

# “Bhutan is an important country for Helvetas”

*President of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Elmar Ledergerber is in the country to celebrate 40 years of Bhutan – Helvetas cooperation.*

*He shares with Kuensel's Sonam Pelden, his views on development and the changes over the years in his journey as a student journalist, a politician and as a non-government organization worker*

## Excerpts

### Your thoughts on celebrating 40 years of Bhutan – Helvetas relationship...

This is not my first visit to Bhutan. I was here almost 30 years ago in 1986 with a mandate from Helvetas for an evaluation of a small hydle programme in Bhutan and rural electrification.

Bhutan has changed a lot and it's a good moment to come back to celebrate these 40 years of cooperation.

### How has Bhutan changed since then?

Development is not only positive. It also has negative aspects, not only in Bhutan but also all over the world. But I wanted to say that almost 30 years ago, when I was starting this program of rural electrification, almost no body in the country besides Thimphu and may be few others had electricity. At this point today, it shows that Bhutan has made big development in the last 30 years. The democratization of Bhutan is a huge step towards a modern society and this is big work which you can be proud of.

### What according to you is the most significant highlight of the Helvetas-Bhutan relationship?

I would say that first of all, the big work has been done by the people of Bhutan. This cannot be done by an association or a development agency. We could give some support in some fields where we are strong and is also working in other countries. These are rural development, agriculture, forestry,

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education and water, at least in other countries and now more also to prevent the countries from the consequences of climate change, which is a big problem for many and for Bhutan as well.

### How have the problems of developing countries changed over the years?

In the 60s and early 70s, the situation was reverse. At that time, a much higher percentage of the world population was hungry and didn't have enough to eat. This exists still but it has changed considerably. The percentage of people, who do not have enough to eat, has become smaller. So we can say that this cooperation between north and south, between developing countries really have had a big effect and brought some progress to this countries. But still, main problems remain – population growth, which is incredibly big and which destroys all the progresses we have made. The environmental problems, the climate change and so on - these are new problems, which destroy a lot of the success we have made together.

### How challenging is it then to sustain the work of Helvetas and



Elmar Ledergerber

### these countries?

Challenges remain. They have changed to a certain extent but many countries still need support from the developed countries. But many have also overcome their poverty and are on the way of development, where they can produce more and benefit their countries' economy.

### Journalism, politics and NGO - through which area would you say one is able to contribute most to development?

I was for a long time a consultant and we worked in issues like sustainable development, renewable energy sources and in this position, in this knowhow, the opportunity with agencies like Helvetas or SDC and to bring this knowledge into the projects started.

I was not really a journalist. I tried to finance my journeys by doing some journalistic works and this was a successful approach.

and how to organize their entities. All are important.

### Vocational education is one of the areas of cooperation now...

I would say that in Bhutan, the average age of the people is very young and if you want to have labour and jobs in future, they need an education in this respect. Vocational training is crucial for all these young people if they don't want to be jobless or dependent on some organization. This sector of vocational training in Switzerland is well developed and is a good example for other countries. If you look at other European countries, in Italy and Spain, they don't have this kind of training and are starting now. They are much far behind. So if Bhutan can start to go in this direction to improve vocational training, they have a comparative advantage over the other countries. They need this investment in their training and education.

### How would the Bhutan - Helvetas relationship move forward?

We are now in a discussion phase and we see that our programmes are phasing out in the coming two years. Bhutan is for Helvetas an important country in the sense of our history. We were very strongly engaged in Bhutan for 40 years and we have an emotional bond. So we are discussing how it can go ahead and with how much money and in what fields we can proceed. Our board will decide after the evaluation in 2016 on how it will go ahead. I hope it will be positive and personally, it will be very positive to maintain a corporation with Bhutan.

For me, it's this combination of these different jobs. Now as an elder professional, I am coming back as the president of Helvetas and so the circle is closing and I am very happy with this situation.

### Which area of cooperation between Helvetas and Bhutan would you consider the most important?

I think all of them are important. The infrastructural work, bridge building is important for the population and our projects in forest development are still important as well rural development.

Bhutan is losing percentages of agricultural goods and importing more and more. So I think our work in rural economy is very important, but so is education. And now governance is important as well because the society is changing and you have new political structures. This is a process where both bodies have to learn to deal with the problems and how to govern