

Food Security and Gross National Happiness

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Introduction

This paper intends to reconsider the concept of food security reflecting the idea of Gross National Happiness (GNH). In other words, this is a piece of experimental thoughts to find out how much the conventional concept of food security can be expanded, and what areas food security is related to in the light of Gross National Happiness.

The experimental thoughts will start from looking at the conventional understanding of food security. It will then move on to look at the idea of Gross National Happiness and its indicators, the Bhutan Development Index. Based on these, the main part will explore various cases relating to people's food security, including production, circulation and consumption, and will examine factors which would affect the increase and decrease of GNH indicators. This will, in turn, indicate aspects which the concept of food security should include, and also areas which the concept of food security affects. Through these analyses the paper will try to refine the concept of food security to fit into the GNH framework.

The Concept of Food Security

The concept of food security has experienced several transformations. In 1974, when the concept was launched at the first World Food Conference, food security was understood as an issue relating to food supply. Food security was defined as "availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs" (United Nations 1975). In order to achieve food security, each state was "to remove the obstacles to food production and to provide proper incentives to agricultural sector", and the highly industrialised countries "should promote the advancement of food production technology, and should make all efforts to promote transfer, adaptation and dissemination of appropriate food production technology for the benefit of the developing countries" (United Nations 1975). A new perspective emerged in the early 1980s, with Amartya Sen's work on hunger and markets (Sen 1981). Sen emphasises 'access to food' and thereby turns attention from supply to demand. The food security is understood as an issue of access to rather than production of food. The World Bank report, *Poverty and Hunger*, maintains this perspective. In the report, food security is defined as "access by all people at all times to enough food for

an active, healthy life” (World Bank 1986: 1). In 1996, at the World Food Summit in Rome, food security is redefined as follows.

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. (FAO 1996)

New elements are added such as safe and nutritious food and food preferences. Pottier points out that the Rome declaration goes for the widest possible approach, and reflects postmodern uncertainties (Pottier 1999: 13).¹ The mention on “food preference” is seen as an attempt to address context specificity of the issue (Pottier 1999: 14).

So far, we have understood that there are a few turning points in the definition of food security. Although various documents emphasise the complexity of the issue, at the level of definition it should be safe to understand as a matter of availability of food with considerations of nutrition, safety and preferences to people.

GNH

Gross National Happiness proposes a holistic approach to development. It is a broader approach comparing to the conventional approach to development which mainly focuses on material progress. The contribution of the idea of GNH to the development thinkings cannot be exaggerated. The idea encompasses not only material aspects of life, but also culture, tradition and natural environment. It also integrates objective realities and subjectivity, namely what people feel about their own lives. In order to capture the overall progress of maximising GNH, the construction of comprehensive indicators of GNH, namely the Bhutan Development Index, is under way. The indicators are divided into nine domains. I do not have to lecture on the Bhutan Development Index to this well-learned audience. Here I would just like to remind you those nine domains. They are: Psychological Well-being, Good Governance, Education, Health, Community Vitality, Time Use and Balance, Culture, Ecological Diversity and Resilience, and Living Standard.

Dasho Karma Ura, in his recent TV interview, points out four very important features of the idea of GNH (Ura, 2008). Firstly, he says that under the GNH concept we need to look at the reality as one, taking a multi-sectoral integrated approach. He points out the GNH calls for a perspective which goes beyond one sector, and states that we have to be mindful about consequences which policies/ programmes of one sector would give to another sector. If a solution within a certain sector becomes a cause of a problem in another, it is actually not a solution. Secondly, the concept encompasses both subjectivity and objectivity and hence its indicators integrate the both. This is to say that a progress in, for instance, the health sector should be

¹ Maxwell (1996) also suggests that a post-modern perspective is reflected in the concept of food security.

measured both from conventional health indicators (such as infant mortality rates and the number of population for one doctor), and people's feeling on their own health. Thirdly, he emphasises the 'relationships' as being fundamental to happiness. According to him, "relationships, or shared situations, are where happiness spontaneously arises: you are not looking for happiness, but it comes out when relationships improve". "In some sense, happiness is really a by-product of improving relationships", he says.

In the next section, I will examine the concept of food security from the perspective of GNH.

Food Security and GNH

In this presentation, I would not look into which areas in Bhutan is food secure and food insecure. Rather, I would like to look at some of the stages of food production, circulation and consumption, and try to analyse how these would relate to the GNH way of thinking shown above, and how possibly these would affect GNH indicators. I shall do so through citing some of the stories from my previous fieldworks², and also from secondary sources.

Needless to say, food security is fundamental to sustain life. Food security however relates to many more aspects of people's lives than merely meeting biological requirement. How food is produced, circulated and consumed; all of these have implications to GNH and its indicators.

On producing food

When I visited villages in the western part of Bhutan in 2004 with the purpose of carrying out a research on production and trading of chillies, I met a lady who grew cabbages. She usually took these cabbages to markets to sell (both local and export markets). She said to me that by selling cabbages she could earn cash which was important in many ways including sending her children to school, but, she continued, while growing cabbages she had to use lots of pesticides to kill insects and worms which harm the harvest. In her mind, this is not a Buddhistic act and certainly leads to losing religious merits, therefore she said that she did not want to grow cabbages so much.

In such a short sketch of production of food, we can see many elements relating to GNH. Cash income from selling cabbages will increase the elements of living standard and education, however, the use of pesticides might affect adversely to ecological diversity and resilience. The religious aspect, as she pointed out, would affect the cultural element of the GNH indicators. Moreover, as she feels uneasy about using pesticides it would affect psychological well-being. When we look at this

² The fieldwork was made possible by a very kind arrangement of the Ministry of Agriculture, Royal Government of Bhutan and many friends in Bhutan who extended their helping hands to me. Especially I would like to express my gratitude to the Council for RNR Research of Bhutan in the Ministry of Agriculture, and Dasho Karma Ura, Director of Centre for Bhutan Studies.

sketch from the view point of conventional food security concept, the attention will focus on availability of food items which she grows and buys with money she earns by selling cabbages, and those nutritious values and cultural and personal preferences. These are mainly concerned with the food materials (i.e. which food and which nutrition) and its amount. When we examine the case under GNH light, it becomes more obvious that how those food items were grown also means a lot to people, namely the process. It is a matter of “relationship” people have with food. In other words, how people are engaged in foods which they produce.

On trading food

In my fieldwork, I have been looking at trading practice of chillies in Bhutan. Chillies, as you know, are such an important food item in Bhutan. It is used as a vegetable as well as a spice. Some people even say that it is “a staple food” in Bhutan together with rice. While rice can be substituted with other grains, such as maize, buckwheat and millets, chilli cannot be substituted by anything. Those people who live in a place where chilli does not grow also eat chillies, so that they have to obtain them somehow from other places. Trading occurs not only between a chilli producing place and a non-chilli producing place, but also among chilli producing places. This is mainly because of difference in harvesting timings due to altitude and climate. In some areas, chilli harvest is in the middle of the monsoon season, so that they cannot dry chillies. Hence they have to depend on harvest in higher altitude areas where the harvest is after the monsoon, so that chillies can be dried and people can get seeds for the next year.

Trading of chillies can be largely classified into two categories, one is cash medium transaction at the markets, and another is barter. I recognise that there can be barter in markets and also cash medium exchanges in villages and houses. But these are relatively smaller in scale, and here I focus on the first two modes of transactions. The features of these two modes of trading can be applicable to trading of other food items such as grains, fruits and vegetables, therefore the discussion would not be confined to the case of chillies.

Now I would like to compare these two modes of trading, namely cash medium trade at markets, and barter which usually occurs by visiting communities and households. The cash medium transactions at market places include both export market and local market and shops. It usually operates individual bases, and needless to say, it is mainly for those people who manage to have an access to markets and shops. The price of the item fluctuates in various degrees in markets. In case of chilli, the highest price is ten times (or even more) more than the lowest price in the season. In barter, communities or households within which the exchanges take place are usually fixed. For instance, Community A and Community B exchanges chillies and rice. Many people who engage in barter have their own hosts who arrange the distribution in their own community, and the relationship between the host and the hosted can last for generations.

While the cash earned at markets can be exchanged with any items and

services available, in barter, the items farmers bring are directly exchanged with the items which are available in the partner village. Usually this is something what the farmers would like to obtain (since farmers know what is available where), but to be fair there is a limitation in the ranges of items available. One farmer in the eastern Bhutan told me that while in the vegetable market he had to wait for a whole day for customers to come, in barter he can rely on his host for distribution and all he has to do is to deliver items for barter and gifts for his host. He later receives the exchanged items from the host. For him, transactions through barter are less tedious. The same farmer, however, points out other aspects of these two modes of transaction. According to him, when he buys in markets and shops, he can choose the quality of the items, but in barter he cannot be choosy about the quality which people in the partner community bring for exchange since he has a long term relationship with them. In barter, however, he would be sure, from the beginning, about the amount he would get with the amount of items he takes for exchange. In the market, since the price fluctuates, and also since he would not be sure how much he will be able to sell, he cannot predict how much he will earn.

From these comments, we can see that trading itself is about managing 'relationship'. It is relationships with market in terms of physical accessibility to it, fluctuations in price, quality and quantity of items, and human relationships with shop-owners and customers. As for the barter, it is relationships with partner communities and hosts, their socio-economic circumstances, quality and quantity of items they exchange.

Among the GNH indicators, the transaction at the market is directly related to living standard, and, with cash obtained, indirectly related to education and health. In theory these can affect both positively and negatively. The barter transaction can affect to indicators in the area of living standard and community vitality.

Within the conventional food security framework, it does not matter so much whether community sprits and partnerships are strengthened through the process of transaction of foods. It is not in the scope of the framework how food items are transferred from producers to consumers. When we consider food security in the framework of GNH, however, it is certainly included in the area of thoughts and operation. What is important in the area of transaction from the perspective of conventional food security framework is perhaps the price of and accessibility to food items. Taking an extreme example, the conventional food security framework does not differentiate rice obtained from the long term partner community and the ones through illegal transaction. The concept of GNH very much cares how it is obtained.

Pottier aptly observes this point with a different example. He looks at the food items which are distributed to the poorer sections of society through 'self-targetting' mechanism, and poses an important question, "Does self-targeting enable the poor ... to access what they really want or is the strategy perceived as a social control mechanism which stigmatises and reinforces social hierarchy?" (Pottier 1999: 15). The food items which are provided though such mechanism and those which are bought in an ordinary shop must have different meanings, and hence influence

emotional well-being. In other words, how food items are obtained makes difference in the light of GNH thinking.

On consuming food

Food is consumed primarily to sustain our life biologically. At the same time, as humans are social beings, there are also socio-cultural elements to eating. Kunzang Choden in her recent book titled, *Chilli and Cheese: Food and Society in Bhutan*, illustrates this point in detail. She describes vividly the role food plays in Bhutanese society. While she introduces in a number of different occasions how food plays an important social and cultural roles, one chapter is devoted to “Food for Hungry Spirits”. (It seems that in Bhutan we need to think about food security of spirits besides 630,000 population!) She says, “Food is a means for maintaining a reciprocal link between the humans and the spirits; the malevolent spirits that harm humans must be propitiated and appeased by gift of food.” (Choden 2008: 53-54).

What to eat is defined not only by availability of food, but also by individual preferences and appropriateness to certain occasions and circumstances. Food items and preparation methods for everyday meal are differentiated from those for festivals and special occasions. Some food items and cooking methods signify regional identity, such as *puta* for Bumthang, *branja* for Mongar and *hyuentey* for Haa.

How to eat is also an important and complex issue. There is a large difference between eating alone and sitting for a family meal in the light of GNH. There are special occasions when people get together and share foods. What to eat and how to eat has to match each other. In other words, there are food items and cooking methods that are considered to be appropriate for certain occasions. Some items are even indispensable for certain occasions, such as *desi* in celebrations and rituals. One farmer told me that he always makes sure that his family has enough red rice for rituals and festivals.

There are certain cooking skills and recipes which have been passed down through generations. At the same time, however, there are nearly forgotten food items and menus. Kunzang Choden (2008: 139-140) points out that we are inclined to forget our traditional and indigenous foods, and that this trend is accelerated by urbanisation and the growing cash economy. She argues that many people associate eating wild plants and herbs with backwardness and poverty, and that consequently, we have forgotten many of the plants eaten by our parents and ancestors. She takes an example of one herbal plant, marjoram and continues that urban dwellers may import it in bottles with fancy labels as an ‘exotic’ herbs, not knowing that there is plenty of marjoram, free for the picking in their own backyards. Like wild marjoram, she points out, other cultivated and wild plant species used in the past are no longer used or, worse still, their use in Bhutanese cookery is forgotten (Choden 2008: 140).

There are many implications from her observations. A loss of menu is a loss of cultural asset that society has. One might say that while we lose certain menus as socio-economic conditions changes, new menus are introduced from abroad. In terms of the number of recipe cards, one can hardly say if there is an increase or decrease.

But the issue is not only the number but also the components of it. For instance, we might introduce hamburgers to our menu, and lose one recipe which used to be used in certain ritual or celebration. It might be the same in terms of the number of recipe cards, but hamburgers, for instance, may not be able to substitute the item which used to be served in a ritual. This is because food and cooking methods carry cultural and social meanings. Therefore, taking hamburger and losing a certain dishes of which the recipe has been passed down for generations signifies a change of meanings which circulate in the society.

During my fieldwork in eastern Bhutan, an informant showed me a soupy (thin porridge like) dish made of maize flour. When I come back to Thimphu, I talked about the dish to a friend who is from the same area. The friend said to me that he remembers that his parents and grandparents used to eat the dish, especially in cold winter morning, but he does not eat it these days. The talk of the dish actually stirred his memory of his childhood.

In consuming food, what is important is obviously not only nutritional factor, but also its cultural and social elements which foods carry. Consequently, the GNH indicators which directly affected by this is not only health and living standards, but also psychological well-being, community vitality and culture. Ecological diversity and resilience is also affected by the kind and amount of fuel which is required to prepare food. How long one would spend to prepare and consume food is another consideration. As modernisation progress, new convenient equipments are introduced and people may not have to stand in front of fire for a long time, but, at the same time, as life becomes busier, people might as well spend less time for meals.

In the conventional concept of food security, what people eat is an important matter since it is a matter of nutrition and sustaining life. It however mention very little about how people eat. Even when menus are the same, lone eating, family eating and communal eating are significantly different in terms of its soio-cultural implications and certainly in terms of GNH. It is a matter of relationships among people who share food. As Sutton illustrates, memories of sharing food stay for a long time, and it works to strengthen human relationships (2001). Having a meal together is a basis of creating and nurturing human relationships, which should last for a long time.

Conclusion

Throughout the presentation, it has emerged that the conventional concept of food security is actually not very much concerned with 'how' questions; namely, how foods are produced, how these are traded, and how these are consumed. The concept points out that food security is a matter of access. The access might be concerned with trading, but it does not differentiate various modes of trading. As far as people have access to food, the concept does not question further implications associated with a certain mode of trading.

Further consideration is that these 'how' questions, apart from implications to

GNH, may have a strong relation with sustainability of food security. Take an example of how it grows. An excessive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides might decrease long term productivity of the land. Take an example of how it is traded. An excessive dependence on market might make farmers vulnerable to price fluctuations and other factors outside their control.

We have so far examined the concept of food security dividing into different stages from production to consumption of food, and examined how GNH indicators are affected. It has been clear that food is not only to meet our biological requirement for survival. It has far wider implications when we consider food security in the light of the concept of GNH. The conventional concept of food security would need a refinement in the light of GNH, and the paper has found that this is primarily on 'how' questions.

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