

Leveraging Youth Groups for Change

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Democracy. Sexual and reproductive health. Crime prevention. Gender parity. Art. Environmental conservation. Substance abuse. Sports. Child protection. Sustainable development. LGBT rights. Civic engagement. Mental health. Employment.

What do these topics have in common? They are all issues to which various youth groups in Bhutan are dedicated. With a majority of Bhutan's population under the age of 25, these groups are emerging as a response to the many opportunities and challenges facing youth.

A group is a collection of individuals who have relations with one another, making them interdependent to a significant degree.¹ Organising groups is thus an act of identification, sharing similar beliefs, and interdependence, working together for a common purpose. Groups enable young citizens to celebrate shared identities, discuss public problems, address them, and advocate for policies that benefit youth.

Across Bhutan, government and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are now trying to institutionalise and leverage youth groups to drive their change agendas. Formal youth groups are growing rapidly and are attempting to explore new roles young people can play at the grassroots level. With the right support and guidance, youth groups have the potential to promote social justice, dignity and sustainability in their communities. This article highlights the major youth groups and organisations, their focus areas, their gaps, and their future directions.

Fulfilling Government Mandates

From a government perspective, youth groups should be seen as a means of service delivery and fulfilling mandates. They can function as extensions of certain agencies to the youth population. Institutions such as the Ministry of Education and the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) are now beginning to utilise youth groups to encourage meaningful participation in society, good governance, and policymaking.

¹Cartwright, D., & Zander, A. F. (1960). *Group dynamics; research and theory*. Ed. by Dorwin Cartwright Alvin Zander. New York: Harper & Row.

Concurrently, these youth groups can help to address the growing needs and youth issues identified by the government, such as the rise in mental health problems, suicide, drug abuse and crime.

At the societal level, the ECB started Democracy Clubs in schools to work towards its mission of “Ensuring Free, Fair & Democratic Elections.” These clubs are meant to enable children in schools and educational institutions to learn the principles and practices of electoral democracy as early as possible. The Bhutan Children’s Parliament (BCP) is intended to be a national platform for Democracy Club students to share the experiences, opinions, hopes and aspirations of youth towards policy options under consideration by Parliament and the government.

As the government’s point of reference for youth, the Department of Youth and Sports (DYS) under the Ministry of Education has the mandate to provide health and development programmes that nurture young people with the necessary values and skills to cope with emerging challenges and provide avenues for positive growth. DHS has formed or supported several youth groups to work towards fulfilling this mandate.

Under the Scouting and Culture Division of DHS, the scouts are perhaps the most recognised with their distinct yellow and orange neckerchiefs. Scouts are mostly in-school youth who build leadership and life skills through recreational activities like outdoor camps, first-aid training, and community service. To promote lifelong education through scouting, Community Based Scouting caters to out-of-school youth and graduates.

Under the Youth Centre Division, DHS runs 10 youth centres in concentrated urban areas, such as Thimphu and Gelephu, where facilities can be easily accessed. These centres deliver services, including counselling, Internet access, library access, sports, and other recreational activities. Harmony Youth Volunteers coordinate closely with the youth centres in delivering services and providing programme support. The volunteers also offer youth perspectives in various youth policy forums.

To address mental health and suicide prevention in schools, guidance counsellors—supported by the Career Education and Counselling Division at DHS—developed the Peer Helpers programme to engage youth in improving outreach for counselling in schools. Through identification and referral, peer helpers assist their fellow students, especially those facing difficulties, in accessing counselling services.

Related to mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse are escalating problems among youth. Adolescents and youth between 13 and 24 years old make up 84 percent of substance users.² A coalition of partners led by the Bhutan Narcotics Control Authority support Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) groups for young recovering substance users. These support groups complement the work of peer outreach workers and counsellors at the Drop-in Centres and drug rehabilitation centres in Bhutan by creating safe spaces for successful sobriety and recovery.

In response to the rise in youth crime, the Royal Bhutan Police started the Police Youth Partnership Program (PYPP) and Police Out of School Youth Partnership Program (POYPP) as advocacy youth groups with emphasis on youth-related crime prevention and public safety. PYPP and POYPP serve as community policing strategies for improving relations and trust with youth communities while sensitising youth to the law.

Developing Citizenship and Identities

In Bhutan's burgeoning civil society, non-government organisations are equally important for fostering young voices and change initiatives. CSOs and their corresponding youth groups help fill gaps in public service delivery. Likewise, they encourage civic engagement, foster identity and advance youth-led actions at the grassroots level.

School clubs are a useful model for CSOs to reach out to the large population of in-school youth, imparting important messages early in their development. For instance, Tarayana School Clubs under Tarayana Foundation help instill the spirit of volunteerism among students in both urban and rural settings. Nature Clubs started by the Royal Society for Protection of Nature with support from the Ministry of Education enhance environmental education and conservation activities for students.

Outside schools, there are CSOs and groups that promote various causes relevant to youth today. The Voluntary Artists' Studio, Thimphu, popularly known as VAST, is a group of young artists and art enthusiasts who guide and assist young people to explore their full potential through exposure and participation in art and social issues. VAST programmes aim to cultivate creativity, vocational skill development, social awareness, intergenerational learning, international participation in art platforms, and cultural preservation among youth.

²Policy brief on *Protecting Adolescents and Youth in Bhutan from Substance Abuse* produced by UNICEF Bhutan, 2015

To spur important conversations on gender, sexuality, and reproductive health, two youth groups work to change perceptions through youth-led awareness campaigns. UNFPA funds and supports Y-PEER, the Youth Peer Education Network that promotes peer-to-peer advocacy around adolescent sexual and reproductive health. What makes Y-PEER unique is its youth-to-youth model that leverages trained youth peer educators for comprehensive sexuality education, gender equality and equity, and HIV/AIDS awareness.

RENEW's Druk Adolescents' Initiative for Sexual Awareness Network (DAISAN) funded by the International Planned Parenthood Federation empowers young girls and boys, in school and out of school, as responsible advocates for women. DAISAN spreads awareness on reproductive health and sexual rights while advocating against gender-based violence.

Bhutan is also learning to embrace different identities by listening to the passionate voices of minority groups and their supporters. The LGBTIQ Community is one such example. The youth group promotes the rights and dignity of people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Questioning (LGBTIQ). The group is supported by Lhak-Sam, the CSO network of HIV positive people. The LGBTIQ Community is trying to provide leadership, education, and capacity building for creating an inclusive environment free from stigma and discrimination for PLHIV and LGBTIQ people.

On the civic engagement front, Young Volunteers In Action (Y-VIA) is an active network of diverse young people engaged in community service under the Bhutan Youth Development Fund. Y-VIAs work to empower communities through sustainable development projects—like improving the livelihood of rural women in an adopted village—and strengthening Bhutan's network of young people through volunteerism and leadership, especially around child rights and protection.

Supported by the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, the Youth Initiative (YI) is a non-party affiliated association that gives youth practical, hands-on experience in deliberating on national issues and taking community-based action. Youth are trained in democratic debate, research, critical thinking, communications and advocacy skills. YI members work on various policy-focused projects, including researching and deliberating on Bhutan's social media policy, and presenting their findings to parliamentarians and policymakers to influence change in favor of youth.

Outside the formal structures of government and civil society, there are informal youth groups that have yet to register under existing organisations or as new ones. Groups such as the Bhutan Youth Foundation, Bhutan GNH Youth, Siddhartha Wisdom Club (started by a young Rinpoche), are trying to cater to needs not addressed by CSOs. This flexibility offers the ability to experiment with various ideas and harness the energy of volunteers, but they also face difficulties with fundraising and lack of focus. Alternative youth groups, such as Y Co-op, a youth cooperative legally registered under the Department of Agriculture Marketing and Cooperatives, are trying to seed new models for youth employment.

The Need for Coordination and Sustainability

The challenges facing civil society and government exist among youth groups as well. For instance, CSOs and their corresponding youth groups often have funding constraints and financial management challenges. One such example is the Youth Media Centre which lost its status as a CSO in 2015 due to misuse of funds. As a result, the youth group Go Youth Go also shut down. Additional capacity building in this area will strengthen long-term financial sustainability and transparency, which are essential for effective public service.

Similarly, the lack of coordination among youth groups causes duplication and waste of financial resources. Youth groups, like CSOs, tend to work in silos with little knowledge of what others are doing. To address this issue UNICEF supported the launch of the Youth Groups Association of Bhutan (YGAB), which is trying to build a unified youth network to amplify voices for change. YGAB aims to reduce overlap and encourage group coordinators to increase their sustainable impact through collaboration and regular discussion.

Meanwhile, government stakeholders, including the National Commission for Women and Children, Gross National Happiness Commission, and Parliament, need to improve public policy options by incorporating the important perspectives of youth. Youth participation in policymaking can only serve to advance the National Youth Policy and other policies pertaining to youth, including the Child Care and Protection Act as well as the National Education Policy.

Policymakers must also keep in mind that technology and social media usage among Bhutanese youth is disrupting traditional forms of communication. Youth today have a higher comfort level with information platforms that are more open, participatory, and peer-driven than those of the past. The creation of new digital forums and online

tools that support youth groups in consuming, sharing, and shaping information meaningfully can increase overall youth participation and coordination across Bhutanese society.

Measuring the impact of youth groups will also help civil society, government, and the public to better understand their work, promoting improved collaboration and sustainability. To date, there have been very few research and evaluation studies done on youth groups with tangible recommendations for improvement. More comprehensive qualitative and quantitative metrics should be utilised to increase efficacy. Unless research informs key decisions among youth groups, it is unclear how they can evolve in broader efforts for change.

Promoting Inclusive Voices and Civic Engagement

As youth issues and groups continue to grow, stakeholders must ensure that all related communities, including rural youth, monks, nuns, differently-abled youth, out of school youth, youth in conflict with the law, and other disadvantaged or marginalised youth, are equitably represented in an inclusive, enabling environment. Part of the challenge is the concentration of youth groups in urban areas where there are more resources and easier access. Accelerated rural-urban migration contributes to this problem and deprives rural youth of valuable opportunities for civic engagement.

While there are organisations such as the Ability Bhutan Society and the Bhutan Nuns' Foundation catering to the needs of vulnerable youth populations, they do not specifically mobilise youth groups as a strategy that engages them fully as equal partners in their development. Moreover, government and CSOs still face many difficulties reaching and engaging out-of-school youth, differently-abled youth, and youth in conflict with the law. These difficulties are in part due to the multiple disadvantages these groups face in accessing equitable resources. Service providers must listen closely to understand these unique challenges and needs so as to better integrate their voices into programmes and policies.

New youth groups with different focus areas, such as anti-corruption, food security, women's political representation, youth justice, and entrepreneurship, can also increase opportunities for more inclusive youth engagement across Bhutan. Government actors like the Bhutan National Legal Institute and CSOs like the Bhutan Network for Empowering Women (BNEW) can help to open different avenues for youth volunteerism, catering to these important and unmet needs. Mapping the landscape

of existing youth groups may help to identify additional gaps for the creation of new groups or encourage integration of novel areas into existing groups with a broad enough mandate.

While inclusion and diversity are essential, shared decision-making with youth groups is vital for effective civic engagement. At present, many institutions and organisations that manage youth groups only support activities that align with donor-driven priorities. Youth, however, have strong views on what they think is best for them and their communities. When adults act as co-learners and mentors, young people feel empowered to initiate and lead action for change within their groups. New youth-led initiatives for civic engagement are providing inspiring illustrations of this type of re-orientation.

Earlier this year, groups of Young Volunteers in Action noticed the lack of engagement in various low-income communities across Thimphu, especially those with makeshift dwellings or informal shelters. They decided to advocate on behalf of community members by communicating their challenges to the local government while working to fill gaps in service delivery through awareness campaigns. Also this year, the LGBTIQ Community led awareness campaigns in collaboration with United Nations' agencies to mark for the first time in Bhutan the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia (IDAHOT). With more and more examples like these, youth groups have the potential of shifting adult perspectives from at-risk to at-promise, transforming deficit constructions of youth as passive recipients to more authentic alliances as change-makers.

The Way Forward for Youth Groups

Ultimately, youth groups are working to address the distinct needs and aspirations of Bhutan's youth population. At their best, these groups can enable young people to find community and take concerted actions to build a more just and sustainable world. To move forward, understanding youth trends, building capacity for increased impact, and strengthening diverse youth identities must be priorities for the government and civil society. Policymakers, CSOs, and funders must ensure that investments and policies help to amplify youth voices while deepening collaboration for collective youth leadership. Youth groups have the passion, the people and the pioneering spirit to drive social change in Bhutan. We should celebrate and empower them.