# 18

# WELLBEING AND POLICY IN BHUTAN

*Kehinde Balogun and Kariuki Weru*

## Overview

Bhutan is a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy (Dorji, 2020) with diverse ethnicities comprising about 0.7 million people, which has globally spearheaded a wellbeing-based development framework. The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) was introduced in 1979 (Meier & Chakrabarti, 2016) and subsequently declared as a superior policy directive to Gross Domestic Product (Verma, 2022). Its novelty paved the way for the 2011 United Nations (UN) resolution 65/309 on Happiness, and its efficacy as a new global economic paradigm was discussed on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in April 2012. In 2013, the UN recognized March 20 as the International Day of Happiness, inspired by GNH's emphasis on happiness and collective wellbeing, moving away from the monetization at the heart of the GDP-driven global development model (Verma, 2022).

Happiness has long been at the forefront of policy in the Kingdom of Bhutan. This dates back to the country's unification in 1729, when the legal code stated that the central function of the government is to provide enabling conditions for its citizens to achieve happiness (Masaki & Tshering, 2021; Meier & Chakrabarti, 2016; Ura et al., 2012, p. 111). The concept of happiness in Bhutan differs significantly from the hedonistic and individualistic understanding that fuels the current economic and developmental trajectories (Verma, 2022; Levenson et al., 2004). For Bhutan, happiness is endogenous and directly linked to social responsibility (Verma, 2022). This form of happiness takes center stage in the holistic development of the wellbeing of individuals (Meier & Chakrabarti, 2016) and it acknowledges the interconnected nature of all lives (Richardson, 2023). The GNH policy emerged from the integration of Buddhist philosophy, local Indigenous development approaches, and the translation of research into policies and practices

DOI: 10.4324/9781003382447-21

(Richardson, 2023). The resultant merging of external and internal ideas (Richardson, 2023) makes it distinct from other wellbeing approaches, as noted by Sithey et al. (2018). This is because the GNH policy prioritizes the tripartite interconnected spheres of (1) preserving the environment, (2) promoting collective wellbeing, and (3) the pursuit of individual happiness. In wellbeing science, this is referred to as relational wellbeing, where the individual, societal, and environmental spheres are interdependent and mutually supportive in achieving holistic wellbeing (Balogun et al., 2023).

From this perspective, the principles of sufficiency (or contentment) and balance guide the harmonious interdependence of the individual and the collective on nature to concurrently meet spiritual and material needs. By emphasizing the importance of spiritual development to address "inner" or cultural poverty, which involves a deficit in fundamental human values and compassion, encompassing negative emotions and their impacts (Singye, 2014), GNH provides a comprehensive governance framework with happiness and wellbeing as the ultimate goals and outcomes of all growth efforts. This chapter illustrates how GNH policy strives to create the necessary conditions for happiness by addressing both internal factors (such as perceptions and values) and external challenges (including social inequality and biodiversity loss) through various government policies (Richardson, 2023). We present GNH as a holistic wellbeing initiative at a national level, while exploring its effectiveness and governance. Furthermore, we highlight GNH's knowledge gaps on mental health and offer areas of further research and public dialogues on wellbeing and sustainable development at global level.

## Wellbeing initiatives in Bhutan

The GNH framework can broadly be described as aiming toward the harmonious balance of human happiness within the bounds of localized sustainability by enhancing wellbeing in the economic, social, environmental, and cultural dimensions of Bhutanese society. GNH policy formation is institutionalized through both the GNH *Index* (GNHI) and the GNH *Commission* (*GNHC*), in which the former is a measurement tool that appraises the happiness of the population, while the latter is a multilayered governance framework that monitors and evaluates policies based on GNH philosophy (Masaki & Tshering, 2021). GNH differs from other wellbeing initiatives because it equally balances the four pillars of (1) sustainable socioeconomic development, (2) preservation and promotion of culture, (3) environmental conservation, and (4) good governance (Richardson, 2023; Dorji, 2020). From these pillars emerge nine policy domains: living standards, education, health, cultural diversity and resilience, community vitality, time use, psychological wellbeing, ecological diversity, and good governance. This forms the basis of the GNHI, thereby constituting the yardstick of progress used by the GNHC. As a framework that seeks the public good, GNH requires responsibility shared across government, individuals, communities, and businesses to achieve positive results

both over time and across different regions (Balasubramanian & Cashin, 2019; Ura et al., 2012, pp. 113 & 143).

In 2008 Bhutan created its first GNHI (Sithey et al., 2018) and in 2010 it introduced the revised GNHI and policy screening tool. The GNH *policy screening tool* allows for a systematic assessment of policies across the GNH domains (Sithey et al., 2018) and to prompt public deliberation, policy design, and resource allocation (Ura et al., 2012, p. 113). The GNHI on the other hand draws from a holistic and intentional vision of development (Ura et al., 2012, p. 113) consisting of 33 total indicators with 124 variables, each with their own indicator weights and considered equally important for achieving happiness (Balasubramanian & Cashin, 2019; Sithey et al., 2018). The selection of indicators was informed by participatory consultations based on the GNH pilot *surveys* conducted in 2006 and 2008 involving decision-makers, government agencies, autonomous bodies, and academics (Sithey et al., 2018). The GNH survey is a tool developed by the Centre of Bhutan Studies to measure happiness across GNH domains (Meier & Chakrabarti, 2016). It allows survey enumerators to engage with respondents, ensuring a thorough understanding of their perspectives and insights (Ura et al., 2012, p. 114) in order to rank their level of satisfaction on a scale from deeply unsatisfied to incredibly satisfied (Meier & Chakrabarti, 2016). As such, the data from GNH surveys can be compared longitudinally or be granularly disaggregated, by identifying (un)happy people by subgroups of districts, demographics, or particular indicators (Ura et al., 2012, p. 140). In so doing, the GNHI is a dynamic tool that captures the holistic experience of individuals and shows the diverse faces of happiness across time.

The GNHI was developed using the robust Alkire Foster methods for measuring concepts such as poverty or inequality, but tailored to Bhutan's needs to identify people either as happy or not yet happy by considering the "*sufficiencies*" that they enjoy (Ura et al., 2012, p. 130). The GNHI's sufficiency threshold indicates how much a person needs to enjoy sufficiency in all 33 indicators of the GNHI and how a particular respondent enjoys or lacks sufficiency in each indicator (Ura et al., 2012, p. 128). Measuring sufficiency thresholds determines the ratio of people who are either extensively or deeply happy (enjoy sufficiency) versus those who are not yet happy (lacking sufficiency) (Ura et al., 2012, p. 128). To date, three surveys in 2010, 2015, and 2022 followed the same 66% sufficient happiness threshold; that is an individual is considered happy if they met two-thirds of the variables and indicators stipulated by the GNHI.

For GNH policy creation and integration, the GNHC is the responsible body for the inclusion of GNH into all levels of governmental functions and policies across administrative and judicial districts, as well as locally at the level of residential blocks (gewogs) (Sithey et al., 2018). According to Balasubramanian and Cashin (2019), the GNHC implements such policy through a 5-Year Plan (FYP) with a results-based approach to assess each sector's performance across the four pillars of GNH. Sithey et al. (2018) noted that this requires individual government agencies to submit concept notes for review and consideration by the Council of Cabinet

Ministers. The initial screening of the concept note is done by the GNHC secretary to ensure its adherence to the GNH framework, by using the GNH policy screening tools and GNH indicators as reference points (Balasubramanian & Cashin, 2019). Thereafter, the GNHC, a 15-member committee with representatives from ministries to industries gives a score of 1 to 4 for 22 variables (Balasubramanian & Cashin, 2019; Sithey et al., 2018). The minimum score for proceeding to the policy approval process is 66 points and policies scoring less are rejected or require adjustments (Sithey et al., 2018). If successful, the concept notes proceed to the Cabinet for approval (Balasubramanian & Cashin, 2019). Upon approval, the planning, monitoring, and evaluation of the projects and policies occur continuously throughout their lifecycle (Balasubramanian & Cashin, 2019) and are spearheaded by the GNHC. As such, public surveys inform the GNHI, which then shapes GNH policy through the policy screening tool to allow for evidence-based decision-making for effective implementation.

### Evidence of effectiveness of existing wellbeing initiatives

The overall effectiveness of GNH policy can best be shown through the holistic logic of relational wellbeing, a dynamic and interdependent tripartite relationship between the environment, society, and individuals (Balogun et al., 2023). On the individual level, according to Ura et al. (2023, pp. 61–62), the proportion of individuals reporting happiness from 2010 to 2022 increased by 7.2%—from 40.9% in 2010 to 48.1% in 2022. The proportion of those categorized as "not yet happy" had negligibly increased, from 56.6% in 2015 to 57.9% in 2022. This shows the effectiveness of the survey in measuring happiness and its utility for time-based comparison, both of which consequently provide a feedback loop to enable specific corrective policy measures.

On the societal level, the national GNHI rating rose from 0.743 in 2010 to 0.756 and 0.781 in 2015 and 2022, respectively (Ura et al., 2023, p. 5). Balasubramanian and Cashin (2019) noted that this achievement was a consequence of the focus on poverty reduction during the 2008–2013 Five Year Plan, aligned with GNH principles. For example, from 2000 to 2010, GNH-inspired development approaches shifted resources to local districts and communities, thereby enhancing localized capacity, accountability, communication, and coordination. Over this period, GNH-based policies played a vital role in achieving economic growth, environmental legislation, biodiversity action plans, enhanced credit access for entrepreneurs, and sustainable industrial development. As a result, Bhutan averaged around 6% real GDP growth between 2010 and 2017, positioning it as one of the fastest growing low-income countries (Balasubramanian & Cashin, 2019).

Although GDP is widely associated with people's wellbeing, it is limited in this measurement, as it does not capture environmental damage to produce goods and services, nor does it consider the distribution of wealth among citizens. Studies have shown that higher levels of GDP and income do not correlate with happiness

in the long run, namely the Easterlin Paradox. This has also been observed in Bhutan, where substantial GDP growth has also remarkably contributed to poverty decline since 2007 (Balasubramanian & Cashin, 2019), leading to improvements in material wellbeing, including increased income, better housing, and enhanced healthcare (Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, 2016, p. 6). However, several psychological wellbeing indicators have significantly regressed (Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research, 2016, p. 7). A recent study notes that while individuals in lower- and middle-income brackets exhibit a heightened vulnerability to suicidal thoughts, individuals in the middle-income category demonstrated a reduced propensity for suicide attempts compared to their high-income counterparts (Dendup et al., 2020).

Bhutan's modernization efforts have inadvertently created some counterintuitive trends. For example, van Norren (2023) highlighted that the modifications made to educational criteria and curricula by the GNHC have created a scenario in which individuals who have undergone the latest school curricula hold an advantage in parliamentary elections (van Norren, 2023). Additionally, despite many youths passing national secondary examinations, only approximately half of these students can secure admission to national higher education institutions (Lester et al., 2020). Furthermore, youth in urban areas are often unable to secure employment, and those who recently migrated to the capital are frequently unable to cope with the demands of modernity, with many subsequently abusing substances (Grimmond et al., 2019). The substance abuse alongside food insecurity, stressful life events, academic pressures, physical and sexual violence, as well as loneliness and despair have been reported to contribute to suicidal ideation and attempts in Bhutan (Dendup et al., 2020; Dema et al., 2019). These studies show that women, and girls in particular, have a heightened vulnerability to both suicidal ideation and attempts as compared to their male counterparts (Dema et al., 2019).

The 2022 GNH report acknowledges and expresses concerns about both the heightened prevalence of unhealthy lifestyles—such as obesity—and the decline in mental health indicators (Ura et al., 2023, p. 74). For the latter, suicide ranks among the primary causes of mortality rates in Bhutan, representing an intricate interplay of personal, socio-economic, psychological, cultural, biological, and environmental factors (Dema et al., 2019). Given Bhutan's emphasis on non-economic measures to alleviate inner poverty through psychosocial wellbeing indicators, there is a need to better understand and address this phenomenon. However, preventive measures such as awareness-raising activities in schools and religious institutions, training of health workers as first responders, the establishment of a 24-hour crisis support hotline, and a national suicide registry are being implemented (Dendup et al., 2020).

Another outcome of GNH is environmental sustainability, rooted in the Buddhist principle of seeking harmony and balance with all living beings. Before GNH's inception, Bhutan's people valued their natural environment and acknowledged it as part of their own national identity (Thinley & Hartz-Karp, 2019). This led to

Bhutan's policy-makers and population advancing this inherent inclination towards the continued preservation of the environment by translating it into their development agenda. As a result, despite its accelerating modernization and development from the early 1960s to the late 2010s, Bhutan's forest cover increased by 8%. To this end, Bhutan remains one of the few carbon-negative nations and has pledged to remain at most carbon neutral in the future (Thinley & Hartz-Karp, 2019).

## Discussion and conclusion

This chapter discussed the GNH philosophy, its framework, index, survey, and policy screening tools, all of which were created to ensure happiness for Bhutan's population. It presented GNH as a national governance framework that considers GDP as one of the tools for achieving holistic wellbeing. By conducting a deeper exploration of the Buddhist and Indigenous thoughts that informed the GNH, this chapter underscores how a relational approach has shaped economic development and policy frameworks. Overall, GNH's focus on promoting happiness has resulted in policy reforms within a dynamic and inclusive form of governance. It achieved this by successfully harmonizing local belief systems with international best practices to simultaneously achieve economic growth and environmental sustainability. However, a key finding of this chapter is the concerning trend of unhealthy lifestyles and the decline in the mental health of Bhutanese citizens. In this regard, the chapter highlights knowledge and policy gaps in the interplay of socioeconomic status and mental health challenges that lead to high rates of suicide. Given GNH's focus on non-economic measures of wellbeing, we suggest key action points later, both for and beyond Bhutan.

## Actionable points

GNH as an alternative development paradigm highlights two important lessons: (1) the benefit of aligning development policies with locally shared identities and values and (2) establishing inclusive governance mechanisms that involve early consultation with diverse stakeholders to frame national wellbeing policies. However, wellbeing practitioners and policy-makers need to be sensitive to underlying inequality patterns and process unique to different contexts in adapting GNH to other localities and following the following recommendations:

- *Greater investment in Indigenous Knowledge* is needed due to its emphasis on spiritual and inner growth for intellectual diversity in understanding how psychosocial deficiencies link to various socioeconomic contexts. This should focus on the youth with an intersectionality approach, given that on a global scale, suicide ranks as the third leading cause of death for females and fourth for males among young people aged 15 to 29 years (World Health Organization, 2021).

- *Prioritizing non-economic wellbeing measures*, like a shared environmental identity, has enhanced GNH's success. However, limiting people to a single identity within national boundaries that exclude global influences, through access to the Internet for example, can hinder their capabilities (Sen, 2014). Given that the GNH agenda closely aligns with international development goals (Yangka et al., 2018), further research is needed to explore the impact of a rapidly changing global culture on individual identities and their wellbeing.
- GNH's approach to development requires *an ontological understanding of the interdependence of human wellbeing and environmental sustainability*. While there has been an increase in the calls for wellbeing-centered economies, Balogun et al. (2023) underscore that there is a need to realize that the current economic paradigm—centered around autonomous individuals and hypercompetition—is in itself a *belief* that undermines the essential relationships essential for human growth and development. The disregard of this growth and development from a young age can impede an individual's ability to achieve happiness and harmony with nature (Singye, 2014). Thus, we call for global research and public deliberation on the role of belief systems on human development to generate insights that can support the reorientation of institutions and policies toward sustainability and wellbeing.

## References

Balasubramanian & Cashin (2019). *Gross national happiness and macroeconomic indicators in the kingdom of Bhutan*. s.l.: International Monetary Fund Working Papers.

Balogun, K., Weru, K., & Shen, X. (2023). Freedom from want: A critical reflection in the face of the anthropocene. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, *24*(2), 274–283. https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2022.2161493

Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research (2016). *A compass towards a just and harmonious society*. Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research.

Dema, T., Tripathy, J. P., Thinley, S., Rani, M., Dhendup, T., Laxmeshwar, C., Tenzin, K., Gurung, M. S., Tshering, T., Subba, D. K., Penjore, T., & Lhazeen, K. (2019, December 2). Suicidal ideation and attempt among school going adolescents in Bhutan – a secondary analysis of a global school-based student health survey in Bhutan 2016. *BMC Public Health*, *19*(1), 1605. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-7791-0.

Dendup, T., Zhao, Y., Dorji, T., & Phuntsho, S. (2020, January 30). *Risk factors associated with suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in Bhutan: An analysis of the 2014 Bhutan STEPS Survey data*. *PLoS One*, *15*(1), e0225888. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0225888

Dorji, T. (2020, December 22). The gross national happiness framework and the health system response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Bhutan. *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, *104*(2), 441–445.

Grimmond, J. K., Kornhaber, R., Visentin, D., & Cleary, M. (2019). A qualitative systematic review of experiences and perceptions of youth suicide. *PLoS One*, *14*(6).

Lester, S. V., Sacra, M. M., Durham, J. C., & Nirola, D. K. (2020). Youth and young adult suicide in Bhutan: A stress and resilience approach. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling*, *42*, 132–146.

Levenson et al. (2004). *Happiness in the midst of change: A human development approach to studying GNH in the context of economic development* (pp. 450–460). Centre for Bhutan Studies.

Masaki, K., & Tshering, J. (2021). Exploring the origins of Bhutan's gross national happiness. *Journal of South Asian Development*, *16*(2), 273–292.
Meier, B. M., & Chakrabarti, A. (2016). The paradox of happiness: Health and human rights in the kingdom of Bhutan. *Health Human Rights*, *18*(1), 193–208.
Richardson, J. (2023). How does Gross National Happiness offer an integrated perspective linked with health, economics, and nature? *Journal of Ayurveda and Integrative Medicine*, *14*(1).
Sen, A. (2014). Justice and identity. *Economics and Philosophy*, *30*, 1–10.
Singye, N. (2014). Role of teachers in alleviation cultural poverty: GNH begin in the classroom. *Journal of the Open University of Japan*, *31*, 47–54.
Sithey, G., Li, M., & Thow, A. M. (2018). Strengthening non-communicable disease policy with lessons from Bhutan: Linking gross national happiness and health policy action. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, *39*, 327–342. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41271-018-0135-y
Thinley, J. Y., & Hartz-Karp, J. (2019). National progress, sustainability and higher goals: The case of Bhutan's gross national happiness. *Sustainable Earth*, *2*(11).
Ura, K., Alkire, S., Wangdi, K., & Zangmo, T. (2023). *GNH 2022*. Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies.
Ura, K., Alkire, S., & Zangmo, T. (2012). *Case study: Bhutan: Gross national happiness and the GNH index*. s.n.
van Norren, D. E. (2023). Gross national happiness in Bhutan: Is Buddhist constitutionalism legitimate in the age of secularism? A post-colonial view. *Religions*, *14*(72).
Verma, R. (2022). Bhutan's gross national happiness: A development alternative at the interface of anthropology. *General Anthropology*, *29*(2), 3–6.
World Health Organization (2021). *Suicide worldwide in 2019: Global health estimates*. s.n.
Yangka, D., Newman, P., Rauland, V., & Devereux, P. (2018). Sustainability in an emerging nation: The Bhutan case study. *Sustainability*, *10*(5), 1622.