

Delegates eager to hear how to rule by happiness

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ANTIGONISH – The former prime minister of Bhutan admits to being overwhelmed with the amount of interest shown in his country's way of life.

Delegates from more than 30 countries came to Antigonish for the four–day Second International Conference on Gross National Happiness, an event designed to challenge traditional ways of measuring successful development.

For three decades, Bhutan has used happiness as the foundation for decisions on sustainable economic development, cultural promotion, governing and environmental preservation.

Lyonpo Jigmi Thinley said this mindset was so different from what the rest of the world was practising that his government, concerned for Bhutan's credibility on the global stage, only started sharing its blueprint with the rest of the world in 1998.

"When anyone spoke about happiness as the purpose for development, it was dismissed as a utopian idea, impractical," Mr. Thinley said before closing ceremonies Thursday.

"But we saw the relevance of it in our own lives, in our own country and we pursued it and never really were of the view it would have the acceptance to the degree that it seems to have."

More than 400 people attended workshops and seminars over the course of the conference.

Mr. Thinley, now Bhutan's home minister, said the appeal of his country's way of life derives from the realization that obsession with materialism leads to disappointment.

Happiness, he said, "is something that everybody, without any difficulty or question, can subscribe to."

Mr. Thinley said that in Bhutan, the gap between rich and poor is "very, very small, as opposed to what one might see in developing countries."

He also said per capita income is among the highest in the region and environmental programs are a priority.

Bhutan, which is 26 per cent dedicated as wildlife sanctuaries and 72 per cent to forest coverage, was the recipient of the United Nations Champion of the Earth award for placing the environment at the centre of its development policies.