

# Editorial

## Bhutan After the COVID-19 Crisis

On March 5, 2020, a tourist tested positive for COVID-19 in Thimphu. Sensing the growing threat of the pandemic, quarantine was introduced for all travellers entering Bhutan from March 14. Bhutanese schools were closed on March 18 and the international border was sealed on March 19. By the end of March, 2020, Bhutan was treating four people infected with COVID-19.

Thus began a surreal year. Physical distancing, face masks, hand sanitisers and contact tracing became a social norm; the government asked people not to hoard food even as it stocked food supplies and assisted in the distribution. August was a taxing month with a nearly month-long lockdown as we saw the first cases outside quarantine facilities – the much-dreaded local transmission. Workplaces, offices, and businesses closed. Tensions and stress led to health problems including mental health.

As countries across the globe suffered socio-economic and political upheavals with millions of COVID-19 cases and hundreds of thousands of deaths. The Secretary General of the United Nations defined the situation as a “developmental disaster”. Governance was transformed as the “normality” we knew was dissipated by the unprecedented menace.

Given the severity of the crisis, His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck personally took the helm of the national COVID-response efforts with swift preventive and emergency relief measures. As the society remained traumatised, His Majesty the King, appearing live on television, personally explained the magnitude of the threat and the need for extreme measures. Images of the King visiting the most remote communities, and a compassionate Royal Address on September 12, left many in tears.

A coordination mechanism was established under Royal supervision, with a National COVID-19 Task Force in Thimphu supported by regional task forces. The government’s “Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan” was a comprehensive guide to fight the pandemic and ensure livelihood round

the year even under a worst-case scenario. The result was that Bhutan was protected by dedicated frontline workers, the service forces, and many citizens working round the clock to keep the Coronavirus at bay.

Even as analysts talk of a “new normal”, pragmatic Bhutan must understand that we are living through a reality that keeps changing. Out of this catastrophe is emerging a new wave of thinking about the future. Visionaries are urged to think ahead and, as Winston Churchill said, “never let a good crisis go to waste”. Many Bhutanese thinkers agreed that the country needed drastic change.

It is not a question of society bouncing back, or returning to normal, but of reinventing the future. As our own astrologers seek cosmic advice, our policy-makers must turn problems around and find directions for a vision for the future.

If confusion is truly the beginning of wisdom, The Druk Journal, a journal of thoughts and ideas, has the important responsibility to inspire thinking, discourse, and ideas. This issue of the Journal captures some of the innovative brainstorming and prompts that are being shared with national planners and implementers including the government. For example, BCMD and the UNDP organised a series of forums that delve into the current situation: “Reimagining Bhutan: Building Forward Better Beyond COVID”.

Experts, thinkers, and decision makers ask vital questions and brainstorm solutions to help mark the way forward:

- What can be done to strengthen social protection even as people lose jobs and face increasing social challenges like domestic violence?
- How can Bhutan create an innovative world of work and revamp the education system and employment opportunities by taking advantage of the digital world?
- What can Bhutan put in place for well-being and a healthier population?
- What are the innovative solutions Bhutan can take heed of in order to move beyond COVID times?
- How can we revamp our education system to prepare us for the future?
- What should a new economic scenario be?

- What has the COVID crisis taught us to refine the system of governance?
- What are some of the bold decisions Bhutan needs to take?

The times have changed, the situation has changed, and the world has changed. But for Bhutan, Gross National Happiness (GNH) remains a relevant goal for human development. His Majesty The King once said that the vision of GNH does not change but how we achieve GNH will change with the times.

This is now a resounding mandate for today's generation of Bhutanese.