

Editorial

Coordination, Collaboration, Consolidation, and the Fourth C (Civil Society)

The theme for this issue of The Druk Journal, “civil society”, is a critical element of democratic governance. It is an active sphere where civil society organisations (CSOs), non-government organisations (NGOs), and groups work in areas of common interest. This could include areas where the government’s impact is limited for various reasons. Internationally, civil society refers to organisations and institutions like labour unions, non-profit organisations, religious institutions, and other service agencies that provide important services to society but generally ask for very little in return. Some countries also include the independent mass media, think tanks, universities, social groups which can mean families, and the space where citizens associate around areas of need, concern, or interest.

These organisations work to improve the quality of life in the economic, political, and social sectors. They provide humanitarian services such as short-term relief to prevent fatalities, promote human rights through efforts to create a supportive political environment, and step up re-building during and after conflicts and natural disasters.

Civil society is often described as the “third sector” of society or the “third space”, along with government and business. Governments and organisations including the United Nations recognise the importance of partnering with civil society because of the vital roles that they play in the governance of society.

In the early phase of our so-called development process, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, Bhutan developed a deep distrust of non-government organisations (NGOs). In the context of a small country in a volatile region that is South Asia, there were clear reasons for this caution.

Bhutanese society had inherited and developed an instinct, which was nurtured by its dependence on an absolute Monarchy that was the “government”. In a cultural context the term “non-government”, therefore, was perceived to have connotations of being anti-government. This was fueled by the fact that NGOs, which had seen random and prolific growth in South Asia, were largely known to be synonymous with corruption.

Fast-forward three decades... On December 17, 2016, civil society in Bhutan came

into focus when His Majesty The King awarded 22 CSOs the National Order of Merit (Gold) medal. It was the highest-level recognition of non-government services that ranged from livelihoods to care-giving, gender, media, governance, environment, poverty alleviation, and a couple of mutual benefit associations serving the people.

The emergence of citizen initiatives, or civic action, in this period is an interesting trend, and the evolution of civil society as a part of the system of governance is the inevitable transition into a new era.

With development came new trends such as urbanisation, the emergence of a business community with increasing purchasing power, youth cultures influenced by globalisation, and a dramatic change in lifestyle for many sections of society. And with these came the “gaps” created by a breakdown in the existing social systems.

As governance of the nation evolved from the Royal Court into a modern government, the structure and functioning of society changed. Government agencies viewed (and still do) their mandates as being rigidly sectoral and did not even coordinate their cross-sectoral responsibilities. It also became obvious that the bureaucracy, with this tunnel view, was not prepared nor was it capable of fulfilling the new needs and services.

Like most aspects of change in Bhutan the first non-government activities came, not as society’s response to change, but as foresight pre-empting future needs. They were mostly initiatives from the Throne. As a hierarchical society where the people continued to look up to the King for their well-being, they came as new movements initiated or approved by the King who was often represented in organisations, or directly in the activities by members of the Royal family.

In 1973, a group of youth got together as the National Youth Association of Bhutan and started a weekly broadcast of news and entertainment. They came from the elite section of society – mostly western educated – with Her Royal Highness Ashi Dechen Wangmo Wangchuck, the older sister of His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo, as their Patroness. Likewise, the National Women’s Association of Bhutan, established in 1981, was inspired and driven by Her Royal Highness Ashi Sonam Choden Wangchuck, the oldest of the Royal siblings. Sensing that women were falling behind in the new era of modernisation, the association was established to promote gender equality.

As the divide between the government and a growing private sector became more defined, the need for the “third sector” was obvious. Social activities came up as independent interests and enterprises, independent of each other, and were only much later grouped into organisations working for the benefit of citizens, operating outside of the governmental and for-profit sectors.

Here again, the most prominent CSOs are organised and championed by members of

the Royal family. Her Majesty The Queen has taken up unofficial responsibilities of great significance early in her Royal life, and is Patroness of several CSOs, including the most recently launched Red Cross Society of Bhutan, of which Her Majesty is the President. The four Queen Mothers are also active Patronesses of CSOs and spiritual organisations.

Bhutan faces a situation that many other countries have confronted. The government took care of law and order, businesses offered goods and services in exchange for money. How then do we address the other complexities that raise the quality of life, especially in a GNH society?

The questions are piling up. What are the mindsets that have to be overcome? What are the skills and capabilities required? How will the social sector attract, train, and retain talent? How do we build a cohort of civil society workers and social entrepreneurs? How can talent move beyond defined boundaries and sectors to bring skills and capable people to the social and civil society sector?

As the values of interdependence that bound traditional society disappear, the challenge is for civil society to fill in the gaps.