All societies seek to create wellbeing for individuals. The question is not whether societies desire welfare or not. The fundamental questions are: What does wellbeing mean? How do we measure it? And how do we use indicators to organize society and its institutions to maximize wellbeing?

Answering these complex questions is a challenging endeavor, especially given the diversity of values and worldviews around the globe. However, at the center of the essential questions of development and progress lie the indicators we use as a society to measure wellbeing and develop policies. As Hazel Henderson, futurist and evolutionary economist, said, “Statistical indicators are the structural DNA codes of nations. They reflect a society’s values and goals and become the key drivers of economic and technological choices” (as cited in Salvaris, 2007). Indicators reveal particular information about society and should embody values that people care about, or at least should care about. Therefore, if indicators are to drive the policies that push society in a genuine direction of progress, they should adequately measure wellbeing and progress.

Over the years, the world has developed what Joseph Stiglitz, Professor of Economics, Columbia University, calls “GDP fetishism,” a dogmatic fixation on GDP as a measure of progress. As a result, institutions and policies have revolved around maximizing GDP with little regard for what that means for individuals’ standard of living and for social and environmental wellbeing.

Alternatives to GDP
If GDP is not an appropriate measure of wellbeing and progress, then what is? Questioning GDP means asking the questions: What do we care about as a society? What does wellbeing mean for us? As Stiglitz (2009) asserted, “We need to open a national dialogue that sheds light on what values are important to society, and then create metrics that reflect this and are used by decision-makers.” This dialogue is not an easy one to have, but it is definitely a fruitful one. If more holistic, comprehensive, and sustainable indicators are to emerge, what variables should be used? Who decides what these variables are? How is the information that the indicator reveals used by decision-makers?
Gross National Happiness in Bhutan

Bhutan is a country about the size of Switzerland located on the eastern ridges of the Himalayas. Located between the Assam-Bengal Plain of India and the Plateau of Tibet of southwestern China, the country has a population of approximately 682,000. In 2008, it shifted from being an absolute monarchy to a multiparty parliamentary democracy. Seventy percent of people live in rural areas and mostly farm for a living, although like in many other countries, rural to urban migration is a growing trend in Bhutan.

The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) was first introduced in 1972 by the fourth King of Bhutan, H.M. Jigme Singye Wangchuck. For years following the introduction of the concept, GNH served as a guiding philosophy for the absolute monarchy based on four pillars:

- Equitable Economic Development
- Environmental Preservation
- Cultural Resilience
- Good Governance

Having absolute power, the King used the four pillars of GNH to guide the construction and implementation of policies in Bhutan. In recent years, however, with more Bhutanese students pursuing education in India, the United States, and elsewhere, and with Bhutan slowly opening up to the world, the concept of GNH has been scrutinized and sometimes criticized for not being measurable or statistically sound. GNH first came to public global attention in 1987 when, in an interview in Bhutan, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck told John Elliott of the Financial Times, “We are convinced that we must aim for contentment and happiness . . . (because even if we) raise the per capita income and increase prosperity (it) is not going to guarantee that happiness, which includes political stability, social harmony, and the Bhutanese culture and way of life” (p. 1).

As a way of integrating the scientific methods of industrialized nations, the Center for Bhutan Studies (CBS) has developed a GNH index from the research of a team that culminated in the first GNH questionnaire in 2005 (T. Zangmo, personal communication, July 24, 2009). The most recent GNH questionnaire focused on nine areas:

- Psychological Wellbeing
- Time Use
- Community Vitality
- Cultural Diversity and Resilience
- Education
- Ecological Diversity and Resilience
- Living Standard
- Good Governance
1. PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING
“As collective happiness is the main goal of a GNH society, psychological wellbeing is of primary importance in gauging the success of the state in providing appropriate policies and services” (Ura, 2008). The psychological wellbeing domain of the GNH questionnaire covers three areas: general psychological distress indicators, emotional balance indicators, and spirituality indicators. Elements like the prevalence rates of negative emotions (jealousy, frustration, selfishness) and positive emotions (generosity, compassion, calmness), the practice of spiritual activities like meditation and prayers, and overall life enjoyment are part of this domain.

2. TIME USE
“The domain of time use is one of the most effective windows on quality of life as it analyzes the nature of time spent within a 24-hour period, as well as activities that occupy longer periods of time” (Ura, 2008). The time use domain highlights the value of non-work time for happiness and overall quality of life. The domain was constructed under the assumption that non-work activities such as “sleeping, personal care, community participation, education and learning, religious activities, social and cultural activities, sports, leisure, and travel add to a rich life and contribute to levels of happiness” (Ura, 2008). Even though the “measurement of time devoted to unpaid work activities like care of children and sick members of a household, maintenance of household, and others can provide a proxy measure of the contribution made by unpaid activities to welfare,” the value of such activities are underestimated in most national accounts (Ura, 2008).

3. COMMUNITY VITALITY
“The domain of community vitality focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of relationships and interactions within communities. It examines the nature of trust, belongingness, vitality of caring relationships, safety in home and community, and giving and volunteering” (Ura, 2008). The domain consists of seven areas: family vitality, safety, reciprocity, trust, social support, socialization, and kinship density.

4. CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND RESILIENCE
“Maintenance of cultural traditions has been one of Bhutan’s primary policy goals, as traditions and cultural diversity contributes to identity, values, and creativity” (Ura, 2008). This domain considers the diversity and strength of cultural traditions through six areas: dialect use, traditional sports, community festivals, artisan skill, value transmission, and basic precept.

5. HEALTH
“The health indicators assess the health status of the population, the determinants of health, and the health system. Health status indicators show information on self-rated health, disabilities, body-mass index, number of healthy days per month, knowledge about HIV transmission, and breast feeding practices” (Ura, 2008). Barriers to health are also assessed according to the walking distance to the nearest health facility and access to health services. The three areas in the health domain are health status, health knowledge, and barriers to health.
6. EDUCATION
“Education contributes to the knowledge, values, creativity, skills, and civic sensibility of citizens” (Ura, 2008). The emphasis of the education domain is on the effectiveness of contributing to collective wellbeing. The education domain consists of the following areas: educational attainment, Dzongkha language, and folk and historical literacy.

7. ECOLOGICAL DIVERSITY AND RESILIENCE
“By examining the state of Bhutan’s natural resources, the pressures on ecosystems, and different management responses, the domain of ecological diversity and resilience is intended to describe the impact of domestic supply and demand on Bhutan’s ecosystems” (Ura, 2008). The ecology domain mainly focuses on perceptual data on ecology, since most of the objective measurements of ecological diversity and resilience are conducted by other environmental agencies. It uses three areas: ecological degradation, ecological knowledge, and afforestation.

8. LIVING STANDARD
“The domain of living standard covers the basic economic status of the people. The indicators assess the levels of income at the individual and household level, sense of financial security, room ration, and house ownership” (Ura, 2008). The indicators also reflect economic hardships, like inability to repair households and the purchase of second-hand clothing. The living standard domain consists of four areas: income, housing, food security, and hardship.

9. GOOD GOVERNANCE
“The domain of good governance evaluates how people perceive various government functions in terms of their efficacy, honesty, and quality. The themes… include human rights, leadership at various levels of government, performance of government in delivering services and controlling inequality and corruption, and peoples’ trust in the media, the judiciary, and the police” (Ura, 2008). The three areas of the good governance domain are: government performance, freedom, and institutional trust.

Policy Making Based on GNH
The Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) is the planning branch of the government, and they use the information that the GNH index reveals to construct policies that promote GNH. The GNHC develops most of the policies and programs in Bhutan, and they are increasingly using the information from the GNH index to channel resources to the areas and issues where they are most needed.

GNH and its Challenges
Bhutan is indeed a living example of a society where the distinct culture has a strong influence on not only how the country is governed, but also how the country moves forward in their efforts to join the community of industrialized nations. They have actively opened a dialogue that addresses questions such as, “What is progress? What matters to us as a society? How do we measure it? How do we use statistics to shape institutions and policies?” As does any other country in the South Asian region and other developing regions of the world, Bhutan faces many social, economic, and political challenges. But what differentiates Bhutan from other nations is that it uses an alternative approach to development by using Gross National Happiness as its metric of progress and as the driver for policies in the country. This allows its cultural heritage to remain intact as it embraces the globalization of the 21st century.
Comprehension Check-in

1. What fundamental questions should societies concerned about the wellbeing of their citizens ask?
2. Why was the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) created?
3. How effective is the GDP at measuring progress?
4. Upon what principles did the King of Bhutan base the idea of Gross National Happiness (GNH)?
5. How did the Center for Bhutan Studies (CBS) develop the Gross National Happiness index?
6. What are the nine areas of focus in the GNH index?
7. What is the impact of GNH in Bhutan and globally?

References


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