

What are we Teaching our Children?

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Bhutan's laws and policies emphasise attention and focus on youth care and development. The National Youth Policy and Child Care and Protection Act 2011 require that the State initiates programmes and services to encourage values and development of skills that will help children develop their potential as individuals and as members of society.

Youth have been prioritised in the 12th Plan, and both central and local government flagship programmes aim to create gainful employment for youth. About eight ministries, 35 departments, 12 autonomous agencies, dzongkhags and gewogs all have the mandate to create employment for youth.

But none of this has been translated to action, and Bhutan is dealing with many youth-related problems. They suffer the impact of dysfunctional families and use of social media. Youth violence, like bullying, cybercrime and fights, is common, where children, as young as 14 years, were detained for their involvement in brawls. Thousands of youth have been arrested in connection with drugs, alcohol and other crimes. Youth crimes – in other words - are getting more serious.

Unemployment is highest among youth, recorded at 22.6 percent, according to the labour force survey 2020. The pandemic had worsened the situation as thousands of youth working in tourism and hospitality sector lost jobs. Many Bhutanese youth working overseas and sending remittance home also returned.

Youth today have mental health problems. A parent in Thimphu, Dorji, said youth today have sunk into hopelessness. "They have lost their direction in life and are unmotivated." He said parents are too busy or not bothered to invest time in their children and provide guidance.

When Thimphu police arrested five boys aged between 14 and 16 years in June, 2021, after a video clip of two students beating another boy went viral, parents of the boys blamed the victim for bullying another boy that

resulted in the fight. A parent of the main accused said he requested the Prime Minister to intervene when police and the court refused to grant bail to the boys. He claimed the government should be there for the children, as they are young and cannot think for themselves.

Parents defended their children and said they got involved because of their friends. They even blamed the school authorities for not having strict rules and regulations in school to deter the children from getting involved in such fights.

Neglect

Parents do not have an answer when asked how much time they spend with their children. They often do not know how their children spend most of their time.

Law enforcers said poor monitoring and supervision of children by parents and lack of parental disciplinary practices and guidance result in youth-related crimes. Many law enforcers and implementers believe that youth today do not have the right values and that parents and teachers have failed to inculcate them in the children. A police constable in Thimphu said most youth coming in conflict with law come from broken families. “They are not bothered about the consequences. They are not scared of the law or their family members.”

Teachers said many parents are either too busy to teach their children important values at home, or do not even understand the values that need to be taught. A teacher, Kinzang, said increased economic and social pressures on some parents limit their time with children.

A newspaper editor, on his way home late one night, came across a minor hitching a ride in Thimphu. The minor was on his way to Ngabiphu to drop some medicines for his mother, who told him she was suffering from flu and cold. “There were many people in his mother’s place, but they made the little boy do the chore,” the editor said. “I was told his mother and friends were gambling.” The class eight student lives with his sister and brother in Olakha.

Distractions

Many children in urban areas are also glued to smartphones, playing mobile games all night. “We have many students who appear lost in class,” a teacher said. “When we inquire about them, most of their parents are either busy, divorced, or live overseas.”

In Paro, one mother has to not only cook for her son, who is in his 20s, but also recharge his mobile and give him pocket money. The boy’s uncle said the youth spent the whole night playing online games and slept all day. “My sister loves her son too much,” he said. “But I hear that he chases her with stones when she can’t give him the money he demands.”

Values

There are youth, living in groups in Thimphu, doing manual jobs in the construction and service industry. And there are also youth who refuse to take up manual jobs because of poor working conditions, lack of job security, poor salaries, and because they reject them as “menial” work.

The more serious problem is that youth have adopted the values of a status-conscious society. One mother says her five-year-old son does not want to be dropped near the school gate because the family does not own a luxury car, like his friends.

A class eight student in a private school in Thimphu committed suicide earlier this year after his parents could not take him overseas as promised. It was learnt he had not seen his parents for many years and he lived with his grandparents.

Sonam, 46, lives in Babesa. Her husband drives a taxi and she cleans three offices to supplement the family income. “My children refuse to go with me to clean the offices,” she said. Sonam explains that the children are worried their friends might see them doing cleaning work. The oldest completed class 12 and younger ones are in class 10 and 6. “They are not so good in studies and I am worried they will not get a white collar job,” says Sonam.

Employment

More than 2,000 university graduates could not qualify in the preliminary examinations for the Bhutan Civil Service Examination in 2021, exacerbating the overcrowded job market.

“The Royal Civil Service Commission is still the main choice for graduates like us,” said Deki, 22, who completed her studies in hospitality and tourism in India. “With the pandemic impacting hospitality and tourism industry, I want to sit for the civil service examination. There is no job security in the industry.”

Another graduate, Pema, sat for the preliminary examination for three years. “I did De-Suung and volunteered for some work,” she said. She lives with her cousins in Thimphu and plans to go overseas when the pandemic ends. Her parents are in the village but she is not thinking of returning home. “I have a younger sister who dropped out from class 12. Both of us cannot stay at home. One of us has to work and send money home.”

The government initiated the “Build Bhutan Project”, aiming to engage 7,000 youth to meet the shortage of workers in the construction sector in 2020. The government allocated a budget of Nu 1.04 billion under the economic contingency plan for the project, but only about 600 youth are employed through it today.

The project could not attract many youths as anticipated because most youth who took up the work found the working environment difficult. Owners of construction companies that provided employment through the project claimed that youth are not ready for the hard work in the construction industry.

Agriculture

When 24 youth met in Thimphu in January last year to review the National Youth Policy, they concluded that the agriculture business is the way forward to solve youth unemployment. They said young people today are not interested to take up farming because of lack of skills, limited market, funds, and technology. But with farm mechanisation and increased investment in agriculture, things would improve.

The government also allocated funding through the economic contingency plan for agriculture, prioritising marketing and commercial farming. Many youths availed support through this plan to start commercial farms, but lack of coordination amongst agencies is affecting the work. For example, many youth farmers in Sarpang and Dagana could not extend their commercial farm as the National Land Commission did not lease them the land.

Lack of markets during production season, climate change, and human-wildlife conflict also de-motivate youth from engaging in farming.

Youth today do not have the support of rural communities. According to Pema, people in her village think youth should find jobs and stay in urban areas once they complete their studies. Many youth today do not want to return home to the villages without getting a proper job at hand, fearing villagers might look down on them.

“When I returned home to participate in local government elections, no one in the village supported me,” Tashi, 33, from Trongsa said. “They said I completed my university degree and should find a government job. I gave up and returned to Thimphu without even contesting in the elections.”

Way Forward

The Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa government, before the elections, promised to review the National Youth Policy and implement the national youth action plan in its 25 pledges for the first 120 days, but the National Youth Policy review, started in 2019, is still incomplete.

The Gross National Happiness Commission is reviewing the National Youth Policy to be presented to the government, which is then required to implement the national youth action plan, currently in a draft form, to address the needs of the youth.

“The revised policy will address the emerging youth issues, like those in vulnerable occupations, protection issues, parenting, dysfunctional families and youth with disabilities,” an official from the Education Ministry said. “It will also institute a high-level coordination mechanism to provide timely services for youth.”

He said the problem was that most agencies worked in silos today. Agencies working for youth should coordinate and collaborate. When a 12-year-old gave birth in Samdrup Jongkhar, it was a non-governmental organisation called Nazhoen Lamtoen that reached out to the girl, besides her school teachers. Most other organisations did not even follow up the case.

Communities should play a greater role in persuading youth to return home and help their parents on the farm, by not demeaning youth returning home as failures, but by encouraging them.

Local government authorities which are allocated Nu 5.00 million block grants should initiate activities for youth in rural communities. Local government officials said most of the budget was utilised to construct infrastructure today, but they are also prioritising youth groups in agriculture and livestock activities.

The Education Ministry's Department of Youth and Sports is conducting workshops to sensitise local government officials to promote child-friendly local governance, and promote youth participation in local planning and budgeting processes.

Parents like Dorji say that providing skills to the youth, motivating them, and supporting them is necessary. "His Majesty The King is doing a lot of it through the De-Suung skilling programmes. Other agencies should also fulfill their responsibilities," he said. "For a long-term solution, we have to re-look into the education system, civil service, and the national economy."