

Bridging Generations - Creating Bhutan's Future Through Collaborative Wisdom

Tshoejab Mephram Denlen¹

Introduction

Bhutan is at a crossroads, balancing cultural identity and values and socio-economic changes. Rapid changes in technology, demography and world interconnectedness shift the focus to cross-generational dialogue and engagement. Providing a focus on cross-generational engagement, the theme of The Druk Journal, Generations in Transition, is particularly relevant considering the socio-cultural transformations and generational focus of the knowledge systems of construction and organisation in the society of the country.

Largely, the country's demographics constitute both a socio-economic dilemma and a potential resource. With less than a third of the population over the age of 25 years, Bhutan is, statistically, one of the youngest countries in the world (UNICEF, 2025).

However, with about 7 percent of the population over the age of 65 and an aging index of 32 (National Statistical Bureau, 2025), the generational cohort is somewhat worrying. Moreover, with 9 percent of the population out of the country, engaged in education and work abroad, the generational dynamics are significant.

Cross-generational collaboration offers a pathway through which Bhutan can harness the collective wisdom of its diverse age groups to navigate change while preserving cultural continuity. This article explores the opportunities for different generations to meet, work alongside each other, and co-create a future that honours Bhutan's past while embracing necessary innovation.

¹ Tshoejab Mephram Denlen is a judge at the Commercial Court, Thimphu. His work bridges law, governance, and social impact.

By examining the value of intergenerational engagement across various domains, including education, culture, economy, governance and community development, we can identify practical approaches to strengthening these connections in a rapidly changing society.

Understanding Bhutan's Generational Landscape

To effectively explore opportunities for cross-generational collaboration, it is essential to first understand the diverse generational cohorts that constitute Bhutanese society today.

Youth Population - The Engine of Change

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2025) reports that individuals between 10-24 years constitute approximately one-third of Bhutan's population. This demographic bulge presents both opportunities and challenges. A large youth cohort can drive innovation, economic growth and social transformation. On the other hand, without adequate opportunities and support, this demographic could become a source of social tension and instability.

The young people of Bhutan are growing up in a vastly different context from their parents and grandparents. They are digital natives, connected globally through technology, and exposed to diverse ideas and perspectives. At the same time, they are traditional in spirit but modern in expression. This position is a tremendous asset for innovation but it also requires guidance and opportunity.

When our young minds depart for education and employment opportunities abroad, this presents another dimension to this generational picture. While this brain drain poses challenges for Bhutan's development, it also creates a diaspora that can contribute knowledge, skills and international connections to the homeland. The challenge lies in creating mechanisms that enable this diaspora to remain meaningfully connected to Bhutan's development (Royal Civil Service Commission, 2025).

Aging Population - Keepers of Traditional Wisdom

Our older adults are more than a demographic statistic; they are living libraries. In a society where so much knowledge has been passed by word of mouth and heart-to-heart, their memories are our national archive. They hold the “why” behind our customs, the subtleties of our environment, and the resilience learned from history.

The aging index of 32 elderly people for every 100 children indicates a society in transition, with a growing number of older adults who can contribute to national development through their accumulated wisdom and experience.

Research on aging societies suggests that older adults can play significant roles in knowledge transfer, community building, and intergenerational learning (World Health Organization, 2022). In Bhutan’s context, this is particularly relevant given the importance of oral traditions, cultural practices, and indigenous knowledge systems that are often preserved and transmitted by older generations.

However, ensuring that this knowledge is effectively transferred to younger generations requires intentional strategies and mechanisms that respect traditional ways while adapting to contemporary contexts. His Majesty’s secretariat is one example of this, where the senior and accomplished elders actively transfer knowledge to the younger generation within the secretariat. Imagine the effect if all ministries adopted this.

Middle Generations - the Bridge Between Past and Future

In between stand the adults — parents, teachers, leaders, professionals. This generation, in their late 20s to 60s, faces unique challenges as they navigate between traditional values and modern demands. They are often caught between the expectations of older generations and the aspirations of younger ones, requiring them to serve as cultural interpreters and mediators. Their position gives them a unique perspective on both the past and future, making them crucial facilitators of cross-generational collaboration.

The Value of Cross-Generational Collaboration

Cross-generational collaboration offers numerous benefits for Bhutan's development journey. When different generations work together, they create synergies that leverage the strengths of each age group while mitigating potential weaknesses. This collaborative approach is particularly valuable in a rapidly changing society like Bhutan, where traditional knowledge must be preserved while innovation is embraced.

Enhanced Problem-Solving and Innovation

Cross-generational teams bring diverse perspectives and experiences to problem-solving, leading to more creative and effective solutions. Different generations approach challenges through different lenses — older generations may draw on historical precedents and traditional wisdom while younger generations may offer innovative approaches and technological solutions (Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007).

In Bhutan's rapidly changing context, this diversity of perspectives is particularly valuable. When addressing environmental challenges, older generations may possess traditional ecological knowledge about sustainable resource management. For example, growing up in Sarpang, my grandparents used elephant bamboo (*hati baas*) during times of drought to store water, while a small insertion made at the base worked as a drip irrigation for orange trees.

Meanwhile, younger generations may contribute scientific understanding and technological solutions. Similarly, in economic development, older generations may provide insights into traditional economic practices while younger generations offer knowledge about global markets and digital economies.

Social Cohesion and Intergenerational Understanding

Cross-generational collaboration fosters mutual understanding and respect between different age groups, reducing potential conflicts and enhancing social cohesion. In many societies, including Bhutan, generations can sometimes develop stereotypes or misunderstandings about each other because of limited interaction (Ayalon et al., 2021).

When different generations work together on shared projects and goals, they develop personal connections that transcend generational divides. These relationships help break down stereotypes, build empathy, and create a sense of shared purpose. In Bhutan, where rapid change is creating new social dynamics, such intergenerational understanding is crucial for maintaining social harmony and national unity.

Sustainable Development and Long-Term Planning

Cross-generational collaboration contributes to more sustainable development by ensuring that long-term perspectives are incorporated into decision-making processes. Older generations often have longer time horizons and can provide a historical context for current decisions, while younger generations represent the future beneficiaries of these decisions and can advocate for intergenerational equity (Howlett & Rayner, 2023).

In Bhutan's pursuit of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which emphasises sustainable and equitable development, intergenerational collaboration is particularly relevant. By involving multiple generations in planning and decision-making processes, Bhutan can ensure that development pathways are both sustainable and aligned with the nation's values and aspirations for future generations.

Opportunities for Cross-Generational Engagement

Given the value of cross-generational collaboration, it is important to identify specific opportunities where different generations can meet, work alongside each other, and co-create Bhutan's future.

Education and Knowledge Transfer

Education represents one of the most critical domains for cross-generational collaboration in Bhutan. Intergenerational learning programmes — where older adults mentor younger students or where youths teach digital skills to elders — can create reciprocal knowledge exchange opportunities. Such programmes have been successfully implemented in various contexts and have shown benefits for both younger and older participants (Kaplan et al., 2022). In Bhutan, this could involve traditional artisans teaching crafts to youths in exchange for lessons in digital literacy or social media skills.

Cultural Preservation and Innovation

Culture represents a domain where cross-generational collaboration is both valuable and urgent. Bhutan's rich cultural heritage faces challenges in the face of globalisation and modernisation. At the same time, cultural innovation is essential for keeping traditions relevant in contemporary contexts.

Cultural heritage preservation initiatives can benefit from the collaboration of older generations, who possess traditional knowledge, and younger generations, who can document, digitise and disseminate this knowledge through modern technologies. For example, projects to preserve Bhutan's intangible cultural heritage, such as traditional dances, songs and rituals, can involve elders teaching these practices to the young, while youths help create digital archives and multimedia presentations (UNESCO, 2023).

Economic Development and Entrepreneurship

Economic development presents significant opportunities for cross-generational collaboration in Bhutan. Different generations bring complementary skills and perspectives that can contribute to sustainable economic growth.

Traditional economic sectors in Bhutan, such as agriculture, handicrafts and tourism, can benefit from the integration of traditional knowledge with modern techniques and market knowledge. Older generations with experience in traditional farming practices can collaborate with younger generations with knowledge of sustainable agriculture techniques and digital marketing to create value-added products and to access new markets (Royal Government of Bhutan and United Nation Development Programme, 2021).

The emerging digital economy in Bhutan is particularly fertile ground for cross-generational collaboration. Younger generations with digital expertise can work with older generations with industry knowledge and experience to develop digital solutions for traditional industries. This approach can help Bhutan leapfrog development challenges while maintaining its unique economic character.

Governance and Policy-Making

Effective governance requires the integration of multiple perspectives and experiences. Cross-generational collaboration in governance and policy-making can ensure that development pathways are both innovative and grounded in historical context and cultural values.

Participatory governance mechanisms can create spaces for different generations to contribute to decision-making processes. Youth advisory councils or intergenerational forums can serve as formal mechanisms for cross-generational input into governance processes. These bodies can provide ongoing opportunities for dialogue between generations, and ensure that youth perspectives are incorporated into policy development while respecting the wisdom of experience (Royal Government of Bhutan & United Nation Development Programme, 2021).

Community Development and Social Services

Community development initiatives offer numerous opportunities for cross-generational collaboration. When different generations work together on community projects, they build social capital while addressing local needs.

Intergenerational community service programmes can bring together the youth, adults, and elders to work on shared projects, such as environmental conservation, heritage preservation, or community infrastructure development. Such programmes have been shown to strengthen community bonds while addressing practical needs (Kaplan et al., 2022).

In the context of Bhutan's aging population, community-based organisations can serve as platforms for cross-generational collaboration by designing programmes and activities that intentionally bring different age groups together. These organisations can play a crucial role in bridging generational divides and building cohesive communities in Bhutan's rapidly changing society.

Challenges to Cross-Generational Collaboration

While opportunities for cross-generational collaboration abound, several challenges must be addressed to realise these opportunities effectively. Understanding these challenges is essential for developing strategies that strengthen intergenerational connections in Bhutan.

Generational Differences in Values and Perspectives

Different generations in Bhutan may hold different values, priorities and perspectives, due to their formative experiences and the contexts in which they grew up. These differences can sometimes create misunderstandings or conflicts that hinder collaboration (Ayalon et al., 2021).

Older generations in Bhutan may prioritise cultural preservation, traditional values and community cohesion, while younger generations may emphasise individual opportunities, global integration and technological advancement. These differing priorities can sometimes lead to tensions, particularly when addressing issues of cultural change, economic development, or social transformation. Bridging these value differences requires open dialogue, mutual respect, and a willingness to find common ground.

Technological Divide

The digital divide between generations presents a significant challenge to cross-generational collaboration in Bhutan. Younger generations, being digital natives, often have greater proficiency with technology, while older generations may struggle with digital tools and platforms (World Health Organization, 2022).

Structural and Institutional Barriers

Existing institutional structures and policies in Bhutan may inadvertently limit opportunities for cross-generational collaboration. Age-segregated educational systems, workplace practices that separate different generations, and community organisations that target specific age groups can all limit intergenerational interaction (Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007).

Overcoming these structural barriers requires intentional policy interventions and institutional reforms that create spaces and opportunities for intergenerational engagement. This may involve revising age-segregated practices, developing intergenerational programmes, and creating policy frameworks that recognise and support the value of cross-generational collaboration.

Resource Constraints

Limited resources can present challenges to implementing cross-generational initiatives in Bhutan. Financial constraints, limited human resources, and competing priorities may all limit the ability to develop and sustain intergenerational programmes and projects (Howlett & Rayner, 2023).

Additionally, the out-migration of young people seeking education and employment opportunities abroad can reduce the human resources available for cross-generational collaboration within Bhutan. This brain drain requires creative solutions to maintain connections between the diaspora and homeland, as well as strategies to retain and engage young people in Bhutan's development.

Addressing resource constraints requires innovative approaches to leveraging existing resources, building partnerships across sectors, and developing sustainable funding models for intergenerational initiatives. It also involves recognising that cross-generational collaboration can be a cost-effective strategy for maximising the impact of limited resources.

Case Studies of Successful Cross-Generational Initiatives

Examining successful examples of cross-generational collaboration in Bhutan and similar contexts can provide valuable insights and models for strengthening intergenerational connections. While specific Bhutanese case studies may be limited, examples from similar cultural contexts offer relevant lessons.

The Bhutanese Cultural Heritage Preservation Programme

The Bhutanese Cultural Heritage Preservation Programme represents an initiative that intentionally bridges generations in the service of cultural preservation. This programme brings together traditional artisans, cultural experts and young students in collaborative projects to document, preserve and promote Bhutan's intangible cultural heritage.

The programme operates through a mentorship model, where older artisans teach traditional crafts, techniques and cultural knowledge to younger participants, while youths contribute their digital skills and contemporary perspectives to documentation and promotion efforts.

The best example in the country was the lone *Woochu* knife artisan, who under the programme trained many young artisans to forge the *Woochu* style knives. This reciprocal exchange ensures that traditional knowledge is preserved while being adapted to contemporary contexts and disseminated through modern channels (UNESCO, 2023).

The Bhutan Network

The Organic Farmers Exchange Programme (OFEP) addresses Bhutan's agricultural challenges — such as rural exodus, youth disinterest in farming, and the loss of traditional knowledge — by facilitating a two-way knowledge exchange with Austrian organic farmers.

This reciprocal study-tour model aims to build long-term connections, demonstrate farming as a viable, modern profession, and ultimately inspire Bhutanese youth to pursue sustainable agriculture, thereby strengthening the organic movement in Bhutan and reducing rural-urban migration (Bhutan Network, 2025).

The Intergenerational Community Garden Initiative

The Intergenerational Community Garden Initiative represents a grassroots effort to bring different generations together around a shared activity that addresses practical needs while building social connections. These gardens are typically established in community spaces. His Majesty's establishment of Micro Parks within the Thimphu City is one such initiative that can

address contemporary challenges. It is one tangible example where community cohesion and sustainable practices are valued.

The initiative operates on the principle that different generations bring complementary skills to gardening. Working together, they create productive gardens while building intergenerational relationships (Kaplan et al., 2022).

Community gardens have multiple benefits beyond food production. They create spaces for intergenerational interaction, build community resilience, improve food security, and provide opportunities for physical activity and mental wellbeing.

Recommendations for Enhancing Cross-Generational Collaboration

Based on the opportunities, challenges and case studies examined, several recommendations emerge for enhancing cross-generational collaboration in Bhutan. These recommendations address various levels of intervention, from policy frameworks to grassroots initiatives.

- ***Develop Intergenerational Policy Frameworks***

Bhutan should develop explicit policy frameworks that recognise and support cross-generational collaboration across various sectors. These frameworks should include intergenerational perspectives in national development planning, establish mechanisms for regular intergenerational dialogue, create incentives for intergenerational programmes and address the needs of both young and older populations in a way that recognises their interdependence (Howlett & Rayner, 2023).

- ***Intergenerational Education Programmes***

Bhutan's education system should be reformed to include more opportunities for intergenerational learning and collaboration. Specific recommendations include developing intergenerational learning programmes, creating mentorship programmes, incorporating intergenerational components into curriculum design and establishing community learning centres (Kaplan et al., 2022).

- ***Strengthen Cultural Heritage Preservation Through Intergenerational Collaboration***

Cultural preservation efforts in Bhutan should be strengthened through intentional intergenerational collaboration: Supporting mentorship programmes, developing digital documentation projects, creating cultural heritage enterprises and establishing cultural heritage education programmes in schools and communities that involve multiple generations in teaching and learning about Bhutan's cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2023).

- ***Develop Intergenerational Economic Initiatives***

Economic development in Bhutan should leverage the complementary strengths of different generations by supporting intergenerational business partnerships, creating entrepreneurship programmes that bring together experienced entrepreneurs and young entrepreneurs, developing cooperative models and mentorship programmes.

- ***Build Intergenerational Community Spaces and Programmes***

Community development efforts should focus on creating spaces and programmes that facilitate intergenerational interaction: Establishing community centres, developing intergenerational volunteer programmes, creating community events and celebrations that bring different age groups together in living arrangements.

Community initiatives should be grounded in local contexts and needs while building on Bhutan's strong traditions of community cohesion and mutual support (Kaplan et al., 2022).

- ***Leverage Technology for Intergenerational Connection***

While technology can create divides between generations, it can also be leveraged to strengthen connections, by developing digital platforms that facilitate communication and creating intergenerational digital literacy programmes, using digital storytelling projects and supporting virtual exchange programmes.

Technology initiatives should be designed to be inclusive and accessible to all generations, recognising different levels of technological proficiency and ensuring that digital complement rather than replace face-to-face interaction (World Health Organisation, 2022).

- ***Research and Documentation of Cross-Generational Initiatives***

Systematic research and documentation of cross-generational initiatives in Bhutan are essential for learning and scaling successful approaches. This includes establishing a research agenda, creating mechanisms for documenting successful intergenerational initiatives, supporting academic research and evaluation frameworks.

Research efforts should be collaborative, involving both academic researchers and practitioners from different generations, and should generate practical insights that can inform policy and practice (Hertzog et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Bhutan stands at a unique moment in its history, characterised by significant demographic shifts, rapid change, and the challenge of preserving cultural identity while embracing development. In this context, cross-generational collaboration emerges not merely as a nice idea but as a strategic necessity for creating a future that honours Bhutan's past while embracing innovation and progress.

The opportunities for cross-generational engagement span multiple domains of society, from education and culture to economy, governance, and community development. Each domain offers specific pathways for bringing different generations together to share knowledge, build relationships and co-create solutions to shared challenges. The case studies demonstrate that when generations collaborate, they create synergies that enhance individual and collective wellbeing while strengthening social cohesion.

However, realising these opportunities requires addressing significant challenges, including generational differences in values and perspectives, technological divides, structural barriers, and resource constraints. Overcoming these challenges requires intentional strategies.

The recommendations outlined in this article provide a roadmap for enhancing cross-generational collaboration in Bhutan. Together, they offer a comprehensive approach to strengthening intergenerational connections in Bhutan's rapidly changing society.

As Bhutan navigates the complexities of change, the wisdom of its elders, the energy of its youth, and the experience of its middle generations can combine to create a future that is both innovative and rooted in tradition. Cross-generational collaboration offers the promise of a Bhutan where different generations work together to build a society that is prosperous, culturally vibrant, environmentally sustainable, and socially cohesive; a society that truly embodies the principles of Gross National Happiness for present and future generations.

The path forward requires commitment, creativity and collaboration across generations. It requires recognising that Bhutan's future is not the sole responsibility of any single generation but is a shared endeavour that calls upon the strengths, wisdom and aspirations of all. In this spirit of shared purpose, Bhutan's generations can meet, work alongside each other, and co-create a future that honours the past while building a legacy for those yet to come.

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