

Bhutan's Retired Generation Still Clearing Ground

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Within the vast gathering of more than 10,000 volunteers assembled for the 4th Gelephu Mindfulness City Volunteer Programme from 23–26 December 2025, a small group of 138 individuals stood out, united by purpose, determination and an extraordinary will to serve.

Aged between 60 and 89 years, they embodied a cross-section of the nation's leadership: Former ministers, administrators, diplomats, judges, parliamentarians, members of the armed forces, educators, medical professionals — people who had dedicated their careers and, in many cases, their entire adult lives, to the building of modern Bhutan.

For four days, under the open sky of a country they had spent their lives serving, they cleared land earmarked for a park. They asked for no special treatment, recognition or concession for their age. They simply wanted to be part of something that pointed towards the future as envisaged by His Majesty The King.

This will to serve is characteristic of their generation, one of the many common arcs that define that cohort. These were individuals who came of age in a Bhutan without roads, electricity, hospitals, schools, or television.

With support from the Government of India, they were sent as young boys and girls to schools in Nainital, Darjeeling and Kalimpong in India. The Colombo Plan, United Nations, and other scholarships later gave these individuals the opportunity to pursue further studies in the USA, UK, New Zealand and Australia.

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However, they returned to Bhutan, despite having had every opportunity to remain abroad, choosing instead to work in a government of only five ministries and for salaries that were modest. They came back not because the conditions were comfortable, but because, perhaps, they felt deeply rooted to a country which was theirs, and its future was a personal responsibility.

Over the decades that followed, they witnessed and drove a profound national transformation under the enlightened leadership of our Monarchs. Bhutan evolved from a country without paved roads into one connected by highways, airports and digital networks; from a nation where life expectancy hovered around 37 years to one where citizens commonly live beyond their 70s.

They laid the foundations of modern governance, building institutions, educating new generations of the country, and administering districts all over Bhutan. On the global stage, they steadfastly safeguarded Bhutan's national interests at the international fora and negotiated agreements that helped shape contemporary Bhutan.

In granting an audience to this group, His Majesty noted that the present generation owes a deep sense of gratitude to this cohort. They served His Majesty the Fourth King, and even earlier— the Third King — faithfully, and contributed to building a stable, prosperous and widely respected nation.

Yet, the story of nation-building does not belong to officeholders alone. Among the 10,000 volunteers and the broader generation they represent, were also ordinary men and women whose names appear in no gazette and whose contributions were never formally recorded.

The farmer who cleared hillside terraces by hand and fed a district through lean years. The village midwife and Basic Health Unit staff who walked hours through mountain paths to deliver children in homes without electricity. The trader, the craftsman, the teacher in a one-room school, the mother who held a household and a community together through years when the nation was still finding its footing.

These are people now in their 70s and 80s, living quietly by themselves or in the homes of children who are busy with lives of their own. They

did not build Bhutan through policy or diplomacy. They built it through daily endurance, through the accumulated weight of small, unremarked acts performed over decades in the service of family, neighbour and place. Their labour is woven into the same fabric that the civil servant and the ambassador helped to shape.

That they gathered, too, in Gelephu without titles or portfolios, but with the same willingness, is a reminder that the obligation of gratitude His Majesty spoke of, should reach into every corner of the country where an elderly person sits with a lifetime's knowledge that no one has yet thought to ask about.

The 138-member volunteer group in Gelephu in December 2025, was coordinated by the Royal Society of Senior Citizens (RSSC), itself an institution born of Royal vision. Established in 2011 through a Royal Command by His Majesty The King, the RSSC was founded on a recognition that Bhutan had never formally named — let alone planned for — this constituency of people.

Until that moment, the words “senior citizens” had perhaps not appeared in the country's development plans. An entire generation had been rendered invisible through a quiet tendency that the writer Maria Popova (2016) articulated with uncomfortable precision: “The great tragedy of our culture is that people seem to disappear from our scope of curiosity as they grow old. Animated by unconscious social biases, despite our best intentions, we lose interest in who a person is and render the elderly invisible, denying them the dignity of being seen for the immutable parts of the human spirit.”

The founding vision of the RSSC was both practical and profound. Bhutan's retired civil servants, His Majesty emphasised, carry reserves of experience, institutional knowledge and wisdom that the nation cannot afford to squander.

The retirement age of 57 to 63 (Bhutan Civil Service Rules and Regulations, 2024) in Bhutan is young by international standards, which means that many highly qualified, productive, capable and deeply experienced people are stepping back from formal service at the height of their competence.

The RSSC's early recommendations were modest for an inclusive society for senior citizens: Discounted fares on Bhutanese airlines, designated queues at hospitals, banks and service providers and annual health checkups. Such measures asked relatively little but signalled something important—that older citizens deserve to be seen as a category of persons with specific needs and specific dignity.

Some were implemented. Others were adopted in partial measures or quietly rolled back. The gap between policy intent and lived reality is a familiar one in Bhutan, and the elderly are among those least equipped to close it themselves.

Under its present Board of Trustees, the RSSC made a more ambitious attempt. A National Policy for Senior Citizens 2023 was drafted and launched by the Prime Minister, coinciding with the Royal Wedding Anniversary at the historic Simtokha Dzong on the 13 October 2023, addressing the health, safety, social inclusion and overall wellbeing, and formalising the rights of senior citizens to live in dignity, free from discrimination (Royal Senior Citizens' Secretariat, 2023). The government has pledged a substantial budget within the 13th Five-Year Plan for a new social protection framework (The Bhutanese, 2023).

That this concern for senior citizens is not merely institutional was made plain during the COVID-19 pandemic. At a time when the elderly were among the most vulnerable — isolated, unable to travel, and dependent on supply chains that had been severely disrupted — His Majesty The King personally ensured that essential medicines and rations reached elderly citizens across the country.

It was an act of care that went beyond the management of a public health crisis; it was a statement about who matters, and about the obligation of a nation to its older citizens when they are most exposed. That memory endures.

His Majesty The King and His Majesty the Fourth King have, in their innate wisdom and compassion, called upon retired officers to serve the nation at times when their experience is precisely what the moment requires. This is not unusual.

In countries like Singapore, India, Nepal and Pakistan, capable retired officers take on special assignments as envoys on specific diplomatic briefs, as advisors to think tanks, as institutional memory for governments navigating unfamiliar terrain. In Belgium and the Netherlands, they serve in the Royal Court and are called upon during high-level diplomatic events hosted by the Monarch.³

In none of these cases is the arrangement about displacing those currently in office. It is about drawing on a depth of knowledge that took decades to accumulate and that once lost to retirement is not easily replaced.

Bhutan faces a particular version of this challenge. As younger and educated Bhutanese leave the country, the question of how to preserve and transmit institutional knowledge becomes more pressing. The retired civil servant who negotiated a bilateral agreement, administered a remote dzongkhag through difficult years, or built a ministry from its earliest foundations, carries something that cannot be downloaded or briefed.

It can only be shared in the right conditions, when such conditions are created deliberately. There is a model for how to do this. There is also, in the men and women who gathered in Gelephu in December, a living argument for why it matters.

But the challenge runs deeper than policy. It is also a challenge of imagination.

Psychologist Hal Hershfield's research⁴ shows that we tend to think of our future selves not as continuous extensions of who we are now, but as strangers, essentially different people with whom we feel little emotional connection or sense of shared identity.

The neural patterns activated in the brain when we imagine our future selves more closely resemble those activated when we think about other people, than when we think about our present selves. And so, we act accordingly, making choices that serve today's self at the expense of tomorrow's. We

3 According to the lead author's personal observations during his assignment as Ambassador to Belgium and the Netherlands.

4 For a collection of Hal Hershfield's work, refer to: <https://www.halhershfield.com/considering-the-future-self>

save less, skip the workout, leave the difficult conversation for another time and also forget with remarkable consistency that we will one day be old.

Hershfield's suggestion is simple but radical: Make friends with your future self. Treat that person not as a stranger but as someone you know, someone whose life you are actively shaping with every choice you make today. The implications extend beyond personal finance and health.

If we cannot imaginatively inhabit our own ageing, we will struggle to genuinely care for those who are already there. The elderly become not a mirror but an "*other*"— and others, as history shows repeatedly, are easy to overlook.

Gautama Buddha did not overlook them. At 29, Prince Siddhartha, sheltered his entire life within palace walls, rode outside for the first time and encountered four sights: An old person, a sick person, a corpse, and a wandering holy man. It was the encounter with ageing that was the beginning of his awakening.

Ageing, in the Buddhist tradition, is not something to be managed or deferred or politely ignored. It is one of the great teachers. It is written into the nature of things, inescapable and instructive, a reminder of impermanence that no amount of development or prosperity can ultimately dissolve.

A society that has absorbed this teaching as deeply as Bhutan has, as part of its foundational cultural and spiritual inheritance, should in principle be better equipped than most to face the realities of an ageing population with both clarity and compassion.

And Bhutan is ageing. According to the United Nations Population Fund (2022), the share of the population aged 65 and over is expected to rise from 5.9% in 2017 to 13.4% by 2047, more than doubling in a single generation.

The old-age dependency ratio, which stood at 8.7 older persons for every 100 working-age people in 2017, is projected to rise to 19.3 by 2047. Life expectancy at 73 (World Bank, 2023) is increasing. This means that people are not just living longer, but they are at risk of living beyond a point where we do not actively engage with them socially as well as intellectually.

The geography of ageing matters too. Rural areas already have a higher proportion of older residents than urban ones, and this gap is projected to widen considerably. Such communities are where formal support structures are thinner, where families are more dispersed as younger generations move to cities or abroad, and where the informal networks of care that have historically sustained older people are under growing strain.

The mass migration of younger Bhutanese is not a future risk. It is a present reality that is already disrupting the traditional architecture of care rooted in proximity.

Women face particular vulnerabilities within this picture. At 80 years and above, women outnumber men, and they are more likely to be widowed, more likely to be financially dependent, and more likely to spend a greater proportion of their remaining years in poor health.

Many elderly adults do not have stable income sources post-retirement. When a retiree dies, the spouse receives only 50% of the deceased's pension amount (National Pension and Provident Fund, 2018). The feminisation of ageing sits at the intersection of gender, economics and care in ways that demand specific, sustained attention.

These are not abstract numbers. They are the future faces of people who are, right now, clearing land in Gelephu, tending a small farm in a rural dzongkhag, or sitting quietly in the home of a child who is busy, well-meaning, and slightly unsure of what to say.

Bhutan stands at a rare and vertiginous moment. The ambition of the Gelephu Mindfulness City, a project of extraordinary scope and vision, is being conceived and constructed at precisely the time when the country's demographic landscape is shifting beneath its feet.

The aspiration for Gross National Happiness made tangible, the continuation of democratic deepening, the integration of Bhutan into regional and global economies; all of it is being built on ground that an earlier generation prepared; ground that, in some cases, they are still clearing with their own hands.

The men and women who gathered in Gelephu in December 2025 were demonstrating something more than civic duty. They were weathered, yet fiercely committed to a common aspiration for the nation's future.

The question this moment asks of us is not simply how we will care for our elderly as their numbers grow, although that question is urgent and deserves serious, sustained policy attention. It is deeper and more personal than that.

It is whether we can make friends with our own future selves. Hershfield urges us to close that distance imaginatively. The Buddhist tradition urges the same, in a different language. Both are pointing at the same truth; that we cannot build a good society for the old if we cannot bear to think of ourselves as becoming them.

Bhutan has an opportunity that few countries at a similar moment of transition have possessed: A deep cultural and spiritual framework that takes ageing seriously, a caring and an extraordinary Monarchy that has explicitly named the obligation of gratitude across generations; and a living cohort of older citizens who are not waiting to be asked – who are already there, already working and demonstrating what it looks like to remain in full possession of one's agency and purpose into the sunset of life.

They showed up in Gelephu without fanfare and expectation. They cleared the ground. The least we can do is turn around, look at them, and understand that they are showing us not just who they are but who we will become.

You can engage with the Royal Society of Senior Citizens at <https://www.rssc.org.bt/>.

AI Disclosure

Generative AI (Chat GPT) was used to generate references and suggestions on how to improve the flow of the article. All ideas and final text represent our original work and judgement. We have reviewed and taken responsibility for content.

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