

# IDI Occasional Paper #4

## Reassessing the role of culture in fostering sustainable entrepreneurship

Two cases from Indonesia and Bhutan

**Kent Schroeder**  
**November 2024**

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## OCCASIONAL PAPER 4

# Reassessing the role of culture in fostering sustainable entrepreneurship

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. Introduction</b>	1
<b>2. Entrepreneurship and national culture</b>	2
<i>2.1 Entrepreneurship as an engine of economic development</i>	2
<i>2.2 National culture as a barrier to entrepreneurship</i>	2
<b>3. Methods</b>	4
<b>4. Two national cultures; two conceptualizations of entrepreneurship</b>	5
<i>4.1 Indonesia - Entrepreneurship as collective social good</i>	5
<i>4.2 Bhutan - Entrepreneurship as interdependence</i>	7
<b>5. Rethinking the role of national culture in entrepreneurship</b>	10
<i>5.1 Reconceptualizing a more meaningful understanding of entrepreneurship</i>	10
<i>5.2 Reframing a more sustainable form of entrepreneurship</i>	12
<i>5.3 Fostering sustainable entrepreneurship through the lens of culture</i>	12
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	13

## 1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship has long been conceptualized as a competitive strategy intended to drive economic innovation and growth. Richard Cantillon, who is generally considered the first person to introduce the concept into the discipline of economics in the 1700s, defined entrepreneurs as persons who “...live on uncertain income rather than fixed income, buying goods at known prices to sell at unknown prices.” (Cantillon, 2010 [1755]). This definition has had considerable influence. Indeed, Adam Smith used Cantillon’s notion of entrepreneurship in his conceptualization of the invisible hand (Thornton, 2009). More recent influential definitions of entrepreneurs or entrepreneurship tread similar ground. Joseph Schumpeter (1965) defined entrepreneurs as “individuals who exploit market opportunity through technical and/or organizational innovation.” Entrepreneurship was defined by Kirzner (1973) as “the competitive behaviours that drive the market process.” While there are analytical differences across these classic definitions (Candelo, 2023), they laid the foundation for how we conceptualize and understand entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship. Taken together, they demonstrate that entrepreneurship is characterized by individualism, competition, innovation, uncertainty, and free market processes. Given these characteristics, fostering entrepreneurship is viewed as an important vehicle for promoting economic growth.

When entrepreneurship is conceptualized in these terms, national cultures characterized by less emphasis on individualism and competition have been identified as barriers to effective entrepreneurship. This paper argues, in contrast, that the common conceptualization of entrepreneurship outlined above is a ‘western’ construct based on cultural values rooted in liberalism, and that it should be reconceptualized in different contexts to take different cultural values into account. Doing so will provide a contextually more meaningful perspective on entrepreneurship and its connection to sustainability.<sup>1</sup>

The paper draws on research from Indonesia and Bhutan to demonstrate that entrepreneurs in these two countries understand the concept of entrepreneurship differently than the common construction provided by Cantillon and others, and that they do so based on their cultural values. And while the entrepreneurship practices that emerge from these alternative conceptualizations have been designated by some in the ‘west’<sup>2</sup> as failures, they are in fact reconceptualizations that better connect entrepreneurship to the notion of sustainability within their cultural contexts. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the promotion of entrepreneurship as an economic development strategy in the Global South needs to take cultural reconceptualizations of entrepreneurship directly into account in order to be effective.

The paper is divided into six sections. Section 2 provides a review of the literature on entrepreneurship including past research that argues national cultural values that are different from those associated with

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<sup>1</sup> This Occasional Paper is a revised version of a conference presentation by the author:

K. Schroeder. Rethinking entrepreneurship through the lens of culture: Snapshots from Indonesia and Bhutan and their implications for sustainability. Paper presented at the 7th International Conference on Gross National Happiness: GNH of Business, 7-9 November 2017, Thimphu, Bhutan.

<sup>2</sup> There is a well-recognized challenge of how to properly classify countries in the context of ‘development’. In this paper, the terms “west” or “western” will be used in the context of discussing countries with cultural values characterized by liberalism. The terms “Global North” and “Global South” will be used when discussing countries in the context of development and economic growth.

western liberalism can act as a barrier to successful entrepreneurial activity. The section concludes by raising the question of whether this limitation of the concept of entrepreneurship to a western liberal construct makes sense when applied in the Global South. If not, what are the implications of reconceptualizing entrepreneurship in non-western cultures for successfully fostering sustainable entrepreneurial growth? To answer these questions, section 3 outlines the methods used in the study. Section 4 then presents the study's findings. It analyzes how Indonesian and Bhutanese entrepreneurs reconceptualize entrepreneurship based on the values within their respective national cultures and contrasts these with the western liberal conceptualization found in the entrepreneurship literature. The section argues that these reconceptualizations are not only more culturally relevant but contribute to more sustainable forms of entrepreneurship. Section 5 analyzes the implications of the study's findings for fostering sustainable entrepreneurship in the Global South, focusing on entrepreneurship policy and entrepreneurship education. Section 6 concludes the study with a summary of the key findings.

## **2. Entrepreneurship and national culture**

### ***2.1 Entrepreneurship as an engine of economic development***

It is well established that there is a link between greater entrepreneurial activity and economic growth, both regionally and nationally (Acs & Armington, 2004; Audretsch & Keilbach, 2008; Berkowitz & DeJon, 2005; Foelster, 2000; Robbins et al., 2000; World Bank 2016). Entrepreneurs enhance competition, drive innovation, and generate employment as they act as an engine for economic growth (Fernandez-Serrano & Romero, 2013; Thornton et al., 2011; Wennekes et al., 2002; Tambunan 2007). At the same time, the level of entrepreneurship activity itself differs across countries (Kelley, Singer & Herrington, 2012; Peterson & Valliere 2008). Several variables have been identified in an attempt to explain these country differences. Some point to a relationship between the level of per capita income and entrepreneurial activity. This research outlines a U-shaped relationship where entrepreneurial activity is higher in countries with lower and higher levels of per capita income while subsiding in countries in-between (Fritsch & Schroeter, 2011; Wennekers et al., 2005). Others point to the nature of the process of economic development as having a relationship to entrepreneurship. Economic development processes that emphasize large firms or mass production, in this view, are characterized by lower levels of entrepreneurial activity (Chinitz, 1961; Stuetzer et al., 2016). Still others explore the role of the location of economic development, arguing that urban-focused development strategies generate greater entrepreneurship (Acs & Armington, 2006).

### ***2.2 National culture as a barrier to entrepreneurship***

While each of the above explanations provides important insights, they are not sufficient to explain country differences in entrepreneurial activity (Liñán & Fernandez-Serrano, 2014). A significant amount of research attempts to fill this gap by focusing on the role of 'national culture' (Bogatyreva et al., 2019; Hayton, George & Zahra, 2002; Herbig, 1994; Liñán & Fernandez-Serrano, 2014; Mueller & Thomas, 2000; Shane, 1993; Wennekers et al., 2001). This body of research generally argues that certain national cultural values - those that emphasize individualism, self-enhancement, risk-taking and competition - are associated with entrepreneurial intention and action (Gorgievski et al., 2018; Jaén, Moriano, & Liñán, 2013; Morris & Schindehutte, 2005; Liñán, Fernández, & Romero, 2013). National cultures with values that emphasize collectivity, hierarchy and conformity, in contrast, are less likely to promote entrepreneurial behavior (Hayton, George & Zahra, 2002). The nature of national culture can therefore

influence, either positively or negatively, individuals' attitudes towards entrepreneurship, society's demand for entrepreneurs, and the attraction of entrepreneurship as a vehicle for self-employment.

Culture is often defined as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another and includes systems and values” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 25). Culture in this conceptualization is complex. This complexity can be seen in several characterizations of culture that include multiple dimensions (Hofstede 1980; Hofstede et al. 2010; House et al. 2001; Schwartz 1994; 1999). While there are challenges with each of these characterizations, Hofstede's dimensions of culture have been one of the most influential models of culture (Bogatyeva et al., 2019; Puumalainen et al., 2015, p. 278). Hofstede's dimensions address the basic issues faced by any society including relations to authority, the conception of self, and ways of dealing with conflict (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 29-31). Hofstede's six cultural dimensions include the following:

- i) *Power distance*: the degree to which people in a society accept hierarchy and unequal distributions of power as normal.
- ii) *Individualism versus collectivism*: the degree to which people in a society prefer a framework of loosely knit individuals who take care of themselves versus a tightly knit collective that is interconnected.
- iii) *Masculinity versus femininity*: the degree to which people in a society are motivated by competition, achievement, assertiveness and quantity versus cooperation, caring and quality.
- iv) *Uncertainty avoidance*: the degree to which people in a society are comfortable with uncertain or ambiguous situations.
- v) *Long-term versus short-term orientation*: how members of a society prioritize maintaining links to their past while preparing for the challenges of the future.
- vi) *Indulgence versus restraint*: the degree to which members of a society prioritize the gratification of human desires versus the suppression of these desires.

The nature of each national culture can be characterized by where it falls on an index of 100 points for each of these six dimensions (Hofstede & Minkov, 2013). While using the national level of culture as a unit of analysis has faced criticisms given the existence of subcultures (Tung, 2008), it is a meaningful category that can provide insights into patterns of entrepreneurship as basic cultural values cluster at the national level (Liñán & Fernandez-Serrano, 2014: 97; Minkov & Hofstede, 2012). Using this unit of analysis, past studies have generally hypothesized that low power distance, high individualism, high masculinity, and low uncertainty avoidance characterize a more entrepreneurial national culture (Hayton, George & Zahra, 2002). These relationships do not always hold, including across all levels of economic development, the stage of the entrepreneurial cycle or over time (Baum et al., 1993; Pinillos & Reyes, 2011; Tiessen, 1997) but they are generally consistent with a national culture that promotes entrepreneurialism.

The cultural dimensions in Hofstede's model that are associated with entrepreneurship – low power distance or hierarchy, high individualism, high masculinity or competitiveness, and low uncertainty avoidance – correspond to a broader literature that argues individualistic, competitive and self-enhancement cultural values are associated with entrepreneurial intent (Gorgievski et al., 2018; Jaén,

Moriano, & Liñán, 2013; Morris & Schindehutte, 2005; Liñán, Fernández, & Romero, 2013). It has been further argued that these individualist cultural values are linked to countries of the Global North rooted in liberalism and its emphasis on individual rights, civil liberties and free enterprise (see, for example, Liñán, Moriano, & Jaén, 2016). The implication is that countries of the Global South with national cultures not rooted in the values of liberalism – those that emphasize hierarchy, collectivism and/or cooperation - will face challenges in fostering effective entrepreneurship.

While this characterization in the literature of non-western cultures and their relationship to entrepreneurship may seem accurate on its face, it is based on a key assumption: entrepreneurship should be conceptualized in the liberal tradition of Cantillon, Schumpeter, and Kirzner. Entrepreneurship is conceptualized around individualism, self-enhancement and competition. But is this a useful assumption to make for different national cultures that may be more collectivist, hierarchical or cooperative in nature? Does it make sense to limit our understanding of entrepreneurship to a ‘western’ liberal construct when applied to the Global South? To do so, by definition, relegates many economies of the Global South to being poorly equipped to promote an entrepreneurial culture. If, however, entrepreneurship is reconceptualized based on the values of non-western cultures, what are the implications for the nature of entrepreneurship and its connection to sustainability?

### **3. Methods**

This study undertook a qualitative comparative analysis of how national culture impacts the conceptualization of entrepreneurship among Indonesian and Bhutanese entrepreneurs. Comparative studies are useful in that they compare variables across cases, potentially uncovering similarities or differences that may have theoretical implications (Smelser, 1973). Given this, the selection of Indonesia and Bhutan as comparative cases was made for two reasons. First, the two cases have a broad commonality as Asian cultures whose understandings of entrepreneurship can be compared to the western liberal conceptualization of entrepreneurship often found in the literature. Second, while both cases are from Asia, they are culturally distinct enough to also enable a comparison between them. Overall, this allows for an analysis of potential differences in understanding entrepreneurship on a broad scale (east/west) as well as a more granular scale (Indonesia/Bhutan). This enables a deeper and more nuanced assessment of the role national culture might play in conceptualizing entrepreneurship in different contexts, avoiding a simplified sole east/west dichotomy.

The qualitative data for the current study is drawn from two previous studies undertaken by the author in Indonesia and Bhutan. These two studies provide overlapping data on the conceptualization of entrepreneurship by Indonesian and Bhutanese entrepreneurs themselves, and the connection of these conceptualizations to national culture. The Indonesian study focused on the nature and impact of entrepreneurship education on new entrepreneurs, including how they understand entrepreneurship and what drives this understanding (Schroeder, 2017). The Bhutanese study analyzed the broader implementation of the country’s national development strategy, known as Gross National Happiness (GNH), and included a component that explored the role of entrepreneurs in implementing GNH and how they understood this role (Schroeder, 2018).

The two studies had overlapping data but somewhat different analytical intentions. As such, the use of the two cases in this current study should be thought of as small “snapshots” as they are primarily exploratory when used comparatively. In both studies, nonetheless, similar methods were used. The Indonesian study used semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs involved in an entrepreneurship



training project in North and South Sulawesi. Fifty-six entrepreneurs took part in the study. In the Bhutanese case, twenty-five entrepreneurs were interviewed from across the country but, reflecting the nature of Bhutan's private sector, primarily in the capital city of Thimphu.<sup>3</sup> The findings from each study were assessed separately to identify how entrepreneurs from each country conceptualize entrepreneurship within their respective national culture. The two cases were then compared to one another to understand similarities and differences across the two cases. The two cases were then jointly compared with the argument found in the existing literature on the impact of national culture in non-western cultural contexts. Again, this enabled an analytical approach that not only compared two Asian cases to the western liberal model found in the literature, but compared the experience between the two Asian cases to better assess the role of national culture in defining entrepreneurship. The next section turns to the findings that emerged from this method.

#### **4. Two national cultures; two conceptualizations of entrepreneurship**

##### ***4.1. Indonesia - Entrepreneurship as collective social good***

Indonesia is a country with notable entrepreneurial activity that has seemingly not translated into corresponding economic growth. On the one hand, approximately 60% of Indonesians are confident they have the skills needed to start a microenterprise (Nawangpalupi et al., 2016, p. 31). Historically, the vast majority of Indonesian businesses outside of the agricultural sector have been microenterprises and they provide much of the country's employment (Vial, 2011; Tambunan, 2007). On the other hand, this success in generating employment has historically not been matched by the contributions of these enterprises to national economic growth (Tambunan, 2007). Indonesian micro and small enterprises tend to lack innovation, are risk averse, have low productivity and experience little growth (Widyarim et al., 2016; Tambunan, 2007: 99; Vial, 2011). Moreover, these entrepreneurs exist within a regulatory environment that, while improving, remains challenging as Indonesia ranks 73<sup>rd</sup> out of 190 countries on the World Bank's *Ease of Doing Business Index* (World Bank, 2019).

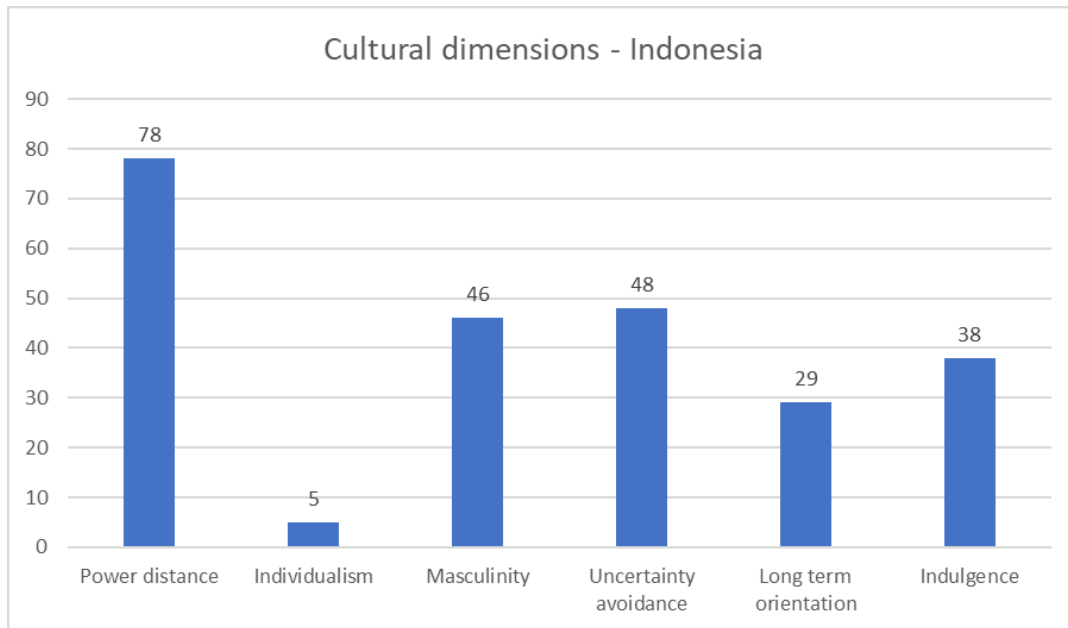
Some gains have been made recently. There has been a significant scaling-up of small and medium enterprises in recent years, yet the average enterprise size remains small and labour productivity continues to be modest (OECD, 2018). The proportion of young Indonesians who aspire to become entrepreneurs has now surpassed other countries in the region, yet youth unemployment remains the second highest in the region (ADB, 2021). The move to an entrepreneurial culture that drives greater economic growth continues to face challenges.

The literature's focus on national culture seems, on the surface, to help explain this apparent unfulfilled entrepreneurial success. Applying Hofstede's dimensions of national culture illustrates that while low power distance, high individualism, high masculinity and low uncertainty avoidance are generally hypothesized as contributing to a more entrepreneurial culture, Indonesia's national culture is conversely characterized by high power distance, extremely low individualism, medium masculinity and medium uncertainty avoidance. All of these, according to the literature, mitigate against an entrepreneurial culture (figure 1).

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<sup>3</sup> The 25 interviews used here are respondents from the private sector that took part in the larger GNH study. The larger study itself involved 157 respondents from the public sector, civil society organizations, international donors and the private sector (see Schroeder 2018).

**Figure 1: Hofstede's cultural dimensions applied to Indonesia**



Source: [Country comparison tool \(theculturefactor.com\)](https://theculturefactor.com/country-comparison-tool/)

Multiple analysts further this argument. The cultural character of Indonesia means risk is to be avoided and stability sought; hierarchy, obedience and conformity are valued; and harmonious collective relations fostered (Reisinger & Turner, 1997, pp. 141-143). The implications for entrepreneurship understood as individualized competition are clear. Cole (2007, p. 470) states that these Indonesian cultural values are “inhibitors” to economic development as “high power distance, uncertainty avoidance and collectivism all hinder entrepreneurship.” Collectivism is a drag on entrepreneurship and business growth and this is directly tied to Indonesian culture (Iskander et al., 2022, p. 14). Indeed, the sentiment that Indonesia’s national culture is not entrepreneurial in nature is sometimes simply assumed to naturally be the case (see, for example, Bhasin & Venkataramany, 2010, p. 102).

On the surface, this represents a significant challenge for Indonesian policy that strives to promote entrepreneurship to spur economic growth (see Mirzanti, Simatupang & Larso, 2015). National culture, it would seem, is a barrier to fostering such entrepreneurship. Yet it is only a barrier when entrepreneurship is defined in economically deterministic terms rooted in western liberal cultural values of individualism and competition. Indonesian entrepreneurs interviewed as part of this study demonstrated a very different understanding of entrepreneurship and what it should achieve, an understanding that is rooted to their collectivist culture. By doing so, they move to a more integrated and sustainable understanding of entrepreneurship that changes how Indonesia’s national culture should be perceived in its entrepreneurial role.

Many of the businesses started by entrepreneurs in this study were still young but they were often successful in generating profit. This is a positive development for entrepreneurship as a vehicle for increasing individual incomes and promoting economic growth. Most respondents themselves, however, viewed entrepreneurship in much broader terms. Entrepreneurship is as much about contributing to

collective social good as it is about personal wealth building. This is no mere focus on corporate social responsibility or social entrepreneurship. Enhancing collective bonds and wellbeing is a foundational and inherent part of entrepreneurship, as respondents understood it, which exists in parallel to its economic function. These entrepreneurs are not “choosing” to be socially responsible or to focus on social entrepreneurship; it is their default understanding and practice. “Our collective values,” according to one respondent, “mean entrepreneurship is about strengthening social bonds and harmony.” Profit is not unimportant but it is paralleled by an equally important, and sometimes more important, need to promote collective social good.

Creating employment was a frequent issue raised as a core *social* function of Indonesian entrepreneurship. According to one respondent, “It’s not about the money but how we help people, how people can be supported through the business.” Another concurred, claiming, “I don’t need to make a lot of money; I need to help others.” “The biggest happiness in my life is when I pay my employees,” said another. In many cases, respondents outlined how they specifically provide jobs for people who they know are marginalized. Respondents’ businesses employ poor students, orphans, people from broken homes and a people with disabilities. Respondents pointed to other ways their businesses foster a larger social good. Those with culinary businesses frequently outlined their focus on providing healthy food options to promote better health in their communities as obesity rises in the country. Others spoke of using their business to support their families, particularly through providing tuition money for siblings. All of this does not suggest that these Indonesian entrepreneurs are more compassionate than entrepreneurs from other national cultures. It suggests their collectivist cultural values direct them away from an economically deterministic conceptualization of entrepreneurship built on individual competition and self-enhancement to one that is culturally relevant, prioritizing social and economic concerns as equally consequential in business. Entrepreneurship does not involve choosing to *be* socially responsible, it *is* socially responsible by definition.

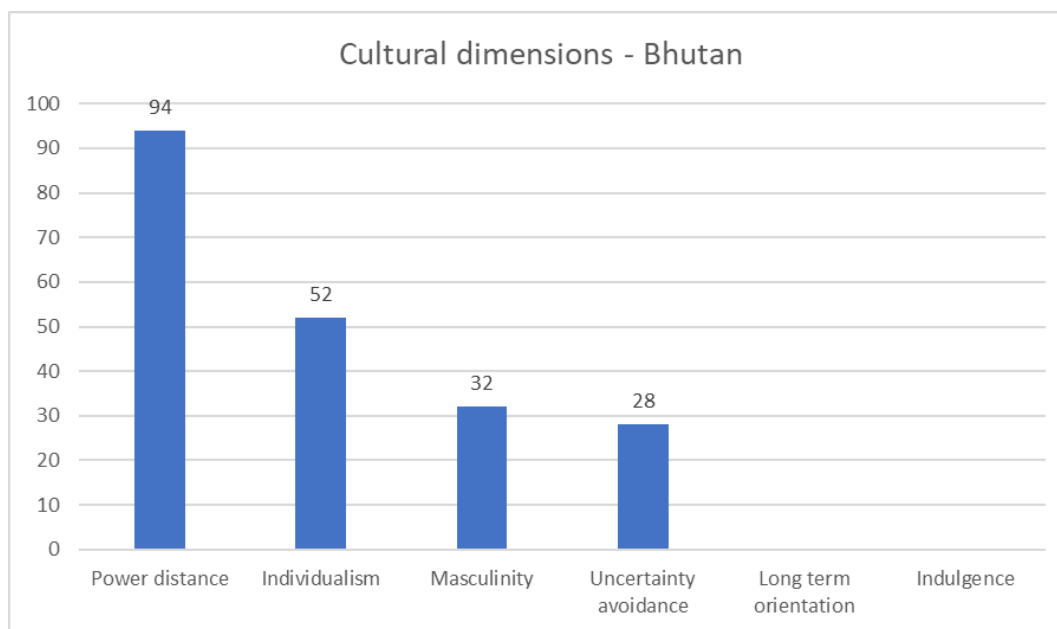
#### **4.2 Bhutan - Entrepreneurship as interdependence**

The private sector in Bhutan has been identified as a key player for driving the country’s Gross National Happiness strategy (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2024). At the same time, it has historically been small. A glance through Bhutanese policy documents over the last few decades bears this out. The Fifth Five Year Plan (1981-1987) states “the private sector is still very weak” (Planning Commission, 1981, p. 58). Bhutan 2020, the country’s long-term development vision published in 1999, concurred in its claim that “the pace of private sector development... continues to lag behind expectations (Planning Commission 1999, p. 33-34). The Tenth Five Year Plan (2008–2013) continued this theme, stating “the small and underdeveloped private sector ... has been unable to fulfill the potential of becoming the engine of growth and provider of employment” (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2009, p. 79). The government of Bhutan has, in response, made significant efforts to promote private sector development and entrepreneurship. The Economic Development Policy of 2016 (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2016) sets out to promote a private sector enabling environment that restructures the macro-economic base of the country. The Cottage and Small Industry Policy of 2019 further emphasizes the development of an entrepreneurial culture as one of its key areas of strategic focus (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2019). The current Thirteenth Five Year Plan (2024-2029) prioritizes fostering entrepreneurship as one key strategy to drive the country towards high income status (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2024, pp. 39-48). Indeed, over 20 agencies directly or indirectly provide entrepreneurship programming in a county of less than 1 million people (Gurung & Tenzin, 2018, p. 52). Currently, however, Bhutan maintains a

middling rank on the World Bank's *Ease of Doing Business Index*, ranking 89 out of 190 countries (World Bank, 2019).

A look at where Bhutan falls on Hofstede's dimensions of culture suggests there may be challenges for developing a more entrepreneurial culture. Again, low power distance, high individualism, high masculinity and low uncertainty avoidance are generally hypothesized as contributing to a more entrepreneurial national culture. In contrast, Bhutan's national culture is characterized by extremely high power distance, medium individualism, relatively low masculinity and relatively low uncertainty avoidance (figure 2). While the latter bodes reasonably well for an entrepreneurial culture, the other three are less promising.

**Figure 2: Hofstede's cultural dimensions applied to Bhutan**



Note: *Long-term orientation* and *Indulgence* figures are not available for Bhutan

Source: [Country comparison tool \(theculturefactor.com\)](https://theculturefactor.com/country-comparison-tool/)

This nature of Bhutan's culture has frequently been described as Buddhist in character. While Bhutan is a multi-religious country, Buddhist values like equity across all people and across time, interdependence among all sentient beings, harmony within society and with nature, balance between the inner and outer worlds, and dignity of all people form the basis on Bhutan's culture (Priesner, 2004; Schroeder, 2018). According to past research, however, the implications of this cultural character for entrepreneurship in Bhutan, like in Indonesia, are challenging. Relatively little research on entrepreneurship in Bhutan exists, but Valliere (2014) provides intriguing insights into what this character of Bhutanese national culture means for entrepreneurship. Valliere's study uses a number of additional dimensions beyond Hofstede, but he reaches a similar conclusion about the entrepreneurship challenge as it relates to Bhutanese youth: Bhutan's national culture provides mostly negative signals to youth about the attractiveness of entrepreneurship as a career path. Ultimately, Valliere (2014, p. 141)

concludes: “The development of effective national entrepreneurship programs in Bhutan will face significant challenges from adverse cultural factors.”

Vallier’s findings are significant for fostering the entrepreneurial culture envisioned in policies like the Economic Policy of 2016 and the Cottage and Small Industry Policy of 2019. They illustrate that Bhutan’s national culture may act as a brake on the pursuit of economic growth through entrepreneurship. Other studies suggest something similar. Fujita, Lhendup and Thinley (2022, p. 5) argue that the cultural preference for stability and status lead to government employment being the preferred option over entrepreneurship. Gurung and Tenzin (2018) similarly state that the cultural perception of entrepreneurship as a last resort is a barrier to greater entrepreneurial activity. Interestingly, empirical evidence from a study by Valliere and Gedeon (2016) appears to contradict this notion of a lack of entrepreneurial culture, suggesting an emerging high level of positive attitudes towards entrepreneurship in Bhutan. Yet, tellingly, this is not due to a valuing of individualism and competition as the core values of entrepreneurship; rather, it is ironically due to the hierarchical character of Bhutan’s national culture as Bhutanese take their cue from the top-down promotion of entrepreneurship from government.

The existing literature therefore paints a relatively bleak picture for fostering an entrepreneurial culture in Bhutan rooted in individualism and competition. National cultural values in Bhutan - extremely high power distance, or hierarchy, medium individualism, and low masculinity - would appear to suppress the development of entrepreneurship. But, again, a more positive picture emerges if the concept of entrepreneurship itself is re-framed in Bhutanese cultural terms. Similar to Indonesian respondents, Bhutanese entrepreneurs re-defined the concept to move beyond economic individualism and competition in the marketplace. Where Indonesian respondents reconceptualized entrepreneurship in terms of collective social good in parallel with economic growth, Bhutanese respondents reconceptualized it in terms of interdependence. Rather than primarily focusing on the competitive generation of profit, entrepreneurship for Bhutanese respondents involves a tight and inherent interdependence across economic, cultural and environmental concerns. Entrepreneurship is about a holistic interlinkage across all of them; they are not stand-alone components but interconnected by nature, requiring constant consideration of all three in the business process. Again, profit is not absent in this equation but it is inextricably linked to cultural and ecological concerns. Entrepreneurs in the tourism industry, one of the largest sectors in the Bhutanese economy, frequently spoke of how the interdependence of the three work together to create a virtuous entrepreneurial circle: entrepreneurs pursuing a manageable and sustainable level of economic growth will help preserve the country’s environment and cultural traditions; the resulting pristine environment and traditional culture will, in turn, further promote tourism that raises incomes and generates moderate growth. All three – economy, environment and culture – work together as an interdependent whole.

This interdependent conceptualization of entrepreneurship is clearly represented by one tourism entrepreneur’s description of his business approach: “Profit is not everything. Our philosophy and belief is if we are profitable as a society, as a community, as a tour company, we need to take care of [cultural and ecological] things. If not we’ll kill the golden goose.” The relationship between economic, cultural and environmental concerns is not viewed as a struggle among competing issues where profit is the focus, but as an integrated whole where each is mutually beneficial to the others. In contrast, killing cultural and ecological integrity kills the economic golden goose. Some respondents went as far as criticizing the Bhutanese government based on their perception that its policies were overemphasizing

the pursuit of competitive profit. The government “...always has an agenda that is just based on profit,” said one. Another claimed, “They go where big money is, they want the buck even if it’s not good for the environment.” Even more surprisingly, a third entrepreneur stated that the government’s perceived focus on economic growth “frightens me.”

This seems counterintuitive to those functioning on a liberal conceptualization of entrepreneurship: entrepreneurs themselves criticizing the government for too much focus on economic growth. Yet it is entirely consistent with Bhutan’s national culture that values balance, harmony, and interdependence. Moreover, Bhutanese respondents’ reconceptualization of entrepreneurship as interdependence demonstrates a clear connection to Gross National Happiness, Bhutan national development model. As the name suggests, Gross National Happiness is an alternative model of development that moves beyond the prioritization of economic growth. It is a holistic model characterized by multiple social, cultural, ecological, governance, economic and psychological domains. Significantly, these domains are understood as interdependent, interacting and strengthening one another. Each domain is foundational to development, while also instrumental to the other domains and their contribution to holistic development. This entire GNH model is conceptualized as resting on a foundation of Bhutanese cultural values focused on balance, harmony among all living things, interconnectedness across the past and present, and interdependence (Givel, 2015; Rinzin, 2006; Schroeder, 2018). When respondents speak of their conceptualization of entrepreneurship as interdependence across economic, environmental and cultural concerns, they are describing a GNH form of entrepreneurship distinct to Bhutan.

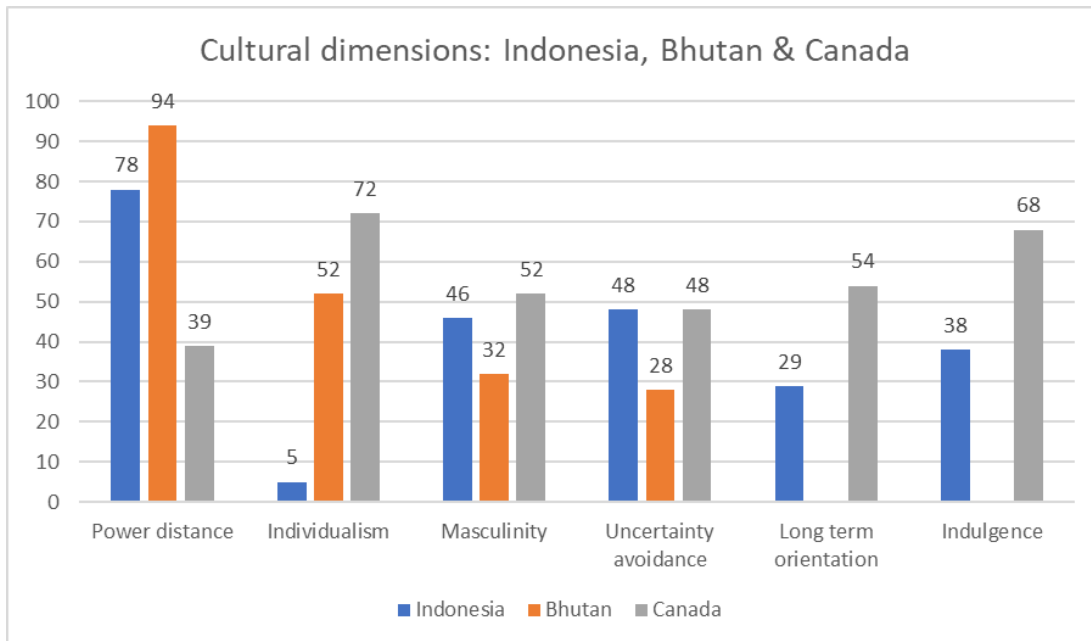
Moving to this reconceptualization of entrepreneurship defined as interdependence re-positions the role of Bhutan’s national culture. National culture is no longer a brake on entrepreneurship as much of the literature suggests; rather, it becomes the foundation for an inherently sustainable kind of entrepreneurship specific to Bhutan and its GNH model. Like the Indonesian case, Bhutanese national culture frames a more appropriate conceptualization of entrepreneurship that prioritizes the pursuit of values important to the Bhutanese. Profit is not absent, it is simply placed on an interdependent and level playing field with cultural and environmental concerns.

## **5. Rethinking the role of national culture in entrepreneurship**

### ***5.1 Reconceptualizing a more meaningful understanding of entrepreneurship***

An emerging picture arises from the cases of Indonesia and Bhutan. While Indonesian and Bhutanese cultural values may inhibit entrepreneurship when defined as an economic phenomenon based on the liberal values of individualism, competition and self-enhancement, their respective cultural values appear to promote a more sustainable form of entrepreneurship that is relevant to their national context. Entrepreneurship conceptualized by Indonesian entrepreneurs equally values the pursuit of profit and the creation of social good that better fits with the more collectivist character of Indonesian culture. For Bhutanese entrepreneurs, conceptualizing entrepreneurship as an interdependent phenomenon connecting economic, environmental and cultural concerns fits within the country’s GNH model and its foundation in Bhutanese cultural values of interdependence, balance and harmony.

The entrepreneurship literature, as previously shown, views both national cultures as barriers to successful entrepreneurship. In light of this, it is instructive to compare the scores of Indonesia and Bhutan on Hofstede’s dimensions with Canada, a multicultural country that nonetheless has been characterized historically by a dominant liberal national culture (figure 3).

**Figure 3: Indonesia, Bhutan & Canada comparison**

Note: *Long-term orientation* and *Indulgence* figures are not available for Bhutan

Source: [Country comparison tool \(theulturefactor.com\)](https://theulturefactor.com/country-comparison-tool/)

Canada, unlike Indonesia and Bhutan, scores low of power distance and high on individualism, as well as moderately on masculinity and uncertainty avoidance. All of these contribute, according to the entrepreneurship literature, to a more entrepreneurial culture. But, again, this reflects the literature's conceptualization of entrepreneurship as a liberal concept emphasizing western individualist values that differ from Indonesia and Bhutan. This is not to say the literature is wrong in its treatment of national culture; rather, it is *limiting* in its treatment of national culture outside of the west, ascribing western liberal cultural values to the very character of entrepreneurship and then applying this conceptualization to other national cultural contexts. It is not surprising, then, that non-western cultures with a greater collectivist, hierarchical or interdependent character will be viewed as less effective in fostering a westernized understanding of entrepreneurship.

This study suggests something different. It illustrates that in the case of Indonesia and Bhutan, moving beyond a western liberal cultural lens to infuse the conceptualization of entrepreneurship with each country's national cultural values shifts how entrepreneurship is understood and practiced. Entrepreneurship in Indonesia and Bhutan is understood differently than it is in the west, infusing it with non-western values that move beyond individualism. Further, it is understood differently between Indonesia and Bhutan, again rooted in each country's distinct national cultural values. In this sense, national culture represents a significant variable that potentially shapes how entrepreneurship is understood, is carried out, and should be assessed. Reconceptualizing entrepreneurship based on national culture therefore provides a more meaningful understanding of entrepreneurship beyond the simple imposition of a western, liberal understanding.



## ***5.2 Reframing a more sustainable form of entrepreneurship***

The role of national culture in reconceptualizing entrepreneurship in different cultural contexts is important on its own. But the results of this study suggest that the value of such reconceptualizations goes further, at least in the cases of Indonesia and Bhutan. If entrepreneurship is to be a meaningful vehicle for sustainable development, the cultural values of Indonesia and Bhutan are not barriers, they are in fact part of the answer. The parallel prioritizing of social and economic issues in the Indonesian case and interdependence across economic, culture and ecological concerns in the Bhutanese case reframe entrepreneurship in a more integrated and holistic manner. Individualized competition in the pursuit of profit is not the main goal. In both cases, the pursuit of profit inherently occurs alongside social, cultural and/or ecological concerns. In both cases, a more holistic and sustainable form of entrepreneurship is the result. National culture therefore becomes a springboard on which to build a more sustainable private sector in both countries. This is not to say there is not a recognition of other concerns in western countries with liberal values: corporate responsibility, the 3Ps (people, planet, profit) and other approaches are now common. Yet a more integrated and holistic approach is inherent in the very conceptualization of entrepreneurship itself in the Indonesian and Bhutanese cases. Indonesian and Bhutanese entrepreneurs in this study are not choosing to incorporate corporate responsibility into their business practices; it's a fundamental component of how they understand business in the first place. In these two cases, national culture is consequently a key to a *more* sustainable form of entrepreneurship. Instead of assessing the practice of entrepreneurship as facing barriers in countries with non-western cultural values, as some in the literature argue, the practice of entrepreneurship in the Global North can learn from other, non-western cultural traditions on how to reframe entrepreneurship for a more sustainable form of business.

## ***5.3 Fostering sustainable entrepreneurship through the lens of culture***

Reframing a more sustainable form of entrepreneurship based on national cultural values has further real-world implications. It promotes a rethinking of how to effectively foster entrepreneurship within individual cultures. This is critical as fostering entrepreneurship is not only a key development strategy for many countries in the Global South, it is also a key component of the aid agendas of many Northern (or western) donors.<sup>4</sup> To start at the broadest level, the results of this study suggest that the design and implementation of policies and programs directed at developing or supporting an entrepreneurial culture, whether implemented by governments, donor-funded projects, the private sector, or a combination of these, need to be explicitly grounded in national cultural values. The default to a western liberal conceptualization of entrepreneurship is not helpful. Meaningful entrepreneurship programs and policies must be rooted in the cultural values within which entrepreneurs actually exist. Imposing a liberal understanding of entrepreneurship is a recipe for potential failure, reproducing the cultural blinders found in the entrepreneurship literature.

In addition, incorporating national cultural values in entrepreneurship policies will direct attention to what is most valued in the sustainability equation and what, conversely, is less emphasized within a particular cultural context. This will allow for policies to focus on consolidating what is already emphasized and addressing what is not. For example, the case of Indonesia illustrated a

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the development priorities of [USAID](#), [SIDA](#), [Global Affairs Canada](#), [JICA](#), and Australia's [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#) among others.



conceptualization of entrepreneurship as a combination of economic and collective social concerns. At the same time, Indonesian respondents placed little emphasis on ecological issues. Explicitly rooting sustainable entrepreneurship policies within a culturally appropriate framework in the case of Indonesia would then direct policies towards consolidating the economic and social components of entrepreneurship while also building the missing ecological component. Using a conceptualization of entrepreneurship rooted in national culture enables a diagnosis of where policy attention is needed to more effectively promote sustainable entrepreneurship.

Beyond the broader policy environment, using national culture to conceptualize entrepreneurship is also critical for entrepreneurship education. The results of this study suggest that entrepreneurship curriculum and teaching methods should reflect their cultural context. To be successful, entrepreneurship education should not simply export curriculum steeped in western liberal cultural values. Yet many entrepreneurship education programs do just that, taking a one-size-fits all approach (Lourenço, Taylor & Taylor, 2013, p. 506), an approach rooted in the western experience. Doing so potentially misses the appropriateness and richness of culturally relevant conceptualizations of entrepreneurship which may, at least in the cases of Indonesia and Bhutan, help foster a more sustainable approach to business. The Indonesian case is again instructive. One of the study's respondents was highly critical of his entrepreneurship education, which occurred through a northern donor-funder project. He stated: "The class focused on entrepreneurship as a concept related to profit. The curriculum forces students to run after money. Entrepreneurship is not just about money here but how to benefit people. The curriculum misses this." Another respondent simply stated, "we sometimes get trapped in a western model." Importing a western entrepreneurship education model will not foster the kind of entrepreneurship that will be most effective in other cultural contexts.

Successfully fostering sustainable entrepreneurship therefore demands explicitly locating the nature of entrepreneurship within its national cultural context. Whether this is at the policy level or in the education of future entrepreneurs, a one-size-fits all approach is inappropriate. National cultural values need to be recognized as part of the foundation for effectively defining and fostering sustainable entrepreneurship, and this will likely look different in different cultural contexts.

## 6. Conclusion

National cultures in the Global South have often been viewed as a potential barrier to entrepreneurship. Yet this argument uses a cultural lens that defaults to the western liberal tradition: entrepreneurship is conceptualized using the cultural values of individualism, competition and self-enhancement. Such cultural blinders, not surprisingly, result in other cultural values being designated as barriers to entrepreneurship.

This study suggests something else. The snapshot cases of Indonesia and Bhutan illustrate that thinking differently about the role of national cultures in conceptualizing entrepreneurship enables a deeper exploration of how to promote sustainable business within individual cultures. As the two cases suggest, their national cultures are not barriers to entrepreneurship, they are different entry points into a more meaningful understanding and operationalization of sustainable entrepreneurship in their cultural contexts. Explicitly incorporating national cultural values in the conceptualization of entrepreneurship can act as a foundation for more sustainable entrepreneurship policies and entrepreneurship education that fosters a more meaningful form of business in countries of the Global South.

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