

A unique destination requires a unique path: An innovative education policy for Gross National Happiness

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Conventional measures of development focus on economic growth (ie: Gross National Product). I believe the demand for material items, the increase in individualism, and many things from the West are detrimental to the people and culture of Bhutan. Bhutan hopes to implement a very different measure of development: Gross National Happiness (GNH). The GNH vision is an alternative measure of development. It focuses less on material wealth and more on spiritual health and the connections between people and the environment for long-term growth and well-being. I believe the best way to achieve GNH through its four pillars¹ is through education. My field of study is educational policy. My presentation will focus on how current, mainstream educational policies, often adopted from the west, may not be the best way for us to understand and reach GNH. Shifts in the current educational system need to be made in order for more people to understand and work toward GNH.

It is difficult to make changes in current educational policies since many of them are not yet fully articulated, nor are they known enough to the citizens of Bhutan. My presentation suggests a participatory method of policy making. Educational policies and practices need to be developed with the people. However, there are rarely quick fixes to systemic issues. Creating an education policy in Bhutan that is responsive and effective with the input of the general population will take a huge leap of faith. To gain popular support, politicians may have to decentralize some of their power and allow more local governance. These issues are easy to state but extremely difficult and sensitive to put on the table and put into practice. Overhauling educational policy in Bhutan will take many years. But we can start right away by developing specific projects that help people understand the concept of GNH. It is time that GNH goes beyond narrow intellectual discourses and becomes part of everyday public conversation.

I am confident that Bhutan can be a role model for the rest of the world. Our tiny country can make things happen, can spread the genuine practice of Gross National Happiness. The understanding and attainment of GNH will continue to be a work in progress. It is something we must always strive towards. To get there we have to be humble enough to absorb and reflect on all critiques as well as stubborn enough to see these as positive contributions that help us achieve our goal.

¹ Sustainable and equitable economic development,
Environmental preservation,
Cultural and social promotion, and
Good governance