

Emergence of Civil Society in Bhutan

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Given that civil society is generally understood as the total space outside the domain of the government and private sectors in which civilians act collectively to pursue common interests, there is no denying that civil society in Bhutan existed long before we even knew what civil society actually meant. While some believe and argue that civil society is a recent development in Bhutan, there are many who have argued otherwise. The truth is civil society did exist in Bhutan since ancestral times, but the concept of formalised civil society emerged only in the late 1980s.

Back in the early 1990s, I had just graduated and began exploring employment and career opportunities. Inspired by the environmental education programmes and activities of the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN) I, and few of my graduate friends, were given the opportunity to carry out RSPN's "Clean Stream" project. Back then, I did not realise that I was already pursuing a career in the civil society sector as the term "civil society" was rarely used. In 1993, I secured a job with RSPN as the Programme/Administrative Officer. As I progressed on the career ladder I took on the role of programme officer, senior programme officer, Acting Executive Director, and Executive Director before moving on to the private sector in 2014. Today, it appears that my entire career with RSPN has had much association with the emergence of organised civil society in Bhutan. This article is a personal account of the emergence of civil society in Bhutan.

Based on my experience in the civil society sector, the emergence of civil society in Bhutan may be best described in terms of the evolutionary stages.

Era of De-facto Civil Society (Pre 1990s)

This stage represents the era in which isolated rural communities evolved and practiced self-help mechanisms to cater to individual and community needs for economic and spiritual well-being. Before the launch of planned socio-economic development in 1961, much of the community needs were catered through traditional collective self-help systems. Over the centuries, isolated rural communities pursued subsistence livelihoods characterised by interdependence among members of the community. For example, individual household needs that were beyond the capacity of one household were realised through in-kind material and labour contributions from other households in the community. Such practices were based on principles of reciprocity and rotational obligations. Likewise, customary practices and traditions also existed to cater to common communal needs for construction, maintenance, and management of irrigation and drinking water supply, footpaths, and temples, and organising community rituals and festivities.

While formal government assistance for development of rural areas began with the initiation of the Five Year Plans (FYPs) in the early 1960s, customary practices and traditional institutions remained instrumental in driving collective action at the community level. As the country progressed with policy reforms, modern legislation, and increased FYP development interventions at the local level, such traditions and institutions began fading away, diminishing in significance and legitimacy. However, with the limited capacity of the government to provide for every need of the community, traditional institutions and customary practices continued to play a significant role in supplementing the efforts of the government, predominantly in areas related to construction of houses, agricultural activities such as cultivation and harvesting of crops, funeral rites, and rituals, among others.

Nascent Stage (1970 -2007)

The nascent stage refers to the period in which national non-governmental organisations began to emerge as government initiatives in the absence of any specific civil society laws. During this period, the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB), under the leadership of His Majesty The Fourth Druk Gyalpo, played a crucial role in setting the stage for the birth of civil society in the country. The coming into existence of both international and national NGOs pioneered the engagement of the “third sector” - the civil society sector - in the socio-economic development of Bhutan. This was made possible under two distinct initiatives namely i) engagement of international non-governmental entities and ii) support for establishment of national NGOs.

Engagement of International Non-governmental Entities

The launch of the first FYP in 1961 marked the birth of organised civil society in the country. It was the beginning of a period in which Bhutan became increasingly exposed to the international community, thereby opening its doors to foreign assistance and development partners. Apart from bilateral donors, the Royal Government initiated selective engagement of multilateral and international non-governmental organisations such as Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation in 1975, World Wildlife Fund-US in 1977, Save the Children-US in 1982, and SNV in 1988. These development partners were essentially civil society organisations, then more conveniently termed as international non-governmental organisations (INGOs).

Support for Establishment of National NGOs

The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) played a crucial role in setting the stage for emergence of national NGOs in the absence of specific CSO laws. Under the leadership of His Majesty The Fourth King, the RGoB also played a vital role in the establishment and operation of pioneering NGOs through initial start-up institutional support. For example, the RSPN was established in 1987 with the blessings of His Majesty The Fourth King and the associated government support

for office space and subsequent Royal patronage provided by the then Crown Prince Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. The Youth Development Fund (YDF) was established in 1998, under the leadership of Her Majesty The Queen Mother Tshering Pem Wangchuck, by command of His Majesty The Fourth King along with a capital endowment and funds from the government for construction of its office and youth facilities. The Tarayana Foundation was established in 2003 under the leadership of Her Majesty The Queen Mother Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck with government support in the form of deputation of a civil servant as its chief executive.

The existence of the above national NGOs was possible only with the blessings of His Majesty the King and case-by-case support from the Royal Government of Bhutan. All the above organisations were allotted government land on nominal lease rent to accommodate their head offices. In addition, these organisations were also granted tax exemption by the Ministry of Finance, thereby relieving them of the requirement to pay taxes on their financial income as well as for import of items for their organisations. With no official mechanism to register and monitor the work of NGOs, there was also an interim measure designating the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs as the registry for the national non-governmental entities operating in the country.

One critical aspect of this nascent stage of civil society development in Bhutan was the lack of understanding among government officials about the important role civil society plays in nation building. As a result, there was the general tendency on the part of government officials to look at work of NGOs as competing rather than supplementing and as needing strict monitoring and control.

Fledgling Stage (2007 Onwards)

This stage denotes the beginning of organised civil society organisations (CSOs) wherein CSOs are granted the legal opportunity for registration and operation. This was enabled with the enactment of the Civil Society Organisations Act of 2007, a landmark in the history of civil society development in Bhutan. This Act defines civil society organisations and provides the legal platform for both foreign and national CSOs to register and operate in Bhutan. While it was not evident at that time in 2007, it is quite evident now that the initiative was one of several visionary initiatives of our Monarchs in preparing for the transition to parliamentary democracy in 2008. It goes to demonstrate the vision of the Monarchs in recognising the role of civil society in a democracy.

With the establishment of the CSO Authority in 2009 and launch of CSO rules and regulations in 2010, civil society secured the legal space and mandate to play their rightful role in a democracy. This not only allowed existing NGOs to register as CSOs but also provided a major impetus for new CSOs to be established. Today there are 39 public benefit organisations (PBOs) and 10 mutual benefit organisations (MBOs).

While much progress has been achieved in promoting the role of civil society, much needs to be done in terms of CSOs fulfilling their rightful role of effectively representing the voices and concerns of society. In view of this, CSOs in Bhutan are currently at a fledgling stage.

Most CSOs are stuck with issues of initial establishment and institutional strengthening. Most CSOs are faced with the issue of citizen support coming in the form of spirit (verbal support) with no commensurate voluntary and financial contributions.

Learning to cope with the needs to complement and supplement the efforts of the government. CSOs are still faced with the challenge of gaining the confidence of relevant government ministries, agencies, and officials to recognise them as partners in development.

Though registered and legally mandated for what they do, the civil society sector remains low on the priority of the government. Unless there are dedicated donor funds for CSO development, government resources for work of CSOs is non-existent. Perhaps, the government is not in a position to fund CSOs. Maybe it is not considered desirable if CSOs are in the ideal situation of providing third party opinion and playing the role of watchdog to the government.

Registration of certain types of CSOs, especially locally driven civil society initiatives that are part of global networks, are not clearly provided in the Act and regulations. This warrants a review of the Act in terms of the challenges faced by the existing and aspiring CSOs.

In concluding, it must be emphasised that Bhutan has adopted a slow but steady development of civil society organisations in the country. The required legal platform for registration and operation of CSOs is already in place. It has gone to the extent of allowing CSO representation in the Authority that regulates the CSOs. The ball is in the court of CSOs. It is now for the CSOs to play their rightful role. Their existence and success is based on the principle of competitiveness that apply to businesses. Those that do well in garnering public support will sustain and grow. Those that don't will die a natural death. The good news is that government officials, bureaucrats, and the general public are beginning to realise the role of non-government organisations in a fledgling democracy. It is up to the CSOs to strategise, build respective constituencies, and contribute meaningfully to nation building.