

Towards an Inclusive and Accessible Bhutan: A Vision for Persons with Diverse Disabilities

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Bhutan is known for its commitment to Gross National Happiness and its rich cultural identity. However, beneath the serene beauty and spiritual tranquility lies a pressing challenge - the need to create an inclusive and accessible society for persons with diverse disabilities. While the services and facilities required for a disabled-friendly society are quite well established in most developed countries, Bhutan needs to emphasise the perspective of a society that needs to catch up.

With the growing awareness in recent decades and an intuitive sense of compassion, Bhutanese society is seeing a positive transformation. There is emerging leadership among the community of persons with disabilities, with initiatives like a homegrown sign language - Bhutanese Sign Language (BSL) - being recognised as a national language. Yet there is much left to be done to enhance the well-being and happiness of persons with disabilities.

In line with the UNDP theme for inclusive social protection policy for vulnerable groups, this article explores a comprehensive and integrated approach with three key objectives: (1) Protect and Prevent, (2) Empower and Promote, and (3) Transform Society. Through these pillars, we envision a Bhutan where every individual, regardless of their abilities, can thrive and contribute to a resilient and equitable society.

1. Protect and Prevent: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Ensuring Access to Essential Services

Protection and prevention are the bedrock of any inclusive society. As in any country in the world, for persons with disabilities in Bhutan, reducing vulnerabilities and ensuring access to essential services are crucial. This

involves not just physical accessibility but also social, economic, and environmental factors that contribute to their well-being.

Ensuring Physical Accessibility - Imagine a world where every street, building, and public space is designed with every individual in mind. This vision can become a reality by implementing universal design principles in infrastructure development such as wheelchair ramps, tactile paving/braille for the visually impaired, and accessible public transportation. These are necessities that ensure independence and dignity for persons with disabilities.

Decision-makers and leaders at national and local levels need to be aware that infrastructure facilities like ramps are important, not only for persons with disabilities, but for the growing aging population in urban and rural Bhutan who are using wheelchairs and crutches. With growing awareness and advocacy programmes, and increasing voices of persons with disabilities, people are asking for more accessible mobility facilities like elevators, rails, and cable cars, to holy places like Taktshang, that are currently out of reach.

Access to Healthcare - Healthcare is a fundamental right. Yet, given the difficult mountainous terrain, many persons with disabilities in Bhutan face barriers to accessing medical services. By establishing specialised accessible healthcare facilities and training healthcare professionals in disability-inclusive practices, we can ensure that everyone receives the necessary services. Mobile health clinics can reach remote areas, providing essential services and reducing the health disparities faced by individuals with severe disability.

Social Protection Programmes - Vulnerabilities extend beyond physical barriers. Economic hardships often exacerbate the challenges faced by persons with disabilities. Social protection programmes such as disability allowance, subsidised transportation costs, and financial assistance for assistive devices can alleviate these burdens. In line with SDG 2030, a robust social safety net ensures that no one is left behind, fostering a sense of security and belonging.

2. Empower and Promote: Enhancing capacities through improved access to healthcare, education, and employment

Inclusive education is the cornerstone of empowerment. An inclusive education system in Bhutan would ensure that children with disabilities receive quality education alongside their peers. This can be achieved by training teachers in special education, providing accessible learning materials, and fostering an inclusive school culture. It is heartening to learn that the Paro College of Education started a Master's in Inclusive Education programme to equip teachers with skills and knowledge to teach children with diverse disabilities.

By enhancing the capacities of vulnerable persons and households through improved access to healthcare, education, and employment, we pave the way for an inclusive society where everyone has the opportunity to succeed. This can be achieved by training teachers with skills and knowledge in special education, providing appropriate and adequate accessible teaching-learning materials, and fostering an inclusive school culture. In fact, even common sense tells us that when children with disabilities are educated in an environment that values diversity, they grow up with the confidence and skills needed to contribute to society.

Vocational Training and Employment Opportunities - Economic independence is a significant aspect of empowerment. Vocational training programmes tailored to the abilities and interests of persons with disabilities can open doors to meaningful employment. Public and private sectors can collaborate to create job opportunities and promote inclusive hiring practices. By showcasing the talents and capabilities of individuals with disabilities, we challenge stereotypes and build a more inclusive workforce.

With the development of society as a whole, and more people with disabilities being educated and skilled, appropriate resources such as braille and computer applications will help the person with visual disabilities to earn and live with dignity. For example, there are not many people with visual disabilities who can afford the software, JAWS, which converts text to speech enabling persons with visual disabilities to use computers.

Access to Healthcare Services - Empowering individuals also means ensuring their health and well-being. Accessible healthcare services,

including mental health support, are essential. Telehealth services can bridge the gap for those in remote areas, while community health programmes can educate families about disability-inclusive health practices. When persons with disabilities are healthy, they are better equipped to pursue their aspirations and contribute to their communities.

Many forms of intellectual deficiency were not recognised until recently. With the Pema Centre focusing on mental illness, a large percentage of mental disability and mental illness is now seen as a curable medical condition.

Autism has been covered by the national media. Schools need to recognise social behaviours as a psycho-social disability. Students who cannot cope with others, or those with hearing and seeing limitations that sit at the back of the class, should be brought to the front. This is known as reasonable accommodation.

3. Transform Society: Addressing Root Causes of Poverty, Inequality, and Vulnerability

To create a truly inclusive and accessible Bhutan, we must address the root causes of poverty, inequality, and vulnerability in society as a whole. This transformation requires a holistic approach that encompasses social attitudes, policies, and community engagement. Today, there are more discussions on disability. Politicians are recognising and raising the issue in Parliament and also including the issues in their manifestos and campaigns.

Even as physically disabled people are being recognised, there is a need to include those with mental and intellectual disabilities. With the national policy on persons with disabilities adopted, some agencies are beginning to use them as guidelines in their activities.

Changing Social Attitudes - Societal perceptions play a significant role in the lives of persons with disabilities. Stigmatisation and discrimination hinder their opportunities and diminish their self-worth. Public awareness campaigns, inclusive media representation, and community engagement can shift these perceptions. By celebrating the achievements and contributions of disabled individuals, we foster a culture of respect and inclusion.

There needs to be a twin-track approach for both people with disabilities and their employers and associates. People with disabilities themselves need to make conscious efforts to overcome problems. They must talk to friends - be open about the need for help. They must not try to hide or emphasise their disabilities. For example, there is no need to cover up disabilities in schools, workplaces, or public spaces. It is important for persons with disabilities to acknowledge in conversation that it is “us” facing difficulties, not “them”.

Inclusive policies and legislation must reflect the needs and rights of persons with disabilities. Bhutan can draw inspiration from international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) to develop and implement comprehensive disability laws. These policies should ensure equal access to education, employment, healthcare, and social services, creating an environment where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

It is good to have the right policies but implementing them is equally important. This takes some persuasion and doing because it can be inconvenient and expensive. For example, there is a need for special counters and assistance even in the largest hospitals to help the disabled find direction and services. The same with transport, sports, and other services.

Thimphu-based disabled persons’ associations have tried to create awareness using Disability Equal Training (DET) strategy among taxi drivers and city buses on how to help passengers with disabilities, such as people with heavy or bulky wheelchairs.

Community Engagement - Communities are the heart of Bhutanese society. Engaging local communities in the process of inclusion is vital. Community-based rehabilitation programmes can empower families and caregivers, providing them with the resources and support needed to care for their loved ones.

Inclusive community planning ensures that public spaces, cultural events, and social activities are accessible to all. When communities come together to support inclusion, they create a network of care and solidarity that

benefits everyone. It is important to reach communities and involve the parents and families of people with disabilities.

A good approach is to help people try to do things rather than just overprotect and provide, making them dependent. Sometimes they are as simple as spouses of visually impaired people remembering to inform them before moving furniture or before leaving the room.

A Collective Vision for an Inclusive Bhutan

Creating an inclusive and accessible society for persons with diverse disabilities in Bhutan is not just a goal; it is a collective vision that requires the commitment and collaboration of individuals, communities, and the government. By focusing on the three key objectives - Protect and Prevent, Empower and Promote, and Transform Society - we can build a Bhutan where every individual, regardless of their abilities, can lead a fulfilling and dignified life. This vision is rooted in the values of compassion, equality, and respect. It acknowledges the inherent worth of every person and recognises that our strength as a society lies in our diversity.

As we work towards this vision, we must remember that inclusion is not a one-time effort but an ongoing journey. It requires us to listen, learn, and adapt continuously. Stories of hope and resilience behind every policy and programme are the stories of individuals whose lives are transformed by inclusion. Let us share some stories of hope and resilience from the heart of Bhutan.

True Life Stories (From Personal Experiences)

Bhutan has strengths of its own. For example, the experience of Muenselling Institute in Khaling showed that the relationship between children with visual disabilities and the local Khaling communities is so natural that they do not need any facilities or advocacy programmes to understand each other as they do in many parts of the world. Khalingpas do not see Muenselling students as being disabled but as members of the same society.

It would be great to have similar attitudes towards persons with disabilities in every community in Bhutan. A main challenge for the children from Muenselling Institute, when integrating into mainstream school, is that

they lack opportunities. For example, STEM is a current priority for the Bhutanese education system, but schools for children with visual disabilities lack the facilities and the groundwork to take students to the same level. Therefore, the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB), especially the Ministry of Education, should focus more on providing facilities and resources to improve the situation.

Tshering, a young man from a remote village, was born with a physical disability that limited his mobility. For years, he depended on his family for support, facing challenges in accessing education and employment. However, through a vocational training programme, Tshering discovered his talent for woodwork and painting. With determination and the support of his community, he started his own small business, creating beautiful handcrafted sculptures and traditional paintings. Today, Tshering is not only financially independent but also an inspiration to others in his community, showing that with the right opportunities, anyone can achieve their dream.

Pema, a passionate advocate for inclusive education, was born with a visual impairment. Despite the barriers he faced, he pursued his education with resilience and graduated with a Masters Degree in Education. Pema now works as a Chief Programme officer in the Ministry of Education where he promotes an inclusive policy and teaching practices and mentors teachers working with students with disabilities. His efforts have led to significant changes in the inclusive approach to education, ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities, receive the support they need to succeed. Pema's story highlights the power of education and advocacy in driving social change.

A Community's Commitment to Accessibility

In a small number of town community centres in Bhutan, groups of community members came together to make their public spaces more accessible. For example, Kuensel reported that teachers in Tendu Central School in Samtse got together to install accessible facilities for children with disabilities in their school. They organised fundraisers to build wheelchair ramps, install tactile paving, and create accessible playgrounds for children with disabilities. This collective effort not only improved physical accessibility but also fostered a sense of unity and inclusion within the community. The town's commitment to accessibility serves as a model

for other communities in Bhutan, demonstrating that when people come together with a shared purpose, they can create meaningful change.

Moving Forward: A Call to Action

As we look towards the future, it is essential to take concrete steps to realise our vision of an inclusive and accessible Bhutan. Here are some key actions that can drive this transformation:

Strengthen Legislation and Policies: Develop and implement comprehensive disability laws that align with international standards, ensuring equal rights and opportunities for persons with disabilities. There is a policy and convention but currently no law to enforce the implementation.

Invest in Infrastructure: Prioritise the development of accessible infrastructure, including public transportation, buildings, and public spaces, to facilitate independence and mobility.

Promote Inclusive Education: Train teachers and provide resources to support inclusive education, ensuring that all children, regardless of their abilities, receive quality education.

Enhance Healthcare Services: Expand access to specialised healthcare services, including mental health support, and invest in training healthcare professionals in disability-inclusive practices.

Foster Economic Opportunities: Create vocational training programmes and promote inclusive hiring practices to provide meaningful employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Engage Communities: Involve local communities in the process of inclusion, promoting awareness and understanding through community-based initiatives and public awareness campaigns.

Celebrate Diversity: Highlight the achievements and contributions of persons with disabilities, fostering a culture of respect and inclusion through media representation and public recognition.

An interesting challenge for Bhutan is the need for language to discuss issues related to the disabled. International languages, like English, are not easy because the “politically correct” terminology keeps changing. Perhaps, like other languages, Dzongkha terms are even slower to respond to cultural sensitivities. When translated into other languages, descriptions of disabilities sound crude and rude. This was particularly obvious when issues related to disability was discussed in Parliament in 2024.

There is a need for an agency responsible for the regulatory and legislative environment for persons with disabilities. While the Gross National Happiness Commission secretariat assumed this role in the past, there is currently no organisation carrying out this mandate.

Conclusion

Creating an inclusive and accessible Bhutan for persons with diverse disabilities is a journey that requires collective effort, compassion, and commitment. By focusing on the principles of Protect and Prevent, Empower and Promote, and Transform Society, we can build a nation where every individual is valued, respected, and given the opportunity to thrive.

Let us come together to create a Bhutan that truly embodies the spirit of Gross National Happiness, where the well-being of every citizen is cherished, and the strength of our society lies in its diversity. There is a parallel need for society to be educated on the language and terms to address sensitivities even as national policy and legislation are framed for inclusivity.

Reference

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United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Sustainable Development Goals, (SDGs) 2030.

Relevant articles from Kuensel and Bhutan Broadcasting Corporation, BBSCL.

Pema Chogyal, Dy Chief Programme Officer, Education Ministry, and Pema Tshering, Artist in Simply Bhutan, and patients with permanent disabilities at physiotherapy OPD, JDWNRH.

My lived experiences and various interactions with individuals and communities during my formal and informal meetings and discussions.