

From Passive Observers to Active Participants: A Nation Between Generations

*Tsheten Lhamo*¹

“A nation’s future will mirror the quality of her youth. A nation cannot fool herself into thinking of a bright future when she has not invested wisely in her children,”

–His Majesty the King

One might argue that Bhutan stands at a generational threshold, particularly by observing the pronounced rise in outward migration in recent years. The young population is constantly navigating a complex balance between deeply rooted cultural values and the rapid pull of global mobility.

While this shift can be attributed to individual economic decisions, this pattern can also serve as a reflection on national belonging and identity.

Against this backdrop, this article explores the evolving role of young people in governance by unpacking how their “situatedness”² is shaped through social, political and cultural institutions. Simultaneously, it is also dependent on how these institutions condition their capacity to meaningfully participate in civic space³.

This article adopts a generational lens and an institutional framework to understand how these forces shape youth civic engagement in Bhutan. As a member of the demographic in question, I argue that while the desire to serve the nation remains high, changing political and social landscapes are shifting young people’s perspectives on their role in Bhutan’s future.

1 Tsheten Lhamo is a Chevening Scholar pursuing a postgraduate degree in Gender Studies in the UK. She has previously worked at BCMD and RENEW.

2 Deeply embedded knowledge or actions within specific physical, social or cultural context

3 An environment that enables individuals or groups to meaningfully participate in the political, social, economic and cultural life in their societies

Wray-Lake & Shubert (2019) argues that civic engagement is not a linear path but a fragile process, sensitive to external disruptions. In the context of Bhutan, this disruption is manifested through outward migration and an insufficiently articulated civic education framework, both of which interrupt civic awareness among young people.

Thus, Bhutan risks cultivating a generation with fragile civic identities and diminished confidence in governance, not due to lack of interest but due to lack of an institutional roadmap to enable entry into civic spaces.

To ground this argument in empirical evidence, I conducted two targeted small-scale surveys, one focusing on students aged 10 to 15 (Generation Alpha) and the other focusing on youth primarily aged 16 to 25 (Generation Z). In total, 55 respondents participated, 24 from Generation Alpha and 31 from Generation Z.

The respondents represented young people from across Bhutan, including several who had migrated to Australia or had prior experience living abroad. The survey was administered during the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy's (BCMD) 10-day Winter Youth Initiative Programme in Gelephu in December 2025, which brought together participants from diverse regions of the country.

The findings suggest a nation at a crossroads, where one generation is brimming with untapped potential, while the other is grappling with systematic barriers and the lure of the global horizon.

Generation Alpha: The Enthusiastic Observer

Generation Alpha represents a cohort with high enthusiasm for civic participation that is, however, paired with a lack of conceptual grounding. They enter the civic space with high potential, yet their civic identity remains largely unformed.

Empirical data from this small-scale survey suggests that 100% of the respondents of this cohort expressed interest in joining civic related activities. Furthermore, 91% indicated interest in leveraging on digital platforms to communicate their concerns and ideas with local leaders.

However, despite the interest, a notable gap remains between knowledge and confidence. While civics are taught in schools, 82% stated they only understood civic education “a little”. This gap calls for an educational reform, particularly in civics.

The cohort demonstrates an affinity for experiential, digital engagement, suggesting technology as an indispensable enabler rather than a distraction, and that it is used for purposeful civic ends, such as informed participation and community engagement.

Generation Z: The Disrupted Cohort

Unlike the previous cohort, Generation Z demonstrates a rather different civic narrative. They shift from a nascent enthusiasm to negotiating with structural barriers, such as lack of information, and unclear civic pathways impacting their civic engagement.

Central to this shift is the current outward migration as a factor. This movement creates a growing distance from informed participation in the civic space, placing this cohort in a state of transition where the traditional ways of “belonging” is being eroded by global mobility.

The primary barrier to civic participation as cited by this cohort remains “lack of information”. This suggests that while the desire to contribute to the civic space remains, it is disrupted by an informational vacuum. Generation Z exhibits the will to participate yet lacks an institutional roadmap of *where* and *how* to engage.

This tension culminates into a profound *Impact Paradox*⁴ — 81% of the cohort affirms the theoretical value of civic education, yet they remain divided about their own ability to make an impact. This internal divide reflects a deeper uncertainty about their role in Bhutan’s evolving governance, as they weigh their commitment to the nation against the practical realities of a changing world.

4 The ‘Impact Paradox’ refers to situations where young people recognise the value of civic education (the desired impact) yet simultaneously express low confidence in their own ability to create change, producing a contradictory outcome. This pattern emerged clearly in the survey findings among Generation Z respondents.

A Failure of Institutional Design

The empirical data suggests a significant “Knowledge-Confidence” gap⁵. This gap can be attributed to *institutional misalignment* rather than the deficiency of youth ability or interest. To understand this misalignment, one must analyse the structural frictions within social, political and cultural institutions.

The Social Institution: Prioritising Examination over Citizenship

Social valuation of young people is often inextricably linked to academic performance in Bhutan; that is how society assigns worth, opportunity and recognition, based on exam results (Roder, 2016). Within this broader social framework, the education system is a key social institution that shapes how young people understand their role as citizens.

However, civics education remains a low weighted curriculum, focusing primarily on government structure rather than on citizenship values (Wangmo, 2017). This inadvertently signals an institutional failure.

When civic education is embedded as part of the History curriculum, it lacks sufficient assessment weightage to contribute to overall grades, making it unlikely to receive students’ attention. This also suggests that the education system enforces understanding of legislative processes as a requirement to pass tests rather than a prerequisite for life.

This creates a disconnect for young people. As reflected in the survey, both Generation Z and Generation Alpha report “understanding civic education a little” largely because their engagement with civic education is oriented toward academic certification rather than developing a sense of civic agency or active citizenship.

The Political Institution: A Pathway Deficit

Examination of the empirical finding suggests that Generation Z perceives a fundamental flaw in Bhutan’s political participation design; specifically, the framing of pathways into civic spaces and decision-making platforms have been structured.

5 Disparity between an individual’s civic knowledge and their confidence in applying that knowledge in real context

The impact paradox observed within the Generation Z cohort signifies that “political engagement” remains with an elite few. This illustrates a systematic barrier where meaningful participation in decision-making spaces becomes a gatekeeping problem, causing governance to be perceived as a distant monument rather than a responsive entity.

For instance, during my work as a youth programme coordinator, invitations to youth civic engagement programmes were sent to institutions, who then nominate participants internally. Through informal conversations with attending youths, I learned that these nominations were often based on academic performance, eloquence or student leadership positions.

This results in perceiving civic space as only accessible to limited, high-achieving students, reinforcing the perception of civic space being filtered through academic proficiency rather than broad democratic inclusion.

This is exacerbated by the technological inclination of young people towards communicating their concerns against the traditional idea of civic space, *zomdue*. The reliance on 20th-century communication methods (i.e. important local announcements delivered through in-person *zomdue*) disenfranchises a 21st-century generation.

Even when information circulates through local online messaging group chats, these are often adult-dominated spaces to which young people are not added, further limiting their access to civic information.

The Cultural Institution: A Culture of Silence

Bhutanese culture values social harmony and hierarchy; however, this cultural practice inadvertently fosters a “Passive Observer” syndrome, stifling civic agency. This further manifests into a respect paradox⁶, where questioning authorities can potentially be viewed as a disrespectful action.

However, the empirical findings from the small-scale survey suggest an intriguing shift — 72% of Generation Alpha believe in their personal capacity to enact change. While there is desire to *speak*, it has become imperative to foster this initiative among the Generation Alpha cohort

6 The ‘respect paradox’ refers to the tension in Bhutanese civic culture where young people are socialised to respect authority and maintain social harmony, yet this very norm discourages them from questioning leaders or expressing dissent, thereby limiting their civic agency.

and further provide them the necessary platform, a microphone, for their voices to be heard.

Loss of Mentorship

The outward migration after the COVID pandemic presents a unique challenge to Bhutan's democratic continuity, particularly among the younger cohorts. The nation is not only losing human resources but also a generation expected to inherit democratic responsibilities.

I addressed the urgency of this crisis as a youth representative during a parliamentary sensitisation workshop in 2024. I questioned if we are losing the very individuals who are destined to become the next generation of Bhutanese legislators. This intervention forced a confrontation with an uncomfortable reality — if our youths are leaving in record numbers, who will be left to inhabit the seats of governance?

The concern over outward migration becomes a fundamental breakdown in nation-building and necessitates an evaluation of how the current systems in place provide an avenue for young people to engage meaningfully in the civic space.

However, the underlying yet unquantified factor is that we are also left with a mentorship void for Generation Alpha. The continuum of engagement becomes fragile, when Generation Z imprints the idea of “better opportunity abroad”. Generation Alpha is left with no immediate role models actively engaging in civic spaces. This mentorship vacuum makes civic participation feel like an impossible or irrelevant goal.

Reflecting on a Generation Z who do not see their personal role in governance, indicates a growing cynicism. It is a disappointment rather than apathy.

As young people continue to witness their peers moving abroad, it creates a ripple effect in which those who remain begin to reassess their own prospects. Each departure reinforces the perception that inclusion within the domestic system is reserved or available for high-performing or well-connected individuals.

If this pattern continues to persist, current governance institutions risk being seen as an inaccessible space, subtly encouraging migration rather than fostering engagement.

A Way Forward to Enhance Civic Learning

It has become timely to address the growing gaps that limit young people's meaningful participation in civic space. Bhutan could move towards a multi-dimensional strategy that addresses the distinct needs of the two youth cohorts.

Given that the younger cohort, Generation Alpha, is more driven towards digital engagement, there is a need to strengthen and centralise existing digital civic infrastructure. This would allow a pathway to civic participation beyond social media engagement and move into a space where peoples' feedback is looped, allowing direct communication between young people and decision makers.

Digitalising *zomdue* through a dedicated technological intervention also serves as a unique pathway to make governance align with 21st century generational needs.

The knowledge-confidence gap could be addressed with a more experiential form of civic learning and structured mentorship. The current "classroom" with definition-based learning of civics must be pivoted towards experiential learning. Young people need to move out of the classroom setting and co-design micro community-based projects with decision makers at both national and local level.

BCMD's youth programmes offer a clear example of experiential civic learning, where young people analyse local issues using problem-solving tools, develop solution-based advocacy materials, and present them directly to decision-makers in youth-parliamentary forums.

Past participants have raised issues such as the need for digital CID (Citizen Identity) verification at club and bar entrances, demonstrating how such structured mentorship enables youth to translate civic awareness into concrete action.

This approach not only shifts a young person's position from observer to participant but also embeds a civic mindset through experience fostered by civic action. Therefore, transforming the abstract concept of civic education into lived reality, educating the younger generation that their agency is an asset that can be developed rather than merely a symbolic representation.

The most crucial issue remains — combating civic cynicism and 'lack of information' as indicated by Generation Z respondents. Governance institutions could integrate an accreditation approach, a formal recognition and incentives.

Civic action should not be perceived as a voluntary or extracurricular act but rather be recognised as a contribution to nation-building. Institutions catering to young people of all ages must ensure participation is supported with structured or recognisable pathways, such as certification or opportunities for direct collaboration with decision makers.

Such an approach gradually provides a reason to stay engaged regardless of their present residency, ensuring that their identity as an active participant in the community, society or overall governance is reinforced by the institutions that raised them.

From Passive Observer to Active Participant

A lack of pathways is the reason affecting young people's engagement in civic space, rather than a lack in youth interest. Generation Alpha possess significant civic energy that require interactive form of engagement while Generation Z awaits information and recognition to overcome their cynicism.

We should address the institutional gap to avert a hollow democracy, where capable future leaders reside abroad and enthusiastic young cohorts at home are left without a roadmap. By strengthening the institutional frameworks mentioned above, Bhutan can provide a pathway for our enthusiastic Gen Alpha and Gen Z today to become tomorrow's policy actors, ensuring that Bhutan's future remains as His Majesty envisions.

AI Disclosure

The core research, survey data, and primary arguments in this article represent my own work and judgement. In preparing this article, I acknowledge the use of Gemini and Microsoft Co-pilot as editorial aids to articulate the structure of my article (i.e. subheads) and ensure technical concepts were accessible to a general audience. I have reviewed and take responsibility for the content.

References

- Roder, D. (2016). Too Good To Teach. In *Anthropological Perspectives on Student Futures: Youth and the Politics of Possibility* (pp. 33-49). New York : Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wangmo, R. (2017). Bhutan Civics Education: Insights and Perspectives of Stakeholders. *The Druk Journal* , 26-35.
- Wray-Lake, L., & Shubert, ..J. (2019). Understanding stability and change in civic engagement across adolescence: A typology approach. *Developmental Psychology*.