

Intervention by Major Groups and other Stakeholders

Question: “We believe the philosophy and practice of Gross National Happiness can contribute to build back better in balance in Bhutan but also beyond.

For every SDG 1- 17, Gross National Happiness adds another dimension of solidarity and dignity to sustainable development. Starting with SDG 1, ending poverty, GNH assists by suggesting well-rounded well-being for world.

For SDG 4, it is the heart of the 2030 agenda offering help and hope to all youth. Therefore we must prioritize its role in our national policy and through adequate resources to realize rights of all in Bhutan. Education provides purpose to youth deciding ability to contribute to our common future.

In regards to SDG 11, Bhutan will build from community to city to country encouraging greater engagement in local affairs and government. Bhutan should support human rights cities and build model Voluntary Local Reviews for our next Voluntary National Review.

In regard to SDG 16, Bhutan has made significant improvements in its national institutions embracing equality and equity with reforms rooted in human rights and ever engaging its people toward greater and genuine democratic governance. Another improvement will be to create a an independent National Human Rights Institution.

We believe GNH is essence of SDG 17. We desire to contribute as civil society and state. We are supportive of Aotearoa measurement of well-being and believe it adds to our chorus of GNH. We call on all countries of the UN to contribute cultural models to measure the SDG movement and partner with purpose to achieve the 2030 agenda.

Will Bhutan reach out and partner with fellow member states on initiatives building on GNH for greater well-being around the world?”

Bhutan’s response:

Firstly, thank you so much for your very pertinent questions to Bhutan and also for acknowledging the holistic role that our development philosophy of GNH can play in building back Bhutan and beyond, better from this current pandemic. Particularly we are glad that the young gentleman representing Major Group and other Stakeholders (MGoS) has comprehensively comprehended the relation between GNH and various SDGs. We are happy to respond to the four sub-questions raised as follows:

1. Need to prioritize the role of youth in our national policy and through adequate resources to realize rights of all in Bhutan.

Building on the foundations laid for democracy and active citizenship in the earlier decades of planned development, the 12th Five Year Plan (FYP) is geared towards bringing effective governance ‘closer to the people’. As such, during the formulation of the current 12th FYP, youths were consulted as a part of stakeholders’ engagement. In the recent past, many

initiatives were taken for civic engagement, particularly among the youth. For instance, the initiation of Democracy Club Meets by the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) now provides a more inclusive platform for young people around the country, to become familiar with the principles and practices of electoral democracy and raise their concerns. In addition, several CSOs in the country are increasingly working towards promoting an engaged citizenry—by encouraging and facilitating civic engagement, providing platforms for public discourse, and imparting media literacy and other capacity development programmes to the general public and youth in particular.

Also, the space for youth participation and action has expanded, with more agencies (both Government and CSOs) exploring ways in which to engage with and leverage the potential of youth. Youth voice and action are now more visible in a wide range of areas. For the first time, youth were extensively engaged in reviewing a national policy. In 2020, as the National Youth Policy 2011 went under review, youth participated in the process not only as informants but also led discussions with peers to review the policy, gather data, and provide recommendations towards the revision of the policy.

Finally, despite restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the VNR process has adopted a participatory and inclusive approach by engaging all relevant stakeholders including youth and different youth groups in the country. We will continue to engage our youth in the process of formulating national plans and policies as an important stakeholder and partner so that we will be able to address issues affecting them directly and realize their full potential.

2. Build model Voluntary Local Reviews for our next Voluntary National Review

Bhutan applauds countries and local bodies that have taken an extra initiative to develop their Local Voluntary Reviews. We have no slightest doubt that these Voluntary Local Reviews will accelerate local actions in implementing SDGs. In Bhutan's case, we do not formally develop Local Voluntary Review for SDGs as such. And given the size of the country and also the way we plan and implement our socio-economic development activities, we are of the view that local level voluntary review for SDGs is not so critical for us. We are of the view that Local Voluntary Review makes more sense to the larger countries and more so to the countries with the federal structure. Having said that we have our own structured periodic inclusive review process that is inbuilt in the system, which to a large extent is similar to the Local Voluntary Review for SDGs. Our Local Governments, as a part of the system review their plans and programmes periodically. Therefore, at the moment we have not considered undertaking a separate Local Voluntary Review per se, as the objectives behind VLR is already taken care.

3. Create an independent National Human Rights Institution

Bhutan takes note of this recommendation. The Royal Government will study different options that may be best suited for the country taking into considerations the need and national state of preparedness.

4. Will Bhutan reach out and partner with fellow member states on initiatives building on GNH for greater well-being around the world?

Bhutan's approach to development is guided by GNH, which is highly consonant with the principles of the SDGs and has also contributed to shaping the Global Goals. You may recall the UN's adoption of "happiness resolution", which was directly inspired by Bhutan's GNH development philosophy, and which calls on UN member states to explore and adopt more holistic and inclusive approaches to sustainable development. It is a precursor to the SDGs, and although not acknowledged as much, has contributed to the development of SDGs.

As such, we are convinced that regional and multilateral cooperation remains critical, and increasingly so in working out common and shared solutions for issues transcending geographical boundaries— such as the impacts of climate change. Going forward, Bhutan will continue to play an active role as a responsible international community member to call on other member states to partner in accelerating the SDGs, so that progress towards inclusive, low carbon, and resilient development pathways – as envisioned in our GNH approach is adopted and sustained by all for the peace and prosperity of the world.
