

A 'New' Paradigm of Development?

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Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to critically analyse the call of an alternative paradigm of development presented by the Kingdom of Bhutan. It aims to analyse what is novel or original about the Bhutanese project. It is found that notwithstanding critical views about the coherence and effectiveness of this new approach to development, it does retain a fresh and new insight on development thinking. It places emphasis on hitherto neglected values and amounts to a highly ambitious project of radically transforming the mainstream approach to progress and development and has great potential for being successful.

Keywords: New Paradigm of Development, Bhutan, mainstream, development

Introduction

The need to secure economic development has remained on the agenda of international political economy since the end of the devastating Second World War in 1945. The predominant meaning attributed to the idea of development has more or less remained the same until very recently. Development has meant recovering of sinking economies, securing and maintaining a stable or an increasing rate economic growth per annum so that the needs of each country could be adequately met. As rightly observed by Roberts, however, development can only be conceived within an ideological framework, one can trace the changes coming to mainstream development thinking as it gradually transitioned Keynesian prescriptions for an embedded Liberalism for a more Neo-liberal mode of economic management beginning from the 1970 and continuing.

Parallel to this development mainstream certain alternative understandings of development have been taking shape especially since the 1970s when the mainstream approaches failed to deliver development in the Global South. The core concerns of this alternative approach have been equity, participation, empowerment, ecological sustainability and the like.

A major development of the late 1980s was the publication of the Brundtland Commission report entitled, Our Common Future that mooted the idea of Sustainable Development. The entry of this novel idea marked a watershed. For the first time, there was an emerging global recognition that economic development could not continue at

the cost of the ecological health of the planet and without remedying the existing inequities that prevail. Thus concerns about equity and ecology have been central to the evolving discourse of sustainable development. *The report defined Sustainable Development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need. It acknowledged the hitherto undermined inter linkages among politics, economy, society and the environment, thus affirming that the economy could not be treated as an isolated entity.*

According to the WCED report (1) the idea of SD contains two key concepts ,that of 'needs' particularly those of the world's poor and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet present and future need recognising that there are certain absolute ecological limits to growth that cannot be transgressed.

However, progress with sustainable development strategies since, was not remarkably satisfactory. A lot had yet to be done.

In April 2012, the Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon requested the Royal Government of Bhutan to take GNH to a new level, urging the government to create a New Development Paradigm (NDP) that, whether adopted into policy or not, will mark for future generations a point in history when populations across the globe started rethinking the role of government.

The former Secretary General observed that there is an urgent need to revolutionise our thinking to address the multiple economic, ecological and social crises facing our world. He made the following observations. (2) “The old model is broken. We need to create a new one... In this time of global challenge, even crisis, business as usual will not do...Clearly we must unite around a shared vision for the future — a vision for equitable human development, a healthy planet, an enduring economic dynamism.”

Bhutan's New Development Paradigm (NDP) initiative is part of the worldwide effort to help define a new and more viable post-2015 global development agenda. The report, [Happiness: Towards a New Development Paradigm \(3\)](#) was submitted to the UN in December 2013. The NDP is grounded in the principles of Gross National Happiness – the unique vision of human development first proposed by the 4th King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in the early 1970s when he declared that “*Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product.*”

The official website (4) mentions the following about NDP

“The New Development Paradigm offers a transformative vision and practical pathways for genuinely holistic, sustainable and inclusive social progress. It gives a

higher purpose to development than just economic growth by recognising the interdependence of all life on Earth.”

“Sustainability, wellbeing and happiness are interdependent. Without happiness, there can be no appreciation of the beauty and preciousness of life and our natural world. And, without wellbeing, happiness can never be. So, likewise, wellbeing, that may otherwise come at the cost of planetary wellbeing, can only be moderated by considerations of sustainability and happiness.”

“Happiness involves a deep abiding sense of harmony with the natural world, of compassion, contentment and joy, is not just a private yearning. It is a universal goal.” “. . . and the foundation for happiness is wellbeing. Wellbeing is not about accumulating material wealth. It is about good health, knowledge, peace, security and justice, equality and meaningful relationships. These are the essential conditions for freedom and the ability to pursue happiness - that ultimate state of being which is the true measure of human civilization.”

Now the question that arises is in what ways is NDP really making a significant break from the existing paradigm of developmental thought?

Critics are of the view that there is nothing very novel about the paradigm suggested by Bhutan.

According to Jan Nederveen Pieterse (5), “.... as a heading ‘alternative development’ no longer makes much sense. It made sense in the 1970s and 1980s when there was a clear break between mainstream development and ‘another development’. ‘Alternative’ as a heading made sense when the relationship between mainstream and alternative was more or less static, not fluid as it is now. Now mainstream development has opened up and several features of alternative development - the commitment to participation, sustainability, equity - are being widely shared (and unevenly practised), not merely in the world of NGOs but from UN agencies all the way to the World Bank.

A remarkable reflection of this apparent convergence of thinking on development in the present world is found in the 2019 OECD Report(6). The following three key messages of the report bring this out clearly:

1) There is a better understanding about the limitations of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita as an indicator of development. Economic growth is no longer quality growth. Compared to early industrialisers, developing countries today are growing faster, but improvements in well-being outcomes have been much slower for the same rate of economic growth. Economic growth must therefore be matched by investments and policy efforts that improve well-being outcomes and ensure sustainability.

2) The development experience is different today, as countries are confronted with challenges like never before. The new development context has new rules, new environmental constraints, new technologies and more competition. Development strategies need to adapt to these changes, and reflect a country’s context, endowments and institutions. Rather than following a singular paradigm, development strategies

should be context-specific, and based on the principles of being participatory, place-based, multisectoral and multilateral.

3)Facing the complexity of today's challenges implies a plurality of development pathways. Development paradigms have broadened significantly over time to include many new elements beyond a pure focus on economic growth. However, they continue to promote an approach that envisions a singular pathway to development for all countries, embodied in the idea that development starts with financial capital.

*Dr David L Luechauer has been a vocal critic of the Bhutanese GNH policy. He is presently teaching at the Krannert School of Management in the USA under Purdue University. Dr. Luechauer argues that the key variable used in the New Paradigm, 'happiness' has not been clearly defined thus rendering the approach incoherent. He argues that Bhutan demanding GDP being replaced by GNH makes little sense because, "a country could measure GDP or GNP and still practice as much or more GNH related principles than Bhutan currently demonstrates."(7)He counts countries like **Singapore, Sweden, USA, Finland, Denmark, Netherlands and Germany in that list.** Wellbeing depends on existence of measures like Child Safety laws, which are non existent in Bhutan, he observes.*

Furthermore, it is attacked that Bhutan tends to promote GNH as the only acceptable model against all the rest. It's advocates wholly nullify the positive sides of the existing western models outright. It amounts to indoctrination and is antithetical to democracy and has a semblance of the deterministic models of development found in Soviet regime.

Yet another way that one could question the novelty of Bhutan's endeavour is by viewing it's call for a NDP as simply an assertion of the poor nation's soft power tools as a means of rising in a world dominated by the big military powers such as USA and China today.

What then is 'New' about the model of development advocated by Bhutan?

Inspite of all the criticisms against this model, there is great potential in it. It cannot be altogether nullified as offering nothing new. Upon closer scrutiny, it appears that the model has introduced the new notion of 'happiness' as an end of sustainable development. Interestingly, contrary to what critics like Dr Luechauer claim, *the report on the New Paradigm of Development has given a specific meaning to the term happiness. Quoting from the official document(3)-*

"We define happiness as a deep abiding sense of harmony with the natural world and with our fellow beings that is characterised by compassion, contentment and joy. This is a societal vision at the core of true human development and is not just a private yearning." This is undoubtedly a novel as well as a highly ambitious idea as it has not limited the scope of development policies simply to the provision of material conditions for living a decent life, but also to cover the psychological realm of feelings and human behaviour.

David Korten(8) who himself was among the experts to formulate the report on NDP has interestingly brought out the essential differences between the old and new paradigms. He writes that by the old paradigm logic ‘money’ is the measure of value and by the new paradigm ‘life’ is the measure of value. As he writes, “In the worldview of the Old Development Paradigm, money is the measure of value and the purpose of the economy and business is to grow aggregate consumption and financial returns, flows, and assets.” “In the worldview of the emerging New Development Paradigm, life is the measure of value and the purpose of the economy and business is to maintain and enhance the health, vitality, resilience, and creative potential of people and nature—including strengthening relationships of caring, cooperation, and sense of attachment to nature and communities of place.”

An implication of introducing ‘happiness’ as goal of development is however the significant blurring of public private dichotomy. In the usual scheme that has been followed, developmental policies tend to be concerned with the clearly ‘public’ issues like infrastructure development, employment generation, poverty alleviation, food security and so on but not with how people ultimately felt. Neither was there much preoccupation with the inculcation of desirable values beyond a basic official commitment to the principles of equity and social justice for deeper values like altruism, cooperation and love for nature---all of which were mostly seen as personal traits of select individuals. These now find a central place in the new paradigm literature.

Moreover, the traditional approach thought that GDP growth is the key to securing desirable well being outcomes. So that increasing the wealth of a country was prima facie and everything else would automatically be take care of. By contrast, what the NDP advocates think is, only thinking that greater amount of money can securing wellbeing is a wrong idea. Because such an approach pulls attention away from the very process of generating more wealth. Moreover it leads to the assumption that there can be a common mode of securing economic growth. Modernisation theory, embedded liberalism to neoliberal capitalism and even socialism and underdevelopment theories are treated as nothing but reflections of this notion. It might be so that the process of economic growth or wealth generation itself is causing grave setbacks to wellbeing. This could be happening in a number of ways such as due the adoption of environmentally insensitive or damaging means to make economic gain or through indulgence in activities that are monetarily profitable but degrade human value like prostitution for instance.

So, basically the GDP fails as an appropriate yardstick of assessing progress of a society in holistic terms. It can only measure economic growth. Many activities that negatively affect wellbeing can make the GDP grow. On the other hand many activities that positively contribute to our wellbeing , such as home care of parents, are not figuring in the GDP. Accordingly, if the basic target of development policies simply remains to increase the country’s GDP, the many wrong choices will be adopted. The scenario becomes more complicated because, often the implications of a policy that is meticulously calculated to raise the GDP, are not clearly perceived in the immediate

context but tends to show only in the long run. To cite one example in support of this could be Allowing MNCs in and opening up to FDI are proven ways of boosting growth, but what about their impact on the local culture, local environment?

What was missed out was how the process of wealth generation itself, the values underlying the process might affect the GDP.

Even if this is what the advocates claim to be new about the paradigm, there might be counters.....the changes attending the current economic growth strategies of neoliberalism have been presented as positive transformation and post modernity and to try to resist them might be viewed as being conservative or reactionary.

Finally another very crucially novel idea that is provided by the new paradigm advocates is how the economy is to be understood as a subpart of society which in turn is a subpart of the larger ecological system of the planet. As such, the goals of the economy cannot afford to be antithetical to those of the society and the planet. The economy has always to serve the larger whole of which it is a part. Such an approach automatically would reject the so called 'weak' versions of sustainable development and ecological modernisation.

Conclusion

This article attempted a critical analysis of the model of development advocated by Bhutan with a view to discern what really makes it novel and different from the existing approaches to development. It is found that although not satisfactorily articulate yet the New Paradigm of Development cannot simply be nipped in the bud. It has great potential. One must look at the context in which it is trying to make a mark on global thinking. It cannot also be denied that it might well be a means for the country to become a bit popular and be heard at the world stage, but this is also necessary because the ideologically hegemonic position that mainstream thinking still commands is backed by the great powers like the USA which makes it very difficult to be challenged in the first place. One has to be heard first before they can influence. At the same time, it remains a valid point made by the critics that the best way forward for Bhutan would be to prove the worth of the model it is advocating by making it a success at home. Bhutan must become an epitome of real alternative development before the world can recognise that indeed there might be an altogether new and different route to secure development in terms of Happiness as the Bhutanese understand it.

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