leading Environmental Conservation:</b> Constitutional protection of forests, vast protected areas, and carbon-negative status. -</p> <p><b>Strong Public Service Provision:</b> Commitment to free basic healthcare and education has yielded significant gains in human development. -</p> <p><b>Positive International Brand:</b> GNH has given Bhutan a unique and influential voice on the global stage, attracting tourism and international</p>
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	interest.
<b>Weaknesses</b>	<p><b>- Persistent Social Inequities:</b> Significant and stubborn gaps in well-being based on gender, geography (urban/rural), and occupation. -</p> <p><b>Economic Vulnerability:</b> High dependence on hydropower and tourism makes the economy susceptible to external shocks. -</p> <p><b>Human Rights Concerns:</b> Unresolved issues regarding the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities and restrictions on political freedoms. -</p> <p><b>Measurement Challenges:</b> Inherent difficulty in quantifying a</p>

	subjective concept like happiness; data reveals complex and sometimes contradictory trends.			
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Climate Finance and Carbon Markets:</b> Leverage carbon-negative status to attract international climate finance and participate in carbon markets.<sup>44</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Niche Economic Diversification: Develop "Brand Bhutan" by focusing on high-value, low-volume exports in sustainable agriculture, textiles, and handicrafts.<sup>53</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sustainable Urbanism: Use GNH principles to guide innovative projects like the proposed "Mindfulness City" to attract sustainable investment and talent.<sup>57</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Digital Transformation : Overcome geographic disadvantages by investing in knowledge-based industries and e-commerce, supported by near-universal electricity and internet access.<sup>53</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Threats</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Youth Unemployment and Emigration:</b> High unemployment is driving a "brain drain" of young, educated citizens, threatening future human capital.<sup>26</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Globalization and Cultural Erosion: The pressures of modernization and external media influence could erode the unique cultural values that underpin GNH.</li> <li>- Climate Change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Shangri-La-ization": The risk of the GNH narrative becoming a simplified international brand that masks complex domestic challenges and prevents critical</li> </ul>	

		Impacts: Bhutan is highly vulnerable to climate change, particularly the risk of Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs), which threaten communities and hydropower infrastructure. 51	self-assessment.26
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## Section 7: Conclusion and Strategic Recommendations: Rebalancing GNH for the 21st Century

The analysis presented in this report confirms that Bhutan's Gross National Happiness is a pioneering and deeply influential development framework, far more substantial than a mere slogan. It has been effectively institutionalized within the state apparatus and has guided the nation to remarkable and globally significant achievements, particularly in environmental conservation and the establishment of a robust social welfare floor. However, the framework is now at a critical inflection point. Its foundational ideals are being rigorously tested by the pragmatic and often harsh realities of economic modernization, social evolution, and globalization. The romanticized narrative of a "happy kingdom" is an oversimplification that belies the complex trade-offs and profound paradoxes inherent in Bhutan's unique journey.

### 7.1 Synthesis of Findings

The GNH philosophy has demonstrated its profound effectiveness in achieving specific,

value-driven goals. Its greatest success lies in making environmental stewardship a non-negotiable constitutional principle, resulting in a carbon-negative status that stands as a model for the world. It has also succeeded in delivering on "first-generation" development objectives, providing its citizens with near-universal access to basic health and education services and significantly reducing income poverty. The GNH Index, as a measurement tool, has proven its utility by providing a nuanced, multidimensional picture of well-being that reveals critical disparities in happiness across gender, geography, and occupation, offering a valuable guide for policy.

However, the framework's effectiveness is diminished when confronted with "second-generation" development challenges and internal contradictions. It has struggled to ensure the quality and equity of the services it provides, leading to significant gaps in educational and health outcomes. It is facing a severe economic crisis manifested in high youth unemployment and a mass exodus of its most valuable human capital. The very definition of "National" happiness is challenged by unresolved human rights issues concerning minority populations, revealing a tension between the promotion of a uniform cultural identity and the principles of inclusivity. Furthermore, the reliance on large-scale hydropower creates a direct conflict between the pillar of economic development and the pillar of environmental conservation. GNH is thus a framework of profound strengths but also significant, unresolved weaknesses.

## 7.2 The Future of GNH

As Bhutan graduates from its status as a Least Developed Country and confronts the accelerating pressures of the 21st century, the GNH framework must evolve or risk becoming an artifact of a simpler time. Its future relevance depends not on its past achievements but on its capacity to adapt and effectively address the contemporary drivers of "unhappiness." These are no longer primarily about a lack of basic services but about a lack of economic opportunity, persistent inequalities, questions of social justice, and the rising aspirations of a globally-connected youth. The strategic pivot towards a "High-Income GNH Economy" is a tacit acknowledgment of this reality. The challenge ahead is to ensure this pursuit of economic growth is genuinely guided by GNH principles, not a replacement for them. The framework's survival hinges on its ability to foster a dynamic, inclusive, and opportunity-rich society that makes Bhutan a place where its citizens, especially its youth, can and want to build their future.

## 7.3 Recommendations for Policy

To navigate these challenges and rebalance the GNH framework for the future, the following strategic recommendations are proposed:

1. **Prioritize GNH-Aligned Economic Diversification and Youth Employment:** The most urgent threat to GNH is the lack of economic opportunity. The government should aggressively pursue diversification beyond hydropower and tourism.
  - **Actionable Policy:** Create targeted investment incentives and skills-training programs for GNH-aligned sectors with high potential for youth employment. This includes leveraging the "Brand Bhutan" concept for high-value, organic agricultural products and artisanal handicrafts<sup>53</sup>, and expanding the knowledge-based economy through further development of hubs like the Thimphu TechPark.<sup>53</sup>
2. **Shift from Access to Equitable Outcomes:** The focus of social policy must evolve from simply providing services to ensuring their quality and closing the equity gaps identified in the GNH surveys.
  - **Actionable Policy:** Implement targeted resource allocation and pedagogical reforms in the education sector to improve learning outcomes for rural and low-income students.<sup>38</sup> In health, develop specialized programs to address the "triple burden of malnutrition" and the emerging mental and environmental health challenges that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.<sup>37</sup>
3. **Launch a National Dialogue on Inclusivity and Human Rights:** To strengthen the "Good Governance" pillar and ensure the "National" in GNH is truly inclusive, Bhutan must address the paradox of its human rights record.
  - **Actionable Policy:** Establish a formal, independent commission to review the cases of political prisoners and initiate a national dialogue on minority rights and cultural inclusivity. This process should aim to reform policies to ensure that the rights of all citizens, regardless of ethnic or religious background, are protected, thereby resolving the contradiction at the heart of the GNH framework.<sup>6</sup>
4. **Strengthen and Deepen GNH Measurement:** To provide more timely and actionable data for policymaking, the GNH measurement process should be enhanced.
  - **Actionable Policy:** Increase the frequency of the full GNH survey from every five years to every three years to better track the impacts of policy in a rapidly changing environment.<sup>56</sup> Supplement the quantitative survey with regular, in-depth qualitative studies to understand the root causes behind key trends, such as the decline in certain psychological well-being indicators and the drivers of emigration.<sup>10</sup>
5. **Leverage GNH for Strategic International Partnerships:** Bhutan should proactively use its unique GNH brand and unparalleled environmental credentials to secure international support that aligns with its development vision.
  - **Actionable Policy:** Develop a comprehensive strategy to engage with international climate funds and carbon markets, monetizing its carbon-negative status to fund sustainable development and climate adaptation projects.<sup>44</sup> Ensure that all foreign direct investment and development partnerships are rigorously assessed using the

GNH Policy Screening Tool to guarantee alignment with national values.

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