Education for Sustainable Development: Linking Learning and Happiness

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Happiness is the ultimate desire of every human being. All else is a means to achieve this end. It should logically follow then that all individual and collective efforts should be devoted to this common goal.

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His Excellency Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley
Head of the Royal Government of Bhutan

Values and Development:
Gross National Happiness

Keynote speech delivered at the UNDP Regional
Millennium Meeting for Asia and the Pacific

30 October - 1 November, 1998

Seoul, Republic of Korea

This pamphlet provides a brief overview of the development concept of Gross National Happiness and its linkages with Education for Sustainable Development as a means for promoting 'Happiness' through quality learning.

1 WHY HAPPINESS?

Social philosophers have held that human beings live in two states, one of doing and the other of being. It is the state of being that humanity relates with welfare and happiness and it is this concern with welfare and happiness that has driven human societies to continuously seek to organize life and work so that happiness and welfare can be achieved. Economic activity, work and income have played a great part in defining whether happiness has been achieved, especially in modern industrial societies where economic growth is the driving force of humanity. This growth is measured often as the total output of a country's domestic economic activity and expressed through the indicator, GDP (Gross Domestic Product). An increase in GDP, however, indicates only a limited sense of well being in the present and does not provide an indication of confidence, or security, in the future. Even if increases in economic growth lead to higher incomes for some, it does not necessarily mean an increase in the wealth for the overall population or prosperity for the environment. On the contrary, history has shown that an increase in economic growth can be associated with an increase in the income gap between the rich and poor, environmental degradation and a reduced sense of community and family life as, for example, longer working hours result in less time spent with family. All of these factors limit a sense of environmental, individual and community wellbeing. It is the search for an overall sense of wellbeing that has generated momentum for Happiness and for measuring states of wellbeing, in addition to moving away from more narrow GDP-types of measures.

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2 WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

A. What is Happiness?

Happiness is more than a state of wellbeing; it is a state of wellbeing arising out of a notion of contentment – to be content and, therefore, happy. A state of contentment must also ensure that individual happiness does not stand in the way of larger societal wellbeing or public good. Major contributions to the discussion on wellbeing have developed through, among others, Buddhist societies, from His Majesty the King of Thailand's notion of the 'self-sufficiency economy' to similar concepts found in Ladakh and Leh in the Himalayas. Many Pacific Island societies and indigenous communities the world over have also evolved concepts of wellbeing and happiness which are closely related to their local knowledge systems.

A major contribution to the discussion on the measure of *'Happiness'* in development circles today is closely related to the Bhutanese concept of Gross National Happiness, or GNH. The GNH concept of *'happiness'* is closely related to the word *gaki* in the Bhutanese national language, Dzongkha, in which *ga* means 'happy' and *ki* means 'peace' (Ura, forthcoming). This idea of happiness is well accepted and understood in many Asian cultures which have tried to retain a philosophical notion of 'contentment'. 'Contentment' is also closely related to the parallel notion of 'restraint' found in early Jewish, Christian and Islamic societies and other cultures. The Ten Commandments in the

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Old Testament, for example, underlie this notion of restraint through the words, "Thou shalt..." Similar notions of restraint are also expressed in the Qur'an. In addition, a number of early civilisations and indigenous societies including those in the West also had different notions of contentment which correspond to requirements of restraint. The paths between the notions of contentment and restraint and a narrow understanding of happiness as a material sense of wellbeing became more and more divergent with the rise of consumer societies in many industrial economies. To reflect the GNH concept of 'happiness' in English, therefore, alternative terms are often used such as *contentment*, *wellbeing, utility, livability* and *inner peace*.

The following discussion on GNH and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) links the concept of happiness with the notion of guiding development and progress in terms of *wellbeing* through *contentment*. ESD is a process through which societies change their ways of thinking and behaviour toward life, work and wellbeing. ESD aims to empower people to link personal wellbeing with societal wellbeing and the sustainability of ecosystems on which all human life is dependent. ESD re-establishes the link between contentment and the importance of restraint, not only as a moral choice, but as being central to collective human survival.

B. The movement towards Happiness

Movement toward Happiness-related development and philosophy can be found throughout history. For example, in India, J.C. Kumarappa, known as Mahatma Gandhi's economist, collaborated closely with Gandhi to create an economic theory consistent with Gandhi's principles of non-violence, including the propagation of a non-violent economy. Gandhi was a consistent critic of the industrial economy which he saw as breeding violence. In response to Gandhi's ideology, Kumarappa produced his famous work, 'The Economy of Permanence.' As modern economics limits consideration of ecological sustainability or distributive justice, Gandhian economics tried to address these issues. Kumarappa's work and Gandhi's own critique of the industrial economy five decades ago are important forerunners to the discussions on sustainability and the mobilization of alternative paradigms of development such as GNH and sustainable development.

Today, global awareness and support for 'Happiness' as an alternative focus for development continue to grow rapidly.

Western media have aired documentaries and published articles on the concept of Happiness; international conferences have been held to explore the Happiness concept and how it might be measured; UNICEF released a report providing 'An overview of child wellbeing in rich countries' based on children's health, security, education, and sense of being loved (UNICEF, 2007); and the New Economics Foundation released the Happy Planet Index, an indicator measuring 'happiness' according to a country's average life expectancy, general feeling of life satisfaction, and ecological footprint (NEF, 2006).

One of the most significant steps for developing Happiness-related policy outside of Bhutan has taken place in Thailand through His Majesty the King's Sufficiency Economy theory. Through inputs such as honesty and integrity, coupled by processes of moderation, consideration and self-reliance, Sufficiency Economy attempts to promote balance among economy, society, culture and the environment, similar to GNH. Sufficiency Economy theory has strong conceptual links with GNH including outcomes associated with happiness (Puntasen and Prayukvong, 2007).

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WHAT IS GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS?

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A. A brief history of GNH

Gross National Happiness (GNH) originated in Bhutan as an integrated concept of development as opposed to a gross measure of Happiness measured by material wellbeing in terms of production and consumption indexes. Located in the middle of the Himalayas, Bhutan was virtually cut-off from much of the world until the late 1950s. At that time, subsistence farming was still prevalent throughout most of the country, only a few hundred students attended primary school and the average life expectancy was less than 40 years. The King of Bhutan intended to develop the country gradually to minimize the influences from the outside world on the Bhutanese way of life. However, as a result of the Tibetan uprising in 1959, the desire for Bhutan to maintain independence, sovereignty and security as a nation state took precedence over gradual development and Bhutan opened up to its neighbors and the rest of the world (Priesner, 1999).

Due to Bhutan's isolation for centuries, the outside world had little influence on the knowledge, technology and values inside the country. As a result Bhutan was able to move forward with development posited upon a strong set of Buddhist and traditional values which laid a foundation for policy priorities in support of the Bhutanese way of life. Soon after the 1959 uprising faded, policies toward cultural preservation were adopted with the intention of minimizing and balancing influences from the outside world. Bhutan aimed to continue their socio-economic system founded on Buddhist and traditional principles. Bhutan also strived to maintain its political identity which was also closely embedded in Buddhist tradition (Priesner, 1999). Rather than focusing on increasing wellbeing through material economic development, Bhutan's development philosophy revolved around the notion of 'happiness.'

In the late 1960s, the late King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck first articulated his thoughts on Bhutan's goal for development as making "the people prosperous and happy," putting emphasis on the importance of happiness (*Kuensel Vol 2.* as cited in Priesner, 1999, p. 28). The term Gross National Happiness was then formulated in the late 1980s when His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck introduced the concept to the rest of the world (*Royal Government of Bhutan [RGoB], 1999*). GNH rejects the notion that a direct relationship exists between economic wealth and happiness; rather, maximizing gross national happiness revolves around four complementary and mutually reinforcing goals (Thingley, 1998):

- economic prosperity;
- environmental preservation;
- cultural promotion; and
- good governance.

These goals are often referred to as the Four Pillars of GNH.

B. Economic prosperity and GNH

Through GNH development, Happiness is the core objective of economic activity. Economic prosperity, however, is not an end in itself, but rather one component acting among four mutually reinforcing pillars of happiness. Some

Bhutanese citizens, however, do see economic wellbeing as a key pillar in GNH development. In a study conducted by Rinzin, Vermeulen and Glasbergen (2007) on Bhutanese public perceptions of GNH, those who emphasized the significance of economic prosperity noted that "without economic development environmental and cultural preservation is not possible" (p. 58).

Though economic activity may be a key pillar in the GNH development balance, this notion should not be confused with the idea that economic development outweighs the other three. Economic prosperity is simply one of the keys to maintaining harmony among all four pillars.

D. GNH vs. GDP

Whereas an increase in GDP suggests an increase in wellbeing due to economic growth, GDP does not take into account the pillars of environmental preservation, cultural promotion, and good governance as does GNH. For example, GDP does not consider how hard a person works or the time spent away from family to increase income; nor does GDP take into account the impact production has on the environment and culture in an effort to become prosperous. While GNH aims to establish and maintain harmony among the four pillars, it maintains a holistic approach toward development with the objective of promoting culture and preserving the environment, in addition to promoting economic prosperity and social wellbeing. Two centuries of capitalist industrial economic growth in the world and the consciousness it has produced in both the West and the East have appeared to create the illusion that any discussion that focuses away from 'economic growth', such as GNH, is opposed to 'economic efficiency.' However, conventional economic growth models, as many economists have

now come to accept, have many inefficiencies which are negative influences on society and nature. As conventional economists like to put it, "a trade off" exists between efficient economic growth, society and the environment. Through a GNH concept of development, the central aim is not to achieve economic or material gain, but rather maintain balance among the four pillars in an effort to maximize Happiness. Under this notion, Bhutan has previously refused international support if tied to deliverables that disrupt the harmony of the four pillars of GNH (Priesner, 1999).
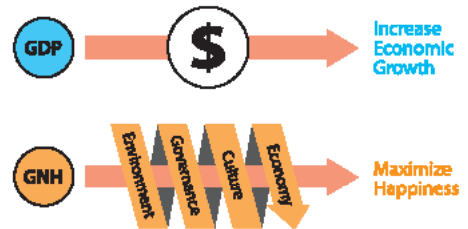

Figure 1. GDP development vs. GNH development

Figure 1 depicts the differences between GDP and GNH-focused development. In many cases, development with an emphasis on GDP strives for the most direct course toward a goal of increasing economic growth. National policies and programmes are then designed with economic efficiency and growth in mind. Development that focuses on the concept of GNH, however, revolves around harmonizing the four pillars and an overall efficiency among both society and natural systems with no "trade offs" which cause harm to our environment in its broadest sense.

4 WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

A. Sustainable development

Prior to introducing the concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), it is important to share a common understanding of what 'sustainable development' means. The 1987 *Brundtland Report* by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987). Expanding on the importance of the Bruntland Report, more than 187 countries at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro adopted the Rio Declaration, setting out twenty-seven principles for achieving sustainable development whilst adopting Agenda 21, a guiding document for sustainable development.

This discussion on GNH and ESD views sustainable development in light of the Brundtland Report, the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21 based on three pillars: society, economy, and the environment;

- **Society:** an understanding of social institutions and their role in change and development, as well as participatory systems which provide opportunity for the expression of opinion.

- **Economy:** skills to earn a living as well as a sensitivity to the impact of economic growth on society and on the environment.

- **Environment:** an awareness of resources, the fragile nature of the physical environment and the effects of human activity and decisions on the environment.

As an underlying dimension, a fourth pillar of sustainable development has also been included, culture;

- **Culture:** ways of being, relating, believing that reinforce harmonious living and differ according to context, history and tradition.

Sustainable development aims to establish a balance between society, the economy and environment. As these pillars become balanced, ideally wellbeing increases in line with sustainable development. How the relationship between these three pillars and the natural world is perceived, however, is dependent upon each individual's local circumstances and worldview.
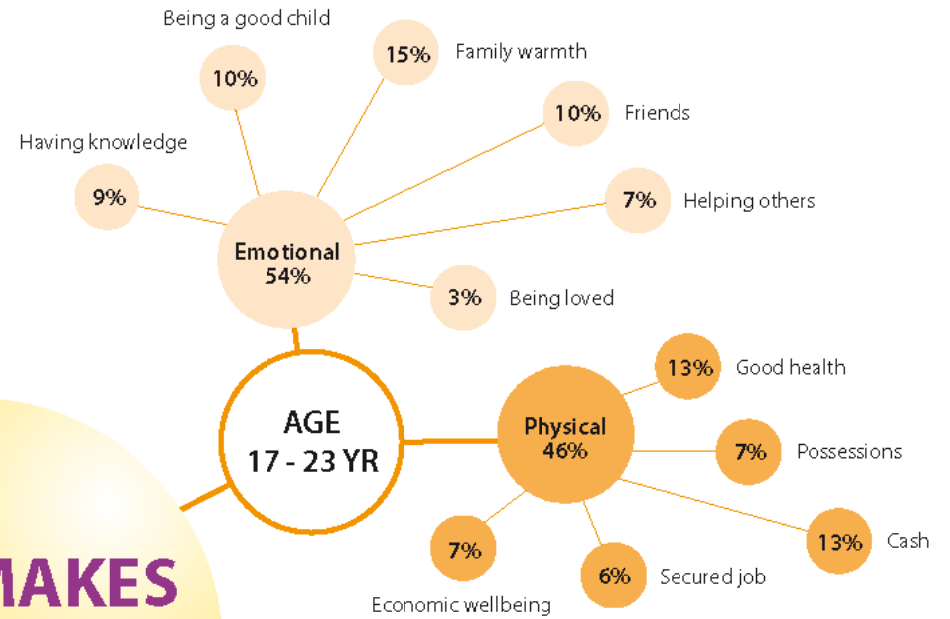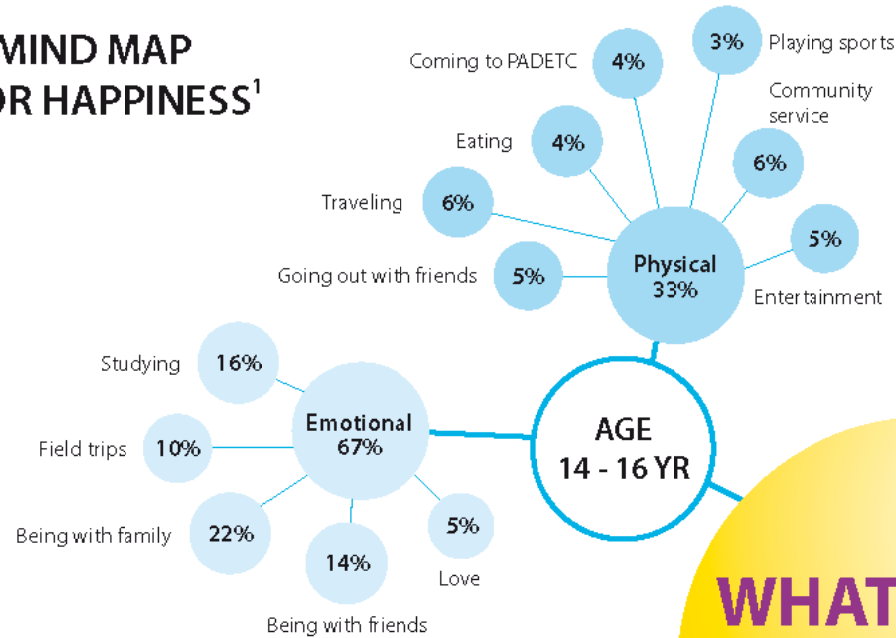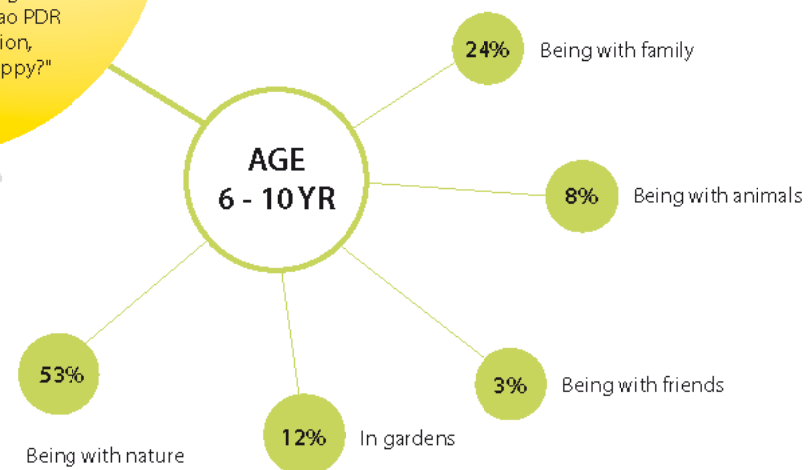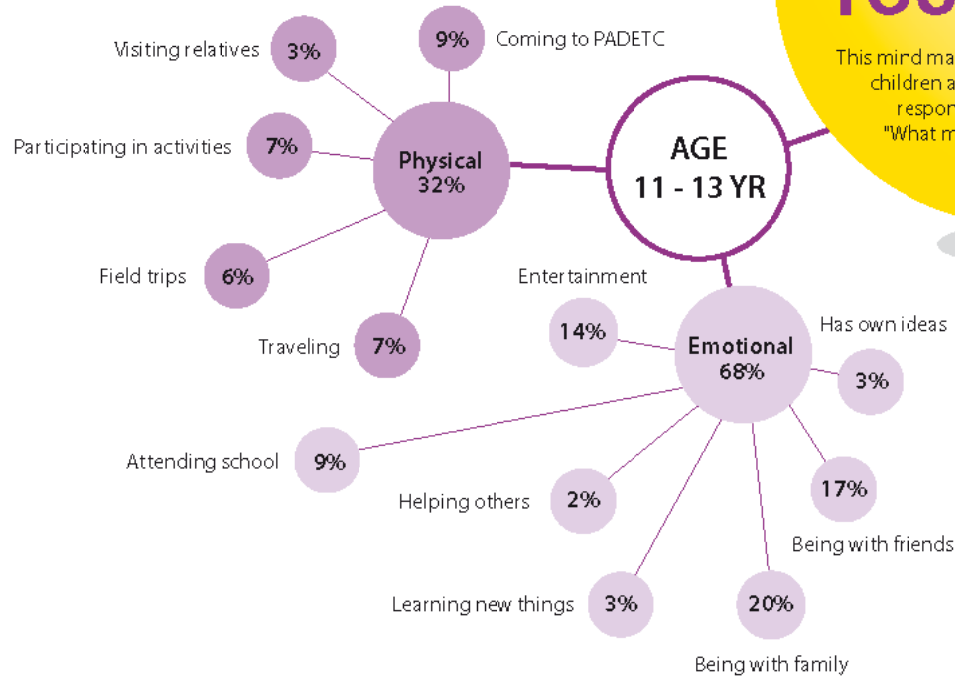
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A MIND MAP FOR HAPPINESS[1]

WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY?

This mind map is based on thoughts from children and youth in the Lao PDR responding to the question, "What makes you most happy?"

AGE 14 - 16 YR

Physical 33%
- 4% Coming to PADETC
- 3% Playing sports
- 4% Eating
- 6% Community service
- 6% Traveling
- 5% Going out with friends
- 5% Entertainment

Emotional 67%
- 16% Studying
- 10% Field trips
- 22% Being with family
- 14% Being with friends
- 5% Love

AGE 17 - 23 YR

Emotional 54%
- 10% Being a good child
- 15% Family warmth
- 9% Having knowledge
- 10% Friends
- 7% Helping others
- 3% Being loved

Physical 46%
- 13% Good health
- 7% Possessions
- 13% Cash
- 6% Secured job
- 7% Economic wellbeing

AGE 11 - 13 YR

Physical 32%
- 3% Visiting relatives
- 9% Coming to PADETC
- 7% Participating in activities
- 6% Field trips
- 7% Traveling

Emotional 68%
- 14% Entertainment
- 3% Has own ideas
- 9% Attending school
- 2% Helping others
- 17% Being with friends
- 3% Learning new things
- 20% Being with family

AGE 6 - 10 YR
- 24% Being with family
- 8% Being with animals
- 3% Being with friends
- 12% In gardens
- 53% Being with nature

[1] Information contributed by the Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC), Vientiane, Lao PDR.

B. Education for Sustainable Development

ESD is a vision of education that seeks to empower all people to assume responsibility for creating a sustainable future. ESD goes beyond teaching about the knowledge and skills associated with understanding the environment, society, and economics; it aims to foster respect and understanding for the values and perspectives necessary for nurturing sustainable livelihoods, as well as build capacity to enable people to act upon these understandings.

UNESCO describes ESD as striving to promote sustainable development through four thrusts which originated in Chapter 36 of Agenda 21. These include:

- **Promoting and improving quality basic education** to share knowledge, skills and values throughout a lifetime of learning in such a way that it supports citizens to lead sustainable livelihoods;

- **Re-orienting existing education programmes,** from pre-school to universities. Emphasis lies on re-orienting curricula, as opposed to developing new curricula, to encourage content and pedagogy that support sustainable

development with a clear focus on developing the knowledge, skills, values and perspectives associated with change for a sustainable future;

- **Building public understanding and awareness** through community education, including informal education through media; and

- **Providing practical training** to businesses, institutions and civil society to build capacity to carry out sustainable practices at the local, provincial and national levels.

ESD is based on the premise of "learning by doing". Each country, at the national and local level, may choose to address ESD in the context of its own needs and aspirations for sustainable development. Thus, there can be no "one-size fits all" approach to ESD. The challenges in formal education, for example, will be quite different to the challenges of engaging people in ESD through non-formal education. How a small coastal community addresses ESD will, similarly, be different to the activities of an urban community. Examples of ESD can be found in ongoing education initiatives such as peace education, health education, values education and environmental education, to name a few.

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C. The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014)

The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2002 and officially launched in March 2005. The DESD was formulated in response to an increase in the income gap between rich and poor in the 1990s, an increase in conflict after the end of the Cold War, and long-term environmental degradation. The recommendation for the Decade was proposed by the Japanese delegation at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 as an effective way to increase awareness and understanding about sustainability and emphasize education's role in fostering sustainable practices. The Decade is part of a wider mission to promote sustainable development on a global scale and links to other international initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The Decade of ESD envisions a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from education and learn the values, behaviours and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation. The overarching goal of the Decade is to integrate the principles, values, and practice of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning. Part of achieving this goal entails understanding and addressing issues of sustainability that affect countries, communities and individuals, such as poverty and hunger, HIV/AIDS and environmental degradation. In addition, developing understanding and respect for our own values, the values of society and the values of others around the world are also important for the Decade, as is learning how our local actions can play a role in the global transformation toward sustainable development (UNESCO, 2005).

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5 ESD : LINKING LEARNING AND HAPPINESS[2]

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A. Modeling learning for wellbeing and happiness

If we compare the four pillars of GNH and sustainable development, we can see overlap among the pillars of environment, culture, economics and society/governance. With this in mind, how can ESD play a role in promoting sustainable development and thus quality learning for wellbeing and happiness?

If we step back and look at sustainability and education from a holistic perspective, education will be sustainable only if it operates within a model of development that is also sustainable. Similarly, for development to be

sustainable, it must be continuously nurtured and guided by learning from real life experiences that aim to achieve sustainable development. Education must, therefore, be at the center of sustainable development for either to be successful.

Figure 2 presents one model of sustainable development in which ESD forms a foundation for development. The model presents a balance among the four pillars of GNH and sustainable development economic development, environmental preservation, cultural promotion and social wellbeing. The four pillars are anchored in ESD and are a part
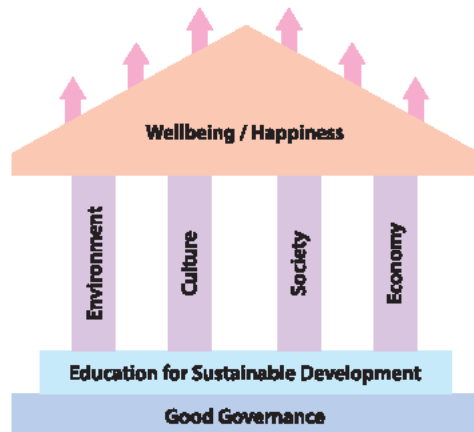

Figure 2. Model of sustainable development (Somphone, 2006)

[2] Ideas in sections 5 and 6 are based on the presentation by S. Somphone (2006) on *The Interdependence between Education and Sustainable Development* at the 10ᵗʰ UNESCO-APEID International Conference in Bangkok, 6-9 December 2006.

of the education process. At the base of the model is "good governance", which supports and promotes the holistic development represented throughout the entire model.

In a nutshell, this model intends to promote participation in sustainable development with its roots in education and an ultimate outcome of wellbeing, or happiness. How the components of this model are interpreted will ultimately depend on an individual's local circumstances and worldview. For example, some might associate the pillar of society with spiritual wellbeing, or education of the *heart and mind*, to emphasize the importance of learning about oneself within (e.g. one's values) in addition to learning about the external world (e.g. the values of one's society and the values of others). The social pillar may also be seen to encourage good governance through youth leadership, building self-confidence and participation in decision-making for sustainable development. These traits in education would have profound, long-term effects on the base of "good governance" which would ideally echo similar characteristics, resulting in a virtuous cycle towards happiness and wellbeing.

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B. Learning for happiness in action

Increasing wellbeing and happiness through education requires more emphasis on learning and less on teaching. Linking learning and happiness through ESD can be a part of any number of formal, non-formal and informal education settings. Through formal and non-formal education, for example, story telling can be carried out by learners of all ages. Story telling is not only fun, but it promotes creative thinking, greatly improves reading skills and encourages team work and the development of leadership skills, communication skills and confidence. Through informal education, media can contribute by going beyond the introduction of issues, as is often the trend today, to explaining the underlying causes of the issue, possible solutions and questions for discussion which promote critical thinking on a societal level for sustainable development and wellbeing.

ESD programmes demonstrating the link between learning and wellbeing and happiness are beginning to emerge throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The following programmes provide a few examples of ESD in action:

In small communities throughout the Pacific islands, ESD approaches are helping to engage communities in decision-making about their own lives. Drama and comedy are used to help communities share their concerns about their economic and social wellbeing. In Vanuatu, for example, many villages are visited periodically by a traveling theatre group known as Wan Smolbag. This group puts on plays that simultaneously entertain and inform villagers about important issues such as HIV/AIDS and malaria-reduction through mosquito control. A past theme of the main play was concerned with the need to conserve sea turtles. This play initiated selecting 'a turtle

monitor' in over 100 coastal Vanuatu villages to help encourage turtle conservation (Johannes & Hickey, 2004).

In Thailand, Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn has, since 1980, undertaken numerous projects to develop the wellbeing of disadvantaged children and youth in remote areas of Thailand. The implementation of projects focuses on "Total School Development" by addressing food and nutrition, health and hygiene, education, training in vocational skills and cooperatives, and environmental and cultural conservation. The philosophy behind this approach is to use the school as the centre of learning for the community and to use the community as a learning resource for the school. The projects have yielded a positive impact in enhancing the potential of many children, reinforcing their self-sufficiency and improving the wellbeing of the community.

The Participatory Development Training Center in Laos engages students, teachers, parents and community members in project-based Happy Learning. Through community-based projects, students develop the knowledge and skills present in the national curriculum while learning through locally-relevant experiences. Through Happy Learning projects, students help organize and conduct field visits to forests or ponds to identify plants and animals and their relationship with the natural environment; set up recycle banks at schools where students are responsible for weighing and organizing recyclables, calculating revenues and dividing up earnings; and raising earth worms, including observation of earthworm diets, calculating the weight of food, adjusting feeding habits and eventually selling earthworms to fish, chicken and frog farms.

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In the Asia-Pacific region and around the world, Gaia Education is working with community leaders, students, educators, NGOs and others through an innovative curriculum based on holistic learning for sustainable community design and development. The Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) curriculum is based on four core dimensions of sustainability (worldview, social, economic and ecological) and draws on the experience and expertise of some of the most successful ecovillages and communities from around the world. EDE promotes sustainability in communities through educating for the transition to a fully sustainable culture – embracing a holistic worldview, establishing consensus decision-making, relocalising community economics and restoring

6 MOVING AHEAD: LEARNING FOR HAPPINESS

As support for GNH-related development and indicators grows, education for sustainable development will be key to fostering the changes in behavior at the individual, community and global level necessary to achieve sustainable development, and ultimately wellbeing and happiness. There are opportunities at every turn to incorporate sustainable development-related ideas into curricula, such as life skills, values, global perspectives and knowledge, from content relevant to the social, cultural and environmental contexts of learnersí lives.

There are several ways to initiate the process toward GNH-related development through ESD. One way, as educators, is to listen to and include learners in decision making so they become a part of, and remain at, the center of the development model. Second, improving pedagogy can also help; for example, incorporating stimulating approaches to learning, such as student-centered learning, active learning, and project-based learning, will be key to developing wellbeing and happiness. A third method for initiating change toward happiness involves taking the four pillars of development into account in education. For instance, teachers can develop lesson plans to incorporate relevant sustainability-related content in such a way that satisfies the national and local education standards. Community participation in lesson planning will also be an asset as it provides an opportunity for students to learn about their community from the community members themselves.

Somphone (2006) articulates a vision for developing education that links learning with wellbeing and happiness as follows:

Let's plant the seeds of good leadership and quality education among our new generation, starting right from birth and through the various stages of education, in and out of the school environment. If we do this right, we will be contributing to molding a generation who will be physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy, creative and dynamic; take pride in their culture and history; respectful of diversity, protective of the environment; and ensure a sustainable and peaceful future for the generations to come.

ESD has great potential to plant this seed and engage people in environmentally, socially and culturally relevant life-long learning for sustainable development, wellbeing and happiness.

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7 QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION:

1. Ask friends or colleagues, "What is happiness?" After a short period of discussion, ask yourselves how your conversation is related to Education for Sustainable Development.

2. Can access to education for girls, children in remote areas, children with disabilities and children who don't speak the national language promote Gross National Happiness? Why or why not?

3. How can we involve children in the process of decision making to maximize happiness?

4. What are your pillars of GNH? (i.e. what truly makes people happy in your national context and culture?) How can education facilitate development of these pillars in order to maximize happiness where you live?

5. What is needed for happiness to lead to sustainable behavior (including sustainable policy-making practices) that will ultimately lead to sustainable societies?

6. According to Seligman (2004), it is possible to identify our personal strengths and values that make each individual truly happy. How can ESD help identify these strengths and values? Is it possible to identify the strengths and values of a society as part of the effort to maximize happiness on a societal level?

7. A common argument against progress toward sustainable development from a Western economic viewpoint is that people are just not willing to sacrifice what they have for others. However, some people say we shouldn't have to sacrifice, but we can share. What examples of sharing can we see today that could potentially increase happiness? How can sharing be promoted through ESD?

8. According to Rizin, et al (2007), as a country moves toward "an advanced industrial society, people tend to be happier and more satisfied with their lives as a whole. However, as they move beyond a given threshold, people begin to emphasize quality of life concerns..." (p. 56). What examples can we see today of industrialized societies where people are concerned about the quality of life? How can education (i.e. ESD) play a role in increasing the quality of life toward happiness?

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The happiness and prosperity that people seek can be achieved, but by actions that are ethical in intention and execution... True prosperity is something creative because it gives benefit to others and to people in general as well.[3]

"

His Majesty the King of Thailand

10 July, 1975

Chulalongkorn University
Bangkok, Thailand

[3] Obtained from UNDP. 2007. *Thailand human development report 2007: Sufficiency economy and human development*, p. 34. Bangkok: UNDP.