

“I Didn’t Know What I Was Capable Of”: The Voice of a Bhutanese Youth

Riikka Subonen

Introduction

...government can’t solve all the problems, you know... Because if you look at Bhutan today... we have a lot of skilful, talented youths. I think it is very important that youth come together, they discuss, debate and if they can come up with a good solution... I think it is a good idea. It helps youth to engage in productive decision-making.

Barun, male, 21 years, focus group discussion January 27, 2014.

About one-fifth of Bhutan’s total population are between 15 and 24 years of age. Such a large number of youth can easily be seen as risks and problems: How to create enough jobs for them? How to make them stay in the rural areas and preserve their culture? However, this number of young people can also be seen as a possibility: How to harness their energy and creativity, and come up with innovative, youth-led solutions to current problems?

When democracy is understood as being more than voting and elections, as a participatory process where citizens come together to learn, collaborate and share solutions with each other, it is crucial to enable different sections of the society to participate—including young people. The legal basis for youth civic engagement and the right of children and young people to participate in the society is set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed and ratified by Bhutan in 1990.

The data and quotes used in this article come from three focus group discussions where a total of 19 young Bhutanese, between 17 and 28 years of age, participated. Two out of three interviewed groups were young people who had been selected for the first batch of the Youth Initiative for Debate, Deliberation and Development (YIDDD), a platform for training youth in participatory democracy and civic skills facilitated by the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD). The third

group included youth who were unemployed at the time and were undergoing a short training in another civil society organisation. The identity of individual participants is protected by using pseudonyms in the citations.

The text is divided into three parts: firstly, looking at the concepts of active citizenship and youth civic engagement; then focusing on some of the issues highlighted by young Bhutanese during the interviews; and ending with suggestions to better support youth civic engagement in Bhutan.

Youth Civic Engagement

The concept of civic engagement has many definitions. UNESCO describes it as “ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” and “exercise their rights and assume their responsibilities as citizens as social actors”. Civically engaged citizens use their skills to serve their communities, working together to solve problems or interacting with democratic institutions.¹

Demonstrated benefits of youth civic engagement include reduced risky behaviour, better performance in school, and more active civic participation in later life. By participating in civic matters, young people can gain work experience, learn life and employment skills, responsibility and accountability, while contributing to the development of their community.²

Youth civic engagement can involve many types of activities: community service and volunteering, advocacy or campaigning for a social or environmental cause, youth media, social entrepreneurship, or leadership training and practice. Activities may take place either informally at the local grassroots level or more organised in schools, higher education institutions, civil society organisations, political institutions or parties. People can act individually by writing to an editor of a newspaper, giving money to charity, discussing politics or social issues with friends, following media coverage on political issues, or recycling of waste. Collective actions could mean volunteering in a group for social or charitable causes or being active in a community-based organisation.³

¹UNESCO. (2013). *Civic engagement and social inclusion of youth in Indonesia*. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002211/221102e.pdf>

²Campbell-Patton, C. and Patton, M. Q. (2010). “Conceptualizing and Evaluating the Complexities of Youth Civic Engagement” in Sherrod, Lonnie R., Torney-Purta, Judith and Flanagan, Constance A. (2010). *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth*, pp. 593-620. Wiley. Kindle version. (p. 609)

³Brady, B., Dolan, P., Kearns, N., Kennen, D., McGrath, B., Shaw, A. and Brennan, M. (2012). *Understanding Youth Civic Engagement: Debates, discourses and lessons from practice*. Retrieved from www.childandfamilyresearch.ie. (pp. 4-7)

Bhutan Through Young Eyes

The number of young participants interviewed here cannot paint a comprehensive picture of what Bhutanese youth from diverse backgrounds think, feel and experience. This selected group of youth did, however, openly discuss the real-life questions they faced when growing up in different parts of Bhutan. Many participants were either students in high schools or colleges, or looking for work around Thimphu. When re-reading the transcripts of the focus group discussions, I was struck once again by how extremely insightful and smart young people can be. These young Bhutanese recognise the issues and problems of the country and also understand the benefits of youth engaging in public matters and offering solutions to challenges.

Social and cultural norms have a big influence on how young people's efforts are received by wider society and this is the case also in Bhutan. The reluctance to listen to young people, or even consider them as equal participants in meetings or events, was often mentioned in the focus groups. Being polite and humble is valued whereas questioning seniors or expressing one's own views can be considered disrespectful. These kinds of informal cultural barriers—respect for authority, lack of dialogue and debate, critical thinking and questioning in general—were typically stated as major constraints to youth civic engagement in Bhutan.

Stereotypes associated with young people make it even more difficult for them to be taken seriously. In Bhutan young people are often labelled as “spoilt”, not hard working, and only expecting easy civil service jobs. However, as pointed out by one of the interviewees, the dislike of blue-collar jobs is not something invented only by the youth:

There's a contradiction... old people say '...there are so many jobless people why don't they do construction...we could replace Indians'... everybody says it. But if it was that easy, for example, why do the parents send their kids to school to get a job in Thimphu in the first place?

Karma, male, 28 years, January 2014.

Youth are also often seen as being “ignorant” and not yet able to understand the world of the adults. Young people repeatedly recount their experiences of not feeling confident or supported by older generations, from parents, colleagues, or senior government officials who tend to underestimate young peoples' ideas. Numerous attempts to engage with decision-makers or authorities usually end with them not being taken seriously, as “immature youth talking nonsense”:

One thing is that, at a gathering of the elderly people... if we pop in to that meeting... the elderly people will ask you to get out of their meeting... Just ignoring us. That culture is there.

Dawa, male, 21 years, focus group discussion 27 January, 2014.

Another stereotype attached to young people is that they are a rebellious, chaotic mass, demanding their rights and potentially becoming dangerous if they “get political”:

People generalise. When they say ‘youth’, they go like ‘drugs! stabbing! robbing!’ And they don’t give youth the power, the rights, the voice. So if we don’t get the voice, when we get it when we are adults, we don’t utilise it the way we should... people, when they say youth, don’t give any responsibility, thinking they will go against the law, against the government.

Priya, female, 17 years, focus group discussion March 8, 2014.

To better understand the issues of Bhutanese youth today, it would be essential for the people in decision-making positions to listen to young people. Challenges are no longer the same as they were decades ago when the current decision-makers were growing up.

Youth suggested various ways to be taken more seriously: being patient, polite and having well-thought ideas to present when approaching authorities. However, if only these active young people approach decision-makers, the voices of the wider youth population remain excluded. One of the interviewees described his experience of participating in the consultations for the Youth Action Plan in Bhutan, having been invited as an active youth volunteer:

The quite surprising thing was they were consulting volunteers and they weren’t trying to gather people from all walks of life. Youths who are present in, let’s say *drayang*s... And maybe our ideas mean nothing to people who do live in very vulnerable places, right? Our ideas can be totally different, our views can be different.

Jigme, male, 21 years, focus group discussion January 27, 2014.

The need to include diverse groups in decision-making instead of only those who are already active and doing relatively well in life was recognised by the young people themselves. Another central theme in the focus groups was the vast difference between the opportunities for rural and urban youth:

...us in urban areas, we have YDF and all. There is YDF in other places but they don't have as good facilities as we do. In Thimphu we can go like: 'Oh, I'm going to attend a forum. I'm going to attend this, I'm going to attend that.' But if you say the same thing in the rural area, they'll be like: 'What are you talking about?'

Priya, female, 17 years, focus group discussion March 8, 2014.

Many participants were calling for civic skills training programmes such as the Youth Initiative to be spread more widely in Bhutan:

I feel that this training should be given to every youth around the country. Not only in Bhutan. Also outside the country. Because after becoming one of the members, I feel I got some guidance on how to work with a proposal. I got some experience on how to deal with the issue.

Vijay, male, 20 years, focus group discussion January 27, 2014.

Gender issues stirred a very interesting debate when a young male participant claimed that girls are just not interested in politics. A female participant responded:

That's a very wrong perception, saying 'girls are not interested in politics'...girls have to do the housework... They are in charge of the families... They have to go to schools. And, if they have children, people will criticise: 'She's not a good mother, she wants to be a politician so she's leaving her child and going for campaigning.' People are very negative about a girl who wants to become someone in life and wants to bring changes. So I think because girls don't want that criticism, they don't come in front... Guys are dominating and they're not giving a chance to the girls... If the guys step back, girls will be able to take the responsibility.

Priya, female, 17 years, focus group discussion, March 8, 2014.

This conversation was an exception. In general, female participants in the focus group discussions tended to be more silent and had to be encouraged to share their views while a few vocal young men often dominated the discussions. Although interviewees noted that Bhutan is faring well in terms of gender equality and, today, more women have the possibility to be educated, they also talked about how "totally shy" Bhutanese women still are.

One of the questions during the focus group discussions was on role models, in Bhutan or abroad. The lack of inspiring female role models was evident. Only one

participant named a female, Mother Teresa, as his role model. Politicians were also not favoured. Only the former Prime Minister of Bhutan was mentioned. The most common answers were His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo for his hard work, bravery and dedication, and His Majesty the King for being humble, kind, friendly and approachable also to young people. Several interviewees also mentioned teachers as their role models. Foreign role models included world-famous leaders such as Gandhi, and public speakers and writers such as Robin Sharma or Les Brown. Overall, this question seemed difficult and one participant noted that, perhaps, Bhutanese are not very used to the idea of having role models.

Although aware of the growing gap between the rich and the poor in the country, and also worried about their own employment opportunities, the young people in focus groups were still immensely positive and proud to be Bhutanese, sharing unique cultural traits and having many possibilities offered by the government to develop themselves. They recognised the current cultural change and expressed their concerns about the loss of Dzongkha and other local languages and cultures in Bhutan. Yet, many of them saw the abundant information available through the Internet as a very positive thing that has opened up new worlds and new thinking, or access to “different kinds of values”.

The final part of this article looks at the ways in which young Bhutanese can be supported to create sustainable solutions to the challenges of the changing society, together with the older generation.

“Our Voice Doesn’t Matter Usually”—Listening to Youth in Bhutan

We have been told that our responsibility isn’t just to listen and to avail the services, but our responsibility is to listen to them as well as to question them. And one of the responsibilities that we also learnt in the whole session was not to forget that we can also be service providers, not just service consumers.

Jigme, male, 21 years, focus group discussion January 27, 2014.

This quote summarises the discussion on responsibility and civic sense which had been an integral part of the training offered for the first selected representatives of the Youth Initiative in January, 2014. Both international research and the experience of the participants of the Youth Initiative training show the clear benefits of supporting young people in their path to become active citizens. Enabling structures, training and encouragement are necessary ingredients for promoting youth civic engagement more widely, but how to do this?

Firstly, portraying young people more positively in the media—as potential role models—is crucial. One participant notes:

If they [youth] did a crime or something, it will come on the first page. If they did something good for the country, it will be on the second page...for ministers and all, if they do something good, they will be on the front page. If they do something bad, it is not mentioned.

Rinzin, male, 26 years, focus group discussion, April 7, 2014.

When given the chance, young people want to be a part of the solution, but there are few channels available to voice their concerns. Although youth participation is stressed as an important objective at the policy level in Bhutan, the actual space for meaningful youth civic engagement is still very restricted for reasons ranging from a non-supportive educational system to cultural barriers. Education in Bhutan has largely focused on creating personally responsible citizens who understand their civic rights and responsibilities at the individual level, emphasising voting in elections, integrity and self-discipline. Many existing Bhutanese youth organisations tend to focus on youth problems such as drug and alcohol addiction, or issues like reproductive health. There has been less focus on “ordinary youth” and their aspirations, strengthening their skills and confidence.

Developing youth participation should be a collective responsibility taken seriously by families, schools, government agencies and youth organisations alike, in Thimphu, but even more so in the rural areas. Funding of activities is one aspect, but showing moral support and trust in youth—allowing activities to be truly youth-led—is even more important. Different sides and generations—the “old” and the “young”—should reach out to each other. To overcome the perceived mistrust and fear, there is a need to create common platforms for youth to express themselves and also to learn from and respect the wisdom of older generations. Supportive adults are still needed as mentors to motivate and guide young people, as well as to develop their skills in goal-setting, conflict-solving, teamwork, communication and participation.

“School of citizenship” is a concept coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in his monumental work *Democracy in America* (1835/1840), meaning civil associations where citizens can learn about cooperation and public affairs and create hubs of political power independent of the state. These autonomous civic hubs would help prevent democracy from becoming the rule of a few individuals or institutions.

According to de Tocqueville this “treating public affairs in public” makes the citizen better aware that “he is not so independent of his fellow man” and encourages individuals to think of their duties as citizens and actively participate in democratic governance. Schools of citizenship can function at different levels: introducing more student councils or associations in school administration; ensuring youth participation in local-level decision-making; or creating more strategic, long-term channels and platforms for youth participation by civil society actors and relevant government bodies.⁴

Young participants in the first batch of the Youth Initiative, one kind of a school of citizenship, echoed de Tocqueville’s ideas:

Before I attended YIDDD, if I wanted to make a change, I was like ‘aah, never mind, I’m too small... I can’t do anything... it doesn’t matter, I’m just one...’ But after attending that, finding out what you can do, how you can get people’s attention, how can you make your issue public, and get people to help you with that... I didn’t know what I was capable of, actually.

Priya, female, 17 years, focus group discussion March 8, 2014.

Most importantly, civic engagement and democratic participation are not only about your own arguments and expressing yourself, but also about active listening:

Few things why I really think YIDDD has made us alert is you, know, doing whole sections when we are especially talking about how to be an effective listener as well, not just to talk... That other person also has something to offer to you... and it’s wonderful just to listen to them, look in their eyes.

Jigme, male, 21 years, focus group discussion 27 January, 2014.

The importance of listening is crucial when developing empathy and better understanding of the other. Listening can be one of the hardest skills to learn, both for young and old, but it is also the key to meaningful youth participation.

⁴de Tocqueville, A. (1835/1840). *Democracy in America, 1 and Democracy in America, 2*. Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/815> and <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/816>.