

# SDGs: Value-added for GNH?

## Challenges and Innovations of a Development Alternative from a Socio-cultural Lens

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### **Introduction**

Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a living example of a development alternative, a unique voice against the backdrop of a GDP-centric, climate negative and globalised world. Upheld as holistic development with values, its moral concept, conceptual framework and index of measurement offer an innovative path for conceptualising, shaping and measuring well-being, and expanding the boundaries of development beyond the mainstream.

While GNH is Bhutan-specific with varied influence globally, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are decidedly the result of mainstream development efforts to institute a set of goals to influence the international development agenda and its deployment globally. Although the two share some commonalities, they differ in terms of their conceptual framing, historical foundations, their place in the world, ability to affect development on the global stage, capacity to engage in cultural and local context-specificity, and potential to challenge problematic aspects of conventional development thinking.

This paper comparatively analyses GNH and SDGs in relation to the discourses, institutions and apparatus of international development. The comparison is detailed through the analysis of its historical and conceptual foundations and a general overview of each approach in the context of development. In particular, the paper focuses attention to what the SDGs leave out: innovative domains of culture, community vitality, psychological wellbeing and time use. It also reflects on gaps in GNH and potential learning from the SDGs, while keeping in mind the importance of socio-economic, cultural-spiritual and geopolitical specificities of Bhutan's middle path approach to development. It concludes that GNH is unique and prolific in the world, making important contributions to humanity and sentient beings in the context of a rapidly changing world.

## **An Overview of Conceptual and Historical Foundations of Two Approaches to Development**

The SDGs transitioned from the resultant effects, global learning and critique of the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The SDGs operationalise the post-2015 global development agenda, articulated in the resolution “the Future We Want”, ratified by United Nations members states at the Rio+20 conference in 2015. The agenda is shaped by three inter-related pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environment. The end product is a set of seventeen global goals and one hundred and sixty-nine quantifiable targets, whose aims are to contribute towards poverty eradication and the elimination of hunger, while recognising the importance of sustainable patterns of consumption and production, protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development, and inclusive and equitable economic growth (UNGA 2012).

Most notably, the SDGs are fixed, time-bound, medium-term, multi-dimensional and predominantly rational-functional international goals with the aim of furthering a certain version of sustainable development at different scales in different locales around the world. It is the culmination of contemporary international efforts to capture a set of global goals that can be engaged by different international and national bodies in pursuit of development. However, it remains unclear what ‘development’ itself means, how it is defined, what its theoretical foundations are, and whether it is achievable at all scales, levels and by every person within the specified decade and a half. Although it has evolved from its earlier permutation of the MDGs, it is firmly located within the development mainstream in terms of its articulation, institutional apparatus, actor-networks and policy framing. Although its discourse expounds a challenge to problematic aspects of development such as patterns of consumption and production, unsustainable natural resource management, and issues of unequal economic growth and exclusion, it is firmly entrenched in the very political-economic apparatus and historical conditions that have created the unsustainable patterns and systems it wishes to overcome. This means the SDGs are stuck in an internal loop that they are unlikely to escape.

GNH was conceived in 1979 by His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo. His ground-breaking statement that Bhutan is more interested in GNH than in GDP (Gross National Product) was made in reaction to the problematic objectives and means of prevalent economic development of that time (GDP continues to be the central, hegemonic approach to international development today), and would lay the foundations for different manifestations of GNH that would follow (Verma 2017a;

Elliott 2015; SNDP 2013). In 2008, His Majesty The King affirmed the importance of GNH, and further elaborated its significance as development with values.

As I elaborate elsewhere, GNH is many things at once, and can be summarised by its eight manifestations (Verma 2017, 2015, forthcoming). It is a moral concept, guiding principles for holistic development, a conceptual framework for alternative development, an index of measurement, policy and project screening and evaluation tool, a matter of individual practice, global influence, and the secularisation of Buddhist concepts that lead to meaningful development (ibid.). More specifically, in relation to the SDGs, Gross National Happiness measures the quality of a country's progress in a holistic way and postulates that the beneficial development of human society takes place when material and socio-cultural development occurs side by side to complement and reinforce each other. It comprises a set of values that promotes happiness as the end goal of development. It is the guiding principle for development in Bhutan that steers public policy, institutions and actors across society, and is the overarching objective of almost all official plans and documents (Ura et al. 2012a).

It entails ensuring that an “individual's progress toward enlightenment is not impeded by unnecessary suffering, material or mental. This is the very heart of GNH and what distinguishes GNH from other development approaches. It is the point of departure for the formulation and implementation of GNH development policies. The GNH state undertakes, therefore, to minimise those material conditions that can be disruptive” (Mancall 2004:37). It is based on four central pillars (sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, environmental conservation, preservation and promotion of culture, and good governance), nine domains and 33 indicators, and encapsulates core values of holism, balance, collectivity, sustainability and equality. A central argument is that holistic development cannot be achieved by any of the pillars in isolation. Hence, each pillar is accorded equal weight and mutually supports the other.

GNH is a fluid, dynamic and evolving, long-term, multi-dimensional and holistic national goal with the aim of enabling, enhancing and measuring the well-being and happiness of the people in Bhutan. It is a living example of a development alternative that is distinct from the mainstream in many aspects (see Verma 2017a, 2017b, 2015). It challenges hegemonic development and calls into question the central organising belief of economic growth as the panacea for happiness and well-being. Its questioning of the over-emphasis on material wealth is located in Buddhist moral concepts (Verma 2017b, Givel 2015, Wangmo and Valk 2012, Tashi 2004), but also supports the findings of scholars in questioning the relationship between a

higher income, or rate of growth, and happiness over the long-term (Easterlin et al. 2010).

### **A Comparative Overview of GNH and SDGs**

International knowledge of the SDGs and GNH is associated with certain actor-networks. While the SDGs are common knowledge within mainstream development, they are less known to the public-at-large, and most critically, to the local end-beneficiaries of development for whom the goals are intended. In this sense, it is the primary basis of policy formulation for international development, thus providing the discourse, direction, tools and resources for development practitioners; in particular, those located in inter-governmental bodies of the United Nations. GNH, or happiness, is increasingly associated with Bhutan from the perspective of common knowledge, but remains at the periphery of mainstream development. Further, while GNH is Bhutan-specific, albeit with modest but growing influence internationally, the SDGs are a global set of goals, conceptualised, endorsed and instituted by the international development community to advance a conventional and common approach to development. Although the Royal Government of Bhutan made significant contributions towards having happiness and well-being recognised as an element of development, including the submission of the report *Happiness: Towards a New Development Paradigm* to the U.N. General Assembly in December 2013, which was unanimously adopted (SNDP, 2013), the moral concept is not central to the SDGs, with the exception of well-being being included in SDG 3 but only pertaining specifically to health as it relates to psychological well-being.

Both the SDGs and GNH advance the notion of betterment, but from different sets of values, beliefs and end goals. The end goal of the SDGs is development at a global scale, with a focus on “leaving no one behind,” as it pertains to developing countries. Within this agenda, attention is accorded to least developed countries (LDCs), which are seen as getting to the “last mile” towards development (UNDP and UNCDF 2016). In this conceptualisation of development, the SDGs fail to break out of earlier, outdated theories of development that view it as a linear progression, from a pre-modern to a modern state, or from a state of under-development to development, based on western modes of development as the ultimate goal of human achievement (Peet and Hartwick 2009). Here, we also observe important divergences between GNH and the SDGs, as Bhutan is no longer considered an LDC, but a lower Middle Income Country (MIC). Although the GNH state drove the transition from Least Developed Country to lower MIC status of Bhutan, it is now in different development territory from the primary focus of the SDGs, with

implications on donor funding, focus and relations, as donors divert development resources towards LDCs who are perceived as being in greater need. Further, GNH takes as its point of departure, a healthy critique of western modes of consumption, materialism and growth-at-all costs that neglect other dimensions of development such as social, cultural and spiritual dimensions, a point I return to below.

The SDGs have the official backing, endorsement and resources required for their implementation of an internationally recognised inter-governmental system of nation-states, and have been endorsed by its member-states, including Bhutan. They are, therefore, an internationally accepted set of goals that shape the way mainstream development is designed, deployed and evaluated.

GNH, on the other hand, is a development alternative with growing international recognition, but with specific relevance and policy influence limited to Bhutan. It carries increasing weight in development debates as the problems associated with dominant growth-led paradigms and GDP-centric development become more evident, and discussions on development alternatives become more pressing (Verma 2017a). This is reflected in the burgeoning global discussion about possible alternatives and the possibility of a new development paradigm that can dislocate the development centre from its fixation on growth towards more sustainable options such as degrowth, happiness, and well-being (e.g. Verma 2017, NDP 2013, Demaria *et al.* 2013, Thinley 2012, Latouche 2009, Martinez-Alier *et al.* 2010). It is also reflected in the growing cross-pollination of ideas between scholars studying and analysing development alternatives from Bolivia and Ecuador as encapsulated in Buen Vivir, for example, and from movements such as degrowth which originated from France but are gaining greater traction globally (*ibid.*). However, only a rare and limited number of living development alternatives exist in response to the emergent crisis of endless patterns of consumption, deep inequality and resource depletion (Verma 2017a). GNH holds a special place among them, and what makes it especially unique is its three and a half decades of sustained focus, evolution, learning and progress on different manifestations. This is unlike the SDGs, which can be considered as a new updated but limited “version 2.0” of the MDGs.

While the SDGs have a prominent place in international development with the backing of international development resources, institutions and policies, GNH remains at the periphery of the development machinery with little international support or funding. However, this place at the periphery allows it to be innovative and escape co-option by more powerful forces that mainstream development is unable to evade. This is increasingly important as powerful multi-national corporations,

philanthropic development organisations previously headed by famous CEOs and the private sector begin to play a prominent role in development, thereby further entrenching a GDP-focused and mass consumerist rationality. In the same vein, while for GNH the focus is well-being and happiness at the national level with the unintentional by-product of moderate influence internationally, for SDGs it is development at the international level with ambitious goals that are heralded as being universal.

### **Challenging the Development Mainstream from the Lens of Culture**

Although everything humans think and do is cultural, including all aspects of development, well-being and happiness (Thin et al. 2013), culture is a commonly misunderstood and neglected dimension of development (Ura, 2007). This is most apparent in the failure of the new United Nations development agenda, and in particular, the SDGs to address and include a cultural pillar or set of indicators pertaining to culture. Hence, what sets GNH truly apart from the SDGs, is its inclusion of culture as a key conceptual and organising pillar, including a domain and set of indicators specifically on culture, amongst other related and innovative domains and indicators. Given this inclusion from a holistic development perspective, and when compared to the SDGs, GNH is more robust and comprehensive in its ability to articulate context-specificity, socio-cultural relations, and lived experience.

More specifically, GNH defines and measures culture in relation to well-being and happiness through four indicators, including language, artisan skills, socio-cultural participation and *Driglam Namzha* (traditional etiquette) (Ura et al., 2015, 2012a; 2012b). Given that culture is often missing and neglected, or, if present, at the margins of most approaches to mainstream development (Verma et al. 2010, Cernea et al. 2006), its inclusion in a multi-dimensional framework and measure of development such as GNH is ground-breaking and innovative. Similar to leading institutions in Bhutan, this volume recognises that GNH is a work in progress. In this vein, the domain of culture is also a work in progress, given its current focus on tangible elements of culture. As argued elsewhere, future efforts might consider deepening the domain in terms of intangible elements of culture such as values and attitudes, roles and identities, beliefs and knowledge and capabilities (Thin et al. 2013). Other critical gaps exist regarding understanding of how GNH is lived, experienced and given meaning at the local level by different people. Hence, GNH must engage in qualitative and ethnographic methods to document lived experience in terms of happiness, well-being and development (Verma forthcoming, Penjore 2013, Hoellerer 2010, Pommaret 2000). The capacity to carry out such analysis is

rapidly being developed by emerging Bhutan anthropologists in the country. Support for ethnographic analysis also comes in the form of the development of the first Ph.D. program in Anthropology at the College of Language and Culture Studies, Royal University of Bhutan, with the valued support of the prestigious Wenner Gren Foundation (Verma and Pommaret, in press).

GNH also addresses culture indirectly through three new and innovative domains in particular: community vitality, psychological well-being and time use. However it is noted that culture influences other domains of GNH as well, including living standards, education, health, environment and governance. Community vitality includes indicators of donations, community relations, family and safety; psychological well-being includes the indicators of life satisfaction, spirituality, positive emotions and negative emotions; and time use includes the indicators of work and sleep (and leisure time) (Ura et al., 2012a; 2012b).

While it can be argued that the SDGs indirectly touch upon issues of culture, given that all aspects of human existence and interaction are cultural, it perhaps has greater relevance in terms of gender equality, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production. At the same time, perhaps an exercise to identify which of the SDGs is more welcoming to the integration of culture is futile, given its problematic neglect of culture in the overall conceptual framing of the development agenda and goals, and therefore explains the lack of accompanying resources for its study, promotion and protection. It should be noted that during the planning and negotiation of the post-2015 development agenda, concerted efforts were made, spearheaded by UNESCO and other development agencies, to include culture as the fourth pillar of the SDGs. Despite an active campaign for its inclusion, it failed to succeed. This failure echoes past attempts to promote culture, and it is perhaps in this sense that UNESCO refers to culture as ‘the most neglected dimension in strategies to achieve the MDGs’ (UNESCO, 2011:17). It may be that culture is often debated because its processes and manifestations are often diverse (making it hard to define), and because many cultural processes arouse strong passions either for or against ‘traditions’ and identities (Thin et al., 2013). Being diffuse, dynamic, power-laden, dependent on the lens of the viewer, culture is sometimes considered by some as being too complex to serve well as a rubric for development planning - but it is also too important to ignore (ibid.).

While international efforts to influence the post-2015 global development agenda from a socio-cultural perspective failed to gain critical mass at a given moment in time, GNH continues to forge an alternative and unique development path

in Bhutan, with culture as one of its central pillars and domains. Its potential for influencing international debates is especially relevant as global calls for development alternatives gain momentum in the face of the failures of GDP, deep inequalities inherent in narrow framings of capitalism, and the destructive environmental forces of carbon-emitting mass consumer culture.

While the SDGs are particularly flawed in their handling of socio-cultural elements of development, its thought-provoking goals of gender equality, life under water, and innovation, infrastructure and industry, paradoxically challenge GNH's congruence with its conceptual foundations of collective happiness, well-being of all sentient beings and middle path development. GNH can learn from the inclusion of gender equality in the SDGs, although efforts are underway to analyse the GNH findings from the lens of gender (Verma and Ura 2015, forthcoming). While Bhutan is a landlocked country far from any ocean, its many sacred lakes and rivers are abundant with life under water; and as the only country in the world to be carbon neutral, the importance of including innovation, infrastructure and industry become imperative in order to balance environmental and material needs.

### **Conclusion: Contributions of GNH in an Unequal World**

Even before they transitioned to the SDGs, there was profound scepticism if the MDGs would be met in practice (Lewis and Mosse 2006). Indeed, there has been well-deserved critique of the MDGs and the SDGs in terms of their epistemology, ontology, effects and most importantly, their impact (Hickel 2014, Sen 2013). The greatest concern centres on whether the change that the UN development goals aim for are possible within the macroeconomic system within which policies, programmes, institutions and actor-networks are located (Sen 2013), especially given that the central logic underlying mainstream development is GDP. This concern is alarming, given growing evidence that GDP, instead of allowing for wealth, capital and resources to “trickle down” to economically poor sectors of society in developed countries, has in fact enabled the concentration, capture and consolidation of wealth for a handful of actors (Piketty 2015). Hence, the distribution of wealth has widened, and along with it, inequalities in the North. Also problematic are the effects of neo-liberal policies, capitalist-centered growth, technocratic interventions and globalisation and its fixation on production, consumerism and materialism through the commodification and exploitation of natural resources (Paulson 2014; Peet *et al.* 2011). One central argument is that market mechanisms externalise socio-cultural and environmental costs, values and meanings, together with long-term consequences and effects of actions associated with them, and have thus failed to



protect forests, oceans, air, the climate and culture (Peet *et al.* 2011). The underlying yet problematic premise of development is that developing countries follow the path of developed countries, thus the question that arises is if and how the SDGs are different from mainstream GDP-centric development approaches. While the Rio+20 document and the SDGs expound a discourse of concern regarding inclusive and equitable economic growth and reducing inequalities (UNGA 2012), two years into the SDGs, the gap in inequalities in wealth continues to widen (Oxfam 2017).

GNH's focus on quantitative measures and gaps in terms of SDG equivalents of addressing inequalities amongst nation-states and global partnerships also provide reflections about its humble impact on the post-2015 agenda, especially in relation to its potential of advancing the missing element of culture and holistic well-being for meaningful development on the global stage. Important strides were made by the Royal Government of Bhutan through a two-year project headed by the Secretariat for a New Development Paradigm, based on the principles of GNH. An International Expert Working Group (IEWG), composed of distinguished scholars from around the world representing a wide range of disciplines, was established to translate GNH into a new development paradigm and policy objectives for implementation beyond Bhutan. A high level meeting on well-being and happiness was convened at UN Headquarters in New York in April 2012, followed by a meeting of the IEWG in Bhutan in January- February 2013. The IEWG wrote background papers on the nine GNH domains (RGoB 2012), which provided input for the submission of the report *Happiness: Towards a New Development Paradigm* by the RGoB to the UN General Assembly in December 2013 (SNDP 2013). Important accomplishments included having a UN resolution on happiness ratified by the United Nations, and the establishment of World Happiness Day. However, key concepts of happiness, well-being and culture were not integrated into the SDGs.

Bhutan's success in implementing external goals such as the MDGs have been noteworthy. As it moves forward with implementing the SDGs, it will do so with a focus on three goals in particular, as articulated elsewhere in this issue. Bhutan's real challenge will be how it upholds GNH as a middle path approach to development in terms of rising materialism and consumption levels as its standard of living increases over time (Brooks 2013). As I have argued elsewhere, in a globalised world dominated by GDP, GNH faces several other key challenges (Verma 2017a). The rate of socio-cultural change and political-economic development of Bhutan, from isolation to active engagement with the world over a short period of time, cannot be emphasised enough. It has experienced rapid changes within five decades of opening politically to the outside world, and a decade and a half of exposure to the powerful

forces of a globalised media. These changes range from economic growth, increased engagement with international development processes and narratives, pressures on government to deliver material benefits in a newly formed democratic political system, and exposure to Western consumer lifestyles through television and social media, travel, education abroad, tourist interaction, advertising and other forms of cultural transmission (Hayden 2015; Walcott 2013). As a consequence, Bhutan has not been immune to capitalism, resulting in increased materialism and the emergence of a status-conscious consumer class with disposable income (Brooks 2013; Hayden 2015; Priesner 1999; Walcott 2011). Hence, currently in Bhutan, GNH exists side by side with the practice and measurement of GDP.

An urgent issue is rapidly changing cultural identities, especially experienced by youth who feel caught between two worlds, unable to relate to an older generation who grew up in a different set of political-economic circumstances in stark contrast to their own. In this regard, GNH is more robust than the SDGs, given its inclusion of culture as a GNH pillar and domain, and such omissions render the SDGs comparatively weak in contrast. However, as highlighted earlier, deepening the cultural pillar, domain, indicators and methodology of GNH in terms of its ability to analyse rapidly changing cultural identities through qualitative methods and ethnographic study is critical. In this regard, Bhutan is making strides in meeting this challenge. Its ability to mediate such challenges by deepening GNH in terms of its conceptual framing, methodological approach, and the other manifestations, will also have implications on broader ground-breaking policies that enable it to remain carbon neutral, pursue low impact/high volume tourism, maintain over 70 percent forest cover, preserve and promote important aspects of culture, prioritise social services such as free health care and education for its citizens, engage in environmentally clean sources of revenue including run-of-the-river hydro-power, and regulate international development organisations, foreign capital, development aid and foreign experts within its borders.

As Bhutan strives to seek a balance between competing priorities, pressures and its overarching goal of self-reliance, it cannot lose sight of one of its most important contributions to humanity: the development and engagement of meaningful and holistic development in the face of widening global economic inequality, growing mass consumerism and accompanying environmental degradation, and the far-reaching impacts of globalisation as its tentacles entrap even the remote and resistant parts of the world. The importance of its contribution cannot be underestimated, nor can the dangers of a rare living development alternative being “mainstreamed” into conventional development.

As academics, scholars, development practitioners and policy-makers in Bhutan consider the value-add of the SDGs to GNH, there are perhaps three important reflections worth bearing in mind. First, Bhutan already has GNH, which is more comprehensive and holistic than the SDGs. Its cautious approach of focusing on three SDGs is a reflection of its mindful, wise and middle-path engagement with international development.

Second, the conceptual and functional contributions of the SDGs are deepening and expanding the GNH domains and indicators, through the inclusion of areas such as gender equality (Verma and Ura, forthcoming, 2015), while not losing sight of what makes GNH as a development alternative unique and critically important in a GDP-centric world where there are but a few living development alternatives (Verma 2017a). Here, it becomes important to engage with a theory that articulates local, national and global structures; that considers the way the local and the global are mutually constituted through particular configurations of development, environment and political-economy that create and legitimise certain claims over others (Mackenzie 2010). For instance, the legitimacy of the development mainstream over development alternatives.

Third, it is the location of the SDGs as universal solutions within the broader history of development, beyond the MDGs and SDGs, which illuminates larger geopolitical and neo-liberal trajectories of development, and their effects on the self-reliance of nation-states. Such historical contextualisation also point to the geopolitics of development dating back to its invention in the mid-1940s (and earlier, to trace its deeper roots) (Rist 1997), beyond discourse and a narrow focus on failed or successful development projects, programmes, policies or its elusive impact (of the MDGs or the SDGs in particular). They invite a deeper analysis of mainstream development, where the SDGs are firmly located, regarding the decontextualisation of development itself, from the lens of culture, spirituality and context-specificity.

They also open up other questions regarding the historical inequalities and structural conditions of international development, and the ways in which the adoption of the SDGs increase pressures towards global compliance, legitimisation and harmonisation to neo-liberal globalisation and new forms of international governance by international financial institutions and new private concentrations of wealth and power.

As Gupta argues, “it is ironic that the search for invariant methods of poverty alleviation leads to a distancing from the very features that are the most responsible for global poverty, namely historically grounded inequalities, asymmetries of [international] power...if there are invariant conditions that contribute to global poverty, they are likely to be found in the structures of global institutional arrangements...However, it is precisely these structures of inequality that go largely unaddressed in the current discourse of global poverty” (2010-15).