



The Buddhist perspective on measuring wellbeing and happiness in sustainable development

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Abstract

The idea of economic progress became commonly discussed with the advent of the work of Adam Smith and thereafter even while economists were starting to measure national income, the sustainability of growth was still questioned. A lot of recent debate on the search for proper indicators for “development” goes beyond limitations of GDP as a sole measure for societal progress. In this context, measuring and understanding of subjective social development has become one of the major challenges in terms of formulating appropriate indices. It is seen that, happiness being promoted as an unconventional indicator of measuring sustainability of both man and environment in the present development discourse through several attempts such as World Happiness Summit, World Happiness Report, Gross National Happiness Index (GNHI) and Better Life Index (BLI) etc. However, those attempts still have failed to explain many of the factors that impact most on people’s material, social and spiritual lives. In order to fill this vacuum, it is assumed that Buddhist teachings on happiness can be effectively applied with the concept of compassion (Metta). Based on this assumption, the present study aims to identify the Buddhist perspective on happiness in relation to the sustainable development and to find out its applicability in formulating indicators for judging the real happiness. Methodology of the research has set up focusing the literature survey and content interpretation based on the primary and secondary sources. Findings of the paper highlights three important Buddhist approaches for using happiness as a social development indicator; interdependency, favourable relationship and total satisfaction. It is revealed that the social development is motivated by Buddhism with emphasis on happiness where material, social and spiritual life overlap. It is recommended that four-fold happiness should be taken into consideration in measuring social development; physical, mental, social and spiritual.

Keywords: Buddhism, happiness, social development, sustainability, wellbeing

Introduction

Using economic and social indicators to measure the “whole development” has failed to address many of the factors that impact on sustainability of man and environment. A lot of recent debate on the search for suitable indicators for “development” goes beyond limitations of GDP as a sole measure for societal progress. Today, it has been realized that, in order to measure the whole development, attention should focus on the total wellbeing of both man and environment in the context of sustainability. The idea of economic progress became commonly discussed with the advent of the work of Adam Smith and thereafter even while economists were starting to measure national income, the sustainability of growth was still questioned. The common argument is that Gross National Production (GNP) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) cannot be the benchmark for achieving community satisfaction. An increase in GNP or NDP that just arises from inflation does not represent an improvement in wellbeing. Ian Castles (1997) has pointed out that the human Development Index (HDI) had failed in measuring wealth and welfare while emphasizing the idea of Roland Wilson (1946), that wellbeing is somewhat wider than economic welfare. Robert Kennedy has pointed that the GNP measures neither people’s wit nor their courage; neither people’s wisdom nor their learning; neither people’s compassion nor their devotion to the country; it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010) [4]. In order to fill this vacuum, many attempts have been made particularly for converting GDP

into sophisticated measures of genuine progress. Tobin (1972) introduced ‘measure of economic welfare’ for modifying GDP to derive a better measure of true progress and Daly and Cobb (1989) formulated an Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare too. The United Nations’ Human Development Index (HDI), which combines education and life expectancy with per capita GDP has become a widely used development indicator which also give weight to other aspects of wellbeing. The Canadian Index of Wellbeing is another such index, giving equal weight to eight aspects: living standards, healthy populations, community vitality, democratic engagement, leisure and culture, time use, education, and the environment (Hawkins 2014) [11, 12]. Several additional measurements of welfare have been explored for some time now linking with happiness and satisfaction; for example, Kingdom of Bhutan has introduced ‘Gross National Happiness Index’ (GNHI) which has its root within a Buddhist philosophy of meaning in life and which encompasses four pillars of sustainable development, cultural values, the natural environment and good governance. However, such indices have still failed to explain many of the factors that impact most on people’s material, social and spiritual lives (Singh 2014). Still a question is there- how to reduce the gap between material and social development? Are the people satisfied with existing system and how do people become happy? In the light of foregoing, it is clear that there is a research gap which needs to be addressed in order to find many possibilities to strengthen all aspects of happiness in the

development discourse. Hence the main objective of this study is to seek the possibilities to apply Buddhist principles for promoting wellbeing through happiness as development indicators by addressing the gap between economic wealth and social satisfaction.

Research Problem

Over the time, it can be seen that GDP fails to take into account the social and environmental costs of so-called progress. Therefore we can see a gradual transition of development indicators from economic to holistic perspective. It is clear that the attention should be focused to the wellbeing of both human and natural environment in the context of sustainable development. By considering the different aspect of development, the United Nations introduced eight MDGs which range from halving extreme poverty rates to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education. In 2016 again, The UN introduced Sustainable development goals (SDGs) which consist 17 targets will be expected to use to frame their agendas and political policies over the next 15 years. Most of these goals more or less have focused both human and environmental wellbeing.

An economic aspect, social development has also been focused by the world from only objective lenses. The subjective well-being of the communities has totally neglected by the traditional development paradigms. Based on this aspect, social development has widely been defined from employment, production and welfare perspectives. Therefore, the subjective reality of the social sustainability which is very important to human happiness and social quality have not been touched. In social development aspect, happiness or the satisfaction mainly depend on three fundamentals; capability, equity and sustainability. As Kittiprapas *et al.* (2009) ^[14] mentioned the objective well-being may not correlate with happiness or subjective well-being with the emphasis of the applicability of subjective well-being together with objective well-being measurement, which will be useful for policies aiming to increase happiness of the people. In the popular development context, it is now believed that the whole outcome of the development process more or less should be sustainable. Though, there are many meanings and interpretations of sustainability, widely three categories have become orthodox; economic, social and environmental sustainability. Present holistic ideologies promote the use of sustainability which is directed to establishing appropriate material wellbeing, non-harming in economic movement, and realizing the inner freedom from suffering. According to Chambers and Conway (1991) ^[6] social sustainability depends on coping with stress and shocks, dynamic livelihood capabilities and intergenerational sustainability which are interdependent in social development. Social sustainability happens when the formal and informal processes; systems; structures; and relationships actively

support the capacity of present and future generations to create healthy and livable communities. A sustainable society is one that could satisfy its needs without diminishing the chance of the present and future generations. In the light of foregoing, it is clear that there is a research gap which needs to be addressed in order to find many possibilities to strengthen all aspects of social sustainability in the development discourse. Therefore, this research focuses that whether the Buddhist principles can play a vital role for promoting happiness as a key indicator of social development in the present development discourse, and if so, which and how Buddhist concepts can be used to measure the happiness aiming to the sustainable social development.

Methodology

The conceptual framework of the study has been formulated by considering the contradiction between objective and subjective realities of development discourse. First the tangible factors for measuring wellbeing and happiness in the development context were identified as income, education, health, nutrition, sanitation, biodiversity, environmental rules and regulations etc. and then the intangible factors such as equality, freedom, satisfaction, happiness, ecological richness and sustainability that directly affect the happiness and satisfaction of people have been identified through primary and secondary literature sources. Following the above framework used to assess the applicability of Buddhist concepts on promoting wellbeing through happiness for development purposes, the method of textual analysis was used for data analysis. The synonyms used in different teachings were merged and formulated as a common indicator in order to achieve the main objective of the study.

Research Questions

- How to reduce the gap between material and social development?
- Are the people satisfied with existing system and how do people become happy?
- What are the best paths to stimulate a holistic approach to development?
- How to advance methodological approaches to systematize good practices, explore results, and develop suitable measurements of wellbeing?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework has been formulated with two dimensions of wellbeing and happiness such as; measurement aspect and interpretation aspect. First it was identified that the sustainable social development depends on both subjective and objective factors. Then an attempt has been made to create the possible relationships which support to the social sustainability through the concept of wellbeing and happiness (Fig. 01).

Objective

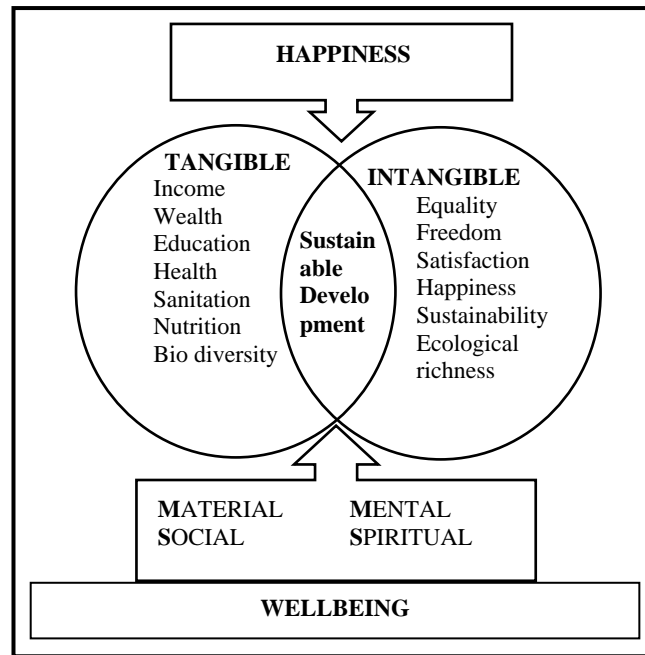


Fig 1: Conceptual Framework

Seeking possibilities to apply Buddhist concepts for promoting wellbeing as a development indicator for addressing the gap between subjective and objective happiness in the context of sustainable development.

Results and Discussion

The term 'eudemonia' had used by Aristotle to explain the nature of happiness highlighting three aspects such as; happiness as a mood; happiness as satisfaction with one's life; happiness as a flourishing and fulfilling life that leaves an impact on society. The latter aspect should be much deepen in promoting it as a social development measure. The significance of using happiness as a development measure has been widely discussed since late 19th century. In 1920 Arthur Pigou emphasized that it would be a great challenge to think about the development indicators in addition to the economic progress. In 1980s happiness became the key concern of development literature particularly for the purpose of measuring social development. Kasma and Stones in 1980 introduced 22 indicators that could be used to constitution of a happiness scale combining Life Satisfaction Index and Philadelphia Geriatric Center Scale. Happiness should not only be a state of mind and a trait, but also be a skill. Unless human beings practice the happiness it wouldn't be experienced. Happiness is an art of living and can be taught, learned and transmitted. Continuous attempt to sustain the happiness by using different techniques such as anger control methods like meditation is a skill need to be developed. On the other way happiness can be treated as a kind of mental disorder of humans that leads to their satisfaction. Buddhism stressed that '*Santutthi paramam dhanam*' ; the most important wealth is the happiness (Dhammapada Verse 209). The word happiness in Buddhist chronicles uses as 'santutthi' or 'santutthatha' and its antonym 'asanthutthi' or 'asantutthatha'. Lokamitra (2004) ^[16] explains the importance of Buddhist view on happiness in the context of development citing the examples with core teachings of the

Blessed One: Lord Buddha. He states; 'The happiness that is dependent on sense and ego gratification is not, according to Buddhist understanding happiness at all. While there may be some occasional enjoyment, there is much more suffering involved. A truer happiness arises from living an increasingly skilful and pure life, having a clear conscience, from generosity and helping others, from friendship, and from creative endeavour. There is the spiritual joy that comes from meditation and finally Enlightenment, the highest happiness man can achieve. The Buddhist life progresses from the realization that conditioned existence is by its very nature unsatisfactory (dukkha) to the realization of Nirvana, the state of being permanently free of dukkha. That state of realization, Enlightenment, is spoken of as the supreme bliss, the state of peace, a state of unrestricted freedom from all bonds. This state remains unshaken no matter how unfavorable external conditions may be. The further one goes in this direction the less dependent one's mind and happiness becomes on external conditions (Enlightenment itself is said to be unconditioned) and the stronger and more positive one's attitudes become. The less likely one is to be drawn into that vortex that the forces of greed in the modern world would like to stimulate and the more one is enabled to take what is useful from developments in the modern world and to leave aside what is not'. Based on the analysis of these all views, this paper has formulated a framework based on the concept of 'total satisfaction' characterized by the happiness. Hence, the main argument of this paper is framed by the concept of wellbeing where material, social and spiritual happiness overlap. Interdependency and favourable relationship among these three-fold happiness make sustainability of the wellbeing. If someone satisfied with the availability of the wealth, the happiness would be the result. The question is whether this status can be measured? This paper revealed that wellbeing of the human beings promotes the happiness followed by the total satisfaction.

The Buddhist view on social development focuses the both

physical and mental satisfaction and security of the society members. The essence of common practice of five precepts in Buddhist virtue, four sublimes for *Brahmavihara*, four means of sustaining a favorable relationship for *Sanghavattu*, Noble eightfold path along with the concepts of compassion and loving kindness are some of guiding principles for total satisfaction at individual, community and global levels. Having considered the key focus of these teachings in relation to the sustainable society, it is revealed that all aspects of Wellbeing depend on the happiness. As Bracho (2004) [10] stated Happiness can be defined as “a state of wellbeing and contentment”. The “wellbeing” component would carry a more external dimension whereas the “contentment” component a more internal one.

As discussed in the introduction of this paper, there has been a prolonged debate about the limitations of the GDP in measuring the social development. Robert Kennedy (2010) [18] had stated that the gross national product does not allow for the health of children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of poetry or the strength of marriages; the intelligence of public debate or the integrity of public officials. It measures neither people’s wit nor their courage; neither wisdom nor learning; neither compassion nor devotion to their country; it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. By introducing the new approach for measuring social development in the field of modern welfare economics, Arthur Pigou (1920) stated that it must be highly skeptical of the view that long term changes in the rate of growth of welfare can be gauged even roughly from changes in the rate of growth of output. Hawkins (2010) suggests four types of wellbeing for measuring the development in present context such as; adjusting GDP to make it more suitable, replacing it with a ‘dashboard’ of alternative indicators, weighting these alternative indicators to form a composite indicator, and using peoples’ own reported assessments of their wellbeing. In the light of foregoing, this paper attempts to fill the vacuum that can be noticed among these approaches when wellbeing practically measured.

The Buddhist view of the wellbeing is more powerful than any other definitions which emphasizes four interdependent aspects; material, social, mental and spiritual. This can be nicely explained with the Dhammapada verse 204; *Arōgyā paramā lābhā* (The Material wellbeing), *santutthi paramam dhanam* (Mental wellbeing), *vissāsa paramā nāthi* (Social wellbeing) and *Nibbānan paramam sukhan* (Spiritual wellbeing).

Material Wellbeing – Satisfaction with the available resources

Mental Wellbeing – Satisfaction with the freedom

Social Wellbeing – Satisfaction with the relationships

Spiritual Wellbeing – Satisfaction with the spiritual practices

Material wellbeing can simply be divided into two parts; human wellbeing and environmental wellbeing. Availability of basic needs and the accessibility to the services provide the satisfactory stage for the people who seek the freedom, good relationships and spiritual practices. To be more precise, total satisfaction depends on how they are able to acquire the physical, human, social, natural and financial assets. According to the current literature on happiness, many primary indicators have been formulated but most of them are only on material wellbeing. As such some of the happiness indicators are; having foods (quality and quantity), evacuating three times a day or as many times as one eats (the capacity of elimination of body waste as a simple indicator of bodily health), participating in food production or preparation for oneself or others, being able to produce as much as possible of what one consumes, having access to information, instruction and training in ways to live better, having work to do and with pleasure, being able to obtain a comfortable, spacious and adequate place to live in near one’s place of work, getting care, and the possibility of cure and compassion in case of illness or death, being able to feel protected and secure in the society in which one lives, being able to enjoy Nature without damaging it, as well as caring for it, enjoying air (including proper breathing), water, light and space in sufficient natural quality and quantity; and sleeping well and waking up rested etc. (Frank Bracho 2004) [10]. The satisfaction with the freedom may include some primary contentment such as; being able to express creativity, being respected and respecting others, being able to express one’s feelings and thoughts freely, having a personal ethical code and being able to cooperate and share with others (Keshawa Bhat 2012). Unless a community get rid of vulnerable situations, they are unable to feel freedom. Without the freedom, sustaining the good relationships and practicing spiritual beliefs wouldn’t become a reality. According to Ambekar (1982), Buddhism teaches social freedom, intellectual freedom, economic freedom and political freedom. It teaches equality, equality not between man and man only but between man and woman. It would be difficult to find a religious teacher to compare with the Buddha whose teaching embraced so many aspects of the social life of a people and whose doctrines are so modern and whose main concern was to give salvation to man in his life and not to promise it to him in heaven after he is dead. Therefore, it is evident that the happiness is the result of Integration of all these four wellbeing which lead to the total satisfaction of a society. Figure 02 shows one of the key findings of this research; total satisfaction framework.

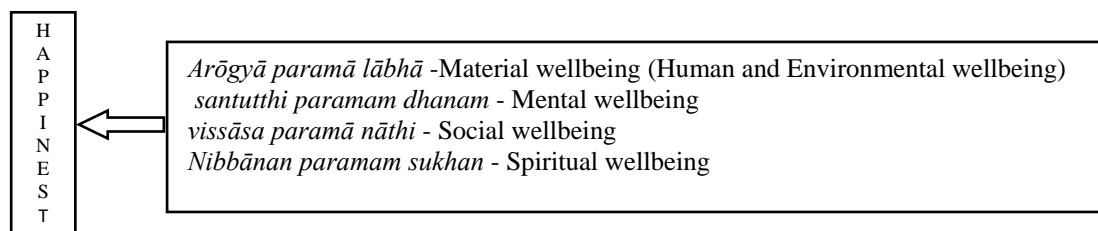


Fig 2: Total satisfaction framework

The satisfaction with favourable relationships and spiritual practices are the missing part of the present development context. As above discussed, the wellbeing component much relates to the health. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines “health” as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. This definition actually highlights the importance of the affirmative or preventive aspects of health—something neglected in defining wellbeing. It is neglected as well in the prevailing yardstick of spiritual wellbeing and progress of modern societies. Hence the propose framework of this paper has touched the gap by introducing new other aspect of wellbeing; spiritual wellbeing. Mindfulness, virtue practices, tolerance, contentedness, loving kindness, uprightness, prudent etc. can be used as measures of satisfaction with spiritual practices. The main expected outcome of the spiritual practices is to fulfill the desire for happiness. There are two components of happiness; physical and mental, with the mental experience or the inner force playing a more powerful role. Mahayana Buddhism happiness springs from an altruistic or compassionate mind. Since human minds are often agitated by afflictive emotions, the results frequently are negative actions, which in turn cause suffering. The essence of Buddhism therefore is to tame, transform, and conquer the human mind, for it is the root of everything – it is the creator of happiness and suffering (Wangmo and Valk 2014).

All the aspects of wellbeing and happiness discussed by different scholars and institutions in relation to the social development can be explained by this framework. Sustainability of the system depends on good practices at individual, community and global levels such as *dana*, *seela*, *samadhi*, *utthana viriya*, *appamada*, *allenatha*, *kalyanamittatha*, *samajeewakatha*, *subaratha* and refraining causes of downfall as mentioned in Parabhawa sutta (samyutta nikāya 1.6) and four sources of destruction as mentioned in Vyagghapajja Sutta (Anguttara Nikāya 8.54).



Fig 3: Incorporating SDGs into the new Framework

One of the other findings of this research paper is that Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have addressed only on two aspects of wellbeing according to the above total satisfaction framework. As figure 03 shows neither mental wellbeing nor the spiritual has taken into consideration by the SDGs through their 17 goals. Still there is a big gap between subjective and objective realities of the sustainable development. Compare to the other aspects of wellbeing, 11 development goals out of 17 formulated only focusing human and environmental wellbeing while the rest had been directed to the social wellbeing.

Conclusion

Since the existing development approaches have not addressed much about the total satisfaction of the life, still there is a big gap between theory and practice in the context of sustainable society. Even though there are many indices have been formulated for the purpose of measuring happiness, the actual measure of relevant subjective wellbeing has not taken into consideration. Thus, in order to overcome the issue, this paper has introduced a new framework to define wellbeing and happiness through the concept of total satisfaction. Having reviewed the Buddhist concepts on satisfactory life, it can be argued that, the total satisfaction based on the interdependent four-fold wellbeing; material, mental, social and spiritual. The framework proposed by this article can be applied into different context in order to overcome the limitations of prevailing applications. New development indicators on subjective and objective satisfaction towards sustainable development can be formulated by analyzing every possible relation with the four-fold wellbeing and interdependent parameters. Finally, this paper opens a floor to undertake comprehensive researches focusing the way in which mental and spiritual wellbeing can be incooperated in the Sustainable Development Goals.

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