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The Pursuit of Happiness: Issues facing Bhutanese youths and the challenges posed to Gross National Happiness

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INTRODUCTION

Gross National Happiness (GNH) has become iconic to the small Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan. Gaining international recognition for its uniquely coined development philosophy, the Kingdom of Bhutan now faces the challenge of living up to its ambitions of sustainable economic development whilst keeping its cultural identity strong.

However, the government may be facing its greatest challenge yet. The current generation of Bhutanese youths are facing changes in society that have been unprecedented in the history of Bhutan. Increasing economic liberalisation and social modernisation have brought an influx of differing cultures and norms, and have caused new conflicts of interest within Bhutanese society. It is pertinent that the government be aware of these issues, and address them before the situation increases in severity.

This paper seeks to explore the two biggest issues facing Bhutanese youths today, and link them to the concept of Gross National Happiness. For the first section, I will provide an overview of how these issues arose, and in the second, explain why these issues will pose a significant challenge to the government's pursuit of GNH-centered development. While there will be primary resources in the form of academic papers and newspaper articles, the bulk of my paper will be based on interviews conducted with those who have a hand in shaping the

social and civic environment of Bhutanese youths, and on personal interactions youths to get a first-hand experience of their culture. For the last section I will elaborate on a few measures that have been or are in the process of being implemented to deal with these youth issues.

I hope that my paper will shed some light on the issues facing Bhutanese youths, and the significance of the new generation of Bhutanese in upholding their country's noble pursuit of Happiness.

WHAT IS GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS?

Until recently, development theories have been very much focused on the economic dimensions of development. Even the most radical of development theories that stressed the importance of psychological, social and political factors in development confined such factors to mere causal variables, meant to lead to the eventual realization of economic growth.¹ What resulted from this is an almost universal use of Gross National Product (GNP) as a means for measuring growth and overall national well-being.

There have been, however, many criticisms against the over-reliance on GNP as an indicator of development. These include i) as an economic measure, it does not take into account non-market activities that influence well-being such as housework, childcare, and volunteer work, amongst others, ii) it does not account for the negative externalities of production such as environmental pollution and detrimental social impacts, iii) GNP does not distinguish how income is being distributed within the country and amongst the population, so overall economic growth does not necessarily mean equal increase in well-being.

Some argue that it is a mistake to confuse the concepts of "growth" and "development". As Herman Daly², former senior economist in the environmental department at the World Bank put it, "growth is the quantitative increase in physical scale while development is

qualitative improvement or the unfolding of potentiality. An economy can grow without developing, or develop without growing, or do both or neither".

In response, new indicators were developed, such as the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) in 1990, which measures life expectancy, adult literacy and adjusted GDP per capita. The EU Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS) which was adopted by the European Council in 2001 emphasized the importance of qualitative factors such as health, awareness, inclusion and environmental quality.³

Perturbed by the various problems that had plagued developing countries in their pursuit of economic growth as a means for increasing overall well-being, the king decided that a new development approach had to be introduced that would cater to the unique needs of Bhutan. In fact, many conventional economic indicators of development hold very little intrinsic interest and significance to the Bhutanese. Fifty years ago, Bhutan was not even a monetised community. Traditional farming communities, which make up a majority of the Bhutanese population, engaged in subsistence farming and barter trade. Even now, rural communities have little use for money or exchange rates.

Propounded in the late 1980s by the Fourth Druk Gyalpo⁴ Jigme Singye Wangchuk, Gross National Happiness was an attempt to redefine development philosophy away from material-centric focuses, and toward more holistic and non-material ones. Strongly influenced by Buddhist concepts and cultural consciousness, the GNH framework is supported by 4 principle pillars, namely the achievement of equitable and sustainable development, the preservation and promotion of local culture, the protection of environmental health and diversity, and the upholding of good governance.

The Centre for Bhutan Studies has further identified 9 domains for GNH-centered development to prioritize on – psychological wellbeing, physical health, time use and balance, education, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards. It is the mantra of policy and planning commissions that while economic performance is recognized as necessary for enlarging self-reliance and increasing the standard of living, its importance should be balanced against non-material goals such as emotional and spiritual growth and development.

*“As the future of Bhutan lies in the hands of our people, it is our responsibility to make sure that the future well-being of our country is secure in the hands of the Bhutanese people and that [they] can successfully shoulder this sacred responsibility **with complete loyalty and dedication.**”*

- *His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuk*

There is some concern that the concept of Gross National Happiness is merely an elitist ideal, held by the ruling class but alienated from the common man. Even in Bhutan there were skeptics, who saw GNH as a catchy but rhetorical phrase.⁵

However, some argue that despite its seemingly recent origin, the term ‘Gross National Happiness’ is really a mere popularization of deep-rooted philosophies that have been present in Bhutanese development since even before the modernization efforts that started in 1959.⁶ Respect for the environment, the sound morals for governance and the significance of culture in everyday life have been advocated by the Bhutanese people for centuries, and is by no means a novel concept in Bhutanese society.

In spite of this, there are still discrepancies in how different people view and understand the concept of Gross National Happiness. While some view GNH as an enlightened personal philosophy of “it’s not having what you want, but wanting what you have”, some others are more critical, commenting that GNH is a mere repackaging of the long iterated concept of sustainable development, the only difference is that they’ve made it more appealing by inserting the word ‘Happiness’.⁷ Similarly, while the official definition of the aims of GNH-centered development is to provide individuals with the opportunities and freedoms to pursue their *own* happiness⁸, there are still many in society who view the government’s advocacy of GNH as a promise of ultimate personal happiness.

The quest for complete loyalty and dedication will prove to be challenging in the absence of a homogenous understanding of what Gross National Happiness means, and what the implications of GNH are for the future of Bhutanese development.

ISSUES FACING BHUTANESE YOUTHS

“The future of the nation lies in the hands of our younger generations.

It is, therefore, crucial that they live up to our high expectations and ensure the continued well-being of the people and security of the nation.”

- *His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuk*

Based on estimated figures, those aged 20 - 45 currently make up about 37.7% of the total population. By 2030, this figure is expected to increase to about 50.5%, which means that a significantly large portion of the population will become economically and politically active by the next decade. In fact, those under the age of 25 currently already make up about 55.69% of the total population.

Table 1: Projected Population (Number) by Age Group and Sex, Bhutan 2008 and 2030

Age group	2008			2030		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
0-4	71,833	35,985	35,848	62,326	31,429	30,897
5-9	65,610	33,346	32,264	65,627	33,124	32,503
10-14	73,412	37,037	36,375	74,410	37,558	36,852
15-19	76,824	38,125	38,699	81,700	41,218	40,482
20-24	73,669	38,736	34,933	79,580	40,136	39,444
25-29	65,769	37,527	28,242	60,938	30,698	30,240
30-34	50,524	27,324	23,200	68,722	34,674	34,048
35-39	40,269	21,893	18,376	74,640	37,499	37,141
40-44	34,875	18,913	15,962	72,121	35,898	36,223
45-49	28,074	15,018	13,056	66,521	37,857	28,664
50-54	25,122	13,464	11,658	52,644	28,665	23,979
55-59	18,704	9,953	8,751	37,570	20,143	17,427
60-64	14,470	7,594	6,876	31,614	16,887	14,727
65-69	12,171	6,280	5,891	21,807	11,290	10,517
70-74	8,936	4,641	4,295	16,953	8,685	8,269
75-79	5,942	3,013	2,929	10,306	5,168	5,138
80+	4,879	2,420	2,459	9,043	4,480	4,563
Total	671,083	351,269	319,814	886,522	455,409	431,114

Source: National Statistics Bureau, 2007.

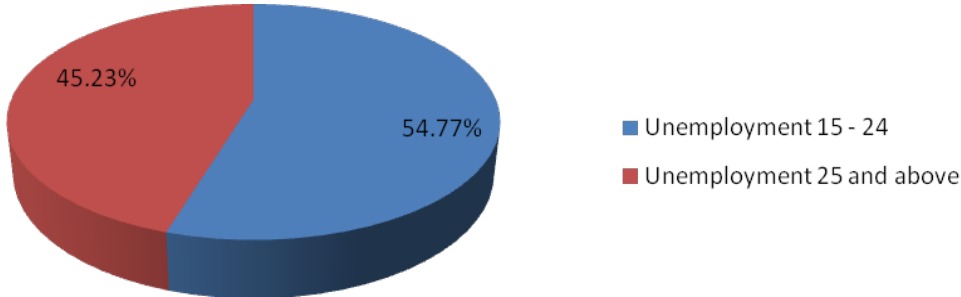
The Issue of Youth Unemployment

Bhutan's demographic transition will also result in a growing demand for jobs, which will far exceed what the current employment market can provide for. In the next five years alone, around 50,000 young people will leave school and enter the labour force. Looking further ahead, a total of 267,000 jobs, even under the most favourable demographic assumptions, will need to be created in the next 20 years.⁹ However, this figure does not take into account those who may choose to leave the rural sector and migrate to urban centres, nor does it make allowances for job displacements due to decreases in labour productivity and the mechanisation process. This means that the real number of job seekers is expected to be considerably higher than the current estimated figures.

Unemployment is a relatively recent phenomenon in Bhutan. In fact, prior to 2000, which was the year that the National Employment Board was established, the issue of unemployment was relatively insignificant. The National Employment Board was later upgraded to become the Department of Employment and Labour in 2002. It was not until June of 2003 that the royal government, prompted by rapidly rising figures of unemployment and a steadily declining employment trend, recognized an increasing urgency for the issue to be dealt with, and a full-fledge Ministry of Labour and Human Resources was formed.¹⁰

A focus group study conducted during my stay in Thimphu revealed unemployment as the foremost concern being faced by Bhutanese youths today. Even though some were sent overseas by the civil service for training, their contracts only lasted a year, after which they lost their employment. For example, one of them was trained for 8 months to speak Korean before being sent to Jeju for a year to receive training in civil engineering. He completed his training and returned to Bhutan three years ago. Currently, he has no formal employment and spends his days helping out in his sister’s shop, and evenings playing snooker and drinking with his friends. For many in the focus group, the unemployment has become their biggest worry for the future.

Figure 1: Youth Unemployment as Percentage of Total Unemployment



Source: Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2005.

Table 2: Unemployment Rate¹¹ by Age Group, Sex and Residence, Bhutan 2005

Labour force activity, Sex	Age group							Overall
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45+	
	Urban							
Unemployment rate	12.3	10.3	3.7	1.6	1.7	1.3	1.4	4.7
Male	10.1	7.6	3.4	1.3	1.4	1.3	1.3	3.6
Female	15.1	16.8	4.6	2.3	2.6	1.4	1.8	7.6
	Rural							
Unemployment rate	4.5	3.9	2.2	1.9	1.7	1.7	1.9	2.4
Male	5.1	3.7	2.4	2.2	1.9	2	2.3	2.6
Female	3.9	4.2	2.0	1.4	1.2	1.2	1.1	2.1
	Both areas							
Unemployment rate	6.1	6.2	2.8	1.8	1.7	1.6	1.5	3.1
Male	6.2	5.2	2.8	1.9	1.7	1.8	1.8	2.9
Female	5.9	8.1	2.8	1.6	1.5	1.2	1.2	3.3

Source: Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2005.

With the average unemployment rate of the Asia-Pacific region at about 8.7 percent¹², the unemployment situation in Bhutan seems almost mild in comparison. However, urban unemployment figures for those aged between 15 and 24 are exceptionally high at almost 4 times the national figure. Based on declining employment figures over the last decade¹³, the unemployment situation in Bhutan is only expected to worsen in the near future.

Furthermore, the pace of rural-urban migration has increased significantly over the past few years. If the current rate of migration continues, it is expected that around 400,000 Bhutanese will live in urban areas by the year 2017, which is more than 4 times the present urban population.¹⁴ Most youths who migrate to urban centres do so in the hopes of finding work that is less laborious and more rewarding than those that can be found in rural areas. Not only will the high rate of rural-urban migration severely stretch the current infrastructural

resources of these urban centres, it will only serve to worsen the urban youth unemployment situation in Bhutan. Currently, it is reported that more than 10,000 youths are unable to find suitable employment, with figures expected to increase over the next two to three years.¹⁵

The reason behind Bhutan’s unemployment is not a lack of education. In fact, as many as 400 unemployed youths hold qualifications that are graduate level and above. Rather, it is the *quality* of education in Bhutan that is the main issue. At the root of the problem is an education system which is unable to equip students with relevant skills, and hence fails in its mission to produce qualified manpower for employment. For example, many employment opportunities in the service sector require specific and practical skills, such as competence with computers and proficiency in English, which were not sufficiently cultivated in schools.

Table 3: Total Unemployed Persons by Educational Qualification and Residence, Bhutan 2006

Level of Education	Unemployed Persons		
	Total	Rural	Urban
Primary	1100	900	200
Junior	600	400	200
High	2400	1500	900
Higher Secondary	1000	200	800
Graduate	300	100	200
Monastic	0	0	0
Masters and above	100	0	100

Source: Labour Force Survey 2006, Ministry of Labour and Human Resources.

The GNH commission has recognised that it has to develop Bhutan’s skilled service industry if it is to generate sufficient employment to meet the needs of the growing population. Looking towards India as an example, Bhutan is trying to expand its business process outsourcing (BPO) services¹⁶. Medical transcription, provided by the company Bhutan Business Solutions

to hospitals in the United States, is one example of such efforts. The first ‘test’ batch of 69 medical transcriptionist trainees, recruited in late 2006, have recently completed training and begun work. Based on the success so far, the company is currently recruiting its second batch of trainees, and hopes to increase the batch number to 150.¹⁷

Medical transcription basically entails listening to a voice recorded medical report and typing out its contents onto a computer. However, the process of establishing competence is not as straight-forward as it sounds. Trainees are either Class XII or university graduates, and have to be educated about medical terminology pertaining to a wide range of topics, from physiology and toxicology, to surgical instruments and anaesthesia. They also have to be acclimatised to American-accented English if they are to understand the recordings properly. From the above example alone, it is evident that the establishment of BPO services requires rigorous and time-consuming preparation. It is also capital intensive, which means that if the industry is to develop, increases in private and foreign investment are necessary.

If successful, however, the BPO industry will be able to absorb a significant amount of labour, and provide a long-term solution to alleviating Bhutan’s unemployment situation. The most pertinent question at the moment is not so much about how the government intends to alleviate unemployment. Rather, the more pressing issue is *how long* the labour market and supporting infrastructure will take to develop.

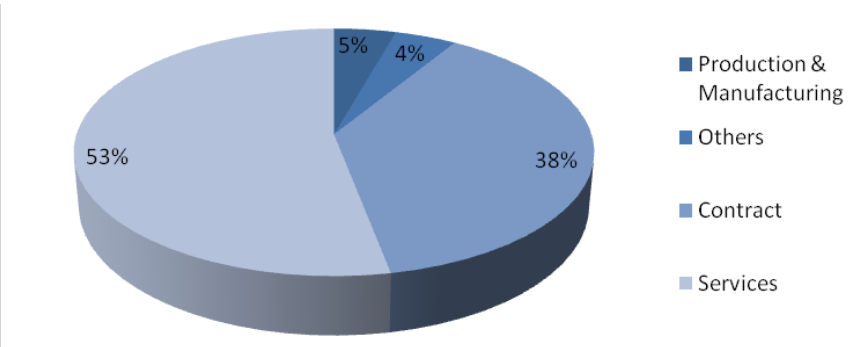
But while there are plans to expand the country’s financial service industry, and talk of a new IT Park to be opened in Serbithang within the next two to three years, the unemployment situation continues to look bleak, at least for the near future. Besides a good educational background and high level of maturity, banks are generally very stringent with their employee selection process.¹⁸ Even then, there is a rigorous training process that will require time and

investment. The establishment of an IT hub will also require job-seekers to have relevant skills and qualifications, and will depend heavily upon the extent of infrastructural development.

Another significant cause of the severity in unemployment is a mismatch of expectations between employers and prospective youths. The Bhutanese are a traditionally proud people, and the current generation is no exception. Many youths would rather go unemployed than accept a job that does not live up to their expected salaries or reflects their level of qualification.

Based on Bhutan’s current labour market structure, the greatest providers of employment opportunities are in the contract and service industries. Specifically, the most labour-absorbing sectors are construction and skilled agriculture. Construction registered a 20% growth in 2006, while agriculture and forestry provide more than 60% of the nation’s total employment¹⁹. However, Bhutanese youths are generally reluctant to accept employment that is rural-based and manual-intensive. Many students leave school with aspirations of white-collar jobs, especially in the more prestigious civil service industries where there is job security, the established 9am-5pm working culture, and flexibility at work.²⁰

Figure 2: Proportion of Industries by Type, Bhutan 2006



Source: Department of Industry, MTI, Thimphu.

However, few will get the civil service jobs they desire. Based on reports by the Ministry of Education, and assuming that most of the universities hold a 4-year course, about 3,381 local graduates will be released into the job market in 2008. This figure does not even take into account those with Masters qualifications or higher, or graduates who were educated overseas. Even with an expected increase of about 1,129 in civil service employment in 2008,²¹ the supply of available positions is simply much too low to absorb the demand for them.

The more popular employment options in private industries fall within consultancy, advertising and filmmaking. These sectors are viewed among youths as the more ‘glamorous’ ones, and the remuneration for a single project has the potential to bring in more than a year’s salary in an administrative or low-rung government post. Unfortunately, the employment capacity of such sectors is only 3,469, a mere 1.73% of the national employment.²²

Many youths are going unemployed because they are unable to find jobs that satisfy all their expectations, and because they lack the vocational skills that employers are looking for. It is unlikely that unemployment in Bhutan will be eradicated, despite the government’s aim to “attain and maintain full employment, particularly among educated youth.”²³ A more realistic goal would be to reduce youth unemployment by at least half the current rate of 10.3%.

The Issue of Cultural Change

Another pertinent issue facing Bhutanese youths is that their social and cultural environment is changing. There is a significant difference between the youths of today and those of the previous generations with respect to their cultural attitudes and understandings.

Very few quantitative studies have been done on the aspect of culture, and none of them have been done in Bhutan. While the Centre for Bhutan Studies is busy trying to find a way to measure well-being for their new happiness index, no studies have been conducted to measure the phenomenon of cultural change in the country, especially amongst the youths in Bhutan's urban centres. Perhaps the main reason for this is because culture is hardly quantifiable. The structure of culture consists mainly of moral and norms that are reflected in society's attitudes and ethics. "Culture is a living manifestation of civilisation, and serves to give spiritual, moral and psychological content and guidance to the Kingdom's future process of development."²⁴ But while the changes in these intangible aspects of culture are difficult to define, the more tangible consequences of change are easier to measure.

When mass media and the internet were first introduced in Bhutan in 1999, it signalled the beginning of a significant change in Bhutanese society, the most worrying of which is the decrease in societal consciousness that has resulted from an increased amount of time being spent in front of the television. Where families used to bond over evening meals when everyone would sit and eat together at the same table, members now eat in front of the television. The internet is also another distraction. With more than 30,000 internet users countrywide, many youths have found themselves spending long hours logged onto chat rooms and online forums.²⁵ The increasing amount of time being spent on television and the internet has caused a collapse in the verbal interaction between family members, disconnecting them from each other and consequently weakening relationships within the family.

While there are many implications of disconnecting a person from a social network, one must be noted with greatest urgency. By increasing the amount of time being spent on media and other exclusionary activities, individuals are prevented from participating and

contributing to lived culture in its traditional forms.²⁶ One of these forms is verbal interaction. Oral tradition is an inherent part of Bhutanese culture, and has been used over the centuries as a means to teach life lessons and transmit morals from one generation to the next. The expressiveness of the oral tradition is best illustrated by A. S. Evans (2006), who wrote:

There is a Bhutanese folktale that poignantly, yet delightfully, portrays that happiness and prosperity are not necessarily one and the same. The story titled “Meme Haylay Haylay and His Turquoise” is about an old man who begins the day finding a priceless turquoise and exchanges the jewel with a horse, the horse for an ox, and the ox for a sheep, the sheep for goat, the goat for a rooster, and in the end the rooster for a song. The words of Buddhist master Shantideva summarize this story well: “The goal of every act is happiness itself, though, even with great wealth, it’s rarely found”. (p. 137)

Traditionally, it is the grandparents who tell these stories to their grandchildren. The breaking down of verbal interaction has hampered the transmission of cultural morals and principles from the older to the younger generations, and rendered grandparent-children relations almost obsolete. This lack of familial interaction has also caused a significant shift in the family unit, which in turn has affected the vitality of the Bhutanese community. Previously, large extended family networks were the norm in Bhutan. First cousins and second cousins were close, and the tradition existed that when a husband marries a wife, they marry each other’s families as well. As a result, almost everyone in a village was related in some way, either close or distant, by marriage or blood. Yearly and traditional festivals were huge affairs, with everyone partaking and contributing. As a result, social support networks were extremely strong, and became a defining feature in Bhutanese society and culture.

With recent modernisation and rural-urban migration, families are becoming more nuclear. It is not uncommon that both parents will be working, and there is an increasing number of latch-key kids in the urban centres. When the parents come home, family members are often distracted by the television, the current craze being Korean soap dramas and movies. There are also more and more recorded cases of divorce and family breakups.²⁷ As a result, social support networks are dwindling, and community vitality is weakening in Bhutan's most densely populated areas.

Another aspect of cultural change being faced by Bhutanese youths is the rapid westernisation of their everyday lives. Tshering Wangchuk, a Producer in the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) Radio Department who handles programmes on youth issues, shares that today's youth interests have significantly shifted away from traditional Bhutanese media and towards western media. Tenzin Dorji, Director of Kuzoo FM, Bhutan's first and only independent youth radio station, seconded that opinion when he shared that most youths who call in to request songs are only interested in genres like Hip Hop and R&B. Along the streets of Thimphu, Bhutan's capital city, almost all the youths are dressed in western fashion, with boys in low-slung jeans and trucker caps, and girls in short skirts and high heels. The only youths you will see in the traditional garb of *gho* for boys and *kira* for girls are students still in uniform.

Although seemingly superficial, sociological studies have shown that there is an intrinsic link between fashion, culture and identity. Fashion, in this case, refers to any trend of images, thoughts, sentiments, and sensibilities that reflect social aspirations.²⁸ In Bhutan, fashion has manifested itself in the form of music, film, and apparel. Fashion has its own source of culture and social structure, and serves the purposes of both social differentiation and

social integration. It is often identified as a form of communication, and is said to satisfy certain psychological needs.²⁹ The significance of the changing fashions of Bhutanese youths is that it signals a deeper undercurrent of social and cultural change going on within society.

Lisa Napoli provides an interesting anecdote that reflects this change.³⁰ In her Marketplace morning report titled “*Bhutan’s falling happiness index*”, she introduces DJ Pink and her friend Pema Lhamo, female youths who reside in Thimphu, and who spend their Saturday afternoons in beauty parlours and Saturday nights dancing away in disco clubs where they sing along to Hip Hop songs with raunchy and provocative lyrics. They compare fashion brands and cosmetics, and boast proudly of new and expensive purchases. As compared to slightly more than a decade ago when most youths were staying with their parents and would spend weekends engaged in familial activities like visiting temples and doing groceries³¹, today’s youth are indulging in a more materialistic lifestyle, in tandem with their increased exposure to western media influences and global culture.

Perhaps even the government has recognised the significant link between fashion and cultural identity. It would certainly be a probable explanation for why the government has placed a ban on smoking and plastic bags, and passed a rule that requires traditional dress to be worn at all times when in public places during daylight hours. The sole proprietor of cable television, the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), also removed three channels from their service after they were deemed inappropriate for broadcast in Bhutan a few years ago. Ten Sports was removed because its wrestling programmes had gained so much popularity amongst the youths that there was an increased frequency of violence among the boys who were trying to mimic the movies. MTV and Fashion TV were also taken off air because of their portrayal of western culture and materialistic lifestyles.

Unfortunately, these measures have proven somewhat ineffective. Contraband cigarettes are still available in the black market, and many youths smoke openly in karaoke pubs and snooker clubs. Youths as young as aged 15 are exposed to drinking and smoking, either through older sibling, cousins, or friends. Plastic bags may not be used in Bhutan, but imported clothes and confectionaries from India and Bangkok come wrapped in plastic, which are sometimes reused, but more often openly discarded onto the streets of Thimphu. Many youths also ignore the national dress code and choose to wear jeans instead of traditional dress. Although wrestling matches are no longer shown on cable television, these shows, along with MTV programmes, are often viewable online on sites such as YouTube and MTV Overdrive. There is also an increasing trend of self-drawn tattoos. There are no tattoo parlours in Bhutan because tattoos are considered taboo, so most youths use a needle dipped in ink, or travel to neighbouring India to have them done professionally.

Succinctly summarised by Dr Ross McDonald (2004):

While it distracts, imported [media] threatens to act as a severe corrosive in Bhutan, dissolving lived culture and its priorities, to replace them with a particularly profitless fixation on material accumulation. The impact may not be apparent as yet, but it is the undeniable end-point sought. Given this, it is a medium that the Bhutanese should handle with considerable care. (p. 83)

On the other hand, Ugyen Penjor, Deputy Editor at Kuensel, Bhutan's National Newspaper, believes that the situation is not as dire as many have feared it to be. He cites the example of his niece who, despite sharing the same preference for Hip Hop music and blue jeans as many of the other youths in Bhutan, still says her prayers every morning and can recite traditional Bhutanese poetry in dzongkha³². However, another issue that has been recognised by the

Ministry of Education is the concern that while these youths may go through the motions of such cultural and religious activities, they do not understand the principles behind their actions, nor do they comprehend the significance of these practices.³³ Without true understanding, the morals behind traditional Bhutanese culture that the government has been trying so fiercely to protect will be lost.

A focus group study consisting of Bhutanese youths aged between 17 and 23 revealed that most of them prefer western culture to their own. They favour American brands such as Adidas and Nike, and listen to rap music by artists like Snoop Dogg and Akon. When asked if they would like to have a McDonald's outlet in their city, there was no hesitance in those who answered "yes". Although there was some recognition that Bhutanese traditions and practices are fundamentally "good" and that they should be respected, when asked quite simply which they would choose if they could only have one, there was a predominance of youths who would rather have western culture over their own.

CHALLENGES POSED TO GNH-CENTERED DEVELOPMENT

Why should these issues be significant to the government of Bhutan? More specifically, what challenges to GNH-centred development do youth unemployment and cultural change pose?

Significance of Youth Unemployment

The most glaring concern of youth unemployment is its social impact. Other than the obvious economic and political repercussions of unemployment, studies have shown that statistically significant correlations exist between unemployment and certain mental indicators such as depression and alcohol abuse. There is also strong evidence to suggest a causal relationship between unemployment and ill health.³⁴ In fact, cases of mental disorders are on the rise.

Of the number of mental disorder cases recorded by hospitals, depression was the most common affliction, making up 39.3% of the total cases recorded.

Table 4: Prevalence of Hospital Morbidity Cases Reported, Bhutan between 2003 and 2007.

Disease	Year				
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Psychosis	0.000257	0.000380	0.000192	0.000201	0.000184
Depression	0.000473	0.000559	0.000699	0.000810	0.001081
Anxiety	0.000347	0.000485	0.000600	0.000467	0.000492
Other Mental Disorders	0.001064	0.001095	0.000890	0.001135	0.000982
Alcohol Liver Disease	0.001533	0.001841	0.001917	0.002367	0.002233
Total Population	611048	623001	634982	646851	658888

Source: Annual Health Bulletin 2008, Ministry of Health.

Most significant of the figures above is the increasing prevalence of depression and alcohol liver disease cases in Bhutan. Furthermore, it was reported that the majority of patients younger than age 20 who were given psychiatric treatment suffered from stress-related and anxiety disorders.³⁵ A plausible explanation for this is increased competitiveness in schools due to the rising unemployment; students are facing more and more stress to perform well in school if they wish to stand a chance at competing in the job market. The lack of employment opportunities may also have caused financial stress to Class XII graduates or school dropouts, resulting in an increased risk of suffering from anxiety or stress-related mental disorders.

However, these figures only cover cases that have been recorded and treated in hospitals. A community study conducted in 2002 showed that the actual number of mental disorder cases is in reality much higher.³⁶ This is because treatment for mental illnesses is on a voluntary basis, and some patients do not even realise that they have a mental disorder. The

issue of mental illness is also rather taboo in Bhutan, which may act as a deterrent for patients to seek medical help.

Alcohol abuse is also on the rise, and Alcohol Dependency Syndrome (ADS) has become a significant contributor to the number of mental illness cases in the country, accounting for nearly one-third of all mental disorders. Reports from hospitals and basic health units (BHUs) show that alcohol ranks between second to sixth among all causes of hospital deaths across the country.³⁷ This figure does not even include drunk-driving related deaths, with drunk driving reported as the most common cause of traffic accident-related deaths in Bhutan.

Considering that one of the nine domains of GNH-focused development is psychological well-being, it is certainly in the government's interests to prevent such occurrences of depression or substance abuse. Psychological diseases also cause significant burdens to society, both economically and socially. Not only will patients be unable to participate in the labour market, the government and the family will have to bear the costs of treatment, not to mention the social stigma that comes with being a mental disease patient.

A study conducted by the Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) has also concluded that there is a positive correlation between youth unemployment and juvenile delinquency.³⁸ The theory behind the relationship between youth unemployment and juvenile delinquency is that the social, cultural and economic conditions of being young, unemployed, and in urban areas allow people to translate their criminal inclinations into action.³⁹ In the capital city of Thimphu, adolescents are often seen congregating in areas where there are many shops, markets and amusement services. Under these circumstances, youths are more likely to commit

crimes under each other's influence, a phenomenon more commonly understood as peer pressure.

The most common youth-related crimes recorded are burglary, theft, and drug abuse.⁴⁰ Most worrying of these is the increasing number of multiple drug users in the country. A study conducted in 2002⁴¹ revealed that substance users are mostly male, students, and under the age of 25. Multiple drug use is also increasing, along with the number of intravenous drug use (IDU) cases. Even then, there is a very high chance that the numbers are grossly under-reported due to the stigma attached to publicly acknowledged addiction. As a result, the actual situation could be significantly worse than what has been made known to the public. Furthermore, the risk of drug abuse escalating in severity is very real and very probable. Bhutan's geographical proximity to high IDU-prevalence countries like Nepal and free unregulated trade with India make Bhutan's borders porous and vulnerable to drug smuggling.

Table 5: Number of Crime Reports, Bhutan 2001 to 2006.

Crime	Year					
	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Assault/Battery	418	369	478	477	615	521
Burglary	129	140	134	186	148	227
Theft	306	267	326	462	480	380
Mischief	39	36	49	54	72	54
Prostitution	2	2	2	3	2	2
Drug abuse	23	18	25	36	60	24

Source: Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs.

Formation of gangs, assaults in bars and discos and reckless driving are also offences characteristically committed by urban youths. A major contributor to the increase in juvenile delinquency is the rapid rate of rural-urban migration, which is closely linked to the rising rate of urban youth unemployment. Lham Dorji argues that the increasing number of school

dropouts in rural communities has caused an influx of youths migrating to urban centres seeking employment, in the hopes of fulfilling their aspirations of a better life. The overwhelming arrival of opportunity seekers in urban centres only serves to aggravate the unemployment situation, which will only result in greater disappointment. As a result, many of them, idle and frustrated, fall victim to crime and substance abuse.

Crime and juvenile delinquency are directly related to a country's well-being and security, essential components with the GNH development framework. It is therefore in the significant interests of the government that they address the issue of youth unemployment if they are to find a long-term solution to the rising number of stress-related diseases and youth-related crimes.

Significance of Cultural Change

There are two main consequences of cultural change in Bhutan, namely the breaking down of the family unit, and the increasing influence of western culture and norms such as materialism and violence. Both of these consequences pose significant challenges to GNH-centered development.

Firstly, changes in family structures and an increasing number of broken homes have a direct impact on youths. Dendup Wangdhee, a Class VIII teacher at a public school in Thimphu, recognises that most of the students who have drug problems or are most susceptible to peer pressure are those who come from broken families, where parents are divorced or there is domestic violence. Rural-urban migration and increasing economic participation of women have caused an increase in the number of nuclear families that have broken away from the extended network of the traditional rural communities. As a result, social support networks are weakened, and youths are more susceptible to negative moral influences as they lack proper

guidance from their elders. This reduces the level of social and civic consciousness from which the concept of GNH was established in the first place.⁴²

Western cultural norms such as materialism and violence also pose a direct challenge to Gross National Happiness. The basis of GNH-centered development was to pursue economic development, but at the same time making a conscious effort to preserve the traditional Bhutanese culture. The very purpose of the invention of GNH was to prevent society from falling into the trap of blind consumerism, to direct a path of more holistic growth in the face of globalisation, and to prevent any subsequent social and economic fragmentation that may arise from neglecting other socio-economic aspects of development. The government recognised that it is Bhutan's unique culture and traditions that will protect the country from some of the "negative and indiscriminate forces of modernisation" by enabling the Bhutanese people to retain their identity in "a world in which 'culture' is increasingly defined as a global commodity".⁴³ That is why such emphasis was placed on preserving and promoting traditional Bhutanese culture – to ensure that while the country grew economically, the people could grow spiritually, so that greater emphasis could be placed on happiness and well-being rather than on the nation's Gross Domestic Product.

Traditional Bhutanese culture focuses on spirituality, and promotes the principles of discipline and simplicity.⁴⁴ The idea of "it's not having what you want, but wanting what you have" is an intrinsic part of the GNH philosophy. However, with the propagation of western norms that promote consumerist ideals and materialistic tendencies, youths begin to chase instant but temporary gratifications, and the need to have more will never be satisfied.

Materialistic greed has also been cited as a probable reason behind the increasing number of burglary cases committed by Bhutanese youths over the last few years.⁴⁵ Violence

from watching western films is also a probable reason behind the increasing levels of aggression among youths, particularly for males. Within the week that I was in Thimphu to conduct field research for my paper, three incidents of aggravated assault were reported.

The causal relationship between unemployment and psychological well-being is also dependent upon other environmental variables, such social safety nets and cultural attitudes.⁴⁶ As much as unemployment may be a reason behind the increasing number of youth-related crimes and juvenile delinquencies, so are the weakening social support systems and cultural change. Similarly, it can only be in the nation's interest that the government deals with the increasing influence of western norms in Bhutanese youth culture, if it is to succeed in protecting the spiritual and psychological well-being of the country.

GOVERNMENT-PROPOSED COURSES OF ACTION

Solving Unemployment

While there have been many proposed policies to alleviate the youth unemployment situation in Bhutan, such as the provision of job fairs and developing the tertiary education in Bhutan, among others, two in particular stand out to me.

The first is the effort to provide specified, skill-based training pertaining to a particular industry. In response to the mismatch of expectations in skill level between employers and prospective youths, the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources has established four Vocational Training Institutes to provide practical skill training and cater mostly to Class XII graduates who have not been accepted for further studies in local universities. The four Vocational Training Institutes conduct varied courses like “market-oriented and demand based training”⁴⁷, such as construction, plumbing, masonry, and electrical engineering, amongst

others. The “market-oriented” aspect of vocational training ensures that the students will learn skills that will make them valuable for employment in the labour market, whereas “demand based” also serves the needs of employers by providing a supply of prospective employees with the necessary practical competencies.

The benefits of establishing Vocational Training Institutes are two-fold. On the one hand, they effectively help to decrease the level of unemployment by attempting to improve the match between expectations of employers and employees. On another hand, they reduce the number of idle youths who are frustrated with their lack of employment by giving them a more productive means of spending their time, thereby reducing the number of youth-committed crimes. There are further plans in the works to open three more schools in the near future⁴⁸ but this has not been confirmed in writing.

Practical training can also be conducted by private companies seeking to expand the BPO industry in Bhutan. While the government recognises the possible trade-offs of increasing the role of the private sector, it nevertheless recognises that only through the development of the private sector and through the encouragement of direct foreign investment will the Bhutanese economy be able to reach its full potential. However, to ensure that the role of foreign direct investments will contribute to the attainment of Bhutan’s broader GNH objectives, more focus has been put on industries that will enable them to acquire technologies for further economic and industrial development. Greater emphasis has also been put on industries that will result in a “sustainable creation of high quality employment” and the impartation of skills and knowledge that will be instrumental to the nation’s further development. As a result, while Bhutan may be learning from India’s success in the

outsourcing industry, it has chosen to focus less on merely labour-oriented services like call centres, and more on high-skilled services such as IT and engineering.

The second is the effort to provide guidance for students to help them select a suitable career path for themselves. The Career Education and Counselling Division was established under the Department of Youth, Culture and Sports to provide vocational assessment and guidance to students who may be feeling confused about what career path they desire to pursue. Students are assessed through personal characteristics like personality, interest, aptitude, and values relevant to occupational contexts. The joint director of the counselling division, Tshering Dolkar explains that “vocational assessment will help provide a systematic and objective assessment of vocational and educational guidance to young students.”⁴⁹ While many youths and students find themselves aimless and confused over what they want their future career to be, the process of appraising themselves will help them understand their own motivations. Rather than floating around with no particular ambition in mind, the assessment process will hopefully help the youths focus their ambitions more productively.

It is important to realise, however, that there is no possible way for unemployment to be completely eradicated. There will always exist a country’s natural rate of unemployment⁵⁰, resulting from a mismatch between jobs and skills, and in particular for the case of Bhutan, a mismatch between aspirations of youths and the availabilities of the labour market.

Solving Cultural Change

While the common consensus is that modernisation and change are inevitable, positive cultural reinforcement can be implemented to mitigate the detrimental effects of change.

"Great changes in the destiny of mankind can be effected only in the minds of little children." - Sir Herbert Read

Rules and restriction are not effective enough in preserving culture. If traditional Bhutanese culture is to truly survive and flourish among the new generations, there must be education and understanding of the morals and principles behind convention. Because Bhutanese culture and values are challenged by modern education systems and curricula, the problem of cultural change should be tackled the same way – through education.⁵¹ The Department of Youth, Culture and Sports has also recognised this, and plans to introduce cultural education into earlier stages of the school curriculum. But conducting classes and practicing culture in schools is not enough. Pema Wangchuk, Planning Officer for the Department, expressed a need to educate the parents as well. Children only spend a small fraction of their time in schools practicing culture. If that is their sole lifeline to Bhutanese tradition, prospects for the future look bleak. Family, on the other hand, has a far greater influence on whether or not Bhutanese children will grow up with traditional Bhutanese morals. Mr Wangchuk suggests that parents should be encouraged to bring their children on more cultural activities, like visiting the temple on the weekends, or practicing dzongkha songs at home. The very act of parents spending more time with their children will already help to improve communication and provide stronger social support within the family. There is also discussion within the Department to introduce a community service programme into the curriculum, in an effort to increase social and civic awareness amongst students.

Youth facilities are also being constructed to provide a good environment for growth and positive development, and to discourage risky behaviour. Non-profit organisations like the Youth Development Fund were established in response to the growing number of youths and youth-related issues in Bhutan, particularly in the capital city Thimphu. In order to curb juvenile delinquency, there is a need to provide youths with “opportunities for constructive

social, recreational and educational pursuit as they make the transition to responsible adulthood”⁵². Unfortunately, most of the existing facilities are old and can no longer meet the needs of the growing and diverse group of youths in the city. Youths prefer to hang out at internet cafes, indoor gaming facilities such as snooker and video games, which in turn has propagated more incidences of drug abuse, delinquency, and alcoholism. As a result, the Youth Development Centre was built in Thimphu, where there are recreational sports facilities like basketball courts and a swimming pool, and a conducive environment for gatherings and group study, in the hopes that it will have a positive impact on the economic and social conditions of Bhutanese youths. The Department of Youth, Culture and Sports is also actively pursuing a rigorous sports programme for school-going children to inculcate values such as sportsmanship, healthy competition, and pride in personal achievement. Karma Lam Dorji, Chief Planning Officer of the sports programme also expressed a need for students and youths to have an avenue where they can spend their time more productively, and that they will have much to benefit from engagement in sports. He also believes that if youths and society in general have sound morals, a fighting spirit, and a responsibility for their community, Gross National Happiness will follow naturally.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

In light of the monarchy’s latest efforts in democracy that many have dubbed Bhutan’s Enlightened Experiment, it would be interesting to relate the issues of youth unemployment and cultural change to the possible effects on democracy. In general, the introduction of democracy causes shifts in people’s mindsets. Particularly in the case of Bhutan where there has been long-standing support for the monarchy, where previously there was unquestionable allegiance to the

king and the greater kingdom of Bhutan, democracy will shift the focus from the macro to the micro. Citizens begin to demand more in the name of individual rights, and begin to hold the government more accountable for their personal well-being.

There is worry that the government will have to cater to citizens' short-term demands, even at the expense of long-term national planning.⁵³ In such a scenario, it remains a possibility that economic frustrations faced by the nation's youth due to unemployment and lack of urban infrastructural resources may spill-over to cause social unrest. Furthermore, there are criticisms that the country's move towards democracy is at too great a speed, and that "it is important for the King to retain, at least for quite a period of time, some sort of a checking power over the legislature, over the Assembly."⁵⁴

There are also criticisms that Bhutan's traditional social structures are counter-productive to democratic efforts. In rural communities where social support networks are strong, citizens may choose vote for candidates based solely on the fact that they share community relations, as opposed to experience and capability. This situation is further aggravated by the lack of education and maturity with respect to the purposes of processes of democracy.⁵⁵ As a result, many young members were been elected who have shown little contribution in parliament.

It will be interesting to study the potential effects of democracy on Bhutanese society, and in turn, how this will affect and challenge Bhutan's pursuit of Gross National Happiness as the defining principle of economic and social development.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, Bhutan is a nation undergoing a state of transition. With the rigorous pursuit of Gross National Happiness as the guiding principle of Bhutan's development, the government has dedicated itself to protecting the cultural and spiritual aspects of the country's well-being. However, the pursuit of Happiness is not without its challenges. Socio-demographic changes occurring within the country have caused an increase in rural-urban migration, and as a result, an increase in urban youth unemployment. Modernisation and the introduction of mass media have also caused a significant change in Bhutan's youth culture to include western influences of materialism and violence. As a result, negative social externalities such as juvenile delinquency, mental illness, substance abuse and broken families have increased in frequency over the recent years. Furthermore, based on my experience of interaction with Bhutanese youths, the prevalent attitude they have towards GNH is that of apathy – they do not know, nor do they care to find out, about the concept that will directly affect their future as citizens of Bhutan. It would seem that the government is facing an uphill struggle in its efforts to achieve its goal of Gross National Happiness.

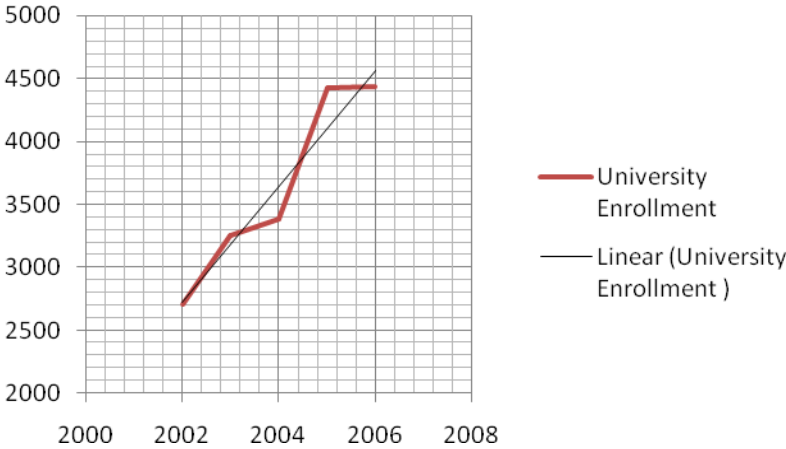
Fortunately, hope comes in the form of an enthusiastic if small group of elites who fervently believe in the ideals of GNH, and who are dedicated to improving the lives of their community. It has the further long-term support of international development partners who either respect or are intrigued by Bhutan's unique avocation of Happiness as the country's main goal, even at the expense of economic growth and profit. Bhutan has also shown smart investment strategies, particularly in the area of direct foreign investment and private sector development, such that it has been able to sustain a steady rate of economic development without compromising too much on its cultural and environmental principles.

The competence of the new democratically elected government remains to be seen, but so far, it has responded adequately to the growing voices of concern about issues such as unemployment and culture change. There are plans to expend Bhutan's economic interests in the service and IT industries, and further in the private sector, which will encourage economic growth and generate employment. Improvements in education are also rigorously underway, with improvements in the tertiary education sector, and emphasis on vocational training to equip youths with practical and employable skills. Greater emphasis on cultural education in schools and development of youth facilities bode well for improving the social support networks of Bhutan's youth.

However, it is important to note that the concept of Happiness, and for that matter culture, is far from cut-and-dried. In the focus group study, one of the questions posed forced the youths to make a choice between western culture and their own. In reality, the two may not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive. As expressed by one of the members of the focus group study, if drinking alcohol and listening to Hip Hop music makes him happy, then hasn't the purpose of Gross National Happiness been fulfilled? If the ideal of GNH-centered development is to remove the barriers for the attainment of personal happiness, and not a government guarantee of individual well-being, then there should not be any

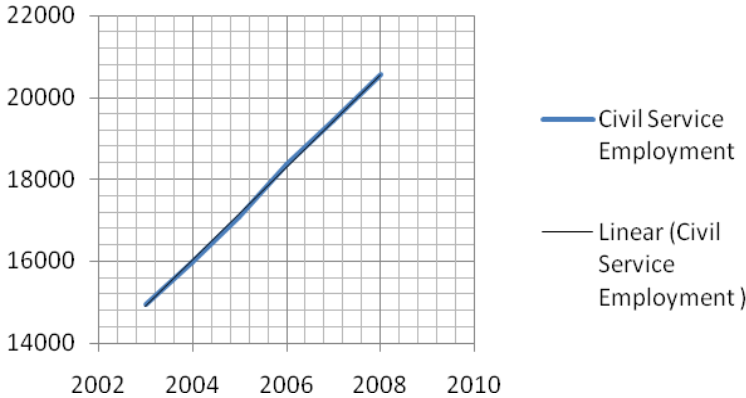
The contradictions and ironies that exist within the GNH concept is probably the most challenging of issues facing the government of Bhutan. Happiness is a fluid concept, and attempts to measure it would only provide short-term validity. Perhaps the most unanimous of understandings is that whatever the government's decision, the world anticipates the fate of what they have come to know as the land of shiny happy people.⁵⁶

Annex 1: Local University Enrollment (Number) Bhutan between 2002 and 2006



Source: Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education.

Annex 2: Civil Service Employment Trend based on projected numbers for Bhutan 2007 & 2008



Source: Royal Civil Service Commission.

Annex 3: Employment Rate Bhutan between 1998 and 2006



Source: Labour Force Survey 2006, Ministry of Labour and Human Resources.

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⁷ Interview with Mr Choni Namgyel, Graduate, Royal Institute of Management, 14 July 2008, Semtokha, Thimphu. He has found employment in the skilled agricultural sector as a management trainee, but while he supports the government’s push for environmental conservation and recognises the importance of sustainable growth, he considers the concept of Gross National Happiness to be a fuzzy philosophy, and is sceptical about its practicality as a development agenda.

⁸ Interview with Mr Jit Tshering, Lecturer, Royal Institute of Management, 14 July 2008, Semtokha, Thimphu.

⁹ *Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness*, 1999.

¹⁰ T. Penjor, 2006.

¹¹ Unemployment rate is defined as the percentage of economically active individuals that are unable to find employment. Economically active individuals do not include the ill and disabled, students, and homemakers. The number of economically inactive Bhutanese is 168,128, out of which 61.3 percent of those are female.

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