

Introduction

This statement is delivered on behalf of the Tarayana Foundation, Respect, Educate, Nurture, and Empower Women (RENEW), and The Disabled People's Organization of Bhutan (DPOB), all registered Civil Society Organizations in Bhutan.

Tarayana Foundation has existed for the last two decades and serves the last mile in the country. It works in remote, rural villages to foster holistic community growth and development for a “Happy and Prosperous Bhutan” by serving vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. Tarayana has participated in UPR processes at the national level since the first cycle and led the submission of the Alternate Report from the previous cycle in 2019.

The Disable People’s Organization of Bhutan (DPOB) was founded in 2010 by people with disabilities to recognize their voices. It promotes the physical, psychological, and socio-economic well-being of persons with disabilities (PWDs) through a rights-based approach. With a vision of creating an inclusive society that recognizes, respects, and promotes the rights and needs of Persons with Disabilities, the DPOB focuses on empowering individuals with disabilities through employment, participation, and decision-making.

This comprehensive statement integrates insights from various workshops, reports, and stakeholder consultations to highlight critical issues and recommend actions for the betterment of the country. It also consists of issues and concerns from 23 registered CSOs.

This statement addresses the following issues: Poverty, Disability and Health, National Legislation, and Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights.

Statement

- The human rights conditions in Bhutan have shown significant improvement, guided by the written Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan (2008). However, challenges remain, particularly in disability rights, healthcare, and support for vulnerable groups.
- In December 2023, Bhutan graduated from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status, a significant milestone in our development journey. We are very proud and happy with this milestone; however, at the same time, we are concerned with the multiple post-graduation challenges the country may face due to the limited diversity in its income sources, both internal and external. Some concerns are our sizeable current account deficits, high public debt, underdeveloped private sector, and a high unemployment rate.
- The country’s economy had a significant setback due to the COVID, leaving our private sector stagnant and youth unemployment rising. Youth unemployment stands at a record high of 22.9 percent as per the first quarterly labour force survey for 2024.

Constitutional and Legislative Framework

Follow up to the last Review

A41 (157.9) Take further steps to improve national legislation regarding the respect of citizens' rights and freedoms.

- In Bhutan, there are 64 registered Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), of which only 54 are currently operating. Of the operating CSOs, 42 are Public Benefit Organizations (PBOs), and 12 are Mutual Benefit Organizations (MBOs). Most CSOs largely depend on donor funds and grants. With the CSOs advocating for an amendment to the CSO Act, the National Council, acknowledging the importance of CSOs in the country, proposed to amend the Act in 2022.
- In 2022, the 7th session of the third parliament amended the CSO Act of 2007. While some amendments were welcomed, others could have been more positive, like the number of CSO representatives on the Civil Society Organization Authority (CSOA) board. The earlier Board had five representatives, with two from the CSOs and three from the government, so the CSOs asked for equal representation; the amended act came with seven members, five from the government against only two from CSOs, raising concerns that decisions by the CSOA could disproportionately favour the government.
- Some of the CSOs are also concerned with the Minister of Home Affairs Chairmanship as a political figure and that the Chairman is not elected, unlike in the original Act. The amended act does not provide equitable representation and ensure fair and balanced governance.

New Developments

- The Civil Society Organisations Authority endorsed the requirement for a minimum endowment fund last year, as mandated by the CSO Act 2022. However, the amendments have escalated the required endowment fund, posing a threat to the existence of the smaller CSOs at the nascent stage.
- With the CSOs expressing grievances on the endowment requirement, the recent 42nd CSOA Board Meeting agreed to a proposal made by the CSOs, the proposal of raising the endowment fund of Nu.3 million (PBOs) and 1.5 Million (MBOs) to be made gradually over the years. PBOs are given four years, and MBOs three years to raise the required amount. The requirement for a 1 million operation fund was also done away. This was welcoming news for the CSOs to continue doing the good work.
- The government's perspective on CSOs is mixed. While some agencies find opportunities to partner and work closely with CSOs, others may not be too receptive. This is also due to the lack of proper Government and CSO Collaboration mechanisms. The previous government commissioned a government-CSO collaboration Guideline, which was

developed. The CSOs reviewed the draft guideline, and the 42nd CSOA Board Meeting endorsed its submission to the cabinet.

Recommendations

1. The endorsement of the government-CSO collaboration Guideline is essential to enabling meaningful partnerships between CSOs and the government. This mechanism will strengthen objective collaborations based on the needs of vulnerable communities. At the moment, the few partnerships that are in place are primarily for advocacy and awareness creation. Partnerships based on core competencies are needed to foster substantial tasks of active interventions.
2. The CSOA Board composition needs to be better balanced, viz., four government representatives and three from the CSOs.

Poverty Alleviation

Follow Up to the last Review

- According to the National Statistics Bureau's (NSB) Poverty Analysis Report 2022, the country's overall poverty rate has risen to 12.4 percent, higher than 11.2 percent in 2022 and 8.21 percent in 2017. The population residing in rural areas recorded a high poverty rate of 17.5 percent, while in urban areas, it is low at 4.2 percent. Inequality is rising in the country, and it is a growing concern.

New Development

- Some policies that target reducing poverty include the Food and Nutrition Security Policy, the National Social Protection Policy, the Housing Policy, and the Bhutan Sustainable Development Road Map.
- Despite all the policies, addressing poverty is a challenge due to the remoteness of the rural communities, limitations in accessing services, vulnerability to climate change and other issues.
- Without separate, well-thought-out strategies to address poverty in rural and urban areas, substantive change will be challenging, mainly because of the government's sectoral approach to delivering services.
- According to the "Poverty Mapping in Bhutan - Small Area Estimation: Gewog and Town Level Results 2003", a report published based on an exercise using the Bhutan Living Standards Survey 2022 data undertaken by the National Statistical Bureau of Bhutan with technical support from the Poverty and Equity Global Practice team of the World Bank, concluded that there is a large variation in poverty rates across blocks/towns within the same district and that blocks/towns with the highest number of poor are mainly in Thimphu, Chhukha, Zhemgang and Samtse districts.

- Experiences of working in remote rural communities show that poverty can be addressed more effectively through a holistic approach where all the services, including basic needs like housing improvement, food and nutrition security, water and sanitation facilities, skills development and access to credit, can be provided together.

Recommendations

1. Holistic approach is necessary in tackling the sticky problem of rural poverty.
2. Different poverty reduction strategies are required for both rural and urban settings, as the causes of poverty differ.
3. Housing improvement is critical to lifting communities and families out of poverty. The current housing policy doesn't cater to the needs of rural communities where poverty is higher.
4. Localized poverty data are needed for effective policy planning. The Bhutan Living Standards Survey calls for enhanced data collection at the local administration level; it is pivotal for identifying vulnerable groups and tracking progress.
5. It is crucial to create jobs for the unemployed youth by skilling them in relevant fields with market demand and enhancing their access to credit.
6. The Desuung Skilling Programme (DSP) imparts high-quality short-term training to unemployed youth who have completed high school. It is significantly addressing unemployment by equipping youth with practical skills and knowledge. Since its establishment, DSP has trained over 3000 youth in various skills and has nearly 8,000 youth enrolled in the different programmes. These youth are prepared for employment and self-employed, contributing to economic and social development.
7. Access to start-up grants/funds required for transitioning from skilled to job creators for all skilled youth who are passionate about business will positively help economic recovery.

Disability and Health

Follow Up to the last Review

Policy and Legislative Gaps:

Bhutan has made strides in creating policies for persons with disabilities (PWDs), including the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) 2019. However, PWDs are minimally included in the labor market and private educational institutions, highlighting a significant gap in policy implementation.

Healthcare Access and Services:

Healthcare services for PWDs are limited, especially in terms of accessibility and the provision of specialized care. Introducing WHO PEN Hearts packages in primary healthcare is a positive step, but disparities in access to quality care persist.

Education and Inclusion:

Efforts to increase school attendance for children with disabilities have led to the expansion of Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools. As of April 2020, there are 18 schools with SEN programme and two special institutes that enrolled 740 students with SEN. However, many PWDs remain excluded from mainstream educational opportunities. There is a prevailing limited societal awareness; acute shortage and lack of specialized teachers, lack of opportunities for children with disabilities to transition after school, and a lack of necessary materials for Children With Disabilities to develop their skills better are some of the issues.

New Developments

- The 10th Session of the 3rd National Assembly and the 32nd Session of the 4th National Council of Bhutan ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in March 2023. The original Instrument of Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was deposited on March 13th 2024, at the Office of Legal Affairs of the United Nations.
- The formulation of the National Policy for Persons with Disability and National Policy for Senior Citizens and the Introduction of priority counters in a few public institutions were some of the new developments.
- There was a policy implementation gap as the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (PWD) 2019 was led by the erstwhile Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC)—the custodian of the policy. During the structural reforms, a part of GNHC was subsumed under the Cabinet Secretary and another part under the Ministry of Finance, with no clear entity identified as the new custodian.
- In the absence of a government agency on persons with disabilities, the organizations working for PWD were challenged with a lack of guidance and a government counterpart to move the national policy forward and coordinate interventions to uphold and promote the rights of persons with disabilities.
- Recently, a new division called ‘the National Policy Coordination Division’ under the Office of the Cabinet Affairs & Strategic Coordination (OCASC), Cabinet Secretariat, was appointed the new custodian for the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (PWD) 2019.

Recommendations

1. A proper plan to implement the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (PWD) and CRPD is critical.
2. Policies formulated and endorsed to benefit PWDs must be implemented (e.g., conditional cash transfer for People with disabilities in the form of pension, but not implemented; Improving the living condition of PWDs, but no achievement in improving the living condition of PWDs).

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3. The UNCRPD was ratified with several reservations: Article 18—Liberty of movement and nationality; Article 23—Respect for Home and the Family; Article 27—Work and Employment; and Article 29—Participation in Political and Public Life.
4. All Bhutanese are given rights as enshrined in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2008, and these reservations contravene their rights. The rights of persons with disabilities as citizens are enshrined in the Constitution, and thus, they must be upheld. All reservations must be removed to ensure the quality of life for persons living with disabilities.