The Eight Manifestations of GNH: Multiple Meanings of a Development Alternative

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Abstract

Despite growing recognition that GDP measures everything except deeper and meaningful aspects of life, conventional development approaches continue to centrally measure poverty, implement policy and operationalize practice in narrow economic and technical terms, without adequate attention paid to the holistic and interconnected nature of development as lived and experienced by those intended as its beneficiaries. The Royal Kingdom of Bhutan represents a rare context for the study and operationalization of a living development alternative that challenges GDP-metrics. The nation is best known for the articulation and practice of an innovative alternative and sustainable development path, exemplified in Gross National Happiness (GNH). In the contemporary context, it continues to be at the forefront of developing and advancing GNH as a unique and holistic development approach that values happiness and wellbeing of people and sentient beings. However, GNH is prone to popular misunderstandings of its concept, principles and manifestations within Bhutan, and subject to superficial and problematic scholarly analysis, hurried comprehension and

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limited due diligence in the international context. This paper makes a modest but concerted effort to respond to the dilemmas and challenges of understanding facing GNH by exploring its epistemological and historical foundations, and disentangling multiple meanings manifested in eight different forms. In doing so, it aims to contribute greater clarity to a growing body of multifarious writings on the subject, and more specifically, to an emerging body of scholarly literature on GNH by shedding explanatory light to the way it is conceptualized, operationalized, practiced, understood, internalized, and continuously undergoing change as it is refined and deepened over time.

Introduction

> Now more than ever, the need for a different development approach is highlighted in ecological, social and economic crises: ecosystem degradation, potentially catastrophic climate change, excessive consumption of the affluent and extreme poverty on the other end; and growing inequalities both between and within nations. Underlying all these crises is the lack of a holistic view that would focus on causes instead of symptoms, and the inadequacy of the architecture of global governance to address these problems (SNDP 2013, p.vii).

The world faces its greatest challenge in post-world-war history, with widening socio-economic inequalities, unchallenged growth, and looming environmental crises driven by anthropogenic climate change (Stiglitz et al., 2008). At the heart of this crises lies a stark disconnect between economic and socio-ecological concerns inherent in conventional development approaches. As the SNDP notes above, there is an urgent need for an alternative development approach that is more holistic, sustainable, equitable, and that centrally challenges the problematic use of gross domestic product (GDP) as a measure of progress (2013). In 1968, during in his famous speech at the University of Kansas, Robert F. Kennedy similarly underscored the serious limitations of GDP:

> even if we act to erase material poverty, there is another greater task, it is to confront the poverty of satisfaction purpose and dignity that afflicts us all. Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things .... Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armored cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities. It counts Whitman's rifle and Speck's knife, and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children. Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile (Kennedy, 1968).

Despite the growing recognition that GDP "measures in short, except that which makes life worthwhile" (ibid.), conventional approaches continue to centrally measure poverty, implement policy and operationalize practice in these narrow terms, without adequate attention paid to the holistic and interconnected nature of development as lived and experienced by those intended to be its beneficiaries. With a limited growth-based focus, GDP only measures and aggregates market economic activity based on a competitive model of endless growth, thereby leaving out what matters for the planet and its inhabitants in the face of multiple ecological, social and economic crises: wellbeing, sustainability

and ultimately, cooperation and conviviality.

Within such a context, the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan represents a rare context for the study and operationalization of a living development alternative that challenges GDP-metrics. The nation is best known for the articulation and practice of an innovative alternative and sustainable development path, exemplified in Gross National Happiness (GNH). In the contemporary context, it has been for a great number of years, and continues to be, at the forefront of developing and advancing GNH as a unique development approach that values happiness and wellbeing of people and sentient beings.

Based on larger body of research carried out from 2011 to 2019[1] that explores the way GNH theorizes, intersects with, embodies and operationalizes culture (Thin et al., 2017), degrowth (Verma, 2017a), climate change (Verma et al., 2018), gender differences (Verma & Karma Ura, 2017), ethical tourism (Verma in press a) and strategic research (TCSRD, 2017; CBS in press)[2], the impetus for writing this paper grew organically from questions arising about its multifarious meanings. During the larger study, it became evident that GNH is prone to popular misunderstandings of its concept, principles and other manifestations within Bhutan (Verma in press b). In the international context, it is subject to superficial and problematic analysis in scholarly writing as well as hurried comprehension, especially in the international mass and social media lacking due diligence (ibid.). This paper

[1] The methods used for the study include quantitative and qualitative analysis of the GNH index, collection of survey data, interviews, participant observation and observant participation, and review of and triangulation against secondary sources of literature.

[2] The author is deeply grateful to Dasho Karma Ura, Dorji Penjore and Tshering Phuntsho (formerly) at the Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies for their encouragement and support in writing this paper, which grew out of nearly a decade of interest and study of GNH. The author is also indebted to Dasho Jigme Y. Thinley, Aum Chime P. Wangdi of the Tarayana Foundation and Pem Lama at the Institute of Happiness and Bhutan Ecological Society, for providing invaluable comments and feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

represents a modest, concerted effort to respond to the dilemmas and challenges of understanding facing GNH. By setting to explore its epistemological foundations, it aims to disentangle its multiple meanings, thereby contributing to some degree of clarity to a growing body of multifarious understandings and writing on the subject.

While GNH has gained traction and influencing power in Bhutan and beyond, multiple sources of misunderstanding are exemplified by confusion and conflation regarding its definition, meaning, intention, articulation, justification, operationalization and effects. For instance, among other issues in the international context, GNH is sometimes confused with other wellbeing and happiness indices. Within Bhutan, the rapidly changing development and political landscape in a new era of democracy has meant that "the precise meaning of GNH and how to best achieve it has become a subject of democratic debate" (Hayden, 2015, p. 177), including misunderstanding of roles and responsibilities between and among individuals, society and the state. During some historical moments in Bhutan's break-neck transition to democracy and middle-income country status, it has sometimes been appropriated internally for political means or externally for academic gain. Hence, expectations regarding the ability of the state to generate GNH are high, but understanding of mutual responsibility and roles, including that of individuals and enabling conditions created by the state in the pursuit of happiness, remains unclear and somewhat muddled.

To gain some degree of clarity about GNH concepts, guiding principles and its functionalities in different spheres, levels and contexts, this paper sets to overview its emergence within context-specific and historical circumstances, before analyzing its various meanings, aspects and articulations, or put simply, the way it manifests itself in eight different forms. In doing so, the paper aims to contribute to a growing body of scholarly literature on GNH, by shedding explanatory light to the way it is conceptualized, operationalized, practiced, understood, and continuously undergoing change as it is refined and deepened

over time.

Emergence of GNH: Brief overview of history and context

A small land-locked country nestled in the Greater Himalayas with a population of 734,374 inhabits and a land area of 38,394 km^2 (NSB, 2019), Bhutan predominantly follows Vajrayana Buddhism (Kumagai, 2015). Its innovative development policy priorities are informed by historical, spiritual influences and socio-cultural values that were not ruptured by the impacts of colonization common in most other countries of the South[3]. Its historical trajectory as a nation began with the existence of small agricultural communities independent of a higher single authority, to their unification by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal into a single administrative apparatus founded on a two-fold system *(lugs gnyis)* of religion and secular government from 1626 to 1651 (Sonam Kinga, 2009; Ardussi, 2004). This was followed by the creation of its first legal code in 1652, with the subsequent legal code in 1729. A hereditary monarchy was established in 1907, which eventually led to the formation of its first national assembly in 1953 by the Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (Sonam Kinga, 2009). Through all these transformations, Bhutan remained isolated over many years, with limited and purposively controlled exposure to the outside world from its geographically remote location in the Himalayas.

Bhutan fundamentally shed its isolationist policy in 1959 in reaction to Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet, which generated fears about sovereignty. Henceforth, political and development priorities became a function of national security concerns, sovereignty and self-reliance triggered by a shift in the regional balance of power (Priesner, 1999). The 1960s were characterized by the cautious opening up to the outside world politically and economically through the establishment of diplomatic ties with India and other countries. In 1962, Bhutan became a member of the Colombo Plan Group, soon followed

[3] Bhutan is amongst a few Asian countries that were never colonized, including Nepal, Thailand and Brunei.

by its joining the International Postal Union in 1969, and its admission as a member of the United Nations in 1971 (Karma Phuntsho 2013; Lham Dorji, 2008). In 1998, the Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck relinquished sovereign power through the election of the Council of Ministers by the National Assembly to govern the country (Karma Phuntsho, 2013; Sonam Kinga, 2009). In 2005, His Majesty declared his intention to hold the first national democratic elections in 2008. He also announced his abdication of the throne to his oldest son in 2006. Soon after, the accession of the Fifth King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck to the golden crown was celebrated nationwide in 2008 (Lham Dorji, 2008). Thus, in just under four centuries, the country went from a collection of loose feudal communities to a constitutional democratic monarchy with a ground-breaking vision of development.

Bhutan's coming of age as a modern nation and cautious emergence on the global stage occurred in the context of rapidly shifting geopolitics of the region, with emerging superpowers flexing their political reach directly to its north and to its south. The volatile politics of the region were further exacerbated by conflicts between and within neighboring countries, with spill-over effects in Bhutan. Further, amidst insurgencies on its southern border, Bhutan's ability to defeat, overcome and push back against threats to its sovereignty, national identity and social fabric proved critical in maintaining its status as a modern nation. These complex issues have been the subject of substantial discussion, debate and critique, as noted by Schroeder (2018) and Karma Phuntsho (2013), for example. Most relevant to the discussion on GNH is Bhutan's ability to encapsulate its unique cultural identity as one of the defining strengths of its sovereignty. This has allowed for the existence of Bhutan as a nation-state, its cultural and political integrity (Karma Phuntsho, 2013), as well as its ability to develop an alternative development path.

Its focus on happiness evolved organically from historical features of social and cultural relations embedded in Buddhist

and feudal values of a nation that was for many centuries isolated from the outside world (Priesner, 1999). The initiatives Bhutan has taken towards addressing various development issues highlights the existence of a distinctly indigenous and organic vision of development – one that evolved from Bhutan's unique socio-cultural, political-economic, demographic and historic circumstances (Priesner, 1999). Rather than an "intellectual construct detached from practical experience", it is results from the translation of a cultural, social and spiritual consciousness into development priorities (ibid., p. 27).

Without the colonial baggage of other countries in Asia, its embracing of modernization was on its own terms, with an explicit focus on prosperity and happiness as the objective of development for its people. In 2008, Bhutan became a democracy, with the adoption of the constitution that ensures "the State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness" (RGoB, 2008, article 9). Its alternative development approach is exemplified by its status of being the only country in the world that is carbon negative, absorbing three times more carbon than it emits (Nelson, 2015; NEC, 2015). This is enabled by Article 5, section 3 of it constitution which specifies that sixty percent of its land must be under forest cover in perpetuity (RGoB, 2008). Other notable policies that exemplify GNH, for example, are its aim to rely predominantly on organic agriculture, reliance on environmentally clean sources of revenue such as run-of-the-river hydro-power, high value-low volume tourism that limits the number of tourists into the country on an annual basis, and jurisdiction over international development organizations, foreign capital, development aid and foreign experts within its borders that enable the stewardship of its own development path.

Eight manifestations of GNH

GNH can be considered many things at once. More specifically, the central argument of this paper is that it manifests itself

in eight different forms elaborated below: a moral concept, guiding principles for holistic development, a development conceptual framework, an index of measurement, policy and project screening, individual practice, global influence, and the secularization of Buddhist concepts (Verma, 2017a, Verma & Karma Ura, 2017).

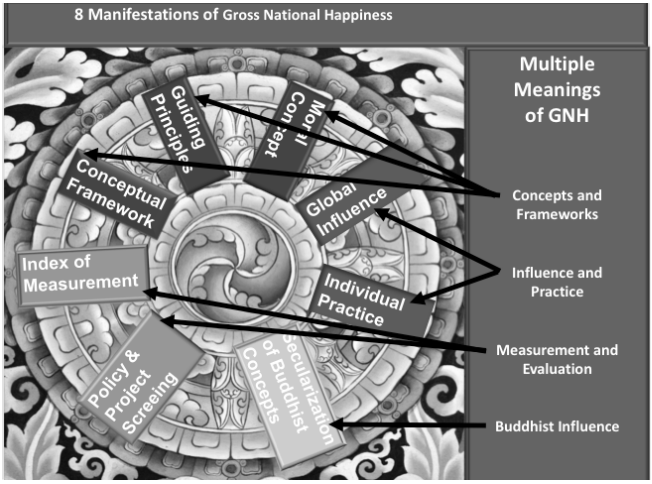

Figure 1. Eight manifestations of GNH

Moral concept

GNH is a moral concept that establishes the foundational influence for its other manifestations. Although a secular moral concept that has influenced and been adapted in different countries around the world, it is implicitly anchored philosophically in Buddhist morality and ethics, as discussed below (Verma, 2017a, 2017b; Givel, 2015; Tashi Wangmo & Valk, 2012; Phuntsok Tashi, 2004). At its moral center, GNH is about happiness, or wellbeing. Rather than a utilitarian approach to wellbeing, the essence of GNH is a higher, meaningful purpose. Such a pursuit of happiness is consistent with moral and ethical notions, which strive to bring about collective happiness and a deeper meaning of happiness in society. Jigmi Thinley (2012) articulates the collective essence contained in the concept of

GNH which differentiates it from conventional individual-centric approaches:

> If every individual were assumed to want happiness for himself [or herself], GNH would be no different from the concept of the well-known utility for maximizing figures in economics, motivated only by their need for personal satisfaction. The pursuit of GNH means the endeavor to create a society or nation in which the facilitation of progressive collective happiness is the goal of governance. To serve this purpose, society, which adopts and adapts to changing goals and thereby defines itself, must want it against barriers and competing ideas that may have the force to push society in different or opposing directions. The meaningful enjoyment of life as a whole is hindered not only by individual circumstances, cognitive fallacies and our lack of positive will, but also by the legacy of past generations in the form of structural conditions which can either prevent – or help us – in achieving harmony of existence or certain pursuits. Thus, building consensus, motivating, creating and maintaining a truly conscious wish to pursue collective happiness among the people becomes a major function of government (p. 11).

Given these ethical and moral roots, GNH strives for the happiness of all human beings, as well as that of all sentient beings, which are critical to a sustainable and thriving environment. Happiness, in this sense, is distinct from "fleeting, pleasurable and 'feel good' moods so often associated with the term [happiness]" (Jigmi Thinley, 2009, cited in Karma Ura et al., 2012a, p. 7). Hence, GNH strives for deeper, meaningful and long-term attainment of happiness, rather than temporary and superficial forms (Verma, 2017a). It focuses on inner-contentment, peace and non-attachment, rather than material comfort and fleeting pleasures alone (ibid.). Collective happiness, concern and service towards others, and harmony with nature and all sentient beings, distinctly sets GNH apart from GDP and mainstream notions of development normally concerned with an

individualistic and material sense of happiness, a hollow pursuit of perpetual growth, and narrowly defined notions of material progress (ibid.).

The moral concept is further elaborated through a focus on balancing both material and spiritual wellbeing, while recognizing the mismatch between unchecked consumerism and the desire to buy, produce, build, employ and borrow, and the limits to all these activities (Schneider et al., 2010; Martinez-Allier et al., 2010). Interdependence plays an important role in attaining this balance. As such, happiness is a public good, although it is experienced subjectively based on and influenced by a person's frame of reference, experiences with respect to others or to the past (Jigmi Thinley, 2012). It is perhaps more relational than relative in character "because the quality and depth of relationships with others influence our happiness far more than a comparative possession of a commodity" (ibid., p. 6). Rather than the diminishment of annihilation of the individual in favour of interdependence, GNH follows the post-structural notion of multiple realities, where both individual and collective happiness co-exist but in an inter-relational manner. It is logical that one cannot exist without the other, as captured by both the aggregation and disaggregation of the index measurement discussed below. At the same time, individualism and egocentric greed that has come to mark the current era of neoliberalism are challenged, while keeping mind that all nation-states, including Bhutan, are based on a collective imaginary.

GNH is distinct in its approach of equating development with moral values. As such, the set of values that promote happiness as the end goal of development comprise of holistic social, physical, material and spiritual needs; balanced progress; collective happiness as an all-encompassing phenomenon; sustainable wellbeing for the sake of current and future generations; and equitable distribution of wellbeing (Karma Ura et al., 2012b). From this perspective, GNH is a middle path between culture and modernization, in order to counter the strong homogenizing effects of globalization (Karma

Ura, 2005). Given that Bhutan's independence had existed without diplomatic links and participation in the international community for a long period (Karma Ura, 2005), it nonetheless felt the acute impacts of modernization, which often involved the introduction of exogenous ideas and items that did not always blend well with its indigenous practices and cosmology (Karma Phuntsho, 2013). Hence, in order retain its sovereignty and to adhere to its distinctively alternative development path, it has been common for Bhutan to reject development aid due to external conditionalities imposed by western donors, or external pressures to relegate foreign experts as advisors (Priesner, 1999).

Guiding principles for development with values

The conceptualization of GNH as guiding principles for development has its roots in the unification of Bhutan in 1729, where the legal code by Zhabdrung Rimpoche declared: "if the Government cannot create happiness (*dekid*) for its people, there is no purpose for the Government to exist" (Karma Ura, 2010, cited in Karma Ura et al., 2012, p. 6). In the early modern era, there is some written evidence of decrees pertaining to happiness as a general, recurrent theme for development at the highest policy-making level (Priesner, 1999). In the late 1960s, the late 3rd King of Bhutan, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, signified his view that the overall objective of development was to make "the people prosperous and happy" (Kuensel, 1968, in Priesner, 1999, p. 28)[4]. He further elaborated that there would be no point in developing the country if the people were to suffer (Karma Ura, 2005). He similarly expressed the importance of "prosperity and happiness" in his keynote address upon the occasion of Bhutan's admission to the United Nations in 1971 (Priesner, 1999, p. 28).

This unique historical legacy regarding the centrality of happiness was meaningfully and purposively placed at the heart of contemporary development and policy-making in Bhutan, as

[4] Priesner, then a program officer at UNDP, Thimphu, Bhutan, cites this quote reported on page 7 of Kuensel Vol. 2, No. 9, May 1-15, 1968 (1999, p. 28).

the vision of the Fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who in his early reign declared "our country's policy is to consolidate our sovereignty to achieve economic self-reliance, prosperity and happiness for our country and people" (Priesner, 1999, p. 28). This vision of happiness-oriented development was first articulated between 1971 and1972 by the 4th King when he ascended the throne and before his coronation in 1974 (GNHC, 2013; Jigmi Thinley, 2012; Karma Ura et al., 2012b; Karma Ura, 2005; Priesner, 1999). He expressed his growing concern over problematic GDP metrics commonly used to guide development. To achieve this, he introduced an innovative vision for Bhutan by drawing on moral concepts of happiness outlined above. The term GNH was first explicitly expressed internationally upon the return of the Fourth King from the 1979 Non-Aligned Summit in Cuba, in response to a question posed by Indian journalists regarding the GDP of Bhutan, whereby he enunciated that Gross National Happiness was more important for Bhutan than Gross Domestic Product (Karma Phuntsho, 2013). The concept of GNH was reported in the international media in 1980, in two articles published by the *New York Times* (Kaufman, 1980a, 1980b), followed in 1987 by an interview given by the Fourth King published by the *Financial Times of London* (Elliott, 1987). In the expression of GNH as a guiding compass for development, the happiness of Bhutanese women and men took precedence over economic-centric growth. The far-sighted wisdom of this approach is based on the understanding of the problematic inter-relation between happiness and income, supported by research that income does not result in happiness in the long term (Easterlin, 2010). Continuing the legacy of happiness-oriented development, in his coronation speech in 2008, His Majesty the Fifth King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, stated "I have been inspired by the way I look at things by Bhutan's development philosophy of Gross National Happiness…to me it signifies simply 'development with values'" (Karma Ura et al., 2012b, p. 6).

From the moment GNH was first enunciated as a reaction to GDP, its elaboration as a moral concept further developed and deepened

over time. GNH is a response to Bhutan's critical engagement with the prevalence of GDP in mainstream development. At its core, it questions the validity of the singular belief in GDP as a measure of societal progress (Jigmi Thinley, 2012), based on the critique of economic-centric role of human relations and society (Sekulava et al. 2013). As O'Neill (2012) suggests, "GDP has undermined the goal of economic welfare that it was supposed to support because people have ended up serving the abstract (but quantitative) indicator instead of the concrete (but qualitative) goal" (p. 222). Within GNH, bias towards consumption found in dominant development approaches is countered by the fact that detachment from the proliferation of wants can lead to happiness. A recognition of social, cultural, environmental and human needs, and how they differ from wants, is critical for this perspective. This holistic and balanced approach led to the formulation of the ground-breaking conceptual framework at the heart of GNH.

A conceptual framework for alternative development

Without a unifying conceptual framework, GNH could not be studied or operationalized as it has been, nor could it be compared or juxtaposed against other dominant development approaches to understand its unique contributions towards theorizing human progress. The articulation and composition of the GNH conceptual framework was spear-headed by Jigme Y. Thinley, then chairperson of the Council of Ministers and who would later become the first democratically elected Prime Minster of Bhutan in 2008, during the 1998 Millennium Meeting for Asia and the Pacific in Seoul, South Korea (Karma Phuntsho, 2013; Jigmi Thinley, 1998). The moral concept and guiding principles of GNH was thus elaborated through a conceptual framework that brings together four concrete pillars that include: sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, good governance, environmental conservation, and the preservation and promotion of culture.

The four GNH pillars translate the moral concept and guiding principles into strategic objectives for development in several

ways. They are founded on the belief that holistic development cannot be achieved by any of the pillars in isolation. Hence, the four pillars are accorded equal weight and mutually support one another. Indicating the growing weight the development alternative was accorded in Bhutan, in 2005, the country's main planning authority was renamed the Gross National Happiness Commission, charged with the writing and implementation of Bhutan's five-year plans, which were first initiated in 1961 (Karma Puntsho, 2013). Hereafter, the four pillars began to influence and shape Bhutan's ninth (2002-2007), tenth (2008-2013) and eleventh (2013-2018) five-year development plans that directed national policies, programs and practices, as well as operationally structured GNH within development planning (Schroeder 2018). Munro (2016) quantifies the increasing emphasis of GNH over the five-years plans (FYP) in terms of the number of times it was referenced, from seven in the 9th FYP, eighty in the 10th FYP, to fifty in the first chapter alone in the 11th FYP which also began to use GNH as its core concept as well as included the analysis the GNH index survey findings discussed below.

As captured by its four pillars, GNH genuinely challenges GDP in terms of its goal of ecological sustainability, social equality and wellbeing, and the incorporation of subjective dimensions towards these goals that GDP fails to capture (Schneider et. al., 2010). The pillar of sustainable and equitable socio-economic development is founded on the principle that qualitative measures of the means and nature of economic activities are as important as their quantitative measures and results (Karma Ura et al., in press). As elaborated in the Strategic Research Agenda for CBS (Karma Ura et al., in press), it goes beyond conventional GDP measures that narrowly measure what is deemed 'productive', while ignoring equally important aspects of life leading to wellbeing such as social and economic services of households and communities, such as free and leisure time, care-giving activities, sleep time, etc., all of which are important factors in happiness.

The pillar of conservation of the environment rests on the principle that happiness and wellbeing are deeply connected to people's relationship with a healthy, vibrant, sustainable and wholesome natural environment. GNH centered development is not only concerned with the quantity of forest cover, for instance, but also the quality of the forest, including diversity and health of biodiversity and the trees themselves, and how this impacts the socio-cultural spiritual-ecological interactions with humans and all sentient beings. This grave concern for the environment in the context of anthropogenic climate change is mounting, given the growing number of climatic events and shocks. For instance, fires raging in 2019 and 2020 in Australia, Brazil and California in altered climates released unprecedented amounts of carbon into the earth's atmosphere, raising fears of an irreversible tipping point (Foley, 2020; Rosen, 2019). As humans enter a new era in which we have drastically altered the climate and ecosystems across the globe and transgressed four of the nine planetary boundaries related to earth-system processes where the planet and its resources are finite, the need for development alternatives has never been more urgent or pressing (O'Neill, 2012). Our development, to date, has been exploitative and unsustainable, due to consumption patterns that have used up resources at a pace far out-stripping their replenishment (SNDP, 2013). The pillar of good governance is as much about the form and power of institutions, as it is about the motivational values that drive them. Securing collective wellbeing and happiness of all people relies on good governance, and is exemplified by Bhutan's transition from an enlightened monarchy to a system of parliamentary democracy in 2008, which may be the most peaceful of its kind in the world.

The pillar of cultural preservation and promotion is a priority area and distinctly sets GNH apart from other development philosophies and approaches that exclude culture. Its importance can be traced back to Bhutan's isolationist history characterized by the near absence of outside contacts as result of a deliberate foreign policy strategy[5], and an exceptionally strong political,

[5] During the 19th century, only three British missions were ever sent

social and cultural identity (Priesner, 1999). Contemporary concerns with the preservation of culture are related to the critical imperative of maintaining sovereignty as a distinct nation within a geopolitically charged context, and in light of rapid changes resulting from multiple drivers of change such as globalization, development and countering of the negative effects of modernization. It also takes a pro-active approach to cultural promotion, while balancing it with voluntary social responsibility and the recognition of virtue in indigenous culture and social relations. However, as further discussed below it is still evolving in its efforts to integrate the notion that culture is not static, but dynamic and changing.

GNH is distinct from dominant development approaches that focus solely on economic-drive solutions founded on the principles of GDP. It is more holistic than prevailing development conceptual frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which only include three aspects of sustainable development, including social, environmental and economic pillars (United Nations 2012). Despite the concerted efforts of various scholars, activists and organizations to push for the inclusion a fourth pillar on culture to the SDGs, culture failed be included as a stand-alone pillar, nor was it featured in any meaningful way.

Index of measurement

In order to foster and enable measurement of a holistic range of GNH values (Karma Ura, 2015), the moral concept and conceptual framework of GNH is further translated into a multi-dimensional index of measurement. A domain-based framework has been developed, piloted and implemented over time by the Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies (CBS). The index is elaborated through nine domains, including classic areas of measurement normally found in dominant international development indices including i) health, ii) education, iii) living standards, new

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to Bhutan, a fact that is perhaps related to the fact that its rulers never agreed to the establishment of British representation in the country (Priesner, 1999).

domains encompassing iv) time use, v) good governance and vi) ecological diversity and resilience, and innovative domains including vii) psychological wellbeing, viii) community vitality and ix) cultural diversity and resilience (Verma & Karma Ura, 2017). In the GNH Index, happiness is assessed through the nine domains, which in turn are elaborated through 33 clustered indicators that inform numerous survey questions (see Figure 2). The indicators reflect relevant aspects of life in a holistic way that is vital to the concept and practice of GNH (Karma Ura et al., 2012a). GNH seeks to convey more fully the breadth and texture of people's lives than the standard welfare measure of GDP per capita, and other dominant indices used in the West such as Human Development Index (HDI) (Karma Ura et al., in press, 2012a; Metz, 2014). It is operationalized in important and innovative ways that help to track GNH progress through time and determine GNH policies (Karma Ura et al., 2012a). Most relevant to this paper, GNH has been operationalized into indicators of measurement, and therefore responds to the interest of the development community for the engagement of new, non-monetary indicators (including subjective indicators) to assess development in terms of holistic social, cultural and environmental values (O'Neill, 2012).

Figure 2. The 9 Domains and 33 Indicators of the GNH Index
Source: Karma Ura et al., 2012a

The first nation-wide GNH survey was carried out in Bhutan in 2008 (with a pre-pilot in 2006), followed by the surveys in 2010 and 2015. GNH surveys allow the government of Bhutan to assess happiness over time, across different regions and districts of the country, across different social domains of difference (i.e. gender, age, marital status, rural/urban, pastoral/agricultural, etc.), and according to the nine domains of GNH. It is an important tool for evaluating happiness and wellbeing within a nation, and for policy-making. The summarized results of the survey illustrate happiness as it is aggregated nationally and therefore can be compared over time, as well as disaggregated to analyze particular trends. Based on the 2010 GNH Survey findings, several differences in happiness require policy attention in the future, including the fact that men are happier than women; people living in urban areas are 50% happy, whereas those living in rural areas is 37%; unmarried and young people are the happiest; civil servants and monks are the happiest; and unemployed people are happier than corporate employees, house-managers and farmers (Verma & Karma Ura, 2017; CBS 2016). These statistics counter dominant assumptions about modernity, corporate-centred development and society in a globalized world.

Policy and project guidance, screening and evaluation

The common set of indicators in the GNH index enables Bhutanese citizens to hold accountable leaders, evaluating whether government policies are effective and being fulfilled, and assessing current and future support for the conditions of wellbeing and happiness in relation to policy contexts (Karma Ura et al., in press). As the comparison between the 2010 and 2015 survey findings illustrate, the GNH Index is attuned to policy-making. It reflects changes over time in response to public action and policy priorities, and reflects strengthening or deterioration in the social, cultural, economic and environmental fabric (CBS, 2016; Karma Ura et al., 2012a). Beyond the GNH survey results and findings being incorporated into Bhutan's national five-year plans, GNH assesses policies and projects. GNH policy and project screening tools, based on the indicators elaborated

above, contribute to policy coherence of government programmes and projects in terms of GNH principles (Karma Ura et al., in press). Although similar in structure, the policy screening tool is made up of twenty screening questions, whereas the project screening tool has been adapted for sixteen sectors (Schroeder, 2018; Karma Ura, 2015). They are used by government agencies such as the GNHC (Gross National Happiness Commission) to determine whether they are aligned with GNH (ibid.). For instance, the GNH policy screening tools were used to assess the National Youth Policy and the National Forest Policy (GNHC, 2011). They systematically assessed the possibility of Bhutan's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), resulting in the conclusion that entry into the WTO was not GNH favorable (ibid.). On the other hand, the National Human Resource Development Policy was assessed using the screening tools, resulting in the evaluation that it was GNH-favorable and within the GNH screening tool threshold (ibid.).

GNH principles and policies are linked by providing feedback and guidance on the effectiveness of existing policies and programmes and 'feed-forward' into programme implementation, thereby allowing the principles they embody to be infused into policies and programmes in a broad-based manner (Karma Ura et al., in press). Thus, in the case of using GNH indicators as evaluative tools, they are intended not only to check whether programmes are consistent with GNH indicators but also to create conditions for a coherent, organic relationship between professed values on the one hand and actual policies, programmes and projects on the other (ibid.). Information collected through the indicators have enabled policy makers to make informed decisions about happy people, to what degree, and how to bolster the conditions towards happiness (ibid.).

Individual practice

GNH focuses attention on collective wellbeing, as well as the simultaneous and mutual responsibility of both the state and the individual in striving for happiness and wellbeing. Hence, while other manifestations have focused on the role of the state in this

regard, this is an area where GNH influences development in its translation into individual practice. While the State's central concern with happiness plays an important key role in ensuring enabling conditions for the realization of wellbeing, happiness and enlightenment, it is important to highlight the responsibility of individual citizens as active participants in the development process.

A central responsibility of the Bhutanese state is to ensure the conditions necessary for individuals to seek happiness, in line with the Buddhist concept of cause and condition. GNH then is considered a collective responsibility, where citizens are expected to participate actively in their own development as well as that of their nation. This is supported through social and development services by the Bhutanese state such a free health care, education, extension services, paid maternity leave, etc. (also exemplified in other social democracies such as Canada, Norway, Sweden, etc.), which illustrate the importance the middle-income country places on balancing economic development with social, cultural, spiritual and environmental issues[6]. In Bhutan, the main of goal of development is the collective happiness of people, whereby happiness reflects the creation, support and provision of enabling conditions by the State, wherein people are able to pursue wellbeing and attain happiness in sustainable and balanced ways (Ura et al. 2012a, Ura 2009). While the State has an important role in providing such enabling conditions, individuals also have a responsibility towards the attainment of both individual and collective happiness, as well as inner and outer conditions for happiness. This individual role entails understanding the central tenets of GNH, as elaborated above, and putting into practice in everyday life the behaviours, attitudes and practices that are central to achieving happiness and wellbeing, both individually and collectively. In Bhutan, the government, the central monastic body, the media and CSOs

[6] Revenue generated for these services are sourced from taxation, donor inputs as well as income generated from industries such as hydro, tourism, agriculture, etc.

plays an important enabling role in this process[7].

Global influence

Although the focus in recent years has been to focus on GNH within Bhutan, the country has influenced other countries and scholars around the world. This influence ranges from influencing the United Nations in terms of integration of wellbeing into the SDGs, to indirectly influencing increased attention and uptake by development scholars and practitioners in regards to GNH, as well as wellbeing and happiness as the ultimate objective of development. Most notably, in June 2012, Bhutan set up a two-year project aimed at developing a New Development Paradigm (NDP) and the Secretariat for the New Development Paradigm (SNDP) for coordinating the initiative. The aim was proposing a new development paradigm based on the principles of Gross National Happiness, as a submission to the United Nations. An International Expert Working Group (IEWG), composed of distinguished scholars from around the world working on various aspects of happiness, wellbeing and development was convened to contribute to this effort. The initiative worked on the translation of different manifestations of GNH into a new development paradigm that is relevant beyond Bhutan. It also elaborated specific suggestions for policy objectives and strategies for its implementation.

Two separate international meetings were convened to elaborate and put forward the new development paradigm, including a High Level Meeting on Wellbeing and Happiness at U.N. Headquarters in New York in April 2012, and a meeting of the International Expert Working Group in Bhutan in January-February 2013. A smaller sub-group of distinguished scholars of the IEWG with a wide range of expertise and disciplines, wrote background papers on each of the nine domains and other emerging issues pertaining to GNH (CBS, 2017; SNDP, 2013), which provided valuable inputs into the submission of the report *Happiness: Towards a New Development Paradigm* by the Royal Government

[7] New CSOs such as the GNH Centre also help individuals and in particular, foreign tourists, in understanding and practicing GNH.

of Bhutan to the United Nations General Assembly in December 2013 (SNDP, 2013). The in-depth background papers were aimed at over-viewing the state-of- the-art issues, identifying gaps as well as elucidating practical and policy implementation of the GNH domains within the framework of the New Development Paradigm (CBS, 2017).

In addition to the international meetings in 2012 and 2013, the GNH surveys in 2010 and 2015, eight different international conferences in relation to GNH have been organized to-date, including: Development (2004), Rethinking Development (2005), Towards Global Transformation (2007), Practice and Measurement (2008), Implementation and Practice (2009), Policy and Praxis (2015), GNH of Business (2017), and Community Vitality (2018). The cumulative effect of these meetings has been the proliferation and spreading of the various manifestations of GNH to different parts of the world.

The concept has been adopted, adapted and integrated in contexts such as Brazil, Japan, Thailand, Canada, Bolivia, Ecuador, France, etc., in terms of national policy making, wellbeing and happiness measures, institutional contexts, and individual as well as collective practice. Such processes, in turn, have also induced the creation of programmes, centres and associations for the study and practice of GNH. Most recently in November 2015, an international association for the scholarly study of GNH was established[8], including the preparation of its launch conference in Oxford in January 2019 and a peer-reviewed journal on GNH. The cross-pollination of GNH with other indigenous concepts that place wellbeing at the center of development is evident in reciprocal sharing of ideas and exchange visits with Ecuador and Bolivia (Buen Vivir), at international conferences on degrowth (Verma, 2017a), and members of the French parliament developing a bill that seeks an alternative measure to GDP, who for example, presented at the GNH conference in November 2015 in Paro, Bhutan (CBS, 2015). More recent conferences sought ways to operationalize GNH into

[8] The International Society for Bhutan Studies.

real-world scenarios, such as the business and corporate sector (CBS, 2018), while attempting to maintain a delicate balancing act compatible with its central tenets of degrowth, steady state economics and holistic development. Similar to the degrowth movement, this cross-cultural exchange and learning of ideas demonstrates the necessity of the South influencing the North in terms of the way development might be envisioned and practiced, as well as the way the North can learn from the South in altering unsustainable development away from growth-based GDP and the dominant western lens.

Securalization of a Buddhist concept

The focus on happiness-centred development evolved organically from historical and socio-cultural features embedded in Buddhist and feudal values of a nation that was for many centuries isolated from the outside world (Priesner, 1999). Contemporary Bhutan is predominantly a Vajrayana Buddhist nation that follows the Nyingma and Drukpa Kagyu schools of Buddhism (Kumagai, 2015). Although GNH is a secular moral concept that has influenced and been adapted in different countries around the world, its holistic nature integrates central moral elements of Buddhism. In particular, it is implicitly anchored by socially engaged Buddhism and Buddhist moral and ethical engagement with happiness (Verma in press b, 2017a; Givel, 2014; Tashi Wangmo & Valk, 2012; Phuntsok Tashi, 2004).

Buddhist engagement with happiness is at the core of GNH. As suggested earlier, happiness, in this sense, is distinct from fleeting and superficial forms … "we know that true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only by serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realizing our innate wisdom and the true and brilliant nature of our own minds" (Jigmi Thinley, 2009, cited in Karma Ura et al., 2012a, p. 7). Its holistic nature integrates moral elements of Buddhism, such as a middle-path of avoiding extremes and maintaining a balanced view (GNHC, 1999a, 1999b). The *middle way* also highlights the importance of balancing the needs of the mind and the body. This is contrast to GDP-centred development that

promotes economic growth to the exclusion of spiritual and mental development and subjective wellbeing (Jigmi Thinley, 2012). GNH aims to balance economic needs with spiritual and emotional needs, maximize wellbeing with minimizing suffering, and nuance outer happiness with inner happiness and material wellbeing with non-material wellbeing. The Buddhist notion of the inter-connectedness of all phenomenon influences GNH in its holistic vision of inter-dependence between human beings and their environment, a belief that centrally influences its conceptual framework. It emphasizes inter-dependence of all phenomena through its multi-dimensional nature and equal weighting of its nine domains discussed further below, which are themselves inspired by Buddhism (Tashi Wangmo & Valk, 2012). Although specific elements of the inter-relation between Buddhism and GNH are detailed elsewhere (Verma in press b,; Givel, 2014; Tashi Wangmo & Valk, 2012; Phuntsok Tashi, 2004), GNH is the secularization of a Buddhist concept that places meaningful happiness and deeper values in life as its central purpose. Prominent Buddhist leaders such His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama promote the drawing upon Buddhist values in the engagement of a meaningful life, without necessarily taking refuge in the religion (HH the Dalai Lama, 2005). As such Buddhist principles, values and practices such as meditation are adapted by people with diverse backgrounds and spiritual beliefs, that do not require them to be Buddhist per se. Similarly, GNH has been adopted and encouraged as a set of secular concepts that are applicable to many contexts around the world. As illustrated in a paper that compares the central tenets of GNH with degrowth, the similarities are indeed striking (Verma, 2017a), thus indicating the universal applicability of GNH in attempt to shift development away from the dominance of GDP.

Conclusion: Deep wisdom against the backdrop of a troubled world

That the eight manifestations of GNH evoke deliberation of the eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche cannot be overlooked. As it may be evident by now, the purpose of this paper is not

to literally translate or correlate each GNH manifestation with those of the manifestations of Guru Rinpoche. Rather, it is to reflect on their greater purpose. Just as the eight manifestations of the great scholar, philosopher, missionary, mystic and Buddhist master Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), considered by some as the second Buddha (Hirshberg, 2018), reflect his ability to appear according to different needs and demands as steps to aid meditation and in support of the path to realization and enlightenment (Hirshberg, 2018; Altman, 2016)[9], GNH manifests itself according to different objectives, principles and requirements to achieve the greater purpose of development with values. In doing so, it reveals eight different yet mutually supportive meanings of the development alternative. These multiple meanings simultaneously support a common purpose: a holistic development alternative that balances spiritual and material needs, while aiming to avoid the socially and environmentally destructive path of conventional development approaches and current market-oriented wants.

The ability of GNH wisdom to survive against the powerful forces of GDP and globalization depends on its ability to address various challenges. First and foremost, paramount amongst them is disentangling its multiple meanings, as well as the skillful means that are engaged to call out the ways it is misunderstood. And for this, it is critically important that the nature of GNH, manifested in its multiple meanings, is understood by the public at large, as well as those who are tasked with its development, safeguarding and implementation. During a time of global political turmoil, widening economic inequalities spurned by deep-seated individualism, and critical questioning of failed capitalist, GDP-centric and business-as-usual development approaches, the conceptualization and operationalization of GNH provides important wisdom, lessons, reflections, directions and healing for a deeply divided and fractured world.

[9] As such, the eight manifestations do not depict *different* Padmasambhavas, but can be interpreted as his ability to appear in varied forms to serve different purposes, which are also known according to the eight different names of the Guru (Atlman, 2016).

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