

Time for Bhutanese Gen Z

Deepika Adhikari

Time, although equally distributed, impacts individuals differently. Generation Z, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, navigates a world dominated by the Internet and shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. This generation values flexibility, innovation, and financial intelligence, often prioritising achievement over happiness.

In Bhutan, Gen Z faces systemic constraints, such as rigid job structures and traditional gender roles which contrast sharply with their dynamic aspirations for multiple jobs, remote work, and entrepreneurial endeavours. The Bhutanese Gen Z, influenced by global trends, finds itself at odds with a system that offers limited options, thus highlighting the need for systemic changes to accommodate their evolving needs and values.

Recognising these challenges, Bhutan's Fifth Druk Gyalpo has implemented forward-thinking initiatives like the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC), Desuung, and Gyalsung programmes to harness the full potential of the younger generation. These programmes aim to integrate youth into community initiatives, leveraging their innovative ideas and fresh perspectives to tackle contemporary challenges.

The visionary Monarch's efforts to reset the system post-pandemic reflect a strategy to ensure that Bhutan's youth are engaged, responsible, and capable of driving the nation toward a future that harmonises development with conservation and tradition with modernity.

Therefore, let us delve a little into who the Gen Zs are, their aspirations, and how Bhutan can harness their full potential.

Time

First, let us talk about time. Time is the only constant that is distributed equally to everyone (24 hours), but the irony is that some have plenty of it, while others run out of it too quickly.

We now live in the world of a newer generation: Generation Z (also known as Gen Z), our focus in this article. Let us also look at the global youth scenario. Approximately 16% of the current global population comprises of youth aged between 15 and 24 years. The numbers will continue to increase and it is estimated that this age group will make up 1.3 billion people in the world by 2030 – equal to seven percent growth from the current population.¹

Gen Z is the generation that comes after millennials, therefore they are the ones born somewhere between the mid-1990s and early 2010s. I bring focus to this generation because they are unique; they are the first generation that has never experienced a world without the Internet, so much so that they know how to type very well on their cell phones but do not know how to operate a laptop properly.

To add to this, they were faced with the global pandemic that turned the entire world topsy-turvy, crushed the economy worldwide, and increased the cost of living for all. These situations and circumstances have forced them to be surrounded by the digital world to the extent that they know so much about the rest of the world but so little about what is around them. This has profoundly impacted their personalities and values - further shaping them into people who are known to prioritise saving money and time, value travel, and are prone to anxiety. They shape culture through social media, including exposure to Artificial Intelligence (AI), work with modern technologies, share their thoughts publicly, value flexibility, and are very competitive.² New technologies are a natural environment for them.³

Gen Zs seem not to wait for time but to turn time in their favour, for they possess excellent time management skills and they know so much more than the rest of us.

Bhutanese Gen Zs are apparently no different, going by the current trends and the mass exodus for job opportunities. We are only beginning to understand what their preferences are. In a world where Gen Zs want to be

1 United Nations, "Youth. United Nations; United Nations," (n.d) <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>

2 Bhagyashree Barhate and Khalil M. Dirani, "Career aspirations of generation Z: a systematic literature review," *European Journal of Training and Development* 46, no. 1/2 (2022): 139-157. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-07-2020-0124>

3 Anna Dolot, "The Characteristics of Generation Z Author(s)," (2018): 44-50

called “they” in place of “him/her”, our systems still offer male and female options. In a world where Gen Zs want to work multiple jobs at odd hours and explore entrepreneurial opportunities while being employed in one, our systems only offer rigid job commitments, bonds, penalties, and sanctions. In a world where Gen Zs want to earn Dollars by working remotely, our systems only offer nine-to-five jobs, paying in Ngultrums. They are not the laid-back generation; they prefer achievement over relaxation.

Times have Changed

On the other hand, we see His Majesty the King trying his best to keep pace with changing times. We can only imagine the amount of pressure to run a country, bring about changes, keep the economy up and running, keep the people happy, and at the same time, parent three children who are all under the age of 10 years.

Amid it all comes Bhutan’s graduation from the Least Developed Countries (LDC) level in 2023. But the visionary Monarch who is trying to press the “System Reset Button” post-pandemic, has a vision to up our game. Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) looks amazing and is also the only way to take Bhutan into an era of transformation.

But have we ever given a thought to why His Majesty had to create GMC and, for that matter, initiate the reform of education and government, the Desuung, the Gyalsung, and Druk Gyalpo’s Institute? Why could these new changes not be applied to the entire nation and be implemented in the existing systems? It is probably because of the adult mindsets, owing to our adult-driven attitude that we subtly or unknowingly impose on the upcoming generation.

In the name of the upcoming generation, we have been practising a “tokenistic approach” that is not inclusive; a tokenistic approach being the practice of doing something only to prevent criticism and make it look like people are being treated fairly.

Being inclusive does not only mean the inclusion of the LGBT+ community and the inclusion of people living with disability. In our approaches, we also have not been inclusive to youth, children, and their needs. Yes, we understand that there are reasons why children and adolescents are not

given access to vote, are not allowed to drive, and are not allowed to marry until they attain a certain age, but it would not hurt to hear them out. They voice their needs through their actions and opinions because they are not as articulate in composing their thoughts and feelings into well-written documents.

Tokenistic approaches must give way to meaningful youth engagement programmes which hold great potential for Bhutan, a country that treasures its cultural heritage and environmental sustainability. By involving young people in community initiatives, Bhutan can leverage their innovative ideas and fresh perspectives to tackle contemporary challenges. Engaged youth can stimulate local economies, create jobs, and drive innovation, propelling Bhutan towards a future harmonising development and conservation.

Having worked in an international organisation and having managed youth-led campaigns, I have seen what engagement does to youth. Besides the impact on the community through their actions, their individual strengths and resilience are built along the process which in turn morphs into employability. There is only a win-win in youth engagement.

Rigid social structures, power hierarchy between youths and adults, and lack of institutional capacity to incorporate child and youth voices in their implementation, discourage child and youth participation. The promotion of culture change in organisations and policy systems will effectively translate youth voices into action. There is a need to incorporate youth voices more systematically into the decision-making process.⁴

Time to Change

The initiatives taken by His Majesty are probably the only way to harness the full potential of our upcoming generation through a skilling and upskilling approach to drive the national economy. Desuung and Gyalsung are large-scale youth engagement through skilling, and GMC is the future that they will live in.

Gelephu Mindfulness City, as envisioned by His Majesty, is apparently

4 Save the Children Bhutan Country Office, “Assessing the Impact and Potential of the SHIFT Campaign Accelerator Model in Achieving Longer-Term Change – (SHIFT Theory of Change), Systematic Review and Qualitative Consultation”, (2023).

going to be a co-living space where rural will meet urban, local will meet global, spirituality will meet rationality, nature will meet Artificial Intelligence, development will meet culture & tradition, and old will meet the young to co-exist in harmony.

In ten years, Gen Zs are going to be the productive citizens of a new Bhutan. We are yet to understand what Generation Alpha (born after Gen Zs) holds in store for us. Therefore, if His Majesty can envision and gift a mindfulness city to a nation grappling with changing times, we can at least ponder upon the following:

Are we ready for our upcoming generations? If a child is interested in visual arts, but we are only offering reading, writing, speaking, and listening, where can the child practice visual arts?

Are these not the generations for whom we are creating a holistic future? The future should be created in their interest, for their time, with things that are relevant to them, and where they would want to stay. What if, through our current approaches and practices, we are creating a round hole for a square peg?

References

- Barhate, Bhagyashree and Dirani, Khalil M. "Career aspirations of generation Z: a systematic literature review" *European Journal of Training and Development* 46, no. 1/2 (2022), 139-157. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-07-2020-0124>
- Dolot, Anna., "The Characteristics of Generation Z Author(s)" (2018): 44-50
- Save the Children Bhutan Country Office., "Assessing the Impact and Potential of the SHIFT Campaign Accelerator Model in Achieving Longer-Term Change – (SHIFT Theory of Change), Systematic Review and Qualitative Consultation", (2023).
- United Nations., "Youth. United Nations; United Nations" (n.d), <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>