

Gross National Happiness: an introductory editorial.

The nine papers in this publication all address the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), albeit from very different viewpoints. They are an outcome of a one day workshop held in March 1999 organised by the Planning Commission to consider whether or not the concept of GNH could be related to the Human Development Index (HDI) developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Not all the papers collected here were given or discussed during the workshop and nor are all of the workshop papers published here. In part this reflects an attempt to capture a wider discussion that has been taking place within the columns of Keunsel over the years. More recently this has been stimulated as a result of the Keunsel's publication in January 1999 of the text of Lyonpo's Jigme Thinley's text to a UNDP regional meeting in October 1998 for Asia and the Pacific. The aim of this publication therefore as a discussion document, is to bring together various strands of opinion on the GNH concept. It is not a final view or statement and reflects an ongoing, and as the reader will find, a disparate debate.

The first article of this collection is the opening statement by Lyonpo Jigme Thinley to the March 1999 workshop in which he lays out the purpose of the workshop and raised a number of issues which he believed the meeting should address. First could an index for GNH be constructed in the same way as it has been in the HDI? Second could the workshop discussion clarify what the main ingredients of happiness are, and if indicators could be found for happiness, what would they be? Third, were the four platforms of economic development, environmental preservation, cultural promotion and good governance through which GNH was being pursued the appropriate ones - were there others that should be considered?

The text of Lyonpo Jigme Thinley's speech to the UNDP meeting in 1998 is the second article in this publication. It outlines the history of the GNH concept which dates back, at least in formal expression, to an article published in late April 1987 in the London Financial Times which carried the headline Gross National Happiness. Lyonpo Jigme's speech elaborates in some detail the philosophy behind Bhutan's approach towards GNH, a theme for which, Stefan Priesner's paper argues, there is historical depth. Priesner believes that Bhutan's 'centuries-long isolation' is an important part of the explanation for the particular pattern of beliefs and values that the country has followed although modernisation processes were triggered by external events. Some might question the extent to which this view of isolation accords with reality. While Priesner sees GNH as a value embedded in Bhutanese society, he believes it to be under threat through pressures on cultural preservation, socio-economic challenges and the potential degeneration of GNH to a mere rhetorical concept.

The fourth paper by Vladimir Stehlik reflects some of Priesner's concerns over the challenges to GNH, particularly from what Stehlik sees as an externally conditioned path of economic development, and the economic disparities that it is already leading to. Stehlik draws particular attention to the fact that while society might choose to provide the enabling environment for happiness, it cannot, and should not, be concerned with the actual provision of happiness. For Stehlik, the attempt even to define what happiness is, is unnecessary.

The literary eloquence of Thakur Powdyel's tribute to GNH represents a particular strand in the current discussions and in essence is a celebration of the concept, echoing Priesner's argument of embedded values. It is to the core of Mahayana Buddhist teaching that Diederik Prakke turns to as his source of inspiration for GNH. The first part of Prakke's article is a clear summary of Buddhist philosophy. The second is a personal exhortation to the individual to focus

more on the content of Bhuddist teaching, and not just the form; he sees 'modern' education within Bhutan as failing to give sufficient attention to the substance of Bhuddist philosophy.

The relation between Mahayana Bhuddism and GNH is turned to in a joint paper between Khempo Phuntsho Tashi, Diederik Prakke and Sammdu Chettri. They argue that Buddhist spiritual concepts can be clearly linked to general themes for the promotion of GNH and, perhaps somewhat awkwardly, that the use of a Logical Framework can help establish these linkages.

Guy Sharrock addresses just one of the four platforms – environmental preservation – that Lyonpo Jigme Thinley argued were part of the government approach towards GNH. Sharrock is a clear advocate for the application of economic planning concepts, and for attributing value to environmental resources to bring environment and resources into the domain of the market place in order to ensure appropriate conservation. It is in a sense the only paper of the collection to bring quantitative measurement into the debate about GNH but admittedly for only one component. But implicit assumptions made in this paper about markets being arenas of well informed, freely operating individuals with profit-maximising behavioural motivations ignores the reality of real markets which are basically about the interactions of actors, with differential interests and power (White, 1993).

The final paper of the collection by Dasho Meghraj Gurung explores the relationship between accountability in public institutions and Gross National Happiness. The paper initially presented at a seminar on Internal Control Systems argues that accountability is an indispensable criterion for good and effective governance and that the quest for happiness requires a minimum standard of accountability in public institutions.

In sum it is clear that the questions raised at the start of the workshop by Lyompo Jigme Thinley largely remain unanswered. The challenge lies ahead and perhaps it is appropriate at this juncture to draw attention to a debate, which was not addressed, either in the workshop or in this collection of papers that may have something to offer to the development of the concept of GNH.

The roots of this debate are to be found in the background to the construction of the Human Development Index, and the use by the HDI of Amartya Sen's 'capabilities approach' to social development, human well-being and quality of life. The UNDP's HDI is a somewhat simplified version of Sen, focussing on 'human development.. (as) .. a process of enlarging people's choices' (UNDP, 1990, p.10) and its evolution since then has probably not kept pace with Sen's developing theory. Indeed debate on the HDI has tended to emphasize the technical details of its construction (see Luchters and Mankoff, 1996).

Sen's theory has been developed as a critique of mainstream welfare economics and utilitarianism. It seeks to address how individuals actually behave, in contrast to the abstract and unrealistic neo-classical conception of individual profit-maximisers and perfect unfettered markets. The capability theory addresses people not just as commodities or human capital who through skill, knowledge and effort can increase production possibilities but also as people with lives that they value in which they have capacity to make choices.

In illustrating the fact that you can be relatively rich but still not have choice, Sen notes as an example, the contrast between the richer Indian northern states of the Punjab and Haryana, and the poorer ones of the south. In the former women have much higher fertility rates and lower female literacy rates; in the latter there is lower per capita income but higher female literacy rates, more female job opportunities and lower fertility rates (Sen, 1998, p.735)

Sen's capability approach is structured around a multilevel framework, based on endowments, the 'factors of production' controlled by an individual. Endowments determine exchange entitlements (what goods can be obtained) for an individual, subject to entitlement relations. The actual goods and services obtained by an individual and the characteristics of these goods (goods for consumption, skill acquisition or investment) provide an individual with capability. In turn an individual's capability allows him or her to actually do certain things and this 'doing and being' is what Sen calls 'functionings'. An individual's well-being will reflect his or her actual 'functionings'. This includes not only the preference fulfillment of neo-classical utilitarianism but also the achievement of satisfaction and happiness and other features of capability (positive freedom, skills and powers etc.). As Gasper (1997, p.231) notes ' by identification of basic functionings and capabilities (basic for survival and dignity).. (Sen).. moves towards a picture of human life and agency which could form a fitter basis for welfare economics', in contrast to its (welfare economics) currently conceived super-rational individual whoes 'life is a series of computed choices among myriad possibilities'.

However Sen work still falls within a fairly utilitarian conception of the individual where action is choice and goal centred. He is also fairly neutral about cultural specificity in relation to the definition and achievement of human capability. In contrast the work of Martha Nussbaum has taken a different path with respect to the analysis of capability and addressed a much fuller conception of human interests, culture and power that control individual action. She is critical of cultural relativism and argues that there are ways to establish cross-cultural values of human capability. The debate on human capability is very much in progress and as Gasper observes (*op.cit.* p293) there is a need for further work to develop more satisfactory pictures of 'culture' and the 'the individual'.

There is therefore a wider and active ongoing debate with which the discussion on GNH needs to engage both to inform itself conceptually and in order to enrich its methodological weaponry. The papers contained in this publication represent a start on a difficult but important intellectual journey.

References

- Gasper, D. (1997). Sen's Capability Approach and Nussbaum's Capabilities Ethic. *Journal of International Development*, **9**, No 2, 281-302
- Luchters, G and L. Menkhoff (1996) Human Development as Statistical Artifact. *World Development*, 24, No 8, 1385-1392
- Sen, A. (1998) Human Development and Financial Conservatism. *World Development*, **26**, No 4, 733-741.
- UNDP *Human Development Report* . New York: Oxford University Press, Various Years
- White, G (1993) Towards a Political Analysis of Markets. *IDS Bulletin*, **24**, No 3, 4-11.