

# Sustainable Development Goals and Gross National Happiness

*Dorji Penjore*

Are there commonalities between the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Gross National Happiness (GNH)? Let me go straight to the point. They are compatible in the sense that the former is only a subset of GNH, just as democracy is a subset of GNH. They are incompatible in how they are conceptualised and measured and how “sustainability” of development is understood and addressed.

The SDGs are a universal set of 17 goals and 169 targets adopted by the member States of the United Nations to help frame their development agendas and political policies between 2016 and 2030. The SDGs aim to end poverty and hunger, give every child the opportunity to live a decent life, create an environment for businesses to flourish, and create jobs and growth within the natural boundaries set by our planet.<sup>1</sup>

GNH is a programme of social and economic change geared towards operationalising the notion of good development that promotes collective happiness as its ultimate value. The GNH Index is aggregated out of 33 clustered (grouped) indicators, and each cluster indicator is composed of 123 variables. According to the second survey, Bhutan’s GNH Index is 0.756, up from 0.730 five years ago. A single GNH Index is a composite index ranging from 0 to 1 with zero as the lowest possible value and one as the highest possible value.<sup>2</sup> This multidimensional index is linked to a set of policy screening tools so that it has practical applications.<sup>3</sup>

## What is Not Sustainable about SDGs?

Sustainable development has been defined in the *Brundtland Report* as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future

1 United Nations Resolution A/RES/70/1 of 25 September 2015: *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.

2 Ura, K., Alkire., Zangmo, T., & Wangdi, K., (2015). *Provisional Findings of 2015 GNH Survey*. Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies & Gross National Happiness (CBS & GNH). p.

3 Ura, K., Alkire., Zangmo, T., & Wangdi, K., (2012). *A Short Guide to GNH Index*. Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies & Gross National Happiness (CBS & GNH).

generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>4</sup> Yet the SDGs are not really about the sustainability of the earth to support the livelihood of both the present (7 billion) and future generations. Rather, if its predecessor Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were about reducing poverty in the developing world, the SDGs are about ending poverty and building global prosperity and sustainability in addition to other goals fundamental to ending poverty. Thus, the SDGs are more accurately about improving the material conditions of the poor people in the poor countries through more development whether it is sustainable or not.

However, the developing world is not the main source of unsustainable development, the developed world is. Thus, the SDGs are about putting additional pressure on limited resources while failing to address the unfettered growth and consumption in the developed world. These are the two main reasons why SDGs are not sustainable although SDG 12 (ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns) supposedly addresses this concern. Unfortunately, it fails to set even an aspirational utopian target on how much is enough, especially for the richer societies.

### And What is Sustainable about GNH?

According to *The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008*, “The State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness”. In 2005 the Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) and Gross National Happiness (GNH) was assigned the task of measuring GNH and developing a GNH Index to systematically guide Bhutan’s development. CBS and GNH has identified the so-called nine constituent domains of GNH as necessary conditions for the people to pursue happiness or promote human development. The GNH survey questionnaire was designed around the nine domains:

- Health
- Education
- Living Standards
- Ecological Diversity and Resilience
- Good Governance
- Community Vitality
- Cultural Diversity and Resilience
- Psychological Well-being
- Time Use and Balance.

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<sup>4</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). *Our Common Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

So what is sustainable about GNH? Firstly, through periodic social surveys, the GNH Index selected 33 from 123 indicators under nine constituent domains of GNH weighted equally. Besides indicators which are characteristic of “sustainability”, there is a “sustainability” component inbuilt in the GNH methodology - there is what is called “threshold” or “sufficiency cut off” at the level of indicator and at the level of domain. In other words, each indicator is given a threshold as a minimum requirement for a person to be happy.

To illustrate the point, let me use one indicator under the Living Standards domain - per capita household income. The national poverty line, based on *the Living Standard Survey 2010*, is Nu 1707.84 per person per month (i.e., 20,494.08 per year). In the GNH Index, Nu 28,738.73 has been fixed as a minimum household income for its members to be happy. Households that do not meet this threshold are considered as unhappy, while those meeting or crossing the threshold are treated as happy. Household A, B, and C earning Nu 28,738.73, Nu 50,000.00 and Nu 200,000.00 are treated equally, thus, income beyond the threshold is considered the same. The point here is that after crossing a certain mark (threshold), income does not contribute to one’s happiness, and there are other domains of life which have to be promoted to lead a holistic life, which correlates with happiness. The principle is that more does not enhance or increase happiness or well-being. The effort should be made to help as many people as possible to meet the threshold fixed for each of the 33 indicators. Then there is a domain threshold fixed at six: a person is considered happy if he or she is sufficient in six out of nine constituent domains of GNH. A person who meets sufficiency in six domains is considered equal with those who achieved sufficiency in all nine domains.

Secondly, GNH is premised on a principle that there are many forms of capital or resources, namely, ecological capital, social capital, cultural capital, human capital, and economic capital. While Gross Domestic Product (GDP) mainly measures economic capital and human capital to some extent, GNH values and measures all forms of capital. For instance, the Ecological Diversity and Resilience domain measures age-old Bhutanese values and customs that are partly responsible for strong conservation ethics. Then there is the Living Standard domain which is a proxy for GDP, presenting a contrast to the conventional GDP-focused development model. To illustrate my point about how the SDGs are subsets of GNH, I compare 17 SDGs and 33 GNH indicators used for constructing a GNH Index.

17 SDGs	33 GNH Indicators
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere</li> <li>2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture</li> <li>3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages</li> <li>4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all</li> <li>5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls</li> <li>6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all</li> <li>7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all</li> <li>8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all</li> </ol>	<p>PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Life satisfaction in one's health, living standard, occupation, family relationship, and work life balance.</li> <li>2. Spirituality measured by spirituality level, frequency of prayer recitation and meditation, and consideration of <i>karma</i> (the law of cause and effect) in one's life.</li> <li>3. Positive emotions like calmness, compassion, forgiveness, contentment, and generosity</li> <li>4. Negative emotions like selfishness, jealousy, fear, worry, and anger.</li> </ol> <p>HEALTH</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Self-reported health status</li> <li>6. Number of healthy days in a month</li> <li>7. Long-term disabilities and activity limitations</li> <li>8. Mental health based on 12 general health questionnaire (GHQ).</li> </ol> <p>TIME USE AND BALANCE</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Work time measured by hours of work</li> <li>10. Sleep time measured by hours of sleep.</li> </ol> <p>EDUCATION</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. Literacy level of the population</li> <li>12. Education level measured by number of years of schooling.</li> <li>13. General knowledge level measured in terms of their knowledge about local legends and folk stories, <i>tshechus</i> (Buddhist mask dances), traditional songs, the Constitution, and of HIV/AIDS transmission.</li> <li>14. Precept values such as prohibition against killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct and creating disharmony in human relations.</li> </ol>

<p>8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all</p>	<p>CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND RESILIENCE 15. Proficiency in native language reckoned by one's ability to speak mother tongue</p>
<p>9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation</p>	<p>16. Cultural participation measured by number of days involved in socio-cultural activities</p>
<p>10. Reduce inequality within and among countries</p>	<p>17. Artisan skills assessed by one's skill in the 13 traditional Bhutanese arts and crafts such as weaving, masonry, carpentry, and painting.</p>
<p>11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable</p>	<p>18. Attitude towards and change over time of the Bhutanese code of conduct and etiquette (traditional etiquette)</p>
<p>12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns</p>	<p>GOOD GOVERNANCE</p>
<p>13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development</p>	<p>19. Performance of government (in creating jobs, reducing the rich-poor gap, fighting corruption, preserving culture and traditions, protecting environment, providing educational needs, and improving health services)</p>
<p>14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development</p>	<p>20. Fundamental rights (freedom of speech, voting, joining political party, forming <i>tshogpa</i> (party), getting equal access to join public service, receiving equal pay for equal work, and the right to the freedom from discrimination).</p>
<p>15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss</p>	<p>21. Delivery of key services (access to health care, electricity, waste disposal, access to water, and quality of water). 22. Political participation (election and meeting).</p>
	<p>COMMUNITY VITALITY</p>
	<p>23. Volunteerism in number of days and donations measured in-kind and money.</p>
	<p>24. Community relationship measured by a sense of belongingness and trust in neighbours.</p>
	<p>25. Family relationship measured by how the members care about each other, a feeling of not wishing to be a part of the family, feeling like a stranger in one's family, time spent with one's family, the level of understanding in one's family, and whether family is a real source of comfort.</p>
	<p>26. Safety of neighborhood or community measured by crime prevalence.</p>

<p>16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels</p> <p>17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development</p>	<p>ECOLOGICAL DIVERSITY AND RESILIENCE</p> <p>27. Perception towards pollution and waste: pollution of rivers and streams, air and noise, waste disposal sites and littering, landslides and soil erosion, and floods.</p> <p>28. Conservation attitude assessed in terms of feelings of responsibility towards environment.</p> <p>29. Crop loss to wildlife</p> <p>30. Problems of urban living like traffic congestion, absence or inadequate green spaces; lack of pedestrian friendly streets, and the problem of urban sprawl.</p> <p>LIVING STANDARD</p> <p>31. Household ownership of assets (phone, computer, refrigerator, washing machine, land and livestock)</p> <p>32. Housing standards (toilet types, roofing materials and number of rooms)</p> <p>33. Per capita household income</p>
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As evident from the juxtaposition of the two sets of indicators above, GNH is broader and more holistic than SDGs. There are no equivalent SDG goals to match the indicators under the GNH domains of cultural diversity and resilience, psychological well-being and time use. Here 17 SDGs and 33 GNH indicators are mapped and matched for comparative purpose and there are fundamental differences even among comparable SDGs and GNH indicators under the health, education, and environment domains.

The SDGs are broadly articulated and largely focus on conventional domains or domains that cater mostly to the physical needs of the people. Hence non-conventional domains such as psychological well being, culture and tradition, and how the allocation of time among competing claims of work, sleep, and non-work such as socialisation and leisure are non-existent.

My SDGs critique is based on its silence over mindless and wasteful consumption in affluent western societies. The capacity of the planet to sustain the livelihood of both present and future generations and development pursued under the conventional growth-based model is a zero-sum game. We are right to worry about the planet's ability to provide for even the current generation let alone the future generation

if the developing world takes the same development path as the developed world, providing a standard of living inconceivable even to royalty a century ago.

Thus, the need for sustainable development. When the earth has reached its limit to sustain the present population, more economic development is not a solution. The problem of the sustainable development is not poor people's poverty, but rich people's affluenza and wasteful consumption. When sustainable development is often understood as a return to a subsistence existence, any impetus for the leadership of the developed world to make development sustainable and to convince societies accustomed to a high consumption lifestyle to voluntarily embrace a path towards sustainability is lost. Yet the rich can still enjoy current high living standards by resorting to renewable energy, consuming mindfully and sustainably, reusing and recycling resources. The rich world is in a position to show the way by innovating economies, adopting renewable energy (solar, wind, geo-thermal and hydro) and upgrading transportation (electric vehicles), as well as by increasing the Official Development Assistance to the developing world that is unfairly bearing the brunt of conventional development that took place in the developed north.

A sustainable world is economically feasible if there is an end to mindless growth and if the rich people could be convinced to change how they live. Can the rich world accommodate a reduced growth rate in the name of sustainable development? If SDGs cannot address this question, GNH can.