

Review on Role of Agriculture Cooperatives in Optimising Gross National Happiness

ABSTRACT

Gross National Happiness (GNH) is Bhutan's development philosophy emphasising on happiness of people instead of seeking economic prosperity alone. Scholars have studied GNH in relation to different fields such as health, education, etc. However, as studies on impact of a business model like Agriculture Cooperatives (ACs) on GNH are rare, the authors felt the need to fill this study gap. As such, the objective of this article is to review the roles of ACs in optimising GNH. The "proposed GNH of Business"—a framework developed by Centre of Bhutan Studies and GNH—guided the review. In this article, we presented direct and indirect evidence of ACs contributing on different domains of the GNH, thereby, improving both worker happiness and organisational conditions for happiness. Review indicates that functional or successful ACs has potential to optimise GNH in the country. However, empirical studies are required to confirm literature-based findings presented in this article.

Keywords: Agriculture Cooperatives, Bhutan, Gross National Happiness

1. INTRODUCTION

Bhutan, often known as the last Shangri-La [1], is a Buddhist kingdom with an area of 38,394 km² and population of 768,577 [2]. Bhutan did not experience external influences until recently, because it was exposed to outside world from its self-imposed isolation only in the 1960s [3]. Thus, traditional Buddhist principles [4,5], still influence Bhutanese economy, politics, and socio-culture. Buddhist principles embedded in Bhutanese culture and traditions are the foundation of Bhutan's development philosophy—the GNH [6]. Unlike other countries where Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measures the country's development, GNH measures country's development in Bhutan. Therefore, in Bhutan, happiness is considered more important than GDP.

Over the years, GNH has been gaining popularity among scholars including education [7], health [8], environment [9], etc. However, studies integrating business operations like ACs and GNH are rare. ACs in this article is defined as cooperative related to crop, livestock, and forestry. As a part of agriculture development, the Royal Government of Bhutan has been promoting ACs in the country [10]. ACs development is a recent phenomenon in Bhutan [10]. Thus, ACs' role in optimising GNH is still not clear. While the Constitution of Kingdom of Bhutan mandates the State to promote GNH, "business entities [such as ACs] will have to also promote necessary conditions for workers and the society at large to pursue happiness" [11]. Studying ACs through lens of GNH will help to understand what its existing roles are and how it can be promoted to optimise GNH in the country. Therefore, the objective of this article is to review the roles of ACs in optimising GNH.

The "proposed GNH of Business", a framework developed by Centre of Bhutan Studies and GNH [11], guided the writing of this review article. There are similar other frameworks such as Corporate Social Responsibility and Triple Bottom Line, etc., however, some frameworks are too specific, while others do not consider happiness as business's end goal [11]. As shown in Fig. 1, the "proposed GNH of Business" consists of nine domains of GNH. We selected this framework because, it assesses the overall functioning of the business entity as per the GNH framework. We reviewed academic, scientific, and grey literature closely related to GNH and ACs. Literature of other cooperatives than crops, livestock, and forestry were, therefore, excluded. In the following, we presented the roles of ACs on nine domains of GNH grouped under two sub-headings: worker happiness and organisational condition for happiness.

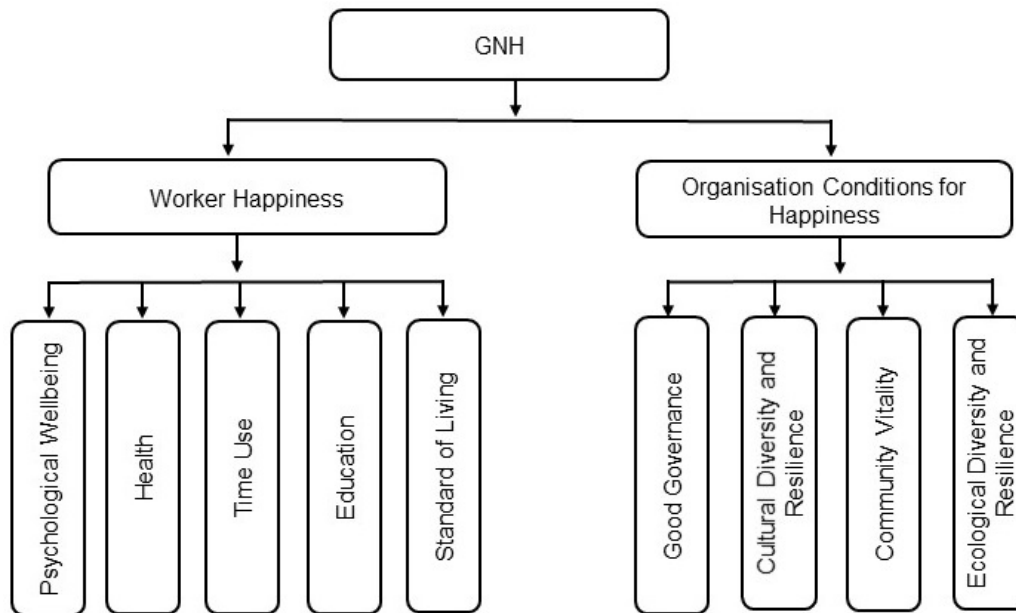


Fig. 1. The “proposed GNH of Business” with nine domains of GNH grouped under two assessment components (with minor changes) from [11].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Worker Happiness

2.1.1 Psychological Wellbeing

ACs treat members as a family, resulting in improved wellbeing of their members [12]. As ACs are member-oriented ventures—they include, consult, and listen to the **members in** making important decisions. These close relationships strengthen trust and increase level of satisfaction among members of the cooperatives [13]. Members’ regular interactions ensure better communication, networking, and trust among each other; and such close-knit platforms reduce workplace discrimination in contrast to the situations in the capitalist multi-national firms [14]. Cooperatives help people to face adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, and stress in the family, relationship, health, work, and finance [15]. For example, ACs minimise the stress related to unemployment [16], children’s education [17], and access to credits [18]. ACs also enhance employees’ job satisfaction as members manage themselves [19]. As such, working in groups improves members’ pride and joy [20]. These pieces of evidence collectively show the roles of ACs on improving people’s psychological wellbeing—one of the GNH domain.

2.1.2 Health

People’s health, including physical and mental, is crucial to both the success of ACs and optimising GNH. ACs serve as a health insurance to its members. For instance, when a member is sick or injured, other members render financial and psychological supports [18]. Studies also showed that the frequent interactions among members of ACs **reduce** their mental stress [12,15]. One plausible argument was that members discuss solutions to their problems like a family. Mellor et al. [21] also noted **that** strong sense of belongingness among the members of ACs has a positive influence on their health. As members themselves own and operate ACs, one can expect health policies, including nature of work, safety, injury, and illness are favourable to the members. Besides, ACs create awareness on health issues during gatherings among the members or with non-members in the community. ACs also improve the public health through their role in improving food security [22], creating employment opportunities [23], and boosting household income [24]. To this end, literature exhibited potentials of ACs to improve health **in** numerous ways. If health determines happiness of people as reported in [25], then ACs have its own role in optimizing GNH.

2.1.3 Time Use

Being autonomous organizations, time use policy can differ among cooperatives. However, as members own and manage ACs to benefit themselves, there is a reason to expect, a presence of time use policy convenient to the members. For example, cooperatives can have flexible working hours, enough for meeting family, education, leisure, and social commitments [26]. Additionally, ACs engage people productively by creating employment opportunities [27]. Gathering members to perform cooperative activities allow the best use of their time in building rapport, sharing problems, and building trust [28]. A study among livestock farmers in Nigeria reported that livestock farmers prior to joining a cooperative had to wake up early, feed the livestock, look after the herd during the day, escort them home, and had to protect from wild predators at night. The tight work schedule left farmers with less time for family, social commitments, and sleep [29]. ACs can solve problems concerning work-life balance by creating enabling conditions. For instance, cooperative members can take turns or perform a specially assigned task to finish faster and use free time for other purposes [30]. Kinga [31] also asserted that such collective actions not only reduce individual workload but also improve quality time use through interaction and rapport building. Thus, ACs contribute to workers happiness by improving people's work-life balance.

2.1.4 Education

Different knowledge and skills are essential for the success of cooperatives [32]. Therefore, cooperatives educate their leaders, members, and other staff. Indeed, one of the cooperative principles according to International Cooperative Alliance [33] is "Education, training, and information". Despite agriculture transformation [10], Bhutanese farmers are mostly illiterate, lacking exposure to modern scientific farming and technologies. However, ACs enable them to access professional services, including training and awareness programs better than non-members [34]. Regular contact with members also allows the exchange of their knowledge and skills. Farmers' tour is another program in ACs that educates members [35]. Farmers' tour can take two forms: (1) cooperative members visit other successful farmers and (2) other farmers visit the ACs. Either way, it has potential to educate both members and non-members in the community. Bello [17] reported evidence where cooperative started a school for their children. Similarly, other cooperatives can replicate such model to educate themselves. Given that there are more illiterate farmers in rural Bhutan, ACs can organize non-formal education program to educate their members or other aspiring farmers in the community. Education in the form of knowledge and skills can improve other spheres of life necessary for happiness.

2.1.5 Standard of Living

Different countries promote cooperatives as the vehicle for nation's development [36]. Cooperatives generate employment opportunities in the community, enabling people to earn decent incomes [23]. The pooling of resources among members reduces transaction cost [37] and improves their bargaining power in the market [24]. As a result, members of ACs earn a higher income than non-members [38]. In a country like Bhutan where people experience seasonal food insecurity [39], farmers use additional income earned from ACs to buy food. Similarly, Zeweld et al. [22] reported a positive impact of ACs on food security in Ethiopia. Members of ACs also enjoy better access to assets, information, services, and markets than non-members [40]. Consequently, ACs reduce poverty and improve people's living standard [41]. ACs improving living standard of countrymen indicates their role in optimising GNH.

2.2 Organisational Condition for Happiness

2.2.1 Good Governance

Evolution of different cooperatives across the world left scholars without a universally accepted definition [42]. However, common values such as self-help, self-responsibilities, democracy, equity, and solidarity guide the cooperatives. Cooperatives practise these values through seven principles: (1) voluntary and open membership, (2) democratic member control, (3) member economic participation, (4) autonomy and independence, (5) education, training, and information, (6) cooperation among cooperatives, and (7) concern for community [33]. The cooperative values and

principles together with other country-specific laws [43] facilitate good governance within the cooperatives. ACs also serve as members' training ground for good governance. For example, ACs practice democratic election of their leaders. They also re-elect their leaders every after a certain number of years providing leadership experiences to numerous members. Leadership experience can be understood in terms of the time in service, diversity, richness, or relevance of previous jobs [44]. We expect individuals shouldering leadership responsibilities will learn specific skills, knowledge, and behaviours necessary for governing groups and organisations. These members with leadership experiences participate in local government and other leadership positions. Likewise, ACs can help in developing local leaders [45]. Moreover, education and training programs such as leadership, office management, and record keeping also enhance their governing skills. At times, ACs make policy recommendations for the benefits of wider communities [46]. As discussed above, ACs guided by its principles optimise GNH by promoting good governance both at the local and national level.

2.2.2 Cultural Diversity and Resilience

While modernization threatens the survival of Bhutanese culture [47], ACs have vital roles in preservation and promotion of culture. For example, ACs in Zhemgang districts of Bhutan produce *Bangchung*—a traditional dome-shaped bamboo container fashioned out of bamboo fibres. Similarly, other ACs dealing with traditional local products are preserving and promoting culture. Gupta [48] also stated that community organisations can develop traditional knowledge through experience and trial and error. Gupta further stated that ACs preserve and pass traditional knowledge to the future generations. Members of ACs comprised of diverse ethnicity, language, nationality, religion, and gender [15]. The interaction of members with diverse cultural background during training and other **cooperatives'** activities promote cultural diversity in the community [42]. The cultural practice of traditional volunteerism such as labour contribution, cash and kind—during sickness, death, constructions, festivals, etc., were found better among members than non-members [49, 50]. Zeuli and Cropp [42] also noted better social capitals, including community relationship and cultural participation among the beneficiaries of cooperatives. These social capitals through cultural participation are more stable and help to develop strong bonds across differences in the communities [15]. The cultural diversities among members of ACs strengthen the social relationship [51], which is vital for optimising GNH.

2.2.3 Community Vitality

Social support, family relationship, community relationship, and community security are important indicators of community vitality [50]. ACs involve pooling and organizing farmers, sharing resources and machines, access to markets, and protection from discrimination in the marketplace [52]. Unlike wage labours, where the relationship ends upon paying the money, labour exchange system among members of ACs is one example of community vitality. Members of such groups receive the better supports in terms of money and time in the community [53]. Members also get better access to government officials, non-government organisations, and other stakeholders [54]. An interactive environment fomented by the necessities of inter-dependence at all levels of cooperatives foster the sense of belongingness among people [31]. The community-based engagement of people through cooperative implies happy society based on the principles of interdependence, reciprocity, mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence [55]. As "concern for the community" is one of the cooperative principles [33], members often engage in voluntary activities, which contribute to improving people's wellbeing [56]. To this end, as said by Kinga [31], the vibrancy and vitality of community life are indispensable in optimising GNH.

2.2.4 Ecological Diversity and Resilience

The Triple Bottom Line by John Elkington in 1994 [57] included people, planet, and profit. ACs, in many cases, have been successful in adopting this model, thereby, significantly harmonizing the **human-environment interactions** in pursuit of business. ACs have a wide range of activities, including water and soil resources management, agro-tourism, and production of quality local organic food [20]. ACs also enable people to find new solutions to environmental changes by enabling them to diversify their economic activities and embrace more green ventures [46]. Downing et al. [58] highlighted the emerging importance of ACs in the production of renewable energy and enabling the world societies to move forward in the global quest to curtail the carbon emission and use of fossil fuel. According to Renting and Van Der Ploeg [46] and Van der Ploeg [59], ACs benefits human-environment

interactions in two ways: (1) natural track and (2) environmental track. The natural track benefit includes activities regarding management of ecological and landscape values in the members' farms. The environmental track benefit includes reduction of environmental pollution on member farms through increased use of internal farm resources and curtailing the use of external resources. In socio-political respects, ACs facilitate environment policy formulation, endorsement, and achievement of the policy goals through diligent implementation of these policies in their activities and localities [46]. There are evidences where ACs can also address GNH's domain of ecological diversity and resilience.

3. CONCLUSION

We reviewed the role of ACs in optimising GNH using the "proposed GNH of Business"—a framework developed by Centre of Bhutan and GNH. The literature indicates that ACs have potential to optimise GNH by improving workers happiness and organisational conditions for happiness, given the ACs are functional or successful. Unlike other profit-driven business model such as state-owned enterprises, ACs exhibited not only economic benefits, but also environment, social-cultural, and good governance. Therefore, strengthening the existing ACs and promoting establishment of new ACs can help in optimising GNH in the country. Although this article based on earlier literature showed positive impacts of ACs on GNH, there is need for empirical studies to confirm the discussions presented in this article. We expect this article will inspire future scholars of related fields to empirically study ACs through lens of GNH.

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