

Gross National Happiness and Human Development - Searching for Common Ground

Opening statement to the Workshop

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May I first of all express my immense pleasure to be here this morning to attend the inauguration of this important workshop. I would like to thank Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba, Chairman of the Planning Commission, for his warm words of welcome to all of us. I would like to extend my own greetings and welcome to all the participants from both Bhutan and other countries. All of you have taken considerable trouble to contribute to the discussion on Gross National Happiness, which was first enunciated by His Majesty the King. Your abiding interest in the concept has been one of the main stimuli to organise this workshop. I am glad to note that almost all of you, who responded to Kuensel's publication of the keynote speech I made in the UNDP Millennium Meeting for Asia and the Pacific in Seoul, are present in the workshop. I would like to take this opportunity to say how very much I appreciated your contributions that helped to bring many aspects of the concept to the fore.

The intellectual management and guidance of today's workshop is in the hands of two experts in the area: Mr. A. K. Shiva Kumar, an economist and Mr. Sudhir Kakar, a psychological anthropologist. We thank UNDP for the support to field them, as well as for their generous assistance in many spheres of human development activities. The combination of a distinguished economist and a leading psychological anthropologist, as facilitators, is most appropriate for this workshop. The theme of the workshop demands an inter-disciplinary approach, which, I am confident, will be found among the participants, with rich and varied professional backgrounds.

When I addressed the Millennium Meeting in Seoul in November 1998 on Values and Development: Gross National Happiness, I did not particularly explore the parallels and links between GNH and Human Development Index. I expressed my hope in the speech that future issues of the HDI Report will integrate some measures of happiness. The primary purpose of the workshop is to see whether GNH and HDI can be related, by finding their common factors. But, before an exercise on integration can be undertaken, possible conceptual structures of GNH must be clearly laid out, as it has been already done for HDI. I mentioned also in that forum that the academia has so far left us with very little analytical tools to assess happiness. It seems to have been neglected or abandoned as incapable of scientific study. I am confident that this workshop will address some of the difficult conceptual challenges and start an important process in crystallising the concept and measurement of GNH.

The publication of my speech in Kuensel evoked wider debate and several scholars have made valuable comments. Rather than re-treading what I said in the Millennium meeting I would like to highlight some of the reactions made through the Kuensel. The workshop may like to dwell on some of these issues.

I feel that I should bring to your attention various commentaries on my speech, although I hope you will forgive me for not attributing each view individually in the interest of saving time. Moreover, I would like to redefine them as propositions relevant for the workshop. I would like to put them in the context of this workshop's purpose to find common ground between HDI and GNH. As you are already aware, the workshop has to investigate the interrelationships between HDI and GNH. The effort could lead us finally to a method of synthesis between GNH and HDI, with HDI becoming sensitive to GNH.

I need hardly recall for the participants, who better read on this subject than I that HDI combines life expectancy, literacy and per capita income, adjusted for real purchasing power, to give a measure of human development. It is a composite index of these three separate measures. The HDI is an average for each country. If one has information, it is also possible to calculate HDI that is sensitive to environment, freedom, gender difference, regional difference, income distribution etc. It appears, for instance, that the State of Andhra Pradesh has recently produced its own Human Development Report showing disaggregation at gender and district levels. From the three main HDI sub-indices, and several other disaggregated HDI, it is evident that the index requires quantitative data for computing.

This brings us to an important question to which I draw the attention of the workshop: can an index be constructed for GNH as it has been done for Human Development? The possible measurability of GNH has been a thought-provoking proposition. Some participants have not only proposed that it is amenable to quantification, but also illustrated how it might be done. Others have suggested that it would be a speculative exercise into what is essentially a subjective experience, and will defy any statistical device aimed at its quantification. There is a broad area of analytical controversy between them. I would be very keen on any advances the workshop can make on this conceptual and methodological work.

However, the debate on the conceptual and methodological work required for the quantification of GNH is unlikely to make any progress unless one can identify the essential constituents of GNH. Therefore, the next question that the workshop may wish to clarify is 'what are the main ingredients of happiness?' What would be the main, if at all there were, indicators of happiness we can devise? I have tentatively suggested that GNH is being presently pursued through four platforms: economic development,

environmental preservation, cultural promotion and good governance. I would leave it open for the systematic deliberation of the workshop to investigate, if they indeed are the variables on which GNH directly depends. Is there another cluster of components that mirrors happiness? I would urge the workshop to explore the conceptual foundations of human happiness.

Environmental preservation, cultural promotion and good governance are not the principle constituent elements of HDI, although HDI has been extended in some cases to measure environmental quality and good governance (by constructing a freedom index). However, the notion of good governance may differ, although there is increasing convergence on basic norms. Cultural element as part of HDI has been altogether omitted because of its specificity to each country or society. Finding common denominations on cultural values to be incorporated in HDI is almost an impossible task because of the international cultural differences. There is also a conceptual challenge as to whether one can find an indicator for cultural values. It may even be argued that it would be misplaced to search for an indicator for it.

Economic development, or more precisely per capita income growth, is an element common to both HDI and GNH. Several contributors to the Kuensel have remarked that economic development is a necessary condition for GNH, as it is for human development. There is a common ground between GNH and HDI in this respect. But they were quick to point out the limitation of economic growth or development *per se* for GNH. The need for economic development in general was hardly a point of debate, although (a) the type or nature of economic system that would be followed by Bhutan, and (b) the distribution of income that would worsen under a certain type of economic development, were perceived to be major concerns. Where should the balance between free enterprise and equity be struck was considered to be crucial issue for cultural and environmental integrity of Bhutan, and indeed for GNH. The lack of clear economic theory spawned by

Buddhism was regarded by several commentators as a major deficiency. The absence of a Buddhist economic theory would, it is said, leave the field wide open for increasing influence of conventional economic theories. They expressed their suspicion that the essence of conventional economic theories runs counter to GNH.

There were many other comments, some of which were profoundly philosophical, which no doubt will be made again today. I am confident that today's workshop will contribute positively to the Human Development Report on our country. Lastly, I would like to thank the staff of Planning Commission Secretariat for organising this timely workshop.

I wish all of you pleasant and fruitful deliberations.

Thank you and Tashi Delek!