

Manthan

for Operationalisation of
GNH in Bhutan & Beyond

Catalyzing Mindsets and Technologies for Well-being-Centered,
Village-Led Development

19th & 20th June 2025 - Dungkar Dzong, Pangbisa, Bhutan



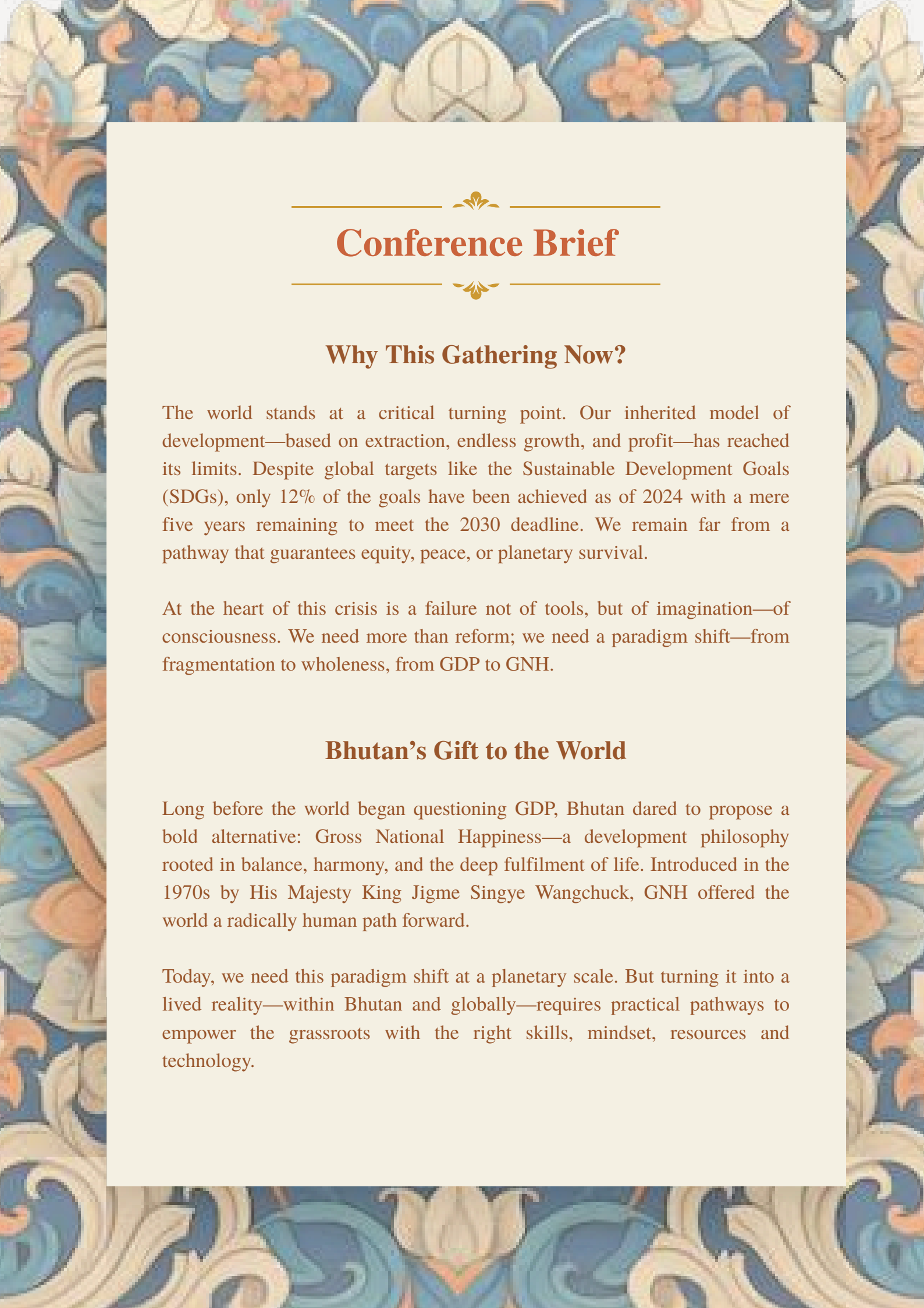


Under the Royal Patronage of Her Majesty the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk, the conference will be hosted by Tarayana Foundation and Georgetown Institute of Open & Advanced Studies.



Her Majesty Queen Mother Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck founded the Tarayana Foundation in 2003 to improve the lives of vulnerable communities in Bhutan. The Foundation focuses on socio-economic development, poverty alleviation, and community empowerment. It has built homes for thousands, provided sanitation, promoted climate-resilient farming, supported women and youth through skill development, and strengthened social protection systems for disadvantaged groups. The Foundation works with nearly 1,000 villages, benefiting over 30% of Bhutan's population. Through its efforts, it has fostered self-reliance, dignity, and hope among underserved communities, helping Bhutan progress towards sustainable development while addressing challenges like climate change and economic inequality.



A vibrant, repeating pattern of stylized flowers and leaves in shades of blue, orange, and cream, framing the central text area.

Conference Brief

Why This Gathering Now?

The world stands at a critical turning point. Our inherited model of development—based on extraction, endless growth, and profit—has reached its limits. Despite global targets like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), only 12% of the goals have been achieved as of 2024 with a mere five years remaining to meet the 2030 deadline. We remain far from a pathway that guarantees equity, peace, or planetary survival.

At the heart of this crisis is a failure not of tools, but of imagination—of consciousness. We need more than reform; we need a paradigm shift—from fragmentation to wholeness, from GDP to GNH.

Bhutan's Gift to the World

Long before the world began questioning GDP, Bhutan dared to propose a bold alternative: Gross National Happiness—a development philosophy rooted in balance, harmony, and the deep fulfilment of life. Introduced in the 1970s by His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, GNH offered the world a radically human path forward.

Today, we need this paradigm shift at a planetary scale. But turning it into a lived reality—within Bhutan and globally—requires practical pathways to empower the grassroots with the right skills, mindset, resources and technology.

What the Conference Aims to Do?

01

Reflect on the true meaning of human development, moving beyond material indicators to embrace inner and outer well-being.

02

Showcase replicable pathways for cultivating the mind, emphasizing mental resilience, ethical clarity, and the right mindset as foundations for a thriving society.

03

Catalyze a shift in education through case studies that demonstrate how holistic, context-based learning can nurture the well-being of self, society, and nature.

04

Reimagine the future of design and planning through principles of deep observation and ecological harmony.

05

Foster mindful economic development using emerging frameworks like the One Earth Balance Sheet, Social Stock Exchanges, and carbon credit systems that align economy with ecology.

06

Demonstrate the role of technology and digital public infrastructure in empowering grassroots communities and enabling mindful governance.

07

Integrate an ecosystem of initiatives to advance systems thinking and enable the practical grassroots village-level operationalization of GNH.

08

Catalyze partnerships and mobilize finance to accelerate the implementation of well-being-centered development in Bhutan and globally.

A central theme of the conference is the operationalization of GNH at the village level, recognizing that transformation must be both systemic and situated. Manthan 2025 will surface replicable models, policy strategies, and enabling infrastructures that can be adapted to local contexts- while informing national and international development agendas.

As global attention turns toward alternative metrics and models for well-being and resilience, Bhutan offers a living example of how development philosophies can evolve into practice. *Manthan 2025* is set to offer a timely and thoughtful contribution to this global conversation.

Concept Note

The world stands at a defining crossroads. There is a growing global consensus that our current development model is failing, and a fundamental rethinking of how we organize ourselves and define progress is imperative. The old world order, entrenched in material accumulation, extractive economies, and social fragmentation, is crumbling under its own weight, yet there is no consensus on what development model for emerging and development economies (EMDEs) will address social and planetary injustices, encompassing a more holistic and inclusive consensus at the grassroots level.

For decades, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been the primary yardstick for measuring progress. Yet, this measure has been repeatedly discredited by eminent academic thinkers and Nobel laureates, who argue that it fails to account for environmental degradation, social well-being, and true human fulfilment. Getting out of the GDP collective action trap means we need not just a viable alternative paradigm, but a process of experimentation with different alternatives, so that we can scale the successes using modern technology, helping different communities to adapt to changing climate and geopolitical conditions to their comparative advantages.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and renewed COP/IPCC focus on environmental well-being represent steps in the right direction. However, up to 2024, only **12% of SDG targets have been achieved**, with a mere **five years remaining to meet the 2030 deadline**. This failure is not due to a lack of resources, technology, or ambition—it is because we are attempting to solve systemic crises partially in top-down institutional silos, **without addressing complex social and planetary systems issues that are interconnected and interdependent in circular feedbacks that created the present quandaries**.

From the **Bodhisattva's path** to modern systems theory, ancient traditions across almost all cultures have long recognized that **everything is interconnected**. The **doctrine of dependent origination (Pratītyasamutpāda)** teaches us that no being, no system, no phenomenon exists in isolation. The suffering of one is the suffering of all. Thus, if we seek true and lasting solutions to the crises facing humanity, we must begin with a **fundamental shift in consciousness—a shift from fragmentation to wholeness, from domination to harmony, from material accumulation to genuine well-being**.

A pioneering example of this paradigm shift is **Gross National Happiness (GNH)**, introduced in the 1970s by the visionary **Fourth King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck**. At a time when the rest of the world was chasing profit at any cost, Bhutan dared to say: **Happiness matters. Well-being matters. Life matters.**

Today, we need this paradigm shift **at a planetary scale**.

However, operationalizing GNH in practice remains a significant challenge, not only for Bhutan as a land-locked kingdom in the Himalayan Kush Highlands, but for the world at large. Like a small plant struggling to thrive amidst towering trees, Bhutan's economy—like many smaller economies—operates in a global landscape where GDP-driven growth and economic scale remain the dominant paradigm. The pressure to increase income levels without taking into consideration human and planetary costs often conflicts with the principles of GNH.

A deeper challenge lies in the mental colonization from the overwhelming influence of social media, a globalized one price-one market narrative, and the lure of materialistic aspirations. These forces are reshaping the aspirations of Bhutanese youth, leading to an exodus of talent, rising mental health crises, and an erosion of indigenous values. This is not just Bhutan's problem—it reflects a global crisis of paradigm, the disconnect between the local and the global, neglect of the cultivation of mind and consciousness, where indigenous experience and wisdom on how to live with nature has been marginalized.

Compounding the issue is the limited access to contextual, holistic, and empowering education. While technological advancements—such as artificial intelligence and digital economies—have progressed rapidly, they are two-edged swords. Used wrongly, they entrench the GDP pathway and worsen the human and planetary imbalances. The institutional structures that govern modern societies remain deeply embedded in GDP-centric frameworks, making it tough to realize GNH principles in practice.

Because Bhutan and other small economies exist in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, achieving multilateral cooperation is essential. Bhutan can learn from the rest of the world, but also teach through its own experiences and pathways. Bottom-up and diverse models of development require more local databases and data infrastructure for better decision-making.

After five decades of grass-root development, Bhutan now needs modern technology and data systems that encompasses more diverse human and environmental indices to enable information and knowledge sharing, including building the trust to enable domestic implementation and some external funding of Bhutan's search for GNH. The lack of robust grassroots-level data systems, effective dissemination of knowledge and funding hinders the ability to scale GNH principles equitably.

These challenges highlight the urgent need to build an enabling ecosystem that aligns with the vision of GNH while addressing the realities of modern economic, technological, social and environmental shifts. Bhutan must **set a precedent by pioneering a full-scale implementation of GNH**, refining its application across governance, economy, education, and social structures. This can serve as a **living model** that can be scaled (and adapted) regionally to neighboring countries and, ultimately, to the global community. No one claims that the GNH or Bhutan way is the only way forward. Its progress, both positive and negative lessons in implementation and experimentation, would help other EMDEs shape their own development paths.

The challenge before us however is not a lack of knowledge but a failure to **translate wisdom into action**. The sutras teach us that **wisdom without compassionate action is empty**—insight alone is not liberation, it must be lived. Knowledge and action are one. While there is no shortage of theoretical discourse on needed solutions, **the efforts to operationalise it remain scattered and disjointed**. What is critically lacking is **a systems approach—a synthesis and integration of these diverse initiatives and insights into a coherent, actionable movement**.

For happiness to be institutionalized, it **must be translated across meta, macro, meso, and micro levels through a structured, operational framework**. The challenge lies in **mobilizing an ecosystem of initiatives at scale**—ensuring that scattered efforts coalesce into a unified transformation capable of redefining the national and global development paradigms. Furthermore, **technology, finance, and governance must be reoriented—not towards profit and power, but towards planetary flourishing**. This requires **bottom-up restructuring of village, community, cities, national and global systems**, ensuring that every policy, investment, and decision serves the higher purpose of well-being for all beings.

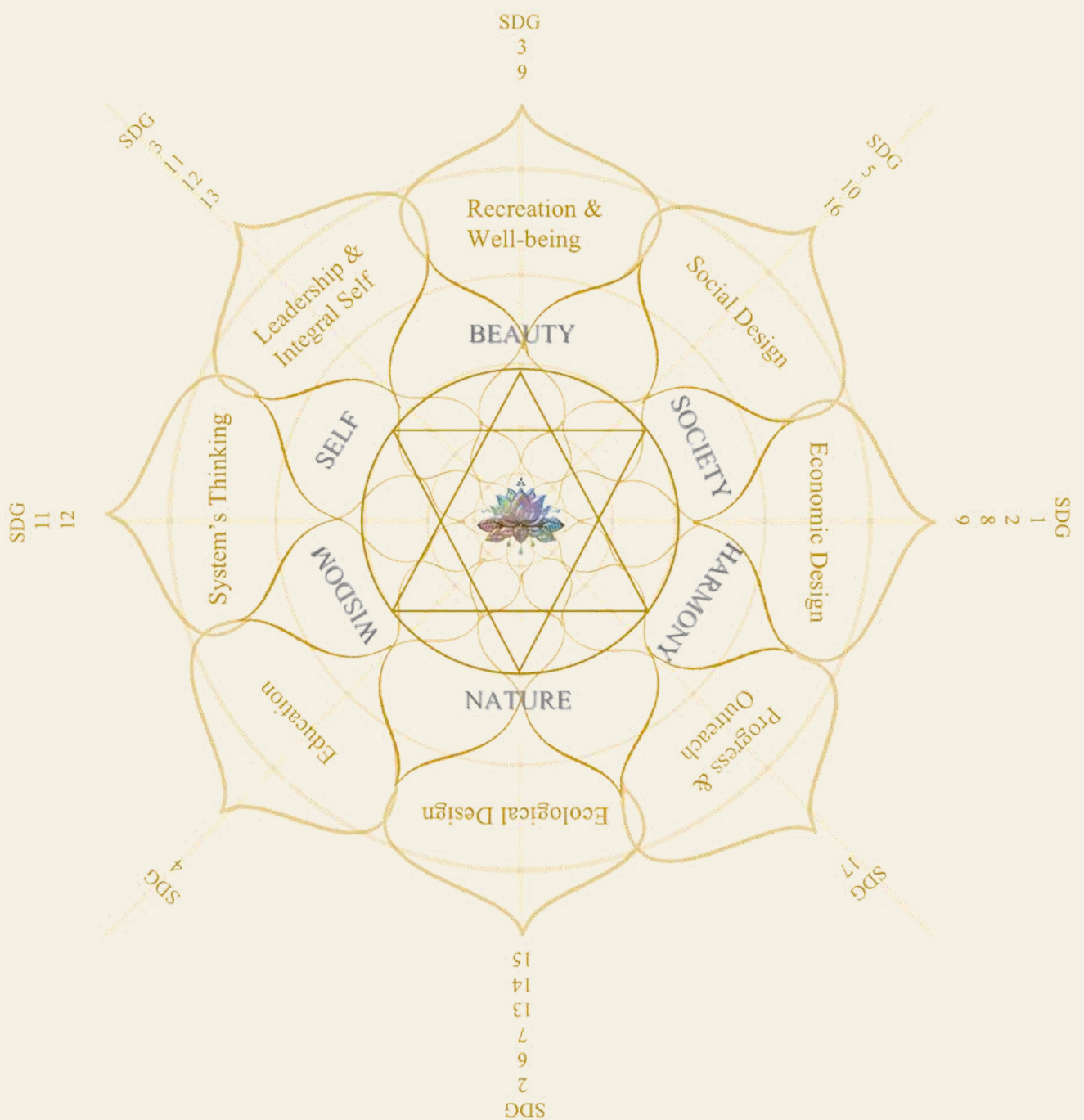
The conference will **illuminate the needed ecosystem of initiatives and explore how advancements in technology and innovative financial mechanisms can be leveraged to operationalise GNH at the scale and speed required**. Rather than a one-size-fits-all solution, the conference will aim to explore a bottom-up approach that is co-created with local communities, adapted to their unique cultural, ecological, and socio-economic conditions.

ESG is an aspiration, in which environmental and social goals can only be realized through proper governance at the human level, recognizing that we are not above nature, but guardians or stewards of the planet for future generations and overall well-being.

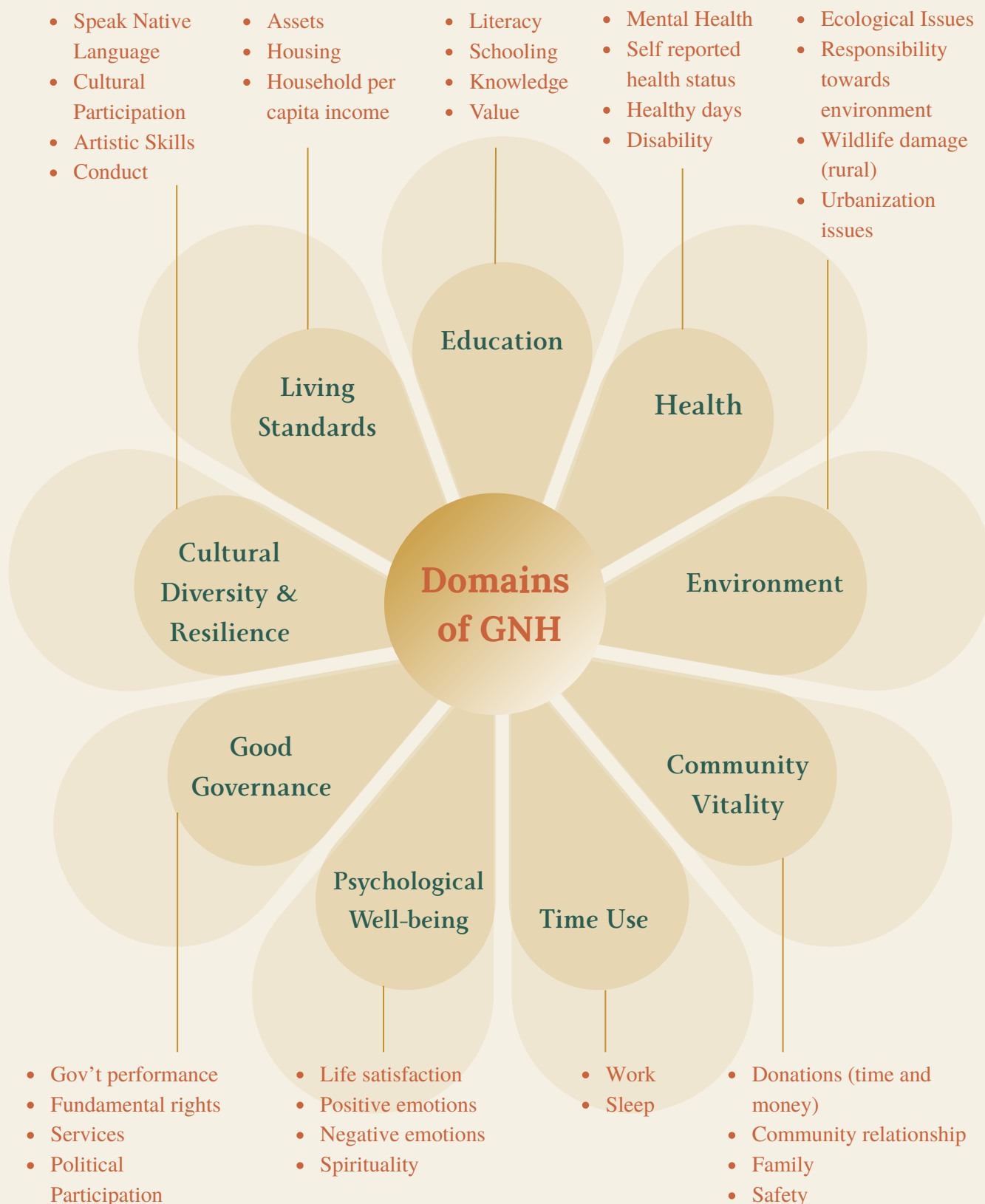
The conference aspiration is to integrate **siloed efforts into an omni-perspective**, uniting visionaries, development agencies, bankers, experts, practitioners, donors, policymakers, spiritual leaders, and technologists into an **alliance for planetary well-being**. To this end, the conference will discuss and catalyze the formation of a design architecture how to operationalize (build on) the GNH paradigm, create necessary technology infrastructure and funding mechanisms.

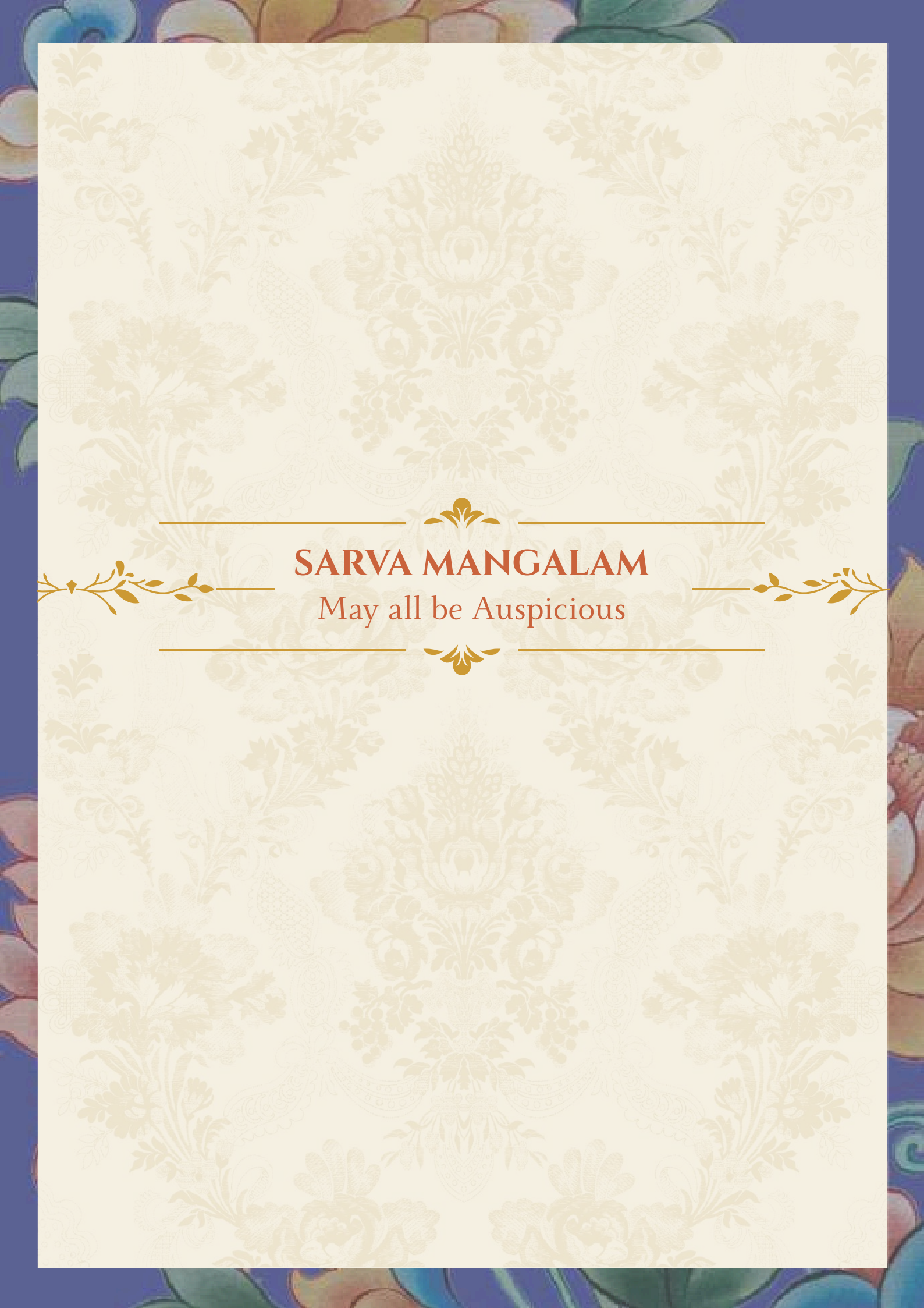
The conference aims to conclude with a declaration of commitments and a consensus roadmap for implementing GNH. **By fostering partnerships and mobilizing resources, this initiative lays out the framework to transform GNH from a visionary idea into reality, creating a resilient and inclusive future for Bhutan, the Himalayan-Kush-Highlands (HKH) region, and beyond.**





Recognising the interconnectedness and interdependencies the conference takes a systems approach towards operationalising GNH





SARVA MANGALAM

May all be Auspicious