

Creating Civil Society Space in Bhutan: When Citizens Become Responsible

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Introduction

Just out of college, 22-year old Meera Ghalley stands before a room full of *Tshogpas* (elected local officials), town council members, representatives from nearby villages, the police force and the business sector. She presents a waste management plan, using a powerpoint and pictures of the Bondey market in Paro district.

Meera's presentation comes from a community-mapping workshop¹ where youth and local residents learn how to adopt democratic approaches, such as public discussions and community action, to solve local problems. The group of youth learnt to "map" the Bondey community² and decided to take action to keep the market area clean. An initial lack of response from the local community prompted the youth to also produce a video to lobby for a plastic-free market. While explaining the work in progress, she recounts the challenges of working with local vendors and the municipal authority.

Meera and her friends represent a cohort of citizens who are identifying issues of concern, and volunteering action to solve these problems with local residents and authorities. This is civil society in action, and it is making visible impact in Paro and other districts.

Civil Society is a relatively new idea in Bhutan. It is the notion of the free space where citizens voluntarily come together to discuss societal issues, to organise themselves and perform certain tasks or pursue objectives that the state is not doing or is unable to achieve.³ An action of civil society is to get the state's attention on issues of concern. Civil Society is also defined as the space outside of government and business, or the third sector.

¹The Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD) has conducted several community mapping workshops to pilot democratic approaches to local problem solving. The participants are mostly youth. BCMD, the first formally registered CSO in Bhutan, has also supported teachers to conduct the mapping activities in schools and communities in Samdrup Jongkhar, Paro, Mongar, and Samtse.

²The mapping exercise includes the mapping of local areas as well as identifying problems and solutions together with the members of the community.

³John Ehrenberg in *Civil Society: The Critical History of an Idea*, gives a succinct account of the development of civil society through historic beginnings to current times. A point made is that civil society aims are not just for social good, but also for common interests whatever they may be. Published by the New York University Press, 1999.

Civil society is emerging in Bhutan as a response to the impact of modernisation. As an important stakeholder in the democratisation process the need for this space is becoming more obvious.

Civil Society and Modernisation

Before the emergence of organised government and the state, people in Bhutan's far-flung villages relied on each another as members of a community. They came together to assist each other in house-building, in repairing and maintaining irrigation channels, in building public facilities, and even in organising and celebrating annual rites and rituals. This was an organic development borne out of necessity, a realisation that we are dependent on one another for our survival.

Today, there are forty-seven registered Civil Society Organisation (CSOs), with more awaiting registration as Bhutan modernises. They are emerging with the breakdown of traditional society caused by new trends including rural-urban migration. CSOs replace the traditional civil society in a more organised social and political environment.

The government estimates that 50 percent of the population is expected to live in towns by the year 2020.

A formerly agrarian society is changing dramatically as more people leave the farms and live individualistic lifestyles. The young embrace the urban towns for jobs, or for the excitement, and the old follow them for comfort and to be with their families. The towns are designed with apartment-style living as opposed to the independent houses that were set far apart from one another in a typical village. Modernisation has influenced the way Bhutanese live, determined our needs, and affected our values. The urban setting means a "bar cum grocery" shop in every apartment block, and the television set has become the centrepiece of the family's social time.

The Impact of Exposure

Globalisation, modern education, and democratisation have raised issues relating to human rights or human dignity. Social media has also helped to rally communities with common interests across Bhutan and beyond. Bhutanese are hearing the voices of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender) members and their supporters for the first time. Other new voices include those of do-gooders who want to associate to clean the towns or build public toilets.

Some new problems are a direct consequence of the modern way of life. For instance, the changing diet has resulted in medical ills such as kidney failure and diabetes. Social ills, including alcohol and substance addiction, sometimes lead to suicides. Research shows that Bhutan experiences high levels of suicides for a small country with about seven deaths due to suicide each month in 2015.⁴ Youth crime is a concern.⁵

Bhutan's CSOs are trying to address these new needs and developments. They run training centres for youth with disability, services for children with learning difficulties, animal clinics, dialysis services, rehabilitation centres for addiction, centres for victims of abuse, and an increasing number of social and health oriented services. Others are pushing boundaries in terms of promoting social accountability and transparency, spreading awareness on HIV, and fostering citizen voice and action. CSOs cater to areas that may not be the state's priorities.

All these represent the diversity in interests and needs in the context of a “modern” Bhutan.

The Regulatory Environment for Civil Society

Policy, legislation and regulations set the framework within which civil society emerges and grows. The Bhutanese parliament passed the Civil Society Act (CSO Act) in 2007 as a means to regulate civil society development in Bhutan as a part of the democratisation process.

Bhutanese decision makers looked around South Asia and beyond and saw some warning signals—that the non-profit or non-governmental organisations were proliferating and not necessarily benefitting people. Partly as a result of this, the CSO Act became more prescriptive than enabling. Its preamble defines civil society as serving humanitarian needs.

The Act classifies CSOs into two types of organisations—Public Benefit Organisations (PBOs) and Mutual Benefit Organisations (MBOs), and precludes trade unions, political parties, religious associations and many other associations generally associated with civil society.

PBOs benefit a section or the society as a whole. They are loosely classified into caregiving

⁴Kuensel, An Action Plan to Reduce Suicide Rate, Sept. 11, 2015

⁵In the summer of 2016, there were 3 stabbing incidents that resulted in one death in the capital, Thimphu, involving youth on vacation. Many CSOs provide training and target activities at youth.

and service provider organisations, those involved in empowerment and livelihood concerns, in governance and the environment. MBOs serve the shared interests of their members or supporters such as people in the same profession. The Act is prescriptive to the extent that youth associations in universities are also considered MBOs.

There is limited space for informal groups to associate, and a demanding application process requires applicants to model themselves into development projects and agencies.

An assessment of Bhutan's CSO capacity development recommends a more progressive and nuanced law as a starting point of the discourse on how to make civil society in Bhutan more vibrant and effective in terms of its geographic outreach.

“While the law is professional in its approach it enacts standards of compliance which doesn't allow nascent or emergent initiatives with legitimacy, and expects a level of professionalism and compliance which may not be possible to be met”, states a report by a civil society governance specialist, Gagan Sethi, co-founder of India's Center for Social Justice and Janvikas.⁶

The Growth of Civil Society

Civil society, in its widely accepted definition, is more than just being humanitarian services. Civil society develops when citizens get involved in socially productive activities. CSOs provide the space for us to develop the “human qualities” stated in the Act's preamble and are instrumental in developing a strong citizenry and creating a better society.

The first Bhutanese CSOs were formally registered in 2010 although a few non-profits have been in existence for longer periods. Tarayana Foundation marked its 13th year in 2016, while the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature was set up twenty-six years ago. The origins of Bhutan's civil society are as varied as the missions they have adopted. Civil society emerges when civic consciousness is awakened, often by human experience as we have seen.

A kidney transplant patient, Tashi Namgay, left his job in government to start a kidney transplant and dialysis support group that eventually registered as a CSO in 2012.

⁶Gagan Sethi has founded several non-profits in India. He prepared a needs assessment on the capacity development of Bhutan's CSOs in 2015.

Ability Bhutan Society provides services for children with autism, cerebral palsy and other special needs. The founders decided to register a CSO to offer support to families after their own initial struggles with raising special needs children.

A teacher who participated in BCMD's community-mapping workshop recounts how he would post a picture of a broken facility, such as a broken street lamp, with a complaint about the municipality on Facebook. After discussing citizen action at the workshop, he realised he had to go beyond complaints and call the municipality to take care of the broken street lamp. That's his duty as a citizen. Today, Passang 'Passu' Tshering heads an initiative called Bhutan Toilets and receives much support for building public toilets and teaching people to clean them.

Going Beyond Rhetoric

Development partners, including the United Nations (UN) agencies, and the government's Gross National Happiness Commission, talk increasingly of the need for civil society as partners in development, instrumental to the sustainability of services that will enable us to attain the global Sustainable Development Goals we have set ourselves. The premise is that the government is unable to accomplish social objectives by itself.

Given the realities of being a developing country, the Bhutanese state must marshal the resources of the private sector and develop resources from international non-profits to accomplish broad social objectives. And, as sign of democratic change, the success of civil society has to go beyond rhetoric.

Civil society has a role to play in sustainability by organising through volunteerism or offering activities and services for particular needs for which the state cannot cater. Examples include the setting up of a neighbourhood association to sustain public health, or to recycle waste, or the community-mapping initiative in Paro.

Self-help parent groups who provide vocational training for special needs children is another example, as is a group of volunteers who conduct children's reading activities at the public library. Civil Societies can promote the values of mutual co-operation in the citizens. This is something the state cannot dictate. But the state can make the processes for the setting up of such associations through CSOs more conducive.

Cumbersome and restrictive funding support processes need to be overcome. Some partners still route assistance to CSOs through the government. This requires CSOs

to be put on a government's work plan, thus modeling CSOs as a kind of pseudo-government agency providing services to fill in the gaps, or as agencies to implement donor-funded projects. Smaller CSOs are often left out of state support.

Civil society itself needs to be democratised. Simultaneously, civil society needs to wean itself away from a tendency to seek endorsement from the state by learning to be more independent.

From Subjects to Citizens

As a part of the democratisation process, Bhutan has established democratic institutions. What we are now seeing, with the emergence of civil society, is the awakening of civic consciousness amongst citizens, the sense of citizenship and belonging among the populace.

Democracy, often described as a “gift” from the Throne, requires a shift in people's thinking and mentality. While the state has been in the driving seat of change, it is time for citizens to be more involved in policymaking and in contributing to local needs. Apart from being loyal subjects, Bhutanese are now also required to become responsible citizens. The duties that citizens must embrace include sitting on public committees, volunteering, working in and supporting non-profits, and attending school functions.

There is a tendency for urban residents to behave simply as clients who pay for urban services. There is an absence of a sense of community, and of volunteerism. In Paro where BCMD is testing its youth-led activities, we faced a disparate group of residents, representatives from the authority and the private sector who initially blamed each other for the garbage problem. No one saw it as a community issue with the need to work together to solve the problems.

Thus the need for civil society to create the space where citizens hold diverse and different opinions and come together to debate, argue and disagree and to eventually find common ground on which to resolve issues. Bhutan is building this public space where citizens are becoming increasingly open about issues.

Nurturing Civic Consciousness

Bhutan's parliament has passed thirty-five new laws and amended fourteen Acts since 2008. But many of us are unaware of what these laws state or how they were

identified and designed. Many Bhutanese believe that, once we have voted people into parliament, the making of laws is the business of parliamentarians.

We have learnt the hard way that citizens need to keep track of law-making because legislation has a profound impact on our daily lives. Laws—no matter how well intentioned—need diverse perspectives to be sound and implementable. The case of the Tobacco Act—enacted in 2010 and amended in 2012—taught us that despite its intent, the Act turned out to be more draconian than useful in building a smoke free, healthy society.

The emphasis by civil service regulations and CSO rules on the need for citizens, especially civil servants and civil society, to be “apolitical” has created the impression that politics is only for politicians. CSOs often work in “political” areas including the reduction of domestic violence, the promotion of social accountability, amplifying voice amongst vulnerable groups, or supporting local produce; these are all aimed at societal good and we should be supporting such causes. In some countries, sections of civil society are activists. We now see the need to develop the civic consciousness that will enable people to question policies and existing systems that are detrimental to the greater good.

This challenge is compounded in an increasingly consumerist world where market values have superseded civic consciousness. We are talking GNH (Gross National Happiness which places emphasis on people’s well-being) and doing GDP (Gross Domestic Product). People view their relationship with the state and community through a market lens where we expect to buy all services. And the subliminal influence of global television with its incessant commercial messages and entertainment turns us into avid consumers rather than thinking citizens.

Bhutanese are just learning that it is the duty of citizens to seek information on public affairs to enable us to make informed decisions. Similarly, citizens are not used to giving constructive feedback. We are not used to sharing alternate views that oppose the mainstream.

Bhutanese support religious projects and charities, but are less willing to provide financial support for civil society work in a country where the state provides free education and health care and there is a strong *kidu* (welfare) mentality.

The good news is that we are beginning to learn how to move beyond mere complaints to being more participatory citizens, more ready to provide feedback, to listen to the

other side and to consider others' arguments. More people are volunteering for a cause, ready to sit on committees, to collaborate and partner with institutions. We are beginning to realise that civic consciousness is a function of civil society, and a necessary quality of citizens.

Sustaining Civil Society

CSOs have expressed concern about sustainability of its services given the small economy in a small society.

With limited state support for civil society, Bhutan's CSOs are reliant on external international grants. A potential risk is that funders and partners place their requirements upon CSOs, expecting them to deliver what the funders expect in other countries. This could homogenise the civil society sector and stifle the diversity and imagination of civil society. Bhutan's CSOs need to be aware of "mission creep"⁷ as they are pushed to take on global issues, or the mandates of funding agencies, rather than Bhutan's own needs.

CSOs have discussed avoiding duplication in services and even raised the possibility of limiting numbers. But is there an optimal number for CSOs in a country with twenty districts, each with their own needs? Another key question is how to encourage the development of CSOs outside of Thimphu, and CSOs that will reach a cross section of Bhutan's population to promote diversity in views and issues. There is no one size fits all approach, or one model for civil society. Agencies will emerge, some will close down as a natural consequence. Diversity is the norm.

We must, therefore, resist from shaping CSOs into the likeness of one another. Collaboration is important, but each partner must be able to maintain its own identity and mission.

Looking Ahead

The understanding of civic life, values, and consciousness needs to be nurtured.

We want a civil society that complements a well-functioning state. Simultaneously, civil society plays the role of holding officialdom more accountable, inclusive, and responsive to society. Tensions are natural in such a relationship but, in the longer term, an active civil society will strengthen people's respect for the state and encourage them to engage in the building of society.

⁷Mission creep occurs when a CSO's mission moves away from its original intent.

State institutions and government officials need to be more open-minded and be citizens, not just officials. In the words of one volunteer: “I am a civil servant during the week, but on weekends, I volunteer with Bhutan Toilets.”

State institutions need to improve their response to citizens. Municipal and government agencies, unused to working with volunteers, need to step up their responses to volunteers and citizens, and to welcome citizen-led activities.

Bhutan needs more space for an informal civil society to operate with flexibility. This will empower youth and other groups to serve and engage with communities, to organise and associate.

Recognising all these challenges, legislation needs amendment to make it more enabling for CSOs to grow. An enabling policy is needed. The UN is calling on governments to have more inclusive institutions. It is imperative that we give civil society more than lip service, and focus on ways to deepen collaboration amongst partners while enabling CSOs to maintain their identity and missions.

CSOs are contributing to developing the values of democratic life: open discussion, negotiation and compromise, civility, tolerance, moderation, and respect for opposing points of view. These values cannot just be taught in school; they are best nurtured and experienced through practice. Bhutan should look to expanding this civic space so that every Bhutanese can begin to truly understand the sense of being a citizen.

Civil society provides a space where people of different backgrounds, beliefs, and ethnicity come together based on their common interests as youth, women, artists, students, farmers, travel agents, construction agencies, environmentalists, and so on. We can bring in more voices from the community—rural residents, people of lower income, people with different sexual orientation, etc. Civil society space provides an arena to contest ideas, to share concerns, to challenge norms. Civic life becomes richer, more diverse, and more tolerant.

Civil society will build a Bhutanese society that is not wholly dependent on the state. Civil society space transcends all the differences, enabling people to come together as citizens, based on our sense of being a single entity. CSOs have learnt that people who participate become more active agents of change in their community. The more we can build participation to be a positive force, the further we can go together as a society, as a nation. Civil society is a critical vehicle to create a Bhutanese modern state with a vital role to play in the future of community and nation-building.

This view was echoed at the closing of the community-mapping workshop held in Paro in December, 2015.

“The youth were so passionate about their findings and intention to get rid of garbage in the market,” said Ugen Tshering, a former Member of Parliament from Paro. “The presenter wasn’t even from Paro. Yet he spoke as if he cared about the place. I’ve not seen many Parops talk about our waste problems like that.”