

# Developing a “Just and Harmonious Society” in Rural Bhutan

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## Introduction

His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo introduced the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) which became the development philosophy that guides Bhutan’s policies and plans. His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck advised that the goal of good development is a “just and harmonious society”, promoting collective happiness as an ultimate value. The interpretation of GNH places on the State the mandate to create the right conditions for well-being and happiness. To guide this, nine domains and 33 indicators (Figure 1) have been established to measure GNH to determine the state of a just and harmonious society.

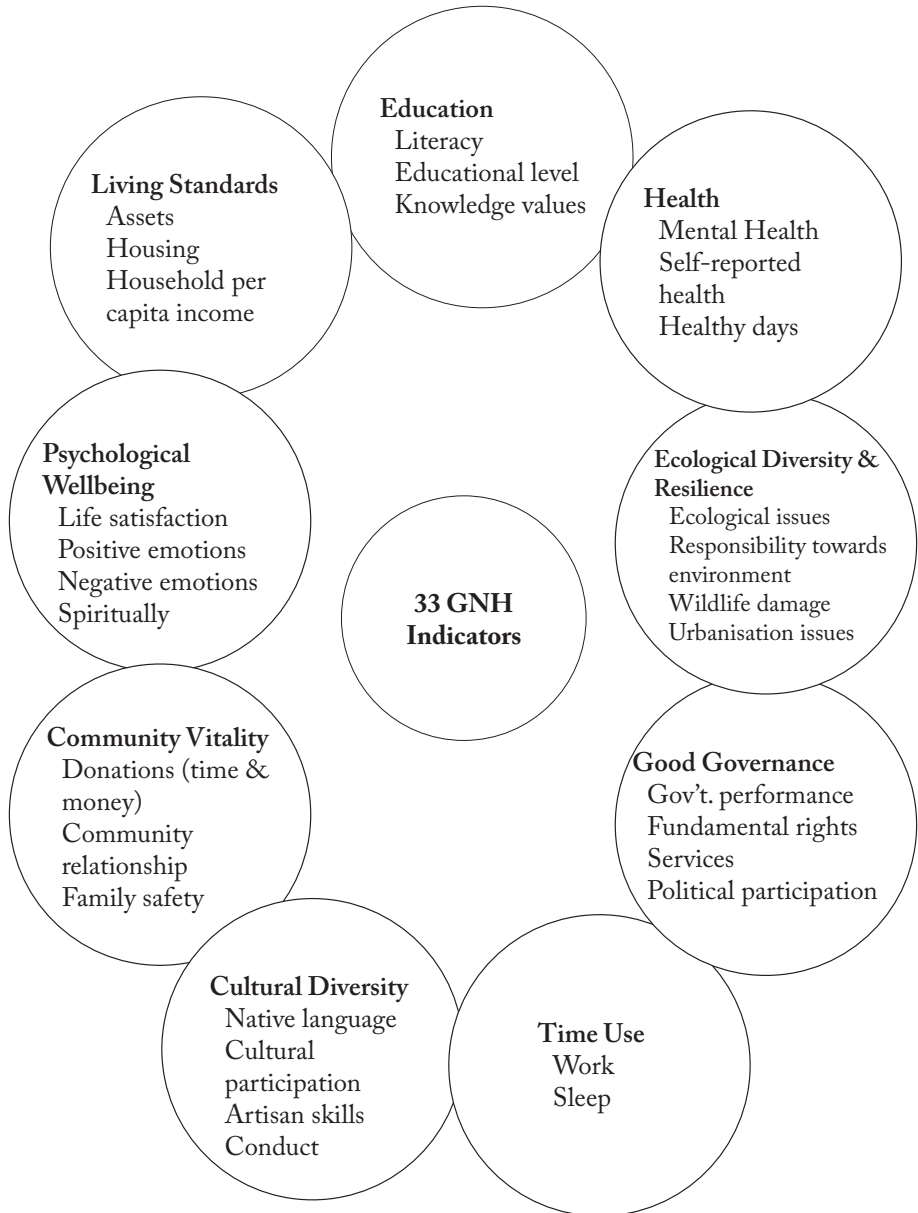
## Tarayana Foundation

Tarayana Foundation is a civil society organisation that was founded by Her Majesty Gyalyum Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck and formally launched on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2003, by the then Crown Prince Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. The Foundation is a Public Benefit Organisation (PBO) registered in Bhutan. Its vision is “A Happy and Prosperous Bhutan” and believes in maximising happiness and harmony among all Bhutanese people, providing opportunities for life improvement to the vulnerable communities in Bhutan.

The Foundation approaches rural development in an integrated and holistic manner. At the centre of the holistic rural development approach is a housing support programme. It has supported more than 2,650 houses across the country and implemented food and nutrition interventions for the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, and World Food Programme in rural Bhutan. The rest of the programmes are woven around this housing programme.

This article explores the support of basic human needs – food, shelter, and income - for a “just and harmonious society”.

*Figure 1. The nine domains and 33 indicators of the GNH index. Source publication: Ura et al. (2012, p. 13).*



Note: Gov't = Government

## Present Status

### *Housing*

Housing is a basic human need. Having somewhere to live underlies every person's health and well-being and underpins the functioning of society as a whole. Having the security and comfort of a home enables individuals and families to participate in work and community life, access education, and build supportive networks. Housing helps provide a sense of place, a sense of dignity, and a sense of community.<sup>1</sup> When a house becomes a home it is an extension of our self-identity. Yet this very basic need is not considered a human right under international human rights laws and even the Constitution of Bhutan. It is rarely talked about as a development issue, especially for the rural population, and is, therefore, glaringly absent.

The Tarayana Foundation, seeing the need for such support, carried out assessments in four dzongkhags (districts)- Mongar, Samtse, Wangdue Phodrang, and Zhemgang - revealing positive impacts. Families enjoyed safety and security with the new houses (93%), saw improvement in sanitation (94%), experienced reduced frequency of sickness (90%), experienced a decrease in the annual maintenance cost of their houses (75%), and increase in number of skilled professionals, especially in construction. The new houses also enabled a feeling of peace and happiness with no worries of leaking roofs, frequent maintenance, and drain on income either through expenses made to repair or through time saved from maintenance to engage in wage labour.

Working in groups to construct new houses has increased community participation and vitality and helped solve household and community problems. The success of the housing programme has facilitated new possibilities to work together to bring development to individual households and communities.

Sangay Wangchuk from Salabi in Khengkhar, Mongar explains:

“I have always dreamt of having a good house but could not imagine how I could fulfill my dream. All the households in my village did not have a decent house. This was our common problem.

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1 “Housing is a basic human need,” Housing Authority of St. Mary's County, MD. <https://www.stmaryshousing.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Cover.pdf>

One day an officer from Tarayana visited our village. He talked about working together in groups and the advantages of working together. The officer told us that Tarayana would support us with CGI (Corrugated Galvanised Iron) sheets for roofs, payment for the master carpenter, and fuel for a chain saw to cut the timber for the construction.

That was when we decided to form a house construction group. We are six households in the village. By the end of one year, all six households had a new house. The new houses had rooms for different uses like a room to cook our food, a room for our *choesham* (altar), a room where we could sleep, and a room to store our things. We even had toilets constructed. The new houses were stronger and more permanent. We could keep houses cleaner than before. The experience of building our homes has given us confidence that we can fulfill our dreams if we work together. The future is good for me and my group members.”<sup>2</sup>

A woman from Sangkama Village in Jurmey gewog whose new house was built in December 2017, said:

“Earlier when officials from the government visited our village and homes, we would hide from them because our living conditions were pathetic. The house was in a dilapidated condition, dark and dirty, and we would not have anything to offer to the visitors. Today, I feel very proud and happy to come forward and receive the guests and invite them to my humble home.”<sup>3</sup>

Senior field officers received positive responses from the communities in housing groups compared with livelihood and health and hygiene groups.

### ***Food***

Food and nutrition are one of the three basic human needs. Food shortages are very real in the rural corners of Bhutan and poor nutrition is a hidden threat. Food shortage is understood as insufficient food production, mainly maize and rice. The findings of the food mapping report and food and nutrition security for the WFP projects that covered four dzongkhags and

2 Chhimi Dorji & Phuntsho Namgyel (PhD). Assessing the Impact of Housing on Family Well-Being & Poverty Alleviation In Remote Villages - A Case Study from Mongar Dzongkhag, East Bhutan

3 Dorji and Namgyel. Assessing the Impact of Housing on Family Well-Being & Poverty Alleviation In Remote Villages - A Case Study from Mongar Dzongkhag, East Bhutan, 2019

eight gewogs showed that 10% of households faced food shortages.

Overall, 56% of households scored an acceptable Food Consumption Score (FCS), while 34% were classified as borderline and 10% as poor. A worrisome 1% only consumed heme iron-rich food daily. In the case of under-five children, the minimum dietary diversity indicator was found to be 54.26%, meaning less than half the number of children did not have minimum dietary diversity, at least during one day prior to a survey conducted in 2020. Similarly, the minimum acceptable dietary at the same time was found to be 35.11% which means approximately two-thirds of the children did not have a minimum acceptable diet, at least during one day prior to the survey. The three biggest worries of the rural communities are getting sick, increasing food prices, and food shortages. All of these are also related to income.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Income***

The common measure of poverty is income: a means of meeting basic human needs. There have been and still are many projects and lots of donor support, especially in agriculture. In recent plans, the focus of intervention in the agriculture sector is commercialisation. Yet in remote rural villages, the main income sources are daily casual labour followed by farming activities. One of the survey reports shows that daily casual labour is the main source of income for 36% of the household followed by farming with 25% of households. Agricultural products as sources of income are limited by the absence of local consumers and uneconomical distant markets.

## **Discussions**

### ***Housing***

Shelter is one of the basic needs of humans after food and clothing, and the house fulfills that need. Achieving shelter is the most challenging of all the basic needs.

A proper house is more than a basic need. A research paper by Rolfe et al. concludes that “the basic human need for a home that provides more than simply shelter from the elements underpins the need to understand the relationships between housing, health, and wellbeing in ways that go

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4 Tarayana Foundation. Household Food and Nutrition Security Survey Report 2022.

beyond obvious problems such as damp and cold.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***Housing and the GNH Index***

The GNH index is measured through nine domains and 33 indicators (Figure 1). This study shows that housing support can contribute to GNH and, therefore, to “a just and harmonious society”. Housing support contributed to four of the nine domains - living standards, psychological well-being, community vitality, and cultural diversity - and 12 indicators out of 33 indicators: assets, housing, household per capita income, life satisfaction, positive emotion, spirituality, donations, community relationship, family safety, artisan skills, cultural participation, mental health and healthy days.

### ***Outcomes Intended and Unintended***

These are presented as evidence from the responses households gave to the assessment team.<sup>6</sup>

A total of 93% out of 425 households supported with the housing programme in Mongar, Samtse, Wangdue Phodrang, and Zhemgang dzongkhags felt safe and secure with the improved houses that have contributed to peace and happiness. This directly relates to GNH index assets, housing, household per capita income, life satisfaction, and positive emotion. There are also stories that those who left villages before the availability of good houses are returning to the villages. Families with improved houses invite friends to their homes without feeling ashamed of their living situation.

Similarly, 94% of the surveyed households said that sanitation had improved and 90% felt that sickness had decreased due to improved houses. The improved houses improved health and reduced maintenance costs, resulting in savings from reduced expenditures. This outcome contributes to household per capita income, mental health, and healthy days of the GNH index. Similar observations were made in the US where the author Guy Boulton writes, “What if doctors could write prescriptions for adequate housing? More than anything else, it might improve a person’s overall health”<sup>7</sup> in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, September 2022. In the

5 Steve Rolfe, Lisa Garnham, Isobel Anderson, Pete Seaman & Cam Donaldson. Housing as a social determinant of health and wellbeing: developing an empirically informed realist theoretical framework, BMC Public Health (2020),

6 Chhimi Dorji. Intervention Assessment Report for Four Dzongkhags, Tarayana Foundation, 2016

7 Guy Boulton. What if doctors could write prescriptions for adequate housing? More than anything else, it might improve a person’s overall health. in Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, September 2022.

same journal Craig Pollack, a physician and professor at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health states “Housing really is the foundation for health and well-being”.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, community members either improved or gained new skills in the construction sector (carpentry, masonry, plumbing, and electricity) and increased their capacity to earn income from construction activities. This outcome contributes to the GNH indicators of artisan skills, house per capita income, and cultural participation.

Housing support increased community relationships after housing improvements were carried out by the housing groups. The Field Officers report engaging with the communities on interventions like livelihood, green technology, and health and hygiene was easier after the initial success of the housing programme. In the same paper Eric Collins-Dyke, assistant administrator of supportive housing and homeless services for the Milwaukee County Housing Division said:

*“Asking people to do all those things while they were living outdoors on the street was just highly problematic and it wasn’t practical”.*<sup>9</sup>

The housing groups have transformed into income-generating groups like mask-making groups and vegetable production groups with the confidence gained from house construction.

Sangay Wangchuk from Salabi in Khengkhar, Mongar explains:

I received training at the Institute of *Zorig Chusum* (thirteen traditional arts and crafts) in Kawangjangsa, Thimphu, to make masks and now I can focus on income-earning activities to educate my children. Now the house construction group continues to work together to produce *baps* (masks) as a *bap tshogpa* (group) and produce vegetables as *sanam* (farming) *tshogpa*.<sup>10</sup>

This comes against the backdrop of *gungtongs* (empty registered houses) which have been a national issue for the last several years. However, there are no reports to show that the houses that the Foundation supported

8 Craig Pollack. Housing really is the foundation for health and well-being in Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, September 2022

9 Eric Collins Dyke in Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, September 2022

10 Dorji and Namgyel. Assessing the Impact of Housing on Family Well-Being & Poverty Alleviation In Remote Villages - A Case Study from Mongar Dzongkhag, East Bhutan, 2019

contributed numbers to those *guntongs*. In fact, there are reports that youths are returning home due to better houses after the Foundation supported the communities in improving their houses. For example, as per the Field Officer under Tsirangtoed gewog, 18 youths out of 30 are back in their villages. Similarly, under Pungtenchhu gewog, 11 youths out of 21 are back in the villages. In Rukha village, 11 youths who have left school are back in the village.<sup>11</sup>

Presently what the Foundation has is thousands of families in communities waiting for the Foundation to build a house for each of them. It will be important for the Foundation to find out the causes of the *guntongs* beyond human-wildlife conflicts, labour shortages, and irrigation challenges.

### ***Food and Nutrition***

Food shortages and undernutrition are concerns for rural communities. Easy access to imported food items, especially rice, is replacing the traditional food prepared from cereals other than rice. At times of food shortages, local cereals like maize, millet, and buckwheat are the last options. It is also surprising that the neighbours are not the first line of contact at times of food shortages. The invisible threat of undernutrition is evident from the reports on food consumption scores, minimum dietary diversity, and minimum acceptable diets. Support for food and nutrition can contribute to the health domain of GNH.

### ***Income***

The only skill that most of the rural population are related to is farming. The major source of income is from daily wage labour. The chances of earning income from off-farm daily wage labour are limited in terms of the skills they possess and the absence of infrastructure development. Often, infrastructure development is given to contractors.

## **Conclusion**

With housing conditions improved, communities can take on other interventions like livelihood, income generation, sanitation, hygiene, and health with confidence and interest, according to field officers.

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11 Personal communication with Field Officer and Ex-Gup of Rukha



With the potential for numerous positive outcomes like psychological, mental, health and physical outcomes like protection from cold and health, this sector certainly deserves national and international attention. To repeat - *“What if doctors could write prescriptions for adequate housing? More than anything else, it might improve a person’s overall health.”*

Achieving food and nutrition security is a big challenge with cheap imports which are easily accessible, and replacing traditional crops which are likely to reduce or stagnate production to self-sustenance. The imported food items are mostly addictive and devoid of nutritional content. Therefore, the government’s plan to provide schools and hospitals with local products is relevant and must be carried out with full intent and resources, beyond the present government’s tenure.

For the benefit of the rural communities, income generation support must not be limited to farming activities without assured markets for the products.

Finally, all the rural households’ needs and capacities are not the same at the same time. Everyone cannot build a house at the same time. Similarly, not all households have the same food and nutrition needs, or income. Therefore, only if support matches the needs and capacities of rural communities at the right time, can rural communities transform and enjoy a just and harmonious society.

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