

Education Policy in Bhutan: An Observation through the Lens of GNH and Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

The word sustainable development and Gross National Happiness seem to be synonyms in the present context as many of the objectives of both the concepts are overlaps and similar. So in the context of Bhutan GNH policies are meant to achieve sustainable development. In the 1970s, the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuk announced "Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product". Since then Gross National Happiness [GNH] became the Bhutan's development guideline where development is holistic, comprehensive and sustainable. In 2008, GNH become an official national objective to pursue of wellbeing and happiness of citizen through implementing GNH index in county's development policies, plans and programmes. As Bhutan's development is based on GNH index that focuses on nine domains, out of which Education is one of the important domain where 7.5% of the government budget are allocated in this sector. Therefore, this paper seeks to assess the role of education for successful implementation of sustainable development in Bhutan.

Keywords: Gross National Happiness; Sustainable Development; Wellbeing; GNH index; Education.

The emphasis on a search of appropriate social and economic policies and indicators to achieve the sustainable development has become the important agenda in today's world. Long before it became a global agenda, H.M the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, in the early 1970s, propounded the development philosophy 'GNH', where sustainable development concept and principles are entrenched in it (UNDP and RGoB, 2012). Bhutan aspires to have a development to be holistic and sustainable. GNH focus development as a holistic approach where human wellbeing and happiness aspects are considered towards the country development rather than mere focusing on economic aspects.

Even though GNH was propounded in the 1970s, it was less known to the international arena. After the 1990s, better analytical and descriptive tools were developed by Bhutan government and with the help of international scholars, so to give GNH a reliability indicator within Bhutan and to the

global stage (Joseph, 2015). The GNH was based on four pillars: (i) Equitable Economic Development; (ii) Environmental Preservation; (iii) Cultural promotion and; (iv) Good governance. Lately, the four pillars are further classified into nine domains: Psychological Wellbeing; Health; Education; Standard of living; Good governance; Community vitality; Cultural diversity and resilience; Time use; and Ecological diversity. In 2008, GNH was included in the Bhutan's Constitution where in Article 9, sec. 2 states "the state shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of GNH and be the guiding principle for country's development policies, plans and programmes" (RGoB, 2008).

As we see that Bhutan aspires to be a country that pursues happiness of the citizen through GNH index that focuses on nine domains. This paper explores the education domain of GNH; 'Education' where 7.5% (2015 budget) of the government budget are allocated in this sector (Thinley, Y. 1998) and as a framework for sustainable development

in Bhutan by explaining the implementation of GNH principles in government policies, plans and programmes, and shows how Bhutan is doing in terms of policy implementation and outcomes in one of the important domain 'Education'.

Objective

- ❑ To assess the various GNH policies and plans related to education that contributes to the sustainable development.
- ❑ To find out the outcome of the GNH policies and plans related to education in achievement of sustainable development.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative methodology where policy related to GNH in education in various government organizations and agencies, and annual GNH survey statistics (2010 & 2015) of Bhutan is used. Besides, the review of the research scholars' findings is used to explore the implementation of GNH principles in government policies and plan, and its contribution to sustainable development of the country.

GNH in Bhutan

The kingdom of Bhutan is borderline by India in East, West and South, and China in North. The country has the total area of 38,398 km² and has an estimated population of 782,064 (NSB, 2016). It was until the late 1970s, Bhutan was known to the outside world after being a member of the UN and allowed the international visitors for the first time. In 2008, the King of Bhutan voluntarily handed over is the country to his citizen by changing from an absolute monarchy to a democratic constitutional monarchy (Braun, 2009).

The fourth king of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, first introduced the idea of GNH and proclaimed that GNH is more important than Gross National Product [GDP] and he believed GDP to be an incomplete dimension to measure the wellbeing of the nation. GDP only measures external conditions of human existence as far as it can measure through price (Ura, 2015)(Ura, 2015). Aware of the other developing countries negative experience in the name of development, he realized that development should be balance and holistic way that has less impact on country's culture and spiritual integrity

(Brooks, 2013) (Brooks, 2013). Thereby, the idea of GNH was emerged as a way to have balance and holistic approach for the development of the country and government development policies should be based on GNH principles.

GNH towards Sustainable Development

In 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development, United Nations, (2015) stated that to achieve sustainable development, it is important to have harmony among economic, social and environmental and the Swiss 'Monitoring of Sustainable Development Project' [MONET] (2001) defines sustainable development is the principle of fairness in use of social resources, environment and economic for present and future generation (Centre for Environment Education, 2007) which was similar to the idea of GNH philosophy that was introduced way before Sustainable development become a global agenda. There are various sustainable development approaches implemented by many countries, such as Circular Economy in the European Union and Germany¹, Natural Capital Accounting in Botswana [NCAB]² and, Payment for Ecosystem Services in Costa Rica³ which show global level tools and concepts that can be applied successfully at the national level. However, from all these approaches, UNEP considered the GNH approach is an example of the complete approach which touches upon the three core dimensions of Sustainable Development-economic, social and environment (UNEP, 2016) (UNDP, 2016).

The GNH development philosophy is the Bhutanese version of the global concept of sustainable development. It is inspired by the Buddhist concept of "The Middle Path"- balanced development strategy (Rinzin, Vermeulen, & Glasbergen, 2007; J. Brooks, 2013). In Buddhist perspective, development is a holistic process where human beings need to fulfil the material, social and spiritual needs (Wickramasinge, 2000). Sustainable development

¹Circular Economy approach is a policy plan adopted by EU for the circular economy that measures the whole cycles from production and consumption to waste management.

²NCAB is a concept introduces in Botswana which measuring the stocks and flows of natural resources such as geology, air, water, soil and all living things, and measuring the contribution of this nature to a country's economy.

³Payment for ecosystem idea was first adopted in Costa Rica. It is concepts where farmers and landowners are paid for preserving and conserving their land which contributes to ecological services.

has been the significant part of Bhutanese society, as its emphasis on co-existence with nature, which shares the common Buddhist beliefs⁴ (Rinzin, Vermeulen, & Glasbergen, 2007) (Rinzin *et al.* 2007). This perspective can be seen in the GNH policies, which captures the human development approaches, as to maximize the happiness of all Bhutanese (Planning Commission Secretariat, 1999) that is achieved through equitable and balanced development among economic, social, spiritual and environmental indices (UNDP and RGoB, 2012) (UNDP and RGoB, 2012).

Today, Bhutan's policies are institutionalized under the GNH development framework and it is mandatory for all policies and projects to go through GNH screening tools⁵ that analytically evaluate their impact on GNH and it is based on all nine GNH domains (UNEP, 2016) (UNEP, 2016). From nine domains, we will be studying two domains; education and health. Its policies and contribution towards sustainability.

GNH for Education towards sustainability

Many researchers consider that education for sustainability development [ESD] is an education on the environment that develops a sense of responsibility for resolving environmental problems (Tilbury, 1995); whereas Palawan Council for Sustainable Development [PCSD] (1996) defined it as a study of the interrelation among environmental, social and economic issues. In 2005, the United Nations stated that ESD is the practice of educating students with skills and techniques that an individual should have to protect the environmental, social and economic welfare for both presents and for future generations (UN, 2005).

In Bhutan, education receives the most attention as it is one of the fundamental means to achieve GNH (UNESCO & IBE, 2011) (UNESCO & IBE, 2011). All the Bhutanese children are provided free education from Royal Government till high school and scholarship to university level on merit base (Ball & Wangchuk, 2015). (Ball & Wangchuk, 2015) Education domain is sub-divided into four

⁴According to Karma Ura, Bhutanese people believe that disturbing nature such as valleys, ancient rocks and trees, lakes and rivers brings bad luck, illness and death to families and *vice versa*.

⁵There are various GNH screening tools for different types of policies and projects. It is carried out both by the government agency and by the GNH Commission Secretariat (GNHC, 2013).

indicators; Literacy, Educational qualification, knowledge and values. In 2009, MoE, Bhutan launched a nation-wide reform initiative called 'Education for GNH'. It is the process of enriching the education system by infusing GNH mindfulness into everything that is learned and taught (Sherab, 2013a) (Sherab, 2013a). Two major changes resulted in Bhutan's education system from this initiative; 1) infusion of GNH principles and values in the school curriculum at all grade, and 2) Adoption of 'Green school for Green Bhutan' to realize the overall objective of education for GNH (Brien & Drupka, 2010).

Educating for GNH (2012a) frames that the school curriculum should be developed to ensure meaningful learning through the understanding of concepts, enhancement of skills, values and attitudes in different learning areas according to the child learning ability and skills. For instance, in 1999, 'Value education' was implemented for every grade level in school with a period assignment of 40 minutes per week (Wangyel, 2001), later in 2009, it was emphasized value education through 'Education for GNH' which imparts the values of individual's self-discipline (being responsible, honest, ethical and accountable), individual relationship with nature (the values of environmental care and protection) and relationship with others in the society (commitment to others in society) (MoE, 2012b), so that every child develops with a set of morals, values and knowledge of their own culture and heritage.

Community involvement and local knowledge activity were another part of school curriculum, where students are interacted with local community and learn about different aspects of Bhutan's environment, traditional knowledge which are passed over generations and local traditions. Also, Arts education, where students are exposed to local Bhutanese music and performing Arts (Mask dance and folk songs and dance), and even students are made to interact with community artists for exploration of traditional art forms (Sherab, 2013a).

The Second initiative was 'green school for green Bhutan', is a pedagogy where children are prepared with knowledge and skills to conserve the natural environment and resources. It is a teaching method of caring and learning with the environment (Tenzin, 2014). This concept is constructed into eight

indicators; Natural, Academic, Spiritual, Aesthetic, Social, Moral, Intellectual and cultural greenery.

As it is mention that sustainability is all about harmony among environmental, social and economic issues. Many researchers have found that GNH education has played a role in sustainable development, but with challenges. Sherab (2013a) found that schools in Bhutan have made changing efforts towards achieving the government’s vision of GNH education especially in terms of initiating and implementing innovative extra-curriculum programs [ECPs] such as cultural activities and sportsmanship. Also, he mentions that students were mindful of their actions, and seen a reduction of disciplinary problems such as gang fights and bullying. Common impact was found in terms of environmental surrounding of schools with litter free (Sherab, 2013; Drakpa & Dorji, 2013), and took responsibilities with commitment, and practiced

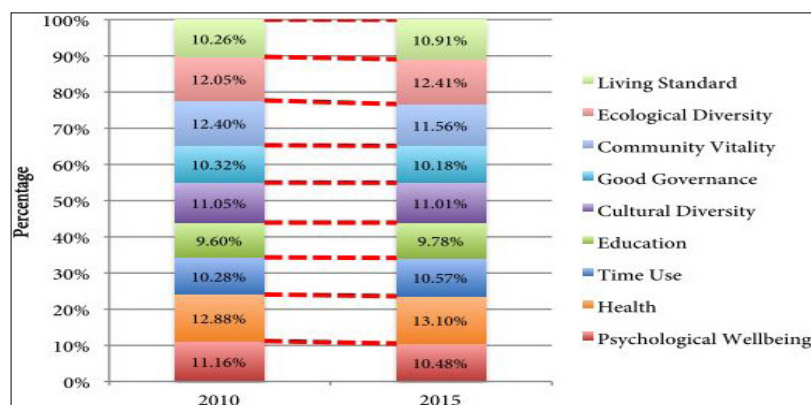
healthy habits by reducing the use of packaged foods, and found caring attitudes among students towards the environment. Besides promoting values to teachers and students, schools has been successful in spreading the concepts to parents and communities (Sherab & Maxwell, 2013). Having a vegetable garden in school has been another impact of GNH education in capital’s primary schools, and each classroom has its tree and flower garden to look after. Some school has started scheme of recycling the materials used in the school and community such as brooms made from recycled bottles and twigs for cleaning the schools (Sherab, 2013). According to GNH survey, 2015 report, all the indicators of education domain had seen an improvement within the five years but in minimal rate (refer Table 1).

However, some argue that impact of GNH Education, based on teaching and learning of

Table 2: Assessment of education domain for the year 2010 and 2015

| Indicators | Education domains | | Change |
|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| | 2010 | 2015 | |
| Literacy rate | 48.66 % | 52.32% | 3.66% |
| Urban- | 71% | 72% | 1% |
| Rural- | 40.2 % | 43% | 2.8% |
| Year of schooling | 2.8 years (SD=4.9) | 3.6years (SD=5) | 0.8 years |
| Urban- | (M=6.1, SD=6) (n=1588) | (M=6.6, SD=5.9) (n=2026) | P= -2.59*** |
| Rural- | (M=1.9, SD=4) (n=5554) | (M=2.5, SD=4.2) (n=5127) | P= -7.36*** |
| Knowledge ⁶ | 7.5 % (sufficiency) | 8% (sufficiency) | 0.5% |
| Value ⁷ | 97.1% | 99% | 1.9% |

*significance at $p < 0.05$; ** significance at $p < 0.01$; *** significance at $p < .001$; (Source: 2015 GNH survey report).



Graph 1: Domain contribution to GNH Index in 2010 and 2015
(Sources: GNH survey report 2015)

⁶Knowledge includes historical knowledge, cultural knowledge, knowledge of traditional songs, health knowledge, and civic knowledge.

⁷Value includes five destructive actions to be justifiable: killing, stealing, lying, creating disharmony in relationships and sexual misconduct.

Table 2: Percentage of nine domains to unhappiness, 2010 GNH survey

| | | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----|
| Education | | 15.4 | Psychological well-being | | 11 |
| | Knowledge | 6.2 | | Spirituality | 4.9 |
| | Schooling | 4.8 | | Life satisfaction | 2.2 |
| | Literacy | 4.2 | | Positive emotions | 2.1 |
| | Value | 0.2 | | Negative emotions | 1.8 |
| Living standard | | 13.6 | Ecological diversity | | 8.3 |
| | Housing | 5.7 | | Wildlife damage | 5.5 |
| | Assets | 2.8 | | Urbanization issues | 1.5 |
| | Household per cap income | 5.1 | | Ecological issues | 0.8 |
| | | | | Responsibility towards environment | 0.5 |
| Time use | | 13.5 | Community vitality | | 7.4 |
| | Work | 8.7 | | Donation | 4.5 |
| | Sleep | 4.8 | | Community relationship | 2.1 |
| | | | | Family | 0.4 |
| | | | | Safety | 0.4 |
| Good governance | | 13.5 | Health | | 6.1 |
| | Services | 7.2 | | Healthy days | 2.4 |
| | Political participation | 4.6 | | Mental health | 1.6 |
| | Fundamental right | 1.1 | | Disability | 1.2 |
| | Gov. performance | 0.6 | | Self-reported health status | 0.9 |
| Cultural diversity | | 11.3 | | | |
| | Cultural participation | 5.6 | | | |
| | Artisan skills | 3.3 | | | |
| | Etiquettes | 2.1 | | | |
| | Speak native language | 0.3 | | | |

(Source: 2010 GNH survey report)

values, cannot be seen immediately because of its long-term orientation (Sherab, 2013). In terms of creative and innovative activity, few schools are involved in encouraging their students (Drakpa & Dorji, 2013). According to GNH survey report 2015, education contributes the least to GNH index (refer Graph 1). Moreover, GNH survey report 2010, states that education scores highest contribution in unhappiness (refer Table 2).

CONCLUSION

Education has been one the important area where Bhutan government has been investing the highest fraction(7.5%) of the government budget and has been the main part of GNH index. In several ways, government have achieved the wellbeing and happiness of the people through the implementation of GNH in education which further contributes to sustainability development of the country.

In terms of education, the concept of 'education for sustainable development' and 'GNH for education' has same key factor measurement of sustainability although both the concepts use different terminologies to define it. With the limited literature on impact study of GNH education, some of the findings are, most of the schools in Bhutan have successfully implemented the GNH education policy and learn the techniques and methods to conserve the natural environment which fulfils the one of the concepts of sustainable development. Another major finding is in terms of socio-economic factors. It was found that many schools in Bhutan have involved the community, parents, government and agencies for awareness of human rights, equity, culture and value of sharing, being in harmony and love. Although, it is found that education domain was the less contributor to GNH index, but the improvement has been seen in all the indicators of education domains.

Therefore, we see that implementation of GNH policy in Education has played some role in contribution toward people's wellbeing and happiness and towards achieving sustainable development of the country.

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