

De-suung – Helping Society Function

*By The Druk Journal with contribution from
De-suung Skilling Programme and Colonel Sisir Chhetri*

Introduction

The De-suung, conceived by the Royal command, represents the spirit of Bhutanese values with a new look. The orange-clad citizens have evolved from being much-needed volunteers to constructive skilled workers and are becoming lifelong professionals. De-suups now enjoy an identity and career earned through meaningful action. They do not function as a separate entity but help the functioning of Bhutanese society by complementing all other services, from volunteerism to spiritualism to security. In the process, they have carved a relevant and respected place in society over the past decade, personifying true service to the *Tsa-wa-sum* (King, country, and people).

Early in His Majesty The King's reign, Bhutanese youth repeatedly requested His Majesty to institute militia training. They represented a generation seeking ways to take part in nation-building. His Majesty reasoned that raising a militia would be out of context at the time but Bhutanese society had needs: volunteers for relief and rescue during disasters; large public gatherings to coordinate and control; vulnerable parts of the country, like the borders, to protect; innovative responses to be implemented during mishaps.¹

Two years later, the concept of De-suung was born - De coming from *dekyid*, meaning peace, and *Suung* being the act of guarding. De-suung translates as “guardians of peace”. On February 21, 2015, the De-suung programme was instituted by Royal Charter.

It was the right idea in the right place at the right time.

De-suups in Action

The orange-clad men and women have become an integral part of Bhutan's socio-cultural scene. Today, de-suups are a reassuring presence at every

1 From His Majesty's audiences with Bhutanese youth

calamity caused by nature or by humans, at events and functions, and in various situations where people, communities, and government need help.

With a nation-wide chain of command and established procedures, de-suups are among the first to arrive at disaster sites, supporting rescue workers, armed forces, foresters, medical staff, and civil volunteers; they fight fires, evacuate the injured during disasters, control crowds at large national and religious events.

During the coronavirus pandemic, His Majesty The King took direct leadership in protecting Bhutanese citizens from the virus and Bhutan from the devastating impact of the global crisis. For de-suups it was a call from the supreme commander and thousands were active in 24-hour vigils around the country, delivering vaccines, unloading and delivering food and other emergency stock, distributing essentials like masks and hand-santisers, patrolling the international borders, manning quarantine facilities, escorting citizens to avail services, educating the people on physical distancing and critical lifestyle changes... in all aspects of daily living.

De-suups were the backbone of “reverse isolation”, a ground-breaking strategy initiated by the Royal command to shield vulnerable groups from community-transmitted Covid-19 virus. Focusing on elderly citizens and comorbid patient, reverse isolation facilities were set up nationwide. The de-suups’ roles ranged from facility management to security, caregiving, cooking, and delivering essentials. They also helped thousands of people receive Royal Kidu in numerous forms.

In 2015, His Majesty The King sent a self-contained earthquake relief team to Nepal with adequate medicines, equipment, and surgeons to help people in the severely hit Trishuli district. They were de-suups, helping victims and treating more than 2,000 patients. They made an impact that will be long remembered. In less than a month, the team raised Bhutan’s credibility as a country able to help others and won the goodwill of a close neighbour.²

In the winter of 2018, 119 de-suups accompanied His Holiness the Je Khenpo to the holy city of Rajghir in India. The Bhutanese entourage of

2 Extensively reported in Bhutanese and Nepali media in April 27 to May 29, 2015

2,500 monks and three senior lopons performed the *moenlam chhenmo* (The Great Prayer Festival) attended by more than 10,000 pilgrims. De-suups also help Indian pilgrims attend sacred *Tumdra Ami Nye* in Chukha, promoting cross-border goodwill among residents along the Bhutan-India border.³

Teams of hundreds and thousands of de-suups have taken up water projects, road construction, surveys, and services related to culture preservation, environment conservation, social problems, and special assignments like border security. They work with the government when required, like collecting data for digital governance, village-to-village delivery of plant seed and seedlings, controlling crowds and helping voters during elections. Bhutan's problem of stray dogs, for example, was a perennial threat and nuisance until more than 9,000 de-suups helped sterilise 61,680 dogs and microchip 32,544 dogs in 2023.⁴

De-suup Skilling Project

It was a natural shift that the de-suung services expanded from emergencies to the diverse needs of a changing society. Experts from Bhutan and around the world are training de-suups in more than 20 professions and skills through 140 programmes.⁵ This is leading to skilled jobs and life-long careers. The training raises the bar for the level of skills and the work culture of Bhutanese youth who have been described by at least one trainer as being “very nice, very creative, and very lazy”.⁶

According to a DSP report, more than 7000 de-suups have been trained in professional skills, the most popular courses being Information & Communication Technology (1,704), Tourism & Hospitality (1,208), and Beauty, Fitness & Wellbeing (957). The Culinary Arts: Multicuisine, Play School, and Introduction to Coding are also popular. The rush has not abated. Beginning with 125 volunteers in 2011, the de-suup population is expected to reach 50,000 in 2024. The online registration process rate in 2023 was about 2,000 in four minutes.⁷

3 Interview with Dorji, Passang, Director of Law and Order

4 Interview with Dr. Dorji, Kinley, Head of Veterinary Department

5 DSP report, 2024

6 Comment from cosmetic jewelry trainer (unnamed)

7 DSP report, 2024

According to Colonel Sisir Chhetri of the RBP (Royal Bhutan Police), Officer on Special Duty for De-suung, the programme is readying itself for the evolution of the nation. For example, trained de-suups can team up with investors and provide supporting skills in the emergence of national initiatives like the Gelephu Mindfulness City Special Administrative Region.

The often-used term “heroes in orange” is more of an adulation than recognition at this stage but de-suung has become popular enough for young children to get a thrill wearing orange, indicating a sense of admiration for de-suups. This enhances the positive identity of de-suups, giving them a sense of belonging and pride. De-suups enjoy an identity which stimulates in them the dignity of labour even for blue collar and manual jobs.

More important than the image, however, is the values that the de-suups are expected to imbibe and demonstrate. These are the character-building ideologies that His Majesty The King advises: the spirit of volunteerism, the positive influence of ethics, the values of community service and civic responsibility, accountability and responsibility.⁸ For example, de-suups in the civil service are required to be examples in serving the people. They are expected to nurture good human traits and values such as discipline, integrity, teamwork, commitment and dedication to work, respect for elders and seniors, sense of ownership.

“In the past, I would just glance at an unfortunate situation, maybe feel a little sorry, and move on,” said one de-suup.⁹ “After my de-suup training, I’ll drop everything and help.” Many de-suups share this sense of social responsibility.

Monitored and Evaluated

The questions that must be asked are being asked. Without de-suups, major disasters like the Wangduephodrang Dzong fire could have been more catastrophic and the rush during *melam chhenmo* and National Day could have been more chaotic. But are they indulging neighbourhoods and communities by going to the extent of clearing their trash? Are they

8 DSP report, 2024

9 Architect with Gyalsung

nurturing a complacency that dilutes the citizens' sense of civic duties? As it is, there are citizens who, instead of clearing their own trash and waste, wait for the thomde to do it.

Some question the rationale of giving youth “menial tasks” instead of productive professional skills. In the distribution of seedlings in rural areas, there are reports of confusion and inadequate follow up.

The De-suung leadership, however, maintains that such exercises help to sensitise communities on the environment, hygiene, and life skills. Besides, the millions of days contributed by De-suung, worth billions if monetised, earns the De-suung high profits in terms of goodwill. “We win their hearts,” says Colonel Sisir Chhetri.

Another thought-provoking question is, what would de-suups, particularly youth, be doing without De-suung? We are talking about a population reaching 50,000 and beyond, mostly youth who could otherwise be directionless and unskilled. De-suung is not paid labour. There is a growing awareness that trained and skilled de-suups must become successful professionals and entrepreneurs.

The De-suups

The profile of de-suups represents Bhutanese society in its entirety, from youth whose parents are attempting to discipline them to drug and alcohol addicts in the recovery process to prime ministers and parliamentarians and members of the Royal family. There are civil servants, teachers, students, doctors and dungtshos, engineers, architects, dentists, agriculturists, horticulturists, judges, foresters, administrators, and planners. There are centennials, millennials, generation X and baby boomers, as well as some just hoping to cash in on the De-suung reputation.

Starting in 2024 all 18-year-old boys and girls will join the Gyalsung programme (national service) which will have a major impact on Bhutanese society. Gyalsung, as it is sometimes misunderstood, will not replace the De-suung which will focus on training for skilled occupations. According to a Gyalsung organiser, a voluntary force like the De-suung holds a badge of honour. When the gyalups complete their reserve duty at the age of 45 they can volunteer to join the De-suung which is an opportunity for a

meaningful, productive, and prosperous life.

The De-suung is a symbol of unity and harmony in every sense. Every group working on any project is a mix of gender, age, regionalism, and social status. They are expected to serve all sections of society. As Supreme Commander, His Majesty The King is not only the symbol and strength of unity. His Majesty is literally in active command in the sense that he personally meets and talks to all de-suups, knowing a large number by name. Guardians of peace mean not only protecting the nation's sovereignty and security but also ensuring the unity and harmony of the entire population.

The De-suung programme transforms volunteers from all walks of life into guardians of peace. And de-suups are also aware that Bhutanese from all walks of life – armed forces, public servants, the businesses community, farmers, students, monks – must succeed for Bhutan to succeed. This refers to His Majesty The King's statement: There's no Bhutanese without Bhutan.¹⁰

10 His Majesty The King