

## **Gross National Happiness: Bhutan's Alternative to Gross Domestic Product**

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“Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross Domestic Product,” stated King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the 4th King of Bhutan, in the late 1970s. With this affirmation, the term “gross national happiness” itself was established. Wangchuck believed that states should pursue policies that lead their citizens toward happiness, rather than merely focusing on increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In this manner, states would become more developed due to people having one common accomplishment in life, happiness, and would live harmoniously together (The Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative [OPHI], n.d.).

This “happiness” could not only be achieved by relying upon economic measures like Gross Domestic Product. To put this idea into action, Bhutan created a Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index, which contains 9 domains in the 2022 revised version: psychological wellbeing, health, time use and balance, education, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standard (Ura et al., 2023). These nine domains also include 33 indicators, which are created by the conditions of the GNH. The index considers 4 types of groups: unhappy, narrowly happy, extensively happy, and deeply happy. To be classified as “happy”, for the Index, the individual should at least fulfill 66% of the 9 domains and/or 33 indicators. The Index has a range between 0-1; values close to 0 mean having low GNH and individuals being titled “not-yet-happy people” while values being 1 are defined as a perfect score and individuals are titled as “deeply happy”.

In the results of the 2022 GNH Index, there has indeed been a noteworthy increase in comparison with the results from 2010: Within 12 years, Bhutan’s GNH Index values rose from 0.743 to 0.781 (OPHI, n.d.). This increase is very impressive and major, given that the

COVID-19 pandemic was in this timeframe. Furthermore, on December 13, 2023, Bhutan graduated from the category of least developed country into developing country status with a 5-year transition plan between 2024 and 2029 (United Nations, n.d.-a). However, despite these shown improvements, criticisms regarding human rights remain. For example, Dr. David L. Luechauer argued that Bhutan, lacking base-level amenities, health and social services, and human rights protections, does not constitute as a good example for GNH's application (Luechauer, 2013). In their first universal periodic review (UPR) in 2009, the government of Bhutan also expressed that without enjoyment of human rights, Gross National Happiness cannot be achieved (Human Rights Council, 2009). Currently, Bhutan is in its fourth cycle for UPR with regards to human rights investigations and plans for improvements, with their latest review done in 2024 (Human Rights Council, 2024).

The formulation of the GNH had international impacts. In 2011, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) published a resolution which emphasized that “the pursuit of happiness was a fundamental human goal” and recognized that the GDP indicator was neither designed to nor could reflect people’s happiness, sponsored by Bhutan (UNGA, 2011). Following this resolution, on April 2nd 2012, a high-level meeting was held at the United Nations, hosted by the Royal Government of Bhutan, so that governments could take urgent action towards creating a new economic model based on wellbeing and sustainability (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2012). During this meeting, twelve policies were introduced that could provide a framework for a new economic paradigm which were accordant with United Nations Environmental Programme’s green economy proposals. Moreover, it was then recommended that happiness and wellbeing should be conceptualized within potential Sustainable Development

Goals in the future. The first World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2012) was also presented at this meeting (World Happiness Report, n.d.).

A few years after the high-level meeting, in 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was published with a list of 17 sub-topics that aim to end poverty and deprivation by implementing different approaches/goals (United Nations, n.d.-b). Like the GNH, the SDGs emphasize sustainable socio-economic growth. Some SDG topics are indeed related to GNH domains. For example, one of the main domains of the GNH is “psychological well-being”, which has direct links with SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 3 (good health and well-being). Also, SDG 8’s 8.4 target claim about resource efficiency and environmental decoupling is directly connected to GNH’s “ecological diversity and resilience” domain, as they both underline the importance of economy and environment (Rai, 2024).

As all the points above demonstrate, although there are aspects of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness (GNH) policy that could be further developed and improved, it can still serve as a valuable starting point for a new economic framework. Considering that many institutions have incorporated elements of it into their own policies and that it shares many common goals with the SDGs, a more refined version of this policy could provide not only economic but also significant humanitarian benefits.

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