

Honourable Prime Minister, Lyonchen Tshering Tobgay,

Dignitaries from the Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in Bhutan

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to be a part of the celebrations for the 40 years of fruitful partnership between Helvetas and Bhutan. I'd like to extend my sincere gratitude to Helvetas for giving me an opportunity to be here today.

I was in class eight when I first heard the name 'Helvetas' because a friend's father worked there. Back then, all I remember thinking was that it's a pretty strange name. I was totally unaware of the impact Helvetas was making in the lives of our rural population, their relentless efforts in reducing poverty, and empowering and enabling our citizens to take our country's development forward.

I work at Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, a civil society organisation with a mandate to nurture a culture of democracy in Bhutan. To do this, one of BCMD's activities is to promote the role of civil society in Bhutan. The concept of civil society and its role in a democracy is relatively new. It's role is changing from voluntary and informal groups to an organized and regulated environment. Civil society contributes to a diversity of voices and the exchange and contest of ideas that are crucial to a democracy. Today, there are 45 registered CSOs, several non registered ones such as youth groups and associations as well as community based organizations spread across the country.

As an example of civil society action; I'd like to share a story of Ngawang, a youth initiative member, who advocated for buying local products. He and his friends convinced his school canteen to sell Bhutanese products and went on to lobby at other schools in Thimphu. With this experience, Ngawang and his friends started a Youth Co-op and although some of them are in college now, they continue to engage meaningfully.

Helvetas is supporting a project with a goal to strengthen civil society so that the sector can reach its full potential to play its role in a democracy. The project aims to enhance the understanding of civil society, promote meaningful networks and joint initiatives among different forms of civil society organizations. It also addresses common capacity challenges -

ultimately contributing towards a vibrant and meaningful civil society engagement in the country.

I'd like to emphasise how much we appreciate the work of Helvetas in Bhutan and pray that the partnership and friendship between Helvetas and Bhutan goes from strength to strength. Ultimately, that is what today's gathering here is all about – recognizing the vital role that Helvetas has played and still continue to do so in the lives of the many Bhutanese. Thank you and Tashi Delek!!