

**HOW HAPPY ARE THE PEOPLE IN BHUTAN?
A STUDY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
QUALITY OF LIFE**

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ABSTRACT

Bhutan is a tiny mountainous kingdom which demonstrates its priorities for the welfare of its citizens in the concept called *Gross National Happiness*. Its planning documents and other relevant publications categorically focus towards this noble thought. This paper studies the quality of life of Bhutanese people residing in Phongmey geog and Trashigang town (both the locations are situated in eastern Bhutan). An opinion survey was conducted during January-March 2006 on the residents of these two areas in order to determine their quality of life. The perception of the people as to the importance of neighborhood, Media, TV, Radio, etc and their satisfaction with neighborhood, development plans, local public services & utilities, education services, transport facility, crime prevention measures, medical facilities, family planning measures, electricity facilities, housing status, sanitation and water facilities etc is studied in the paper. Further general life satisfaction was also enquired in the beginning and end of the schedule. 5 point Likert scale was used in order to gauge the status of quality of life of residents. The survey included 330 individuals (183 from Phongmey and remaining 147 from Trashigang town).

The study included farmers, businessmen/women, housewives, employees and priests in the sample.

Key Words: Satisfaction, Gross National Happiness, Bhutan, Quality of life

HOW HAPPY ARE THE PEOPLE IN BHUTAN? A STUDY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF QUALITY OF LIFE

Our greatest happiness does not depend on the condition of life in which chance has placed us, but is always the result of a good conscience, good health, occupation, and freedom in all just pursuits.

- Thomas Jefferson

INTRODUCTION

The quality of population is one of the most important issues of development, especially in the third world countries. Welfare economics advocates investments in the areas of social infrastructure like education, health, sanitation, public utilities and services, etc. The so called ultimate beneficiaries of this welfare economy are still away from the mainstream development, though the agenda is for the people. As human capital or population in general, is the back bone of any country's economy, it becomes important to study their satisfaction level. Their perception about the importance of public services, laws of the land, environmental issues, spiritual activities etc is also an area which relates to their quality of life (QOL).

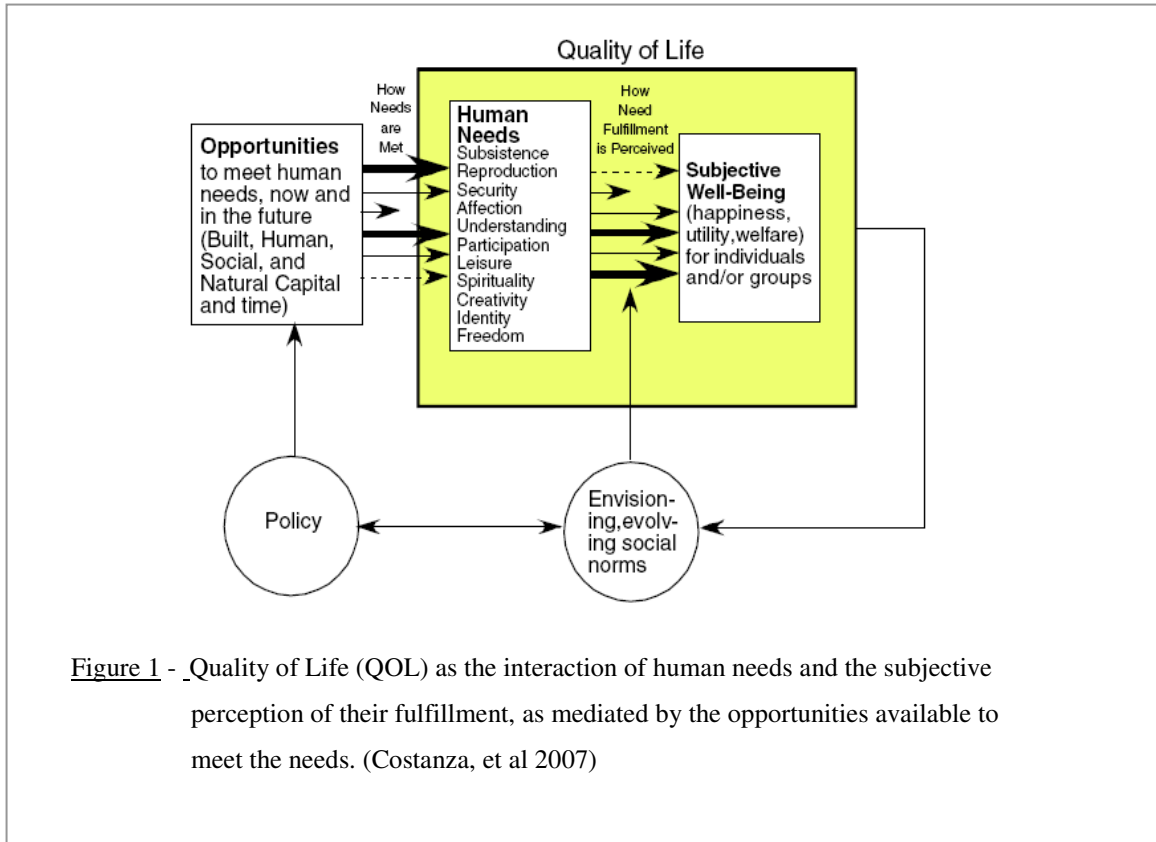
In the times of digital divide and deepened differences amongst the people, the study of quality of population becomes more important and pertinent. The resources and allocations are all directed towards the well being of the people but still there are people who are not able to reap the good fruits and who are not aware of real development. Their understanding of development is much broader and better in many ways than that of so-called developed and powerful groups of the society. Their level of happiness and contentment, their sense of understanding, and the mind with the least expectations speaks volumes of their goodness as human beings. Let there be digital divide, hats off to the concept of good living.

The satisfaction of people, QOL, human development or Population quality are very closely related to the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which is one of the guiding principle of economic, social, and political planning in Bhutan. *'A great deal of consistency exists between the Bhutanese concept of GNH and human development...The pursuit of GNH calls for a multi-dimensional approach to*

development that seeks to maintain harmony and balance between economic forces, environmental preservation, cultural and spiritual values and good governance.'(BNHDR 2000 p 20) The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) has been targeting to provide better facilities and services to the people to ensure their development through its Five Year Plans and other planning instruments.

The priorities of the RGOB have been classified under five thematic headings as, Human Development, Culture and heritage, Balanced and Equitable development, Governance and Environmental conservation (BNHDR 2000, p 21). Further, Bhutan has identified four essential constituents of happiness; Economic development, Environmental preservation, Cultural preservation and promotion and Good governance (BNHDR 2000, p 20). These areas have also been given focus in the latest BNHDR (2005) where little difference has been made in the terms as Sustainable and Equitable Socio-economic Development, conservation of environment; preservation and promotion of culture; and enhancement of good governance. These priority areas have been chosen to improve Population Quality vis-à-vis GNH.

The importance of family values and various issues like protection of countryside and environment, the role of Newspaper, Radio, & TV, laws of the land and taking part in spiritual activities, provision of public utilities and services, infrastructure, etc., play important role to satisfy the citizens of a nation. The premise of QOL is derived theoretically from human needs (Figure 1) and once these needs are fulfilled it results into Subjective Well-Being (SWB). The objective aspect of QOL can be taken care of by looking around the economic and social indicators as well as through human development index. However it is important that the satisfaction level of people is studied from QOL perspective which can provide some policy guidelines which can further be used to improve satisfaction.



The literature on happiness has dealt in detail with different components of QOL as Veenhoven (1991) put it (on happiness) - *the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of life favorably*. Further he describes four qualities of life viz., Livability of environment, Life-ability of the person, Utility of life and Satisfaction. (Veenhoven 2000) (Figure 2). This description of qualities of life is not related to physical quality of life unlike its relationship with ‘human needs’ and ‘SWB’.

	<i>Outer qualities</i>	<i>Inner qualities</i>
<i>Life-chances</i>	Livability of environment	Life-ability of the person
<i>Life-results</i>	Utility of life	Satisfaction

Figure 2 - Four Qualities of Life (Veenhoven 2000)

The Big-Push theory as propounded by Rosenstein (1943) and the Balanced Growth Theory by Hirschman (1958) provide models to be followed for improving economic growth and subsequently developing a nation. But to poor countries, the main concerns are always identified as health and hygiene, education, social security, poverty alleviation, gender related issues, people participation and empowerment etc. The trade-off between quantity and quality of life has been studied by Jones (1977) with the help of health status indices. The study is based on the indices which allow an increase in the quantity of life to offset decrease in average health status. The impact of health on happiness also has been studied from philosophical angle.

Holidaytaking seems to have positive effect on the well-being of the people as studied by Gilbert & Abdullah (2004). Their study concludes that holidaytakers experience higher sense of well-being prior and post their travels as compared to non-holidaytakers. Well-being has been taken as a very near variable to quality-of-life. A paper by Grinde (1996) looks into a biologically-based understanding of what constitutes the QOL. Brotchie (1978) related the concept of QOL with focus on freedom of choice and diversity for urban population and community. Further, Falkenberg (1998) studied Scandinavian and American cultural view on three basic elements of QOL which are social equity (including issues like virtues, justice, fairness, equal moral value, human rights, resource ethics etc), efficiency (including liberty, pursuit of happiness, individual choice, exit and voice options, etc.) and freedom (including liberty, pursuit of happiness, individual choice, exit and voice options, etc.). The argument concentrates on social equity being a driving force for efficiency and freedom of choice.

The present work is based on the background that happiness is derived from satisfaction, as Frey & Stutzer (2002) puts it – *happiness is not identical to utility, but it well reflects people's satisfaction with life* (p 12). Hence once we are able to assess satisfaction, we could be able to project happiness level of the people. As discussed earlier it is closely related to QOL as well.

OBJECTIVE

This paper is attempted to find out the level of satisfaction of the people in Eastern Bhutan, with the services provided by the RGOB and to study their general perception about importance of certain services, utilities and social and development issues.

METHOD

The data is collected through opinion survey conducted during December 2005-March 2006. There were 25 items related to satisfaction and importance and respondents were from different individual characteristics. Individual characteristics such as gender, age, education, marital status, occupation and place of stay were included in the first part of the schedule. Apart from the 25 items, questions as to 'whether they are aware of the development plan of the government, whether their lives are peaceful and comfortable, whether they think that they are happy family, were put towards the end. A question regarding general life-satisfaction was put twice in the questionnaire, in the beginning and at the end; its average was calculated to make it reliable. 5 point Likert scale was followed, 1 being very satisfied/important and 5 being very dissatisfied/not important at all. Another option 6 was also there which was to be selected if they 'did not know' the answer. The data is analysed on the basis of Mean and Standard Deviation. Further, the satisfaction level is assessed by adding the option 1 (very satisfied/important) and 2 (satisfied/important), which indicates the percentage of people which were satisfied with the services and utilities. One question 'How many days of the last week were happy days?' was put to in the schedule with the options as 1,2,3,4,5,6,7 to find out their happiness level in the lines of Happy Life Years (Veenhoven 2004).

RESULTS

The data is analyzed on the basis of the information provided by the respondents in the given questionnaire. Their individual characteristics are discussed first and then

the importance and satisfaction level is analyzed. Further their feelings as to happy days in a week is analyzed.

DEMOGRAPHIC/INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS (TABLE 1)

The minimum age of the respondents was fixed at 16 years without mentioning maximum age. The respondents were taken from TG town and the villages which fall under PM geog. 330 valid samples were analysed from both these locations. Table 1 provides a general brief composition of the respondents. Average age of a respondent was 34.37 years, TG respondents were little younger (average age 31 years) than Phomgmey respondents (average age 37 years). The respondents were divided in 5 age groups as below 25 years, between 26 to 35 years, 36 to 45 years, 46 to 55 years, and 56 years and above. Around 34% of the respondents were below 25 years of age as against around 9% who were above 55 years. There were more female respondents from PM (56.3%) as against TG where male respondents were more. In total there were 53% males and 47% females. The ratio of married respondents to single respondents was 2.3: 1 in total. It was around 3.1:1 in case of PM and 1.7:1 for Trahsigang.

IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENT SERVICES & FACTORS (TABLE 2):

There were 9 items in this category which included the questions related to the perception of the respondents as to the importance of neighborhood, spiritual activities, respecting others, relationship with the local authorities, awareness of the laws of the land, Television, News Paper and Radio, family planning measures, and environment protection.

It is observed that PM had a better mean value (1.087; SD .396) than TG (1.361; SD .835) so far as neighborhood importance is concerned. It shows that relatively, PM residents thought that having a good neighborhood is very important. There seems to be no two opinions about having a good neighborhood both at TG as well as at PM as 98% and 93% respondents respectively thought it to be important. As far as their opinion about the importance of spiritual activities is concerned, PM residents thought it to be more important than the residents of TG. There was a significant difference as to the importance of respecting others. In this case though on an

average around 91% respondents thought it to be important; however for around 99% respondents of PM it was important as against around 82% of TG respondents. This could be because of urban impact on society at TG. The relationship of the people with the local authorities was found to be better at PM (80%) than TG (65%). However the skewness was more or less similar at both the locations. 82% of the respondents thought that it is important to know the laws of the land. For PM respondents it was more important as compared to TG respondents.

Until 1998, TV viewing was banned in Bhutan; however there were many video libraries in the urban areas to make available entertainment softwares. But Bhutan was away from the telecasted information. When TV viewing was publicly allowed in 1998, the residents were happy and its impact on society was being discussed and debated in the local media. Around 66% of the respondents thought that it was important to own a TV. This percentage was higher in TG than PM. The size of the respondents giving importance to news paper and radio was more (90%) as compared to TV. It could be because of the slow growth of TV network in the eastern Bhutan between 1998 and 2005. Contrary to the general belief that urban people are more aware about family planning measures, and thought may be more important than their counterparts from the rural settings, it was found that around 91% of PM respondents thought it to be important whereas 84% of TG respondents thought so.

Bhutan had 72.5% forest coverage (RGOB 2001) and the highest legislative body, i.e., the National Assembly had mandated that the country should maintain at least 60% of the land area under forest cover for all time to come. (RGOB 2002, p 30) Environment protection was also one of the highly important area for the respondents. Around 92% of the respondents thought it to be important to protect the environment. It shows that the RGOB has been quite successful in providing awareness about environment protection both the urban as well as rural population.

SATISFACTION LEVEL WITH DIFFERENT SERVICES (TABLE 3):

This section had 12 items covering satisfaction of the respondents related to neighborhood, development plans, public services and utilities, education, public transport, police services and crime prevention measures, medical facilities,

electricity, housing, sanitation and water, newspapers, radio and TV, and leisure activities.

The percentage of satisfied people with their neighborhood was 85% in total comprising of around 91% at PM and 79% at TG. There was a very poor satisfaction as regards to the existing development plans of the government. Especially at PM it was just 13% whereas at TG it was around 53%, which shows that TG people were much more satisfied with the development plans as compared to their counterparts at PM. It is important to mention that only 29% of PM respondents were aware of the development plan. For the basic facilities of education and health, TG residents were found to be more satisfied than PM residents. In total the percentage of people satisfied with education and medical facilities were found to be 70% and 80% respectively. Around 61% of PM residents were satisfied with education whereas at TG it was around 80%. There was not much of a difference so far as medical facilities are concerned where it was around 81% and 79% for TG and PM respectively.

The satisfaction level with water and sanitation facility was around 76% comprising of around 71% at TG and 74% at PM. So it shows that PM residents were more satisfied with this facility as compared to TG residents. The public transport system in Bhutan is not yet developed and still only few public buses are operating on the designated routes. In the last 5-6 years, good numbers of private taxis are operating which has made things easier people. However it is important to mention here that ownership of personal vehicle is very common in Bhutan. And it could be assumed that there is a cause and effect relationship between transport facility offered and ownership of vehicles. On an average around 66% residents were satisfied with this facility and there was a good difference between the residents of TG (72%) and PM (61%).

In general, Bhutan does not have problem of electricity as they have huge potential of hydro-power and the government has recognized it as one of the most important potential. Bhutan exports electricity to the adjacent states of India. And for the economy of Bhutan power generation is one of the most important sectors. Hence,

the satisfaction level with the electricity facility was found to be very high (89%) both at TG (85%) and PM (92%). As for other public services and utilities (like post office, public toilets, banks, telephone etc) the satisfaction level was found to be around 72% in total and around 66% and 76% for TG and PM respectively. So far as availability of these services is concerned, TG certainly has better services than PM. Still TG had lower satisfaction level. It could be because of the expectations people had at TG. For police services and crime prevention measures, around 82% at PM residents were satisfied against around 70% of TG averaging around 77%.

The satisfaction level with their housing status was relatively low as compared to other variables where it was just around 60%. Around 58% of PM and 62% of TG people were satisfied with their housing status. There is only one newspaper (Kuensel) which is published weekly in Dzongkha (National Language), English and Nepali. The paper is also available online (www.kuenselonline.com). Bhutan has a public broadcasting service named as Bhutan Broadcasting Service which takes care of radio as well as TV transmissions. However, cable connections are allowed and people own dish antennas. So they have access to the international media through different channels. The satisfaction level as to media (newspaper, radio and TV) was rated around 69% comprising of 73% from TG and 67% from PM.

Leisure time activities are found to be very important component of assessing quality of life or life satisfaction of people. The satisfaction level from leisure activities was around 77% and surprisingly there was a gap of around 20% between TG (65) and PM (85) residents.

The respondents were asked about general life satisfaction as a whole to put it on 5 point scale. It was asked in the beginning as well as at the end to take care of any variations during the course of responding to other questions. These two responses were averaged, and it was found that around 73% residents were satisfied with their life as a whole. Another question as to whether their life was comfortable and peaceful, 85% respondents responded with affirmative answer. Further they were asked to rank it on the scale of 5 (1 being most comfortable and peaceful and 5 being least comfortable and peaceful). The responses for 1 and 2 rank were added which

came out to be around 63%. Similarly they were asked about whether they thought that they were happy person and family, around 87% responded positively. Further when asked to rank on the scale of 5 (1 being the highest level of happiness and 5 being lowest level of happiness), the total of first two ranks i.e., 1 and 2, was around 60%. Most of the people thought that happiness is something which is very subjective in nature and it may not be possible to measure it as their response to 'Whether Happiness can be measured in terms of money', around 62% respondents thought that it can not be measured in terms of money. In response to a question 'How many days of the last week were happy days?' the mean value was found to be 5.627 with 2.007 as standard deviation. (Table 4).

MAJOR FINDINGS:

On the basis of the above results, following major findings are drawn -

- Respecting others was most important for rural residents whereas having good neighborhood was most important for urban residents
- Least importance was given to own a TV both by urban as well as rural respondents.
- The variation was least in case of media (TV, newspaper, and radio) importance whereas in case of importance of respecting others the variation was most between TG and PM respondents.
- Highest satisfaction level was observed for electricity facility provided both at TG as well as at PM.
- Least satisfaction level was found from the development plans; the variation was also too high between TG and PM in this case.
- Residents ranked less satisfaction from housing status as compared to other items.
- 57% of the respondents reported that they were happy on all the seven days of the last week.

- Very few people reported their leisure time activity, however generally it was found that most of them were involved in spiritual activities during their leisure time.

DISCUSSION

Bhutan has been placed 8th in the World Map of Happiness (White, 2006) based on the parameters of life expectancy, access to education, GDP per capita and life satisfaction. This shows that though Bhutan is lagging behind in GDP (an indicator of economic growth) and Human Development Index, but on the basis of happiness of people it enjoys much higher status as compared to many developed nations. A fact sheet published by RGOB (2006) also records very high percentage of people enjoying happy status of life. This is based on 3 point scale (1 being very happy, 2 being happy and 3 being not very happy). As reported 45.2% people responded to 1, 51.6% to 2 and remaining 3.3% choosing 3. This data is based on the sample of 126115 persons which can easily be taken as representing the status of the nation. This also convinces that the development mantra called 'Gross National Happiness' has really worked well in the nation.

This present work also more or less, focuses on this aspect. On most of the items the responses are very positive resulting in very high level of satisfaction. The attitude of people towards their neighborhood seems to be very good, as when asked 'while their neighbors are in trouble, how often they help' around 90% of the respondents told that they help them. This attitude speaks of the good value system and strong community feeling. Neighborhood was taken as one of the most important variable and the satisfaction level with existing neighbors was also one of the highest just ranked after electricity service which could satisfy around 90% people. Environment protection was also in the top priority of the people on the basis of the importance of its conservation. Though it was observed that most of the people were involving themselves in some spiritual activities during their leisure time, however respecting others, importance of media and family planning measures were thought to be more important by relatively larger respondents. TV ownership was given least importance. Around 57% of the respondents were not aware of the development

plan. It was very poor in case of PM where only 29% respondents were aware of the development plan. Further, people who were aware about the development plan were also not very satisfied with it. The standard deviation was highest for this which indicates that across the sample, satisfaction level was lowest with this variable. Another important concern is housing with which relatively the satisfaction level was low. The satisfaction level was higher for medical facilities as compared to education. Rural-urban divide was visible in case of the importance of respecting others as for PM residents it was much more important than TG residents. TG has better education and health facilities, hence the satisfaction level of TG residents was also found much higher than PM residents. Relatively the satisfaction level from police services and crime prevention measures was much higher at PM than TG.

On the basis of the satisfaction level of the people it could be concluded that they are happy people and their happiness level is very high as most of them (85% or more) feel that their life is comfortable and peaceful and they are happy person and happy family. Similarly if we analyze their response as regards to number of days of the last week when they were happy, a meager percentage of less than 10 was reported as being happy for 3 days or less, which further strengthens the argument that people in Bhutan are happy people.

The government has been quite successful in implementing their programs with a focus on GNH rather than concentrating on just improving economic indicators. However, on many of the parameters it has improved, access to primary health care is over 90%, access to safe drinking water in rural areas is around 65%, more than 90% children are immunized, life expectancy at birth has gone up to 66 years (see BNHDR 2000, p 7). Bhutan attained the status of “Normal Iodine Nutrition Country” becoming the first South Asian country to do so. (see BNHDR 2005, p 29). Bhutan has been identified as MDG fast-track countries on the basis of governance qualification (See UNMP Report 2005, p 234). *Bhutan has been one of the most successful countries in South Asia in its development and delivery of social welfare.* (Rutland, 1999). As discussed in a paper by Shrotryia (2004), the development philosophy called GNH, can teach lot of lessons to the other nations which might have better economic conditions and so called much favorable economic indicators.

Bhutan can lead the breed of the GNH economists who can tell the world that even within lot of constraints and having been under pressure, it can sustain its developmental process. GNH is a phenomenon which has transpired the citizens of this kingdom to put forth their efforts to maintain peace, tranquility and sovereignty (Shrotryia, 2006). The general perception is that economic growth takes care or human development and human development takes care of the happiness of people. This is a traditional approach to guide public policy in a state. With the lessons from Bhutan it could be concluded that if this cycle is reversed and the public policy is initially targeted at providing satisfaction (happiness) to the people, it could take care of human development which further would influence economic growth positively. Bhutan has basically experienced it. The time would prove it with more success stories and evidences brought out from this unique kingdom which is marching ahead slowly but steadily in order to sustain the fruits of development.

MAJOR SUGGESTIONS:

To conclude following suggestions could be made on the basis of the present work. Some of these suggestions are already in the priority of the government. Certainly if these suggestions are followed, it would further strengthen this small nation -

- The awareness campaigns of the development plans should be initiated at the government level.
- Better planning for improving housing status of people, more importantly in rural areas is required.
- To bridge up rural-urban divide, better social infrastructure (for education, health & public utilities) in the rural areas is required.
- Some initiatives to develop better community feeling at urban areas are required.

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ANNEXURES

Age in years	TG		PM		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Below 25 Years	64	(43.54)	48	(26.23)	112	(33.94)
26-35 Years	42	(28.57)	38	(20.77)	80	(24.24)
36-45 Years	20	(13.61)	45	(24.59)	65	(19.70)
46-55 Years	14	(9.52)	29	(15.85)	43	(13.03)
56 Years and above	7	(4.76)	23	(12.57)	30	(9.09)
	147	100	183	100	330	100
Average Age (in years)	30.57		37.43		34.37	
Female	51	(34.7)	103	(56.3)	154	(46.7)
Male	96	(65.3)	80	(43.7)	176	(53.3)
Married	93	(63.27)	139	(75.96)	232	(70.30)
Single	54	(36.74)	44	(24.04)	98	(29.7)

Importance of -	TG		PM		Total		TG	PM	Total
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	1+2	1+2	1+2
1 Neighbourhood	1.36	0.84	1.09	0.4	1.21	0.64	92.52	97.78	95.41
2 Spiritual activities	1.68	1.17	1.53	1.02	1.6	1.09	81.25	88.95	85.54
3 Respecting others	1.61	1.11	1.16	0.67	1.36	0.92	81.63	98.85	90.97
4 Relationship with local authorities	2.25	1.49	1.95	1.44	2.09	1.47	65.07	79.89	73.23
5 Awareness of laws	1.83	1.41	1.84	1.42	1.84	1.42	77.4	86.34	82.37
6 Having a TV	2.17	1.32	2.54	1.6	2.37	1.49	69.18	63.93	66.26
7 Newspaper and Radio	1.52	1.02	1.53	1.19	1.52	1.12	86.9	91.80	89.63
8 Family planning	1.63	1.21	1.48	1.19	1.55	1.20	83.56	91.26	87.84
9 Environment protection	1.48	1.02	1.31	0.84	1.39	0.93	88.36	95.08	92.1

Satisfaction from -		TG		PM		Total		TG	PM	Total
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	1+2	1+2	1+2
1	Neighbourhood	1.90	1.21	1.44	0.81	1.65	1.03	78.77	90.71	85.41
2	Development plan	2.31	1.75	3.18	2.54	2.79	2.27	53.28	13.49	33.06
3	Education	1.72	1.19	2.43	1.54	2.12	1.44	80.28	61.45	69.78
4	Medical facilities	1.72	1.25	1.84	1.29	1.79	1.27	81.38	78.89	80.00
5	Water & sanitation	2.01	1.35	2.19	1.24	2.11	1.29	70.63	74.03	72.53
6	Public services & utilities	2.05	1.27	1.97	1.16	2.01	1.21	66.20	76.24	71.83
7	Police services & crime control	2.07	1.38	1.97	1.48	2.02	1.43	70.34	81.97	76.83
8	Public transport	2.10	1.29	2.44	1.61	2.29	1.48	71.53	61.24	65.84
9	Electricity	1.54	0.96	1.52	1.03	1.53	1.00	84.83	91.62	88.58
10	Housing	2.25	1.35	2.36	1.30	2.31	1.32	62.33	57.54	59.69
11	Media (Newspaper, Radio & TV)	1.97	1.30	2.27	1.29	2.14	1.30	72.79	66.67	69.39
12	Leisure activities	2.13	1.56	1.85	0.94	1.97	1.25	65.25	85.39	77.22

	TG	PM	Total
Mean	5.367	5.836	5.627
SD	2.196	1.820	2.007
Happy Days in a week	% of the responses		
1 day	1.50	1.70	1.60
2 days	1.49	3.93	2.89
3 days	7.46	3.93	5.45
4 days	5.97	7.30	6.73
5 days	15.67	10.11	12.50
6 days	15.67	12.36	13.78
7 days	52.24	60.67	57.05