

PROJECT EXPERIENCE



A CSO stall at the CSO Fair (photo: Kunzang Dorji)

Informal groups and associations have traditionally existed in Bhutan while formally organised Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) with a legal status are a recent development. Apart from their individual engagements in social and economic activities in the country, the rise in number and diversity of CSOs in the country offers opportunities for networking, collaboration and joint initiatives. HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Bhutan and its partners are engaged in supporting and facilitating spaces and platforms for such networks to take place among CSOs in Bhutan.

Context

In 2007, the Civil Society Organizations Act of Bhutan was passed to facilitate the establishment and growth of civil society organizations (CSO) in the country. The Act identifies two types of formal CSOs: Public Benefit Organization and Mutual Benefit Organizations. Public Benefit Organizations are those which benefit a section of society or society in general and includes organizations that work on topics such as poverty reduction, women's empowerment, and promoting educational opportunities. Mutual Benefit Organizations are membership-based organizations that are formed to advance the common interests of members and include associations of artisans, tourism travel agencies, and industries.

In 2009, a CSO Authority was established to, among others, review and approve applications for registration of CSOs and to advise the government on the roles and activities of CSOs. Successful registration by the Authority means that a CSO will gain legal status, be eligible to raise funds, and be benefit from certain tax exemptions. Registration is also seen to enhance the portfolio of a CSO and gain recognition from state partners.

The Project

Support for Local Governance Project, funded by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, has 3 interlinked components:

- With increasingly more decentralization of powers and responsibilities to local governments, capacity development in management, facilitation, and long term planning are deemed important. Therefore, **capacity support for local governments** in 3 districts in the south and south eastern part of Bhutan is a priority.
- There is a positive environment for the emergence and growth of civil society organizations in the country. Building on this opportunity, **supporting and facilitating platforms for networking among CSOs, raising issues and concerns, and becoming recognised discussion partners of the state** are emerging topics of importance.
- The **engagement of citizens**, specifically through opportunities to participate in local governance, is of priority.

The Department of Local Governance, the CSO Authority, local governments, and formal and informal CSOs are important partners in the project.

Growing Numbers

With the passing of the CSO Act and the establishment of the CSO Authority, several individuals and groups were interested in establishing CSOs and seeking registration. The first one to do so was the Bhutan Center for Media and Democracy. Several small and emerging CSOs found it difficult to meet the registration requirements. At the same time, the Authority was stretched beyond its capacity to review all the proposals for registration and to support the registration process for individual CSOs. As a temporary measure, the project provided legal services through two local legal firms to support the Authority in examining proposals for registration and to advise CSOs on the various legal requirements for gaining a legal status.

There has now been a rise in the numbers of CSOs since 2009. Today, there are 33 registered formal CSOs in the country working on a wide range of topics: poverty reduction in rural areas, women's economic and social empowerment, associations and organizations focusing on a specific group of people (e.g. people living with HIV/AIDS, children and youth with disabilities, economically disadvantaged youth) or a specific topic (environment, media and democracy, health, music), and associations of people belonging to a particular business or trade. 26 of these 33 registered CSOs have used the services of the local legal firms.

Opening up Spaces

There are legally provided formal spaces for CSOs to interact with government agencies. The CSO Rules and Regulations 2010 mandate the CSO Authority to organize an annual face-to-face meeting between CSOs and government agencies. So far, this space has not been used. The members of the CSO Authority are two senior officials from the government, an eminent lawyer, and two elected representatives from among the CSOs. Such a composition of the Authority brings together senior government officials and CSO representatives. Although it is not clear how far such an arrangement has been used to augment the position of CSOs, it is a highly positive move that opens up opportunities for elected representatives from among the CSOs to participate in decisions that would affect all registered CSOs and also those seeking to register.

Apart from the formal and legally provided for spaces, what could be CSOs led options where they would be comfortable networking, sharing experiences and expressing themselves?

This was a question that led to monthly meetings among CSOs, joint trainings on common topics, and the idea of a "CSO Fair" and a common webpage for CSOs in Bhutan.

CSO Fair



Youth and Children at a CSO stall (Photo: Kunzang Dorji)

The Fair was conceptualized by CSOs to present themselves to the State, and the public in general. Each stall (a small white tent) showcased the objectives and work of a CSO through pictures, posters, products and face-to-face interactions. High level officials from the State with the Minister of Health as the Chief Guest, private sector representatives, donors, and the general public participated in the fair.

As a lead up to the fair, an essay contest was organized among youth and the public to reflect on the roles and potential roles that CSOs can play in society. Participation from youth was high in this contest.

It is difficult to assess the impact of such events and to judge whether the objectives were genuinely met. However, considering the short history of formal and organized civil society organizations in the country, the event contributed towards publicizing the work of existing CSOs and providing an opportunity to CSOs to present themselves as an emerging and important sector. There are also challenges of maintaining the momentum generated by such events. Specifically, the networking among CSOs is seen as an important element to carry on. Therefore, a CSO website has now been developed to provide at least one platform to network and raise common concerns and issues. As auspicious signs and dates are considered very important, the website was launched at the fair as well:

<http://www.bhutancsos.org/>

Objectives of the CSO Fair:

- To create awareness and understanding on the roles of CSOs
- To bring together CSOs in a common space