

“Can We Increase Gross National Happiness?”

Peter Singer

The small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is known internationally for two things: high visa fees, which reduce the influx of tourists, and its policy of promoting “gross national happiness” instead of economic growth. The two are related: more tourists might boost the economy, but they would damage Bhutan’s environment and culture, and so reduce happiness in the long run.

When I first heard of Bhutan’s goal of maximizing its people’s happiness, I wondered if it really meant anything in practice, or was just another political slogan. Last month, when I was in the capital, Thimphu, to speak at a conference on “Economic Development and Happiness,” organized by Prime Minister Jigme Y. Thinley and co-hosted by Jeffrey Sachs, Director of The Earth Institute at Columbia University and Special Adviser to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, I learned that it is much more than a slogan.

Never before have I been at a conference that was taken so seriously by a national government. I had expected Thinley to open the conference with a formal welcome, and then return to his office. Instead, his address was a thoughtful review of the key issues involved in promoting happiness as a national policy. He then stayed at the conference for the entire two and a half days, and made pertinent contributions to our discussions. At most sessions, several cabinet ministers were also present.

Since ancient times, happiness has been universally seen as a good. Problems arise when we try to agree on a definition of happiness, and to measure it.

One important question is whether we see happiness as the surplus of pleasure over pain experienced over a lifetime, or as the degree to which we are satisfied with our lives. The former approach tries to add up the number of positive moments that people have, and then to subtract the negative ones. If the result is substantially positive, we regard the person’s life as happy; if negative, as unhappy. So, to measure happiness defined in that way, one would have to sample moments of people’s existence randomly, and try to find out whether they are experiencing positive or negative mental states.

A second approach asks people: “How satisfied are you with the way your life has gone so far?” If they say they are satisfied, or very satisfied, they are happy, rather than unhappy. But the question of which of these ways of understanding happiness best captures what we should promote raises fundamental questions of value.

On surveys that use the first approach, countries like Nigeria, Mexico, Brazil, and Puerto Rico do well, which suggests that the answer may have more to do with the national culture than with objective indicators like health, education, and standard of living. When

the second approach is taken, it tends to be the richer countries, like Denmark and Switzerland, that come out on top. But it is not clear whether people's answers to survey questions in different languages and in different cultures really mean the same thing.

We may agree that our goal ought to be promoting happiness, rather than income or gross domestic product, but, if we have no objective measure of happiness, does this make sense? John Maynard Keynes famously said: "I would rather be vaguely right than precisely wrong." He pointed out that when ideas first come into the world, they are likely to be woolly, and in need of more work to define them sharply. That may be the case with the idea of happiness as the goal of national policy.

Can we learn how to measure happiness? The Center for Bhutan Studies, set up by the Bhutanese government 12 years ago, is currently processing the results of interviews with more than 8,000 Bhutanese. The interviews recorded both subjective factors, such as how satisfied respondents are with their lives, and objective factors, like standard of living, health, and education, as well as participation in culture, community vitality, ecological health, and the balance between work and other activities. It remains to be seen whether such diverse factors correlate well with each other. Trying to reduce them to a single number will require some difficult value judgments.

Bhutan has a Gross National Happiness Commission, chaired by the prime minister, which screens all new policy proposals put forward by government ministries. If a policy is found to be contrary to the goal of promoting gross national happiness, it is sent back to the ministry for reconsideration. Without the Commission's approval, it cannot go ahead.

One controversial law that did go ahead recently – and that indicates how willing the government is to take tough measures that it believes will maximize overall happiness – is a ban on the sale of tobacco. Bhutanese may bring into the country small quantities of cigarettes or tobacco from India for their own consumption, but not for resale – and they must carry the import-tax receipt with them any time they smoke in public.

Last July, the UN General Assembly passed, without dissent, a Bhutanese-initiated resolution recognizing the pursuit of happiness as a fundamental human goal and noting that this goal is not reflected in GDP. The resolution invited member states to develop additional measures that better capture the goal of happiness. The General Assembly also welcomed an offer from Bhutan to convene a panel discussion on the theme of happiness and well-being during its 66th session, which opens this month.

These discussions are part of a growing international movement to re-orient government policies towards well-being and happiness. We should wish the effort well, and hope that ultimately the goal becomes global, rather than merely national, happiness.