

Young Bhutanese and Climate Change

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The preservation of a habitable planet is one of the - if not the - most defining challenge of this generation. Of the 510 young Bhutanese, aged 15 to 24 years, surveyed by the UNICEF in 2020¹, 86 percent said that they learnt about climate change in school and 51 percent of those respondents said that they would not be able to explain how much they understood climate change and global warming. This survey is one of the very few empirical studies that examine the perceptions of Bhutanese youth on climate change.

Two things can be inferred from this. First, for young Bhutanese, it points to a lack of knowledge of climate change or, at least, of knowledge that is imparted through schools. Second is a line of inquiry into the impetus for climate action: are Bhutanese youth willing and able to act to prevent rising temperatures through local or global initiatives?

For many Bhutanese, there exists a cultural affinity for environmental preservation; a spiritual connection with nature is deeply rooted in our everyday practices. They are not grand gestures or rituals but simple acts that convey co-existence with nature as a part of life. My grandmother plucks a leaf from one of her orange trees and dips it in her bucket containing fresh milk. She swishes the leaf into the air while praying to aum Doro Chum, my village's guardian deity. My grandmother is one of the subsistence farmers who make up more than 60 percent of the country's population who are sensitive to the rhythms and cycles and changes of the environment.

The political will for climate action has also been positive. Bhutan has been internationally recognised as an environmental champion. It is almost trite to talk about Bhutan's carbon negative status, the Constitution mandating 60 percent forest coverage for all time to come and for every Bhutanese to be a steward of the environment.

So where do the collective consciousness of young Bhutanese on climate change and subsequently, climate action, figure into this?

¹ UNICEF ROSA, "Rising to the Challenge Youth' Perspective on Climate Change and Education in South Asia," (November 2020): 13.

Is the Issue of Climate Change Relevant to Bhutanese Youth?

The willingness and ability to act upon something is expedient on a complex web of factors beyond policy intent or even cultural affinity. To get Bhutanese youth to care about climate change would entail that the issue is relevant to their identities. However, young people today face challenges that have an impact on their day to day lives and, therefore, appear more urgent than having to care about climate change.

Most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a damaging impact on the economy, educational opportunities, employment prospects, and physical and mental wellbeing, making life choices and chances for young people appear rather grim. In contrast, climate change would appear to be a distant and abstract phenomenon for the average Bhutanese youth.

Firstly, climate change needs to be contextualised in the interests and concerns of young people. I call it the need to humanise climate change for young Bhutanese, or an “understanding of climate change that is personally relevant to young people today.”² I spent the year attending various dialogues spurred by the pandemic to have us re-examine our national priorities and approaches to achieving them.

From conversations on climate change and action, what I gathered was how young Bhutanese mostly articulated their personal connection to the changing climate in the context of their direct experiences. They almost always spoke of natural disasters floods, snowfall, windstorms. These direct experiences will most certainly be more and more common as the years go by.

Some also said that they had never experienced the impact of climate change because they had not experienced a natural disaster. This thinking might be more prevalent than we would like and there is a danger in that, because it means that young people may be oblivious to how the changing climate will affect them, not only in terms of environmental instability, but also their food and water supply, social stability, and economic opportunities. They may also be oblivious to the fact that climate action is not only a matter of environmental preservation, but also of how we think about economic growth, how we choose to consume our food and water, how we wear our clothes, build our cities and our homes, how we produce energy, and so on.

² Lee K, Gjersoe N, O'Neill S, Barnett J, “Youth Perceptions of climate change: a narrative synthesis,” Wiley WIREs Climate Change, (2020): 15.

Therefore, we must elevate youth conversations on climate action by enabling imagination that allows young people to see how their economic and social opportunities are affected by the changing climate, for example, youth engagement programmes. Teachers and policymakers could ask, as well as teach young people to connect the dots between how the economic future of young people will be affected by the green transition, and what sort of opportunities will be available for eco-entrepreneurs in green sectors. These may be ways to put into context how climate change is personally relevant to young people.

Second, we may have also failed to create curricula that teach climate literacy. Students in Bhutanese schools learn about climate change only as the science behind it. The science is vital but it is also quickly forgotten. Thus, I propose two elements that constitute what I dub climate literacy: systems knowledge and effectiveness knowledge.³ The systems knowledge of climate change — the ability to connect how rising temperatures are related to the fossil fuel industry, or the fast fashion industry or the food industry – has been shown to be more receptive by younger children than older people. Thus, climate literacy must begin early.

But young people’s engagement with climate change has been shown to be more likely when they possess effectiveness knowledge – the understanding of effective climate-friendly actions, or what they can do. Thus, climate education needs to be “contextual, practical and action based.”⁴ The Himalayan Environmental Rhythms Observation and Evaluation Systems, or the HEROES Project, is one such example I have encountered.

The HEROES project solves a pertinent issue that a country like Bhutan experiences related to climate change – the availability of reliable climate data, such as changes in temperature, precipitation, solar radiation, soil moisture, wind speed and wind direction. The HEROES project has engaged 14 schools, whereby young students collect such climate data for public use. This dataset is then incorporated into the Regional Database System (RDS) and International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), to be used to design adaptation policies in the country and region. The students also track the impact of changes in climate on biodiversity and human lives. So they also track blooming of plants, movement of animals, and patterns in people’s activities.

³ Lee K, Gjersoe N, O’Neill S, Barnett J, “Youth Perceptions of climate change: a narrative synthesis,” Wiley WIREs Climate Change, (2020): 14.

⁴ “Series IV: Youth Matters: Voices and Action in Climate,” Facebook, uploaded by UNDP Bhutan, 11/08/2021, <https://www.facebook.com/UNDPBhutan/videos/615656356087405/>.

Such programmes provide “value added and targeted learning experiences to the classroom” and provide young people with avenues to contribute and collaborate. This is what our curricula should strive to emulate.

Third, young people may genuinely be doubtful of individual action to address climate change. I previously mentioned the need to humanise climate change for Bhutanese youth. In this section, I elaborate on the need to strengthen the ally-ship between institutions of policymaking and young people, for climate action.

On one hand, the government and institutions have increasingly expressed their openness to engage with young people in recent years. This is proven by how most government, international and non-government agencies now have resources, such as funding for initiatives and projects, earmarked for “youth engagement”.

On the other hand, many young people remain unaware of the availability of such resources. Many young people are also unaware of or find policy content and processes elusive. I suspect that this is because many of our institutions do not consider public outreach especially to young people, who must be viewed as an important stakeholder, as the largest sector of the population, as an essential component of policymaking. This may explain why Bhutanese youth often fail to take ownership of well-formulated policies.

Thus, it is imperative that agencies and institutions connect with young people about what is being done at the policy level in Bhutan and globally to address climate change. There is a lot to be appreciated: Bhutan has garnered much admiration for its ambitious Nationally Determined Contribution to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) under the Paris Agreement, Low Emissions Development Strategy (LEDs) and National Adaptation Plan. It is also within the context of these documents that young people could learn how their lives could be impacted by certain policies, or leverage on its premises to innovate and drive action.

This finally brings us to ask, what about the roles and responsibilities of Bhutanese youth themselves? What can Bhutanese youth do to seek the kind of education and engagement that is required to be civically

conscious and active citizens, especially for climate action? I would like to frame the following suggestions I am about to offer as an exercise in agency of Bhutanese youth. I hope that a young person reading this finds it empowering rather than patronising.

First, seek intergenerational ally-ship rather than intergenerational alienation. There are people -- civil servants, environmentalists, CSO workers -- who have been involved in the climate change discourse, nationally and internationally, for decades. Reach out to them, hear their experiences, understand their scepticisms and use these as opportunities to shed entrenched narratives about each other.

Talk to your parents and your grandparents about what their childhoods were like in connection to their environment. Go live in a village for a while to connect to indigenous knowledge and ways of life that were more sustainable.

Second, create networks of knowledge and action among like-minded peers. Hold a weekly discussion on an aspect of how the changing climate will impact young people. Take up a small project, lead an initiative. Reach out to an organisation that works in the environmental or climate sector.

Read widely and broadly or go on a hike to get on top of a mountain and take in the majesty but also fragility of what you see. Organise an event, a dialogue, and create conversations on climate change. Earn your credibility by showing up and putting in the hard work.

To conclude, the changing climate is not only intimately connected to the futures of young people but also presents a huge potential for action. I would like to end on a note of hope. Young people are likely to be open to mindset shifts like a reduction of consumption or to change how we think about economic growth that are required to address the climate crisis.

Further, the pandemic has made some things - such as up-cycling, cleaning campaigns, and appreciation for nature - more attractive to the young. The self-efficacy for climate action by Bhutanese youth may be increased by humanising climate change and by equipping them with the imaginative and intellectual tools to understand how the changing climate is very much relevant to their lives.