

**Address by Elmar Ledergerber,  
President of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation**

*The spoken word shall prevail*

Honorable Chief Guest, Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay

Honorable Chief Justice of Bhutan, Lyonpo Tshering Wangchuk

Honorable Ministers of the Royal Government of Bhutan, Honorable Members of Parliament

Dashos, ladies and gentlemen, friends of Switzerland and Helvetas!

It is a great pleasure for me as President of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation to celebrate with you forty years of development cooperation between Helvetas and Bhutan. As my previous speakers have pointed out, this cooperation is appreciated greatly by the Royal Government of Bhutan, The Federal Government of Switzerland and Helvetas. I personally agree – and would like to thank them for their kind words.

This year does not only mark forty years of cooperation with Bhutan. Helvetas also celebrates its sixtieth anniversary. We began our work as a small, privately funded organization in 1955 with activities in Nepal and Tunisia. Helvetas has strong roots in civil society. Among its idealistic founders were entrepreneurs and humanitarians, charitable Christians and peace activists, liberals and socialists. As a pioneer, Helvetas played a crucial role in the awareness raising process for development cooperation. Soon, the Swiss Government and many private organizations joined the effort. Today, Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation is the largest independent Swiss development organization with activities in more than thirty countries. It is committed to improving the living conditions of disadvantaged people in rural parts of Africa, Asia, South and Central America and Eastern Europe. And it is an advocate for the concerns of developing countries and their poor populations within Switzerland.

Helvetas' engagement in Bhutan began in 1975. Back then, activities focused on gid disease control in yaks, dairy farming, forestry and health care in Bumthang. The program later expanded to potato and fodder seed production, building of suspension bridges, education, small enterprise promotion in rural areas and good governance. The exhibition celebrating forty years of cooperation inaugurated today does, however, treat neither. Instead, it is about "*Tradition and Innovation in Architecture*". Why this topic? – I wondered. Perhaps because *buildings* and the *task of building* embody many aspects of development cooperation.

An architect faces many *constraints*. He has to adapt creatively to circumstances. Financial means are limited. Building materials may be hard to come by. His designs must be aligned to the skills of the artisans available. The building (s)he is planning has to be practical, but also appealing. It should be easy to service and maintain without the need for specialists. These challenges are indeed very similar to those of development cooperation. Let us look back to the earliest of Helvetas' projects, dairy farming and the production of cheese. First of all, there was not enough milk. Hence, the fodder base had to be improved and cows were imported from a Swiss supported breeding project in India. Farmers then had to be instructed in livestock husbandry. Cheese dairies needed to be simple. They had to work without

electricity and the apparatus had to be robust and easy to maintain and repair. Bhutanese cheese makers did not yet exist, so they had to be trained. And finally, the product, rich in proteins and tasty, had to be marketed. Eventually, the trade took root: the first cheese dairies initiated by the Swiss still exist today, as private enterprises.

The process of building is characterized by *cooperation* between people of distinctive skills. Architects, engineers and foreman lead the women and men at work. Masons build walls, electricians fix installations, pipes are laid by plumbers and plasterers fettle walls. This workplace is inclusive: everyone has his task and is important to the completion of the building. Thus, a construction site serves as a model for society with responsible leaders and an active citizenry. Helvetas strongly emphasizes education and skills formation as means of economic, social and political inclusion. This is why it has supported primary and secondary education as well as well as vocational education and training in Bhutan. Helvetas is also aware that capable planners and leaders are needed for nation building. Hence, it supports the country in its efforts to strengthen local government and engages in capacity building of the civil society – their leaders are, of course, also shapers of the nation.

Eventually, buildings are *places for living, working and learning*. Every household, office or school knows implicit and explicit sets of rules of conduct. In societies, these rules are generally referred to as institutions. Good political institutions enable citizens to partake in the democratic process, to elect their representatives, and replace them. In consequence, politicians plan for the provision of basic services and infrastructures, such as law and order, roads, access to schooling and skills or healthcare. Bhutan has undertaken an impressive transformation towards a parliamentary monarchy. This process has been accompanied by further institutional reforms. Steps towards decentralization have been taken and an independent judiciary has been set up. Helvetas, together with SDC, support Bhutan in these endeavors.

Buildings and the process of building inform us about overcoming development constraints and the importance of cooperation. Household rules for living together bare similarities to the institutions of the state. But how do the forces of tradition and innovation affect a developing society? Earlier, Mr. Pfeiffer has expressed his admiration for the traditional houses of rural Bhutan. They are indeed beautiful. While walking through Thimpu yesterday, I noticed that many of the new concrete buildings bear ornaments emulating the traditional style. Perhaps, I thought, they hint at a conflicting relationship between tradition and modernity.

This conflict is in fact familiar for a citizen of Switzerland. Towards the end of my tenure as Mayor of the city of Zurich, the construction of a new skyscraper sparked quite some debate about the changing – the modernizing – cityscape. This is but a mild expression of a pervasive sentiment among the Swiss that has existed at least since the industrial revolution: that progress might be too fast. That it might strip us of our sense of identity. And yet, we are tempted by the lures of modernity.

Tradition and progress are the “charges” of the poles that set the course of development. The two forces create a productive suspense. In my opinion, this becomes visible in the exhibition “Tradition and Innovation in Architecture” which commemorates the 40 years anniversary of development partnership with Bhutan. The buildings portrayed are unequivocally Bhutanese by design. But for their construction,

new technologies have been introduced. These have been crucial in order to provide adequate infrastructures for the schools, training facilities, colleges and hospitals they inhabit. The function of these institutions, which are the accomplishment of the cooperation between Helvetas and Bhutan, are distinctively those of a modern society.

“A state without the means of change” the conservative philosopher Edmund Burke proclaimed, “is without the means of its conservation.” In the past 40 years, your country did have the means of change. The architecture on display is emblematic of evolving Bhutan, which has always conserved its identity.

Thank you and Tashi Delek