

## **The Politics of Gross National Happiness: Values, Power and Policy Implementation**

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### **Introduction**

There is a growing global consensus that development needs to be conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon. The former dominance of the economic growth paradigm is now paralleled by multidimensional approaches to development that place people, not economic growth, as the ultimate end of development. Accompanying this emerging global consensus is a recognition that effective governance is the foundation upon which to foster such development. The concept of *governance* moves beyond the notion of *government*. The nature of government is restricted to state actors. Governance, on the other hand, involves the exercise of power through interactions among public, private and civil society actors and the norms, institutions and values

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that shape these interactions. The expansion to state and non-state actors that is characteristic of governance requires an opening of the public policy process – formulation, implementation and evaluation – to effectively engage this broadened set of actors.

Despite the recognition of a vital link between effective governance and operationalizing multidimensional development approaches, much scholarly attention focuses primarily on the formulation of multidimensional development policies or the evaluation of their outcomes. Analysis of the role of people’s agency in achieving multidimensional outcomes, particularly through policy implementation, tends to remain simplistic or default to insufficient notions of collective rationality that do not adequately take power relations into account (Gasper 2002; Johnson 2009: 119; Stewart & Deneulin 2002: 70). This ignores the reality of multiple state and non-state governance actors with potentially conflicting political interests. Such conflicting interests may compete to influence the policy implementation process in a manner that generates development outcomes that may not reflect the original multidimensional intentions of policy formulation.

This is a critical issue for Bhutan. The country has implemented a multidimensional development strategy known as Gross National Happiness (GNH) since the 1970s. GNH was initially constructed as four integrated pillars including sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, cultural preservation and promotion, environmental conservation and good governance. More recently it has been expanded into nine domains. The domains broaden the original four pillars to include psychological wellbeing, health, time use, education, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standard. Since the inauguration of this multidimensional development strategy in the 1970s, governance in Bhutan has evolved considerably. Deepening decentralization and democratization have broadened the number and kind of actors, both state and non-state, now involved in

the implementation of GNH policies. Multiple interests, and potentially competing interests, are a part of the process of putting GNH into action on the ground.

A GNH governance framework, including a set of GNH-specific policy tools, has emerged as a means to shape and harmonize potentially competing interests so they are consistent with the multidimensional character of GNH. Exploring how, or whether, this governance framework is successful in harmonizing competing policy implementation interests is necessary to gain a better understanding of how GNH can be best operationalized at the policy level. Do state and non-state governance actors pursue competing interests when implementing GNH policy? If so, does Bhutan's governance framework with its policy tools successfully shape their actions in a manner that is consistent with GNH? Or do competing priorities in the policy implementation process subvert the achievement of intended GNH outcomes? This study explores these questions. It argues that the GNH-specific policy tools are not primarily responsible for successfully harmonizing competing power interests. Rather, a common commitment among competing governance actors to a set of Buddhist-inspired cultural values plays a key role in shaping policy implementation in a manner consistent with GNH.

## **Research Methods**

Exploring how GNH policies are implemented on the ground requires an analysis that draws upon multiple and diverse policy contexts. Doing so allows stronger inferences to be made about the nature of the implementation of GNH policies and the political dynamics that surround the process. As such, this study comparatively analyses the implementation of four GNH-related policies: media, tourism, farm roads and the human/wildlife conflict strategy. The four policies were selected using three criteria: i) a clear integration of several GNH pillars or domains within the policy field, ii) multiple state and non-state actors involved in the actual implementation of the policy, and iii) a history of

policy outcomes that can be assessed for whether they reflect the initial GNH intentions of the policy. In addition, the four policies collectively represent a mix of both centralized and decentralized cases of policy implementation. Again, this diversity among the four policies allows for stronger inferences to be made about the nature of implementing GNH.

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were undertaken with 157 respondents representing three levels of government (national, district and village block), the private sector, civil society organizations (CSOs) and international donors involved in implementing the four policies. Purposive sampling was used to ensure representation from the main geographic regions of Bhutan as well as areas of high, medium and low levels of poverty incidence. The semi-structured and focus group interviews were complemented by site visits, participant observation and document analysis.

For each of the four policy fields, the research explored three questions:

- i) What are the initial GNH intentions of the selected policy?
- ii) How does Bhutan's governance framework shape the potentially competing interests and actions of state, non-state and donor actors involved in the implementation of the policy?
- iii) What are the resulting policy outcomes and how do they compare with initial GNH policy intentions?

The following sections turn to an analysis of these questions.

### **Gross National Happiness and its Governance Framework**

Bhutan is at the forefront of implementing a development approach conceptualized in multidimensional terms. Since the early 1970s Bhutan has pursued Gross National Happiness as its national development strategy. GNH articulates an understanding of development that incorporates multiple and interrelated dimensions. It is an attempt to construct development in a holistic manner that

addresses the multiple and interdependent dimensions of being human. The initial four pillars and recently expanded nine domains of GNH are explicitly rooted in a foundation of Buddhist cultural values (Lokamitra 2004; Planning Commission 1999: 19; Tashi 2004; Tideman 2011). Balance, harmony, sustainability, the sanctity of all life, moderation, responsiveness and the interdependence of all sentient beings form the value foundation upon which the pillars and domains of GNH rest. Respondents in this study referred to these values as Buddhist values, Buddhist-Hindu values or, most frequently, Bhutanese values. The values intimately connect Gross National Happiness to its national cultural context.

The official construction of GNH as a national strategy rooted to its cultural context has led to the Bhutanese state itself being defined as a “GNH state”, or, more often, a state aspiring to become a GNH state (Dessallien 2005; Tashi 2004: 485; Ura 2003: 1; Zangmo in McDonald 2010: 119-120). Gross National Happiness is often portrayed as a normative statist goal, a legitimization of state policy or a self-representation of the state itself (Ura 2007: 41). Examples are numerous. Article 9.2 of the constitution outlines the state’s role as the enabler of GNH. Gross National Happiness is also embedded in the mission statements of many central government ministries and agencies. Legislation on the role of local governments explicitly links them to fostering GNH. Upon his ascension to the throne in 2006, the fifth King announced that the pursuit of Gross National Happiness will be a key aspect of his reign (in Kinga 2009: 298). GNH is deeply engrained in the very character of the Bhutanese state.

The Bhutanese state may officially play the lead role in the national pursuit of GNH but non-state actors have a role as well. The state is not intended to be the sole source of power. It needs to engage with a broadened range of domestic development partners including civil society organizations and the private sector (Planning Commission 1999: 52; GNH Commission 2009a: 51; RGoB 2005a: 3). International donors are also key development partners in the implementation of

GNH policies (Planning Commission 1999: 21-22). This governance framework of broadened actors has further evolved since 2008 to incorporate the unique set of GNH-specific policy tools. The tools are an attempt to ensure the policy process is infused with GNH in a manner that constrains the potentially competing interests of expanded governance actors so they remain consistent with GNH policy intentions. The tools have been designed for each stage of the policy process including policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. Further, the tools are, to varying degrees, participatory in nature. They directly engage governance actors in a collective process where the multiple dimensions of GNH are taken into account at all stages of the policy cycle. A more interdependent and holistic policy process is the intended result.

The GNH tools include a policy screening tool to be used in the process of policy formulation; a draft project screening tool, GNH committees and a GNH check to be used in planning and policy implementation; and a GNH Index for measuring and evaluating policy outcomes. The policy and project screening tools require governance actors to collectively rank draft policies and projects against a set of screening questions based on the GNH domains (Centre for Bhutan Studies n.d.). The tools ensure that regardless of the policy or project, the GNH domains will be taken into account and balanced. GNH Committees are structures meant to exist within each ministry and agency in the central government as well as within sub-national governments. The committees are to act as links to the GNH Commission, the main body responsible for operationalizing GNH, and to ensure that GNH is mainstreamed into policy implementation at all levels of government (GNH Commission n.d.). The GNH check is intended to enable communities to prioritize and plan local development activities in accordance with GNH criteria (Tshering & Chuki 2009).<sup>1</sup> Lastly, the

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<sup>1</sup> In 2014, after the data collection for this study was completed, the GNH Check was incorporated into a set of three new community planning tools. The three new tools include: i) Critical Reflection and Challenging Our Assumptions, ii) Situation Assessment through Gender, Environment, Climate

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GNH Index is a tool that measures policy outcomes using the nine domains (Ura et al. 2012). The domains are further expanded into 33 variables with over 120 indicators. The multidimensional nature of the GNH Index ensures that policy outcomes are measured in a way that reflects the integration of the nine domains. The measurements can then feed back into the policy formulation and implementation processes.

In addition to these GNH specific tools, Bhutan's Five Year Plans (FYPs), which have been used since the early 1960s, have been explicitly designed as GNH tools since the 10<sup>th</sup> plan began in 2008. Results-based management, or RBM, is the management strategy used to guide the FYPs towards the achievement of GNH policy outcomes. Taken in total, the various GNH structures and tools represent a unique set of policy instruments that put the multiple dimensions of GNH at the heart of the governance and policy process in Bhutan. They require governance actors, at least in theory, to take the multiple GNH dimensions into account regardless of actors' own individual interests. The next section explores what actually happen in practice. It analyses the common themes that emerge from the experience of implementing the policy fields of tourism, media, farm roads and human/wildlife conflict.

### **The Politics of GNH in Policy Implementation**

Each of the four policy fields explicitly intends to integrate some combination of pillars or domains of GNH. This is clear from government documents and interviews with government officials. Tourism policy strives to maximize equitable economic growth while minimizing the negative cultural and environmental impacts of this growth (DoT 2005: 67-71; NEC 1998: 51; Planning Commission 1999: 20, 35-36; DoT 2001: 18; RGoB 2011: 3). Media policy intends to

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Change, Disaster and Poverty (GECDP) Lens and iii) Situation Assessment through Gross National Happiness (GNH) Lens. For more details see Tshering & Chuki 2014.

foster a free and responsible media that contributes to good governance within Bhutan's emerging democracy while preserving Bhutanese culture as a dynamic force within a free and globalized media landscape (BICMA 2010: 5; DoIM 2010: viii, xi; 2012; Pek 2003: 7). Farm road policy promotes a greater role in decision-making for local communities in the construction of environmentally friendly farm roads that contribute to rural economic growth and improve access to social services (DoA 2009: 5, 28; GNH Commission 2009a: 45, 95, 139; 2009b: 30; MoA 2009: 84; RGoB 2005b: 109-110). The human/wildlife conflict strategy, which addresses the problem of wildlife destroying crops and livestock, intends to better integrate rural economic activity within conservation practice by enhancing conflict mitigation strategies and fostering sustainable economic alternatives through decentralized decision-making (GNH Commission 2009b: 328-330; NCD 2008). These are the GNH intentions of the four policies. Their actual implementation illustrates four interrelated themes that complicate these intentions. The first three themes represent a threat to the successful implementation of GNH: unpredictable applications of power by governance actors in different contexts; missing or misunderstood GNH policy tools; and contested understandings of GNH itself. The fourth theme, however, mitigates the threat represented by the previous three. Governance actors maintain a common commitment to a set of cultural values – the same values that underlie GNH – that shape and constrain their policy implementation actions in a manner consistent with GNH. The resulting policy outcomes are therefore a general reflection of the initial GNH policy intentions. The following explores each of these themes in turn.

### **Unpredictable Applications of Power in Different Contexts**

There is not one consistently dominant governance actor in the process of GNH policy implementation. Bhutan is often viewed as being dominated by a strong centralized state but the implementation of the four policies shows that different kinds of state and non-state actors are able to exert power in different contexts. Significantly, the context in



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which a certain kind of governance actor is dominant is frequently unpredictable. The same actors' influence often changes in different policy fields, geographic locations or configurations of governance actors. The result is an unpredictable policy implementation process where different actors with often competing interests engage in conflict, shifting alliances and emergent policy priorities.

Evidence of divergent and often unpredictable influence is stark across the four policy fields. In the implementation of media policy, the central ministry's interests often dominated when engaging with the private sector and CSOs. At the same time, conflict occasionally arose between the ministry and other central government agencies that checked the dominance of any one of them. In contrast, central government ministries were often isolated and ineffective in farm road policy. They had inconsistent influence – sometimes powerful, sometimes not – within different configurations of governance actors or different geographic regions in tourism and human/wildlife conflict policies. Sub-national governments at the *dzongkhag* (district) level and *gewog* (village block) level demonstrated similarly diverse patterns of power. Gewog governments consistently had significant influence on the nature of farm road construction. Yet this influence was driven by community pressure, sometimes at the expense of the gewogs' own interests. Both gewog and dzongkhag officials had strikingly inconsistent influence in different geographic regions in tourism policy and were often confused about their roles in implementing the human/wildlife conflict strategy. In the latter case this led to inconsistent implementation of the strategy in different geographic regions.

Non-state actors also demonstrated diverse and often unpredictable applications of power and influence. Civil society organizations involved in media and tourism policy wielded limited influence in partnership with the central government while, in the case of tourism, were sometimes effective in pursuing their priorities when confronting the central government. Private sector influence in tourism and media policy, on the other hand, was almost entirely unpredictable. Private

sector actors were sometimes successful in influencing policy implementation when allied with CSOs and government agencies while at other times similar alliances were not successful at all. Similarly, they were both successful and unsuccessful on different occasions when acting individually. In the case of media policy in particular, private sector actors often subverted their own collective interests due to mutual mistrust. Lastly, international donor voices were often silent, effectively integrated into the Bhutanese government's formal GNH development priorities within the policy fields. An exception is evident with tourism policy, however, where one international partner was able to carve out its own specific interests in partnership with a state agency while another was not effective in a similar partnership with a different state agency. Overall, the application of power and influence in GNH policy implementation, and the subsequent interests that dominate, is a complex cocktail that is often unpredictable.

### **GNH Policy Implementation Tools: Missing in Action**

The diverse and unpredictable applications of power complicate the GNH policy implementation process. Multiple priorities and interests emerge but when and where they will be influential is often hard to determine. Given this unpredictable policy context, the GNH-specific policy tools were created to ensure diverse and unpredictable policy interests are harmonized in a manner consistent with the multiple dimensions of GNH. Nonetheless, a clear theme emerging across all four policy fields is the general absence of the specific tools intended to shape the policy implementation process. In some cases, this was due to a lack of knowledge of the existence of these tools. This was particularly the case with the draft GNH project selection tool and the GNH check which, while occasionally known, do not appear to be used at all. In other cases, GNH tools were well known but not used as they were seen a redundant given existing structures or policy instruments. This was particularly the case with GNH Committees. Many respondents within government spoke of the multiple committees that already exist and the lack of clarity around why another committee is necessary. They were

disinterested in forming active GNH committees as a result. When GNH tools were used, they were often misunderstood or misapplied. The Five-Year Plans are particularly influential yet many respondents did not understand their connection to GNH since this link was made with the 10<sup>th</sup> plan. Others did understand the connection but did not understand the role of results-based management in operationalizing the plans.

Overall, this general absence or misunderstanding of the GNH tools in the policy implementation process represents a lost opportunity. They could play a critical role in shaping the diverse and unpredictable applications of power that occur among governance actors in different contexts. They could play a role in promoting intended GNH outcomes. In contrast, the policy screening tool, which is used in the process of policy formulation rather than policy implementation, has been used extensively. It brings together policy stakeholders to bridge potential policy differences by requiring them to formulate policy structured by the GNH domains. The policy screening tool represents a significant step towards harmonizing competing interests in the process of policy formulation. Unfortunately, this experience does not extend to the politicized and unpredictable process of policy implementation.

### **GNH as a Contested National Development Strategy**

A more fundamental challenge arises beyond the lack of use of GNH tools. GNH itself is often contested by policy implementation actors despite it being Bhutan's national development strategy. The reason it is contested resides in different understandings of the very nature of GNH. Gross National Happiness is frequently understood only superficially, not understood at all, viewed in isolation from any links to policy, assumed to be a component of only one political party's electoral platform or viewed as too complicated. For some respondents, the GNH tools themselves, and particularly the GNH Index with its expansion of the four pillars to nine domains, have complicated GNH and obscured its understanding. For others, GNH has become the

domain of Bhutanese elites and international academics, removing its relevance from everyday Bhutanese life. For many Bhutanese governance actors engaged in the implementation of the four policy fields, the country's national development strategy is merely a buzzword drained of consistent meaning. One of the things intended to define the Bhutanese state is misunderstood or contested by the very people tasked with implementing it.

### **Common values: Filling the void**

The previous three themes represent a significant challenge. Unpredictable applications of power largely unconstrained by the GNH policy tools or a common understanding of GNH itself offer a clear recipe for undermining the successful implementation of GNH policies. The themes suggest a situation ripe for policy outcomes that do not look anything like GNH policy intentions. The unpredictable political dynamics of the GNH policy implementation process hold significant potential to thwart intended GNH policy outcomes. Yet the actual policy outcomes achieved across the four policy fields tell a rather different story. The outcomes generated by the policies generally tend to mirror the original GNH policy intentions. This is not always the case but it is a very common result despite the complex process of policy implementation. The reason for this lies in the role of cultural values. Both state and non-state governance actors demonstrated a common commitment to a common set of cultural values: balance, harmony, sustainability, moderation, responsiveness, respect for the sanctity of life and the interdependence of all sentient beings. Significantly, these Buddhist-inspired values are the same as those that are the foundation of the official construction of GNH, whether governance actors realized this or not. The values shape both the interests and actions of state and non-state governance actors in the policy implementation process. In this sense, the values do not prevent conflict but constrain it. When different governance actors demonstrated competing interests, they were limited to differences over operational issues rather than over the policy intention itself or the need to balance economic, social, cultural,

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ecological and governance concerns. Conflict is a matter of degree rather than kind.

Within tourism policy this manifested in disagreements among governance actors over the desired operational balance between economic growth and cultural and environmental preservation. Media policy was characterized by differences over how the media should specifically promote good governance and what a dynamic Bhutanese culture should look like in a globalized world. The nature of accountability across levels of government was a key contested issue in the implementation of farm road policy. Implementing the human/wildlife conflict strategy experienced disagreements over the degree to which successful conservation or expanded rural livelihoods was the key driver of the problem. In all cases, governance actors did not dispute the intention of each policy to incorporate or balance GNH pillars or domains. Their actions and disagreements over how the operational balance of GNH dimensions should be achieved were constrained by a collective commitment to the values of harmony, balance and interdependence. In some cases, respondents understood that these values were GNH values. Several government officials even suggested that the values make the GNH-specific policy tools unnecessary as Bhutanese will naturally act in ways consistent with GNH. At the same time, other respondents did not recognize the values as GNH values despite their role in shaping actions in ways that are consistent with GNH. These governance actors are pursuing GNH priorities without realizing it based on their value system.

There were a few cases, however, where an apparent shift in values has led to policy outcomes that are less consistent with Gross National Happiness. This was particularly the case within farm road policy where a decentralized process is leading to the construction of farm roads that improve rural livelihoods and access to social services but are doing so in a way that is often not environmentally sustainable in the long term. Part of the challenge is insufficient capacity and funding to build roads in a manner consistent with the environmental aspirations

of GNH. But a shift in values also seems to play a role. Democratic decentralization appears to be driving a value change among many local government officials to prioritize responsiveness to community demands over the other dimensions of GNH in ways that threaten the environmental sustainability of farm roads. A value shift may also be occurring within human/wildlife conflict policy as a few government officials questioned the value of respecting the sanctity of all life given the extent of crop and livestock destruction by wildlife. These officials sometimes ignored the illegal killing of problem wildlife as a result. Lastly, the outcomes of media policy suggest that recent access to global media may be driving a value shift within Bhutan towards a greater consumer culture that is at odds with GNH.

Despite some emerging evidence of possible value shifts, the findings overall suggest that the Buddhist-inspired cultural values that underlie GNH have often played the key role in shaping how governance actors act in policy implementation. Moreover, this has generated policy outcomes generally consistent with GNH policy intentions. This has occurred despite the unpredictable applications of power, lack of use of the GNH policy tools and inconsistent knowledge of GNH itself.

## **Conclusion**

Gross National Happiness represents a serious attempt to put a multidimensional development strategy into practice. It represents a well-thought-out model that moves beyond a sole focus on economic growth as development. This study has shown, however, that such a multidimensional model is subject to the complications of multiple and potentially competing political interests in the process of policy implementation. The experience of implementing four GNH-related policies demonstrates that power is applied in diverse and often unpredictable ways by different kinds of state and non-state governance actors with their own interests. In addition, power is applied in a context where the GNH-specific policy tools play a very limited role in shaping governance actions so they account for the multiple dimensions

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of GNH. Most seriously, governance actors themselves do not share a common understanding of Gross National Happiness as the country's national development strategy. Nonetheless, Bhutan's experience with implementing GNH suggests that cultural values fill this governance void. A common commitment to shared GNH values, whether these are understood as GNH values or not, shapes and constrains policy implementation actions and disagreements in ways that are generally consistent with the goals of GNH.

Overall, the role of cultural values in driving GNH governance bodes well for the continued success of Gross National Happiness. Yet this study found that a caution is in order. Cultural values are not static. While it may take considerable time, values change as circumstances change. Continuing to rely on common values as the key to successful GNH policy implementation runs the risk of being confronted by future value change that may be inconsistent with GNH. Indeed, this study found that some value shifts with challenging connections to GNH appear to already be occurring. Two key questions therefore emerge for Bhutan. First, how might GNH successfully adapt to future value changes that may have tenuous connections to GNH? Second, how might GNH itself shape the nature of future value change in Bhutan? Answering these questions will be critical as Bhutan continues to operationalize Gross National Happiness.

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