

Civil Society: Change, Challenge, and Chance

Dr Karma Phuntscho

The Change

Bhutan has been going through a tremendous transition in all aspects of life. I have often been reiterating that, in the gap of half a century, the country has moved economically from subsistence farming to a consumerist market economy, socially from a totally rural country to a largely urban nation, and from a mostly oral society directly to an audio-visual and social media world, culturally from a nature-oriented spiritual system to a secular scientific world view, and politically from a medieval monarchy to a multiparty democracy.

Bhutan has left its hermetic isolation to embrace the global meld with such speed that the majority of the people have not seen a fixed telephone line but moved directly to mobile telephony. The country has seen motor roads, electricity, television, and smartphones arrive in the gap of a few decades, without the time and education needed to cultivate the soft knowhow, skills, and understanding about the new products and services. Electricity is a good example. While nearly the whole country is now electrified, electric short circuits have become the main cause of fire in temples, *dzongs*, and farmhouses because of a lack of knowledge and skills required for full and proper use of the new energy.

A fundamental shift is also taking place in the way Bhutanese organise society, implement the rule of law, and maintain and mobilise community members for public good. Bhutan has a rich tradition of societal organisation and governance both on the level of the national state and the local communities. This is not surprising as Bhutan is an old society and one of the oldest countries in the world. There are only a dozen countries in the world which predate Bhutan as a nation state. Bhutan today, in both extent and ethos, is almost the same country founded by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and his coterie in the middle of the 17th century.

Besides, even centuries before the Bhutanese valleys were unified into one country, the valley communities had their own forms of social order and rule of law. My own community in Ura, for example, still retains, for the smooth flow of community engagement, some of its ancient organisational structures and social schemes which existed long before Ura's merger with the new Drukpa state in the 17th century. Such community civic practices today run in parallel with national governance and administration. The village is still divided into four *dho*, or quarters, named after their

location in relation to the castle of the *dbung* ruler and each quarter has one *letsshan* and two *taza* households appointed each year in rotation as representatives to lead the village activities and mobilise resources.

In addition, the village has many unwritten social contracts on the use of pasturelands, water sources, maintenance of public spaces including religious monuments and village commons, and execution of village events. The codes and rules for the annual *Ura Yakchoe* festival alone amounts to a big book as we try to put them into writing. Until a few decades ago, all internal disputes were settled through mediation and reconciliation by local elders without recourse to the formal court. Similarly, if a family had to build a house, it could be built entirely through voluntary labour from the villagers. The village had social mechanisms in place to help the bereaved, conduct seasonal religious rituals, work together in the event of emergency and disasters, and manage the community smoothly in general.

This was true for almost all Bhutanese village communities. Even a remote and scattered community of Ngangla Trong in the Kheng region has a very sophisticated social system of looking after the temple and organising the annual festival in rotation among the three main tribes of Brela, Lhamenpa, and Bjarpa. The community has local traditions of civic responsibility and engagement, taken very seriously and sincerely by its members although these traditions are largely unwritten and passed down orally. Such civic traditions served as the social cement to hold the communities together and were sustained because the communities lived visibly interdependent and connected lives within the same social and geographic space. The community members felt the impact and benefit of such communal engagements and social actions. If I did not provide voluntary labour to help build my neighbour's house, I would suffer shortage of labour when I built mine. Thus the need for reciprocity and sense of sharing and caring was immediate, leading to a robust practice of civic organisation and community solidarity.

However, this situation is changing today. As large numbers of people leave rural villages to settle in new urban towns, Bhutan's old practices of civil society and community mobilisation are declining or being forgotten. Material development of structures and amenities in the new urban centres is rapid but the intangible social support systems are yet to take a proper shape. Thus the new urban towns lack a sense of community and civic organisation. While people have moved in droves from rural villages to urban centres, Bhutan has not managed to effectively transfer the traditional civic culture to its new urban areas.

Currently, the civic support which is common among the new urban settlers come mostly from the *tshogpa* or associations formed on the basis of people's origins primarily to attend to the welfare of the village they came from. In addition to helping development and other issues in the village, these associations also provide social support to members of the village.

Despite being distributed in different parts of the town or even in different towns, people originating in the same village come together to look after each other in times of illness and bereavement.

People living in towns today are socially more connected to people of the same origin in another part of the town than their immediate neighbour. Compared with the village context, they have a much lesser sense of ownership of their surroundings as the state provides most of the public facilities. Unlike when in the villages, they are not involved in a decision-making process for the use of public resources or community organisation in their area of residence as most of these are provided and regulated by the state or municipality authorities. Urban residents do not have social contracts or community practices to run their neighbourhoods. On the contrary, individualism is on the rise with anonymity granted by crowded urban life. The extended family culture is increasingly being replaced by nuclear families, which is necessitated by the limitations of space and resources in an urban environment.

In addition to this shift in social situation, Bhutan has also drastically moved from a largely oral mode of communication and transaction to a system of written documentary communication, and more recently to audio-visual technology and social media tools. Except for some state laws a vast majority of the social conventions, mores, rules and practices guiding Bhutanese communities were never written but practised and passed down orally until the mid-20th century. Yet, with widespread education and persistent efforts to write laws and policies, Bhutan's mode of formulating civic practice has also changed from an unwritten oral culture to written forms of legislation and rules. In doing so, Bhutan has also enthusiastically embraced the modern practice of instituting civil society organisations with written articles of association and a mode of governance and administration which requires the ability to read and write.

More recently, people have also started to form civic groups using social media platforms such as Facebook and Wechat. While Facebook is popular among educated Bhutanese, the Chinese Wechat technology is now used widely even by illiterate Bhutanese. One can find today many Wechat groups formed for the purpose of religious teachings, cultural understanding, educational pursuit, social charity, and even for discussing specific genealogical or family matters. Although social media has not yet brought together people physically to engage in civic engagement, it has become a convenient and effective method for sharing information and knowledge, and raising funds for many people.

The Challenge

Bhutan is poised on the cusp of change in civic organisation and social engagement. In the village communities, the country is facing many challenges in maintaining community vitality, economic productivity, and social cohesion. The localised old traditions of civil society, which held the communities together and were largely passed

down through oral transmission, are now fast declining. The village communities of Bhutan today are facing serious economic, social, cultural and political challenges. With migration of people from rural to urban communities, there are fewer people in the rural villages to carry out agricultural work and cultural activities than there were in the past. This is particularly true in the case of the young adult population who are increasingly flocking to urban centres.

The rise of communication facilities such as television and Internet has also made the Bhutanese more individualistic and less social. Even in remote villages, one can find families eating in front of the television and engaged in very little conversation over meals. In addition mainstream education, which is primarily imparted in the medium of English, has also created a serious gulf between the generation of traditional elders and parents and the modern children. The traditional elders and parents visualise their life and life goals based on the local Bhutanese world-view while the outlook and character of a modern youth is heavily influenced by their exposure to the outside world. Due to this cultural and linguistic gap, there is a serious rupture in the transmission of traditional values, practices, and skills including the traditional culture of civil society. Many of the traditional knowledge and practices of village organisation or use of resources are also becoming obsolete with the massive shift in people's lifestyle.

However, a major shift in the organisation of civil society is occurring with the formal process of civil society development that the state has adopted. As with many other areas of development and modernisation, the state adopted a new Western model with which most Bhutanese were not familiar. The process was based on a written Act and formal registration of organisations with written articles of association. This process entailed rigorous procedures of formation and certification and was intended to bring higher degrees of accountability, scrutiny, and regulation. It differed from the traditional practices which were based on unwritten understanding among the local stakeholders. None or little effort was made to draw on the strengths and incorporate any element of the traditional civil society practices in this new development.

The development of the new system was not short of challenges. Over a decade ago few Bhutanese were familiar with the idea of the formal civil society organisation and charitable foundation. The local languages did not even have the vocabulary for terms such as NGO, foundation, and trustee. I remember sitting with one of my colleagues writing the memorandum for the Loden Foundation in Dzongkha late into the night some time in 2005 and struggling to find an appropriate term to translate the English term "foundation". Our efforts resulted in the new Dzongkha term *zhits'hog* which has gained wide currency. The new Memorandum in Dzongkha, which we created for the Loden Foundation, based largely on a model memorandum shared by the Charity Commission of England and Wales, has since been used as template for many civil society organisations in Bhutan.

As much as the general population lacked the understanding of the role and purpose

of the new civil society system, the country was lacking in the knowledge, exposure, and experience to introduce formal civil society procedures. Only a handful of people had a basic understanding of how the formal process would work. It was a novel system even for the leaders in the government and the Act was properly implemented only in 2009 with the formation of the Civil Society Organisations Authority. When the announcement was made to register CSOs, the Loden Foundation was one of the first to submit its application and undergo the grueling process of registration. Loden's co-ordinator, I, and the co-founder had to make up to a dozen trips to the CSO Authority to respond to queries, submit additional documents, and to sign documents in person and (in order to) confirm that the signature was not forged.

The process of registration was not the only thing which was meticulously scrutinised, and rightly so. The charitable activities carried out by the organisations were likewise viewed with some suspicion. When BBS screened a story of the Early Learning Centre in Samtse, Loden's co-ordinator got a late evening call from an unknown caller enquiring if school has official permission, which of course the school did. Organised social charitable work from ordinary citizens sharing same visions and concerns were a new thing in urban places so many people suspected some ulterior motive behind the good work. Those in the area of advocacy particularly faced resistance as their works were deemed to destabilise the existing power structures. The new civil society system thus was not only encumbered by a lack of understanding of CSO roles and purposes and how they should function but also with distrusting public perceptions.

Thus, it is no small achievement for Bhutan that the new civil society culture is now not only fully established in the minds of the people but some 49 organisations have completed registration and most are thriving. Their activities are making a difference to many sections of the Bhutanese society. By now, the CSO sector has come to be seen as a new and significant player in the process of development alongside the government, public corporations, and international organisations. Although the government initially viewed CSOs at best as minor supplementary projects to the state programmes or at worst as competitors who were eating from the same of cake of donor aid, the perception has gradually changed in the past years.

Most government officials today acknowledge the good works of the CSOs and treat them also as important partners in development. They are aware of the wide range of activities CSOs carry out with efficiency to fill the gaps left by the government, and how they do so without the burden of the bureaucratic processes. This changed perception is clearly reflected in the increased number of invitations the government offices send to CSOs for different events. One clear sign in this regard was the involvement of CSOs and the solicitation for their feedback to the process of drafting the 12th Five Year Plan by the Gross National Happiness Commission. The Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs has also played an active role to address the grievances of the CSOs in dealing with the government, to make the CSO Authority much more robust, and also to table amendments to the CSO Act 2007 in order to facilitate faster and better services by the CSOs.

This change in perception of CSOs was certainly enhanced by the recognition His Majesty The King bestowed on the CSOs in 2016 National Day celebrations through the National Order of Merit Award. The royal recognition confirmed the importance of CSOs and the outstanding contribution made by them to nation building. Today, the new system of civil society through CSOs have fully emerged and there is a pervasive understanding that CSOs play a significant role in Bhutan's development, particularly in the remote and marginalised areas which are not covered by the government.

The fairly quick and healthy rise of the civil society culture in Bhutan through CSOs is to no small degree due to the royal initiatives and patronage. With many of the leading CSOs founded and led by eminent members of the royal house and many more having royal figures as patrons, it did not take the CSO sector in Bhutan very long to receive the attention of donors and the interest of the people. While retaining the highest integrity and transparency, the CSO sector could fairly easily work with the government counterparts and reach the target beneficiaries.

Yet by the same token, the CSO sector development, especially when dealing with public and government counterparts, was driven more by individual influence and connections rather than by well planned systemic structures and procedures. As a result, the not-so-well connected CSOs often struggled to liaise with the state counterparts and to achieve the desired impact, in spite of their best intentions and efforts. During the CSO summit in 2017, some members of the CSO sector strongly protested against such an unequal playing field and called upon the state and CSOs to not work in isolation but set up an open and fair system to facilitate all CSOs to bring out the best impacts.

Another major challenge raised during the CSO summit was the issue of sustainability. Most of Bhutan's CSOs rely heavily on foreign donors and programme funds from institutions. Local Bhutanese support is still marginal as the culture of charity in the social sector has not yet gained currency in Bhutan. Although Bhutan enjoys a special position in the world and has many supporters and well wishers across the globe, there is no guarantee this will continue. The CSOs in Bhutan need to start working on having sustainable sources of funds for their programmes if they are to endure into the far future.

The Chance

Bhutan, being in a state of transition, faces numerous challenges. In addition to the stress which normally comes with the process of change, there are also serious apprehensions about the direction change is taking. Yet, being at a juncture also provides room for visualising prospects.

The Bhutanese identity and nationhood is today more dynamic and amorphous

than it ever was. A vast majority of its population is made up of energetic and impressionable young people, thus making the country very malleable.

Even the civil society system which is being established and promoted is fresh and adaptive. It is only beginning to take shape and we have ample opportunity to mould it in the best possible form.

I vividly remember the advice a senior official gave me at the turn of the century when I was visiting government offices to find out the procedure for setting up the Loden Foundation. “No one will have precise instructions on how to set it up and no one will also stop you if you went ahead with it”, the official advised. The fact that modern Bhutan is changing and is open to new ideas and practices presents us with a wonderful chance to set up great new systems and steer Bhutan’s change in a positive direction.

With time, the civil society culture in Bhutan is evolving and progressing and there are endeavours to streamline CSO administration and activities to bring greater and faster benefits to the target beneficiaries. Efforts are also made to facilitate efficient partnership between the CSOs and the government, the public, and among CSOs themselves. Evidence of such initiatives include the bimonthly CSO meetings, the discussion on “Coordination, Collaboration and Consolidation” during the CSO Summit in 2017 involving high level experts and leaders, and the €2.5 million grant from the European Union in 2017 to strengthen CSOs in Bhutan. The discourses on fostering a clean and vibrant civil society culture and the resources, which are being made available, reveal the special opportunity Bhutan has to develop a robust and effective civil society tradition, and also the need for much more conversations and efforts to this effect.

The current situation also presents us the opportunity to work on the general culture of giving and charity. Despite seeing an insidious rise in materialism and material consumption, religious piety and giving still flourishes in Bhutan. Bhutanese people practice a robust culture of charity although much of it is dedicated to religious causes such as building temples, creating religious artefacts, sponsoring religious events, or funding a pilgrimage. The recent improvement in living standards has certainly enhanced this culture of giving and it is opportune that CSOs now work on transferring some of this philanthropy from religious devotion to social causes such as education, health, and poverty alleviation.

A great deal of work has already been done in channelling this form of charity towards animal welfare, especially in rescuing the animals from being slaughtered. Several civil society organisations today work across the country in saving animals and freeing them as “liberated lives”. Similar efforts must be made to tap the charitable proclivity of the Bhutanese people for basic support of human well-being, particularly in developing strong foundations for community solidarity and civil society. As the fundamental Buddhist principles

and philosophies which inform religious charity are also applicable, and in fact even more pertinent, to social causes if properly understood, there is great need for CSOs to reformulate some of the religious teachings and capitalise on the religious sentiments for raising resources locally. This will also help considerably in ensuring the sustainability of the charitable activities.

The golden chance for sustainability of the noble programmes run by CSOs of Bhutan, however, lies in the current global trend in philanthropy and Bhutan's postcard country image in the eyes of the developed countries. There is today a growing move from traditional philanthropy of giving handouts and grants to a sustainable approach of investing in social projects which develop the moral and technical capacity of the beneficiaries and also yield recurring financial benefit. Benefactors and beneficiaries work as partners on a project to bring about lasting social impact while also achieving financial returns and psychological fulfilment. Bhutan's CSOs must capitalise on this fervour of impact investment which is in vogue in the developed countries.

The current perception of Bhutan in most parts of the world, projected through its pristine *Shangri-La* image and GNH discourse, is highly advantageous to local CSOs to seek external support for their programmes. This is further heightened by Bhutan's exclusive status of being the last Himalayan Buddhist kingdom, especially in the eyes of the rising followers of Buddhism in Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Thus both the state and CSO sector today enjoy the goodwill and admiration of many people in the world, which can be effectively translated into initiatives to support sustainable activities in the country.

The greatest and by the far the most important chance the current situation of being a nation at crossroads presents is of developing a stable and vibrant culture of civic responsibility and civil society. As Bhutan's urban settlements evolve into organised communities and the rural villages adapt to modern situations, fostering a conscientious and responsible citizenry is a challenge as well as an opportunity for its people, especially those involved in CSOs. We need to aptly modify, adapt, and transfer the traditional civic culture of the villages to our new social environment as well as explore new ways of building a universal sense of social responsibility and community solidarity among our organisations and individuals through education, exposure, and advocacy. In the final analysis, the true success of our efforts in developing civil society will lie not in the number of CSOs or the size of our budgets and programmes but in inspiring the population as a whole to live collectively, conscientiously, and compassionately as members of a close-knit and interdependent society. The political atmosphere, social circumstances, cultural climate, economic situation, and technological tools today are all favourable for aspiring and actualising such a goal.