

A happy occurrence

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Last week, there was no better place on Earth than Antigonish to go put on a happy face.

OK, so you may think that measuring "Gross National Happiness" – as opposed to the Gross National Product – is one of those airy–fairy concepts or that playing host to the second international conference on the subject was so much pie in the sky.

But the 400 or so health professionals, academics, farmers, environmentalists, business folk and entertainers who attended this powwow weren't of the kooky variety. These were serious people who were trying to make the world a better place, in the finest tradition of the Antigonish Movement.

As Nova Scotians will recall, it was Father Moses Coady who pioneered this gospel of self–help and social justice during the Great Depression, aiding poverty–stricken miners and fishermen to achieve financial independence through interdependence. To this day, the Coady International Institute at St. F.X. University in Antigonish perpetuates his legacy by training students from emerging nations in the art of lifting people out of poverty.

At bottom, that is what Gross National Happiness is all about: progress. Not just material progress, which is how we tend to measure it in the West, but in a holistic sense. The well–being of citizens – and of nations – depends on a complex ecosystem of economic, environmental, social and political conditions which are difficult to reunite all in one place.

In all these domains, Canada is remarkably blessed, although it has as much to learn from the rest of the world as it can teach.

The collapse of the northern cod stocks demonstrated how economic well–being goes hand in hand with environmentally sustainable practices. With better governance, this catastrophe could have been avoided.

The ingredients that go into Gross National Happiness are well–known. "What we have here is all the elements of what it really takes to create a good society," said Ron Colman of GPI Atlantic, the non–profit research group that organized the conference.

The secret lies in finding the collective will and wisdom to implement the recipe for success. Here's hoping last week's meeting of the minds can further illuminate the way to a more utopian existence – one of humanity's perpetual quests.