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STATEMENT

BY

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AT THE

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT  
(RIO + 20)

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RIO DE JANEIRO

Madam President,  
Mr. Secretary-General,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Let me begin by extending our warm congratulations to you, Madam President, on your election as the President of this conference. I would also like to thank the government and people of Brazil for their warm hospitality.

Propelled by technology, fuelled by greed and driven by GDP, the path mankind trod for more than half a century brought us to a crossroads here at Rio, twenty years ago. Despite agreeing to make a turn, we accelerated onward. Those who lagged behind hoped to catch up, while those ahead spurred on to keep their lead in the race to extract, produce, sell and consume more in a world with less resources. The costs of reckless speeding along the highway of 'development' have been devastating. Society is crumbling, climate is changing, ecosystems are collapsing, resources are depleting, and civilization is clearly headed backward to the primordial state of the 'survival of the fittest'. As species die in quick succession, mankind's own extinction draws nearer.

Indeed, survival is the question of the day. Surely, it is this fear and the knowledge of having erred, that have brought us back to Rio after 20 years – after two more decades of living dangerously and hurtling ourselves toward annihilation.

Yet, we speak not of the harsh reality of life or death that stares at us. Choosing gentler language, we argue about sustainability and green economy, words with enough ambiguity to divide us on the very issue of our survival that should unite us. In being euphemistic, let us not underplay the dire state of humanity.

**Sustainable development means survival.** It is about how we, as a species, must live within the bounds of what nature can provide. Sustainable development is not a choice. It is an absolute necessity. It is neither an ideal beyond the reach of the poor nor a threat to the rich and affluent. And we have no time to waste over arguments of who must bear the guilt for our predicament. When we have, in varying degrees and with growing efficiency, stripped earth of its remaining capacity to support life, there will be no judge or jury to separate the rich from poor, the north from the south, or the more guilty from the less.

Humanity's need of the hour is a saner, safer and sustainable path. To that end, my country, Bhutan, will support all efforts.

But how do we chart a new course? Where do we go from here? Unless we can agree on a vision to guide us, society will remain rudderless in a perilous sea. But that need not be. As highly evolved beings with social, intellectual and emotional needs, we do share one common vision – the ultimate dream of happiness. This aspiration transcends all the dividing contours of society and has the power to unite all of humanity. It is this goal toward which the new path must be blazed.

The search for happiness, which is 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 it has nothing to do with an ephemeral, fleeting mood – happy today or unhappy tomorrow due to the slightest variations in external conditions. Its vital importance to humankind and society is made clear by compelling evidence and our deep seated knowledge that most human problems arise from one single reason – the failure to stay on the path of true happiness.

Beyond providing the perfect motivation for survival, happiness causes us to live well, for living well is the wellspring of happiness. And wellbeing, we realize, is not about accumulating or consuming material wealth. It is about cultivating and enjoying good health and knowledge; peace, security and justice; equality and meaningful relationships. These are the essential conditions that promote freedom, and the ability and will to pursue happiness - that ultimate state of being which is the true measure of human civilization.

The three conditions of **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.

Civilization has reached the time and moment to acknowledge the primacy of this innermost human yearning and to make the purpose of development the creation of enabling conditions for its pursuit. It is with this conviction that, for four decades, Bhutan has made happiness, this quest of every citizen, the object of public policy and resources. In so doing, we are supported by a comprehensive index of 9 domains and 72 variables, still undergoing refinement, to measure both the subjective and objective dimensions and conditions of happiness.

Situated in the folds of the high Himalayas, my country, Bhutan, is among the most fragile of ecologies. We worry, witness and experience helplessly, the advancement of doom, as our mountains lose their snow cover, water sources dry up, crops fail, new diseases strike, and prices of food and fuel soar. And looking out from the high Himalayas, what we see tells us that more is yet to come, and that no country is immune to what happens beyond its borders. It reminds us of the reality that what a country does within its territory can never be enough. We fear that our pursuit of happiness may be short-lived.

The world desperately needs a consensus for collective action for our own sake and for that of our children and posterity. But it would be wrong and irresponsible to subject all our actions to what may or may not happen here in Rio alone. Life, after all, is not negotiable and yet, this is what our delegations have had to do in preparing an outcome document that takes care of all sensitivities and accommodates all kinds of doubts and suspicions of member states. And so, long in words, this document will fall far short of what must be done. Let us, therefore, pledge that each of us, as sovereign country and leader, will do far more in our own country and assist the weaker among us for the sake of our own national

wellbeing in a globalized and ecologically borderless world. And let us, as leaders, strive to convince our nations of the merit of doing so. Let us be worthy of the trust our people have placed in us to lead and to lead in the right direction.

In this regard, it is most heartening that even in those countries that may appear to stand in the way of international consensus, there is praiseworthy action. Where collective endeavour has failed, much has been done and more continues at the sovereign, subnational, community and individual levels. Many nations, businesses and communities are providing cutting edge leadership and examples of sustainable action in ways that raise hope. The wealth of knowledge and technology created by brilliant scholars, scientists and economists to promote sustainable living, which has remained largely on the fringes of academia and politics, is now entering mainstream. And more and more countries, communities and businesses are beginning to make the sane choice.

My own country will continue to stay the sustainable course.

At COP 15 in Copenhagen, Bhutan pledged to remain a net carbon sink in perpetuity. This, and our belief in the web of interdependence among all life forms, has led to our biodiversity and watershed protection measures, our wildlife corridors, and the many other ways in which the natural environment is placed at the very core of all our development policies. With 80% forest cover, Bhutan is today more green than the little over 60% we started with some 50 years ago. More than half of our land has been placed under full environmental protection in national parks and wilderness areas. And it gives us pride to realize that some 53% of the ecosystem services generated in Bhutan are benefiting other countries. But conversely, we know that greenhouse gas emissions from countries as far as the Americas are causing, among other devastation, the rapid melting of glaciers in our mountains to threaten floods in our valleys.

All our schools and colleges have volunteered to become green and waste free. From the coming budget year, Bhutanese will begin paying green tax on several goods. Tuesdays are now pedestrian days in all urban centers with inspiration flowing directly from our bicyclist King and royal family. Even as we take advantage of Bhutan's emergence as a popular destination, we remain resolute adherents to the principle of high value, low impact tourism.

And as rural prosperity and urban wellbeing become a development theme, we are determined to become the first wholly organic food producing country by weaning our farmers and crops away from chemical dependency to ensure food security and sustainable agriculture. Bhutanese farmers have begun to plant the seeds of a new and sustainable society.

We have become mindful of how development or economic gains come at unaffordable but unmeasured costs. Sustainable National Wellbeing Accounts are now being developed to reflect the comprehensive natural, social/cultural, human, and other such costs of economic activity, and the first valuations of such capital were released in February this year. Through this full cost accounting system, we confine GDP to its original purpose as a

measure of marketed economic activity, and as a measure of what we pay for those activities. And it gives me immense pleasure to report that the World Bank is now about to take the lead in promoting green accounting by enrolling and supporting several countries and corporations that will maintain such accounts.

Bhutan's commitment to sustainable development with the clear long term vision of attaining the ultimate state of being has been conditioned for 40 years by our development model of Gross National Happiness or GNH. It is a holistic paradigm that emphasizes sustainability, equity, human values, ecological resilience and good governance. Once we knew what we wanted, choosing the means have not been as difficult as might otherwise have been. All our policies and projects are now cleared only after being passed under a GNH lens to examine their GNH value to society.

The unravelling of the GDP-based economic model and the immeasurable damage that it has caused to society have attracted interest in Bhutan's sustainable development paradigm. Since the UNDP facilitated the introduction of the concept to the world in 1999 at the Asia Pacific Millennium Summit, its acceptance by the international community has been marked by the unanimous adoption of the resolution on Wellbeing and Happiness by the UN General Assembly in July 2011. This led to the very successful High Level Meeting on the subject in April this year, at the UN Headquarters in New York. There the debate was greatly enriched by the contributions of the President of Costa Rica, the Secretary-General of the UN, the Presidents of the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council, the UNDP Administrator, many high officials, leading economists and scholars including Nobel Laureates, civil society, business, and spiritual leaders.

I was most honoured to be able to submit the report of that meeting to the Secretary-General for onward distribution to all member states. The report recommends that wellbeing and happiness must form the basis and reason for sustainable, holistic and inclusive development. The meeting rekindled my faith in humankind; in its goodness and innate wisdom; and in the enormous potential to build a sane, secure, and happy world. Copies of the Report are being distributed at this Conference.

As urged by the High-Level Meeting, His Majesty the King of Bhutan is now establishing an international working group of experts to elaborate the architecture of the new development paradigm that was agreed upon by the Meeting. It is intended that the group will work closely with the High Level Panel just appointed by Secretary General Ban Ki Moon so that the UNGA, in 2013, will have before it two separate but complementary reports. It is our hope that these might help the world to pave a new path toward wellbeing and happiness.

My country believes that not only is Rio the last opportunity for humanity to prevent its own extinction but for civilization to truly flourish. Sustainability, wellbeing and happiness are still within our reach. Let us seize the opportunity here and now, for in another twenty years, humanity will have crossed the point of no return.

I wish the conference great success. Thank you and Tashi Delek!