

Voice, Accountability and Freedom

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Like all of the others, I want to thank the Centre for Bhutan Studies and the UNDP for all of their vision and their labours in bringing us to together for such a nourishing and enriching few days.

And I would like also to echo the comments of appreciation that they not only provided this forum, but also allowed time in which to discuss the ideas that have been presented. And so the process of this Conference has matched the topic and there has been a coherence between them.

One of the themes of those discussions around the last three days has been confusion and a feeling of being daunted or overwhelmed by the complexity and number of components of democratic practice.

So I'd like to begin with a note of encouragement. Last month, Lord Nicolas Stern delivered a presidential address to the European Economic Association and he argued that economists did not anticipate the financial crisis, in part because their minds were so compartmentalised – they could not see the whole. They also did not co-ordinate their research to build an economy that would not fall apart. Stern said that if you look at the giants of our profession, many of them strode across it. They made important contributions right across. You could see in conversations just how easy they found it to link up different parts of the economy. He argued that in order for economists to serve the common good, rather than bend to ideological whims, economists must again stride across many parts of the profession ranging from financial stability to poverty, to climate change.

Although I am an economist, I have found that here there are many present and future giants in democratic thought and process, and the kind of wide ranging conversations that we have had are actually a very healthy approach.

Beyond the Ballot Box

The title of my paper is Voice, Accountability and Freedom in the wrong order. It could also be called Listening, Neutrality and Freedom. For is it the ability to have a voice that we speak, even if you talk to yourself in the mirror? No, what people yearn for is to be compassionately heard, to feel that others trust us, that we have wisdom and insights to contribute.

And accountability, the checks and balances on power, occur because not only are we partly wise and insightful, we are also frail and prone to foibles. So, if we are honest with ourselves, we know we also subject to laziness and vice. Allowing others to align themselves with our better selves, to remind and call out of us the best that we can offer is another motivation for accountability, but has maybe not been expressed in that way before.

In the opening of this Conference, the Assistant Secretary-General Ajay Chhibber urged the participants here to go beyond elections in their understanding of democracy. In his presentation, and in the discussions that we have had since that time, we have discussed many democratic ideals, and many democratic institutions and I think we have well completed this charge to try to think through different aspects of deepening democratic ideals and institutions.

So in this last session I would like to attempt to deepen democracy in a different way. And one way is to try to connect it in different possibilities and ways to the normative objectives of society, and the second is to ask questions not about formal democratic processes or ideals, so much as informal democratic practice outside of those formal institutions.

And I frame this as five questions, because I hope that this will foster debate rather than provide any closure. And as it's not a mystery, these are the five questions:

First, is democracy a means or an end?

Second, is voice or 'agency' part of society's objectives? For the purposes here, I will frame these objectives as Gross National Happiness.

Third, does GNH include democratic practice or process freedom?

Fourth, will democracy engage the full voice and values of the people?

Fifth, why might citizens hold the democratic institutions to account.

I would like to take as my starting point, perhaps not to your surprise, the writings of Amartya Sen, who argues that freedom has two parts or two aspects. One relates to processes, and one relates to opportunities. I'll begin with the opportunities. He has also referred to this as 'capabilities'. What he argues is that when we judge social arrangements, when we judge societies, and political and economic systems, what we should look at in part, is the ability people have to enjoy freedoms they value and have reason to value.

The 'beings and doings' he refers to come from the functionings that Professor Grayling mentioned yesterday. As well-being and well-doing, they refer to things that people value and have reason to value. Things like being nourished, being able to visit your aunt, being able to eat rich sweets, being able to enjoy a higher education. The beings and doings are not limited, but they do have the qualification that they must be things that people value, in that if I do not value it, it is not a capability.

And second, they have to be functions in some sense that people have reason to value, that are responsible to value that are not divisive or damaging to others.

Sen argues that having the freedom to obtain these functions is important because let's say that last night you stayed in your hotel room and read a novel, and you were perfectly content to do so because you had decided that. But let's say that instead there was no transport, which there has been, or there was no opportunity to go out last night. There was a curfew. Then you may have also have stayed in your room and read your novel, but you would not have had the freedom to do

anything else. Sen argues there is an important difference between those two, and so focuses on making people free or able to do things that they value and retaining for them some sense of choice in the matter. This need not be an individual choice, because in many societies choices are made by communities or in discussion, but some level of freedom, individual or collective, is retained as an objective. So that's the opportunity aspect of freedom, which in a moment I will link to GNH.

The second is a process aspect. At one level, at the individual or personal level, this relates to what Sen has called 'agency' – people's ability to behave on what they value. This need not be selfish. I could act to save the seals, I could act to help the children in my community. The same concept of agency, as far as I could detect, was presented by the Prime Minister's speech on the first evening when he said that democracy in Bhutan came not by the will of the people but by the persuasion, persistence and sacrifice of their King, who believed in the rights and the capability of people to shape their own destiny.

And similarly, Ajay Chhibber quoted Gandhi who said that in a true democracy, every man and woman is taught to think for themselves and that democracy must come from within.

So this is taking the conversation away from democratic ideals and institutions and directing it towards the people. And thinking of people, whether they are civil servants, elected officers or citizens, as people who made a value of expressing their agency, acting and shaping their destiny.

Sen also articulates in his 2002 book, "Rationality and Freedom" that the process of freedom has many other aspects and in his book the idea of justice elaborates those a little bit more. For example, it includes democratic practice and institutions, so procedural freedoms on which a number of people have spoken have other manifestations beyond the individual as well.

What we have been discussing here very clearly relates to the process of freedom, so I thought I would summarise it in a quotation, which is

often repeated by Amartya Sen. "It is essential to see the public not merely as the patient whose well-being commands attention but also as the agent whose actions can transform society."

People have been discussing, and presenters and panelists and participants have disagreed as to whether democracy is a means or an end. So what I thought I would share with you, simply for discussion, and to stir the coils of your own thoughts, is one interpretation of Sen's work and how GNH, as a representation of certain capabilities and democratic practices, as a representation of agency would fit together.

For Sen, democracy has three values: the first is the instrumental value. The example, which I think everyone is familiar with, which was the basis of Sen's 1981 book "Poverty and Famine", is his articulation that because elected leaders know that they will come before the public at the next election, and because all the famines only affect a small proportion of people, they are profoundly disturbing to the wider population. Famines do not tend to occur in a democracy. Another reason for this is that democracy tends to allow a freedom of press, so there can be information sharing, which has not always occurred in some of the tragic famines, so the government actually knows the situation on the ground.

The second, Sen argues, is that democracy has intrinsic value, not at all times perhaps, but he argues that being able to so do something not only for oneself but also for other members of society is one of the elementary freedoms, which people have reason to value.

And he points to the situation that was mentioned earlier in the conference - the emergency in India - as being a testimony to the commitment of people, including very deprived people, to their own political freedom.

The third value is one that is emphasised more and more in Sen's writings and which maybe also very pertinent here. It is what he calls the constitutive value. The basic idea is that in the give and take of reasons and opinions in hearing how a policy will affect members of our society - and exchanging those kinds of information - we shape one

another's values. We influence the positions other people hold because they did not realise, perhaps, before our conversation, how a policy would affect a different group, or they did not know a piece of information, that upon knowing it, shifted their view.

He gives the example of declining fertility rates in India, which had been much influenced by public discussion, on the bad effect on fertility rates on the community at large and particularly on the lives of young women. So the two aspects were public discussions of family planning, which led to reshaping the values around families and child bearing. And this was influenced by new information, learning about family planning, learning about declining infant mortality rates around the world, about over population, and about how alternative family structures can function economically and the strains they come under with too many children.

But this new information was complimented by a critical reflection on values, the values of having too many children in order to obtain status or labour force, and in the relation to the value of maternal health and enabling higher aspirations to one's children.

So these aspects of having new information, and critically reflecting on your values by being exposed to others values, whether they are of your own society or from abroad, are all aspects of the constitutive value of democracy. Sen says that you may or may not agree with the values that others put forward, but at least understanding and engaging them strengthens and deepens your own position.

So to summarise, both capabilities and agency – or democratic practise – at the level of people are ends, and in of themselves, they can be of intrinsic value. But they may also be means to other things. If you have good health, you can go to school, you can work in the labour force. If you have a good education, it's instrumental to having family planning or a higher degree of professional attainment. So clearly, both are means to themselves, and this creates a very messy situation because there is the requirement of trade off's between them. Sen argues that these trade off's are no embarrassment, and we should not be ashamed

of the need to make them. There is no perfect way to make them, but he argues that holding them both as intrinsically valuable is essential.

So, that's one view, and there will be others. What would the implications be for the relationship between GNH and democratic practise? One could conceive of Gross National Happiness as representing a set of capabilities that was desired, a set of freedoms that was desired for all people. All people may not take of advantage of them, but at least they would be available, real opportunities that they could enjoy, should they wish.

And similarly, democracy, provides a freedom to act as an agent. So in this view, there might be ends.

There are two further points that I wish to point out. The first is that agencies are intrinsically valuable. I observe that in the domains of GNH it includes good governance and this might be a domain that also refers to this ability of people to act as agents to shape their destiny. If that position were held it would not be in isolation. Looking at the human development reports from 1990 to 2009, we find only one year when political freedoms were not mentioned as part of the objective of expanding people's capabilities. So it might be that this democratic practice, whatever it is called, could be part of the domains of GNH.

Another example is the Sarkozy Commission whose report was a released a month ago. It was a commission in France that was chaired by Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Laureate and many mainstream economists were involved. It argued that GDP should not be the objective, not only for France, but for many of the other countries that participated in this commission. It argued three things: We need to refine GDP. We have to include the environment. We have to come up with better measures for the quality of life. Bhutan was acknowledged in that report.

They also came up with nine dimensions. The ninth dimension is different but the other eight are broadly similar and parallel to the GNH dimensions. The sixth they called Political Voice in Government and they described it as being an intrical dimension in the quality of life.

So in a sense, maybe democracy is not only an end in itself, but also a part of GNH. A third issue is when we go beyond the formal institutions of democracy to peoples' practice and how we understand that practice. As I mentioned at the beginning, the discussions to date in this event have focused on democratic ideals such as civil liberties or human rights as well as democratic institutions. I want to focus on how democracy is practised outside of the formal institutions of government, which is the ability of an active public to influence democratic institutions so they at least respond. This is not only about elections, but going beyond elections as how citizens between elections - and through other informal media - can take part in democratic debate and deliberation and influence.

So my question is whether GNH represents the objectives of society in terms of well-being or whether it would also have a process feature. I want to mention that in 2010, because UNDP is one of the participants in this group, a global report will focus on rethinking on human development. It is 20 years since the first human development report was launched and part of that rethinking involves a reformulation of the definition of human development. The original definition focused on enlarging people's freedoms. It talked about health, education, income and livelihoods, but is also talked about the ability to participate creatively as workers. It talked about social relationships, about cultural liberty, about the role of women, and many other freedoms. But in this rethinking of human development there are questions among many different communities as to whether this definition should be expanded to include a second clause that has to do with democracy. Human development would then be seen not only as a process of enlarging peoples' freedoms to do and be what they value in life, it would also empower people as active agents in the development processes. This is tentative, it's being discussed by other groups and it would be interesting to have your input. It is also meant to clarify that people and groups together must participate as agents to try and build up the common good.

So far, I have asked three questions that may seem quite abstract, but that maybe relate to how democracy relates to GNH at least

conceptually, and the motivation for doing so was to ask two further questions, which are more practical.

These last two questions are those to which I do not have answers, but I believe are critically important and would be good to discuss further. The first question is whether the standard democratic practises will create and revise political objectives, which Professor Richardson is his opening plenary, encouraged the revision and rethinking of objectives. If these democratic processes will create and revise objectives that are as good or better than GNH, I believe it is an interesting question, The Prime Minister said in his opening speech that the purpose of democracy and the contents of development programmes, will and must change as people consider happiness as their explicit goal in life. So, if the purpose of democracy is going to change because you have this wider set of ideals, and yet at the same time, there is a learning from other countries in Asia, and a learning from other experiences in democracy that maybe have different sets of objectives. So, the question is really how these two are going to come together.

And I would like to raise three challenges. The first is an “inadvertent ventriloquism”, the term comes from Robert Chambers, and it refers to work in the village level participatory processes of civil society. And what he observed is that when an NGO or health or education minister comes to a rural community, and asks what would you like, the people look at the car, and say what they think the minister would like them to say, so this destroys the process of engagement.

And the second challenge is that there are democratic cultures in terms of the appropriate topics to be discussed and what should be omitted categorically from the discussions of the public good. The boundaries of what is public and private vary across societies.

A Southeast Asian official in 1953 said to the US. “We asked you for hope, understanding and love and you gave us money and technology. Are these the things that account for your country’s greatness?”

So the question here is that there are certain topics such as economic or technological development that are appropriate to discuss, along with

financial stability and climate change. And there are other more behavioural, cultural and attitudinal values that are not appropriate, and with which we do not have good practises for discussing and yet which seem to have greater prominence here in Bhutan.

And the third challenge is simply a fact. In the 2005 census it showed that 55% of Bhutan's population is under 24. So many of the voices that will be trying to articulate the objectives will be from the younger members of this society. So the issue is how to include their voices, which may have a different formation, different reference points and different values than the one's that have been enacted at present.

As to how the content and purpose of democracy will change having a fuller objective rather than simply economic development, I have a couple of concrete suggestions. Clearly to learn from the deliberative processes, but also to learn from the more community level participatory processes.

I had the pleasure of working in Pakistan with Oxfam and was working on women's income generating projects. And the first time we asked the women about the benefits and impacts of the project, they told us how much money they had earned. They grew roses and stitched them together into garlands and sold those garlands at a 54% rate of return and they were able to buy milk, to buy shoes to send their children to school.

We also asked about different domains of life – skills, friendships, inner peace and aesthetic matters. Their responses were quite provoking. A 34 year old widow and a mother of two was very much excluded from the community because she was a widow. But, she said that having grown the roses, and they were used as acts of adoration, people changed their perceptions of her. They invited her into their houses and even bought the roses from her, and she told me the fragrance of roses was always on her clothes.

So having a wider set of curiosities and questions about what people do value and being a bit more proactive in the public discussions and perhaps a bit more structured have been some of the avenues that

participatory village level groups have done to try to create village development plans that carry the culture and the values of the people a bit more fully.

Another possible commendation comes from Sen's latest book "The Idea of Justice", where he argues that it is such a wrong understanding to see democracy as a Western concept. He gives many examples. I will only cite three here.

In the 6th Century the Buddhist councils in India provided the earliest open general meetings and settling disputes on different points of view on social and religious matters. The adherents got together to argue out their differences. Sen also advocated more study of the emperor Ashoka, who hosted the third and largest Buddhist council in the 3rd Century, but he also spent a great deal of his life trying to promote good and spontaneous behaviour in people towards one another and to encourage values. Clearly, many would have regarded him as too optimistic, but it is an interesting and quite a different model of democracy. Third and finally, Sen mentions the Constitution of 17 Articles that a Japanese prince Shatoku produced in 604, six centuries before the Magna Carta. The Constitution insisted that decisions on important matters should not be made by one person alone. They should be discussed with many. It also said that each person has a heart and that every heart has its own moments.

These are different, gentler and richer approaches to democracy. I know that Bhutan and all of the other countries here also have traditions that I am not aware of. But they might enrich other understandings of democracy very much so.

In regards to the processes of accountability. We heard from Dasho Kinley about the aversion and the shyness to the issues of protest and conflict and yet so much of the literature and the culture of democracy in other countries relies on and indeed celebrates conflict, as does Sen's argument that we need to rage to protest to power. So how do we understand that? We need to rethink accountability not just in confronting but more as clarifying and supporting. It is also a way that the youth and the media can be involved.

I hope that those five questions I have asked might foster more open debate and I would to close by motioning the Sarkozy Commission I referred to earlier. Joseph Stiglitz was surprised by the response and he wrote, "The work of our commission has not surprisingly struck a global chord." But he also acknowledged that even before we convened, Bhutan was creating a measure of GNH and Thailand is also developing a Sufficiency Economy.

As people have spoken of their confusion, there maybe confusion because there is a difficult task that has been chosen, and there's a commitment to undertaking it very seriously and thoroughly. But what I have tried to offer here is the perspective that this task of trying to deepen democracy in new ways is important for others. The Sarkozy Commission also had nine dimensions, but it did not mention a democratic process to create them or to promulgate them or to revise them. It was behind this group in that respect. So, as different democracies in South Asia learn how to respond to these vitally important questions, many others will learn also from you.

(Transcribed)