

Our Youth, Our Future: They are Here, it is Now

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The future is neither unseen nor unknown. It is what we make of it. What work we do with our two hands today will shape the future of our nation. Our children's tomorrow has to be created by us today.

His Majesty The King

Introduction

Bhutan today is a youthful nation, with about one third of its population between the ages of 10 and 24. With youth literacy being more than 93 percent, the demographic dividend we are experiencing should last for the next two to three decades.

What is exciting is that, with their youthful vigour, young people possess the boldness and energy to dream big, to explore innovative and creative ideas, and to better themselves and their communities. This represents a powerful potential to drive the country's socio-economic progress.

However, strategic investments are required, so that our youth are physically and mentally healthy and well-equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills to navigate the challenges of the 21st century. Youth need the space to think critically, express themselves, and participate in decision-making processes, especially on matters that concern them. It calls for an enabling environment and the appropriate opportunities that allow them realise their full potential.

After more than six decades of planned development, we can be proud of our achievements on many fronts—from being one of the fastest growing economies, to being a leader in environmental conservation, preserving cultural heritage, and good governance. But, with the onus of the nation's future on our youth, what are the ground realities facing our young people today? Are we in tune with their lived experiences and their aspirations?

Their Dreams

Bhutanese youth are blessed with His Majesty The King as their central role model, an embodiment of service to their parents, their communities and the nation. As they seek societal guidance and opportunities to be able to fulfil their responsibility, their thoughts were captured through focused group discussions in the revised 2011 National Youth Policy.¹ These are some of the aspirations expressed by young Bhutanese:

- They dream of a Bhutan with no gaps between the rich and the poor, where all young people, regardless of social background or gender, have access to more equitable opportunities to learn and to engage.
- They wish for a society that is safe, especially for children. Young people want essential life skills to be productive and resilient. They want protection and guidance from their parents to create strong family bonds and emotional support.
- They express a need to identify with their cultural heritage.
- They want holistic learning environments where their creative pursuits are as appreciated as much as academic excellence.
- They wish for governance that is free of corruption and bias where the decision-making process is more open and inclusive of their voices.
- They would like to see policies that are long-term in outlook and can withstand changes in government.
- They wish for job opportunities in the country with access to skills that are valued, and want to be independent and self-sufficient.
- They wish for innovative knowledge, practices and technology, and want to be engaged in making meaningful contributions to the development process.

Shortcomings in the Lived Experiences of Youth

At the same time, youth themselves harbour a perception that “most young people neither know what they’re doing nor what they want to do in the future”.

Although many of our youth are doing well, there are also many who face serious hurdles in life. Aside from issues commonly associated with adolescence and transition to adulthood—which is a shared experience

¹ http://bcmd.bt/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Youth-Voices_-Youth-matters-BCMD-Final-Design-layout.pdf

for youth in general—we have many young people who suffer economic hardship, harmful home environments including neglect and abuse, mental health issues including substance abuse and addiction, engagement in delinquent activities and crime, and unemployment.

These are just a few of the many social ills confronting young Bhutanese today. Consequently, the wellbeing of individuals and their families, the peace and harmony within local communities, and the health of the nation at large are affected.

We, as a society, are confronted by some fundamental questions. Have we, as parents and caregivers, failed to empower our children to make better life decisions? Why are they losing core Bhutanese values such as *tha damtshig* and *ley judre*? What are the reasons for the poverty that many families face, and the growing gap between the rich and poor which has a huge bearing on the lives of many of our youth?

Why can we not create the conditions, both at home and in the public domain, that give our youth a greater chance to realise their potential as responsible citizens contributing to nation-building?

We have fallen short on many of these fronts. Even as multiple actors across government and civil society are given the mandate to address wide-ranging youth-related concerns—from health and education, to social protection, employment and participation—we are functioning in silos without clear strategic direction.

Such issues in a small country like ours—where the goal of life is “gross national happiness”—is an indication that there is a serious disconnect somewhere. The important reminder that “the future of the nation lies in our youth”, much like the noble idea of Gross National Happiness, is becoming rhetoric. Which is why we need to ask, what then is there for our youth to look forward to?

A Guiding Force for Generations of Bhutanese Youth

Even before his ascension to the Golden Throne, in 2006, His Majesty, as Crown Prince, had deep concerns over the quality of education and learning environments for young Bhutanese. Several attempts at improving

the quality of education in past decades have not borne the desired results—and we continue to grapple with the serious issue of meaningful employment of youth, which is directly related to poor education outcomes and is often associated with anti-social behaviour.

The urgency for fundamental reforms in the country's education system was once again impressed upon the nation during the 113th National Day address on 17th December, 2020, followed by a Royal *Kasho* to the education sector.

In addition to nudging the government machinery to undertake serious work on transforming what and how young Bhutanese learn, His Majesty instituted several Royal Projects that provide additional—and critical—opportunities for young Bhutanese to develop their full potential.

The Royal Academy in Pangbisa, Paro, was established “to nurture the development of committed, mindful and compassionate leaders” through a residential learning experience from grades 7 to 12, with the first batch of students representing all 20 dzongkhags enrolled in 2016. The academy's philosophy is based on the philosophy of Guru Padmasambhava and is oriented toward the development of “skills, processes, and watermarks” to support “an interconnected view of all phenomena”.

Advancing the theme of developing the whole person - where the idea is that Bhutanese youth are knowledgeable and skilled not only at the level of being internationally competent but also well-grounded in the nation's cultural heritage - His Majesty has personally initiated the Gyalsung (National Service) programme.

Once it commences, the Gyalsung will bring together 18-year-old Bhutanese youth from all over the country for a one-year programme designed to guide and encourage them to be critical thinkers, and to equip them with the personal attributes and professional skills necessary to excel in the 21st century. His Majesty's vision to nurture young citizens who can be meaningfully employed while contributing to the nation's socio-economic progress will immerse youth in the critical areas of agriculture sciences, entrepreneurship, computers and coding, and health sciences, among others.

Another signature initiative of His Majesty The King is the De-Suung Programme, which facilitates the personal development of participating Bhutanese citizens based on the principles of volunteerism, integrity and civic responsibility. The idea for this programme emerged from the repeated requests of young people themselves who expressed their desire to be of service to the nation, especially in times of difficulty.

The past year has seen a record number of young Bhutanese signing up and undergoing training to become De-Suups, effectively serving the country as frontliners in various capacities. Inspired by His Majesty's address to the nation in September 2020 amid the pandemic which led to the displacement of a large number of young people from their regular jobs, the De-Suung Programme, in collaboration with the government, is engaging youth in nation-building activities, beginning with the development of water resources to ensure its sustainable supply.

With the holistic development of young Bhutanese being a priority for His Majesty, the school-based scouting programme and the Bhutan Scouts Association were revitalised in 2013 to enable young people to internalise key values such as *tha damtshig* and *ley judre*, and to facilitate their growth as self-fulfilled individuals who can play a constructive role in society. This followed Camp Raven, an annual winter programme that provides opportunity for children of the armed forces to spend their winter vacations productively, engaged in sports, art, dance, film, and other fun and educative activities.

His Majesty has also encouraged the expansion of developmental and career pathways for young Bhutanese on several fronts. One is through long-standing support to civil society initiatives in the contemporary arts—a field in which a sizeable number of children and youth engage as an avenue for creative and cultural expressions. An artist himself, His Majesty has consistently inspired, promoted, and provided young Bhutanese artists with opportunities to develop and improve their skills as well as to showcase and sell their work.

The development of professional sports in the country has also received greater impetus. The vigour of various sports federations was enhanced with the appointment of HRH Prince Jigyel Wangchuck as President of the Bhutan Olympic Committee, and many youth are now able to participate

not only at national level events, but also represent the country in regional and international sporting events. Furthermore, to boost women and girls' participation and to ensure that they are not left behind in excelling in sports, His Majesty granted *soeltra*—making it possible for women national football players to draw salaries at par with male players.

By applauding and publicly recognising the efforts of young local entrepreneurs across a range of crafts and trades over the years, His Majesty has and continues to inspire youth to explore alternative fields of employment, including self-employment, and to take pride in their work. Government efforts at facilitating youth engagement in agriculture and related enterprises also received impetus with the Land Use Certificate programme—a royal initiative that encourages participation especially of unemployed rural youth, through the grant of user rights for arable state land.

His Majesty has always been deeply concerned about the increasing incidences of young people engaging in delinquent and criminal activities. Although not broadcast to the public, His Majesty has taken many personal initiatives to work with affected youth, based on the firm conviction that reformation is possible and that we must not give up. One of the many examples of this is His Majesty's moral and financial support of the establishment of the Chithuen Phendey Association, now a registered civil society organisation, which works to prevent and address the issues of substance abuse and addiction—an affliction that is very common among young Bhutanese.

In addition, it is also apparent that His Majesty invests a great deal of time in providing personal guidance for our youth in the 21st century. Taking into full consideration technological advancements and other rapidly-changing global contexts, deep thought is given to how we must adapt in ways that will be of most benefit for the country. This comes through very clearly in the Royal Addresses to young Bhutanese graduates to widen their horizons as they set out in the world of work.

In the coronation speech, His Majesty said:

The future of our nation depends on the worth, capabilities and motivation of today's youth. Therefore, I will not rest until I have given

you inspiration, knowledge and skills so that you will not only fulfil your own aspirations, but be of immense worth to the nation. This is my sacred duty. A strong, motivated, young Bhutan guarantees a strong, bright future.

Today, as we reflect on these words, we see that His Majesty is continuously working to widen the scope of opportunities for young people.

From Bhutanese society, however, there is much to be desired. Knowing full well the momentous task of ensuring the wellbeing of youth and, thereby, the nation's future, the entire burden appears to be carried by His Majesty The King. We have been complacent on many fronts—and we know this because we are still talking about the same systemic shortcomings that should have been prioritised years ago.

For example, the adoption of a comprehensive National Youth Policy in 2011 was expected to provide a cohesive strategic direction in ensuring effective outcomes for the holistic development and wellbeing of young Bhutanese. A decade later, there is no sign of the kind of inter-agency cooperation and coordinated approach that it envisioned.

With efforts of both government and non-government agencies still fragmented for the most part, the duplication of resources on one hand and critical youth issues falling through the cracks on the other, continue to be our ground reality. Without monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, we are not that much clearer on the actual impact that such a policy has made to improve the situation of our youth.

Sadly, the situation we are in today is not a result of ignorance but more a lack of collective integrity to see through our proclaimed commitments. There is no other way to explain it. Year after year, as we celebrate the National Day on December 17, His Majesty has provided us with very clear and frank assessments of our successes as well as our shortcomings—as public servants and as a society. And year after year, we have not shed our complacency.

His Majesty's Address to the nation on the 113th National Day gave us, yet again, much to reflect on and put into action. The Command for civil service and education reforms reminded us that the reforms are meant to

benefit the nation, not individuals and organisations. We were reminded about our responsibility to work with integrity and to ensure delivery. We were also reminded that, if there are tasks beyond our capacity, we should give way to others who are able to do so.

His Majesty has not minced any words in this Royal Address. For those of us who have a bearing on youth welfare - which is practically the whole of Bhutanese society - the message is clear. If anyone has failed, it is not the children.

At this point in time, the sincerest tribute that we can pay to His Majesty The King is to unveil and demonstrate the true strength of the Bhutanese character. This means that we must first of all be very honest with ourselves on where we have fallen short. And in our various and differing capacities, we need to remedy what is not working, taking initiative to devise interventions that are in keeping with the changing times, while never losing sight of the “bigger picture”.

As for the youth of Bhutan, the best tribute would be if they were to never lose hope; if they are able to translate the inspiration provided by His Majesty into lifelong commitment and action; and if they are able to take pride in their work, no matter what the profession, and to perform to the best of their ability.

As His Majesty has always said:

... it is not a question of whether we have the capability to achieve success. The question is, “Will we make the decision to stand up and take responsibility? Will we choose to make a difference?”