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Abstract

Gross National Happiness is the brainchild of a tiny Himalayan country, Bhutan. The policy has garnered both criticism and commendation around the world. Under the realm of Gross National Happiness, Bhutan places environmental conservation as one of the pillars to achieve happiness. The paper studies whether or not the environment conservation is relevant. The study finds that the environmental conservation is relevant, however, it also illustrates that based on Elinor Ostrom's theory and eight design principle, Bhutan's forest policy lags in empowering the rural forest users. Over the years, the dependence on forest has led to pressures on the use of forest resources sustainability. This remains a threat to the conservation pillar. It also shows that GNH as the guiding policy mostly accommodates the conservation policy, but falls behind when it comes to giving rights to the people who are dependent on the forest. The paper concludes that even though GNH is a justifiable approach as a public policy, it needs to be readdressed so as to uphold the conservation commitment and empower rural people for the sustainable use of forest at the same time.

Keywords: Gross National Happiness, Environment Conservation, Forest, Rural People

1. Introduction

A wide consensus regards the measurement of economic development by traditional approach, Gross Domestic Product which represents country's economic performance and development. Emerging from the time of neoclassical economist, happiness is defined in terms of material consumption. It also comes as a golden rule in economics that wellbeing is associated with the income with a notion "the more the merrier". But as complex and challenging it is, the need to factor "Happiness" or "Well-being" as an end of a human pursuit in policies has been recognized in the political agenda today. Against this backdrop, the paradigm of economic growth is gradually paralleled by other approaches to development that keeps people at the end as opposed to economic development.

Bhutan journeyed its interest in "Gross National Happiness" (GNH) when the fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck pronounced the term in 1972 with a bold questioning of the GDP's inability to capture happiness and well-being of the society. Bhutan is a tiny Himalayan country in South Asia, sandwiched by two giants, India and China with a population of less than one million. It is a small and peaceful country but it is most definitely not an idyllic place filled with happy people. Like any other country, it is grappling with pros and cons of globalization. Nonetheless, the government of Bhutan has adopted a different approach than the traditional economic growth, a search to go beyond material fulfillment and settle on an intangible idea of happiness.

Bhutan transitioned into constitutional democracy in 2008 from monarchy and while considering policies and legislation, the constitution directs the leaders to consult the four pillars of GNH, namely Good Governance, Environmental Conservation, Socio-economic development and Cultural Preservation.

Even though happiness as a public policy is still at a nascent stage, Bhutan believes that since happiness is the ultimate goal for everyone, the government must enable conditions for happiness, under which, living in harmony with nature from environment conservation is one of the most important tenets (Thinley, 2012).

However, there are critics claiming GNH is just an empty slogan or too fuzzy for serious policy making (Nguyenokwu, 2014) and with regard to GNH Survey questionnaire, critics warn that happiness is an intangible and subjective concept which is hard to measure (Khatiwada, 2013).

Despite that, happiness as inclusive in the public policy is readily embraced and gradually gaining ground not only in Bhutan but in some part of the world, cementing Aristotle and Jeremy Bentham's belief that purposes of the state can be gathered from the goal of its members by aggregation (Duncan, 2010).

2. Happiness: Mean or End?

Pursuing happiness as a policy might come at the expense of whether it should be taken seriously or it is a meaningful goal at all. Understandably, happiness is an individual pursuit but this norm was once proposed by Bentham who envisioned a public policy guided by its effect on the happiness of its people (Bentham, 1789). On the contrary, public policies have been biased towards economics and driven by political interests.

To pursue happiness and well-being as the goal of public policy obviously raises a lot of questions and criticism because happiness is a private realm. It is subjective and validity of how it can be measured is questioned. Moreover, it is a general human tendency to equate happiness with money. But it has also drawn some scholars such as Layard (2014), Easterlin (2004), and Veenhoven (2006) to look at it differently that conform to the idea that the happiness is not associated with the affluence and wealth, breaking the barrier of general perception of happiness being tied to the level of income.

Easterlin (1974), who introduced the 'Easterlin Paradox', was amongst the first few to study about the reported level of happiness in the United States. Studies have shown a striking revelation, showing that increase in income in many countries have not translated into the rise in levels of happiness. The Easterlin Paradox was tested by Blanchflower and Oswald (2004) and their findings revealed levels of well-being over the last quarter of a century had decreased in the US and Britain which is consistent with the Easterlin Paradox.

Similarly, the Kingdom of Bhutan sees development not only through the economic lens but provides a more important input into policymaking than the drive for material prosperity. Bhutan measures country's prosperity determined by the citizens level of happiness through nine domains and thirty-three indicators of GNH. Similar to the 'Easterlin Paradox' the government of Bhutan notes that after certain basic needs are met, furthering the consumption of material goods does not guarantee happiness (Centre for Public Impact, 2015).

To pursue happiness and well-being as the end in public policy may not make it to every policymaker's agenda given that it is still at a nascent stage and based on various reasons. However, there are studies that show that happiness policy is not as futile a pursuit as it may seem. But despite the theories holding happiness in different perspective, the Utilitarian moral philosophy, "the greatest happiness principle" claims that happiness is universal, and that conditions for happiness appear to be similar across the world according to the study done by a veteran researcher of happiness Veenhoven (2010) similar claimant are also put up by Ng (2011) who mentions that to believe happiness depends on how individual perceives is a common mistake, he states that happiness in itself is universal not only amongst different individual but all species capable of enjoying and suffering.

3. Relationship between Happiness and Environment Conservation

Out of the four pillars of Gross National Happiness, this paper focusses on environmental conservation. Bhutan is known for its strong commitment to conserving forest and it is evidenced by the mandate in the constitution to preserve 60 percent of forest cover at all times to come. Forest, under the realm of environment, are critical to human welfare, providing people with shelter, livelihoods, water, food, and fuel. Owing to the fact that a huge number of population are reliant on the forest in Bhutan, this paper examines how the government straddles in conserving the environment while recognizing the people's dependence on the forest.

The conservation of the environment and Gross National Happiness is closely linked on the basis of provisions like food security, fresh water, Energy, Shelter and rural income that contributes to the happiness of the people. Environmental Conservation pillar recognizes that human beings are intimately connected with the natural environment and all sentient beings therefore the pillar is also considered an important key to contributing to GNH (Schroeder, 2015). Hence, "GNH is not the fleeting, pleasurable feeling that happiness is generally associated with. Instead, Happiness is from serving others, living in harmony with nature and realizing our own innate wisdom and brilliant nature of our own minds" (Ura, Alkire, & Zangmo, 2011). It is important to trace the significance and links of environmental conservation and

human well-being so as to either consolidate, justify or negate the relevance of environmental conservation pillar under Gross National Happiness.

The connection of human being and environment traces the work of Wilson (1984) who holds that humans are naturally affiliated to its surroundings, thus Wilson's "Biophilia Hypothesis", posits that connection to nature is rooted in our evolutionary standpoint. Hence, true to his hypothesis, studies show that the connectedness to nature plays a factor in making people happy. For instance, Capaldi, Dopko, & Zelenski (2014) find in their study "The relationship between nature connectedness and happiness: a meta-analysis" that nature and happiness has a significant relationship revealing that people living in close contact with nature are happier. Similar results are also shown by a study that concludes other than connectedness to nature, environmental conservation and attachment to nature can increase the level of peoples' happiness (Tsurumi, Kuramashi, & Managi, 2012) so does a research by Adjei & Agyei (2014) who found a positive connection between the two.

In addition to that, MacKerron & Mourato (2013) also gives a compatible view of the connection between nature and well-being, revealing that participants in the study are notably happier in all natural or green habitat types, concluding his study that environmental quality does matter in relation to people's happiness.

Coincidentally, Bhutan believes that happiness comes from protecting the environment and conserving it which is in line with the studies done by Wilson (1984) and MacKerron & Mourato (2013). Bhutan's environmental policy is based on conservation. Therefore, recognizing the importance of environmental conservation, Bhutan has placed it at the center of its developmental strategy.

The qualitative literature on the connection between environment and happiness reveal a positive and significant relationship between the two. Wilson (1984) 'Biophilia' and Bhutan's perception towards the environment is on the same lane, wherein both believes that there is an affiliation towards nature and building upon studies by other scholars, under the policy of GNH, living in harmony with people is one way to achieve happiness. Therefore, environmental conservation is placed as one of the pillars under GNH.

4. Importance of Environment Conservation and Policy

Nelson (2008) explains the term “Deep Ecology” invented by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, that nature has intrinsic value in itself, its richness and diversity. It advocates the spiritual connections to the earth’s living system and a moral obligation to protect them. On the other hand, World Economic Forum (2015) states that the presence of environmental risk is more than economic ones, such as unemployment and fiscal crises. Such studies and propositions show that the need for stern environmental policy and the importance of conservation must be realized before it is too. Therefore, it is crucial to safeguard forest and environment to address the environmental issues as it is also a threat to human well-being, and if not taken necessary steps, the humanity will be inviting large-scale destruction.

Supplementing the “Deep Ecology” concept, Rinzin (2006) reports that the relationship between sustainable development and Bhutanese society is founded on a harmonious existence with the natural system, which is projected by beliefs that mountains and forests are a home of Gods and deities. Therefore, perturbing any pristine environment or wildlife would infuriate the deities bringing ill luck, sickness and death. Environmental Conservation was pointed as one of the bases of development under the paradigm of GNH, indicating the prominence of ecology and the environment within the country and implementation of policy and practice. Environmental Conservation just doesn’t mean safeguarding animals, trees or rivers. It comes down to an essential fact of our own survival.

At this point, it is important to note that there are countries that emphasize on ensuring better protection of the environment apart from Bhutan even without having public policies such as GNH as their guiding policy. Nonetheless, safeguarding forests, environment and the well-being of the people that are associated with the attributes of an environment is the running theme of any government that places importance on it. It is important to note that economic growth is vital but it should not be at the expense of an environment degradation. Hence, a policy that places environmental conservation a priority is crucial for the well-being of the people and the world at large.

5. Threat to the Conservation Policy: Tragedy of the Commons

Against the backdrop of Bhutan’s emphasis on environmental conservation, it has come at a time where the policy of conservation is at a conflict due to the fact that people’s livelihood

is also hugely dependent on natural resources such as forest. Introduced by Garrett Hardin in 1968, the Tragedy of the Commons interprets a situation whereby natural resource that is shared by many continues to be used until there is no benefit left ultimately getting detrimental to everyone involved. Such incidences had occurred in England in the mid-1750s wherein overconsumption of grass both led to degradation and death of the sheep (Hannon & Ruth, 1994).

Abundance of natural resources such as pastures, water or forests has a possibility of facing congestion or overuse. Such overuse could also lead to issues such as the tragedy of commons whereby the self-interest nature of human being will lead to the degradation of the resource in the long term. Forests experience the tragedy of the commons via deforestation. A prominent example which is believed to be still happening today is the destruction of Amazon Rainforest through cattle ranching (Sayers, 2015).

However, Elinor Ostrom effectively answers this popular theory which has been explained by Hardin that private property is the only means of protecting resources from depletion. In order to avert the tragedy of the commons, Ostrom offers eight principles in order for the local communities to govern the resources sustainably (Ostrom, 2005). In a brief overview it posits that a clearly defined area to show who has the right to withdraw from a well-defined resource (Design Principle 1) that effectively assign cost proportionate to benefits (Design Principle 2), Users design their own rules (Design Principles 3), that are enforced by the users or which is accountable to them (Design principle 4). The users also have graduated sanctions (Design Principle 5) That way, collective action and monitoring problems tend to be solved in a reinforcing manner. Moreover, there are rapid, low cost, local arenas to solve conflict among users (Design Principle 6), a minimal recognition of the right to organize by a national or local government (Design Principle 7). The 8th design principle may be present in robust systems whereby the common-pool resources are being managed by a large group (Ostrom, 2005).

This paper adopts Elinor Ostrom's Eight design principle to examine the relevance of Environmental Conservation on Gross National Happiness. This is because firstly, Ostrom's theory and her eight design principles are considered one of the most coherent and influential in checking the effectiveness of institutions and sustainability of forests in a way that supports local livelihoods (Ostrom, 1999). Secondly, as mentioned above, Ostrom provides design principles to avert the tragedy of the commons. In similar lane, Bhutan has abundance in

natural resources such as forest, and 69 percent of the population in Bhutan are predominately made up of rural people who are reliant on the forest for their livelihood (RGoB, 2009). Therefore, it is apt to adopt Elinor Ostrom's theory and her principles to study how and where Bhutan's Conservation policy fares well in line with Ostrom's theory, which would inturn determine the coherence of the Environmental conservation pillar as well.

5.1 The table below shows a brief discussion on how Elinor Ostrom's eight design principles fit well with Bhutan's conservation policy.

Elinor Ostrom's Eight Design Principles	Bhutan's GNH on Conservation Policy
1. <i>Clearly defined Boundaries - Individuals or households who have rights to withdraw resource units from the CPR must be clearly defined, as must the boundaries of the CPR itself.</i>	★ ★ ★
2. <i>Congruence between appropriation and provision rules and local conditions—Appropriation rules restricting time, place, technology, and/or quantity of resource units are related to local conditions and to provision rules requiring labor, material, and/or money.</i>	----
3. <i>Collective Choice Arrangement - Most individuals affected by operational rules can participate in modifying operational rules</i>	----
4. <i>Monitoring - Monitors, who actively audit common-pool resource conditions and user behavior, are accountable to the users and/or are the users themselves.</i>	★ ★
5. <i>Graduated sanctions - Users who violate operational rules are likely to receive graduated sanctions (depending on the seriousness and context of the offence) from other users, from officials accountable to these users, or from both.</i>	----

6. Users and their officials have rapid access to low-cost, local arenas to resolve conflict among users or between users and officials.	★ ★ ★
7. Minimal recognition of rights to organize- The rights of users to devise their own institutions are not challenged by external governmental authorities.	★ ★
8. Nested enterprises - Appropriation, provision, monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution and governance activities are organized in multiple layers of nested enterprises.	★ ★ ★

★ ★ ★: Strongly Present

★ ★: Moderately Present

----: Not applicable or not recognized in the act and policies

5.2 Compatibility of GNH Conservation Policy with Ostrom's Principles

As can be seen, some of the of the policies found in the acts and policies fit into some of the eight-design principles, while some are clearly missing. For the first design principle, it is reflected in the Identification and Selection of the area whereby people who want to establish community forest are being assisted for the selection of the area/site. Thus, Bhutan's conservation policy scores three stars for the strong prevalence of their right to withdraw from a well-defined resource. The Design Principles 2 is important for the users to consider the rules fair and legitimate and that both rules are well matched to local conditions is absent. The Design Principle 3 involves the users to involve in modifying the rules so that users won't cheat whenever they have the opportunity to do so (Ostrom, 1999). This design is inapplicable because of the Forestry rules and regulations that are already implemented so as to be followed by the people.

For the Fourth Design Principle, it is given two stars as the forest is monitored by forest personnel which is not accountable to them (Dorji, Webb, & Shivakoti, 2007). In addition, design principle 5 whereby it involves sanctions by robust governance in which the initial sanction is considered more of an information to the person who is caught violating (Ostrom, 2005) is also absent. The sixth design principles whereby users have rapid and lowest Users and their officials have rapid access to low-cost, local arenas to resolve conflict among users are reflected as the gup (Block Leader) is the considered the low cost available in local arenas. Hence the three stars representing a strong presence.

The seventh design principle scores two stars because, although the right to organize their institutions are being recognized, it is not challenged as long as it does not challenge the government's program's goals. The eighth design principle scores three stars, because of the presence of legal, administrative system at district and national level nested under the Ministry of Agriculture.

The three important design principles, whereby it involves users taking up most of the responsibilities are either absent or not applicable due to the presence of strong government's role in it. In that regard, Ostrom (1990) mentions that collective action by local communities that are accountable for the mobilization of resources prevent free-riding and forest sustainability. Therefore, due to the absence of those three important design principles in Bhutan's forest policy, it is safe to assume that the degradation of forest could be as a result of that.

Owing to the fact that rural people are highly dependent on forest for their livelihood, the phenomenon of the tragedy of commons could have larger implications on the livelihood of the rural people. In this case, Bhutan's environment policy is met with a conflict between conservation and allocating natural resources properly in order to avert this phenomenon. The policy of Gross National Happiness is a top-bottom approach as opposed to Ostrom's bottom-up both aimed at conservation and wellbeing of collective people. Evidently, forest policies especially community forestry under the realm of environment conservation does lack an aspect of bottom-up approach.

The evolution of forest policy from the nationalization of forest in 1969 to transferring the ownership to the communities in 1995 shows an attempt at bringing the local communities at a forefront of the policy. Even though studies have shown the conservation of environment

to be helpful for people's wellbeing, the environmental policy in Bhutan lags in respect to giving the rural people the full right in terms of using natural resources, as it is mostly regulated by the government. A bottom-up approach, including community participation, is touted as a great approach to ensure a positive impact on the future of forest resources of a country (Chowdhury, Izumiyam, & Koike, 2014). This disempowerment of rural forest users refutes the principle of Gross National Happiness because it subtly affects the well-being of the people. Therefore, given the prioritization conservation of the environment, Bhutan has proven its commitment to conserving which is commendable, nonetheless, it further needs to shift its importance on the rural people in line with the Ostrom's Eight principles.

6. Concluding Remarks and Policy Recommendation

Firstly, the policy of happiness, as far-fetched as it may sound to some people, it has garnered a lot of attention from policymakers and scholars alike. In the contemporary world, happiness is widely associated with the level of income, but studies done refutes this perception. The Government of Bhutan believes that living in harmony with nature that comes from conservation of the environment is important for the happiness and the well-being of the people, hence environmental conservation is placed as one of the four pillars of Gross National Happiness. Nonetheless, the pursuit of conservation is threatened by the phenomenon of 'Tragedy of Commons' considering the fact that the huge settlement of people in rural areas are highly dependent on the forest, resulting in the deforestation and degradation of the forest.

Secondly, it is important to note that having GNH as a guiding policy is relevant with regard to environmental conservation because it is not only geared towards the wellbeing of the people, it also emphasizes the conservation of the environment. Moreover, against the backdrop of qualitative literature revealing a positive connection between environment and wellbeing it, even more, justifies the purpose of Gross National Happiness and the placing of environmental conservation as one of the pillars. Therefore, having environmental conservation as one of the pillars is well justified. However, the policy of GNH in pursuit of happiness in line with those belief influences the conservation policy strongly through these policies and Acts that indicates an imbalance, inadvertently or not, disregarding the rights of the people to use natural resources. But like any other nascent policy, it is not perfect, leaving room for improvement. In order to further consolidate the pillar, it is essential for the government of Bhutan to readdress the policy in line with Elinor Ostrom's eight design

principle of managing commons. Bhutan's forest policy under the realm of environmental conservation has come a long way and the conservation commitment is laudable but it still lags behind in some aspect of Ostrom's principles. How happiness is achieved while meeting the needs of the people while still conserving the forest may not only be a challenge but it may be even more important today than ever before.

Lastly, Bhutan's pursuit to adopt happiness of the people along with the conservation of the environment is commendable. But the balance to create a condition to make people live in harmony with nature and the peoples' basic necessities is at the juncture of a conflict. Bhutan's take on conservation as one of the factors to contribute to happiness does not seem to be a futile pursuit but in order for Bhutan to further both the environment and happiness policy, the policy has to be readdressed so as to uphold both the conservation policy and empower rural people at the same time.

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Author's Profile

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Educational Attainment

- August 2016 - Present: Masters of Arts in Asia Pacific Studies. Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand. College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Thammasat University, Bangkok, Sponsored by Thammasat University



Scholarship & Awards

- 2009-2012 - Bachelors in English and Environmental studies . Royal Thimphu College, Bhutan.
- 2016-2017 - Receptient of Thammasat University Scholarship for Academic year 2016
- 2011 - Recipient of Dean's List for Academic Excellence
- 2010- Recipient of Dean's List for Academic Excellence
- 2008- Winner of Regional Essay competition, organized by Youth Volunteer In Action of Bumthang, Bhutan

Work Experience

- 2013-mid 2016 Volunteer English Teacher at Pathumthani Technical College.

- 2012 – Policy and Coordination Division intern under National Environment commission
- Panelist at the literary festival, “Mountain Echoes” 2011
- 2010- Co-editor of a book “November Light: “An Anthropology of Creative Writing from Bhutan”
- Tour Guide at Bhutan Reisen 2009 (Intern)
- Royal Thimphu College. (2010). *November Light: Anthology of Creative Writing from Bhutan*. (S. Wangmo, D. Saday, P. Wangchuck , U. T. Lepcha, & N. Kaul, Eds.) Bhutan: Royal Thimphu College.

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