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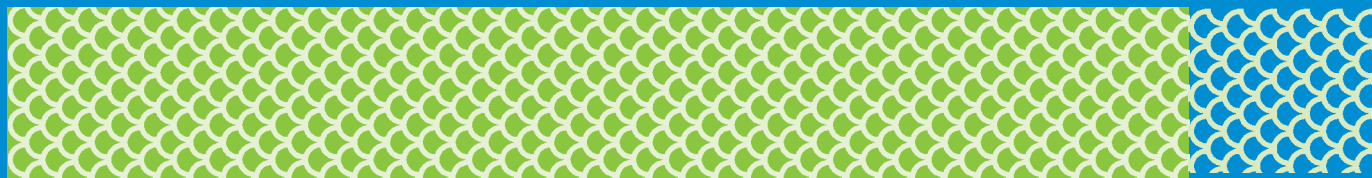


Gross National Happiness:
A Holistic Approach to Human
Progress and Happiness
in Bhutan

by
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The world as we know it today is no longer dominated exclusively by governments; peoples' lives are affected more by business, particularly large multinational companies. Governments have mainly assumed the responsibility of facilitator and regulator, and that too within the bounds of liberal international conventions and practices. Peoples' lives are therefore touched more by what and how business is conducted. The benefits and costs to society, which we are all familiar with, are primarily in terms of employment, working conditions, impact upon the environment, local infrastructure development, health and education, and generally the well-being of the people. All of us are aware of how business interests influence not only social and economic development but even political events.

Given that big business permeates almost all aspects of human life, there is a lot that needs to be done, voluntarily, by big business to contribute to society by helping communities, ensuring sustainability, and giving back to society for the profits enjoyed and long-term mutual benefits. The growing awareness of the need for Corporate Social Responsibility and efforts being made to promote it by organizations like the Business and Community Foundation in Delhi is

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* 11th Business and Community Foundation Annual Lecture delivered by H.E. Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba at the India International Centre on August 3, 2012.

very admirable and encouraging. Having the resources and the capacity, businesses are often better placed to support local communities in addressing specific social and environmental problems.

The massive transformation that the global economy has undergone in terms of GDP growth, technological advancement and globalization has been predominantly the result of growth of business in manufacturing, trade, finance and services. In other words, the growth of GDP is directly linked to the growth of business—the two go together and are interdependent. The global socio-economic scene has changed with greater prosperity, better infrastructure, stronger economic integration, and even greater peace and security than in previous decades and perhaps in the entire past.

Rapid development and socio-economic transformation have however brought with them serious new challenges of sustainability and security of our finite planet. We cannot continue to follow the same path, fully aware of the increasing stress on the planet, the inequity within and among nations, the wastage and over-consumption of scarce resources, pollution and the irreparable damage to the natural environment. We need to redirect the path of development and even question the very purpose of development—is it just wealth creation as an end in itself or is development a means to a greater and nobler end that all ultimately aspire for: that is, well-being, finally leading to HAPPINESS.

Equity

While acknowledging the great transformation, can we honestly say that the world today is a more equitable place? The answer I am afraid is that it is not fair enough. The disparity in income levels is unacceptable, both within a country and between rich and poor countries. Income disparity is even more stark in developing countries where the top 2 per cent control over 80 per cent of the wealth, whereas the bottom 20 per cent own less than 2 per cent of the national wealth.

The divide between the rich and the poor countries is even more glaring. I will not go into all the highly disturbing statistics of income and consumption differences between the rich and the poorer countries, but only mention that the richest 20 per cent consume over 86 per cent of the world's goods while the bottom 20 per cent less than 1.5 per cent, reflecting extreme inequity and poverty. It is also

necessary to remember that the rich 20 per cent use over 60 per cent of the energy and produce 63 per cent of the green house gases, whereas the poorest 20 per cent produce only 2 per cent and yet bear the brunt of climate change and its negative consequences.

In a globalized and unfortunately unequal world, the rich nations have become richer, often at the cost of the poor who provide cheap labour (including at times child labour) and cheap raw material, pay a high cost of capital, and suffer the consequences of pollution and depletion of natural resources. Just as big business has corporate social responsibility, so also do rich countries have a moral responsibility to significantly increase ODA, to eradicate poverty, and ensure peace, harmony and security in our world—for all of us. Unfortunately the rich countries are not ploughing back enough to humanity, just as most companies too are not.

Sustainability

The world is not fair and it is even worse when it comes to sustainability. The current pace and pattern of development in the pursuit of unbridled growth is actually killing our planet. The rate of consumption and extraction of natural resources is almost 40 per cent more than the ability of nature to regenerate itself. Oil and minerals consumed will never be regenerated and will be lost forever. The very earth on which we live is being virtually gobbled up at a frightening pace, leaving little or nothing for future generations.

The greatest threat to sustainability and survival of our world and all of us, people and animals, is pollution and the emission of green house gases which are warming our world and transforming the very behaviour of nature. Nature is no longer able to bear the stress caused by irresponsible human actions, and the pains and scars are manifested in climate change, natural calamities, and a generally risk-driven and unpredictable life for all the inhabitants of the earth. Climate change has not only made the weather pattern erratic, but has definitely led to the general trend of reducing rainfall and the subsequent drying up of springs, streams and rivers.

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It is now an established fact that the mighty Himalayan mountains receive less rain and snow, leading up to an all-round drying up process which I hope will not culminate in desertification of one of the most important water towers of the world; over a billion people in Asia would be at risk as most of the mighty rivers that sustain South and much of East Asia have their sources in the Himalayas. The highest point on our planet, Mount Everest, is no longer the stark white mountain seen in postcards, increasingly the dark rocks beneath the snow are being exposed. It has been projected that by the year 2035, all the glaciers of the mighty Himalayas would have melted, emptying the water tower in the long run while in the short term increasing the risk of Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF).

Even my country, Bhutan, where the conservation of the environment is exemplary and nature almost intact in its primeval form, has not been spared by climate change. Rainfall and snow have reduced and as a result a lot of the sources of water are rapidly drying up. In a land once abundant in water, I now see water as a costly long-term problem. Bhutan has contributed more than its share to the global effort to conserve nature but is suffering for the mistakes of others. The ugly haze over much of Bhutan in winter comes from outside the border. Global warming affects us all, the guilty as well as the innocent, and no country in the world is spared.

While global warming and its consequences is now no longer denied outright, the effort to halt it, if not reverse it, is far from adequate. The inability of the polluters, mostly the rich countries, and the victims, mostly the poorer countries, to wake up to the reality and accept that we are all in the same sinking boat is both sad and ridiculous. Some of the rich countries, pressured by big business, are reluctant to accept carbon emission limits in order to continue the so-called good life, while some of the developing countries feel that on a per capita basis they should, to be fair, be allowed to emit more carbon gas in the pursuit of growth and poverty reduction. The bottom line is that it does not matter who emits this poison which is killing us all—the emitter as well as the innocent victims are both affected equally.

The emission standards must be enforced and countries must accept carbon reduction targets if we are to ensure a future for our planet. While concessions

may be justified for developing countries in terms of their need to grow, it must be clearly accepted by all that growth without sustainability is not worthwhile and may in the long run even be harmful—what is the point of digging your own grave? Unfortunately one is not just digging one's own grave but taking everyone else to it. Businesses, driven by profit motives, tend to be myopic, but countries must always keep the long-term future in mind.

The most sensible thing to do is to repair the boat, regardless from which side the leak is, because we are all in the same sinking boat. The richer countries must increase ODA to uplift those which need help and the poor must not sacrifice the future for the present. We may all go down playing the futile blame game which is already delaying the most urgently needed consensus to ensure the sustainability of our planet. The key to sustainability is not just information sharing and technology transfer, as suggested time and again, but significant increase in ODA to enable poorer countries to meet urgent developmental needs.

Security

In a world that is unequal and unsustainable, security is of utmost concern—there is no doubt about this; without it lies the certain destruction of humanity and all beings on this earth. Security is inextricably tied to equity and sustainability. Sustainability is a necessary condition for equity as it ensures lasting development that benefits society. Equity on the other hand impacts sustainability as the poor and vulnerable often overlook concerns of sustainability in their struggle for survival. Even governments may be compelled to compromise the longer term for immediate problems—this is already happening. In a world of depleting resources and cut-throat competition, security, even from the point of view of conflicts and wars, will always remain a growing threat.

It must also be remembered that inequity and poverty are the greatest risk to peace and harmony. Hence, the transfer of technology and capital from the rich to poor countries is a necessity to ensure sustainability, security and fairness in our world. Trade and investment, often touted as the engines of growth by those who do not want to increase aid, become meaningful only after a country has crossed a certain threshold of development and is able to compete in the global market. Likewise corporate social responsibility will enhance the security of businesses and the world.

Gross National Happiness (GNH)

In a world that is unfair, unsustainable, unsafe and not clear about what progress is or where it is headed, there is an urgent need for a new development paradigm. The old way of considering human development or societal progress mainly through GDP growth and income levels does not reflect the true condition of our world. In the pursuit of growth, via the GDP-led model, the world has witnessed damages to the environment, inequity in income distribution, loss of tradition and culture, loss of mental peace, and the general inability to attain contentment and happiness which is the ultimate desire of human beings. Growth of GDP does not address issues of ethics, equity, or even environmental costs. Exploitation, pollution emission and deforestation through logging would increase income levels or GDP, but is it correct to consider such growth as progress? It is now widely accepted that more money does not necessarily lead to greater happiness. In fact, many wealthy people no

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longer have time to enjoy what they have earned, become extremely stressed, alienated from other people, sometimes even lonely in the midst of many.

The people of Bhutan believe that, in the Gross National Happiness paradigm introduced in the 1970s by the fourth King, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, there is a holistic approach to societal progress that addresses all the shortcomings of the GDP-led growth model. The King, while still a very young man, coined the term Gross National Happiness (GNH) and said that it was more important than GDP and that it was the responsibility of the state to embark upon a development programme that has a direct bearing upon the well-being and happiness of the common people.

In a dynamic world, GNH, while still evolving, is a more holistic and balanced development paradigm that recognizes the importance of physical as well as psychological well-being. It defines happiness as the ultimate goal of life and entrusts the state with the responsibility of creating the basic conditions that are necessary within which happiness can be pursued. These conditions, known as the four pillars of GNH, are:

- Equitable socio-economic development

- Conservation of the environment
- Preservation of cultural tradition
- Good governance

While happiness is a subjective emotion and differs from person to person (and hence it is not possible to enforce uniformly), the state has the responsibility to ensure the conditions that promote or enable individuals to pursue happiness. Even the American constitution recognizes this right to pursue happiness. In fact the most important human institution of all, the religions of the world, all promote lasting happiness as the ultimate goal. I am quite confident that all of us would like to be happy. The desire to be happy is universal and timeless—it is natural and innate to all beings. Corporate social responsibility is basically the attempt to enhance the happiness of employees and the local communities—it is GNH at practice in business.

First Pillar: Equitable Social and Economic Development

While it has been said that GNH is more important than GDP, it must be clearly understood that GDP is also necessary. There can be no GNH if people are poor, uneducated, unhealthy and do not enjoy the basic amenities of life. Living standards must be such that the quality of life is adequate to enable people to pursue happiness. Therefore economic growth and material prosperity, or GDP, is a necessary condition for happiness, contrary to misconceptions that money does not matter; it matters a lot as we all know. However, material prosperity is a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition for happiness. The GNH model promotes the middle path, avoiding extremes and ensuring balance.

It is common knowledge that more wealth does not lead to greater happiness beyond a certain threshold level, and that human beings need spiritual and psychological well-being as well. Growth must be equitable so that the greatest number benefit from development and poverty is eradicated. There can be no GNH if a large number of people have to struggle for survival. Poverty in its multi-dimensional aspect is regarded as the greatest obstacle to justice, harmony and the pursuit of happiness.

The objective of planning in Bhutan is provision of the basic amenities of life such as access to education, health, safe drinking water and sanitation, telecommunications/ internet, electricity and roads. Hydroelectricity and tourism are the key industries

being promoted to create employment and to generate revenue for the state. The government is also trying to promote Bhutan as an international hub for education, health and IT services—basically green industries. It has been quite successful in ensuring enrollment in primary school to about 99 per cent, access to primary health at over 95 per cent, almost 100 per cent telephone coverage, over 80 per cent coverage for electricity, over 95 per cent access to clean drinking water, and most population centres are accessible by motorable roads. With progress in implementation it is expected that within the next two years, most of the basic amenities will be available to all Bhutanese people, even those living in remote and currently inaccessible areas. Education and health services are provided free of cost and most others are subsidized to keep them affordable.

The economic growth rate has been in excess of 7 per cent per annum for a long time and is presently over 9 per cent. The per capita income has reached US \$2,000 which, although low, is a very significant growth in recent years. The private sector is growing stronger and becoming the engine of growth.

As a result of good forest cover, notwithstanding reduced rainfall, Bhutan is blessed with abundant perennial rivers which have given the country a hydropower potential of over 30,000 MW of which 10,000 MW will be harnessed by the year 2020 for export and domestic use. This green power will generate huge revenue and create employment opportunities, besides offsetting carbon emission in Bhutan and India and benefit the world at large. All the hydropower projects are of the type known as run-of-river schemes and do not involve flooding of large areas or displacement of large numbers of people—they are environmentally friendly and in fact depend on the forest cover for water stability.

While Bhutan has no abject poverty, the number of those below the poverty line is now about 15 per cent but is expected to become insignificant in another five years. The disparity in income levels, while increasing with development, is still among the lowest in the region. The government's strategy for poverty reduction is to ensure implementation of a common minimum programme that is vital to enhance human well-being in terms of education and health for all, availability of clean drinking water, telephone connectivity, sanitation, electricity, road connectivity and productive employment.

Second Pillar: Conservation of the Environment

Bhutan fortunately recognized the interdependence of man and nature long before most countries and has initiated timely laws and regulations to protect the environment, particularly the forests. The Constitution of the country requires that a minimum of 60 per cent of the land area be retained under forest cover at all time. The forest cover as a result of sound policies has actually increased in recent times and is presently about 80 per cent of the country. Much of the country, about 50 per cent of the land area, is under national parks and hence a safe haven for the flora and fauna. Indeed one of the common complaints of the farmers is the increasing damage to crops by wildlife as the result of growing animal habitats near villages.

Bhutan is recognized as a global bio-diversity 'hotspot' and the flora and fauna are still in pristine form. We have animals and plants of the subtropics to the arctic, given the range of climatic zones depending on the altitude. I am sure many have heard about the tiger habitat at an altitude of over 4,000 metres in Bhutan as recorded and broadcast by the BBC last year. Even elephants have been spotted at altitudes of over 2,500 metres on top of rather steep hills. On a very recent visit I made to the south of the country, I was amazed to learn that elephants quite freely pass by houses or use footpaths close to villages. These occurrences are happily the result of Bhutan's pristine environment and, sadly the loss of natural habitat elsewhere.

The pristine forest cover in Bhutan has minimized risk of erosion and hence destructive flooding in the lower riparian countries of India and Bangladesh. On the other hand, pollution in the neighbouring and other countries have subjected Bhutan to unseasonal haze and climate change in spite of the near pristine environment in Bhutan.

Bhutan, while still a poor developing country, will not enter the blame game but continue to play a responsible role in the fight to conserve the natural environment. All projects must conform to strict environmental standards, even though this increases costs and time requirements. Bhutan is committed to remaining carbon neutral and contributing to the long-term sustainability of nature anywhere in the world. We are also promoting organic agriculture to ensure

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healthier food and a greener environment. The short-term losses of economic opportunities are sacrifices worth making for more sustainable, longer-term gains. Bhutan will happily continue to contribute to the global effort to contain climate change and plug our side of the leak in the sinking global boat, irrespective of what others do.

Most of the damages to the environment are actually caused by irresponsible business practices in construction, industry, mining, transportation etc.; all the more reason for corporate social responsibility in reducing pollution and conserving the environment.

Third Pillar: Preservation of Culture and Tradition

Human well-being and happiness requires not just material comfort but spiritual and psychological fulfilment. We believe that the culture of a people is essential to promote values, psychological well-being and harmony in society. In the case of a

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small country like Bhutan, culture is also the most visible mark of our national identity. Without culture and values, human beings cannot realize their full potential and life would be sterile and mechanical. Values are the basis for social ethics, harmony and coexistence and a sense of contentment without which human greed will not be quenched and well-being will not lead to happiness.

The preservation of culture both tangible as well as intangible are accorded high priority in the policies of the government. Hence we promote traditional ethics and mannerism (*driglam namzha*), dance and music, customary festivals, local foods, traditional clothing and the unique architectural style of construction. All buildings in Bhutan must incorporate this in the facade even if the interior needs to be more modern. Bhutan is possibly the only country where traditional dress is worn in public offices and generally by most people at all times.

Culture gives inner meaning to life: family values, community spirit, ethical living, contentment, love and care, tolerance and harmony in society, and refinement and enrichment of life. It leads to an

appreciation of the higher and finer things of life beyond the mundane and the material, to the spiritual and psychological fulfilment that is necessary for genuine happiness. Bhutan has a liberal and tolerant culture and hence our society is less bound by social prejudices and is probably one of the most egalitarian and liberal in Asia. Support to cultural activities is an important area that needs consideration under CSR.

Fourth Pillar: Good Governance

The key to the success of the country and the achievement of the lofty ideals of ensuring the well-being and happiness of the people lies in having an effective, caring and just government. A great amount of effort was spent in strengthening the civil service and the judiciary. Administrative and legislative reforms were introduced to improve governance at all levels and Bhutan was able to develop a fairly good cadre of civil servants which enabled the country to develop rapidly and improve the well-being of the common people. The donor community recognized and appreciated Bhutan's good governance long before the introduction of democracy, even when the King's power was absolute.

The government became not only effective but the least corrupt in the region. Basic development was widespread and reached all corners of the country. Access to justice was easy and not fraught with hurdles and high cost as in many countries. The separation of the judiciary and the executive has been assured by the Constitution. We also have various oversight constitutional bodies like the Royal Audit Authority and the Anti Corruption Commission to monitor good governance. The government officials and even the King himself remains easily accessible to the people, which, in some ways, may have been the main reason for keeping corruption under control.

The foundation of good governance, as we all know, must be democracy. His Majesty the King, the champion of good governance, in an unprecedented move, announced the introduction of democracy and set up a representative task force to draft a Constitution. The people were shocked and appealed to the King to reconsider or at least postpone the introduction of democracy as they were all happy with his benevolent rule. His

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Majesty, however, remained adamant and said that the introduction of democracy was the fulfilment of one of his most important objectives.

Hence democracy in Bhutan came by way of the will of an absolute monarch and not by the will of the people. This is the ultimate gesture that gives genuine meaning to good governance—a government of the people, for the people and by the people. Now the task of ensuring good governance rests with the people through the electoral process and laws and institutions. With this visionary and extraordinary gesture, the King sacrificed his own powers to the people, and gave true meaning to good governance and hence GNH. In business too, ethical and inclusive management practices for the benefit of employees and the community is necessary.

Measuring Happiness—GNH Index

One of the questions often asked is whether or not GNH can be measured. Initially it was thought that GNH was a lofty ideal which was worth pursuing even if not easily measurable. Over the years, given international interest in the subject, and the subsequent discussions and debates, we decided to develop a GNH index. The task was made easier as various attempts were being made, elsewhere in the world, to measure human well-being by organizations and even states. Expert advice was sought and relevant ideas or terms were incorporated from studies carried out by academia or research institutes.

The GNH index also incorporated relevant aspects from the UN Human Development Index, the European Social Survey and various other sources. The objective was to measure the level of happiness based on the attainments in the various components of the four pillars of GNH. As Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz said: 'what we measure affects what we do, so it was important to measure happiness if it is to be taken seriously.' Likewise, Jeffrey Sachs in the *World Happiness Report* says that 'Happiness can be measured', and that, 'The Gross National Happiness Index is the first of its kind in the world, a serious objective by a growing number of countries, organizations and intellectuals the world over.'

Bhutan's plans and policies must fulfil the GNH criteria drawn up over time by the Gross National Happiness Commission which is the national planning body for the formulation of the country's plans. The entire plan is structured on the basis of the four pillars of GNH and monitored accordingly.

Having followed the path of GNH one may wonder whether the development of Bhutan has been equitable and sustainable; are the people of Bhutan happy?

We the people of Bhutan believe that we are amongst the happiest people in the world as the state has created most of the conditions that are necessary for the pursuit of happiness. Most Bhutanese feel highly satisfied with the nation's status in terms of peace and safety, the environment, opportunities, free service facilities in health and education, family values, community vitality, flourishing spiritual institutions, and a very caring and responsive government. *The World Happiness Report* however assigns Bhutan only the 38th position on account of the relatively low level of income and educational attainment which is inevitable given our late start in development.

Bhutan is however not Shangri-La, but just a small developing country that is still highly dependent on foreign aid, and struggling very hard with the provision of basic services to the people to reduce poverty and catch up with the rest of the world in a highly unequal and competitive global environment. We are, however, ever more convinced that we have found the right path to development, a path that is sustainable, equitable, people-centric and holistic. GNH has, indeed, served Bhutan very well.

Global Interest in GNH

It is clear that the world needs a more holistic development paradigm to redirect development on the correct path to equity, sustainability and security on a finite planet; GNH offers one such approach.

In recent years the idea of happiness as a goal of development has gained worldwide attraction and several conferences were held in Bhutan as well as in other countries like the USA, Japan, Canada, Brazil, India, Spain and Korea. The Prime Minister of Bhutan has spoken on the subject in various international fora. With each meeting new ideas emerged and various organizations as well as individuals have contributed to giving GNH an international flavour.

The greatest moment for the GNH paradigm was the UN resolution, 'Happiness: Towards a Holistic Development', that was adapted on 19 July 2011 and sponsored

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by Bhutan and 68 other countries—a virtual consensus! This resolution has given GNH global recognition and support as a more relevant development paradigm. The recent conference on 2 April 2012 in New York on 'Well-being and Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm', another conference sponsored by Bhutan with the support of the UN, was an overwhelming success with over 1,000 participants and attended by a large array of distinguished intellectuals, government representatives, civil society representatives and concerned citizens of the world. Even more recently the UN declared 20th March of every year as World Happiness Day—this is indeed a matter of great pride for Bhutan and a great achievement for all humanity to finally accept Happiness as the ultimate goal of all.

The President of Costa Rica, the greenest and one of the happiest nations on earth, Madam Laura Chinchilla in her keynote speech said that there were many paths to happiness, 'But the more global initiative, unanimously embraced by the United Nations, is the one launched by Bhutan...' The Secretary General of the UN, appreciating Bhutan's development philosophy, said that 'sustainable development is intricately linked to happiness and well-being', and underlined that the UN Sustainable Development Conference, also known as Rio+20, in Brazil in June will need to provide an outcome that reflects this. While all the ills of the world were not adequately addressed by Rio+20, valuable understandings were reached to find ways to improve the sustainability of our world.

We are hopeful that a global consensus will soon emerge to enhance sustainability and happiness in the world by adopting a holistic measure of progress that takes into account social, environmental, economic and human aspects of development and progress. Bhutan's GNH index has a lot to offer in the global search for an alternative development paradigm.

Conclusion

Gross National Happiness has been inspired and in turn been influenced by the global dialogue on the need to adopt a holistic development paradigm. It is, by whatever name or form it may be known outside Bhutan, becoming international in

character and 'Bhutan is privileged to have contributed in some small measure, to this urgent effort to save our world.'

While GNH may sound utopian, complicated and unachievable, it is in fact very basic and not at all complicated; it is simply, 'Development with Human Value', as the King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Gesar Namgyal Wangchuck, put it.

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May I take this opportunity to thank Mr. Simon Scarff and the Community Development Foundation of Delhi for kindly inviting me here and for the interest in Bhutan's development philosophy of GNH. It was indeed a great privilege for me to have had the opportunity to share my country's development paradigm with such a distinguished audience. It is the support of people like you which will make the difference in ensuring equity, sustainability and happiness on our planet.

H.E. Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba is the Minister for Works and Human Settlement in Bhutan. Among the various positions he has held in the Government are those of Prime Minister and Minister for Trade & Industry, Finance Minister and Head of Government & Finance Minister. He has won the Druk Thuksey award, and the Coronation Medal for meritorious public service.



The India International Centre was founded with a vision for India, and its place in the world: to initiate dialogue in a new climate of amity, understanding and the sharing of human values. It is a non-government institution, designed, in the words of its founder president, Dr. C.D. Deshmukh, to be a place where various currents of intellectual, political and economic thought could meet freely. 'In its objectives, the Centre declares its purpose as being that of society to 'promote understanding and amity between the different communities of the world by undertaking or supporting the study of their past and present cultures, by disseminating or exchanging knowledge thereof, and by providing such other facilities as would lead to their universal appreciation.'

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