

Gross National Happiness and the Right to Information

Shekhar Singh

Essentially, Gross National Happiness (GNH) comprises nine elements¹: Psychological Well-being; Time Use; Community Vitality; Culture; Health; Education; Environmental Diversity; Living Standard; Governance. This represents a unique and innovative way by which the Royal Government of Bhutan has sought to define and measure human and social wellbeing.

The transparency movement, culminating in the establishment of the right to information as a fundamental human right, is another new and innovative movement sweeping the world today. Interestingly, each one of the elements of the GNH index can be seen to be enhanced through the access of the right to information, and in the absence of such a right each one of these could well remain only partially fulfilled. The role that the right to information could play in each of the nine elements of the GNH is described below.

Psychological Well-being

The right to information is essential to instill a sense of empowerment among the people.

As they perceive themselves to be empowered in relation to their government, and in relation to other institutions that impact their lives, their belief and confidence in themselves and in the system increases. This is clearly an essential element of psychological well-being.

On the other hand, opacity in governance leads to suspicion amongst the populace, which fuels feelings of helplessness, anger and frustration, all of which negatively impact the psychological well being of a person.

Transparency legislations across the world have also been very effective instruments for redress of public grievances. In fact, studies have shown that often the very act of filing an application for information is enough to solve the problem that prompted the filing of the

application in the first place. As psychological wellbeing implies the lack of grievances in the minds of the people, such an act is essential for achieving the proposed levels of wellbeing.

¹ As described in the website of The Centre for Bhutan Studies:
http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/gnhIndex/introductionGNH.aspx#_ftnref1

The domain of psychological well-being as an end includes satisfaction with all elements of life, life enjoyment, and subjective well-being. As collective happiness is the main goal in a GNH society, psychological well-being is of primary importance in gauging the success of the state in providing appropriate policies and services. Among component indicators of the psychological well-being domain, general psychological distress rate, prevalence rates of both negative emotions (jealousy, frustration, selfishness) and positive emotions (generosity, compassion, calmness), spiritual activities like meditation and prayers, and consideration of karmic effects in daily life were calculated.

The psychological well-being index covered three areas: General psychological distress indicators, Emotional balance indicators, and Spirituality indicators.

Psychological well being has been described as being “of primary importance in gauging the success of the state in providing appropriate policies and services”. The Royal Bhutanese Government has rightly determined psychological wellbeing to be a critical indicator to the appropriateness of government policies and services. In many countries across the world, one of the most effective ways of assessing whether citizens are happy with the schemes and services being provided by the government is an analysis of the access to information requests being received by the government. Governments have been using applications for information as indicators to assess what problems the people are having, which areas of governance need improvement, which services are harder to access – in short, transparency legislation is a window into the actual grievances the people face, affording the government an excellent opportunity to address their problems.

Time Use

Transparency legislations compel government departments to proactively disclose information that is essential for the citizen. It also requires them to effectively make

public new schemes and policies specifying the rights and opportunities that the people enjoy. If information about the documents required to apply for a passport, for example, were widely available it would entail fewer trips to a passport office to ask questions, and cut down on the number of times people would have to be sent away because they didn't have the correct documentation in place.

The domain of time use is one of the most effective windows on quality of life, as it analyzes the nature of time spent within a 24-hour period, as well as activities that occupy longer periods of time. An important function of tracking time use is to acknowledge the value of non-work time for happiness. The time available for non-work activities such as sleeping, personal care, community participation, education and learning, religious activities, social and cultural activities, sports and leisure and travel can directly indicate diversity of activities that add to rich life and contribute to levels of happiness. Measurement of time, devoted unpaid work activities like care of children and sick members of household, and maintenance of household, can provide a proxy measure of contribution made by unpaid activities to welfare though the value of such activities are completely underestimated in national accounts. In the GNH index, time use component was divided into benchmark indicators of sleeping hours and of total working hours.

It would cut down the time taken to access government information and services, and lessen the wait for government to respond or take action. Experiences elsewhere show that the implementation of transparency legislation resulted in fewer and shorter delays and reduced transactional time. Every citizen has to interact directly with the government at some point. However, the number of hours that the average citizen spends in interacting with government departments, essentially adding up to time wasted, could be dramatically reduced by the effective implementation of a transparency legislation.

Community Vitality

Experiences with transparency legislation show that many requests for information dealt with issues that affected not just the individual applicant, but entire communities. When battling powerful vested interests, communities tend to unite, releasing and channeling

the community's vitality into a fight for a common good. Once mobilized, such communities develop strong bonds of trust, and transparency becomes a part of life.

The domain of community vitality focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of relationships and interactions within communities. It examines the nature of trust, belongingness, vitality of caring relationships, safety in home and community, and giving and volunteering. These indicators can track changes in adverse affects on community vitality. The community vitality indicators consist of:

Family vitality indicator, Safety indicator, Reciprocity indicator, Trust indicator, Social support indicator, Socialization indicator, and Kinship density indicator.

A community where transparency is the norm is a much more secure and stable one. Neighbors and family members can be sure that they are not cheated by each other, community resources are openly distributed or allocated, and work is evenly allotted. It also helps foster understanding within a community. Clarity about the criteria for eligibility for government schemes would lessen tensions within different groups, where one group may have felt that another was being unfairly favoured by the government.

A community that is so empowered also becomes capable of ensuring its own wellbeing. Its resources are less likely to be exploited by wealthy members and it is less vulnerable to institutional corruption. Once a community knows what is its due, and know how to get

what is due, it will not allow itself to be oppressed.

Culture

The best custodians of culture and cultural traditions are communities themselves, and transparency legislation allows them to be directly involved in its protection, and ultimately propagates cultural traditions and strengthens cultural identity.

Maintenance of cultural traditions has been one of Bhutan's primary policy goals, as traditions and cultural diversity contributes to identity, values, and creativity. The domain of culture focuses on the diversity and strength of cultural traditions.

The domain takes into account the nature and number of cultural facilities, language use patterns and diversity, and participation in community festivals and traditional recreations. The indicators estimate core values, and perceptions of changes in values and traditions.

The indicators of cultural diversity and resilience consist of: Dialect use indicator, Traditional sports indicator, Community festival indicator, Artisan skill indicator, Value transmission indicator, and Basic

Experiences also attest to another interesting cultural development in relation to transparency legislation. The most powerful laws are those that are endorsed by the people, and right to information laws have become the war cry for a large number of people's groups. These groups work hard to spread awareness about the law, often in very innovative ways. Many of these groups have found that the best way to spread the message of transparency is through traditional cultural mediums like theatre, dance and music. Some traditional performance art forms that were fading out have received a huge boost from their new and renewed use as a means of propagating awareness about the right to information.

Health

The right to information has many uses within the health sector, starting with something as straightforward as mandatory proactive dissemination of crucial health and safety information. This simple step can be a key to saving lives and helping raise awareness about health and hygiene issues.

The health indicators assess the health status of the population, the determinants of health and the health system. Health status indicators show information on self-rated health, disabilities, body mass index, and number of healthy days per month. Health indicators also cover the prevalence of knowledge about HIV transmission and breast feeding practices. Lastly, barrier to health services are assessed in terms of walking distance to the nearest health facility, which includes both western and indigenous systems. Thus the health index consists of: Health status indicator, Health knowledge indicator, and Barrier to health indicator.

Transparency legislation is most powerful when the needs of the people and the government coincide, and they can work together. In this case, transparency legislation can be used to monitor pollution and other health hazards that are a byproduct of industry. If the rules and limitations that the industry is to follow are made widely available, then the public can help with the monitoring, making it incredibly difficult for companies to cut corners. The same applies to food adulteration and state sponsored medical care and hospitals.

Education

This is another example of an area where the people and the government can work together, and make transparency legislation twice as powerful. Education is the fastest growing demand amongst most sections of society, but most especially amongst the weaker sections, and it is largely up to the government to make sure that its citizens have access to a reasonable standard of education. The right to information can be used to ensure that information about education schemes are widely disseminated and are well implemented, and also spread awareness about the process of governance, and about democracy and the rights, privileges and duties this system entails.

Education contributes to the knowledge, values, creativity, skills, and civic sensibility of citizens. A domain such as education is not intended merely to measure the success of education in and of itself, but rather to assess the effectiveness of education in working towards the goal of collective well-being. The domain of education looks at a number of factors: participation, skills, among others. However, in the education index, a limited number of variables could be included. The education index consists of: Education attainment indicator, Dzongkha language indicator, and Folk and historical literacy indicator.

Transparency will also foster the spirit of education, a thirst for knowledge and inquiry, and a growth and dissemination of knowledge.

Environmental Diversity

In many parts of the world, including much of Europe and in India, the first public demand for transparency came from the environmental movements. The area of environmental conservation continues to be one of those areas where the right to information is most extensively used.

By examining the state of Bhutan's natural resources, the pressures on ecosystems, and different management responses, the domain of ecological diversity and resilience is intended to describe the impact of domestic supply and demand on Bhutan's ecosystems. However, since most of the objective measurements of ecological diversity and resilience are surveyed by other agencies, GNH survey gathered information on perceptual data on ecology. The ecological diversity and resilience indicators consist of: Ecological degradation indicator, Ecological knowledge indicator, and Afforestation indicator.

Given the convergence of interests of the government and the local communities for the protection of the environment, this is another area where the government and the people can effectively work together. Bhutan is a small nation, with huge areas under forests and other natural ecosystems. It also has a strong culture of environmental sensitivity, with its people caring deeply about the natural riches of their country. Transparency legislation would facilitate the dissemination of information about the state of the environment, and what must be done to protect it. It can raise awareness about the threats posed by over fishing, deforestation and poaching, and help

people to participate in the protection of their countries environment.

Transparency legislation would also work well in this field as an indicator for problem areas.

Living Standard

The living standards of many individuals, especially those in lower income groups, depend to a large extent on government schemes and services designed to help them. The right to information would allow greater access to government schemes, lower the transactional cost and minimize corruption within the system.

The domain of living standards covers the basic economic status of the people. The indicators assess the levels of income at the individual and household levels, sense of financial security, room ratio, food security, house ownership. The indicators were also constructed for economic hardships as shown by inability to repairs houses, inability to contribute to community festivities, and purchase of second hand clothes. Thus the living standard indicators consist of: Income indicator, Housing indicator, Food security indicator, and Hardship indicator.

It would also ensure, through proactive *suo motu* disclosures, that the people, especially the weaker segments of the society, are kept updated on what the government is doing to help raise their living standards, and what their entitlements are. Experience elsewhere has shown that the rise in awareness is invariably followed by a rise in living standards.

Governance

The right to information, and legislation enacted to implement it, are primarily tools of good governance. Its impact can be felt in every aspect of governance and it stimulates the primary function of government, service to its people.

The domain of good governance evaluates how people perceive various government functions in terms of their efficacy, honesty, and quality. The themes of indicators include human rights, leadership at various levels of government, performance of government in delivering services and controlling inequality and corruption, peoples trust in media, judiciary, and police. Therefore, the indicators of good governance consist of: Government performance indicator, Freedom indicator, and institutional trust indicator.

Experience with transparency legislation has revealed how powerful it is in bringing about change, and allowing the people to talk to their elected representatives, to make their demands and problems clear, and to hold them responsible for their actions.

Effects on corruption are the most obvious; it is very difficult to embezzle money when every single citizen has the power to demand the whereabouts of government money, and to find the person responsible for its disappearance. It's hard to dally over a request from a citizen when that citizen can insist on seeing the files pertaining to their request and demand to know why it is taking so long. Similarly one can see the change in resource allocation, record management, and efficiency of decision making. It will also help with the prevention of grievances, and will facilitate the deepening of democracy, and it will make communication a two way street between the government and the populace.

Ultimately, it is a method by which representative democracy gets supplemented by participatory democracy, and governments become accountable to the people not just through their elected representatives, and not just periodically, but directly and every day.