

Good Governance: How Can Politics Promote Wellbeing?

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Introduction

‘Good governance’ usually refers to the way that a political organisation such as a national government or local municipality is run. However, these days the phrase is often used to denote sound policy and practice for any large-scale institution, including a university, union, or business.

Central questions about good governance include: How are decision-makers appointed? Which sort of input do they receive prior to selecting policies? Which procedures do decision-makers use to resolve conflicts amongst themselves? How widely available is information about their decisions? Is their power held legitimately? In whose interests do decision-makers tend to act? How have policies been implemented and monitored? How are infractions of policies prevented and responded to? And, have the policies adopted improved people’s lives?

We take our cue from Bhutan’s understanding of good governance, which is one of the nine domains of its Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index. However, we do not restrict ourselves to that, and enrich it with ideas from global scholarship in philosophy, politics, development and economics.

Although good governance is often viewed merely as a means to the end of better lives, we begin by discussing respects in which it is arguably of intrinsic value, i.e. good for its own sake. Then we discuss the extrinsic benefits that good governance can be expected to bring about in the long run. Next, we note the most salient ways that governance was approached in the 20th century, after which we conclude by putting forth some realistic proposals for change that merit consideration and experimentation in the 21st.

¹This article is a mildly revised excerpt from a chapter appearing in Karma Ura and Ilona Boniwell (eds.) ‘Report on Wellbeing & Happiness’, (Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research, Thimphu, 2013) Pg. 247-261. The original chapter and the larger report were prepared for the Royal Government of Bhutan’s New Development Paradigm initiative (2012–2014) as a contribution towards its final report entitled *Happiness: Towards a New Development Paradigm* (Steering Committee and Secretariat for the NDP, Thimphu, 2013). Scholarly references have been omitted for ease of reading. The authors, listed in order of contribution, are grateful to have their work reprinted here.

Intrinsic Value of Good Governance

It is natural to think of the value of good governance in strictly instrumental terms, as a mere means to an end of promoting wellbeing. Surely what makes governance desirable is no more than the fact that it tends to make people better off, so the suggestion goes.

However, such an understanding of the value of good governance fits poorly with the framework of the GNH Index. If good governance were valuable merely as a means to the end of happiness, then only eight of the nine domains of GNH would count as elements of happiness, with the ninth of good governance being solely a tool to use in order to promote the other ones. Presumably, though, all of the nine domains, including good governance, are constitutive elements of wellbeing.

In addition, it is plausible to think of good governance as more than merely a means to an end. Common views about the nature of wellbeing suggest that the way that a government (or other organisation) treats its members is something that matters for its own sake. The interaction between government and citizens is a relationship, where certain kinds of relationships can be good in themselves for those who are a part of them.

Specifically, perhaps certain kinds of relationships between government and citizens would enhance the *meaning* of the latter's lives, particularly insofar as they are cared for or are enabled to care for others. In addition, in light of why many of us prize being part of a family, one might suggest that cooperative relationships in which people enjoy a sense of togetherness can be desirable in themselves. This approach coheres with a concept central to GNH regarding the interconnected nature of all things, including sociopolitical relations.

In addition, many political theorists and philosophers agree that certain institutional procedures can be just apart from their likely consequences for society, on grounds of *respectful treatment*. Even if a political leader were more knowledgeable and clever than average citizens, it would be disrespectful for him or her never to consult with them about their needs, or otherwise to treat them as ignorant or incapable.

For GNH, two of the four major aspects of good governance are matters of 'political participation' and 'political freedom'. These may, therefore, be understood to be desirable in themselves to some degree.

Extrinsic Value of Good Governance

Good governance is a linchpin for the other eight domains of the GNH Index. If a state were poorly governed, then the chances of the other domains of GNH, such as health and education, being developed would be low. It, therefore, is apt that the other two of the four major aspects of good governance as conceived by GNH are ‘service delivery’, regarding healthcare, electricity, and water, and then ‘government performance’, concerning the state’s advancement of employment and education as well as protection of culture and the environment.

It is clear how bad governance would interfere with the opportunity for public policy to change people’s lives for the better. Some examples include:

- a state unable to sustain itself because of, say, poor tax collection would lack the resources to enact programmes to meet people’s needs;
- a state filled with officials who lack qualifications and have been appointed on the basis of patronage would lack the skills to make efficient use of resources;
- a state rife with corruption would squander resources that could have been used to do much more good for the public than for bureaucrats who tend already to have decent jobs;
- a state that failed to consult with those affected by its policies would tend to overlook their interests and to lack the information needed to satisfy them;
- a state that favoured a certain ethnic group would alienate itself from the general public, whose help it needs in order to make a real difference;
- a state that applied the law inconsistently, without public justification, or according to executive influence behind the scenes would make it difficult for citizens and organisations to plan and would generally make them insecure; and
- a state that used disproportionately harsh penalties in response to infractions, e.g., ‘three-strikes’ laws for victimless or non-violent crimes, would prevent citizens from contributing to the well-being of their families and society.

In the rest of this article, we focus less on bad governance practices to avoid, and more on good ones to adopt, indicating practices that are likely to enable a state to promote the other major domains of GNH (and be desirable in themselves).

Dominant Approaches to Governance in the 20th Century

In the previous century, there were two dominant broad approaches that states around the world took towards political governance. Neither of them was ideal, most proponents of GNH would say.

On the one hand, authoritarian states such as the former Soviet Union and East Germany used extreme coercion and deception in order to advance a particular conception of the good life centred on the development of a nation, a major political programme, or an idealised vision of human nature. All facets of government were intended to do whatever it would take to realise a utopian goal, with those whom the state considered disinclined to support its ideology being killed, jailed, or exiled, and ideas that could have competed with its programmes stifled.

Some states continue to adopt a similar kind of strategy, by enforcing a single religion and killing or otherwise severely punishing those deemed to have flouted it, e.g. house arrest for political dissent, flogging for alcohol possession, execution for atheism, jail for homosexuality, and stoning for adultery. In many contexts, women have been punished more severely than men, indicating bias.

In the cases of authoritarian regimes of the previous century, violence and relatedly severe practices ultimately did little good so far as bringing about the desired goal, instead causing mass starvation and large-scale warfare, while channelling resources towards a small, political class.

In addition, more contemporary forms of state coercion are usually ineffective. Punishment and threats of it are unlikely to change people's deep-seated beliefs and attitudes, while refraining from expressing oneself or one's views merely out of fear is unlikely to be meaningful for either the one threatened or the one threatening.

On the other hand, there have been liberal-democratic societies, common in North America and Western Europe, in which state decisions have been the product of majority vote by legislators who have been elected by the populace once every several years, and in which these decisions have tended not so much to promote a certain conception of the good life as to support people's rights to choose their own ways of life. According to this orientation, the state should usually avoid doing anything to express support for one particular religion or lifestyle, and should instead ensure access to civil liberties and financial resources that would be useful for people to achieve a wide variety of goals they adopt for themselves.

Although these latter societies avoided the disasters that befell the authoritarian ones, proponents of GNH would generally suggest that they are still wanting, in two major respects.

First, in terms of political power, there has been neither enough participation by the general populace, nor enough consideration given to the latter's interests by decision-makers. Once they elect people to office, citizens tend not to deliberate as a collective much about policy. In addition, representatives rarely consult with all those whom their decisions will affect. They instead usually vote in ways that will benefit their particular constituency, viz., those who voted them in and are likely to support them in the future. They are often significantly influenced by special interests with monetary influence, and they often feel constrained to vote in accordance with the interests of big business, which is seen as providing jobs. Jobs are of course welcome, but there are other factors to consider, such as the types of jobs, and the effects on the environment for future generations.

Second, in terms of the content of political decisions, those sympathetic towards GNH would point to the extent of poverty and other forms of grossly undesirable ways of life in the developing world, on the one hand, as well as the inequality, competitiveness, loneliness, isolation, boredom, neurosis, addiction, conformity, passivity, aimlessness, manipulation, repetitiveness, ugliness, anger, hatred, delusion and lack of wisdom pervasive in life in the so-called 'developed' world, on the other. And then there is of course the patent lack of attention paid to environmental concerns.

An Alternative for the 21st Century

There is a proverbial 'third way' that theorists have recommended and that some states have begun to adopt in recent years. It is a matter of the government enacting policies with public participation that are designed to promote good lives throughout society and in ecologically sustainable ways, but with minimal coercion. Within this notion, three elements of governance are prominent: incentives, information, and institutions—elements that weave through the discussion below.

In terms of procedure, instead of policy being decided and implemented solely by political elites, whether elected or not, it could be influenced by constant engagement with those whom the policy affects. For instance, in terms of information, the government might solicit feedback in the form of surveys, or ensure that decision-makers meet with leaders on the ground, or provide resources to local communities to run their own programmes. In terms of institutions, the government might create

and strengthen local governance organisations in terms of greater decision-making, autonomy, and participation.

Then, instead of the content of policy either forcing people to conform to a certain conception of the good life or leaving people utterly to their own devices when it comes to how to live, a state could seek to guide people's decision-making in certain directions, albeit without substantial punishment and threats. Specifically, a state could: provide incentives; warn of risks; inform about benefits; educate the young in certain ways; adopt 'facilitative' law that would create legal options (e.g., marriage) for people to adopt if they choose; make opportunities available; oversee large-scale projects in which people may elect to participate; and use what are often called 'nudges', i.e. making it more convenient for people to make choices that are in their objective self-interest without restricting or penalising alternative choices.

These kinds of approaches would arguably deal with human freedom in the right way. Substantial happiness cannot be realised if people are forced into certain ways of life that they reject, and yet people often need help from the state in order to choose ways of life that they themselves are likely to recognise as desirable, at least upon deliberative reflection with one another.

Below are sketches intended to prompt reflection on how good governance might be effected beyond the normal concerns for an absence of corruption and cronyism and the presence of auditable accountability and efficient bureaucracy.

Including and Enabling Local Actors

Instead of the state being the agent of change in a society, it could provide resources to other agents or coordinate their efforts in ways that would involve the public and build community. For instance, what if a state in a middle-income country provided enabling conditions such as greater participation from society to help improve educational facilities and coordinated the contributions?

Of course the state must do what it can to fund public education as usual, but it could also, by this project, work to organise the efforts of many other private agents, perhaps by asking school children which resources they think would most improve their education; construction companies to put up some rooms that would serve as a school library (or whatever the children reasonably suggest, such as a chemistry centre, or a chess or drama club, etc.); wealthier individuals with extra books to donate some to the libraries; retired persons from the local community to volunteer their time to run the library; large corporations for a portion of their social

responsibility funds to assist. And the state could widely publicise, on the internet, radio, and television, a list of who has contributed and how, indicating to society how far it has come towards its goal of however many new libraries and how far it has yet to go.

A state that mobilised a wide array of actors to help achieve a common goal in this way would realise many ends at the same time; it would improve social cohesion, enable people to give their time and other resources towards a concrete and desirable goal, and of course help to improve students' education.

Sharing Power in Political Institutions

Those who have much power and who are like-minded tend to form blocs, which exclude other interests, values, and perspectives. What might a state be like if those with the most power, whether as a result of elections or not, were required to share some of it with those with less or those who disagreed with them?

Non- or partial-electoral systems could take a cue from decision-making practices in indigenous societies and customary institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa, where a chief would typically make a ruling consequent to consensus obtained amongst elders. Although a monarch or group of elites could retain the final authority to make decisions, they might in practice generally rule in light of unanimous agreement reached amongst an independent group of informed advisors, ideally whom the populace deems legitimate.

Another idea would be to adopt a dual-system of government akin to that of Bhutan, in which advisors are not necessarily required to obtain consensus amongst themselves, but instead must be populated by diverse perspectives (in Bhutan, by spiritual ones in particular). A ruler might make it a habit to get advice from informed people who represent a variety of points of view, particularly those of the public. Such practices would improve the extent to which relevant viewpoints are given serious consideration in non- or partial-electoral systems and are included in policy-making.

Electoral systems could consider another idea proposed by several African political philosophers, namely, of a system in which legislators are initially elected by majority vote but are not tied to any political party, and, once elected, seek unanimous agreement amongst themselves about which policies to adopt. Instead of trying to promote any constituency's interests, parliamentarians would adopt only law that is the object of consensus about what would most benefit the public as a whole.

Less radically, voting-based political systems could require supermajorities more often, or accord some weight to public referenda about which policies are apt. Various affirmative action policies, such as those adopted by several Asian nation-states, might support the inclusion of different voices and wider range of experience to reflect the needs of a diverse population. These modifications would likely result in policies that are better for the common good and would reduce alienation from political processes, as people would be better able to identify with their governments.

Sharing Power in Economic Organisations

These days many firms evaluate themselves in terms of a ‘triple bottom line’, include non-executive directors, and employ an external auditor. Even so, business and industry need to do much more to move towards an ecologically sustainable economic system and more generally towards a society in which genuine wellbeing is promoted. How might the boards of large and wealthy corporations govern better and in ways that do not threaten to put them out of business?

One idea is to require not merely non-executive directors to sit on boards, but also some of them to be workers, consumers, environmentalists, leaders of local communities, professional ethicists, and perhaps even artists. A certain percentage of women directors could also be required. Stockholders would continue to own the firm, but ultimate decision-making authority about how to orient it would be shared with a wider variety of stakeholders.

Another idea would be for firms to become bound to a code of ethics and to be evaluated publicly by the extent to which they live up to it. This would also be a matter of sharing power, as consumers, including potentially large ones such as a government, would have a much wider array of information about the nature of firms and hence able to make better ‘votes’ with their wallets.

These proposals could be adopted voluntarily by a given firm; a board could on its own decide either to give votes to those with clear stakes in interests other than maximising profit for shareholders, or to adopt a certain code of ethics and publicise an independent audit of how well or poorly it lived up to it. Surveys that evaluate ‘gross institutional happiness’ within organisations, following the domains of the GNH survey developed by Bhutan, could be undertaken to assess wellbeing.

However, there would be some disincentive for a corporation to do so, if other, competing corporations were not. In order to keep the playing field even, and to bring on many firms and to do so quickly, it would be advisable for a government

to require these kinds of changes ‘across the board’ (so to speak). If a government legally required the boards of all corporations to include directors from a wide array of backgrounds, perhaps providing a list of conditions only a percentage of which a firm would have to meet, then no particular firm would be placed at a competitive disadvantage within the relevant jurisdiction.

Distributing power over a greater range of stakeholders might itself be desirable, both for the ‘donors’ and recipients. Sharing decision-making is part of sharing a way of life, a meaningful sort of relationship. In addition, such sharing would make more likely decisions that result in better outcomes for social and ecological wellbeing.

Creating a Village to Raise a Child

Nuclear families, let alone single-parent households, are a bad idea. Setting aside concern about problematic gender roles, viz., that women are often expected to do the bulk of cleaning and caring, running a family with children is too big a job to be done by one or two adults, especially when life in a modern economy characteristically involves labour undertaken on the job market.

Supposing that to head a household is to govern a family, it makes a lot of sense to broaden the scope of those with influence and leadership. What if a state designed housing so that a dozen or so units formed a collective compound reserved for those with children and those interested in supporting them? And what if households were not headed or governed by one individual per se, but through a sharing of decision-making and consensus?

Perhaps the units form a circle, so that the middle is a play area for children, on which all adults could keep an eye. Maybe the units are spaced far enough apart for there to be privacy, and yet they are close enough for others to hear if there is serious fighting and abuse. Possibly the compound requires a certain balance in terms of gender and age of its residents, and it might favour some women with children who have suffered abuse and need shelter. It might be that two or three of the residents stay home to watch over the younger children during the day, and that they are financially supported by others who work outside the compound or by the state.

One could suppose that there is a collective area where all children do their homework, or that there is a compound rule that no one may play outside until her homework is done, or that television broadcasts are turned off between 16.30 and 19.00. It could be that the parents meet together every two weeks to talk about parenting issues or matters of collective concern regarding the compound, or that they listen to social

workers and child psychologists during this time.

The last several sections have put forth proposals that have not yet been systematically tested, but that realistically could and should be as ways to promote good governance, as something both good for its own sake and as a means to protecting the environment and promoting human flourishing. Politics permeates many types of institutions—from political parties, governance institutions and customary institutions, to decision-making at the community and household levels, and in all of them it makes sense to adopt practices such as transparency, inclusion, information sharing, power sharing, consensus-seeking and collective responsibility for welfare. Good governance is the linchpin for supporting the eight other domains of GNH.