

# Gross National Happiness index flawed

---

**PUBLICATION:** Vancouver Sun  
**DATE:** 2005.07.01  
**EDITION:** Final  
**SECTION:** BusinessBC  
**PAGE:** H3  
**COLUMN:** Don Cayo  
**BYLINE:** Don Cayo  
**SOURCE:** Vancouver Sun

---

The International Conference on Gross National Happiness in Nova Scotia last week focused on the idea that the prevalence of contentment, not the speed of economic growth, is the real measure of national progress.

It's one of those ideas that intuitively sounds right, but I'm not sure it stands up to analysis.

Even Ron Coleman, the organizer of the conference, admits that you can't measure happiness per se. So you need measurable surrogates — things that might logically make people happy — as components of the index.

Coleman draws heavily on his own index — GPI Atlantic, or the Genuine Progress Index — which he has been promoting for years as a substitute for the Gross Domestic Product indicator that's usually cited when national progress is being discussed. Levels of health, crime and environmental degradation figure in his index, as do income distribution, volunteer activities and unpaid work in the home.

The Happiness conference went further, adding ideas from the king of Bhutan, who 30 years ago decided to try to balance economic development with environmental preservation, cultural promotion and good governance.

Mind you, Bhutan isn't everyone's idea of the happy kingdom. It's GDP per capita is \$1,400 US per year in purchasing power parity (much less in actual cash). And even if you dismiss this as not being a valid measure of anything worthwhile, consider these facts: life expectancy is just 54 years, one child in 10 dies before age 5, only 56 per cent of males and half that number of females can read and write, and 100,000 refugees are camped just outside its borders claiming to be victims of racism.

This questionable role model aside, the other big problem with a happiness index is that it's too heavily based on perceptions.

Family violence statistics, for example, might look horrendously worse now than in our "idyllic" past for the simple reason that child abuse was once not counted as a crime, and spousal abuse was hardly ever reported. Environmental monitoring might detect progress on some specific emissions, but does it reflect the fact that DDT isn't used any more, or that many fewer people smoke, or that the rules on land-clearing now offer far greater protection for waterways?

On the home front, if I'm sipping wine as the salmon sizzles on the barbeque, is this unpaid work that actually adds to the Gross National Worth? And if two people with sharply opposing views — say one is pro-choice and the other pro-life — work tirelessly on behalf of their causes, their efforts might cancel each other out with no net effect on the quality of life, yet their volunteer hours would be counted double. The index would add value for people working on behalf of causes that others despise, and I don't see how the index could or would differentiate between the volunteer who works effectively and the one who wastes time.

If you're thinking that what I'm saying is, effectively, this index will have more or less the same flaws as the more conventional GDP measure, that's largely true. GDP, too, is a flawed measure. It counts negatives — gambling addictions or oil spills or crime waves — as positives because they generate economic activity, even if it's unwanted. It fails to measure costs swallowed by society — traffic congestion, or dirty air, or depleted resources. And it doesn't deal at all with equitable income distribution — assuming Canadians could even agree on what's really fair.

But GDP and related figures are at least based on one countable — money. While I agree with critics who note that money isn't the only thing that matters, it is important, not least because we need it to pay for so many good things — health and education and a clean, safe environment — that all of us value.

So, although we ought to understand the limits of conventional measures and not treat them as more than they are, I'm skeptical that Coleman and colleagues will come up with anything more useful. In fact, I'm not sure we need their index at all.

What we do need, in public forums as well as our private lives, is to constantly weigh a lot of considerations — pros and cons — and try to ensure that life, on balance, gets better. We must each do that according to our own values, not some academic's, or the king of Bhutan's.

dcayo@png.canwest.com