

## Bhutan's National Youth Policy: A Gap Between Commitment and Output?

*Tashi Choden*

The endorsement of a National Youth Policy by the *Lhengye Zhungtshog*<sup>1</sup> and its official launch in December 2011 was an important milestone for the youth and people of Bhutan, as it signaled a promised move towards consolidating the quite vibrant but disjointed efforts related to youth in the country.

Prior to this Bhutan had, of course, long recognised the importance of ensuring the wellbeing and developing the potential of its youth, who today constitute about 24 percent of the population.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the prioritised budget outlay for the education and health sectors since the beginning of planned socio-economic development in the early 1960s, the Bhutanese leadership also instituted several initiatives specifically targeting youth over the past two decades.

These included the establishment of the Department of Youth and Sports (DYS) under the Ministry of Education in 1996, the Youth Development Fund in 1999 as a non-government entity, and a pronounced emphasis on youth wellbeing in key government documents such as the 'Vision 2020' document.

Over the years several agencies, while not solely youth-focused, also assumed partial responsibility for addressing issues or for providing programmes related to youth. The National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC), Bhutan Olympic Committee (BOC), Ministry of Labour and Human Resources (MoLHR), Bhutan Narcotic Control Agency (BNCA), Tarayana Foundation, Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD), RENEW, VAST, and many more civil society groups in recent years have all been working on some aspect of youth-related matters.

There has also been early commitment to key legislation that has a bearing on youth welfare. This includes the Penal Code of Bhutan 2004 with an Amendment in 2011, the Labour and Employment Act 2007, the Child Care and Protection Act 2011, and a host of other related national and international legislation.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cabinet

<sup>2</sup>The BLSS 2013, with youth identified as those between 13 to 24 years of age.

Notwithstanding these important investments made over the decades, it was recognised that there were critical gaps that needed to be addressed in terms of having a cohesive policy and a coordinated approach to the holistic development of Bhutanese youth. As a result, the National Youth Policy was crafted.

And so today, five years since its launch, the question is: to what extent does the National Youth Policy actually guide the relevant agencies and stakeholders in the formulation of their youth-related strategies and programmes?

To answer this question we first take a look at the policy itself in terms of its scope and potential, the problems it faces, where it stands today, and some thoughts on next steps.

### **Scope and Potential**

Initiated by the DYS with financial support from UNICEF, the development of the youth policy was a fairly thorough and representative process. A wide-range of stakeholders<sup>3</sup> were consulted in assessing the situation of Bhutanese youth, including the various challenges spurred by social change in a developing and modernising Bhutan. The relevant youth-related interventions in place since the inception of development in Bhutan were also taken into consideration.<sup>4</sup>

A conscious effort was made to develop a policy that is broadly in tune with the Gross National Happiness (GNH) vision and its four-pillar framework. The policy thus adopts a fairly holistic approach, although there is scope for improvement in the way some details are translated and adopted—especially as the GNH approach itself is (or should be) constantly reviewed and refined.

For instance, in emulating the cultural pillar of GNH, the youth policy principle promotes respect for culture, belief systems and ethical values—all very important of course—but appears to miss out on some equally important elements like appreciation for creativity and the arts, and other aspects of evolving culture to which youth are integral. To its credit though, the policy document makes clear that it should be reviewed and revised to “be responsive to emerging new challenges, issues and aspirations of the youth”.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>These included all relevant government and non-government sectors; youth themselves across various demographic groupings; parents; teachers; media; among others.

<sup>4</sup>National Youth Policy, Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB), 2011, Pg.6.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., Pg. 24.

The National Youth Policy covers most of the critical issues pertaining to Bhutanese youth and provides policy statements to guide relevant stakeholders through eight key thematic areas: education; health and wellbeing; employment and training; environmental education, awareness and action; culture and identity; social environment; recreation and sports; and civic participation and empowerment.

Defining youth as those between ages 13 and 24, the policy also recognises the diversity that exists within this broad age group and seeks to address the needs of youth in general as well as those of priority target youth groups. Targeted interventions are thus advocated for out-of-school youth, under-employed and unemployed young people, young people engaging in risky sexual behaviour, young people using drugs and alcohol, youth with disabilities, orphans, young monks and nuns, domestic workers, girls working in *drayang*s, uneducated young women in urban and rural areas, and gifted youth.<sup>6</sup>

The policy—in recapitulating the rights and responsibilities of youth to participate effectively, responsibly and fully in society—also reminds members of the wider Bhutanese society (government, society and individuals from all walks of life) of its duty to support this process in their various capacities.

## The Problem

While we have a fairly decent youth policy, the sad fact is that the following words delivered by His Majesty the King (during his 2013 National Day address) ring loud and true for the current state of our national policy on youth:

A King should tell the truth to his people and I do not conceal anything from you, my people. With honesty, let me share some thoughts with you today. If we take a close look, we Bhutanese are good at writing plans, speaking well, and expounding ideas. But implementation falls short of commitments. There is gap between commitments made and output delivered. We are not able to deliver results of expected quality in a timely manner.

As is so often the case with implementation of policies (or lack thereof) in Bhutan, the youth policy too suffers at the critical stage of taking action.

Taking the policy forward rests on three key elements.<sup>7</sup> One is the necessity for

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., Pg. 8.

<sup>7</sup>These three elements are identified among several other essential steps in the National Youth Policy document.

an inter-sectoral approach to address youth matters, which are multidimensional in nature. Next, to get moving from policy aspirations to action, a National Youth Action Plan (NYAP) must be developed—every three years per the policy—with the dedicated input and participation of all the relevant stakeholders. And finally, to facilitate such an approach, an appropriately empowered agency must take the lead.

Unfortunately, it is precisely these pre-requisites that have proved to be the greatest challenge to the success of the youth policy.

An inter-sectoral approach has been largely elusive. This can be attributed in part to a lack of commitment and consistency among some stakeholders; paralysis in functioning associated with bureaucratic modes of operation and political processes; shortage of appropriate personnel and scheduling conflicts across a large number of stakeholders; and all the coordinating challenges and subsequent delays that have occurred as a result.

At the same time, the discrepancy between the enormity of responsibility placed on the DYS and its practical abilities was never quite addressed. Although identified as the “guardian” of the National Youth Policy and tasked as the lead agency to facilitate its implementation, the DYS has not been empowered with the requisite authority, technical expertise and financial resources to be able to fulfill such a mandate. In other words, this is not a department-level mandate.

After the initial few rounds of national stakeholder and technical committee meetings to discuss the formulation of an action plan, the momentum fizzled out and there has not been any visible progress on this front. Needless to say, the inability of the various stakeholders to come together to develop a coherent NYAP and to take ownership of it is most unfortunate.

The absence of such a strategic plan means that we lack clarity and direction in terms of how the youth policy goals are to be realised; what kind of timeframe guides the completion of each aspect of the policy; how much it will cost to implement and how it will be financed; and how to systematically establish credible monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

It is no surprise then that, almost five years since the inception of the National Youth Policy, it is not clear what kind of impact it has made—be it on the condition of Bhutanese society overall, the situation of its youth in general, or on the situation of sub-groups of the youth population.

## Not as In-Sync as Envisioned

In the absence, then, of a formally endorsed NYAP and a functional national stakeholder committee, what is happening on the ground?

Basically, different agencies and sectors continue with the design and implementation of their respective programmes and activities, some of which address the youth demographic and may relate in part to the thematic areas and critical issues identified by the youth policy. Many government and non-government agencies do in fact expend considerable effort and resources towards youth-related concerns.

For instance, the Ministry of Health looks into sexual and reproductive health, nutrition, use of drugs, among other issues, as part of its adolescent health programme to improve overall growth and development of adolescents and youth.<sup>8</sup> The BNCA as the main government agency to combat the abuse of drugs in the country works on a variety of interventions that cater to and have an impact on youth as well as other cohorts involved with drug use.

In line with its mandate to facilitate human resource development and to ensure gainful employment for all Bhutanese, the MoLHR has a lead role in facilitating appropriate training and employment opportunities for youth. The Ministry of Education also bears significant responsibility in these areas, as school education curricula must be designed to equip students with the appropriate skills and knowledge required in the job market.

Meanwhile the DYS—as the main government entity mandated to deliver a wide range of youth-focused programmes—works with various government agencies and civil society actors in implementing initiatives such as school-based parenting education, vocational clubs, career guidance and counselling, health and hygiene, games and sport, and scouting. It organises thematic youth forums, supports various youth initiatives, and provides library, Internet, computer, audio-visual and other facilities and services through its youth centres.<sup>9</sup>

As this sampling of sectoral activities shows, a degree of coordination is happening—or should be happening—between the various agencies on some youth-related matters. We can see further illustration of this from youth substance abuse as an issue that requires multi-pronged intervention involving multiple actors.

<sup>8</sup><http://www.health.gov.bt/departments/dept-of-public-health/ncdd/adolescent-health-program/>

<sup>9</sup><http://www.dys.gov.bt/dys-overview/>

Part of what occurs—or should be occurring—on this front is: medical personnel assisting with detoxification procedures in hospitals; a rehab programme provided by the YDF-run rehabilitation centre or referred to centres outside the country; counselling services provided by teachers and school counsellors; peer counselling at Drop-in Centres run by BNCA as well as the Chithuen Phendey Association, a CSO; support for reintegration into society provided by government, CSOs, business houses and the wider community; and emotional support provided by family members and peers all along the way. Side by side, BNCA, police and other law enforcement agencies work on short, medium, and long-term strategies to tackle the influx of illegal substances and related crime.

So, in this respect, with the relevant stakeholders working on their respective agency mandates, we could say that some aspects of the youth policy are being carried through. But the fundamental problem is that we are still missing the big picture. The kind of inter-agency cooperation and coordinated approach envisioned by the youth policy, and for which purpose it was developed, is not really happening. At the end of the day we are right back to where we started—poor coordination leading to duplication of effort and sustainability issues—as though a national policy on youth never existed.

As it is not at all clear to what extent the National Youth Policy actually guides the various agencies in the formulation of their youth-related strategies and programmes, we cannot say with any certainty what the actual outcomes of this policy are—thus bringing into question the usefulness of even having such a policy.

### **What Next?**

Meanwhile, the fact remains that matters related to youth cannot be effectively addressed if many of the relevant agencies and sectors continue to operate in silos. And what better testimony to this fact than the Cabinet's initiation and endorsement of a National Suicide Prevention Action Plan in 2015? This strategic document squarely acknowledges suicide for the complex issue that it is and for the multi-level, cross-sectoral responses it demands, and is thus a sharp departure from the simplistic classification of suicide as a police or medical matter (which has been the norm until recently).

Similarly, we now need to reorient our attitude to recognise that other youth-related matters are equally multifaceted, and that—as the action plan for suicide prevention states—strategies to address the issues in question will only be effective

under certain conditions: the political commitment to the cause remains unchanged; the coordinating unit/agency is accordingly empowered; and there is committed participation in its implementation by all concerned stakeholders at all levels.<sup>10</sup>

But, as we can see from the previous sections, the National Youth Policy remains unimplemented. So what do we do?

Taking the cue from the recent review of some policies by our members of Parliament (agriculture and school education, for example), perhaps it is time to also review the National Youth Policy. Given the rhetoric on how important the youth of today are for the future of Bhutan, this would make sense. The advantage of having the policy studied at that level—whether it is taken up by the relevant committees in the House or in the Council—is that it garners the national attention urgently needed for broader discourse involving the whole of Bhutanese society.

Reviewing the policy is also an opportunity to take a closer look at the inertia surrounding the development of the much-needed NYAP. Fundamental questions like why coordination is so difficult must be answered. Is it a systemic issue? Is it because a small department was given the lead role? Is it a lack of commitment? Apathy? Is it just too cumbersome? Is it just individual egos not getting along? Whatever the reasons, we need to be clear about them, so that the barriers to working together can be addressed and we can move forward.

It would also be a good time to assess the mandate given to the DYS, and determine how exactly it should be empowered to carry that out. Since youth issues extend way beyond the traditional sectors of education, health and employment, should a long-term strategy include a ministry or a special agency for youth, as in some other countries?

In the end, we cannot avoid the fact that dealing with youth matters requires a cross-sectoral approach cutting across all policy domains. Recognising this—and seeing how the attempt at such an approach has not worked so far—perhaps what is needed is to have a central agency monitored by the Prime Minister’s office to coordinate the development and implementation of the NYAP.

These initial questions and suggestions will hopefully trigger more considered thought and follow up action on existing as well as potential interventions for the holistic development of Bhutanese youth. If we truly care about the wellbeing of

<sup>10</sup>Suicide Prevention in Bhutan: A Three-Year Action Plan (July 2015–June 2018), RGOB.

our youth and the state of our society, today and in the future, we must explore our options more sincerely and see what will work best for Bhutan.

Beyond this, the hard fact remains that unless we put our money where our mouth is, it will continue to be business as usual. Having an impressive youth policy is meaningless if it has no impact on improving the situation of Bhutanese youth and society.