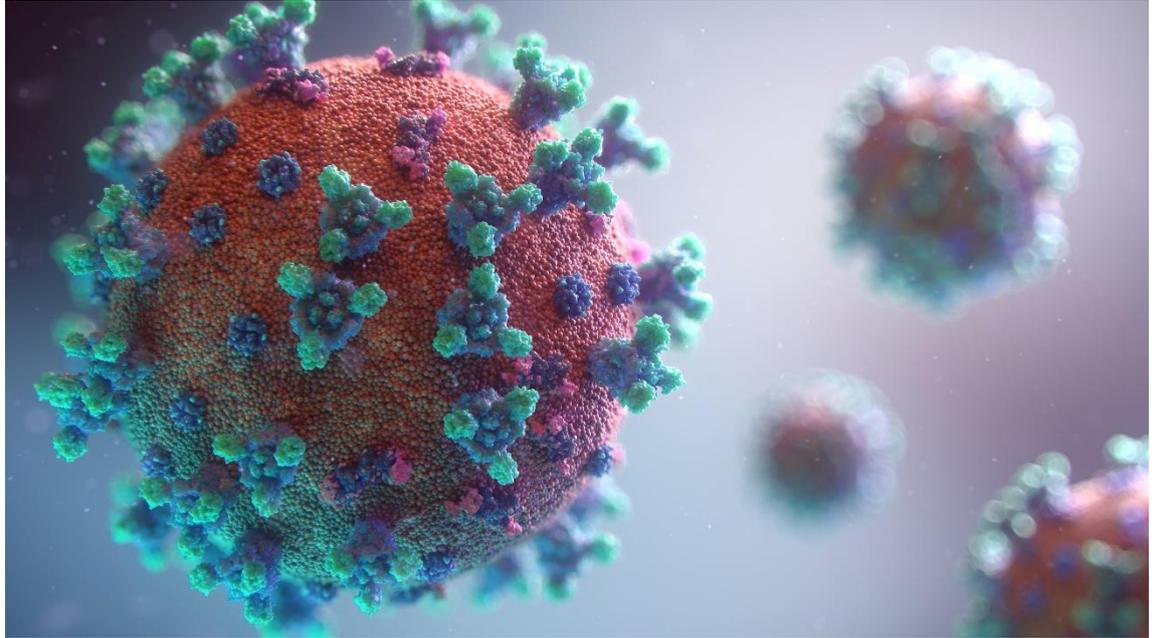


Human Well-being during Covid-19

Perspectives on Sustainable Leadership from the Tiny Himalayan Country- Bhutan

Sudesh Pokhrel*



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Over the decades, the definition of leadership has been construed. The idealization and construct of a ‘leader figure’ has been narrowed down from the pledge of ‘mindfulness’ towards a ‘diminutive imagination’ of a leader who performs exploitative economic gains on behalf of a country usually characterized by over-exploitation and underconsumption. Overwhelming existence and support of such paradigms in itself is an indication of failure to respond towards every crisis specially when such endeavours negate the most important essence of a society i.e., ‘collective living’. Let us take a very simple analogy here; Traditionally, in the 19th and early 20th century people knew about their neighbours to such an extent that they had the count of the number of forks inside their neighbour’s kitchen drawers. Today, the world is highly isolated, and people do not realise who lives next door. They naturally do not care. Owing to such developments, humanity itself has turned out to be the biggest threat to the world and merely seeking ‘change’ would rather bring short term solutions while long-term solutions would require a replacement of the current paradigm of ‘development’ and rejuvenation/reimagination on the liabilities of ‘leadership’. To make things worse, there is no realization to this as “people not only don’t know what’s happening to them, they don’t even know that they don’t know”¹.



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How do we alter this? The time to ‘learn, unlearn and relearn’ has never been as imperative in history given that the world is facing the worst humanitarian crises from the Covid-19 pandemic. We require a parallel development paradigm which focuses on the human wellbeing and the wellbeing of the eco-system rather than perplexing only within the wealth of the countries. The critique of only measuring economic output by Mr. Angel Gurría, secretary general of the OECD in the global solutions journal, issue 4, shed hope on ‘measuring what matters in times of crisis in an attempt to look beyond GDP to a wellbeing framework that measures true growth’ⁱⁱ. This specific expose in retrospect would provide additional perspectives by way of concrete suggestions on ‘policymaking’ taking the example of Bhutan. The illustration of Bhutan is proportionally relevant to the substance of ‘great realignment’ through social, and ecological domains given the fact that these dynamics are already embedded in the growth factor of the country by way of measuring wellbeing and happiness thereby already moving beyond sturdy walls of GDP. Secondly, the piece would justify the former argument by providing practical illustration of ‘How Bhutan has maintained swift preventive actions through affirmative leadership and good governance based on Gross National Happiness’ to triumph in battling Covid-19.

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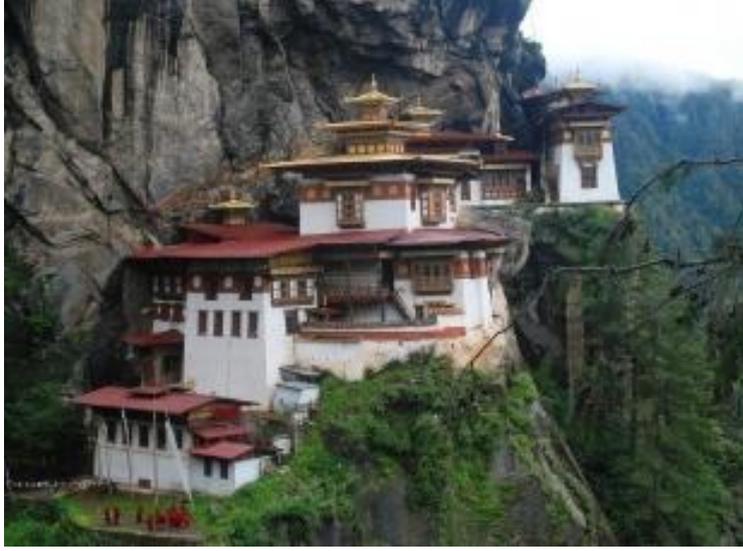


The Need for a ‘New Thinking’ in the ‘New Normal’

There are two great subtleties which ought to be considered while discerning the two aforementioned questions. Firstly, what would leadership entail within such a context? and secondly, what kind of policies emanate from these leadership styles? For many leaders around the world, the new normal serves as a lesson learned from the pandemic. They are ultimately looking into alternatives to measure true growth. However, this is not unusual at all. It is something we have been ignorantly living with. The only problem is that we have been engrossed in the wrong places in quest for the wrong visions. While measuring true growth, ‘leadership’ ought to intake ‘mindful and sustainable route’ which is not just in terms of being consistent in action but also in terms of complete action. Leaders’ ought to be responsible for all their actions. The policies that emanate in Bhutan adheres to the philosophy of ‘Development with Values’ⁱⁱⁱ which stems from the Gross National Happiness framework.

This framework instils a sense of social, ecological and economical responsibility. Realising the need for a new thinking and having seen that governance models of most countries have either failed or proven to be unsustainable, Climate advocates, scholars and activists should aim at reconceptualizing the context of wellbeing within societies with a directive of rectifying the wrong policy decisions through implementation of an interdependent ethical development thinking and paradigm change design. As communities embark on the new normal, it is vital that the younger population equip themselves with new competencies the world desperately needs to solve policy issues. The accentuating quagmires of our world require evolved responses from all the stakeholders to formulate innovative solutions to contemporary problems.

It would be challenging to reach government systems, organizations and other entities to emancipate more on the importance of wellbeing and true growth. It would certainly require more persistency and patience. Nevertheless, when Covid-19 hit the world, it was realised by agencies across the world on the imperativeness of human wellbeing. The world suddenly went digital, and the public were confined to the ambit of their homes. People became extra aware of their wellbeing and the market systems that exploit them. This led to the great resignation. One important aspect stood out here i.e., the importance of recognizing “interdependencies” in human relations. Organizations went bankrupt and businesses shut down. The vision of the people now had to adapt with the new normal and the only way to cultivate a renewed vision was to ‘collaboratively contribute’ by taking into account all the stakeholders of the society. We had to recognize ‘interdependencies’ such as ‘acknowledging that there may be a bigger vision arising from the new normal’. Welcoming the possibility that the vision can change towards pursuing a human centred growth was a win-win situation as it spoke to the new reality. Consequently, the realization made the public more flexible away from the self-centred rigidity of human nature.

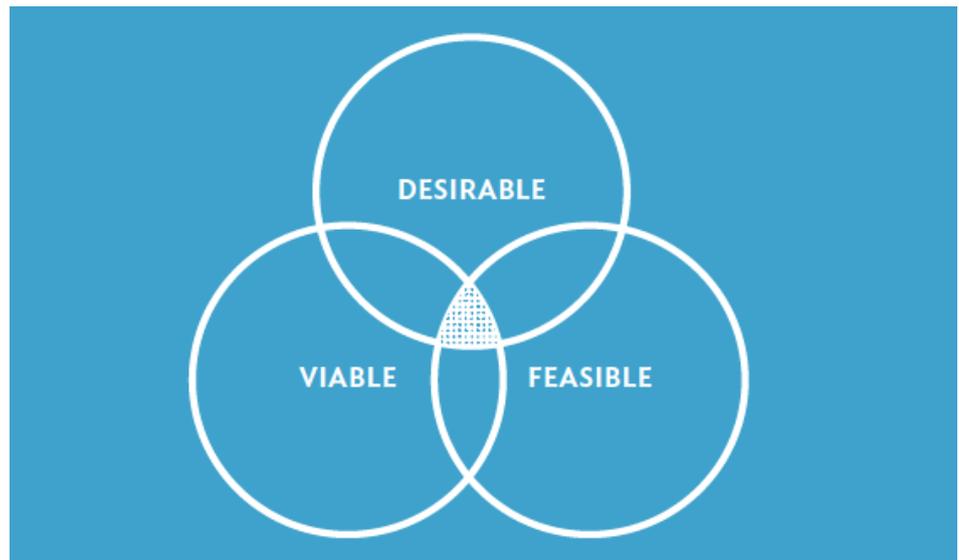


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Why Human Wellbeing is the most Important Factor for Development?

When development thinking is not people-centric, the fruits of economic growth are bound to be not shared equally^{iv}. The schemes that we use to measure the various developments in the world do not put people at the heart of policy design. The ADB report in November 2020 states that ‘applying human-centered methods in policy and project design can enrich our understanding of potential beneficiaries and lead to better policies and projects’^v. It only makes sense that we focus on people as the final beneficiaries of the policies that we design. Economic factors barely consider issues of increased pollution, the causes of the Covid-19 pandemic, or measuring ‘trust’ as an efficient response to covid-19. It even fails to measure better prepared health systems or the sense of community belongingness. When we put people at the heart of policy design, the harmony and realization of interdependence towards the planet and its prosperity will instinctively follow. Following a people centered growth strikes a balance between three forces as presented by the diagram below;



Source: Making cases for change - Venn diagram of desirability, feasibility and viability by Jamie Munger^{vi}

The solutions emerge between the overlap of desirability, feasibility and viability thereby creating change from a humane perspective as well as from the organizational perspective. While considering policies for growth factor, firstly the *desirability* on whether it solves existing problems? secondly, the *viability* of whether the governing body approves the plan? and finally, the *feasibility on whether the road blocks can be overcome realistically?* is deliberated through the human-centered design^{vii}. Therefore, the measurement of wellbeing is spatio-temporal as it does not reside in a static state but rather is embedded in harmony through space and time within an interplay of social, cultural (trust, belongingness etc), economic, ecological and political processes. This is why ‘true growth’ is not just limited to economic agencies but rather requires participation and collaboration from diverse key institutions in order to access and plan the use of ‘wellbeing’ in public policies. Focusing entirely on GDP based development directs to the complexity of ‘self-based/centered’ emphasis. Take for an example of the two influential books on growth; *The theory of Moral sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith. The studies perpetuate that individual working in their self-interest will promote the welfare of the whole society, the so-called invisible hand theorem^{viii}. These studies do not delve upon measuring the outward crisis that impacts human wellbeing, for an example, climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, climate change’s impact on mental health etc. Measuring growth by ignoring these frightening facts detrimental to human wellbeing is not real progress. Real progress occurs when key questions are addressed such as;

1. Can there be a replacement / change in current paradigms or existence of equally competing paradigm of human wellbeing?
2. Can humans reduce the pressure on the planet through behavioural change or rely on other mechanisms to meet their unrelenting demands?
3. Will the limited capacity of the planet’s ecosystem reconcile with growing economic demands?

These vital questions need to be addressed post covid-19 because the current paradigm dictates a snowball of exploitation. For an example, economic growth leads to jobs, jobs lead to production, then towards consumption which leads to trade, trade leads to more economic growth and the process runs in circles again. What looks like a productive growth actually is limited in nature because once the economy starts growing, it cannot stop growing. There is no space for the growth of human wellbeing in this equation and no alternative to economic growth. The model works against self-sufficiency. Such a model leads to high income gap between the rich and poor, in-adequate crisis response system, isolation from good developmental thinking, uncertainty within the VUCA complex world and political failures in policy making. Three things can be done in such scenarios. Priorities must be reframed from economic development to human development. Secondly ideas of growth must be reshaped and newer solutions must be re-formulated and finally, ‘interdependencies’ for a larger vision must be recognized.

Remedial Approaches – The Case Study of Bhutan’s Wellbeing Framework

Bhutan’s wellbeing or the happiness agenda permits policymakers to question any development that occurs in the country. Thus, the core of the policy is deliberated and debated with a purpose of finding best practices which balances environmental conservation and good governance. There is a topdown hierarchy of critical consciousness which addresses the interdependency of ecology and economics through mindful developmental thinking. In other words, it can simply be called Development with Values^{ix}. Such conscious implementation of the people centric design by way of understanding the grassroot remedies makes the people, planet and its prosperity the central tenet of growth.

The proof that such remedial approaches can be seen through the management of the ‘Covid-19 crisis’ by Bhutan. The country had its very first Covid-19 death on January 7th, 2021 ever since the pandemic began last year which was of a person with pre-existing kidney and liver problem^x. A tiny and economically modest Himalayan country sandwiched between two grand nations, India and China did better in handling the novel corona virus crisis than its great neighbours. Similarly, health systems in economically well-off countries collapsed and millions of lives were lost. The United States of America, Russia, Germany and several wealthy countries with world class health infrastructures failed to achieve the impressive statistics of battling Covid like Bhutan; a country with under-resourced health infrastructure and limited man power. This has been because Bhutan follows an ethical developmental agenda by prioritizing ‘wellbeing’ over economic gains and hence the country maintained strict lockdown and 21 days mandatory quarantine policies during the pandemic. Such attentive leadership to the crisis encouraged the public to respect health guidance’s. Further, communities and the general public willingly shared mutual cohesion in an effort to protect the wellbeing of all. This is something which is catastrophically mis-managed even in many wealthy countries. Secondly with a gesture of compassion towards his populace, the king provided a relief fund of

more than 20 million dollars to the people whose livelihood were destroyed by the pandemic^{xi}. Even when the country was already in a financial backlash, the king chose the wellbeing of his people over monetary strength. Such deeper policy impulses of Bhutan where the country values Happiness covers all the aspects of wellbeing. Several lessons can be absorbed from Bhutan on promoting trust rather than ambiguity with the government, stressing on communication rather than ignorance on policies, prioritizing social support over economic support and collectively fighting the crises with preparedness, prevention and support of public health.



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Endnotes

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