Gross National Happiness

- equality and intersectionality from an inside out perspective

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Abstract

This article aims to describe some of the potentials of GNH, Gross National Happiness, in relation to holistic aspects of equality and intersectionality. Being an alternative way of measuring and sustaining welfare, GNH brings about a totally new paradigm that in many ways turns the Western tradition of GDP inside out. When it comes to intersectionality this means that it may include and transcend all kinds of intersectional interpretations, thus offering a wider and more inclusive arena for equality, that also connects to other dimensions in society and worklife.
The GNH model may also be seen as a mandala, a compact way of describing and understanding multi-dimensional, non-hierarchical organization forms. In this way it equips our understanding of organization and collective strategies with more complexity-friendly and all-inclusive potentials. GNH as a mandala shaped vision may thus function as a map for handling the intersectionality, organizational and social resilience of next generation.

Introduction

According to many scientists, our values around prosperity and welfare has shifted radically. The shift is similar to the change from seeing Earth as the central point in our solar system into the heliocentric model of the universe that was developed by Miklaj Kopernik's work in the 16th century. A similar change of worldview is experienced now in terms of our economy shifting from being the only measure of welfare, into being one part of a system that include many other values and dimensions. The shift can thus be called a "Copernican revolution" because it rearranges our values, creating a totally new holistic view where welfare for all living beings, rather than economic growth, can be seen as the "sun" in the center of an integrated system, which in a wider and deeper way includes and transcends all components. The question is: What does this mean for equality and intersectionality in general and in Sweden in particular?

This article aims to clarify and explore this question as well as giving a brief summary of GNH, Gross National Happiness as a way of expressing this new paradigm.

1. GNH - inside out

1.1 Background

GNH, being the core values of leadership and structure in Bhutan, basically means that sustainable development should take a holistic approach to notions of progress and to give equal weight to non-economic aspects of wellbeing.

The term Gross National Happiness was coined by His Majesty the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck in the 1970s. While traveling around in Europe he was interviewed by a western journalist who was questioning the standard of Bhutan and whether Gross National Product was even worth measuring in this small reign. The King then heard himself saying something like:

*"Well, maybe we do not have much of a GDP, but I think we care more about Gross National Happiness anyway."*

The King thus expressed his reluctance to even try to compete with Western measures of welfare, which in his view were far to limited and shallow. Two things in the West impressed the King though, and that was democracy and equality. Today the Fourth King has been succeeded by his son, the Fifth King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, who became King 9 December 2006. The Fifth King continues with the process of democratization in the country by strengthening education, business, civil service and equality.

Equality and democracy have thus gradually been developed in the country. The King's comment in the 70s may seem radical, but it really rests on a solid foundation of values. In fact, already in 1729 the King of Bhutan declared that:

"if the country's ruling can't create happiness (dekid) for his people, there is no reason for government to exist."

The basic concept of GNH is its four pillars: good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and ecology. These four pillars have further been divided into nine areas, or domains, in order to create a broader understanding of GNH and to reflect its holistic values. The nine domains are :

- Living standards
- Health
- Education
- Good (social) governance and leadership
- Ecological diversity & resilience
- Psychological wellness
- Community vitality and participation
- Cultural diversity and resilience
- Time use
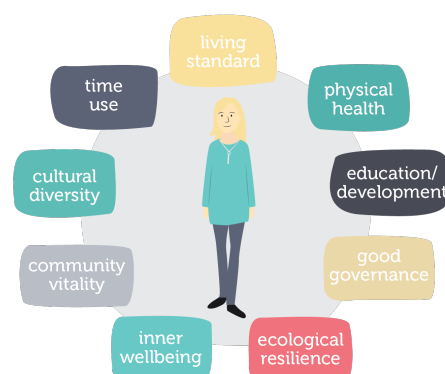
GNH attempts to develop the concept of welfare in a way that includes and transcends living standards. It includes and transcends our habitual focus on economics and profitability, thus letting new opportunities and creative solutions emerge.

These attempts can be seen as utopian; Bhutan has been called "Shangri-La", meaning the fictional, completely happy city that has been considered to be in a valley in Tibet and which also corresponds to the Buddhist mythical city of Shambala. However, this image is simplistic and eventhough there definitely is something sacred about the atmosphere in Bhutan, it should not be described as some kind of heaven. There are significant gaps and shortcomings in the welfare system in Bhutan, just as in other countries. The difference lies in the motivation and the measurement method, that is genuinely holistic.

There are of course other similar integrated models that evaluate and maintain welfare in a more holistic way, such as the Social Progress Index that balances basic needs of wellbeing and opportunities. In comparison, GNH offers profound change and has more dimensions. It is also a model that is easy to understand and apply for each individual as well as for organizations, associations, and the global context.

1.2 Measuring the whole

GNH and similar visionary models of the world bring about a totally new paradigm, a complete mind shift that in many ways turns the Western tradition of GDP inside out, just like a kaleidoscope messing up all the bits and pieces of our well known standards, thus creating a whole new pattern. The most obvious aspect of this new inside out pattern is the contradiction itself, the brave mirroring of the limitations of the Western paradigm, turning the whole worldview inside out and upside down.

The GDP measure quickly became precisely the limiting system of measuring welfare that Simon Kuznet, who developed it in 1934, warned about. Already in 1968 Robert Kennedy questioned it on a fundamental level in his unforgettable speech on GDP, where he stated that it does not give us the right answers.

"…it (GDP) measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."

This understanding has dawned upon us all more and more, and in many parts of the world, including the OECD countries, where there is an ongoing dialogue about the need for new measurements that fit with a new paradigm and value system opening up for equality and resilience.

"GDP measures income, but not equality, it measures growth, but not destruction, and it ignores values like social cohesion and the environment. Yet governments, businesses and most people swear by it."

Indeed, when we measure only GDP, we create a world view where war and natural catastrophes are considered positive, since they increase welfare! Our measurements will determine, in double aspects, what counts in our world.

1.3 GNH in Sweden

In Sweden, the interest in alternative ways to measure and maintain welfare has been existing for some time, exemplified by the SOU report "Will we be better off?", that came 2015 as a compilation of the Swedish government studies on these issues. The visit of the Swedish King and Queen in Bhutan in June 2016 also shows an increased interest in dialogue between Bhutan and Sweden.

In many parts of Swedish society and worklife interest has also grown, along with initiatives of holistic models, in technical industries as well as in healthcare, in the financial sector, in politics and tourism to name a few. Lots of conversations are emerging, on new organizational and decision-making procedures, that correspond to this holistic approach.

Models for shifting the approach and working methods are therefore emerging continuously in Sweden, in the private and public sectors as well as in non-profit contexts.

1.4 Inside out

A basic aspect of GNH is the tendency to value, and even take as a starting point, the inside rather than the outside. This tendency challenges and balances our (Western) habits to value tangible results rather than inner transformation. The basic principles of GNH upgrade inner transformation and balance, with the innermost core of the individual and the context as a basis for changes in the external world. This need not be seen as an exaggeration to the opposite, but rather as a balancing process to explore new ways in which we reconnect with deeper values and our awareness. Thus deeper non-material values are allowed to emerge that aim to sustainably meet the needs of all sentient beings, within the boundary of the needs of nature and future generations.

GNH means an adjustment to what we perceive as the center point, to the holistic, resilient wellbeing of all living creatures - an adjustment as profound as Kopernik's heliocentric model, where Earth is seen as part of, rather than the center of a system. The whole model is based on the Buddhist philosophy that constitute Bhutan's existential framework, which is may be a critical point for its application in Western countries like Sweden. Even after adjusting to the local contexts, GNH retains its dignified focus on deeper wellbeing, and even enlightenment, as its basic vision.

This aspect may seem far-fetched in the West, not least in Sweden, where we do all we can to separate politics from spirituality. To start from the inside is in itself revolutionary in many contexts in society and at work, but it can also prove to be key to a new approach, for example in terms of equality and intersectionality. In the political sphere as well as in the corporate world, there is an emerging consensus about our need for a more holistic and integral view of welfare. Many organizations and well-known companies, in Sweden as well as worldwide, have already turned their lenses, opening up for a modus operandi that is deeply inspired by GNH and similar holistic inside out approaches. The way GNH challenges and balances our age old habit of looking for tangible results before inner transformation might seem a bit strange, but also attractive to Swedish society and worklife.

GNH has been questioned from many angles, both in Sweden and elsewhere, some of the arguments being more respectful and worth consideration than others. Generally, though, it seems that we could really not afford not to listen to this kind of emerging visions. As we continue on our path in cosmos, consuming one and a half Earth every year, this type of mindset could be just what we

need to save humanity from itself. We are in desperate need of a unifying vision, while at the same time this very hope carries an inherent risk of sliding into the same old paradigm. Tainted as we are by the current paradigm of production and success, sometimes even hope and visions themselves loose their existential character and become measurable project goals. Many scientists mean that we are in the middle of an existential crisis, where visions like GNH might be very helpful as a tool to twist our minds inside out and dissolve the attachment to old views that have proven to be more or less dysfunctional.

2. Expanding intersectionality

2.1 Power structures and dualities

A holistic paradigm can engender hope for all who yearn for a new vision. At the same time, we cannot skip problems with inequality or other outstanding issues that to us seem to belong to an older paradigm. We need to see them clearly, and meet every aspect of them with a sober mind - if not in terms of compassion, at least from out of self-preservation. From a holistic point of view, no one will be completely happy until everyone can enjoy the same kind of opportunities and freedom; this is why we still need to focus on equality in society. Human beings seem to share a deep need to reconnect to each other and to nature. We cannot be happy as long as there is disconnection, which means that healing the gaps of power structures is part of the healing process that opens for a new paradigm. In fact, with a new paradigm we do not move away from anything former, rather we include all that has been part of our experience, while transcending it by far.

Many modern researchers that work on equality have a social constructivist approach, which can be a fruitful angle to start from, when we deal with paradigmatic transformations. Whatever is seen as constructed might also be deconstructed, a view that generates both responsibility and hope.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault, for example, argues that power in society can be described as a Panopticon, a kind of prison with a surveillance tower in the middle of a circular building around which the prisoners' cells are placed in a circle. The design allows the monitor to control all the prisoners, who for their part do not know when they are being watched. This, according to Foucault, is exactly what in many ways happens in the community, even if it is usually not as obvious. It often works as a more subtle form of power that influences us to act and choose in a certain way that is not always in line with our nature, or free will.

Similarly, Judith Butler, a gender theorist and philosopher, reflects on complexity in her dialogues on "gender trouble". By gender trouble she means that (social) gender can be difficult partly because it is so often ignored as a dimension of cultural construction and partly because there is a problem to even talk about it as a category, while in fact it is a completely culturally constructed illusion, created by repetition of stylized acts. This creates the illusion of an almost ontological gender essence that is problematic because it generates duality. Butler would therefore inspire a process of denaturalizing our notions of gender.

Continuing with gender as an example, both Foucault and Butler help us see how power structures are continuously defining and redefining gender categories as distinctly binary, when in fact most people do not fit into this simplistic duality. It becomes obvious how we imprison ourselves in a panopticon of limiting categories that make us all basically unhappy. Whatever the position, the structure itself is limiting and adds to our disconnect between each other.

These descriptions of norms and power structures are obviously not limited to gender, but are integrated into most human relationships, often in subtle ways. More aspects of diversity need to be added, such as ethnicity, religion, functionality, LGBTIA, age and so on. Also harmony and connection between human beings and the rest of nature would be good to add. We human beings create power structures within nature, by distancing ourselves from nature, as if we were separate from it and not part of it.

All this is true also in our dialogues between countries; take for example Bhutan and Sweden where many such diversifying, separating patterns of dualism interact. The most important aspect might not be what category or individual we perceive as having a certain position of power, but about the social construction itself, which means that we continue making ourselves and others anxious or fearful in relation to whoever is considered to have power, in such a way that we block ourselves from acting freely as a whole.

2.2 Transcending intersectionality

Dualities need not be intrinsically bad, but when they become rigid we need to balance and dissolve them, in order to liberate more alternative ways to move together.

To dissolve the dualities we need to start by recognizing the consequences of the underlying structures, to see clearly what they do with all of us, not just with those who are currently experiencing the most vulnerable positions. We need to see the gaps that these patterns create, also within and among those who are in positions of privilege. We also need to be prepared to work with the issues in an integrative, coordinated way, at least with a conscious intersectional mindset, i.e. so that the different patterns of equality are seen as integrated and can be analyzed together, because all power structures are interwoven with one another in complex patterns. In my personal case, for example, I am not only Western/white in a more or less racist world, but also I am simultaneously a woman in a world that is to a large extent patriarchal, and so on. In this way the categories of diversity interact within the very same person and situation, more or less breaking the illusory idea of "normality".

Now, when I meet you, how does my being a woman play out in the interaction of you being a man, woman or transperson? How does my being Western/white play out in interacting with your being Asian, African or American? And what about the whole combination? This is part of what intersectionality is about, and this is interesting and complex enough. However, we need to go further than this: It is time to transcend the idea of intersectionality itself.

To visualize what this could mean I want to point to an example made by Shubha Bhattacharya that highlights and analyzes complexity as such, while also highlighting the complexity traveler. In her article about the radical feminist and norm-breaker Gloria Watkins, alias Bell Hooks, Battaracharya mentions three approaches to study intersectionality, and complexity: anticategorical, intercategorical and intracategorical.

The *anticategorical* approach involves a deconstruction of all categorization, which in itself is considered to lead to inequality. The society is too complex to be described in categorical forms, they say. Instead, they advocate a holistic approach that includes everything we are.

The *intercategorical* approach does not care to counter, but engages instead in observing the existing categories that exist in society and study how they change.

The *intracategorical* approach is a sort of combination between the first two, recognizing the shortcomings of the existing groupings and questioning them as the basis for separation. It does not

reject the importance of the categories completely, but admit that they are trying to understand them and use them to support vulnerable groups in the intersection between the anticategorical and intercategorical approach. This is often done by studying people who are in the intersection of several categories, which is precisely what Bhattacharya does by her article on Bell Hooks.

The GNH model may be fruitful in this discourse, since it can be seen as a multi-dimensional development of all these intersectional approaches. The different dimensions of GNH model interact with each other and hang together so obviously that they form their own comprehensive intersectional model between all separate dimensions, not only within the one called social diversity.

While including the traditional sense of intersectionality, where different power structures are woven together, these categories are also transcended and woven together with other dimensions like health, good governance and education.

The GNH model can thus include and simultaneously transcend the concept of intersectionality. This may sound extremely complex, which also reflects a reality that contains all these components. However, it is also quite practical. The GNH model can be seen as a far more democratic and inclusive alternative to Foucault's parable of the panopticon above. Here every aspect and dimension involved has access to the center as well as the parts and where the parts are linked. This is practical and liberating, since it mirrors and cultivates the same interconnectivity that we find in nature.

By transcending intersectionality we allow the issues of equality to be integrated into a larger perspective. Gender equality is included by the GNH dimension of cultural diversity and equality in general, which is in turn included in an integrated pattern of intersectionality (containing all categories of interaction), which furthermore is in turn expanded to a holistic view where yet more dimensions of social interaction are interwoven.

The nine dimensions of GNH has this fruitful potential to resolve dualities simply by being more inclusive and holistic. Bringing in more dimensions counteracts the rigid contradictions and is a good start for achieving a balance between different perspectives. It weaves together the various forms of intersectionality; anticategorical, intercategorical and intracategorical need not be contradictions, but can provide different angles. We can call it an intersectionality-transcending holistic approach, which includes all angles. When we look at all the angles together and how they fit together in a kaleidoscopic patterns, the categories are not cemented, inevitable, or limiting, but important and even enjoyable and rewarding, just as the various instruments in an orchestra.

3. GNH as a model for organizations

3.1 Holistic self-organization

The current emerging trends in organizational theory are clearly portrayed by Frederic Laloux, who argues that the time has come for us to seriously open up to a holistic paradigm in the workplace and in society. Laloux and others talk about holistic, self-organizing organizations that allow our interactions to resemble nature. This means moving far away from models that are influenced by the "command and control" paradigm that is based on strong hierarchical structures, or even the entrepreneurial settings that focuses on results and economic growth. This new paradigm does not even stop by value based trust or integrated orchestras, but leads us (as separate organizations and individuals) into a sense of being part of one whole system moving, that moves naturally together, just

like the parts of a body. In a practical sense this would mean a dynamic form of governance without any formal titles and without a boss.

However, an organically shaped organization does not mean complete anarchy. There are rules, or rather agreements, and an intrinsic rhythmic order, but all of this is naturally integrated and based on trust between individuals that surrender to the processes of the system. Anyone who wishes to make a decision can do it, but will then also bear the responsibility for all the consequences of the decision and all the processes associated with it. This kind of model obviously can not work in any context, only where there is maturity and where a certain level of mental complexity can be handled. However, when it works it mostly works well.

GNH has the potential to contribute to facilitating organizations on any level. It is a vision and a model that can permeate through all levels of mental complexity, although it is less relevant where there is less maturity. GNH can also broaden our understanding and transform our mindsets so that we go beyond the experience of being separate as individuals.

In the image below there are a number of different forms of organization that can be said to match different levels/forms of reliance, maturity and depth of an organization. First, a panopticon, as described by Foucault above, where a single supervisor has control over everything that happens, while participants/citizens/employees act as inmates locked up without any overview or knowledge about when they will be monitored. The next
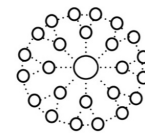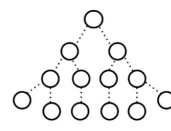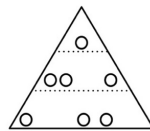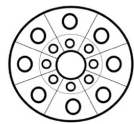
shape is a pyramid, which reflects a clear hierarchy, where the relationship can exist between individuals/compartments in each layer, but where there is no relationship between the layers. Next is a picture of a hierarchical organization where relationships exist between the layers and parts, but where the hierarchy remains. In the node chart hierarchy has ceased to be so strong; there is instead a common core, which can also be a vision, and here all parts and section have the same potential for interconnection. This model is more liberating, but is still limited to a 2 dimensional worldview. The last model is the mandala, which handles system and order in a completely different way, through a naturally summarizing multifaceted and multi-inclusive whole, which can also be visualized, experienced and extended in many directions. It is by this more far-sighted as well as ancient approach that we should understand GNH and its potential to carry and develop the structure of a society or a workplace.

3.2 A Multidimensional Elastic Mandala

GNH can thus be seen as a whole pattern, like a Buddhist mandala. A mandala is a symbolic patterns that summarizes an entire world. With great detail, precision, and complexity, mandalas are carefully shaped by monks, almost like an artistic microchip, filled with information.

We can regard GNH dimensions like the petals of a flower-shaped mandala, symbolizing all aspects of well-being and welfare in a way similar to our solar system, where the sun is in the middle and all the planets, including the earth, find their places around it in a natural way. This connection can be understood based on the fractal geometry and the idea of self-repeating, naturally iterating pat-

terns mainly popularized by Benoit Mandelbrot. His idea of patterns means that each part of a pattern can be regarded as a reduced image of the larger unit. Perhaps the most fascinating insight is not how this occurs in nature, as in the parts and the whole of a romanesco broccoli, but how it turns out in completely different contexts, such as for example in the financial market. Also in this case there seems to be a symmetry between the long-term market price fluctuations and short-term fluctuations, in the same way as in nature. The universe in all its dimensions, albeit transient and dynamic, seem to have an inherent tendency to reorganize itself in this type of patterns.

3.3 Patterns worth repeating

If patterns are self-iterating, and if there is any possibility to influence such movements, then it will be of outmost importance to cultivate patterns that are worth repeating. The GNH mandala may also in this sense be important, as a holistic and elastic model, to support our paradigm shift and contribute to the methods and forms of our interaction in a way that transcends the discourse about intersectionality, power structures and limitations. The GNH mandala gets even more interesting

when we understand its underlying principles. With its roots in Buddhist philosophy, it is in itself in a fractal, with the potential of the most complex mandalas in the Tibetan tradition. Without necessarily repeating the religious aspects, we can look into that traditional Buddhist way of building a mandala, where the pattern is a complex summary of an entire universe, just like an expandable multi-dimensional map.

Allowing for modern politics and society to develop in line with this ancient timeless wisdom seems to create healthy and elastic effects that may well be repeated also in contexts where religion has a different position and role. Even with the specifics of Buddhism or religion removed, GNH preserves some sense of sacredness to our way of interrelating. The mandala carries an atmosphere of natural dignity and respect for the deeper layers of our existence that are not entirely possible to put in words.

For my part, I am absolutely convinced that we desperately need the essence of this kind of an existentially widening and deepening pattern. It may seem exotic, but the core of the issue is about reconnecting to each other, to nature and to ourselves, allowing for profound global natural harmony, which is something deeply universal and human.

What happens when we start handling complexity and intersectionality with this timeless wisdom and responsive dialogue in the West, in Sweden or, for that matter, in the world as a whole?
What happens when our western governments discover and start using all the possibilities of this kind of mandalas?

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