

Gelephu Mindfulness City: Towards Promoting “Proximity in the Plural”

Katsu Masaki

As stated in His Majesty The King’s speech at the 116th National Day celebrations, people around the world will be observing with interest how the country will harness its ethos of uniting people for his vision to develop Gelephu as an economic hub for Bhutan. “Small countries like Bhutan can swiftly innovate and implement what other countries might hesitate to pursue or fail to achieve,” in the words of His Majesty. “The benefits will encompass all dzongkhags (districts), especially farmers, providing niche and lucrative markets in the country for all our products.”

Today, mainstream development economics ostensibly embraces a similar idea, that is, the need to break with the conventional notion that accords rural areas a passive, supportive role for the urban “leading” sector. One textbook¹, for example, recommends that (1) technological, institutional, and price incentives are offered to enable small farmers to raise their productivity, and (2) rural-based non-farm industries are promoted to diversify and sustain rural economies, while domestic demands for their products are raised through urban development.

A proposal of this kind underscores the need to position rural areas as an integral component of development strategy. At the same time, it has the limitation that it may lean towards economism, which equates profit and loss with the dominant pillar of social life.

According to His Majesty, the Gelephu Mindfulness City project is “inspired by Buddhist spiritual heritage”. Therefore, in line with Buddhist economics and its derivation, Gross National Happiness (GNH), the plan envisions transcending economism and, instead, situates the economy within a broader ethical framework. “The GNH premise is that the assertion of self-interest as the dominant motive for business is unacceptable.”² GNH views development as interdependent economic, ecological, social, cultural

1 Todaro, Michael P. and Stephen C. Smith. *Economic Development*, 12th Edition (Harlow: Pearson, 2015), 438–439.

2 Dorji, Kinley. “Editorial: Are we talking GNH and doing GDP?” *The Druk Journal* 4, no.2 (2018), 3.

and good governance concerns.

The Gelephu Mindfulness City project offers ample opportunities for rural communities to become part of the prosperity it will bring. This is not simply about promoting backward and forward linkages between the city (as the central node of production and service activities) and elsewhere. “Bhutan’s economic hub will offer all that and more,” as noted His Majesty. “It will be one-of-a-kind, anchored on the vision and values of GNH.”

Towards Forming a “Distributed” Network of Communities

A promising strategy in this respect is to promote a “distributed economy”³ consisting of scattered, relatively autonomous local production units which are also connected with each other within wider networks of exchange. The promotion of a “distributed economy” entails outreach to rural communities in the country on two fronts⁴: to assist them to leverage place-based resources and culture; and help acquire new ideas through knowledge exchange and external collaboration.

In line with the vision of GNH, moreover, polycentric governance is expected to be pursued in support of equity, reciprocity, self-reliance, collective ethics, and oneness with nature. This calls for what Ezio Manzini terms “place making” (promoting a space endowed with sense)⁵: It provides a space for reflection and action for residents to explore possibilities to expand local economic activities with a sense of mutual trust and ecological concern. Emphasis is placed on the attainment of local well-being, in search of prudent ways for people to satisfy their own needs and those of others without savaging local communities or disregarding future generations.

A “distributed economy” advances an equitable distribution of economic power at the grassroots. It thus enhances local resilience to social and environmental threats, often caused by large-scale, centralised modes of production that hold sway in some “advanced” industrialised economies.

3 dos Santos, Aguinaldo et al. “Distributed economies,” in *Sustainability for All: The Design of Sustainable Product-Service Systems Applied to Distributed Economies*, eds. Carlo Vezzoli et al. (Springer Link, 2021), 23–50, https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-030-66300-1_2.pdf.

4 Wahl, Daniel C. *Designing Regenerative Cultures* (Axminster: Triarchy Press, 2015), 63.

5 Manzini, Ezio. *Design, When Everybody Designs* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015), 189–190.

Grassroots resilience to potential threats is enhanced by certain attributes of local communities; they are often endowed with cultural diversity and wisdom as an expression of living in long-term harmony with each locality's uniqueness, and prioritise both material and non-material wellbeing.

The Parallel Promotion of Scale and Redistribution

Does this approach put a brake on Bhutan's immediate goal "to become a developed country," referred to in His Majesty's speech? This is a legitimate concern, given that the promotion of a "distributed economy" means to "handle complexity not by standardisation and simplification imposed from the centre, but by distributing complexity to the margins"⁶. Indeed, it is likely to be a challenging task to help rural communities in the country to initiate autonomous local production units.

However, this concern may lead to the conventional dichotomy of "pro-growth" and "pro-poor" policy, favouring the former on the grounds that the latter restricts wealth creation. It has been proven around the world that it is unwise to adopt only "pro-growth" preferences based on the "trickle-down" theory⁷. On the contrary, increasing incomes of non-affluent groups can boost economic growth as they tend to spend high proportions of their earnings (although more money going to the well-off can also be diverted to increase jobs and growth). Nevertheless, some industrialised countries stick to the opposite stance, prioritising a hierarchical and centralised mode of "pro-growth" economic development.

Against this background what is required is, not only the pursuit of economies of scale and efficiency through the concentration of production centres (Gelephu Mindfulness City), but also the redistribution of means of livelihood to the country's non-affluent groups (rural economic prosperity). This tallies with the following remark made by Peter Senge and his co-authors, while referring to a strength of GNH, that transcends conventional piecemeal approaches: "Life beyond the Bubble (of industrial growth through mass production) will require suspending 'either/or' thinking."⁸

6 Murray, Robin (2009), cited in Manzini, Design, 20.

7 Chang, Ha-Joon. 23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), 137-147.

8 Senge, Peter et al. The Necessary Revolution: How Individuals and Organizations Are Working Together to Create a Sustainable World (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 40.

Proximities in the Plural

The author would like to suggest that the Gelphu Mindfulness City project initially focuses on advancing a “distributed” system among rural communities around the city⁹. This is to prevent its resources from being spread too thinly. Of course, this should not preclude other not-nearby areas that are already, or will potentially be, endowed with locally-based production units. They too should be entitled to benefit from the Mindfulness City project and deserve any other support programmes available to them.

The project component should go beyond conservation of farming communities, biodiversity, and cultural heritage (although this is crucial as it helps curb diseconomies that may be externalised to surrounding localities). The promotion of a “distributed” system can go as far as paving the way for them to stand on equal footing to open the prospect for two-way flows of people, goods, money, and ideas. This tallies with what a “GNH economy” is like, which does not stop at a “healthy” distribution of income and wealth or a “healthy” balance of population between the towns and the countryside. It also nurtures flourishing social relationships and arrangements that characterise “healthy” communities¹⁰.

Farming communities can grow organic, healthy food and start their own farmers’ markets, agricultural cooperatives, craft making, farm stays, and ecotourism. There is also room to establish various types of model villages drawing on initiatives as follows: community engagement platforms (being promoted by the Department of Local Governance); ecovillages (in pursuit of low-impact living, including locally produced renewable energy); rental peri-urban farms (for urban dwellers to engage in agriculture in their leisure time); smart agriculture (using AI, robots, and other advanced technologies); local currencies (in support of intra-regional monetary circulations); welfare systems for those residents in need (founded on various forms of mutual help); alternative systems of mobility to individual cars (such as ride shared services and autonomous electric buses) ... the list of possibilities can go on.

9 There are reports that some residents in nearby areas have high hopes that the city will open up new sales channels for their agricultural products. For example, “Chhudzom farmers prepare for Mindfulness City,” Kuensel newspaper, January 1, 2024, <https://kuenselonline.com/chhudzom-farmers-prepare-for-mindfulness-city/>.

10 Mancall, Mark. “What is a GNH economy?” *The Druk Journal* 4, no.2 (2018), 10.

In this way, to borrow the terms coined in Ezio Manzini’s book *Livable Proximity*,¹¹ rural communities benefit from “proximities in the plural” (that provide each locality with various opportunities) instead of “specialised proximity” (that constrains each locality to discharge a given set of functions). “Specialised proximity” has affinity with mainstream economics that tends to relegate local communities (as well as any other entities) to “cogs” of the economic “machine”¹². It is accordingly compatible with a centralised, stratified system that prioritises economy-wide growth in size, efficiency, and wealth, while concentrating production bases.

The idea of “proximities in the plural,” on the contrary, is integral to the promotion of “healthy” communities, an attribute of a “GNH economy”. “Healthy” communities thrive not merely on market exchange of commodities but on broader transactions (monetary and non-monetary) that enhance the quality of human relationships with each other and with non-human others. Those communities that benefit from “proximities in the plural” pursue “a new idea of wellbeing, a wellbeing in which a leading role is played by the recognition of the importance of natural and socio-cultural common goods (such as lively social fabric, a healthy environment, a nice landscape and, last but not least, the wealth of diversity that a place can express)”¹³. This accords with GNH that is premised on various forms of capital: economic, ecological, social, cultural, and human capital¹⁴.

With such a grand and attractive plan in place, some young people possibly see the areas around the Gelephu Mindfulness City as a promising location to take up market-oriented farming and other businesses. In this regard, the dzongkhag (district) administration, in collaboration with gewog (county) offices and local communities, can give potential newcomers the opportunity to stay in a farmhouse for some time, to encourage them to make an “I-turn”¹⁵. Once they decide to settle down, they may receive

11 Manzini, Ezio. *Livable Proximity: Ideas for the City that Cares* (Milano: Bocconi University Press, 2022).

12 The terms (“cogs” and “machine”) are used in Gibson-Graham, J.K. et al. *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 2–3.

13 Manzini, *Livable Proximity*, 43.

14 Penjore, Dorji. “Sustainable Development Goals and Gross National Happiness.” *The Druk Journal* 3, no. 1 (2017), 31.

15 The term was coined by a Japanese parliamentarian, to refer to people moving to local communities away from large cities, with which they had no previous connection.

assistance to prepare a plan to make a living in the community and offer income opportunities for local residents.

A Way Forward

“It is far easier to draft good plans and frame good policies than to come up with the right strategy,” as noted by His Majesty. This challenge may be attributed to a known situation often said to exist in rural Bhutan. According to a report prepared by the College of Natural Resources, “the essence of trying to address an individual problem through joint approach is not inculcated”¹⁶. The report, at the same time, acknowledges the mushrooming growth of “Successful Farmers, Agri-enterprises, Farmers’ Groups and Cooperatives in Bhutan” (the title of the report).

“My confidence comes from my deep and abiding trust in our people.” His Majesty’s expectation can be reciprocated with “creative tension”, with which people do not deflect attention from their challenge but face it as part of reality¹⁷. In this way, people pay attention to the question “What do we want to create?” and thus avoid seeking to relieve their sense of discouragement by lowering their goals. The notion of “creative tension” resonates with what Dasho Kinley Dorji describes as a key to transforming Bhutan’s economy: “It is not possible to ‘turn around’ the economy without understanding the values that you want to achieve¹⁸.”

“Many large and industrialised countries may find themselves unable to implement an enterprise of this scale and ambition due to the lack of internal consensus.” His Majesty’s words resonate with a sentiment widely shared among the Japanese people, including the author. As noted by His Majesty, Bhutan is blessed with “the harmony and trust between the King, government, and people that binds us all together in a single vision”. The Gelephu Mindfulness City project will “turn around the economy” while furthering “understanding of the values” of a “GNH economy”.

16 Tashi, Sonam et al. Case Studies of Successful Farmers, Agri-enterprises and Farmers’ Groups and Cooperatives in Bhutan (Punakha: Centre for Sustainable Mountain Agriculture, College of Natural Resources, 2022), 106.

17 Senge et al., *The Necessary Revolution*, 294–297.

18 Dorji, “Editorial,” 2.

References

- Chang, Ha-Joon. 23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).
- Dorji, Kinley. "Editorial: Are we talking GNH and doing GDP?" *The Druk Journal* 4, no.2 (2018): 2–4.
- dos Santos, Aguinaldo et al. "Distributed economies," in *Sustainability for All: The Design of Sustainable Product-Service Systems Applied to Distributed Economies*, eds. Carlo Vezzoli, Brenda Garcia Parra, and Cindy Kohtala. (Springer Link, 2021), 23–50, https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-030-66300-1_2.pdf.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K., Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy. *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
- Kuensel. "Chhudzom farmers prepare for Mindfulness City," January 1, 2024, <https://kuenselonline.com/chhudzom-farmers-prepare-for-mindfulness-city/>.
- Mancall, Mark. "What is a GNH economy?" *The Druk Journal* 4, no.2 (2018): 5–14.
- Manzini, Ezio. *Design, When Everybody Designs* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015).
- Manzini, Ezio. *Livable Proximity: Ideas for the City that Cares* (Milano: Bocconi University Press, 2022).
- Penjore, Dorji. "Sustainable Development Goals and Gross National Happiness." *The Druk Journal* 3, no. 1 (2017): 29–35.
- Senge, Peter, Bryan Smith, Nina Kruschwitz, Joe Laur, and Sara Schley. *The Necessary Revolution: How Individuals and Organizations Are Working Together to Create a Sustainable World* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).
- Tashi, Sonam, Ugyen Yangchen, Yogeeta Dahal, and Dhan Bdr Gurung. *Case Studies of Successful Farmers, Agri-enterprises and Farmers' Groups and Cooperatives in Bhutan* (Punakha: Centre for Sustainable Mountain Agriculture, College of Natural Resources, 2022).
- Todaro, Michael P., and Stephen C. Smith. *Economic Development*, 12th Edition (Harlow: Pearson, 2015).
- Wahl, Daniel C. *Designing Regenerative Cultures* (Axminster: Triarchy Press, 2015).