

Gross National Happiness; Meeting strives to measure well-being beyond the economy's GDP

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Happiness, it seems, is something that can be measured.

Hundreds of academics, farmers, environmentalists, business people, entertainers and health professionals are trying to figure out just how to do that and convince others it's as important an indicator of a country's success as economic well-being.

They will meet in Antigonish, N.S., today for the second International Conference on Gross National Happiness, a movement that is attracting a varied mix of adherents around the world.

"We don't claim to measure well-being directly, but rather what are some of the social, economic and environmental conditions which are likely to produce higher levels of well-being," said Ron Colman of GPI Atlantic, a non-profit research group in Nova Scotia that is organizing the meeting.

"The conventional paradigm that bases progress just on economic growth alone is not satisfactory.

"It's too narrow, so we know we have to assess our progress in a more comprehensive and accurate way."

Colman and other delegates contend a better way of determining a person's well-being and that of their surroundings is by looking at several factors -- environmental preservation, sustainable economic development, cultural promotion and good governance.

The theory was developed more than 30 years ago in Bhutan, where the king declared gross national happiness to be more important than the small Asian country's gross national product.

Colman went to Bhutan last year to attend the first conference on gross national happiness and discovered a group of people keen on "redirecting global development towards socially and environmentally responsible policy and practices.

"The goal is to ensure long-term prosperity and equity for all."

Colman said the old model of thinking -- jobs vs. the environment -- no longer works since the two can be inextricably tied.

For example, there can't be uncontrolled fishing without considering how that's going to affect jobs in the future.

About 400 people from 35 countries will look at that approach this week, examining things such as how Brazil is creating a "sustainable city" based on mass transit rather than car use.

They'll also look at how the Dutch government gave its citizens far more free time and sharply reduced unemployment by encouraging shorter work hours.

"We're bringing all these people together to try to say, 'What would a sane, decent, good society look like when you put all of these parts together?'" said Colman.