

BHUTANESE CONTEXT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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Introduction

Civil society is an issue of great interest, and a topic of important theoretical and political discussion, in many parts of the world, both more developed and less developed. The issue concerns that public space in society which is occupied by neither state or church, nor by their organs, in which open and independent conversation about society and culture can take place and in which citizens can organise social movements, voluntary organizations, popular organizations, and citizen's bodies. The conversation in the space provided civil society concerns the state, the society, the culture, the nature of responsibility and citizenship. The organizations of civil society endeavour to protect the individual living in the society and to provide safety, stability and the opportunity to act independently of the state or church and their institutions. Where public space and civil society exist, it is the arena in which the society and culture also define the institutions and procedures of market or determine the degree to which extra-market forces, such as state or custom, will govern the market. Finally, civil society, public space, is the arena in which the institutions of cooperation and trust among the people and the ability of communities to organise themselves for common purposes, outside the control of state or church, exist. The accumulation of such institutions, trust, and ability constitutes the social capital, which is a crucial factor that makes civil society to exist and function effectively.

Some aspects of civil society in Bhutan will be discussed in this paper, based upon the general theoretical description provided above. Moving from traditional community associations and forums to the emergence of new forms of associations provides both institutional and historical perspectives. Categories of associations and organizations are defined according to the nature of their activities, and the description of these

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activities illustrate the role of civil society in Bhutan. The role of social capital, such as trust and cooperation among the people, in the socio-economic development of the country, the role of government in creating an enabling environment for the growth of civil society, and some of the distinctive characteristics that differentiate civil society in Bhutan from civil society, elsewhere, are also discussed.

Historical Perspective

An analysis of civil society in Bhutan must be rooted in the history and nature of Bhutanese communities. A community unit usually consists of a village or a group of households. However, sometimes, different communities may exist within one village. For the sake of convenience, a village will be considered as a community unit in this paper.

Individuals in any particular village share many interests simply by virtue of the fact that they are inhabitants of the same village. Consequently, a strong sense of cooperation and interdependence among households or individuals historically prevails in the villages. Although it is often said that this sense of solidarity is due to shared Buddhist beliefs, other factors also determine this solidarity. The way in which village resources are managed and the way in which festivals and ceremonies are organised also determine this solidarity.

The inhabitants of a village share more than just the geographical nomenclature of the village. They own and share different resources, which are registered as communal property. Such resources include pastures, drinking and irrigation water systems, roads, bridges, community-halls, and monasteries. Different communities have their own systems of managing these communal properties and organising local festivals. It is such systems of management of communal resources and organisation of festivals, which are unique to different localities that introduce the concept of civil society into our understanding of Bhutanese villages. Therefore, it is useful to discuss some aspects of the management of such communal properties. Some case studies of the construction of communal properties, such as roads and the organization of annual festivals will be described in the following section.

Section I: Traditional Associations

Construction and Maintenance of a Feeder Road in Lomnyekha, Chhukha

The feeder road to Lomnyekha, which is about five kilometres from the Thimphu-Phuntsholing highway, was constructed in 1984. The idea of constructing this feeder road was conceived by three community leaders. Two of them were businessmen and one a retired *gup*¹. This idea of road construction was discussed in one of the community meetings. The rest of the people of the village responded positively to the proposal put forth by these three leaders.

The three leaders acted as coordinators to mobilise resources and seek approval from the authorities for the construction of the road. The people agreed to make contributions both in labour and in cash. There were no standards fixed for cash contribution. People contributed according to their abilities. A common fund was created from the cash contributions made by the businessmen, civil servants, and other people in the village. However, with the consensus of all the members of the community, a standard was set for the contribution of labour. It was mandatory that every adult between the ages of 18 and 60 work on the construction of the road. This meant that if a household had five persons in the above age group, all of them had to work every day in constructing the road, until the project's completion.

A bulldozer was hired from Bondey farm in Paro. Payment for hire of the bulldozer came from the common fund that was generated from the voluntary contributions. More than one hundred persons worked everyday. Two *Chupoens*² of the village were given the responsibility for coordinating the labour. Penalties of Nu.50 and Nu.30 respectively were fixed for male and female absentees. Apart from labour and cash contributions, different households voluntarily took turns to host lunch, tea and dinner for the whole work force.

As soon as the formation cutting was completed, the whole village concentrated on making drains, constructing culverts, and levelling the surface of the road. Labour contribution was still compulsory, but people from some households, who possessed other resources volunteered to use

them. Those who owned trucks and tractors used them to bring stones and mud for levelling the road. Community leaders recall that because of the strong sense of cooperation, construction of the road was completed in one month.

The *chupoens* of the village have been entrusted with responsibility for coordinating the maintenance of the road. During the monsoons, when there are occasional roadblocks due to landslides, the *chupoens* inform the community and, as in the construction of the road itself, the community response is spontaneous and the roadblocks are removed in a matter of hours.

Operation of a Monastic Credit Scheme in Chapcha

The prevalence of a sense of trust and cooperation among the people is very strong in *Chapcha* village. As in *Lomnyekha*, they have constructed a farm road. *Lopen*³ Changlo, who runs a monastic school at the *goenpa*,⁴ coordinated the construction of road. As a *lopen* at the local monastery and *gondhey*⁵, he had no problems raising funds and building consensus among the people.

As a *Lopen* at the monastery, he also coordinates to the organization of religious ceremonies, such as annual *bumdhey*⁶ and *nyungney*⁷. These ceremonies are organised through voluntary contributions made by civil servants, businessmen and farmers of the village. *Lopen* Changlo says that such contributions from the people are not a new practice. He recalls his days as a young *gomchen*⁸ at the monastery, when people contributed rice, chillies, and other resources for the performance of various religious ceremonies at the monastery.

The voluntary contributions, in both cash and kind, far exceed what the monastery can spend for the performance of religious ceremonies. The excess contributions, together with other contributions made by the people for different purposes, enable the monastery to accumulate a good reserve fund. It currently possesses a total revolving fund of more than Nu. 700,000. This fund is used for the purposes of carrying out occasional

minor repairs and maintenance activities of the monastery. Such activities require only small expenditures.

In consultation with the other community leaders, *Lopen* Changlo has converted the excess fund of the monastery into a community credit scheme. He and other community leaders have fixed a simple interest rate of Nu.3 a year for every Nu.20 borrowed, which is 15% per annum. However, those people who avail themselves of this credit pay back Nu.4 for every Nu.20 that they borrow. The extra Nu.1 is being paid as their contribution to the monastery. Thus, the real interest rate is 20% per annum.

Certain criteria have been developed for the allocation of credit to the needy people of the village. First, is that another household in the village must guarantee the loan. Second, credit is allocated only for the purposes of house renovation, the purchase of corrugated galvanized iron sheeting for roofing, and for the purchase of land and housing in the village. Credit cannot be obtained for the purchase of a vehicle or a business venture. *Lopen* Changlo maintains, at the monastery, the records of the credit allotted to different people in the village.

The disbursement of credit takes place only once a year. On the 30th day of the tenth month of the Bhutanese calendar, the whole community of Chapcha gathers at the monastery. Civil servants and businessmen from the village also attend. Among other activities and discussions that day, the gathering reviews the recovery of credit and makes decisions on new disbursements.

This scheme is very popular among the community's members. Apart from the need to have a guarantor, no other collateral is required. Even when debtors are not able to repay a loan due to some problem or misfortune, the rest of the members of the community forgive the defaulters. The credit facility is also considered an opportunity for the borrowers to perform their service to the monastery.

Traditional Water Users' Association in Tangsibji, Trongsa

Almost every household in Tangsibji owns some paddy field. During paddy cultivation, these fields are irrigated with water from a single irrigation channel. All households cultivate their paddy fields at almost the same time. In order to prevent conflicts over use of water from the irrigation channel and to ensure that every household gets its fair share of water, the community of Tangsibji has been following a system which sets the rota for different group of households to irrigate their fields.

For this purpose, the village is divided into three groups, known as *drongdheb*, *lekyap* and *zoorkyap*. This grouping of the households is done on the basis of the fertility of the fields that the households own. Those households, that own the most fertile fields are grouped together as *drongdheb*, those with average fields as *lekyab*, and those with infertile fields as *zoorkyab*. This categorization by the fertility of the soil demands an explanation. In each group, it is possible to have households that have lands with various levels of fertility, but it is not the case.

In earlier times, the paddy fields of *Tangsibji* belonged to *Trongsa dzong*⁹. Local people carried out the cultivation of these fields on a lease basis. A system called *thogjog*¹⁰, which is still prevalent in many parts of the country, was practised. According to which, the people, often a group of households together, were required to give fixed amount of paddy to *Trongsa dzong* annually. This amount was agreed between the *dzong* and the people on the basis of the fertility of the fields. Fertility assessment, which was normally established by assessing past yields, played an important role in determining the amount that each household was required to pay. In a situation, in which either an individual or a group of households was required to pay a fixed amount of paddy to the *dzong* annually, a combination of households cultivating fields of different levels of fertility would not have been feasible. This is the origin of the system of grouping of households into three groups based on different levels of fertility.

Each group appoints a leader called a *leytshen*¹¹, who, with the senior *chupoen* of the village, forms the committee that decides on the rota (*chukor*)¹² for sharing water for a particular year. The rota is not fixed through verbal discussion and therefore, it is not subject to negotiations or alterations by influential members of the committee. Lots are drawn to fix

the rota and, therefore, the order for water use is a matter of chance. As soon as every household completes paddy planting, the committee calls a meeting of the community, on, of course, an auspicious day; the meeting takes place either at the monastery or at the *chupoen's* house. Traditionally, every household used to participate in this meeting, but nowadays most of the time only the members attend. Three bamboo sticks the length of a forefinger are prepared, and each one is marked with one or more crosses. The one with the single cross is the stick that represents the *drongdheb*; two crosses represent the *lekyab* and three crosses the *zoorkyab*. The *chupoen* holds the three sticks in his hands and prays for adequate rainfall and good harvest. Only the two ends of the sticks are visible to other members and the crosses are hidden in his hands. The sequence or order of pulling the stick out of *chupoen's* hands remains same every year. By the virtue of possessing the most fertile land, the representative of *drongdheb* is the first person to pull a stick from the *chupoen's* hands. It is believed that if the stick that the representative of *drongdheb* pulls out is the one with the single cross, i.e. the group's own stick, the crop yield for the year will be good. However, since it is a matter of chance, this doesn't normally happen. The stick that the representative of *drongdheb* pulls out is one with either two or three marks. Whichever group's stick the representative of *drongdheb* pulls out entitles the first turn to use water. The second representative, i.e. the one representing *lekyab*, then pulls one of the two remaining sticks and whichever group that stick represents becomes the second group to use water from the channel to irrigate their fields. Thus, *chukor* or rota for irrigating the fields is established. The duration of time for each group to access the water is one night and one day, starting from the night on which the turn is fixed and is repeated in that order until it is no longer necessary to irrigate the fields.

The architects of this system did not rule out conflicts and violations. In order to prevent conflicts between the groups due to violation of the rota, punishment has been fixed for the violators. The form of punishment, however, has undergone a transformation over the years. The elderly people of the village recall that when they were young, the violators were required to offer *zongtshen-soom*¹³ to the community. Only the few wealthy households, could afford to pay this fine. This punishment was replaced by the digging of paddy field. The violator was made to dig a patch of a few

metres wide in every household's field. This came to be considered somewhat inhumane, because as it took many days for the violator to complete the digging. Today, violators have to deliver mail and other government consignments to the neighbouring village of *Kella*. This is considered punishment not only in terms of the sacrifice of time that the violator must be absent from work but also because the journey to *Kella* village in summertime is very difficult. The path that links the two villages passes through thick jungles, so the violator has to risk attacks from wild animals. Moreover, s/he, has to pass through thick bushes of stinging nettle and could suffer a significant loss of blood from the bites of numerous leeches.

The Five-Day Annual Archery Match in Ingo, Haa

The community of Ingo gathers together each year for five days. This is not to pay tribute to any local hero or to pray to a local deity. It is, rather, an annual tournament that has taken place since time immemorial. Two teams are formed; sometimes the contest is between teams made up, respectively, of younger and older men, sometimes between two age groups more loosely defined.

The event itself is not particularly interesting, since such occasions are quite common in villages throughout the country. What makes this particular contest interesting is in the contest of a discussion of civil society in the way in which the community organizes itself for this event. Every household has to contribute an equal amount of rice, meat and other edibles, together with firewood necessary for the occasion. Normally, there is no event in village life when a household would refuse to make a contribution, but here each year two households, identified in the rota described above, are responsible for the cooking for the community. An elderly person is given the task of overseeing the contributions of the different households and of taking care of the stock gathered.

For the entire five days of the contest, the whole community gathers at the community hall. This event not only provides the community with an opportunity to celebrate together but acts as a forum for the discussion of problems that different members face. For example, at the last contest, the community discussed the problem of the shortage of money faced for performing the necessary rituals and services when relatives die; they decided to raise funds to help at such moments. The community now has a common fund to which its members can turn in times of emergency.

These case studies are only examples of various kinds of organizations and institutions that exist in different parts of Bhutan. They illustrate how communities organise themselves to manage resources and to conduct festivals and religious ceremonies. These structures prevent conflicts between community members and ensure the sustainable use of resources. It is through such institutions that the public is able to participate in the community life in various areas of activity.

Section II: Contemporary Associations

New and more modern types of associations and organizations are also coming into existence in various groups of communities. Most are being formed by educated people and, unlike the traditional associations that operate on the basis of unwritten customary rules and norms, most of these new associations and organizations are governed by written rules and regulations. The first such association to be formed was the National Youth Association of Bhutan¹⁴. It was formed by a group of young civil servants in 1973. This association was intended specifically to provide a radio broadcast in English on the weekends. It became a part of The Department of Information and Broadcasting in 1979 and thus was absorbed into mainstream government organizations.

The second contemporary association was formed in 1978 by a group of civil servants¹⁵. They made contributions and conducted a *tshechu*¹⁶ at the Memorial Chorten in Thimphu on the 15th day of the 4th month of the Bhutanese calendar. This first *tshechu* stimulated the group to decide to make the *tshechu* an annual event. As the group was engaged only in organization of *tshechus*, it came to be known as *Tshechu Tshogpa*;¹⁷ since

this annual *tshechu* was performed at Memorial Chorten, it came to be known as *Chorten*¹⁸ *Tshechu Tshogpa*.

Interactions among the members of this *tshogpa* have increased as a consequence of their cooperation in conducting the *Tshechu*. Whenever a relative died or some misfortune struck in a member of the group, the others provided help. Such occurrences increased with time. Finally the group decided that, in addition to its main mission of organising *tshechus*, its members would also assume a mandate to help each other in times of difficulties. It formulated a well-defined constitution for its operation and named itself the *Lothuen Tshogpa* in 1983.

In 1981, the 53rd session of the National Assembly passed a resolution to establish the National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB), which was organised that same year. The government provided both personnel and other resources required for the initial operations of the NWAB. This should not be mistaken for government interference in the operation of a non-governmental organization. The government did not play any role in the day-to-day functioning of this organization.

Another association was formed by a group of former students of *Semtokha Rigzhung*¹⁹ Institute in 1985²⁰. It was stimulated by the fact that civil servants in those days worked in their offices from 9 a.m. till 2 p.m. and thus had a considerable, almost excessive, amount of leisure on their hands; in that period, there was comparatively little entertainment available to occupy the leisure time of a newly urbanizing class. The group met every day after office hours and practised drama. The dramas were then staged in public. As the formation of their association coincided with the International Year of Youth (1985), they named their association as The Youth Welfare Association of Bhutan. It was renamed The Bhutan Youth Development Association in 1987. In that year, too, another major non-governmental organization, the Royal Society for Protection of Nature was established, under the patronage of His Majesty the King.

Parallel to this development of associations and organizations through private initiatives, a similar development was taking place within the government sphere. In 1981, the government initiated a policy of decentralization. District Development Committees were established in all

the districts. A decade later, in 1991, Block Development were constituted. These two government-sponsored institutions enable the people to plan and implement development activities in their respective districts and blocks. This has fostered among the people a great sense of ownership and commitment to development activities. The success of these two institutions has encouraged people to establish several other associations, such as school management boards, village development committees, village health development committees, associations of potato and apple growers, and beekeepers' associations, and host of other committees.

It is against this background that non-governmental associations and organizations in Bhutan must be discussed. While several associations already existed, new ones began to develop in the early 1970s and 1980s, and more are being established every year. Today, there are hundreds of associations, both traditional and non-traditional.

Section III: Types of Contemporaray Associations

Associations in Bhutan can be grouped into five categories, based on the purposes for which they are established and the nature of their activities. First, there are associations or institutions that have been created for the management of resources. Such resources normally include communal properties such as pastures, bridges, monasteries, community halls, drinking and irrigation water supply schemes, and roads.

The second category consists of those that are relief based. Most of the new associations that have come into existence since the early 1970s fall into this category. Previously, the entire community acted as a relief organization and is still prevalent in many villages. These more modern associations, however, were established to provide relief to bereaved members due to loss of children, spouses or other relatives and to help during times of sickness. Apart from physical help in terms of contribution of labour and other resources, bereaved members are provided with a certain amount of money from the association. These amounts differ depending on whether the death is of children, spouses, parents or other relatives. For instance, the Charter of *Deling Phendhey Tshogpa* outlines the following compensations for the deaths of different category of relatives of a member:

Sl. No	Deaths	Compensation (Nu.)
1.	Husband or wife	7,000
2.	Father/Mother	7,000
3.	Parents-in-law	4,000
4.	Children above 5 and under 25 years	5,000
5.	Children above 1 and under 5 years	3,000
6.	Children above 3 months and under 1 year	1,500

Different amounts are specified for misfortunes with which members themselves may be afflicted. When a member suffers disability through loss of limbs or sight or paralysis of the body, or when a member has to undergo a transplant of organs such as the heart or kidney, he or she is entitled for Nu.5,000. If a member dies, the bereaved family is paid Nu.10,000 as a consolation.

The third category of associations consists of those whose purpose is to conduct different religious ceremonies. These associations conduct *tshechus* and other religious ceremonies on auspicious days. *Tshechu* tshogpas in the villages conduct *tshechus* on the 10th, 15th and 30th day of every month of the lunar calendar. The *Nyungnyey* Trust Fund of *Bartsham* conducts the *nyungnyey* annually.

Fourth, there are associations that advocate or carry out government policies. The National Women's Association of Bhutan conducts activities that promote the development of skills among the female population. In this way, it ensures that the government's policy of promoting income-generating activities for women is effectively pursued. The Royal Society for the Protection of Nature promotes the government's policy of environmental conservation. Through support to different business ventures, the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry ensures effective implementation of the government's policy of demonopolisation and private sector development. The Bhutan Youth Development Association executes different activities related to youths and environmental preservation. It conducts camps and scouting sessions for the youths.

The fifth category includes commercial associations. For example, one of the main purposes for which Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators was established was to enable the tour operators to liaison with different organizations that have a stake in the development of the tourism industry. The Contractors Associations of Bhutan was formed to provide a common forum for the discussion of issues that affect the construction activities in the country. The *Sonam Nyamrub Tshogpa* of Trashi Yangtse was formed to cultivate and market *shitake* mushroom. Similarly, several associations like Potato Growers Associations, Apple Registration Groups, Beekeeping Association and Milk Cooperatives are functioning in different parts of the country. These associations not only discuss issues and problems confronting them but also market their products together in order to enjoy the benefits of economies of scale.

In addition to indigenous and national associations and non-governmental organizations, there are eight international non-governmental organizations and associations operating in Bhutan at the present time:- The Japanese Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV), Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO), Volunteer Service Associations (VSA), Save the Children Federation, (SCF), HELVETAS, German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), and Netherlands Development Cooperation (SNV), and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

Section IV: Activities of Contemporary, Non-Traditional Associations

Many of the recently established, non-traditional associations engage in particular economic and social activities that, in one way or another, mark them off from other associations of a more traditional nature, whenever they are or were established. For example, the *Phunstho Norbu Tshogpa* owns a share of Bhutan National Bank worth approximately Nu.100,000.

The National Women's Association of Bhutan has introduced programmes like non-formal education and group savings and credit schemes in order to provide opportunities for women to develop skills and generate income. Weaving centres have been established in different parts of the country to train rural women in weaving. Besides, the Women's Association engages in buy-back arrangements whereby the products woven by rural women are

bought. It has installed several fuel-efficient stoves in rural homes, reducing health hazards resulting from inefficient traditional stoves.

The Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry is a forum through which the interests of the business personnel in the country are protected. It negotiates interest rates and other terms and conditions that financial institutions impose on business people for loans, it identifies industries to be managed by private enterprises. The Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators and the Contractors Association are forums, which discuss issues pertaining to their own industries and initiate discussions with the government or any other parties involved in one way or another with their work.

The Bhutan Youth Development Association has recently installed fuel-efficient community stoves in two monasteries and nunneries in Trashigang. It conducts workshops to promote environmental awareness, and it organises camps and other activities for the youth. It is planning to carry out a situational study of street children and prostitution in urban areas.

The Royal Society for Protection of Nature promotes environmental education through its assistance in opening nature clubs in schools and its participation in designing school curriculum. The *Sonam Nyamrub Tshogpa* in Trashi Yangtse promotes social forestry through the planting of oaks and other species of plants in the region.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty Against Animals (RPSCA) was formed by a group of young volunteers, and they collect waste food from local vendors and restaurants and feed the stray dogs in Thimphu. It carries out anti-rabies and sterilisation activities. The Voluntary Artists Studio, Thimphu, provides training to young artists and facilitates the participation of artists in national and international competitions.

Section V: Organizational Structure and Source of Funds

With the exception of associations that are based in the villages, almost every association mentioned in this study has a written charter. The associations or institutions in the villages are governed by unwritten sets of

rules and norms that are generally accepted within the community. The charters of the contemporary associations outline their aims and objectives, their code of conduct, the roles and responsibilities of the members and portfolio holders, the members' benefits, etc.

Committees are formed to manage and run the activities of the association. Normally, there are two committees: an Executive Committee and a General Committee. The Chief Executive Committee consists of a chairman or president, a secretary, public relations or welfare officer, and an accountant or treasurer. The General Committee, which consists of three or four members, supports the Executive Committee. The members of both committees are elected. Their tenure and responsibilities are specified in the association's charter.

The National Women's Association of Bhutan, the Royal Society for Protection of Nature, the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Contractors Association of Bhutan and the Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators are formally organised, and each one has an office. The rest of the associations do not have offices, and their meetings take place in various places depending upon convenience, such as hotels or members' residences.

These associations rely on different sources of funds for their activities. Most of the informal associations survive on the basis of the modest contributions made by the members. These contributions consist of entrance fees for new members and monthly fees for regular members. Both the entrance and monthly fees differ from association to association. Fines collected from absentees at the meetings also go into the common fund. In a few associations, if a member travels abroad he or she is required to contribute a certain percent of his/her daily subsistence allowance to the association's fund. Some formal associations like the Contractors Association and the Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators also run their activities through funds gathered from their entrance and regular membership fees.

The government has authorised the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry to collect 40% of the license renewal fees and 0.25% of the total value of letters of credit from Bhutanese exporters. Other sources of funds

for its activities include membership fees and the sale of business licence forms. It gets occasional donor assistance for performing services such as the training of entrepreneurs. The National Women's Association used to receive certain grants from the government, but this was discontinued in 1995²¹. Today, its activities are funded by UNICEF. It has also received some assistance from Denmark and the International Fund for Agricultural Development. The main source of funding for the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature is the assistance that it receives from the Bhutan Trust Fund for the Environment. It also collects a nominal fee of Nu.100 from each of its members.

All these associations require their books of accounts to be audited at regular intervals. While most of the formal associations follow the government's rules and audit their accounts of income and expenditure twice a year, the informal associations audit their books at the end of each year.

Conclusion

Civil society in the form of different community associations and organizations forms an integral part of traditional Bhutanese society, not the design of modern Bhutan. They provide the people with opportunities to participate in taking decisions related to different activities that have a bearing on their day-to-day lives. The new and emerging associations formed by the educated people are really only an extension of the traditional associations. Most of the new or contemporary associations are relief-based, and some act as links between the government and the people. The Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Associations of Bhutanese Tour Operators and the Contractors Association of Bhutan associations negotiate issues of interest to the business community in Bhutan. Apart from providing skills to help women earn incomes, the National Women's Association of Bhutan also works towards assuring gender equality between men and women.

In addition to acting as a mechanism or space for the public participation in decision-making, civil society plays an important role in economic development and in the environmental and cultural preservation of the country. Many communities have constructed farm and feeder roads on

their own. This has provided them access to markets and other social services, such as schools and hospitals. Reliance on traditional norms in the allocation and management of communal pastures and the use of water have ensured efficient and sustainable utilization of resources. These practices are of paramount importance to the government's environmental policy. By assuring fair and just access to common properties, they prevent conflicts within the community. The role of associations and communities in the maintenance of monasteries and in the organization of religious ceremonies and traditional games, plays an important role in sustaining Bhutan's rich cultural heritage.

Despite the existence of a vibrant civil society and the important roles it plays, some of our development partners have often remarked that civil society does not exist in Bhutan. Civil society in their countries usually consists of registered organizations. In contrast, traditional social organizations were never required to register with the authorities. In Bhutan, civil society exists perhaps more informally than formally and plays many important roles in the socio-economic development and preservation of our culture and environment.

Analysis also confirms the important roles that social capital play in our society. Social capital in the form of community leadership and trust and cooperation among the people plays an important role in Bhutanese society. It has not only enabled successful implementation of projects and programmes initiated by the communities themselves; it has also enabled the cost effective implementation of several government-funded projects and programmes in many parts of the country. Its role in the maintenance of development projects forms an important factor in promoting the policy of sustainable development in the country.

The Royal Government plays an important role in sustaining a vibrant civil society in Bhutan. The policy of preserving our rich culture and tradition creates an enabling environment for the survival of the diversity of both traditional community organisations and contemporary associations and organizations. The rules and the forms of such associations are preserved. The diversity and richness of such local institutions are often fed into national policy. The government's policy of instituting water users' associations for both drinking and irrigation schemes in different parts of

the country has been drawn from the example of traditional water users' associations. Today, there are more than four hundred²² users' associations for irrigation schemes in different parts of the country.

The policy of decentralization, which the government introduced in early 1980s, has gone a long way in nourishing and promoting civil society in Bhutan. We can conclude that in Bhutan the government and civil society exist in a symbiotic relationship, each contributing to the other. In order to further promote the growth of civil society, the Royal Government is in the process of preparing NGO and Cooperatives Acts as a legislative framework for the further development of Bhutanese civil society.

Notes

- ¹ Elected representative of a block.
- ² Representative of a group of 10 households.
- ³ Bhutanese word for a Teacher.
- ⁴ Monastery.
- ⁵ Monastic school.
- ⁶ Ceremony in which 16 volumes of religious scriptures are recited.
- ⁷ Religious ceremony in which people fast for a day and a night.
- ⁸ Lay priests.
- ⁹ Fortress.
- ¹⁰ A system in which a person cultivating the field is required to pay fixed amount of paddy or other crops to the leaser of the land.
- ¹¹ A community leader.
- ¹² Rota for sharing water.
- ¹³ Three different types of textile products, viz.
- ¹⁴ Dasho Kunzang Wangdi, Auditor General, Personal Communications, December 2000.
- ¹⁵ Mr. Zangla Namgyal, National Assembly, Personal Communications, November 2000.
- ¹⁶ Religious ceremony performed on the auspicious days.
- ¹⁷ An Association or a Committee.
- ¹⁸ Stupa.
- ¹⁹ Institute for traditional/Buddhist studies.
- ²⁰ Mr. Goenpo Dorji, Kuensel Corporation, Personal Communications, December 2000.
- ²¹ Dasho Daw Dema, Secretary, NWAB, Personal Communication, December 2000.
- ²² Mr. Kelzang Tshering, Chief Irrigation Officer, Ministry of Agriculture, Personal Communication, December, 2000.

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