



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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MUKHERJEE: It is the 30th of November, I am Rohan Mukherjee, and I am with Mr. Karma Tshiteem, the secretary of the Gross National Happiness Commission of the Kingdom of Bhutan. Sir could I ask you to start by providing a brief background of yourself and your work with the government of Bhutan so far?

TSHITEEM: *I have been working with the Royal Government of Bhutan since 1989, and most of my career I spent in the Ministry of Finance, and it is only very recently that I was transferred from the Ministry of Finance to work as the secretary in the Gross National Happiness Commission, which until February last year used to be called the Planning Commission.*

MUKHERJEE: What caused the change of name from the Planning Commission to the Gross National Happiness Commission?

TSHITEEM: *Well, Gross National Happiness has been both the philosophy and vision for the Bhutanese approach to development, and the change of the name was a testament to the will there is to make sure our development goes in line with this philosophy and vision. Basically, the motivation for that change was to in many ways ensure that we don't lose sight of what it is we are trying to achieve with development, that we are not just planning for anything, but we're planning for gross national happiness. I believe that was the main motivation.*

MUKHERJEE: Has that led to any change in the functions of the erstwhile Planning Commission, or is the work pretty much the same?

TSHITEEM: *Actually, it has not led to a lot of changes in the way we do. The main change I would see is, we have to start asking ourselves whether what we were doing was in line with this philosophy and vision of gross national happiness. Of course very quickly we found that we were not; what we were doing was more similar to what most governments do, which is focus on the social sectors, the economy, and the environment, and we were also doing that. Clearly, we knew that embedded in this concept of gross national happiness is that you take the benefits of modernization, but also you ensure you retain and you cultivate and nurture all the good things that generations of Bhutanese who have gone by have passed down to us.*

So then we begin a serious effort to see how we can ensure that what we're doing is consistent with GNH, that we have tools to ensure that policies we make are consistent with it, etc. So then we actually went down the railroad of basically looking at the concept and philosophy of GNH and breaking it down in ways that can be used as a concrete basis for policymaking, decision making in the Royal Government. So that is what we have actually—this name change has actually led us down this path. Since then, I would say, we have come a long way. Of course, we are still early days, I'm talking about last year February when we were renamed. It has just been over a year and a half, but we have done a lot in this time.

MUKHERJEE: And you were transferred to this body at the time that it was renamed?

TSHITEEM: *Prior to that. I was originally there for about ten months.*

MUKHERJEE: Before we talk about how exactly you operationalize the concept of GNH, could you talk a little bit about the history of the concept and its origins?

TSHITEEM: *Basically, as far as the origins are concerned, this was something authored by His Majesty the Fourth King [Jigme Singye Wangchuck], and basically from the*

first speech His Majesty the Fourth King made when he became a king, he spoke about the need to focus the well-being, the happiness of the people as being the ends of what development should achieve.

In terms of the actual usage of the term gross national happiness, I think it surfaced a little later in the '80s. But I think in terms of the message that development must focus on the well-being, the happiness of the people, this was there from the very first speech His Majesty the King made when he was enthroned.

MUKHERJEE: And what are the essential components of this idea?

TSHITEEM: *Well, for a long timem, of course, His Majesty the Fourth King was actually at the helm of affairs, running the government on a daily basis. So we could say that every act in running the Royal Government was imbued with this vision and philosophy, because the author was in many ways running the government. But since 1998, when he devolved absolute authority from the monarch to a group of ministers, at that time we also had formulated the Vision 2020 document, and at that time we articulated the gross national happiness philosophy further, in terms of the four pillars we talk about, which are basically Sustainable Socioeconomic Development, Preservation and Promotion of Culture and Traditions, Good Governance, and then Conservation of the Environment. These are the four pillars. This has guided, you could say, policymaking, decision making in Bhutan until now.*

If you see flourishing culture and tradition or the rich environment, I would say it is no accident. It is because the government pursued that. Every decision-maker had these four pillars in the back of their minds when they were making decisions. But it was not spelled out in a concrete framework. This is then the next set of work we set out to do after we were renamed the Gross National Happiness Commission.

MUKHERJEE: Could you talk a little bit about that process? How did you actually translate these concepts and philosophy into tangible outputs and outcomes for the Gross National Happiness Commission?

TSHITEEM: *This is very much a work in progress, but I can tell you that what we did is, firstly, the tenth five-year plan. We plan on a five-year cycle, and the tenth five-year plan we had this idea about, let's focus on results, on outcomes. So results-based management, as the objective from which we can draw further, then, for all the efforts of the government. We said, what would be the measure of that? We said it must be a set of indicators which approximates this concept we call gross national happiness.*

So this is something—if you read our plan document, it is there. Basically, this is the way we started: the thought process in terms of going from four pillars, which is still very broad, to be able to give—not able to give specific guidance, so we said no, we must break it down further and have those as almost like a personal guide development. That is then the next body of work we did, is through a nation-wide survey. What we did is, we were very clear among ourselves that, look, while it is the pursuit of gross national happiness, it does not mean actually trying to really focus on happiness as such, because that is too difficult to lend itself to a framework or policymaking. That must always been an individual responsibility.

But what we said is, we could do an exercise to really uncover all the conditions or determinants for people to lead these happy and hopefully fulfilling lives. So how did we do that? We commissioned our work to our Center for Bhutan Studies [CBS]. We carried out a nationwide survey, about maybe a thousand-plus respondents, and we asked something like 300 questions. I think each questioner took over a day to respond to. I think we paid—we gave some compensation to the respondents, because at that time we were just trying to bring on the table everything, because we wanted to get a good sense of what is really important to Bhutanese, what is it that Bhutanese want from development beyond the usual, the money, the jobs and all that.

So after CBS did this, then they mined the data and they studied, etc., and finally they came out with, under the four pillars, nine domains, which is then further broken down into—the domains, you could say, are clusters of like-like, but eventually 72 indicators. These 72 indicators, we feel, are a very good approximation of this vision and philosophy of gross national happiness in terms of aspirations people have from development. Many of these 72—in fact, most—are very subjective. This is one thing you always like to point out. We are not using these to displace all other indicators. All the conventional, objective indicators remain; you have UN human development index, MDGs and GDP, etc. But we use this as the other half. Most of the indicators measure things we can measure, but a lot of the subjective, the qualitative aspects are not measured, precisely because they don't lend themselves to measurement.

But our work is actually very much of filling up the spot of the missing indicator work. We feel, only when you have these two, you get a good sense of the real outcome of your effort. It is one thing to keep enhancing life expectancy as a goal and help, but another thing if you find that the people who are living now from 80 to 100 that the last twenty years they live in miserable condition—I mean it shows there's something not working. So by having both of these, we see the picture always as a whole. So this is where we're at.

MUKHERJEE: Broadly speaking, these nine clusters, do they fall in a variety of sectors, or are they concentrated more in the social, education—?

TSHITEEM: *Actually, they fall in all. In fact, I can tell you that they encompass firstly what is normally in every government's policymaking framework. In fact, my personal view is, this work we have done and through these nine domains—what we have been able to do is really bring our holistic development agenda. Why do I say that? The reason is, if you see the policymaking framework for government, as I mentioned, it always focuses on the economy, the social sector, health, education, and then the environment, and not very pleasing treatment thereto. Really this is it, and it makes decision based on that.*

Yet you ask these very individuals who their so-called—who they represent, supposed to represent. If you ask individuals, you will see that, yes, these four are very important, but then there is a whole list of other things which are equally important, if not even more: community vitality, cultural diversity, timely use, good governance itself, and what is the fifth? Psychological well-being, stress, etc.

So what you see is that there is actually a disconnect in the policymaking framework, and by our work we are actually now, in a sense, bridging the gap, because now our policymaking framework has the conventional things, but we have these other five dimensions. Now, in a sense, we have a much more rounded framework for policymaking which really takes into consideration what

individuals consider important on a daily basis in policymaking. So that way the framework is really holistic. I think that's the value it can bring.

MUKHERJEE: And these 72 indicators, how often do you measure them to measure your progress?

TSHITEEM: *We did that once, one survey, and we zoomed in on the 72 indicators. Each indicator has a number, and of course the same size is small. We had to go through all that just now. But the next one we are planning to do, we are looking—at least it has to be statistically significant and all that, so we are looking at much larger number. But it will be focused on the 72 indicators. The idea is every two years, to do this survey and make the results public. This work will be entrusted to the National Statistical Bureau, so that is an independent body which keeps these results.*

What we see is, it could be a very powerful democratic tool. Over and above any political manifesto, you'll have this set of indicators, and society sees how it is doing on community vitality and family relationship, and they can see whether the government is doing something to improve it or not, and they can question. They can say, look, family relationship index is so poor, you can see trust in people is a problem, especially in urban areas, what are you doing. That will be the challenge to us. And we'll have to get creative. We'll have to allocate resources to say, OK, maybe the best way to do that is—I don't know, introduce neighborhood watch in the police. On the other side, maybe create some new temples in urban centers, so they become a more social space where people get to know each other. This would be the way we would use it. It would lend itself to being used in various ways.

MUKHERJEE: And has there been any attempt to create a sort of composite score of these indicators, to see gross national happiness as one figure, as one index?

TSHITEEM: *If you look at the website as it stands just now which is called www.grossnationalhappiness.com, that is the CBS, Center for Bhutan Studies, is hosting—they have actually done that, made a composite. But we're in talk with them, and we want things kept at the 72 indicator level. The idea here is not to measure happiness; that's the type of message we don't want to send out. For us, what we see is, the composite number has no meaning. It really is the trend will get every two years when we do comparison over these numbers and across time. That is the importance, that it gives this important feedback, very rich feedback, in addition to all objective indicators on how we are really doing.*

We feel that the value is at that indicator level, and we are planning to leave it at that, at least from our perspective. Now whether, as an academic exercise, people will give weights and add it up and then say Bhutanese are happy or not, that's another story, but personally I'm not at all for that.

MUKHERJEE: Were there any surprises in the survey results that you saw, of the 72 indicators?

TSHITEEM: *Yes, I would say there were a couple of surprises, but many actually supported what we sort of intuitively knew. It is good that now we can move from intuition to at least have some evidence for our work. In terms of surprises, I do not expect there to be such a strong divide, for instance, on gender. At the moment, given the size of the sample, beyond gender, we feel it may not be statistically—I mean, we cannot draw conclusions we feel to govern. But if you look at the gender, there we saw quite a clear divide. Almost on every indicator, females fared a little worse. The only good thing is, the gap is not big, but they're always*

a little harsher, income is lower, whatever; it is a little harder. I think the only area where they fared good—and if you interpret that to be so—is in time use, because in time use we are looking at the division of time between work, leisure and rest, because that's important. We saw that women sleep longer than men. Both men and women sleep over eight hours, which is very good, but women seem to sleep longer. Maybe this shows some rural bias, because we certainly don't get to sleep that long—but that was one.

But the other one surprising thing I saw was on discrimination. I was surprised to see that there were quite a lot of respondents feeling that there is discrimination. So again now we need to—the only thing, it was left very broad, it didn't say discrimination based on this or that; it just said discrimination based on—, and it listed a whole series. So it doesn't give us helpful—it is not helpful from a zooming-in perspective, but it shows there's a problem. The next time, certainly, we will improve that part of the service to say we want that information to be a bit more specific. But that was quite surprising because both gender—and this we feel we are very, we are quite liberal. Gender certainly, policies are very gender-neutral, and from our perspective, at least compared to the examples around, women enjoy good status in our society for many reasons. In fact, in a large part of the country, matrilineal systems, etc., so that part we were a little surprised.

MUKHERJEE: Have you made any efforts based on the results of the survey and the indicators that you developed to now translate that into policy, to coordinate—have you made any efforts to coordinate with the various ministries?

TSHITEEM: *Yes, well, related to these indicators, the Center for Bhutan Studies has made us a number of tools. They call it policy screening tools, project selection tools. So these tools ask questions on each of these—we have created institutions within the ministry; we have what we call the GNH committees. Their job, whenever there is a policy, is to use that GNH policy screening tool and do some scoring based on that. A group of heterogeneous people, you know. And we also here in the commission, we do it ourselves also, for that same policy. So as our field-testing we did it on the National Human Resource Development policy. So we had the ministry do. And both on the GNH perspective, they passed in terms of: the score was above the threshold, and scoring was actually similar. But we still see that there is a lot of challenge in using the tools, and we need to refine the way we use tools, etc. But basically what it makes us do is, on every policy issue it makes us ask all these things which are important: impact on time, on stress, on family relations. It gets you to think, because others, like us, you normally just think market access, is it good. What does it do for the bottom line? So this is the value. So we've already started field-testing these tools.*

MUKHERJEE: And have you set up these GNH committees in every ministry?

TSHITEEM: Yes.

MUKHERJEE: Since when have they been active?

TSHITEEM: *Actually, the time when we were renamed the GNH Commission, at the same time we set up these committees, because we already we had this thought of how we want to do this, and we have what we call a policy formulation protocol. Any policy in the Royal Government, irrespective of its origin, must go through a set process. In that one is the scoring on the GNH policy selection tool. Also there are other mainstreaming things like gender, environment and all.*

MUKHERJEE: The impetus for renaming the Planning Commission and for setting up these committees, did that come from His Majesty or from—?

TSHITEEM: *Yes, from the cabinet; the order came from the cabinet, but basically reflecting His Majesty's desire to make sure that we really get on this road where we can really operationalize and be clearer about what will guide us so that we can achieve it faster. So yes, I think that really we received a lot of impetus.*

MUKHERJEE: Is there any sort of criticism along the lines of, the fact that there are 72 indicators to already add on to the standard set of indicators that every policymaking body has to take care of?

TSHITEEM: *I wouldn't say that there are criticisms on the indicators as such. I think that what we hear is probably what is there, is this misconception that people have that now we are trying to measure happiness. Once we actually get into the dialog and tell them what we're doing, of course, then people realize it is something else and actually quite useful; it provides additional feedback which did not exist, etc. So once people know that receptivity is very good. But when they don't know—a lot of the problem is perception—that seems to be that indicator work is now going to measure the happiness in Bhutan.*

MUKHERJEE: In terms of the workload of the individuals who are involved in policymaking, does this increase it significantly, the fact that they have to go through a policy action tool that measures all these various things?

TSHITEEM: *Just now, we have only field-tested it once so it is difficult to say, but I would imagine that once it is in place, it will take up some time but actually most people feel it is worth it, at least when we did the field testing, because every time people have had discussions on that—obviously GNH, or during the normal GTPC, I mean—at least these people realize that people feel comfortable that we're talking GNH, and now we're really doing this; we evaluate, we look at through this very important lens.*

MUKHERJEE: Going back to the four pillars of the GNH that you articulated earlier, have you ever come across, in operationalizing these four pillars, a tension between them? For example, in a lot of places we find economic development is not always conducive to the environment or to culture, and that they can be in all kinds of tensions between these four pillars.

TSHITEEM: *Yes. I can tell you that when we were field testing the GNH tool, the policy selection tool, one debate is whether Bhutan should join WTO [World Trade Organization] or not. So the commission, we were asked to give our views. As part of forming our views, I met with all my colleagues in the Secretariat, and I asked them. Then we had a discussion and we had a show of hands: should we join WTO or not. When we had the show of hands, the majority—and it was not a big majority, but still the majority—was for joining WTO. So we said, OK, this is what we feel. Now let us use our GNH policy selection tool.*

So the same group of people, we used that policy selection tool, and the result was failure. We did not pass that hurdle. When we used the GNH policy selection tools, unless we reduce some areas of concern, it basically said don't join WTO. Now what I got from that was exactly what you're asking, that maybe inherently there is some tension between a philosophy like this, which looks at things much more holistically, and something else which is purely focused on returns and all. In some sense, I guess, yes, it is quite obvious. I mean intuitively, also, you would imagine that there would be such a tension, but that exercise actually took

us through that and made us realize that. We were actually quite surprised ourselves that we feel one thing, but we really look at this thing through the GNH, and where we meet against things which are important to us, then it doesn't pass the test. So since then we have not moved; we are still there.

MUKHERJEE: OK, but Bhutan is still deliberating; the government is still deliberating.

TSHITEEM: *The government is delivering, but our Secretariat, we have not been able to come to a single view. That's the whole value of this tool, and like I always tell my colleagues, in the end we may make certain choices even if it does not pass the—even if the GNH policy screening tool tells us otherwise, because options may be limited. But you know now the tradeoff very clearly, and I think that's important, because sometimes you may say no, the tradeoff is not worth it.*

MUKHERJEE: On that point actually are there instances—obviously, you've only piloted this in one ministry, but are there instances where a policy that may contravene the concept or even the practicalities of GNH is still carried out because it is understood to be important from another perspective?

TSHITEEM: *I think that would be—would require, then, more iterations of consultation and addressing the problems of the policy because of which it is not being able to cross the GNH policy hurdle, the threshold for passing. That is the approach we are thinking of right now. It should not be, you just do that test once and leave it; you should go back. Firstly, it could reflect the bias of a group who are doing it, because it is very subjective. What is the likely impact of joining WTO on the family relationship; what do you think? We might have different pictures. So we need to record this and then evaluate. So I think the tool could use a lot of improving, but once it is improved, like I was saying, it makes a tradeoff known, and then it is up to the decision-makers. But now the accountability would be quite high, because people know the tradeoffs and what you're making. But we feel it will lead to better choices.*

MUKHERJEE: And have you made an effort to build up popular support for these indicators and educate the public about how to interpret?

TSHITEEM: *No, not at the moment, because as I said, going down this road until last February it is still quite—we have to be sure and reach a certain level of comfort and have robustness, etc., not being able to stand close scrutiny before going further with the public. But what we are confident in is the public GNH in terms of four pillars: that's very widely and well understood. This is basically just more concretization of this, so that way we feel confident that what we have there will be good support. But what we want to make sure is that it lends itself to good use for policymaking, etc., for really making good choices.*

MUKHERJEE: And what has been the international reception to both GNH as a concept and the new things that you have been doing operationally?

TSHITEEM: *Here, I can just say my personal view, and what I feel is that over the last four or five years, maybe it is really picking up. The genuine acknowledgement and appreciation that there is really a possible third approach in a realistic way. Because if you go back like ten years, I would say—and if you look any reference to gross national happiness for example in *The Economist*, it would always have a sort of like very, what you'd call treated in a not very serious way, almost like they're doing this kind of experiment. With some amount of cynicism, I would say. But now I can see that there has actually been quite a visible change; in fact, in one of the recent *Economists*, when there was an economic focus article on*

Sarkozy's Commission, etc., then in the last paragraph they mentioned Bhutan doing its work with indicators, and for the first time I felt that was without any of that cynicism, and it was saying that someone is doing this in—saying it in the right light. So that way, yes, I see now there is increasing appreciation, and especially after the Sarkozy Commission.

Of course there are NGOs, but I think it was good, NGOs like GPI Atlantic, like New Economics Foundation in UK, the Happy Planet Index people, etc. But there was really no one from the mainstream, so it was good to see someone like the French president suddenly really come out with it. Because otherwise, from a government, central government, I think we were the only ones really saying these things and trying to go down this path; the rest of the players are all think tanks or peripheral. But now it is good to see that there is more—some interest even among governments, and especially to see it in developed countries, leaders talking about this.

MUKHERJEE: All right, I think that pretty much covers everything. Do you have anything you want to add in conclusion?

TSHITEEM: *No, I can't think of anything.*

MUKHERJEE: All right, thank you very much.