

Implementing Gross National Happiness in Bhutan as a Development Model and Governance Tool – Perspectives of Policy Influencers

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ABSTRACT

Bhutan's development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) prioritises the collective wellbeing of its people over economic growth through a multidimensional index that informs policy. While GNH has received global recognition, persistent challenges in conceptual clarity and practical implementation are argued and debated. This qualitative study examines the role and utility of GNH as a development model and its implementation as a multifaceted governance tool in Bhutan. The findings reveal that GNH is conceptualised in diverse ways, ranging from personal happiness to a more generic communal philosophy. While its strengths lie in its culturally grounded framework, key limitations include a lack of shared understanding, overuse in marketing, and tensions with economic growth. As a governance tool, its implementation is challenged by inconsistent political commitment, limited resources, and reliance on informal cultural practices, rather than official policy instruments. The study concludes that for GNH to mature into an effective and replicable alternative development paradigm, Bhutan must address these implementation gaps through legislative formalisation, simplified public communication, and strategies that reconcile its wellbeing objectives with economic imperatives.

Keywords: *Bhutan, Gross National Happiness, happiness, sustainability, sustainable development, wellbeing, wellbeing governance*

INTRODUCTION

Bhutan's development vision stands apart from conventional metrics by embracing Gross National Happiness (GNH) which prioritises wellbeing of its people and all sentient beings (Thinley, 2014). GNH offers a multidimensional, collective understanding of wellbeing, operationalised through the GNH index to guide policies (Verma, 2017) and His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck describes it as development with values (Ura et al., 2023). Unlike conventional growth models, GNH explicitly integrates often overlooked human dimensions such as psychological wellbeing, culture, spirituality, and community vitality (Thinley, 2014), positioning it as an alternative to GDP-centric development. Although newer models like the Organisation for Economic and Cooperation Development's (OECD) Better Life Index broaden wellbeing metric, wellbeing frameworks remain abstract and face implementation challenges (Kasparian & Rolland, 2012), a difficulty also seen in Sweden's Lagom model (Leese et al., 2016), New Zealand's Wellbeing Budget (Anderson & Mossialos, 2019), or Iceland's welfare policies (Eydal & Ólafsson, 2016).

The incorporation of GNH into Bhutan's constitution further cemented the use of GNH as a public policy instrument and the formal implementation of the philosophy nationwide

(Ugyel et al. 2023). After 17 years of its formal implementation since 2008, including three formal rounds of index measurement (explained in the next section), it is timely to reassess GNH as an alternative development philosophy. Although literature on the conceptual evolution is growing, empirical insights into how GNH is operationalised by policy actors remain limited (Verma, 2017). This study addresses this gap by drawing on the perspectives of 40 policy influencers to examine their understanding of GNH and its implementation as both a development philosophy and a governance tool. As part of a broader research on climate change and wellbeing, this paper explores two research questions: i) How is GNH conceptualised in Bhutan in relation to its role and utility as a development model? and ii) What are the perspectives on how GNH is implemented in Bhutan as a multifaceted governance tool?

Before providing further details on the interviews (Section 4 & 5), some defining characteristics of the GNH philosophy are explained.

Understanding GNH

To further understand the notion of GNH as a national development concept for Bhutan, it is useful to understand its genesis. Its origin can be traced back to Lama Ngawang Namgyel (1594–1651),

who founded Bhutan. He affirmed that the happiness of sentient beings was dependent on the teachings of the Buddha, which was further dependent on the happiness of the world (Ugyel et al., 2023, p. 497). The Bhutanese legal code of 1729 stated that: “if the Government cannot create happiness (*dekid*) for its people, there is no purpose for the Government to exist” (Ura et al., 2023). In the 1970s, His Majesty, the fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, established GNH as Bhutan’s development goal, later incorporated into the Constitution in 2008, whose Article 9 mandates the state to promote conditions enabling the pursuit of GNH (Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008, p. 8)

GNH is framed through four pillars - sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development, environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and good governance (Ura et al., 2023). Its implementation is operationalised through the GNH index, calculated every five years using nine domains: psychological wellbeing, health, education, living standards, environmental diversity and resilience, good governance, time use, community vitality, and cultural diversity and resilience (Givel, 2022). These domains comprise 33 indicators and 124 variables that become the basis for the construction of the GNH index (Ura et al., 2023).

By recording people’s personal ratings across 124 variables, the GNH index measures happiness at the individual level (Thinley, 2014). The individual scores are then aggregated across demographic groups (e.g. age, gender, occupation) and/or geographic units ranging from rural-urban areas to villages, village clusters, districts, and regions, ultimately producing the national GNH score (Ura et al., 2023). The GNH index guides national wellbeing by assessing happiness, identifying those who are not happy, and revealing inequalities across groups and regions. These data are considered crucial for policymaking, resource allocation, and targeted interventions.

The concept of GNH went beyond Bhutan in 1998 when it formally declared GNH as its development philosophy at the Asia-Pacific Millennium Summit in Seoul, positioning it as an alternative to GDP-centric models (Chetri 2023). In 2011, the United Nations unanimously adopted Bhutan’s resolution ‘Happiness: Towards a Holistic Approach to Development,’ which led to March 20 being declared the International Day of Happiness (Chetri 2023). Bhutan has since hosted seven international GNH conferences - in Thimphu (2004, 2008 and 2017), Canada (2005), Thailand (2007), Brazil (2009), and Paro (2016), - drawing global scholars to critically engage with the concept and its practical challenges (Ugyel et al. 2023).

Although GNH has gained significant global attention, it remains widely misunderstood due to confusion in its definition, intent, articulation, and operationalisation (Masaki, 2024). Internationally, it is often conflated with other wellbeing indices and misinterpreted for academic gain, while in Bhutan, the shift to democracy in 2008 has led to political interpretations of GNH and a limited understanding of the state’s role in generating it (Verma, 2017).

Bhutan’s public sector transformation beginning 2022 has brought significant changes in the civil service and government structure (Royal Government of Bhutan 2024, p. 1). For example, the number of ministries was reduced from 10 to 9, and the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) – established in 2008 to lead policy formulation and ensure alignment with GNH - was dissolved in October 2022 (Passang, 2022). These changes have created some uncertainty, particularly concerns that policy intentions may be drifting from GNH (as discussed later). However, 13th Five-Year Plan of 2024 reaffirms GNH by setting a long-term goal for Bhutan to become a ‘high-income Gross National Happiness economy by 2034’. This underscores the need to assess how key policy influencers understand and implement GNH in shaping national policy.

METHODOLOGY

An interpretivist paradigm of research was adopted to explore how interviewees construct meaning around complex social issues (Potrac et al., 2024). Semi-structured interviews provided structure while allowing flexibility to probe deeper insights (Adams, 2015). Participants included policy influencers and experts in GNH and climate change, selected in line with Kongrats et al.’s (2019, p. 1494) definition of policy influencers across government, non-governmental organisations, and the media. Including all three elected prime ministers since Bhutan’s transition to democracy further strengthened the sample’s breadth of high-level policy perspectives.

A purposive sampling strategy was used (Guarte & Barrios, 2006) with interviewees contacted for consent and asked to suggest expert substitutes. Snowball sampling (Leighton et al. 2021) remained an option. Data saturation was reached with 40 interviews. Participation was voluntary and confidentiality was assured. The in-person interviews were conducted in Bhutan from mid-February to mid-April in 2024, focusing on interviewees’ understanding of GNH, its strengths and limitations, and all aspects of its implementation in Bhutan.

All interviews were conducted by the lead author, recorded, transcribed, and carried out in English, with some parts in *Dzongkha* (national language) and *Tshangla* (a dominant language originating from eastern Bhutan). Non-English sections were translated into English and all transcripts were checked against recordings for accuracy before being imported into NVivo 12 (Phillips & Lu, 2018). A combined thematic and content analyses was applied: thematic analysis to identify and interpret key perspectives (Wiggins et al., 2024) on GNH, and content analysis to quantify the frequency of core concepts (Nicomans, 2024). Braun & Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework guided the thematic analysis, from familiarization and coding to theme development, review, and reporting.

Interviewees were coded in the order they were the interviewed (11, 12, 13...). The suffix(es) indicate their current or most recent occupation- civil servants (S), politicians (P), non-government organisations (N), and media (M) – listed from latest to earlier ones. Expertise in GNH (G) and/or climate change (C)

appears last in parentheses. For example, 29PS(G) refers to the 29th interviewee, whose latest role was politician, previously a civil servant, with GNH expertise. Many interviewees had held multiple professions; their backgrounds and expertise are summarised in Table 1. Interviewees are quoted 1 to 41, although one participant (36S(C)), declined to answer GNH answers; numbering was retained for consistency across the broader research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section probes into understanding the research questions on the conceptualisation of GNH as a development model and implementation as a governance tool.

Conceptualisation of GNH as a development model

When asked to describe what GNH means, most interviewees (n = 9; 23%) initially described their own ideas of happiness rather than the concept of GNH itself. Their interpretations ranged from personal and individual happiness to collective wellbeing at the community, national, and even global levels.

Personal interpretations included expressions such as “being financially and socially comfortable” (18N(C)) and “being happy and in inner peace” (19NM), reflecting understandings of GNH at an individual level. Interviewees also extended their interpretations of GNH beyond the personal, generalising it to what it might mean to others, as expressed in statements such as “happiness and wellbeing of the individual”

(26N(C)) and “happiness on every Bhutanese face” (17PB). Interviewee 30PMS(G) described GNH as the pursuit of both individual and collective happiness within the framework of the Bhutanese nation-state. Interviewee 21SM(G) emphasized that GNH is rooted in the Buddhist philosophy of interdependence, viewing happiness as a product of communal support intrinsic to Bhutanese communities, where people of all backgrounds help and support one another. GNH has also inspired interviewees to view happiness as a vision for humanity, as explained by interviewee 6PN,

“It's an idea that pursues higher human goals, which is happiness. And ultimately, for every sentient being, it is to be free of suffering, and be at peace, and be in harmony, and be contented.”

The diversity of these reflections reveal that policy influencers do not see GNH has a single, static concept but as an evolving philosophy bridging personal wellbeing and collective harmony. Some interviewees also regarded GNH as a concept that transcends conventional understandings of happiness, describing it as “more than momentary happiness” (12NS(C)) and as “contentment” (7MN; 24N(C)). Interviewee 7MN explained,

“At an individual level, if we remain happy with what we have, if we remain happy with what we are, then happiness is just a by-product of contentment.”

Table 1 The professional background and related expertise in GNH of the 40 participants are outlined in this table

	Occupation/Profession	Participant numbers	Total
1	Civil Servants (S)	1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 17, 20, 21, 23, 25, 29, 30, 31, 33, 34, 36, 39, 40, 41	22
2	Politician (P)	2, 6, 9, 11, 13, 17, 22, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 40, 41	14
3	Non-government organisation (N)	6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16, 18, 19, 20, 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 31, 35, 37, 38, 39	19
4	Media (M) Expertise	2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 14, 16, 19, 21, 28, 30, 32	13
1	GNH (G)	8, 20, 21, 29, 30, 35, 41	7
2	Climate change (C)	1, 12, 15, 18, 23, 24, 25, 26, 31, 33, 36, 39, 41	13

The above findings show that many interviewees first conceptualised GNH in terms of their personal ideas of happiness rather than its conceptual meaning. This indicates a discrepancy between personal interpretations and the institutionalised meaning of GNH, aligning with Ura et al. (2023), who point out that the abstract nature of GNH makes it challenging to operationalise. Some equated GNH to individual wellbeing, like financial security and inner peace and others extended their understanding to collective happiness, reflecting the Buddhist principles of interdependence (Givel, 2015). This duality also reflects discussions about happiness around the world, where Western models tend to prioritise subjective wellbeing (Diener et al., 2018), whereas Bhutan's approach is more inclined towards communal harmony (Schroeder & Schroeder, 2014).

The description of GNH as a beyond-happiness concept and as an ultimate vision for humanity and the main purpose in life resonates with McKnight & Kashdan (2009), who assert that the main purpose in life is a fundamental, self-organizing life objective that shapes and motivates goals, regulates behaviours, and provides a sense of meaning. The description of GNH as more than just a pursuit of momentary or personal happiness can be described as a 'happiness-plus' or a 'neo-happiness' attempt to understand GNH. This interpretation aligns with the eudaimonic perspective of happiness, focusing on human flourishing and purpose rather than on hedonic objectives of mere pleasure and satisfaction (Ehrlich et al., 2024).

Interviewees viewing GNH as a vision for the entire humanity aligns with Bhutan's advocacy for global wellbeing (Thinley, 2014). This broader perspective, although less common, highlights GNH's potential as an alternative development paradigm to the GDP model. Seen through the lens of happiness, the interpretations of GNH reveal a spectrum of interpretations from personal happiness to collective ethos, highlighting the need for deeper public engagement with GNH's principles to ensure its enduring relevance. The following subsections build on this conceptual understanding by exploring the philosophical foundations of GNH and the ongoing debate surrounding its measurability.

Philosophy versus measurability

The participants in the study endorsed GNH as a noble and wise philosophy and expressed their understanding of it through diverse theoretical frameworks. However, concerns were consistently raised regarding its measurability, which remains a point of contention. As a philosophical construct, GNH retains widespread appeal, primarily due to the transformative leadership of its founder, His Majesty the Fourth King. Most interviewees (n = 34; 85%) referenced him when discussing the concept. Those who served him closely (e.g., 23S(C), 29PS(G)) stressed that GNH must be understood within the context of its genesis. Interviewee 29PS(G), a former prime minister and a key figure in the global GNH discourse, claimed to have first heard the king mention GNH in 1974 or 1975. GNH was envisioned as a holistic development paradigm and a counter-narrative to

GDP-led progress, which was said to have brought societies to multidimensional existential threats from ecological and social to economic and nuclear crises. Interviewee 29PS(G) explained,

“So GNH is an alternative track... a track that moves away from this precipice... GNH is a holistic development paradigm which addresses the entirety of human needs”.

Interviewee 8S(G) from CBS observed that no single definition could encompass GNH's breadth and cited His Majesty's own framing of GNH as a balance between material and non-material aspects of development. Interviewees interpreted GNH as a holistic (n=16, 40%), inclusive (n=19, 48%), meaningful (n=9, 23%), and balanced (n=29, 73%) development philosophy/paradigm (n=33, 83%) beyond material development (and/or GDP) (n=23, 58%) placing people (n=18, 45%), happiness and wellbeing (n=35, 88%), at the centre of the development agenda respecting fundamental human values (n=11, 28%) inspired by spirituality (n=7, 18%) in general and Buddhism (n=17, 43%) in particular, culture (n=18, 45%), and Bhutanese way of life (n=12, 30%) guiding one towards the right approach to meaningful living (n=13, 33%). It was characterised as a “holy grail” (23S(C)), “national conscience” (6PN), “Bhutan's soft power” (37N), and even a “pun on greed and GDP” (21SM(G)). Some dissenting views labelled it “too idealistic” or “impractical” (15NS(C)), especially considering its perceived measurement challenges.

While GNH is measured through a robust statistical process, the Alkire-Foster method, only one interviewee (8S(G)) could confidently explain the index. The complexity of this process contributes to a widespread lack of understanding, as reflected in the view of interviewee 26N(C), who stated, “At the index level, it's very confusing.” Regarding whether GNH should be measured, 40% of participants said yes, 30% were undecided, and another 30% opposed it. Critics argued that happiness is a “state of mind” (15NS(C)) and should remain a guiding ideology (16NM), rather than a quantifiable target. Thus, while GNH is widely revered as a visionary philosophy rooted in holistic development, its technical measurability remains poorly understood, contributing to a gap between theory and practice.

The findings reveal strong support for GNH as a development philosophy, aligning with existing literature that positions GNH as a holistic alternative to GDP-centric development models (Ura et al., 2023; Thinley & Hartz-Karp, 2019). The description of GNH as a holistic, inclusive, and balanced ideology resonates with scholarly characterisations of GNH as a multidimensional framework integrating material, psychological, social, and ecological wellbeing (Verma, 2017). However, the persistent concern over its measurability also reflects a critical tension between GNH's theoretical appeal and its practical application (Braun & Hussain, 2009; Diener et al., 2008). The other challenge reflected banked upon GNH's anchorage to Buddhism (43%) and Bhutanese culture (30%),

which reinforces its contextual specificity, ultimately raising questions about its universal applicability and the struggle to reconcile cultural relativism with standardised metrics (Kasparian & Rolland, 2012).

Despite the statistical rigor of the Alkire-Foster method (Alkire, 2015), the interviewees' limited comprehension of GNH measurement reflects a broader issue in wellbeing indices, which is characterised by complex methodologies often alienating policymakers and citizens (Stiglitz et al., 2023). This is similar to the Human Development Index (HDI) being frequently misunderstood outside academic circles (Klugman et al., 2011). The split among participants on whether GNH should be measured mirrors academic divisions between those advocating quantifiable wellbeing metrics and those arguing that happiness is too subjective for standardisation (Li et al., 2023). The dissenting views labelling GNH as "too idealistic" (15NS(C)) reflect criticisms of Bhutan's own developmental contradictions, where the nation's rapid modernisation has challenged its sustainability ambitions (Schroeder & Schroeder, 2014). This tension between idealism and pragmatism is not unique and similar critiques have been levied at Sweden's 'lagom' (balanced living) model, which faces pressures from globalisation (Leese et al., 2016). Thus, while GNH has the potential to offer itself as a compelling alternative development paradigm, it faces the challenges of bridging the gap between conceptual richness and methodological clarity for effective operationalisation. The next subsection extends this discussion by analysing how these philosophical ideals translate into perceived strengths and limitations in practice.

Strengths and Limitations

Described by interviewee 8S(G) from the CBS as the "most comprehensive wellbeing indicator in the world," GNH was contrasted with other global wellbeing indicators, most of which typically measure only 10 to 15 wellbeing variables (8S(G)). In comparison, GNH considers 124 variables, making it more comprehensive and multidimensional. Moreover, GNH includes "intuitive and innovative" domains such as psychological wellbeing, time use, community vitality, and cultural diversity, which are not commonly found in other countries' development planning considerations. The majority of interviewees appreciated GNH for its superior philosophical foundation. Interviewee 20NS(G) described it as an "SDG-plus" model due to its incorporation of cultural values. Interviewee 22PN explained,

"GNH is the answer to all global challenges like climate change, poverty, destruction of nature, and over-consumption."

Further, interviewee 32PM emphasized the moral dimension of GNH:

"In many developed countries... there is an erosion of human values... GNH makes humanity better."

Several participants (n=6, 15%) praised GNH as being "well ahead of its time", conceptualised in the 1970s, predating global sustainable development discussions. According to interviewee 40PS, GNH could have even inspired the SDGs. Interviewee 4M further observed that Bhutan's constitution mandates the government to create a "conducive environment... for people to be happy," establishing GNH as a constitutional commitment.

A prominent limitation cited was the lack of a shared understanding of GNH (n=18, 45%). As interviewee 21SM(G) noted,

"When a concept is understood, there is no question about having any limitation."

Over time, GNH has become a popularised and often misused term, adopted in speeches by civil servants and politicians irrespective of comprehension (2PMS, 20NS(G), 21SM(G)). Interviewees (n=15, 38%) said that GNH had, over time, become an elitist concept with 2PMS describing the discourse on GNH as "academic and limited to the intellectual elite," contributing to its elitist image.

Interviewees noted the over-commercialisation of GNH, naming shops, hotels, and products after it, which led to public confusion and what several referred to as "GNH fatigue" (n=12, 30%) or even a "cliché" (n=7, 18%). This fatigue was described as a predominantly domestic phenomenon, with many believing that GNH largely enjoyed a positive international appeal (n=5, 13%). According to 32PM, GNH fatigue emerges when public dissatisfaction about any issue in Bhutan is framed as "GNH gone wrong," raising unrealistic expectations that everyone in Bhutan should always be happy. Another recurring concern was that an excessive focus on GNH had compromised economic development (32PM), despite economic sustainability being one of its four pillars. Interviewee 13PS pointed out that numerous recent royal decrees have been issued, pushing Bhutan towards more robust economic development, clearly suggesting the need to rebalance priorities. Some interviewees also pointed out the idealistic and impractical nature of GNH (n=5, 13%) and its implementation challenges (n=12, 30%) as limitations.

Interviewees' description of GNH as an 'SDG-plus' model reflects criticisms of SDG which has often been described as a Western-centric, technocratic, and sidelining cultural and spiritual dimensions (Kumar & Giri, 2020). The early conceptualisation of GNH in the 1970s, predating the global sustainability discourses, suggests Bhutan's pioneering role in wellbeing governance (Verma, 2017). This supports Alkire's (2015) argument that GNH played a role in influencing global development thinking by highlighting the importance of non-material dimensions of human development.

However, this paper also identifies critical limitations, with the most notable being the lack of a common understanding of GNH among the Bhutanese people. This reflects findings in the literature that complex wellbeing frameworks often struggle

with public engagement (McRae-Williams et al., 2018). The ‘GNH fatigue’ phenomenon resulting from the overuse of GNH in commercialisation mirrors critiques of “SDG-washing,” which happens when organisations falsely claim to contribute to SDGs for marketing and branding purposes (Costa et al., 2025). Describing GNH as an elitist idea reflects a broader challenge in participatory policymaking where abstract concepts often remain confined to academic circles (Borghi et al., 2017). A key tension exists between GNH’s moral idealism and economic pragmatism, as economic sustainability is a key pillar of GNH, and the emphasis on non-material values is perceived to hinder growth. This mirrors the global discussion on whether wellbeing frameworks can coexist with economic development models (Grimes, 2020). Numerous recent royal decrees calling for a national economic revitalisation also suggest a need to recalibrate priorities to balance ethical governance with material progress, which is a challenge observed in degrowth (Kallis et al., 2018) and post-development literature (McGregor, 2009). Future research should explore how Bhutan could enhance public engagement with GNH, mitigate commercialisation risks, and reconcile its spiritual foundations with economic imperatives. Comparative studies with other wellbeing frameworks, such as New Zealand’s Wellbeing Budget (Anderson & Mossialos, 2019) or Iceland’s welfare policies (Eydal & Ólafsson, 2016), could be undertaken to gain insights into addressing the limitations of GNH in relation to its role and utility as a development model.

Implementation of GNH as a governance tool

Currently, Bhutan does not have a formal policy or legal framework explicitly outlining how GNH should be implemented, while certain guiding narratives have evolved. Interviewee 29PS(G) said that Bhutan has been pursuing GNH “mindfully” since the 1970s. Key welfare provisions like free healthcare and free education are often cited as examples of Bhutan prioritising the wellbeing of its citizens in line with GNH values (21SM(G)).

The first democratically elected government (2008-2013) introduced the GNH screening tools to assess whether policies and projects aligned with GNH principles (29PS(G)). This administration also framed the development objectives of the five-year plan (FYP) and the annual performance reports based on the four GNH pillars. But subsequent governments have demonstrated less commitment, and as noted by a former cabinet minister, 29PS(G):

“Sad to say, this is no longer the case now. We abandoned GNH.”

The absence of explicit legislation on GNH implementation should not be interpreted to mean that it is not being implemented. According to the CBS, GNH is implemented at multiple levels through various mechanisms that have evolved. Interviewee 8S(G) articulated four main implementation strategies. First, the government uses the GNH index data as baselines and targets in FYP formulation. Second,

the government allocates higher budgets to districts with lower GNH scores. Third, the CBS has developed a GNH Certification for businesses as an assessment framework to align with GNH principles. Fourth, GNH has been included in the school curricula, including a master’s level module offered in collaboration with the University of Canberra.

It is noteworthy that Bhutan does not have a formal legislation on GNH implementation despite decades of discourse around the concept. The findings indicate that Bhutan has relied more on normative alignment with GNH values, like free healthcare and education, rather than codified governance procedures. This is consistent with Ura et al. (2023) who maintained that GNH has always functioned as an overarching philosophy rather than a legal framework. Such reliance on moral authority rather than statutory power illustrates both the cultural strength and administrative fragility of GNH as a governance tool. This reliance on implicit norms without legal mandates means the absence of accountability in deviating from GNH principles which could result in an erosion of its influence in policymaking and national planning. This has been pointed out by Brooks (2013), who concluded that GNH has encountered difficulties in transitioning from an idealistic vision to measurable policy outcomes.

While the first elected government (2008-2013) aligned the FYPs to the four GNH pillars and championed the GNH screening tools, subsequent governments have not shown such explicit enthusiasm. These varying political commitments from different governments suggest a vulnerability of dependence on political will rather than legal enforcement. This contrasts with other wellbeing governance models, such as New Zealand’s ‘Wellbeing Budget’ model, which incorporates wellbeing metrics into fiscal policy (Anderson & Mossialos, 2019), thereby offering it a legislative umbrella. As such, the lack of similar legal instruments could help explain many issues related to the implementation of GNH.

The attempt to mainstream GNH principles is evident in the four strategies of implementing GNH as outlined by CBS - integrating GNH into planning, budget allocation, private sector certification, and education. But findings also question the consistency in the application across the four strategies. While the use of GNH data in planning resonates with broader literature on evidence-based policy (Baron, 2018), there is hardly any scholarly evidence to prove the claim about budget allocation prioritising lower GNH-score districts. Moreover, the GNH certification for business, although innovative, is not mandatory and it limits its systemic impact (Bencsik, 2023). However, the inclusion of GNH in the school curriculum and postgraduate education reflects a longer-term approach to societal change aligning with UNESCO’s emphasis on education for sustainable development and transformative learning (Mundy, 1999). The next subsection explores how Bhutan’s Five-Year Plans (FYPs) and the GNH screening tools have served as the main institutional vehicles for translating GNH into practice.

Five-Year Plans (FYPs) and the GNH Screening Tools as governance tools

A majority of participants (n=16, 40%) identified the FYPs as the primary vehicle for implementing GNH. Interviewee 13PS explained:

“All the Five-Year development plans are framed based on the four pillars... all 20 *dzongkhags* (districts), all 205 *gewogs* (sub-districts) are given a guideline... to propose development activities under each of the four pillars.”

This was corroborated by interviewee 20NS(G), who formerly served with the GNHC, affirming deliberate alignment between planning documents and GNH index findings.

The next most cited mechanism (n=12, 30%) was the use of GNH screening tools to evaluate proposed national policies and projects. According to 24N(C):

“Every policy that the government wants to propose goes through a set of evaluations. There is a set of screening tools. I would say it is fairly well-implemented.”

Similarly, interviewee 14M described the tools as a “GNH implementation guideline.” However, their coverage remains incomplete. Interviewee 30PMS(G), a two-time former Member of Parliament, noted that parliamentary legislation is not subject to these tools, highlighting a significant gap in application.

Moreover, concerns were raised regarding the continued relevance and utility of the screening tools. As explained by 34S, a senior civil servant:

“In the past, we tried (the screening tools)... But it was not proven to be relevant most of the time. We wanted to put it in a tool with specific criteria, but we realised that it cannot be a general policy tool. So, it was not found useful. But we are still trying.”

Interviewees identified the FYPs as central to GNH implementation aligning with literature that highlights their role as Bhutan’s primary planning tool (Ura et al., 2023; Thinley & Hartz-Karp, 2019). However, as previously noted, aligning developmental priorities depends on the political will of elected governments, making the process inherently subjective. This study saw interviewees questioning the relevance of the screening tools, even though they were initially seen as innovative instruments to align policies to GNH principles (Sithey et al., 2018). This study also discloses that the GNH screening process does not include parliamentary bills, which raises concerns about how selective application could compromise the coherence of overall policy (Barry et al., 2010). Moreover, doubts about the effectiveness of the screening tools mirror concerns about the complexities of applying complex models in real-world situations (Costa et al.,

2011).

Questioning the Reality of Implementation

Some participants expressed scepticism about the actual implementation of GNH. For instance, interviewee 11PN stated:

“I don't think we are implementing it as such... I don't think there is an intentional, planned government effort in defining the parameters of GNH and implementing it.”

Echoing this sentiment, six interviewees (15%) admitted uncertainty regarding how GNH is being implemented. The recent dissolution of the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) further deepened doubts among respondents (2PMS, 30PMS(G), 13PS). Interviewee 13PS noted:

“Now we have done away with the GNH Commission, which means, I think, GNH screening tools will also disappear.”

However, interviewee 29PS(G) argued that removing the GNHC may encourage a more decentralised understanding of GNH responsibilities, making all government offices accountable rather than a single agency.

Interviewees’ questioning whether GNH is truly being implemented on the ground highlights the tension between policies that serve as a symbolic rhetoric and those that truly reflect an actionable national vision, as noted by Winton (2013). In Bhutan’s case, it is exemplified by the recent dissolution of the GNHC, which prompted interviewees to interpret it as a digression from the pursuit of GNH. Conversely, the argument that decentralising the responsibility of implementation across government agencies could foster wider ownership is reflective of governance theories emphasising shared responsibility (Kater & Kisker, 2018), but the effectiveness of such an approach depends on having effective monitoring systems in place (Rawluk et al., 2021), which Bhutan does not currently have. The next subsection discusses how GNH is informally practised through community life and cultural values rather than bureaucratic processes.

GNH as an Informal Practice and Way of Life

Some (n=6, 15%) interviewees asserted that GNH is more meaningfully practised at the community or household level and not as a governance tool. Interviewee 3MS emphasised:

“GNH is implemented in Bhutan not through governance... but through the community level itself, from the household level itself.”

Interviewee 39NS(C) agreed, stating:

“GNH is being implemented at the household level without even knowing that it is being implemented...”

it's a way of life to live meaningfully.”

This perspective was supported by 8S(G), who highlighted community vitality, volunteerism, and moral belief systems, such as karmic consequences, as informal yet significant conduits of GNH principles.

This finding aligns with the recognition that GNH is embodied in the Bhutanese way of life, and it is embedded in daily life at the household and community level. It reflects a bottom-up dimension of the GNH framework, which is consistent with Givel (2015) in emphasising that GNH is sustained by Bhutanese cultural and spiritual traditions and not just by state institutions. It supports the argument that karmic beliefs, community vitality, and volunteerism, among other value-based systems, are deeply embedded in Bhutanese society and arguably serve as organic manifestations of GNH principles (Givel, 2015). It aligns with Kothari et al.'s (2019) concept of “pluriversal development,” recognising alternative modernity grounded in local epistemologies. This experience of Bhutan also shows that development approaches can be guided by culturally rooted values rather than standardised global models.

Challenges of implementing GNH as a governance tool

Multiple challenges were identified that hinder effective implementation. Besides the lack of common understanding (n=18, 45%), resource constraints were reported by 16 interviewees (40%). As interviewee 34S summarized:

“All activities, at the end of the day, boil down to resources... and we don't have resources. We still depend on external aid, official development assistance, and grants.”

In addition to financial constraints, interviewee 8S(G) emphasised two further challenges: addressing public scepticism about GNH's practicality and deepening the understanding of GNH among policymakers and civil servants. Adding to it, interviewee 10NMS pointed out a gap between GNH literature and policy and highlighted that policymakers don't consult GNH literature produced by CBS.

Interviewees also noted a common misperception that GNH is antithetical to economic growth, potentially delaying progress (20NS(G), 33S(C), 40PS). Additionally, interviewee 30PMS(G) described a self-imposed reputational challenge:

“I think there is this excessive, very obnoxious paranoia about trying to get everything in line with GNH, and that could backfire... We talk as if unemployment does not exist... and then we get carried away with these international reports.”

At the global level, Bhutan's uniqueness in pursuing GNH presents its own challenge. Interviewee 6PN noted:

“A big challenge for Bhutan is that it is charting a lonely path with no precedence.”

The lack of a shared understanding of GNH is noted by Ura et al. (2023), who emphasises the need for ongoing dialogue and education to sustain GNH principles. It reflects findings in the broader governance literature where fragmentation of interpretation is noted as a barrier to integrated policymaking often leading to policy inconsistency (Cejudo & Michel, 2017). Similarly, interviewees citing resource constraints, including dependence on foreign aid as a challenge, is not surprising and aligns with the literature that wellbeing frameworks are often deprioritised under fiscal pressure (Stiglitz et al., 2023).

The limited engagement with academic literature by policymakers aligns with O'Toole (2000), who notes a perennial gap between research and policy. Addressing this tension seems critical in facilitating theoretically grounded and empirically robust applications of GNH. Furthermore, the perception that GNH hinders economic growth reflects the dichotomy between wellbeing indicators and conventional GDP-based development paradigms (Costanza et al., 2025). In this context, scholars like Alkire (2015) stress that wellbeing frameworks like GNH face the challenge of scientifically articulating how they complement economic imperatives rather than rejecting them.

As such, implementing GNH in Bhutan as a governance tool involves a complex interplay of philosophy, governance, and culture. The absence of a formal policy mechanism and political prioritisation presents serious concerns, but the enduring cultural resonance offers itself as a unique model of value-based development beyond the conventions of the GDP-based development model. Ultimately, for GNH to become a credible alternative development model and a governance tool, there is an ardent need for Bhutan to address implementation inconsistencies, enhance institutional capacity, and build stronger linkages between knowledge and practice. Future research should explore how GNH-inspired frameworks might be adapted in other cultural contexts and examine their comparative effectiveness against mainstream wellbeing models.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores how GNH is implemented in Bhutan as a development model and a governance tool. While Bhutan has been a trendsetter in the development model beyond the GDP movement, this study shows that Bhutan's experience with GNH needs further refinement in transforming it into a replicable development model and efficient governance tool. Bhutan could consider formalising the implementation of GNH through legislation (like a GNH implementation Act, or a policy), which could help integrate GNH across all policies by creating an independent oversight body to ensure accountability. There is a need to simplify the GNH index into localised and actionable metrics and narratives to inform and guide policymaking. Bhutan could also develop multi-pronged strategies to dispel the

perception that GNH hinders economic growth. Also, Bhutan could establish knowledge-sharing partnerships with other wellbeing-driven nations to test GNH's applicability to different cultural contexts. To this end, there is a need to invest in research and publish credible outputs accordingly. Future research could explore the understanding of GNH among different demographic groups to understand its evolving relevance to Bhutanese society. Comparative studies with other wellbeing models are crucial towards developing universally applicable development models.

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