

Development Challenges in Bhutan

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In many respects Bhutan is a showcase in South Asia. It is the only South Asian country which enjoys a sustained high level of economic growth, at an average of 8.7% per year, and its level of social service delivery is admired all over the developing world. Despite these positive factors, this small country remains vulnerable, with growing inequality and unemployment.

To address some of these challenges, Aalborg University hosted an international workshop in Copenhagen on 29-30 May 2013. The intention was to highlight some of the key challenges Bhutan is facing, including issues related to policy-making in education and learning, health promotion, Gross National Happiness (GNH), e-learning (ICT), democracy and refugee issues. The aim was to create an interdisciplinary and critical debate involving both Danish and Bhutanese researchers. It was co-financed by the Danish development agency, Danida, and linked to a 10 million Danish Kroner ODA project which aspires to create a critical mass of Bhutanese doctoral candidates and to link researchers in a variety of collaborative research projects.

Danida has been one of the main donors in Bhutan for a number of years. It has provided aid for the social sector and has been a crucial partner in Bhutan's achievements in the fields of education and health. Dr. Bjørn Melgaard explained the background of Danida's ODA activities under the heading 'Danish development Assistance to Bhutan: the early years and how it developed'. He noted that Bhutan's development trajectory is unique as it is overtaking many other developing countries regarding health improvement. He furthermore mentioned that the introduction of democracy in Bhutan is new but also uncertain which direction it may take. Development challenges in Bhutan are becoming more alike to those in other countries, like youth unemployment and growing inequality.

The keynote was delivered by Michael Hutt of SOAS, University of London, with the title: 'Sociocultural and political developments in Bhutan since 1990: reflections from a distance'. The presentation gave a

comparative perspective on the historical and contemporary experiences of Bhutan and Nepal, noting that both governments have had to deal with similar problems, including domestic political opposition and relationships with neighbouring countries. He noted the existence of a consensus in Bhutan regarding a single national identity, but argued that there was a direct causal link between national redefinition and the flight of refugees, and also with democracy and GNH. Professor Hutt stressed that the government would not have been able to begin a democratization project if the demographic had not first been changed, and that many scholars working within Bhutan were still silently avoiding contentious subjects; he noted this as one of the major differences between scholarship on Bhutan and Nepal.

The rest of the programme dwelled on a number of topics. In his presentation on 'Ethno-nationalism, education and health policy in Bhutan', Johannes Dragsbaek Schmidt spoke about a number of contradictions within Bhutan's development model: dependency through self-reliance; a conservative top-down policy-making approach; an absence of civil society; and a lack of links between horizontal and vertical policy. He noted that many countries have a universal right to health and education enshrined in their constitutions, but that this is often not implemented. However, in Bhutan it could not have been realised to such an impressive degree without a dependency on aid. This came first and foremost from India, which regards Bhutan as a strategic asset on its border with China.

Karma Utha and Kurt D. Keller gave a presentation titled 'Continuous assessment in Bhutan: status and challenges'. The term 'continuous assessment' is used very loosely in Bhutan. One of the purposes of introducing continuous assessment was to bring changes and enhance student orientation. The preliminary findings from their research show that there is minimal practice of formative assessment; practice of peer-assessment is not well developed; practices of self-assessment are missing; and feedback in the form of comments is questionable.

Starting with an assertion that the educational sector must be regarded as a key institution for the maintenance and development of GNH, Nandu Giri and Kurt D. Keller's paper, 'Quality of education in the perspective of happiness', concentrated on the notion of happiness in Buddhism and western philosophy and related this to school pedagogics and politics in Bhutan. Yezer and Johannes D. Schmidt's presentation

'Free education in Bhutan: is it sustainable?' discussed the concept of free education, the paradox of promoting private schools and the need for a sustainable financial plan for the funding of free education.

The rest of the programme included presentations on 'Action research as an asset within development strategy for universities, with special reference to Bhutan' (Søren Willert), 'Meaningful integration of ICT for good governance in Bhutan' (Devi Bhakta Suberi), 'Media ecologies in rural Bhutan: where do the community information centres come in?' (Norbert Wildermuth), 'Educating towards happiness' (Signe Ravn Højgaard), 'Lifelong learning and Gross National Happiness - a shared vision?' (Tara S. Adler), 'Exploring health-promotion and policy synergies in education in Bhutan' (Yeze, Johannes D. Schmidt and Line K. Christensen), 'A User-centered Approach to redesigning teaching and learning with ICT in Samtse College of Education, Bhutan' (Kinley, M. Georgsen and P.-O. Zander), 'Pedagogical discourse in Bhutanese school system' (Karma Utha and Hanne D. Keller), and 'Structural model of primary and community school for efficient utilization of resources in Bhutan' (Sonam Wangmo and Tashi Dorji).