



འབྲུག་གྲོས་འཛུལ་

# BHUTAN: BIODEMOCRACY & RESILIENCE

#bhutanbbr2020

(With a focus on pathways to resilience  
in the face of cross-sectoral and regional  
effects of the coronavirus pandemic)

Proceedings of the Second Bhutan  
Biodemocracy and Resilience Conference  
held in Thimphu on December 21-22, 2020

CENTRE FOR THE  
STUDY OF  
DEMOCRACY

UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTMINSTER

ས་གནས་གཞུང་སྐོང་དང་ཞིབ་འཛུལ་སྒྲིལ་

Center for Local Governance & Research

[www.clgbhutan.com](http://www.clgbhutan.com)





འབྲུག་གྲོས་འཛམས།

# BHUTAN: BIODEMOCRACY & RESILIENCE

#bhutanbbr2020

(With a focus on pathways to resilience  
in the face of cross-sectoral and regional  
effects of the coronavirus pandemic)

Proceedings of the Second Bhutan  
Biodemocracy and Resilience Conference  
held in Thimphu on December 21-22, 2020

CENTRE FOR THE  
STUDY OF  
DEMOCRACY

UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTMINSTER

ས་གནས་གཞུང་སྐྱོང་དང་ཞིབ་འཛེལ་སྒྲེབ།

Center for Local Governance & Research

[www.clgbhutan.com](http://www.clgbhutan.com)





zoom









## Table of Contents

<b>PREFACE .....</b>	<b>1</b>
----------------------	----------

### **WELCOME NOTE**

<b>MR THARCHEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CENTRE FOR LOCAL GOVERNANCE &amp; RESEARCH .....</b>	<b>1</b>
--	----------

### **KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

<b>HONOURABLE LYONPO UGYEN DORJI, MINISTER FOR LABOUR AND HUMAN RESOURCES .....</b>	<b>3</b>
---	----------

DAY 1: DECEMBER 21, 2020

<b>SESSION 1: PANEL ON ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE .....</b>	<b>7</b>
--	----------

*Moderator: Ms. Namgay Choden, Foreign Service Officer, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Panelists: Mr Gopal Giri, Director of Department of Macroeconomic Research and Statistics at the Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan; Ms Pem Lama, Director of Landscapes Enterprise Agriculture and Forest (LEAF) Programme with Bhutan Ecological Society; Ani Chopal Palmo, Nun.*

<b>SESSION 2: PANEL ON VOLUNTEERISM AND PUBLIC HEALTH .....</b>	<b>24</b>
---	-----------

*Moderator: Dr Karma Tenzin, Assistant Professor and Deputy Dean of Academic Affairs with Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences. Panelists: Mr Sherub Dorji, reporter with Bhutan Broadcasting Service; Dr Chhimi Wangmo, Ophthalmologist in Gelephu Regional Referral Hospital; Mr Tshering Wangchen, program officer of Chithuen Phendhey Association & regional coordinator for Desuup regional office in Mongar.*

<b>SESSION 3: PANEL ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT .....</b>	<b>38</b>
---	-----------

*Moderator: Mr Lekey Wangdi, local governance advisor with HELVETAS Country Office in Bhutan. Panelists: Mr Tshering Dorji, Gup, Shari Gewog and Chairperson of the Paro District Council; Mr Phub Dorji, Chief Election Officer, Election Commission of Bhutan; Ms Pema Lhamo, Mangmi of Nubi Gewog, Trongsa.*

DAY 2: DECEMBER 22, 2020

**SESSION 1: PANEL ON AGRICULTURE .....50**

*Moderator: Mr Nima, Honourable member of National Council of Bhutan (NC).*

*Panelists: Mr Sherab Wangchuk, a senior planning officer, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests; Mr Nima Lama, commercial farmer; Mr Naiten Wangchuk, the Chief Executive Officer, Food Corporation of Bhutan.*

**SESSION 2: PANEL ON EMPLOYMENT,  
HYDROPOWER AND TOURISM .....64**

*Moderator: Mr Jigme Rinzin, former National Council (NC) Member from Pemagatshel. Panelists: Mr Damcho Rinzin, Head of Tourism Promotion*

*Division, Tourism Council of Bhutan; Ms Tashi Dema, Assignment Editor, Kuensel newspaper; Mr Tempa Dorji, Honorable National Council (NC) member.*

**ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION**

**MODERATOR: MR SANGAY KHANDU, CENTRE FOR LOCAL  
GOVERNANCE & RESEARCH .....76**

**OVERVIEW AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

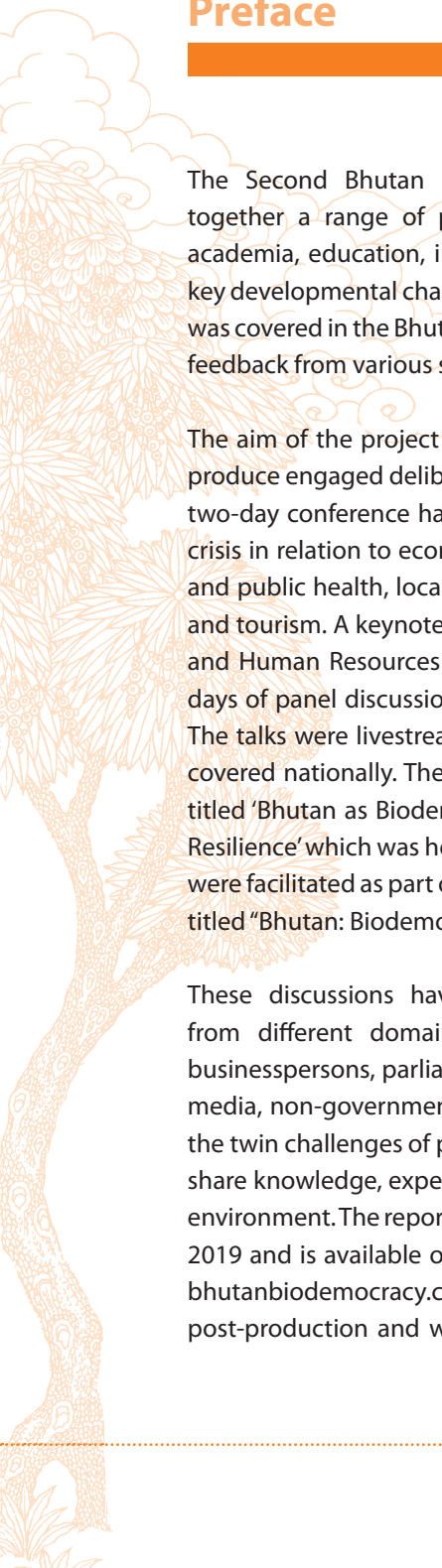
**DR NITASHA KAUL, CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF DEMOCRACY,  
UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER .....81**

**PROFILE OF MODERATORS AND SPEAKERS .....92**






## Preface



The Second Bhutan Biodemocracy and Resilience Conference brought together a range of people from politics, civil society, media, business, academia, education, industry, agriculture in multiple panels to discuss the key developmental challenges in the context of the pandemic. The conference was covered in the Bhutanese media and received an overwhelmingly positive feedback from various sectors of society and on social media.

The aim of the project was to bring together key stakeholders in Bhutan to produce engaged deliberations and reports that can guide policymaking. The two-day conference had panel discussions on the effects of the coronavirus crisis in relation to economic vulnerability and climate change, volunteerism and public health, local governments, agriculture, employment, hydropower and tourism. A keynote address from Lyonpo Ugyen Dorji, Minister of Labour and Human Resources of the Royal Government of Bhutan, began the two days of panel discussions on the pandemic, public policy and development. The talks were livestreamed and watched by thousands of people and were covered nationally. The BBR 2020 conference built upon the first conference titled 'Bhutan as Biodemocracy: Building Socioeconomic and Environmental Resilience' which was held in July 2019. The BBR conferences in 2019 and 2020 were facilitated as part of Dr Nitasha Kaul's Global Challenges Research project titled "Bhutan: Biodemocracy and Resilience (2019-2021).

These discussions have brought together a wide range of Bhutanese from different domains of life – scholars, policymakers, professionals, businesspersons, parliamentarians, teachers, entrepreneurs, citizens active in media, non-governmental and civil society sector, students – to think about the twin challenges of politics and ecology in relation to development, and to share knowledge, experience and learning in a cooperative and non-partisan environment. The report from the first conference was published in September 2019 and is available online along with all the video proceedings at <https://bhutanbiodemocracy.com/archive/> The 2020 conference video archive is in post-production and will soon be made public. We have made progress in





capacity-building, institutional linkages, and knowledge production over the course of the project so far, and will continue to build on this. The sessions in December 2020 brought together perspectives of a diverse range of people -- policymakers, bureaucrats, local government officials, farmers, medics, entrepreneurs, frontline volunteers -- to provide original reflections on the cross-sectoral effects of the pandemic.

Following on from this, Dr Nitasha Kaul (CSD) as principal investigator and Mr Sangay Khandu (CLG) as co-investigator are working on a further Arts and Humanities Research Council project with a special focus on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 12) on responsible production and consumption.

We are encouraged by the ways in which Bhutan can be an exemplar of meaningful and holistic development. To this end, we hope to collaboratively and deliberately generate knowledge that can have an impact in policymaking, and to create opportunities for learning and reflection, so as to provide a useful archive and legacy for the future.

Tashi Delek!

Nitasha, Sangay, and Tharchen (co-organisers)

April 2021





## Welcome note by Mr Tharchen, Executive Director, Centre for Local Governance & Research



The Executive Director of Centre for Local Governance and Research (CLG), Mr Tharchen, welcomed the Chief Guest His Excellency Lyonpo Ugyen Dorji, Minister for Labour and Human Resources, speakers, and participants to the Second Biodemocracy Conference 2020. He expressed his gratitude to the Minister for graciously agreeing to be the Keynote Speaker and set the tone for the two-day online conference.

Mr Tharchen informed the participants that the annual Biodemocracy Conference is an important collaboration central to the partnership between CLG and the Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD), University of Westminster in the United Kingdom. He mentioned that the first Biodemocracy Conference was successfully organised in July 2019, thanks to Professor Dr Nitasha Kaul of University of Westminster who took the lead role in making the conference possible and fostering this special partnership. He said that CLG looks forward to continued linkage between policy and academic discourses in the future under the flagship of this partnership.

Speaking of COVID-19 impact, Mr Tharchen said that millions of people across the world have died and millions more are suffering globally due to the COVID-19 pandemic and currently the entire world is confronted with unprecedented challenges - politically, economically and socially. *"The virus has exposed vulnerabilities in governance, health system, food security and employment sectors, to name few."*

He mentioned that the Bhutanese people were fortunate to have His Majesty the King, who provided wise leadership and guidance to the government and the people during these challenging times. He said that



complacency is neither an option nor an alternative in the midst of this pandemic, and as such, there is a strong need to reflect and prepare to recover from this global pandemic.

Mr Tharchen pointed out that it is critical for everyone to engage in serious discourse and debate on how to tackle the challenges and leverage the opportunities provided by this pandemic. He concluded by stating that toward this end, the Biodemocracy Conference has brought together 15 exceptional speakers, five moderators and three organisers to deliberate on five different thematic areas over the next two days.



## Keynote address by Honourable Lyonpo Ugyen Dorji, Minister for Labour and Human Resources



The Chief Guest, Honourable Minister for Labour and Human Resources, Lyonpo Ugyen Dorji, gave the keynote address, calling the conference a wonderful platform to share ideas, experiences, craft solutions, and reflect on the way forward, out of the pandemic situation. He described this collaboration between a local Bhutanese and a UK university academic as a “wonderful initiative” toward sharing Bhutan’s narrative to the world and engaging in public discourse that would ultimately lead to better decision-making, both at the government and individual levels.

The Honourable Minister said that although the Coronavirus took some time to reach Bhutan, when it arrived, no one can ever really be prepared for a crisis of such an unprecedented nature. Lyonpo Ugyen Dorji said that His Majesty’s leadership was a ray of hope in the middle of this pandemic. He reiterated that His Majesty the King’s admirable leadership filled people with a sense of security and comfort, and hope and enthusiasm despite the huge challenges the country was preparing for. He said that His Majesty led the nation in the fight against the Coronavirus, touring the country, inspecting the borders in the south and the north, and personally overseeing the accelerated Desuung Programme. *“At the same time, people from all walks of life - private businesses, individuals, government agencies - came together to join His Majesty the King in fighting the pandemic.”*

The Minister stated that since it cannot be predicted when the next pandemic would strike again, the only defense was to stay prepared - learning from the current experiences and addressing the shortcomings and challenges. *“How do we build back better? How do we make ourselves resilient in the face of difficulties like these, in the face of a pandemic situation like this?”*



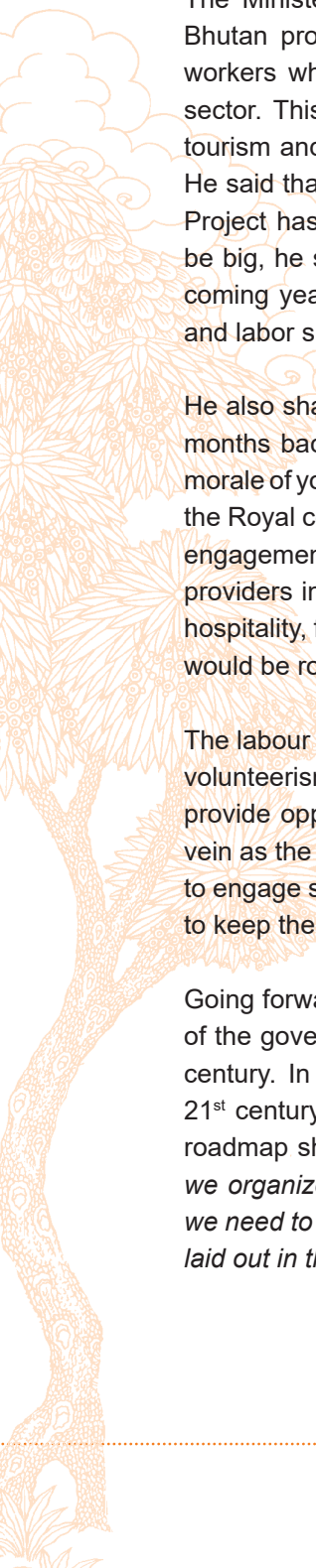


He suggested that a good place to start would be by addressing the loopholes in the system. He pointed out that Bhutan's economy is import driven and hydropower dependent. It is also dependent on foreign workers. He highlighted that one of the immediate impacts of the closure of the international borders was the shortage of foreign workers in the country, which almost brought the economy to a grinding halt. *"We import about 50,000 foreign workers annually. The border closure that happened at a time when foreign workers were supposed to enter the country affected the constructor sector, nearly bringing it to a halt."*

Lyonpo Ugyen Dorji said that other sectors such as manufacturing were also affected due to labor shortage while imports of commodities and essentials encountered numerous challenges. He said that although measures were put in place to ensure continuous flow of goods in and out of the country, the country is still unable to trade in volumes that would normally be required for the economy to function in normal circumstances. He said that the biggest impact of the Coronavirus has been on the public health infrastructure, economy, and unemployment situation in the country. In concrete terms, the Minister said that close to 50,000 Bhutanese are unemployed so far, including thousands of graduates entering the labour market. He said that it would be difficult for thousands of graduates coming out of schools and colleges to find hope and optimism. He said that this would create a dangerous situation to have a generation of young people start out in life with a sense of pessimism and desperation. *"It is exactly this group of people that we have to be mindful of. We must find ways to give them hope."*

The Minister said that in a situation where problems must be tackled head-on, on a daily basis, it often becomes difficult to come up with concrete solutions and strategies – one fixed solution or way forward. *"What is more important is to give hope and optimism to the younger generation to help them start out on a firm footing. Without optimism, dynamism, and that sense of drive among our youth, it is going to be very difficult for us because ultimately whether we are talking about economy, governance or any issue that the country faces, it has to boil down to its human capital."*





The Minister informed that the labor ministry came up with the Build Bhutan project to fill in the vacancy created by some 50,000 foreign workers who couldn't come to the country to work in the construction sector. This was an opportunity for people who were laid off from the tourism and hospitality sector and other sectors that are not doing well. He said that in the last four or five months since its commencement, the Project has attracted about 1,000 graduates. While this figure may not be big, he said that the ministry hopes to attract thousands more in the coming years, and to an extent address the problem of unemployment and labor shortage.

He also shared that His Majesty had commanded the government a few months back to come up with an engagement programme to boost the morale of youth and to give them reasons for hope and optimism. Following the Royal command, the labour ministry has been working on developing engagement and skilling programme in collaboration with private training providers in areas of ICT (Information and Communication Technology), hospitality, food and beverages, and so on. The mass skilling programme would be rolled out next year.

The labour ministry is also working on capitalizing the spirit of Bhutanese volunteerism. The Minister said that the plan is to tap this potential and provide opportunities for people to volunteer their services in the same vein as the United Nations Volunteers programme. The programme aims to engage some 10,000 to 20,000 youth over the course of next one year to keep them engaged and contribute towards nation-building.

Going forward, Lyonpo Ugyen Dorji highlighted that one of the key tasks of the government is to chart out a clear economic roadmap for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In fact, the government has been working on developing the 21<sup>st</sup> century economic road map for the last one year. He said that the roadmap should provide a lot of answers to questions such as: *How do we organize our economy? How do we organize our society? What do we need to do in order to fulfill the aspiration and the vision that would be laid out in the roadmap?*



The Minister said that in the context of human capital development – be it educating and skilling the people, reforming policies and regulations, or looking for new solutions in line with 21<sup>st</sup> century needs – the roadmap will provide the vision and direction by the coming year.

In concluding, the Honourable Minister said that subjects such as climate change and economic vulnerability, volunteerism, public health, agriculture, hydropower, tourism, and employment are worth pursuing and that the outcomes of the two-day conference would influence public opinion and provide meaningful ideas and insights to the government.

“I must congratulate all the speakers speaking on teams from climate change to economic vulnerability, volunteerism, public health, agriculture, hydropower, tourism, employment. I think all these are subjects that are worth pursuing. And I hope the outcomes of the deliberations and the discussions that will continue for the next two days will influence the public opinion, will give the government in particular the initiative, plus some ideas, some insights and some hope that despite this very grim situation that we are in currently, we still have a way forward, if you all work together and working together. I think the discourse like this is the first step of working together to build a nation that is stronger and better once the pandemic is over,” he said.

He thanked CLG and CSD, University of Westminster and said, “I hope the outcomes of the deliberations and the discussions that will continue for the next two days will influence the public opinion, give the government in particular and the nation at large, some ideas, some insights, some hope that despite this very grim situation that we are in currently, we still have a way forward if we all work together. And in working together, I think a discourse like this is a first step to working together to build a nation that is stronger and better once this pandemic is over”.



Day 1: December 21, 2020

## SESSION 1: Panel on Economic Vulnerability and Climate Change

*(Mr Gopal Giri, Director of Department of Macroeconomic Research and Statistics at the Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan; Ms Pem Lama, Director of Landscapes Enterprise Agriculture and Forest (LEAF) Programme with Bhutan Ecological Society; Ani Chopal Palmo, Nun)*



Moderator, Ms Namgay Choden, welcomed the speakers to the inaugural session of the Biodemocracy Conference 2020. She is a civil servant, who is interested in innovation in the government and creation of knowledge networks. She is also a Global Shaper, an initiative of the World Economic Forum and a climate reality leader.

While economic vulnerability and climate crisis are two issues that are complexly related, the Moderator said that it is not new to Bhutanese people since Bhutan's development philosophy has always looked at economic development and growth holistically or as His Majesty the King has said, "Development with values". The Moderator said that the panelists comprising an economist, an environmentalist and a Buddhist practitioner would explore these issues.

Mr Gopal Giri, Director of Department of Macroeconomic Research and Statistics at the Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan, spoke on the current state of the Bhutanese economy, Bhutan's path towards a green transition, particularly of financial sectors and the current challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Ms Pem Lama, Director of Landscapes Enterprise Agriculture and Forest (LEAF) Programme with Bhutan Ecological Society, spoke on how economic growth and climate change are deeply interrelated. And the final speaker, Ani Chophal Palmo, who is currently based at the Kuenga Rabten Nunnery in Trongsa, spoke on ethics, interdependence and climate change.



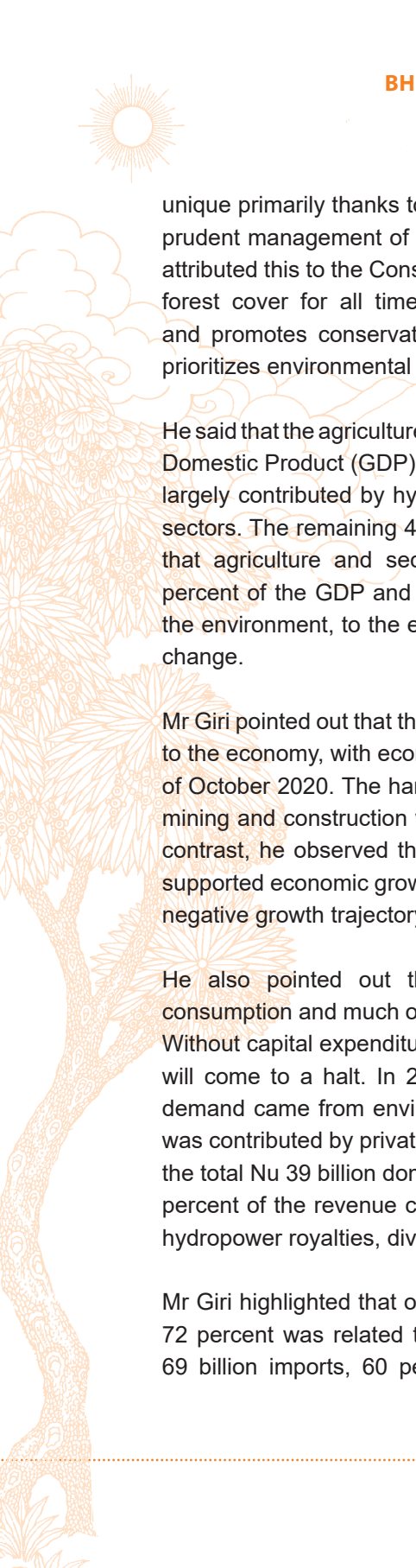
### Presentation by Speakers

**Mr Gopal Giri, Director of Department of Macroeconomic Research and Statistics, Royal Monetary Authority of Bhutan**

Mr Gopal Giri started by discussing how democracy and economic development are interrelated and how climate change impacts both. He said that democracy is an important institution that fosters institutional changes and creates new opportunities for economic development by facilitating and increasing the efficiency of the factors of production, leading to economic transformation. He said that democracy creates good institutions for economic development and progress and in the same way, economic development supports democracy, with economic stability leading to political stability, income equality, and higher per capita income - all of which are good enabling environment for democracy to flourish. Climate change poses a threat to both the institutions.

Reflecting on Bhutan's journey of economic transformation since 1960s, Mr Giri opined that Bhutan's economy is supposed to be somewhere between secondary and tertiary sector. However, data reveals that the primary sector continues to employ a huge number of labour force, an indication that the shift in the factors of production has not taken place in Bhutan's case. Further, Bhutan's economy is also driven by other factors like hydropower and tourism.

Mr Giri pointed out that economic degradation would definitely be higher in a pre-industrial phase but decreases as the economy develops over time. In fact, many countries in the world and the region are experiencing economic degradation. However, Bhutan's case has been



unique primarily thanks to the farsighted leadership of the Kings and the prudent management of the environment and natural resources. Mr Giri attributed this to the Constitution that mandates a minimum of 60 percent forest cover for all times to come, Buddhist principles that supports and promotes conservation and GNH based development model that prioritizes environmental conservation.

He said that the agriculture sector constitutes about 16 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) followed by 36 percent of the secondary sector largely contributed by hydropower and construction related hydropower sectors. The remaining 46 percent constitute the service sector. He said that agriculture and secondary sectors combined together share 52 percent of the GDP and both these sectors are closely associated with the environment, to the extent that the economy is vulnerable to climate change.

Mr Giri pointed out that the recent COVID pandemic has come as a shock to the economy, with economic growth recording negative 6.1 percent as of October 2020. The hardest hit sectors mainly tourism, manufacturing, mining and construction were the key drivers of this negative growth. In contrast, he observed that hydropower and agriculture sectors actually supported economic growth and helped the economy avert a double-digit negative growth trajectory.

He also pointed out that Bhutan's economy is largely driven by consumption and much of the consumption is driven by the public sector. Without capital expenditure in the government, private sector investment will come to a halt. In 2019, roughly 70 percent of the total domestic demand came from environment related sectors and 80 percent of this was contributed by private sector alone. In terms of domestic revenue, of the total Nu 39 billion domestic revenue (excluding the grant) in 2019, 45 percent of the revenue came from environment related sectors such as hydropower royalties, dividend, and sustainable development fees.

Mr Giri highlighted that of the Nu 49 billion worth export in 2019, almost 72 percent was related to environment export to India while of the Nu 69 billion imports, 60 percent was non-environment related. "On one






*hand we are trying to promote environment related sectors and on other hand we are importing non-environment related imports. That's why we need to be careful how we manage both our production and consumption function."* Further, Mr Giri highlighted that of the total 198 billion external debt, 97 percent is related to environment, and if anything goes wrong in the environment policy, the country would be hit hard based on the macro fundamentals.

Mr Giri said that COVID has exposed the economic vulnerabilities and given a strong push factor to make the economy resilient. Identifying unemployment as one of major economic vulnerabilities in the context of a young demographic profile of the country, he emphasized the need to create a promising future for the youth through economic approaches. Discussing the role of RMA in economic development, Mr Giri said that since April 2020 till date, the financial sector has provided Nu 15 billion new loans to support economic activities in productive sectors. Currently, most credits are allocated to building and construction followed by trade and commerce and service and tourism sectors, including personal consumption loans. Agriculture had received the least amount of credit. Mr Giri pointed out that RMA has been looking at diverting some of the productive resources to important sectors that can create employment through financial policy. To that end, RMA has undertaken numerous initiatives such as green finance, *jabchor*, Impact Investments and e-commerce trading platforms.

He shared that the inspiration for green finance was drawn from G20 summit during the UN Conference. Out of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), SDG 12 promotes responsible production and consumption which is in line with GNH principles. Around 80 central banks around the world had taken up the initiative through the Alliance for Inclusion (AFI). He said that the main objective of Green Finance is to promote profitable investments in sustainable development initiatives, environmental products, and development of a sustainable green economy and at the same time create more employment. He said that the roadmap for green finance is currently in the draft stage.





Mr Giri explained that the green finance framework has been drawn from international principles based on 4Ps – Provision, Promotion, Protection and Prevention: Provision of credit by banks and financial institutions to environmental friendly investment areas under the initiative taken by the government; promotion includes incentives provided to green investments; protection includes policies to reduce financial risks, and prevention included policies to avoid undesirable outcomes.

He added that Green Finance has three pillars - i) Governance and coordination ii) Environment and social management, and iii) Promoting Green Finance Flows. For the first pillar, the government is setting a cross-sector committee that will identify key priorities and sync them with national objectives, and develop operational standards and procedures. The second pillar looks at promoting green finance, green insurance, and green investments through banks and financial institutions. The third pillar concerns resource mobilization platforms and opportunities.

Mr Giri said that Bhutan has a lot of advantage on this front since it can be a leader in promoting green finance. *“Most Nordic countries are very keen on making investments in green initiatives and Bhutan has already established a standard benchmark at international level. We can attract more investments to promote green initiatives.”*

Mr Giri pointed out that while Bhutanese are good planners, implementation is a major challenge. He said that Bhutanese values such as *driglam namzha* (social etiquettes), compassion, dedication and commitment must be applied while implementing economic development initiatives as well. He added that there is also a need to reorient the development model based on green principles. He concluded stating that Bhutan needs a clear roadmap for economic development and how to attain a green and digital economy over the long term.



**Ms Pem Lama, Director of Landscapes Enterprise Agriculture and Forest (LEAF) Programme, Bhutan Ecological Society**

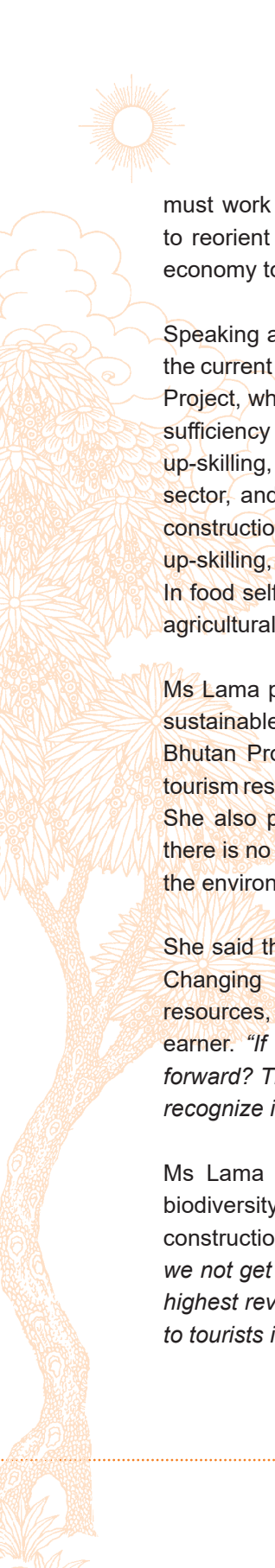
Ms Pema Lama expanded on the linkage between economy and environment and the interrelationship between climate change and building economic resilience. Her presentation touched on Bhutan's geographic and economic realities, climate vulnerabilities, and building economic resilience in the context of COVID as well as other vulnerabilities and realities.

Speaking about geographic and economic realities of Bhutan, Ms Lama pointed out that Bhutan is a small, developing landlocked country situated between two giants, with a small economy that is not very competitive. She said that Bhutan's economy is consumption driven, with little production capacity and its precarious mountainous landscape is prone to landslides.

Bhutan also has many glaciers and glacial lakes, which are vulnerable to climate change realities. She stressed that glacial lakes, if or when they are impacted by climate change, would be one of the greatest threats of Bhutan's geographical reality on the population and the economy. Further, Bhutan is also heavily dependent on some climate sensitive economic sectors such as hydropower and agriculture. Ms. Lama said that while hydropower is the highest revenue generator, agriculture employs a vast majority of Bhutanese population and both these big sectors are linked to climate change realities.

Ms Lama pointed out that with rising temperature, land degradation, soil erosion, flash floods, and droughts, including water scarcity, thunderstorms, pests and diseases have already been reported in some parts of the country. She said that climate change can give rise to new pests and diseases and some could be novel like Coronavirus with devastating impacts.

Ms Lama explained that economy has always been given more importance than climate and environment in the current conversation. While economy



must work to solve poverty and other pressing issues, there is a need to reorient how people think to accommodate environment, peace and economy to build economic and climate resilience.

Speaking about Economic Contingency Plan, Ms Lama pointed out that the current recovery efforts are focused on three big sectors: Build Bhutan Project, which focuses on construction; tourism resilience; and food self-sufficiency or agriculture. Build Bhutan project is focused on reskilling, up-skilling, engaging youth, and providing employment in the construction sector, and also as a measure to solve some of the constraints in the construction sector. In tourism resilience, the focus is on reskilling and up-skilling, and generating employment in the system, among others. In food self-sufficiency, the focus is on increasing production of different agricultural and livestock products.

Ms Lama pointed out that in all these three projects, climate change or sustainable development has not been factored in. For instance, Build Bhutan Project doesn't talk about sustainable building materials while tourism resilience fails to reflect the link between tourism and environment. She also pointed out that in terms of food sufficiency and agriculture, there is no mention of agro-forestry system practices, which are good for the environment and climate change.

She said that climate reality and economic recovery are closely related. Changing hydrological or rainfall patterns can severely impact water resources, and in Bhutan, hydropower generation is the biggest revenue earner. *"If it's impacted, what is the alternative and how do we move forward? This is something we don't talk about very much. Or even if we recognize it, we don't actively try to mitigate it."*

Ms Lama said that climate realities would affect agriculture, forests, biodiversity and natural resources and hence economic sectors – be it construction, agriculture, consumption and even tourism. *"Not only will we not get the sustainable development fee, which is one of the second highest revenue earner for Bhutan but Bhutan will also be less attractive to tourists if we are not as clean or as green or sustainable as we are."*



Ms Lama pointed out that adaptation and mitigation are the way forward for a sustainable future. She added that in the context of hydropower, adaptation would mean exploring alternative energy such as solar, wind and biogas. Adaptation in agriculture would require understanding how climate is going to change in specific areas in Bhutan and how crops would be affected and what innovation and technology can be used to adapt to climate change realities in agriculture.

She said that while it is difficult to prevent climate change from really happening, what can be done is mitigate or reduce the impacts of climate change. This has a lot of relevance in the construction sector, using energy efficiency building materials, and building climate resilient infrastructure. Ms Lama stated that as Bhutan reinvests in rebooting the economy, it is important to think where to invest. As a consumption-led economy, Bhutan imports a wide range of commodities that really do not generate much value in terms of economy, jobs and food. She said that it is important to ask if the investment areas are sustainable, job generating sectors, or climate resilient sectors. She also highlighted the need to build skills in the face of climate change realities and create sustainable, gainful employment for Bhutanese.



**Ani Chophal Palmo, Nun, Kuenga Rabten Nunnery, Trongsa**

Ani Chophal Palmo started by explaining how unity was crucial in the fight against the deadly virus and how it enabled His Majesty the King and frontline workers to combat the pandemic.

Quoting an example from the Dalai Lama's book, *Beyond Religion*, where His Holiness offers an analogy of tea and water to explain religion and ethics, she said that religion is like tea and people can survive without it but ethics is like water, and without it, there is no possibility of survival. "*Ethics is not something that is limited to spirituality, love, respect, empathy, and compassion, consideration for others.*" Ani Palmo stressed that ethical guides are actually basic necessities for survival and that each individual is born with these qualities. A certain degree of training or practice maybe required to manifest and expand these qualities.



She added that ethics plays a crucial role in mitigating the environmental crisis confronting the world today and shape attitudes and actions that create the world people live in. *“Therefore, if you wish to help others, it’s crucial that the change begins from ourselves first.”*

Of the many factors contributing to environmental crisis, Ani Palmo identified two that were definite causes: first, being ignorant or lack of access to knowledge about the situation, and second, knowing but not taking responsibility, which is the worst. She said that humans need a wakeup call every once in a while and this pandemic is one of them.

Ani Palmo said that the pandemic has made it obvious how everything is linked to one another, and how one careless, irresponsible move can affect many lives. She added that people’s lives, their very existence is dependent on the external world. Ani Palmo used the Buddhist term ‘Nejay’ to explain the interdependent nature of the world. She said that the world is like a container and the inhabitants, the content. When one is affected, it has a direct impact on the other, for instance when natural calamities like earthquakes affect the container, the contents are naturally affected. Likewise, when the contents are corrosive, it affects the container, which is what’s happening to the world these days.

She said that as many countries imposed lockdown to combat the pandemic, the quality of air and water improved and this gives hope to humanity that the earth can actually heal if it is treated with more kindness.

She added that while things are good in Bhutan, there is room for improvement. She added that Bhutanese people should from time to time remind themselves how fortunate they are to be born in Bhutan since as creatures of nature people easily forget and cease to appreciate the things that they have until it is too late.

Bringing the conversation back to the topic of ethics, Ani Palmo said that when people develop a deeper understanding of how they are all connected, they develop love, respect, and consideration for a wider



audience, and in the process, selfish attitudes disappear naturally. *“Thus, we learn to take responsibility for the actions we perform and consider the consequences in the long run that may affect all of us.”*

Ani Palmo stressed that the ripple effects of the collective actions of 7 billion humans, be it good or bad, would be phenomenal. She said that everyone should take responsibility and do their part, and in so doing, it will create far-reaching impact on the whole planet.

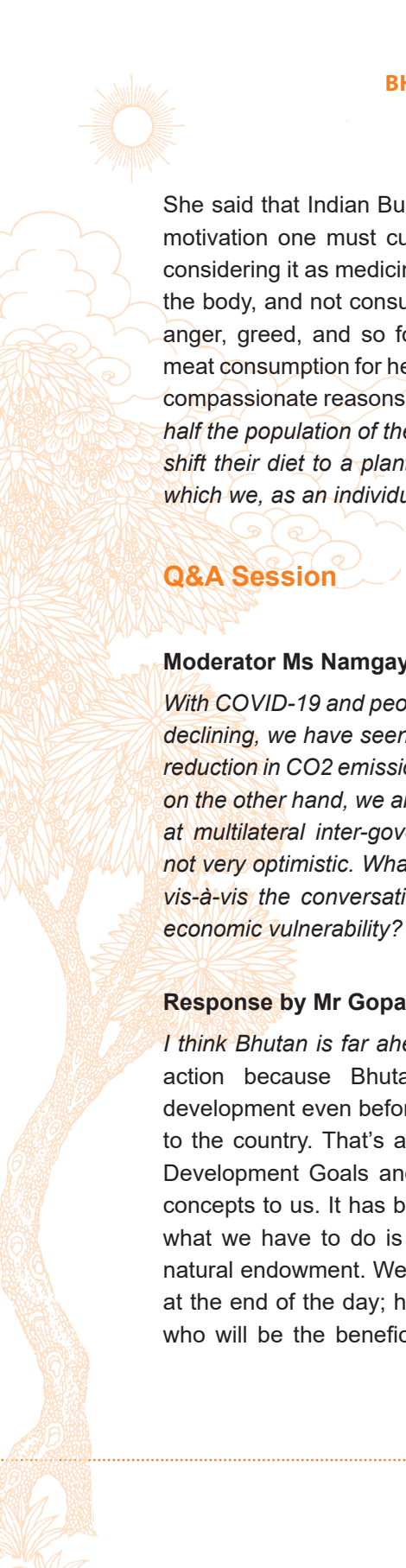
She said that consumption of meat, dairy products, plastics, and food waste are some of the major contributors to global warming. Waste and plastics are emerging problems in Bhutan as well and there is a need for an alternative. *“From both general and Buddhist perspectives, I feel that we can contribute a lot to our planet if we limit our meat and dairy consumption and also consumerism, which has become one of the greatest problems.”*

Ani Palmo quoted His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwang Karmapa, who is also an environmental activist:

*“In our modern world, consumerism has become the new religion on which we place our faith. Consequently, we see no difference between what we need and what we want. We actually need very little but we want everything. A scientist has explained that we could have three or four planets, and this would still not be enough to satisfy our desires. This creates a very difficult situation since our wants have no limit, but natural resources have limits and cannot possibly fulfill our desires. Therefore, we have to be more content with what we have.”*

Ani Palmo explained that to be content is to maintain a proper balance between the outer material world and the inner world. No matter how much material wealth people may have, if that's going to disconnect them from the inner world, they will still live in poverty, she said, and this directly contradicts the GNH principles.





She said that Indian Buddhist master Nagarjuna had long explained the motivation one must cultivate while eating, which is, to consume food considering it as medicine and for the sole purpose of the nourishment of the body, and not consume with negative emotions such as attachment, anger, greed, and so forth. She suggested that people should reduce meat consumption for health reasons and consideration for other's life, for compassionate reasons. *"Imagine the ripple effect on our planet if at least half the population of the world or even half the population of Bhutan can shift their diet to a plant-based diet. These are some initiatives through which we, as individuals, can help combat climate change."*

## Q&A Session

### Moderator Ms Namgay Choden

*With COVID-19 and people staying at home and global demand generally declining, we have seen something of an environmental reset, with huge reduction in CO2 emission. This has excited climate action advocates. But on the other hand, we also have major climate discussions and initiatives at multilateral inter-governmental levels being delayed, so people are not very optimistic. What do the speakers have to say on this, especially vis-à-vis the conversation on climate change and its interrelation with economic vulnerability?*

### Response by Mr Gopal Giri

*I think Bhutan is far ahead of many countries when it comes to climate action because Bhutan had already been practicing sustainable development even before the concept of sustainable development came to the country. That's all thanks to our visionary Monarchs. Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals are not new concepts to us. It has been in our economic development policies. Now what we have to do is to sharpen these ideas and focus on our own natural endowment. We should have a clear idea of what we really want at the end of the day; how can we bring future generation into this, and who will be the beneficiaries of these policies. We don't have a clear*



roadmap right now because often we are guided by *laissez-faire* policies and capitalistic mentality that looks at maximizing profit and returns. The world is already paying for the irresponsible consumption of the finite natural resources on the planet. How can we optimally make use of these natural resources? Climate change impacts everyone living on this planet. In this light, it is important that we make judicious use of common public goods like environment.

**Response by Ms Pem Lama**


I still would *like to remain* positive that COVID has woken us up to some of the things that were not working in the world. It has removed the veil from some of the issues that we face as a society and certainly in environmental and climate change areas as well. Bhutan has been leading this idea for a very long time and with COVID crisis, what we now need to do is revisit some of our strategies that were already in place. In Bhutan, we have great policies. We have a great vision. But it all seems like all-talk and no-action. Ecological or sustainable perspective has been missing while putting things into action, in anything whether it is imports, investments, consumption or even education. We have been borrowing a lot of models that did not have this perspective at all. When it comes to operationalizing, there just hasn't been that type of awareness, environmental awareness or sustainable mindsets. So, I think COVID has provided us the opportunity to rethink, to take a breather, to really zoom out and look at our lives and assess what we are doing right and wrong.

**Response by Ani Chopal Palmo**

We as individuals *can do so much*. You don't have to wait for your government to start an initiative. If you want to change the world, the change must begin from yourself. So, it doesn't need to be something very big. You can just start by picking up trash that you see on your way. You can begin by doing something small. Otherwise, if you leave it for someone else, then I don't think anything is going to happen.

**Moderator Ms Namgay Choden**

*Bhutan has always been happy to take on our role as an advocate for climate action. We are carbon neutral. We are absorbing all the carbon*



*that our neighboring countries emit. Some people may say well then what are other parties doing? They seem to benefit immensely from what we have compromised. How we can capitalize this and how can we benefit from our initiatives and reputation as a pro climate country? What about the possibility of carbon trading for instance?*

### **Response by Mr Gopal Giri**

Bhutan is a *global* biodiversity hotspot with rich, pristine natural environment. But we are yet to harness the economic benefit out of this. Our forest officials work round the clock to protect our environment. This has a cost. But how do we harness the economic gains out of this? Since we are a green economy, can we get certain concessions while negotiating loans with donor countries and agencies? What I understand is that all the terms and conditions are based on general principles, for instance, all LDCs are treated in the same manner. Conservation is not factored in. So, is there a way for Bhutan and other countries that aggressively pursue conservation policies to receive some concessions? Because they are doing something for the global good and I think we must try to work out some mechanisms to support and reward countries that contribute to the global good.

### **Response by Ms Pem Lama**

I do think that we should use carbon trading to our advantage although there are some criticisms about carbon trading in general globally, which is that carbon trading only enables the emitting countries to do more of that. So, environmentally and globally speaking, it not that good a measure. At this moment for Bhutan, a small developing country, carbon trading would be useful in funding our development and to provide free health care and education. We can't keep borrowing especially in the next few years when we graduate from the LDC category. We have to think about alternative economic resources and carbon trading is a good one because it still enables us to keep our trees and forests. If we want people to plant trees and conserve large tracts of our land, somehow they have to benefit from it. It doesn't make sense for farmers to be economically disadvantaged while conserving the environment. So, integrating some sort of community carbon banks will be actually useful for the country.

**Moderator Ms Namgay Choden**

*What about Impact Investments?*

**Response by Mr Gopal Giri**

It is a little bit *premature* to discuss Impact Investment right now since it is still a work in progress. The consultant is working on the framework. But the idea here is, RMA in collaboration with donors and Ministry of Agriculture and Forests will create a financing facility to support production of different commodities in different dzongkhags based on their comparative advantages and social capital.

**Response by Ms Pem Lama:**


The question that we *should* ask is where do we put our money? This is true with Impact Investment as well. While making investments, there are two things that we should think about - the social impact and the environmental impact. The greatest social impact with the least environmental impact would be the ideal Impact Investment.

**Moderator Ms Namgay Choden**

*After the COVID-19 pandemic, what are some of things that we are doing differently in agriculture and construction sectors or any sector where we have innovated on the incentives?*

**Response by Mr Gopal Giri**

We need to look at agriculture sector taking into account the topography, landscape and soil fertility. We cannot replicate what other countries are doing. We need to explore what Bhutan will be good at. We are often driven by food self-sufficiency principles but there are no economies of scale in our case because of small population, soil fertility, and topography. However, I see huge potential for “high value low volume” products in the agriculture sector. We need to focus on high-value products rather than low value products. For example, while rice is very important part of Bhutanese diet, we do not have the economies of scale to produce rice and also we cannot compete with any of the rice-producing countries like India. So, we will have to weigh whether it will be cheaper for us to



import rice than produce it? We need to focus on high-value products, for example, cardamom in the south and cordyceps in the north. We also need to optimize land use since we have only 8 percent arable land. We also need to develop the value chain in the agriculture sector and not only focus on the production front.

### **Response by Ms Pem Lama**

With COVID, obviously our consumption has drastically lowered. Having said that statistics show that import of vehicles reached an all-time high this year. So, we still are consuming. We have to become more aware of how much we are dependent on external products and commodities for our own consumption. A good thing that has happened is that a lot of our youth are returning to their villages and many are being reskilled to take up construction works. We can learn a lot from the world but we also need to understand our local priorities. This focus on reskilling Bhutanese is a good thing because at the end of the day the best solution is to go local in every sense of the word. It would be even better to reskill them with more sustainable skills like green skills. In the tourism sector, a lot of guides and those in the hospitality sector started going back to their farmland. COVID has made economists and policymakers take a mandatory pause and rethink our sustainability as a country and as a society, and our future.

### **Moderator Ms Namgay Choden**

The notion of being a global citizen is very alluring but when it really comes down to making a change you have to think about the immediate community that you are in and what sort of actions you can take to make an impact there – that's also called 'being a public citizen'. Coming back to the broader themes of this conference - biodemocracy and resilience, when we look at the democracy part, that's really how you engage with it locally rather than only thinking from a global citizen's perspective, although that is also important. To end, I would like to ask each speaker to provide one or two actionable things or motivation advice on how we could walk from this and think about creating more than consuming.



**Response Ani Chopal Palmo**

We have already learned so much from this crisis, that we all are connected. And so, we have to realize this and have consideration for a wider audience. I would like to say, be closer to your friends and families, not only electronically, because they are the ones that will help you at the time of your needs. We are so obsessed with the media that we almost lose connection with our close ones.

**Response by Ms Pem Lama**


When I think of creating, I think from an economic perspective, from a policymaker's perspective. We need to create opportunities and incentivize ecologically oriented projects. I also think we need to revisit, synchronize and synthesize some of our policies and rules and regulations that come in conflict with entrepreneurs who are doing something innovative. So, creating an enabling environment for them is very important. I do think that there is a lot of external information that has already been created and maybe some of the work we need to do now is more of an internal transformation. So, even in the economy or policymaking, we can all we can all learn from that process.

**Response by Mr Gopal Giri**

I think maybe we have to learn from nature; nature is a great teacher. I am inspired by how the ant's work – their work spirit. They never fight. They all work diligently, in a coordinated manner. And we should treat our work like religion, with complete faith and devotion. We work in silos in the existing system. There is no coordination or cross coordination, and cooperation. We can resolve the issues by removing all forms of silos in our system.

One lesson that COVID has taught us is the need for economic diversification. Economic diversification is very crucial for us because we are depending on a single sector like hydropower. While hydropower has been the least affected sector, but for how long? There could be another form of natural calamity, which could affect this sector.





COVID has been an eye opener for all of us. Not just small nations, COVID has also affected big nations. COVID has exposed how vulnerable modern human civilization is. And a lesson is that we cannot ignore the basic fundamentals of life, that we have to start building from the grassroots level fundamentals and rather than think big and try to do something bigger without building a strong foundation.



## SESSION 2: Panel on Volunteerism and Public health

(Mr Sherub Dorji, reporter with Bhutan Broadcasting Service; Dr Chhimi Wangmo, Ophthalmologist in Gelephu Regional Referral Hospital; and Mr Tshering Wangchen, program officer of Chithuen Phendhey Association & regional coordinator for Desuup regional office in Mongar)



Moderator Dr Karma Tenzin welcomed and introduced the panelists. Dr Karma Tenzin is an Assistant Professor and Deputy Dean of Academic Affairs with Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences.

Commending the conference organizers for perfectly blending the topics of volunteerism and public health, relevant in the current context of COVID-19 situation, Dr Karma Tenzin said that volunteerism and robust public health are vital for development of a resilient society. He said that in Bhutan, His Majesty the King is the epitome of leadership, compassion, humility, selflessness, teamwork and empathy, and that these qualities and attributes are associated with volunteerism. He said that Bhutanese people have seen and lived volunteerism in the form of the compassionate monarchs.

He said that public health pandemic is all about public healthy urgency and volunteers from all quarters of the communities have played a major role in the management of the urgency so far. He said that according to the report from the Ministry of Finance, Bhutan has spent Nu 2.9 million in the last nine months in handling COVID pandemic, which demonstrated the leadership and clear strategy in managing the COVID-19 pandemic scenario. He observed that WHO reports have indicated disruptions of

essential health services in many countries due to financial, political or other reasons. However, in Bhutan, essential health services were continuously provided without a glitch, which, he said, is a clear indication of leadership. Dr Tenzin highlighted that while leadership matters, so does volunteerism. *“The government might have spent much more than Nu 2.9 million had it not been the true sense of volunteerism exhibited by the people from all walks of life, which His Majesty highlighted in the Royal Address on 17<sup>th</sup> December in Punakha.”*

The moderator introduced the first speaker, Sherub Dorji, a reporter with the national TV channel Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), currently stationed in Samtse. He is also desuup (trained volunteer). The second speaker, Dr Chhimi Wangmo, is currently working as Ophthalmologist in Gelephu Regional Referral Hospital. She is also Assistant Editor of Bhutan Health Journal. The third speaker, Tshering Wangchen, is the program officer of Chithuen Phendhey Association, an NGO working towards promoting alcohol and drug free society in Bhutan. He is also the regional coordinator for Desuup regional office in Mongar.

### Presentation by Speakers

#### Mr Sherub Dorji, BBS Correspondent, Samtse



Presenting on the topic ‘Volunteerism in action’, Mr Sherab Dorji shared his personal experiences on how desuups in Samtse responded to the COVID situation. He said that desuups stepped in when there was a shortage of staff at Samtse General Hospital and Integrated Check Post at the border where hundreds of people moved in and out on a daily basis and also after the borders were closed. The desuups initially had to man about 24 points of entries along the Bhutan-India border in Samtse to ensure people did not cross the border illegally.

Mr Dorji said that all they had was a makeshift shelter made of tarpaulin sheet to beat the adverse weather – heat during the day and the chill during the night. The outposts along the border where desuups were



stationed did not have mobile connectivity. He said that one rainy night at the outpost, a man showed up with a flask of hot tea and snacks for the desuups. He said that they were deeply touched by the man's kindness.

Around 466 Desuups manned 183 kilometres of porous border with 74 points of entries along with 306 army personnel, police, foresters and retired army personnel. He said that people from the other side of the border kept trying to breach the borders for various reasons: some had to repair their water pipes, some came to buy food and ration, and others came looking for work. Many Bhutanese were also trying to cross the border. *"We had to send them back and every time we send them back, the desuups on duty advocated on COVID-19."*

Mr Dorji said that besides his desuup duties, he had to fulfill his professional responsibilities as a journalist, reporting on the increasing COVID cases in neighbouring Indian districts close to Samtse and the number of increasing cases of border breach, among others. He said that as COVID cases increased, 24/7 surveillance of the point of entries along the border started since people were trying to cross over into India to smuggle narcotics and tobacco products. *"Until the lockdown in August, Samtse police had apprehended 60 people in connection with people breaching the border and smuggling of alcohol and narcotic products. Those people were subsequently sentenced by the Samtse district court to a minimum of 11 months and a maximum of four and a half years in prison."*

He said that such decisive punitive measures, in addition to the advocacy and awareness spread by desuups helped in drastically bringing down the number of cases of border crossings. He added that while guarding the 183 kilometres of porous border wasn't easy as many outposts were located far from human settlements, the desuups were still eager and excited to serve for months on end. He said that even Bhutanese people living along the border were cooperative and understood the gravity of the situation.

Mr Dorji said that many villagers contributed vegetables, fruits and dairy

products to Desuung Office. Calling it the Bhutanese spirit, he said that villagers were willing to share whatever little they had with the volunteers on duty, as an expression of their support and appreciation for the work they were doing for the greater cause of protecting the nation. He presented a brief video showing how the villagers generously helped the volunteers. Besides the villagers, contractors also volunteered to build proper shelters at the outposts while many contributed food and water. On top of this, he said that the constant care and love provided by His Majesty the King and Her Majesty the Gyalsuen motivated the volunteers and lifted their spirits.

He said that he reported on several stories about the volunteers – how they were braving the challenges to serve the country. He added that when the stories were aired on BBS or published in newspapers, it further inspired and motivated the volunteers to keep going, despite the challenges. In concluding, Mr. Dorji shared a photo from a remote village in Dorokha where health officials giving care elderly people and medicines to those under medication during the lockdown. The health sector also provided vehicle services to pregnant mothers so that they can visit health centers for their regular pre-natal check-ups.



**Dr Chhimi Wangmo, Ophthalmologist, Gelephu Regional Referral Hospital**

Dr Chhimi Wangmo started her presentation with a rhetorical question: *What is public health and how prepared was Bhutan public health wise at the inception or at the emergence of the pandemic and how did volunteerism bring about changes for the good in the public health sector?* Delineating what Public Health means, Dr Wangmo quoted A. Winslow:

*“Public Health is the science and the art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting physical health and efficiency through organized community efforts for the sanitation of the environment, the control of community infections, the education of the individual in principles of*






*personal hygiene, the organization of medical and nursing services for the early diagnosis and preventive treatment of disease, and the development of the social machinery which will ensure to every individual in the community a standard of living adequate for the maintenance of health."*

Thus, she said that community is an important part of the public health and as such public health is essentially collaborative health or collective health. *The collective responsibility for public health is very much a people centric approach to health where everyone must take charge for all good as well.*

She said that the broad concept of health or holistic health and wellness now focuses not only on physical aspects of health but also encompasses other aspects as intellectual health, emotional health, environmental, occupational, and spiritual health.

Dr Wangmo said that the public health sector in Bhutan and globally has been hit hard by the novel coronavirus pandemic, including mental health with increased reporting in cases of stress related disorders, anxiety, depression and increase in suicide rates. Preventable infectious diseases are also on the rise during the pandemic because the repeated lockdowns have paused routine immunization schedules and caused major disruption to diagnosis and treatment of treatable diseases such as tuberculosis infection, HIV and other vector-borne diseases. During the pandemic, food security was also at stake in terms of affordability as well as availability of the food. She said that COVID has caused major challenges to the public health since it is an emerging disease and the lack of previous data and knowledge has further compounded the problem.

Explaining Bhutan's public health system and preparedness, Dr Wangmo said the Ministry of Health, under the leadership of the Minister and Secretary, is structured into five departments: medical services, medical supplies, public health, traditional medicines and directorate of services. She explained that the Department of Public Health focuses on non-communicable diseases, communicable diseases, public health education



and public health promotion division. In addition, there is Vector Borne Diseases Prevention Programme and Royal Centre for Disease Control. She said that health workers from all of these departments have been working tirelessly since COVID came to Bhutan.

Dr Wangmo said that Bhutan's first confirmed case of COVID was detected on 6 March 2020 in an American tourist who traveled via India. She said that Bhutan was blessed to receive guidance from the visionary monarchs that inspired and motivated the government to take prompt, well-informed decisions in the fight against COVID. The government was also quick to develop new policies and guidelines, which was crucial in the beginning. The national pandemic response preparedness and response plan was also implemented under the personal supervision of His Majesty the King.

She said that everyone worked tirelessly, be it in tracing or testing of contacts of the index patient, and immediately implementing the response plan such as closure of schools and institutions, temporary restriction on tourism for first two weeks, and enhancing public health awareness and education. Subsequently, the government imposed travel restrictions, instituted quarantine facilities, implemented strict health protocols, and put in place entry and exit scanner in hospitals, vegetables markets and other public places. Bhutan went into a national lockdown after another positive case was detected in Gelephu on 11 August 2020. Dr Wangmo said that the people showed immense support, unity and solidarity by adhering to the strict COVID protocols, exemplifying communal harmony and cooperation.

Dr Wangmo said that *desuups* or Peace Corps form the epitome of volunteerism in Bhutan. According to her, volunteerism is acting in recognition of a need without expecting anything in return – a selfless act. She said that the spirit of volunteerism is innate in Bhutanese society, driven by traditional and cultural systems, community practices, and spiritual beliefs. Further, she said that the institution of monarchy has, from the time of the First King, provided *kidu* (welfare) to the people. Through this royal prerogative, the King takes care of the welfare and wellbeing of



the people, particularly the needy ones. She said that the significance of *kidu* system has magnified manifold times during the pandemic.

In terms of provision of health services during the pandemic, Emergency Medical Services were provided unhindered 24/7. Different toll-free numbers for various services were made available throughout the country. Various quarantine surveillance teams were put in place and separate Flu Clinics were set up in Gelephu. Also, mobile clinics were also set up to ensure patients with long-term illness received medication on time. In addition, the *desuups* played a huge role in managing the crowd in the hospitals. They also patrolled the borders to ensure there is no influx of positive cases in the country. *Desuups* were also involved in the distribution of essential goods to the public doorsteps.

Dr Wangmo said that Bhutan Red Cross Society (BRCS) was another organization that made a huge difference. Not only did the BRCS provide free taxi services, it also managed funeral services for families who lost their loved ones, ensuring that the dead were given a proper funeral even during the crisis. It also facilitated travel of patients with health emergencies, including people with personal emergencies.

Dr Wangmo said that other volunteers also came forward. For example, some volunteers provided food for healthcare workers and others built a hand-washing facility at the Gelephu hospital. She added that people also organised fundraising campaigns on social media. Health workers and patients alike were hugely motivated by the Royal visit of His Majesty the King and the Fourth Druk Gyalpo. Further, she said that the prime minister and health minister were at the helm providing critical leadership during the pandemic.

In concluding, Dr Wangmo observed that pandemic has taught everyone that health is everything and that holistic health should be the ultimate mission. She reiterated that the focus should go beyond physical health to include emotional and mental health, including spirituality. She said that everyone should volunteer for change to make the community a better place.



**Mr Tshering Wangchen, program officer, Chithuen Phendhey Association & regional coordinator for Desuup Regional Office, Mongar**

Mr Tshering Wangchen started by quoting Shantideva, an 8<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist scholar; *“All the suffering in the world comes from seeking pleasure for oneself and all the happiness in the world comes from serving others.”* Mr Wangchen equated volunteerism as serving others, which is also a key role of desuups. He said that as per the Royal command of His Majesty the King, the integrated training programme was instituted to be a value based personal development programme, with the main objective to encourage all citizens to play an active role in nation-building. He added that through these training programmes, all desuups are expected to appreciate the sense of unity, harmony, and cooperation as a group and as active members of society and actively volunteer, during disaster operations, participate in charitable activities, and be of service to others throughout their lives.

He informed that since the establishment of Desuup Office in December 2010, the first batch of Desuung Integrated Training Programme was launched on 14 February 2011 coinciding with the Desuup Raising Day. Until the 30<sup>th</sup> batch, the desuung training programme used to train 125 trainees, which included youth, adults, civil servants, and private and corporate sector employees. Currently there are 18,341 Desuups, of which 11,856 are males and 6,485 are females. In the six eastern dzongkhags, there are a total of 2,558 Desuups so far. The numbers are expected to increase with the training still continuing.

He informed that the troops, until the seventh batch, were expected to participate in fire-fighting, search and rescue operations during earthquakes, road accidents, floods and landslides, and manage huge gatherings of people in public areas. Mr. Wangchen highlighted some of the achievements of desuups, which include: Desuups battled Wangduephodrang Dzong fire and saved priceless relics; desuups were deployed as part of Bhutan’s first international relief team during the Nepal earthquake in April 2015; a large number of desuups participated



in setting the Guinness World Record in terms of tree plantation in the country on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2015; and around 120 desuups accompanied His Holiness the Je Khenpo to Rajgir, Bodhgaya in India in November 2018 for *Moenlam Chhenmo*.

Mr Wangchen said that during the pandemic, training was accelerated with the focus to train as many desuups as possible and deploy them all over the country to prevent the spread of the virus. He said that desuups have been at the forefront of combating the pandemic, engaged in distribution of essential goods and medicines for elderly citizens, assisting health personnel in screening and managing crowd at hospitals, and creating advocacy and awareness on health protocols. Desuups have also been involved in surveillance and patrolling in collaboration with law enforcement agencies such as Royal Bhutan Police. Around 500 Desuups are on the southern border duty and around five batches of desuups from Trashigang and Trashiyangtse have been deployed for northern border duty. He also added that 100 desuups in each batch are being given special refresher course in Dewathang in Samdrup Jongkhar and Tencholing, Wangduephodrang.

He said that inspired by His Majesty's Royal address to the nation on 12<sup>th</sup> September, the training from 42<sup>nd</sup> batch focused on training desuups on water source management. Currently, the desuups are engaged in drinking water supply project in Guma Gewog in Punakha. In addition, one group of desuups is engaged in drinking and irrigation channel project in Tsirang, one in Ganglapong, Mongar. Two more groups for Dangdung in Trongsa and Kamji in Chhukha are scheduled to leave soon. He said that villagers in Ganglapong welcomed desuups with offerings of vegetables and juices.

Mr Wangchen said that on the National Day this year, His Majesty conferred the *Druk Thuksey* on the Desuung institution for its extraordinary contribution to the nation, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.



**Moderator Dr Karma Tenzin**

*The Moderator thanked all the speakers and opened the session for question and answers. The moderator asked the first question to Mr Sherub Dorji. Can you feel any difference going to those places as a desuup and as a media person?*

**Response by Mr Sherub Dorji**

Personally, as a desuup, it was more about knowing the personal struggles but when I go out in the field as a media professional, it is about them and their struggles. Even if desuups are exhausted, drained of energy, when they come on camera, they always have something positive to share so that they can motivate other fellow desuups to keep going despite the hardships and challenges.

**Moderator Dr Karma Tenzin**

*To guard 183 kilometer porous border with minimal resources must have been really difficult. What kept you going during these difficult times as desuups?*

**Response by Mr Tshering Wangchen**

What keeps me going is the role His Majesty is playing during this pandemic. His Majesty has been traveling to nook and corners of the country, meeting desuups, understanding their challenges and motivating them. His Majesty granted an audience to five governors of eastern Bhutan, a few days before the first case was detected and during the audience, His Majesty advised that we should make response plans not based on 'if' but on 'when'. After His Majesty left, we were able to draft a plan to combat COVID-19. During the first lockdown, we were able to manage everything in a smooth manner.

**Response by Mr Sherub Dorji**

What kept the desuups going was Their Majesties sharing muffins, cakes, apples, and chips with desuups. What kept desuups going was villagers showing up with vegetables, cheese and milk. What kept desuups going was media putting them in the limelight, showing the work that they were doing. That is what kept them going. Otherwise, it would be really



difficult to stand in a desolate border area, gazing into the wilderness for hours, with no one in sight. I think the love and support Bhutanese people showed them kept them going.

**Moderator Dr Karma Tenzin**

*Dr Chimi, how should Bhutan act in the aftermath of this pandemic to create and prepare a robust and holistic pandemic preparedness plan that can truly encompass all the societal approach with clear roles and responsibilities?*

**Response by Dr Chimi:**

I have the greatest gratitude to His Majesty the King, the Prime Minister and the Health Minister for all the work they have put in to combat the pandemic. We have been very successful till now but there is room for improvement. We can always learn from these experiences to come up with policies that can be implemented at the grassroots level. Likewise, we also have to come up with health guidelines that are sustainable. In the future, we may have more epidemics and pandemics, so we have to come up with contingency plans. There has to be solidarity and support from the public. Everyone should be in charge of their own safety, for themselves and for others.

**Moderator Dr Karma Tenzin**

*To add on what Dr Chimi said earlier, Bhutan provides free healthcare, and it is for this reason many countries appreciate Bhutan's approach to healthcare system and healthcare delivery. However, we still spend less than four percent of our GDP on the health sector, which is by quite less compared to other countries where healthcare is not free. When we talk about a good plan, resource does matter. From a policy side, we should look at how we can increase investment in the healthcare delivery system. That's one thing. The other thing we must look at is leadership. We might have good plans but we must also have strong leadership. We are fortunate to have a public health specialist as the Health Minister. That way leadership is not a big issue. However, resource still remains a challenge. Moving on, there is this widespread belief that our youth have no sense of volunteerism. What do the speakers think about it and how could we encourage our youth to take up more volunteerism in the future?*

**Response by Mr Tshering Wangchen**

I would like to disagree that our youth are not into volunteerism because most of the desuups are youth. Many unemployed youth have joined as desuups and they are guarding the borders, serving at hospitals and vegetable markets. So, I would disagree that youth are not into volunteerism. In fact, they are into it and they are contributing a lot.

**Response by Mr Sherub Dorji**

Young desuups have been volunteering thus far. When we didn't have desuups coming from the training centres in huge number, young people from villages came forward to serve. So, I think it would be wrong to say that young people aren't coming forward. In fact, thousands of young people are coming forward and the desuung training centres have been training them all.

**Moderator Dr Karma Tenzin**

*What is the biggest challenge faced by volunteers in dealing with the community and public during this pandemic; it could be health perspective, media perspective or a desuup perspective?*

**Response by Dr Chimi**

I would say the biggest challenge the volunteers are facing is that while they are volunteering for the good of others, they are putting their own health at risk. That's on the safety front. The other challenge is on the physical and psychological fronts. desuups live in difficult conditions. Are their shelters good? Is their food safe? Are they safe from wild animals? All these might have implications on their physical and mental health.

**Response by Mr Sherub Dorji**

A couple of weeks ago, I was in Dorokha town. I didn't see anyone wearing masks. Obviously, there was no desuup monitoring the people there. When they see desuups, they tend to put their masks back on. People should start taking responsibility by wearing masks and keeping physical distance in public places. Besides Samtse town, I haven't seen people in small towns and villages wearing masks or using Druk Trace App. Complacency is the biggest risk for now.

**Response by Mr Tshering Wangchen**

If we really think deeply about how to combat COVID-19, it is simple. The first thing is to just follow the protocols, that is, wearing masks, maintaining social distance, and using the Druk Trace App wherever you go. That's it. But we become complacent. That is why the second lockdown happened. The second thing is, it is more difficult to deal with the educated lot than with rural or illiterate people. In fact, the illiterate people cooperate with us while educated lot have so many reasons to justify non-compliance. So, it's quite an irony. Thirdly, fake news on social media is a big problem. Many people tend to believe fake news and it creates unnecessary panic and disquiet.

**Concluding remarks by Dr Chimi**

The key point I would want to stress on is that everyone should focus on a holistic model of health, not just physical health but all aspects of health - emotional, intellectual, occupational and environmental health. And public health and volunteerism are very much related. The spirit of volunteerism drives public health system. We also have to take charge of our own health, for our own and other's sake, abide by all COVID protocols and volunteer at the same time because it's a very selfless act and has many social and economic impacts.

**Concluding remarks by Mr Sherub Dorji**

Let's not put extra burden on our volunteers and on our health workers. Stay home, and even if you have to go out, wear masks, wash your hands and use QR codes. By now everyone knows that this is the standard operating procedure that we need to follow wherever we go in public spaces. Let's do that and let's not burden our health workers and volunteers.

**Concluding remarks by Mr Tshering Wangchen**

The last message I would like to pass on is let us take individual responsibility. COVID-19 is nothing if you take individual responsibility, and of course, we will not rest until this pandemic is gone.



### **Moderator Dr Karma Tenzin**

Thank you all the three speakers for summing up well. My takeaway message is that as we say in medicine, at times doing nothing is doing everything. This is the time when our citizens should do nothing and stay home. I think that itself will save the nation to a great extent.





## SESSION 3: Panel on Local Government

*(Mr Tshering Dorji, Gup, Shari Gewog and Chairperson of the Paro District Council; Mr Phub Dorji, Chief Election Officer, Election Commission of Bhutan; and Ms Pema Lhamo, Mangmi of Nubi Gewog, Trongsa)*



Moderator, Mr Lekey Wangdi, welcomed speakers and introduced the thematic session of the panel discussion. Speaking about Local Government in Bhutan, the moderator said that Bhutan is divided into 20 districts, 205 *gewogs* (counties) and *chiwogs* (precincts) and villages. He said that at the district level, an elected representative chairs the district council and is supported by the local government administration that is the Dzongkhag administration. At the gewog level, the gewog administration supports the Gewog Council, headed by an elected representative. The moderator also said that there are four municipalities (Thromdes) in Bhutan, which is headed by the Mayor (Thrompon) and supported by the Thromde administration.

The moderator then introduced the speakers: Mr Tshering Dorji, the Gup of Shari Gewog in Paro and Chairperson of the District Council since 2016; Mr Phub Dorji, Chief Election Officer at Election Commission of Bhutan; and Ms Pema Lhamo, Mangmi of Nubi Gewog since 2016.

The moderator stated that whatever national policy reforms or interventions are implemented at the national level must be implemented at the local government level, down to the community level. In this process, the role of the local government is critical. The moderator informed the participants that the speakers would share their experiences of how Local

Governments responded to COVID-19 pandemic, the lessons learnt and the way forward for Local Governments to effectively manage such situations.

*(Note: This panel was conducted in Dzongkha and translated excerpts of the panel are presented in the section)*



### **Presentation by speakers**

#### **Mr Tshering Dorji, Thrizin, Paro District Council**

Thrizin Tshering Dorji stated that COVID-19 started in 2019 and it reached Bhutan in March 2020, creating a lot of fear and anxiety among the people. However, he said that the wise leadership and guidance of His Majesty the King and blessings and prayers and rituals performed by His Holiness the Je Khenpo and the monastic community in the country have kept the Bhutanese people safe from the pandemic.

Thrizin said that although Bhutan did not suffer like other countries, the pandemic did cause significant disruptions. He said that compared to other districts, Paro is a bit different. It is home to the only international airport in the country. One of its gewog (Naja Gewog) shares border with Phuentsholing in the south while Tshento and Nubri Gewogs share borders with Tibet, China in the north – making the Dzongkhag highly vulnerable to COVID-19. More than 45,000 people live in Paro, including civil servants and other residents and people working in the Dzongkhag. He said that as soon as they heard of COVID-19, the Dzongkhag administration along with the Local Government bodies and the people from across the Dzongkhag started consultations on developing a plan to respond to and manage the COVID-19 pandemic. He said that two committees were formed – one at the gewog level and the other at the Dzongkhag level – and accordingly their roles and responsibilities were clearly outlined and appropriate response plans developed.

He said that according to the plan, the police were entrusted with the responsibility to ensure the safety of the people by building checkpoints at entry and exit points at critical locations in the district. The police



were also involved in creating advocacy and awareness among the people. Desuups in the district provided support to the police in terms of surveillance and patrolling.

Thrizin said that based on His Majesty's wise advice, the Dzongkhag administration and Local Government agencies worked on a plan that placed utmost emphasis in ensuring people's welfare and wellbeing during the pandemic.

He said that they also developed comprehensive plans to ensure uninterrupted supply of food and essentials to the people. For example, they supplied food and essential stocks that would last for six months to people of Tsento, living in the northern border, flanking Tibet. He added that all critical areas in the Dzongkhag were mapped to provide uninterrupted health services to rural and remote areas of the district during the pandemic. To avoid overcrowding, additional distribution outlets for LPG gas cylinders were also established.

Thrizin said that when the lockdown was eventually imposed, the Dzongkhag faced many challenges. Not everything worked according to the plan. While plans were ready, the implementation did not go smoothly as envisaged. He said that they are learning from the challenges and have already put in measures to avoid such challenges in the future.

He said that they learnt a great deal from the lockdown. Firstly, they learnt about the pandemic and its various impacts on the society and secondly how to respond to the crisis, particularly during the first lockdown. Learning from the experience, he said that the Dzongkhag is now prepared for future lockdowns.

He said that the crisis also revealed how dependent the country is on food and goods imported from outside. In the past, Bhutanese were self-reliant and stood on their own feet. However, today most Bhutanese depend on imported goods, and this reality became stark during the lockdown.

Thrizin said that at the gewog level, Gewog Welfare Committees were instituted with clearly delineated roles and responsibilities. The Tshogpas

(village leaders) were tasked with the responsibility to look after the welfare and wellbeing of the people. And as such, on a daily basis, the Tshogpas would assess the situation of the people and the difficulties and hardships faced by the people and report it to the Dzongkhag administration for necessary intervention. The Dzongkhag administration would then provide assistance to the affected people.

He said that in addition the local leaders used the gewog pool vehicles to help people during the lockdown. He said that the people were also cooperative and some of them even donated food and vegetables to desuups, police, and other frontline workers.

In conclusion, he said that the district council has learnt a great deal from the pandemic. Local leaders have also identified critical areas such as enhancing self-sufficiency and import substitution to be included in plans and policies. From the lessons learnt from the first lockdown, he said that they have developed a robust plan of action in preparation of future lockdowns.



**Mr Phub Dorji, Chief Election Officer, Election Commission of Bhutan**

Mr Phub Dorji stated that as mentioned by His Majesty the King, Local Government is the government that is closest to the people, the government that benefits the people the most, and as such, it plays an important role in the lives of the people.

He stated that the role of Local Government is like that of a mother in raising an infant as he went on to talk about the importance of elections at the gewog level from the Election Commission's perspective.

He said that the mandate of the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) is to conduct elections without any bias, fear or favor. One of the primary mandates of the ECB is to conduct national elections like National Assembly and National Council and elections at Thromde and Local Government. ECB also conducts bye-elections in between general election terms when seats become vacant.



He said that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire world and Bhutan is no exception. However, the pandemic has come as an opportunity for the ECB. Initially, ECB was a bit reluctant to conduct elections during the pandemic because of its inherent risks but due to the legal requirements, they had to go ahead with the bye-election in Chhoekhor-Tang Constituency in Bumthang in November 2020. This bye-election, he said, was sort of a rehearsal for the ECB to conduct an election in a constituency during the pandemic. From this experience, the ECB is all prepared to conduct elections across the country during such a crisis.

He said that the health ministry had launched massive health campaigns on the COVID pandemic, which helped the ECB in conducting the elections safely and smoothly. People were aware of the importance of social distancing during gatherings and when candidates were on the campaign trail. All the safety protocols were in place, which made the ECB's job in conducting the elections much easier.

He said that to avoid crowding of people, unlike in the past, the common forums where the candidates presented their manifestos were conducted multiple times with smaller groups of people. Strict COVID-19 safety protocols were put in place such as mandatory wearing of mask, hand washing facilities etcetera. He said everything went smoothly.

Mr Dorji said that as thromde and Local Government elections are nearing, the Bumthang bye-election experience would be crucial in conducting elections in the future. He said that if ECB receives the Royal edict to conduct elections during the pandemic, it is in a position to conduct elections as they successfully did in Bumthang bye-election.

He said that as part of its communication and awareness strategy, ECB is also preparing plans to create education and awareness on election through the media. Earlier, much of this was done through *zomdus* (public meetings). For places that do not have access to media, the ECB would physically reach out to the people, strictly following the COVID health safety protocols.



Mr Dorji said that after the bye-election, ECB conducted detailed review of the election process and conducted consultations with Dzongkhag election officials, Dzongkhag administration and local government functionaries to identify the challenges and solutions and improve the overall election process. He said that the Bumthang's bye-election success has given ECB a lot of experience and confidence to conduct elections during the pandemic.

He concluded that thanks to His Majesty's visionary leadership and blessings bestowed on the people by the Je Khenpo and monastic body, Bhutan has been fortunately protected from the fatal impacts of the pandemic. He said that the pandemic also provides an opportunity for the people to unite in order to collectively combat this pandemic.



**Ms Pema Lhamo, Mangmi, Nubi Gewog, Trongsa**

Mangmi Pema Lhamo started by stating that Bhutan's exemplary fight against COVID-19 is due to the leadership and guidance provided by His Majesty the King and the prayers offered by Je Khenpo and the monastic body.

Mangmi Pema Lhamo said that when the first lockdown was announced, she was quite worried about how she would be able to respond to the situation as a local leader. However, according to the Royal command of His Majesty and the help of the government, the Dzongkhag administration developed a comprehensive plan. Desuups also rendered their services during the lockdown. She said that with their assistance, the gewog didn't face any major challenges and that the gewog administration was able to provide uninterrupted service to the people during the lockdown.

She said that there are five chiwogs in Nubi Gewog with a total of 20 villages. Since one chiwog is near the Thromde (municipality), the Dzongkhag administration provided all necessary services to that chiwog such as supply of food and essential items, among others.

Ms Lhamo said that at the chiwog level, they distributed essential goods



like food items from designated locations mainly farmers' shops and in collaboration with chiwog Tshogpas. Safety measures were put in place in all these designated areas so that people from the chiwogs could access food and livestock feeds.

She said that with the help of the Dzongkhag agriculture officer, livestock officer and desuups, the gewog administration collected and distributed agriculture and livestock products to designated market outlets.

She added that His Majesty also granted *kidu* to needy people, and those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic were provided food and other basic necessities. His Majesty also provided multi-vitamin medicines, vitamin C and soaps to elderly people above 70 years through the Dzongkhag Kidu office and desuups.

The gewog office also facilitated the distribution of LGP gas cylinders. She said that they also distributed tobacco products to tobacco dependent people during the lockdown. So far, the local government has distributed medicines four times and distributed food supplies thrice in the gewog. The district hospital also made medicines available at the BHU (Basic Health Unit) for patients who need daily medication.

In addition, the local government also distributed around 125 poultry to farmers to improve their socioeconomic condition. The gewog office also distributed free dairy feed to the farmers and supported the construction of dairy shed to encourage farmers to focus on dairy farming.

She said that the gewog office encouraged the establishment of new farmers' groups, supplied resources to construct green houses and free seeds to the farmers with the aim to enhance agricultural productivity. Mangmi Pema Lhamo said that the gewog also created advocacy and awareness programs on COVID-19 and safety protocols.



## Q&A Session

### Moderator Mr Lekey Wangdi

*The pandemic has occurred two and half years into the 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (FYP). How do you think this will affect the implementation of the 12<sup>th</sup> FYP? Is there a need to reprioritize planned activities through re-allocation of resources and funds, and adopt new strategies to achieve the development goals?*

### Response by Thrizin Tshering Dorji

The government has developed comprehensive strategies for the implementation of the 12<sup>th</sup> FYP. It is important to execute development plans according to the country's need and situation. It is therefore paramount to prioritize and reprioritize development plans and programmes. It is also vital to give people some authority and responsibility to decide the kind of the development they want, and increase their involvement and engagement in the entire development process.

While the current development strategies are good, there is a need to bring about new changes as well. Compared to the past, the government has introduced many changes and reforms and made it easier for the Local Government to function. In the 12<sup>th</sup> FYP, the government has given block grant to the gewogs, and in the Gewog Tshogde, the budget allocation and prioritization is done based on what is the most important to the people. The prioritization of development plans and resource allocation are based on financial transparency and accountability, and above all the socioeconomic benefit of those plans to the people.

At the gewog level, one of the major challenges is human power shortage. The financial support needs to be accompanied by additional human power, then the plans will be executed properly, which will benefit the people the most, fulfilling His Majesty's vision, people's hopes and aspirations, and the government's development objectives.

**Moderator Mr Lekey Wangdi**

*Most of our youths have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. Many of these unemployed youth are now in the villages. There are also many women without jobs. So, what are the plans and strategies that the local governments have come up with to address these problems?*

**Response by Ms Pema Lhamo**

At the gewog level, we have had discussions and meetings on how to address the unemployment issues. Many Bhutanese women and youth have returned from abroad, further aggravating the unemployment situation in the country. We have quite a number of them in Nubi Gewog. Since this is an ad-hoc issue, we do not have budget allocated to provide direct employment to them. However, on our part, we have encouraged youth to come forward to create vegetable groups and dairy groups as a means for self-employment for themselves. The gewog has promised to provide them with technical assistance, tools and equipment, and training. Some individuals have come forward and formed such groups, and we have provided support to these groups. However, there are also those who are not interested since we are not able to provide them with any substantial funds.

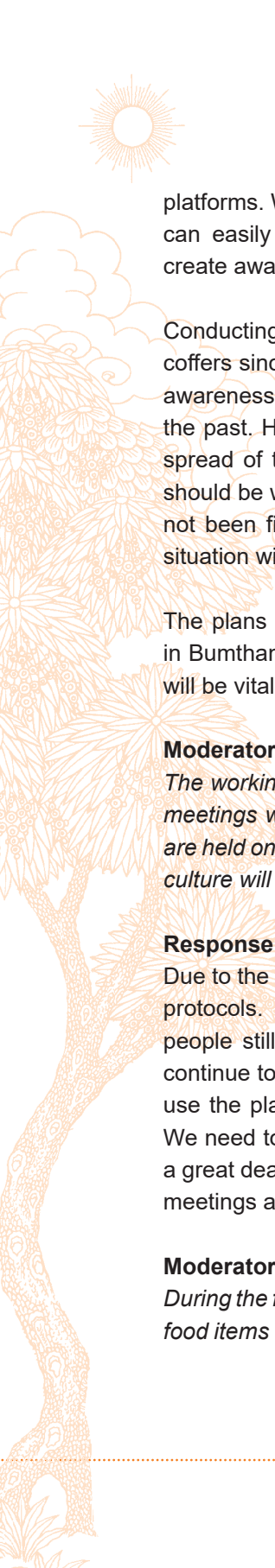
In the future, we will use this experience and knowledge to include relevant plans and programmes to generate employment for young people at the gewog level.

**Moderator Mr Lekey Wangdi**

*Local Government elections are nearing. While people's participation is an important aspect of any election, due to the pandemic, there are restrictions on public gatherings. In this context, what plans and strategies are in place to create advocacy and awareness and to conduct the elections in the future?*

**Response by Mr Phub Dorji**

We plan to make short video clips and share this information to the people. Almost all the people, including children, own mobile phones these days. We want to make information available through mobile



platforms. We will create audio-visuals, songs and memes, which people can easily understand. We will also make pamphlets and posters to create awareness.

Conducting elections during the pandemic will create a dent on government coffers since we will have to spread out the activities and organize more awareness programs, using technology and new approaches unlike in the past. However, the objective is to benefit the people, to prevent the spread of the virus, and to conduct elections in a fair manner. So, we should be willing to bear a little extra expenditure. These strategies have not been finalized yet since we really do not know how the pandemic situation will change in the near future.

The plans and strategies we implemented during the bye-election held in Bumthang in November 2020 has given us a great experience, which will be vital for us in conducting future elections in a pandemic situation.

**Moderator Mr Lekey Wangdi**

*The working environment and culture have changed these days. Earlier, meetings were conducted in person but during the pandemic, meetings are held online and works are done virtually. How do you think the working culture will change at the Local Government level?*

**Response by Thrizin Tshering Dorji**

Due to the pandemic, almost all the work is done online as per the safety protocols. Although Paro Dzongkhag is developed, there are some people still living in remote places. While hosting meetings online, we continue to face many challenges. Sometimes people don't know how to use the platforms since they have never used such technology before. We need to look for solutions to solve those challenges. We have learnt a great deal and gained new experiences by using technology to conduct meetings and work virtually.

**Moderator Mr Lekey Wangdi**

*During the first lockdown, farmers provided vegetables and other essential food items to Desuups, government and to others voluntarily. How did the*





*gewog and chiwogs provide the space to the farmers for such events to take place and what were their reactions?*

**Response by Ms Pema Lhamo**

In Nubi Gewog, we did not have much problem since people voluntarily came forward to help. We had one situation where the ration vehicle got stranded on the way and farmers voluntarily prepared food for those who were stuck due to the road condition. And people helped transport the ration to the supply station.

**Moderator Mr Lekey Wangdi**

*During such pandemic, a lot of expenditure must have been incurred. How were the funds provided? Was it used from the Dzongkhag budget or how were the resources managed?*

**Response by Thrizin Tshering Dorji**

The Dzongkhag had already kept a budget for such events. Although the expenditure was a bit high, we had kept a separate budget for the pandemic. At the gewog level, no budget was kept aside for the pandemic. The government provided Nu 150,000 as budget for the pandemic for each gewog. This amount was used only in those areas where it was necessary. People donated food and vegetables to the frontline workers. Luckily, during the first lockdown, it was a harvest season and the gewog did not have to use its budget. People of Paro also contributed rice and vegetables due to which the expenditure incurred was very low.

**Moderator Mr Lekey Wangdi**

*One of the biggest challenges in the community is fake news that spread like wildfire, especially during elections. What are the plans to curb the spread of fake news?*

**Response by Mr Phub Dorji**

We have already created awareness about such problems in recent years and we will continue doing this in the coming days as well. The Prime Minister's Office and health ministry are also creating awareness about fake news, and through such initiatives people are getting aware

of such scams. Likewise, the election office has been advocating through mainstream media about fake news and will continue to do so. During elections, we have Media Arbitrator who monitors the news of political parties and political candidates. The parties have to route through the Media Arbitrator to inform about their activities and themselves in social media. Now people are becoming smart and they are able to differentiate between fake news and real news. Moreover, we urge everyone to verify the news before trusting any sort of fake news. We have to work collectively to combat fake news.

#### **Concluding remarks by Thrizin Tshering Dorji**

In his concluding remarks, Thrizin said that at a time when the nation is going through such a crisis, all citizens should work together to fight the pandemic and live up to the expectations of His Majesty the King.

#### **Concluding remarks by Mr Phub Dorji**

Mr Phub Dorji concluded by advising people to follow health protocols and follow government instructions and directions, which itself is serving the nation. He said that everyone has been doing their part and they should continue doing so until the pandemic is over.

#### **Concluding remarks by Mangmi Pema Lhamo**

Mangmi Pema Lhamo said that Bhutan has not suffered gravely due to the pandemic as other countries and this is due to the collective efforts of every Bhutanese. As such, everyone must continue to work together to fight the deadly virus.



DAY 2: December 22, 2020

## SESSION 1: Panel on Agriculture

*(Mr Sherab Wangchuk, a senior planning officer, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests; Mr Nima Lama, commercial farmer; and Mr Naiten Wangchuk, the Chief Executive Officer, Food Corporation of Bhutan)*



Honourable member of National Council (NC), Mr Nima, moderated the session. He said that he was part of the team in the NC that reviewed plans, policies and programmes of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests in 2015. He added that in the last session, the Council deliberated on agriculture marketing strategies, plans and programmes. Honourable NC member said that agriculture is an important sector and it would continue to be important even in the future. He stressed that food supply has become critical during the pandemic and when the borders are closed, people should be able produce enough food for all.

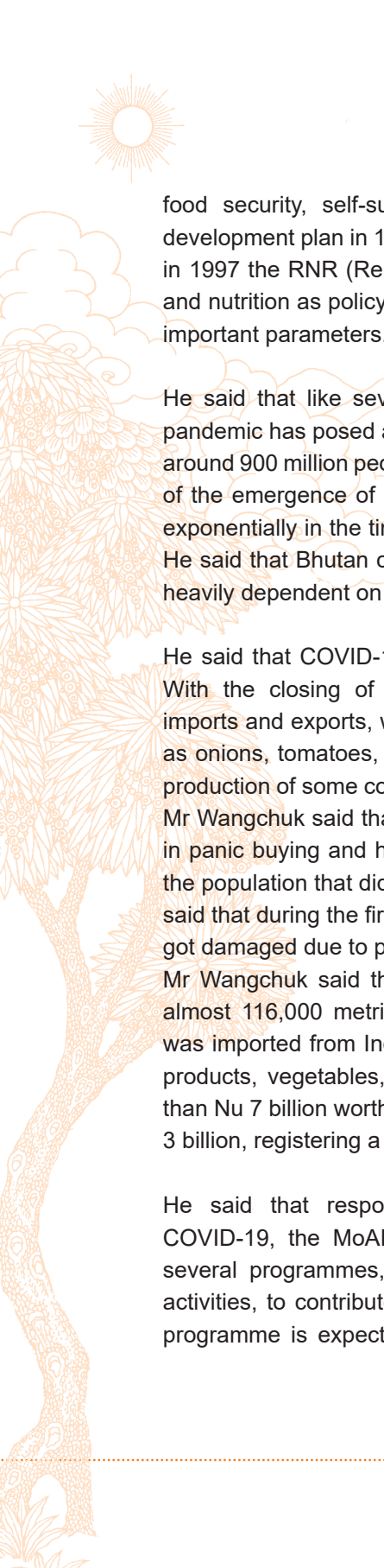
The moderator introduced the speakers: Mr Sherab Wangchuk, a senior planning officer with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, who spoke on food security in Bhutan in the wake of COVID-19; Mr Nima Lama, a former teacher turned commercial farmer. He voluntarily resigned in 2017 to take up commercial farming who talked about preservation and promotion of local seeds and local livestock breeds, and Mr Naiten Wangchuk, the Chief Executive Officer of Food Corporation of Bhutan, who spoke on market-driven agro-enterprises.



### Presentation by the speakers

#### **Mr Sherab Wangchuk, Senior Planning Officer, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests**

Mr Sherab Wangchuk began by explaining food and nutrition security, which is, availability of or accessibility to basic food either through domestic production or imports. He said that Bhutan implemented a broad spectrum of policies to ensure



food security, self-sufficiency, and poverty reduction since the first development plan in 1960s. He informed that from the start of the 8<sup>th</sup> FYP in 1997 the RNR (Renewable Natural Resources) sector identified food and nutrition as policy objectives, with food self-sufficiency as one of the important parameters.

He said that like several global crises in the past, today the COVID pandemic has posed a great threat to food security. Studies suggest that around 900 million people across the world lack access to food at the time of the emergence of COVID-19 and this figure is expected to increase exponentially in the times to come should the COVID situation continue. He said that Bhutan cannot escape this situation, more so because it is heavily dependent on food imports, particularly from India.

He said that COVID-19 has posed several challenges to food security. With the closing of international borders, there were disruptions in imports and exports, which created shortages of crucial food items such as onions, tomatoes, and chilies. On the other hand, there was surplus production of some commodities such as cabbage, mandarin, and apple. Mr Wangchuk said that during the first lockdown, many people engaged in panic buying and hoarding, creating shortages for poorer sections of the population that did not have economic access to buy in bulk. He also said that during the first lockdown, many food commodities in rural areas got damaged due to poor market logistics and poor information systems. Mr Wangchuk said that in 2019, the Bhutanese population consumed almost 116,000 metric tonnes of rice, of which more than 70 percent was imported from India. Bhutan also imported huge quantities of dairy products, vegetables, and meat items. Overall, Bhutan imported more than Nu 7 billion worth of food commodities while the export was only Nu 3 billion, registering a deficit of Nu 4 billion in food commodities alone.

He said that responding to unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19, the MoAF (Ministry of Agriculture and Forests) initiated several programmes, which included fast-forwarding of the 12<sup>th</sup> FYP activities, to contribute to the economic recovery and create jobs. This programme is expected to create 173 enterprises and generate more



than 1,000 jobs. The second is the Economic Contingency Plan, which is implemented as an immediate and short-term measure for 14 months starting May 2020 with an investment of around Nu 600 million in the agriculture sector alone. This initiative is expected to enhance production, particularly agriculture and livestock commodities. It is also expected to improve food distribution system and the logistics. For instance, around 6,500 metric tonnes of milk and over 12,000 metric tonnes of vegetables are expected to be produced under this particular programme.

Mr Wangchuk said that to substitute imports, special programmes such as winter vegetable production, poultry production, and piggery were also initiated with special dedicated investments. Winter vegetable production programme focuses on three mandatory vegetables - onion, tomato, and chilli – along with three signature crops with the most potential to that particular dzongkhag. He said that this programme expects to produce and supply 9,000 metric tonnes of winter vegetables, which comes to roughly 70 percent of winter vegetable self-sufficiency.

He said that unemployment rate in Bhutan is expected to reach a record-high of 11.5 percent in 2020. Till date, 50,000 jobs were lost in tourism and hospitality sector alone. Rising unemployment has become a national concern. He said that initiatives like urban agriculture programme have so far engaged about 600 laid off employees and around 77 acres of land were brought under vegetable cultivation by this group.

Mr Wangchuk said that the MoAF is also redesigning youth employment and rural enterprise to support at least 200 youth enterprises in at least seven districts. The selected youth will be provided with technical support along with the grant support of up to US\$ 500 to enable youth to kick-start a new business related to agriculture sector.

He mentioned that based upon the lessons learnt from the first lockdown, the MoAF has also developed standard operating procedures (SOPs) to respond to and prepare for the smooth sourcing, supply, and distribution of essential food items. The SOP includes export and import of agriculture livestock and non-wood forest products. He highlighted that food security is multi-dimensional in nature and ensuring food security requires the co-



ordination of stakeholders and key partners. He added that with a huge deficit in commodities, it is time to rethink the programmes, policies, and investment priorities. He stressed that interventions to increase domestic production should not be reactive to situations or shocks such as COVID-19, rather there should be consistent support investment.

Mr Wangchuk suggested that it is time to attract youth in agriculture, develop appropriate technologies, bring innovation, and also modernize the farming systems. He added that it is important to create a conducive policy and legal environment so that farming is taken up like any other business. For this to happen, he said that it is time to readjust farming incentives, moving much beyond current practices of input supply.

In conclusion, he stressed that despite the many challenges posed by COVID-19, there is still an opportunity to pursue self-sufficiency and food security objectives. He ended by quoting His Majesty: *“Ensure food security and potential essential aspect of our overall National goal of self-reliance. What youth of Bhutan achieved over a year or a two during the COVID-19 pandemic will remain a mark of term and invaluable asset and legacy for future generations.”*



**Mr Nima Lama, commercial farmer**

Mr Nima Lama said that farmers are provided with hybrid seeds and hybrid animals, which in the long run could pose danger to local seeds. He said that it is important to preserve and promote local seeds and local breed of animals.

He said that hybrid seeds and animals are expensive. While farmers receive support from the government, Mr. Lama questioned the long-term sustainability of such incentives. He said that not only are hybrid seeds more expensive, they are also difficult for them to manage, adding that farmers do not necessarily get higher yields with hybrid seeds.

Mr Lama highlighted the need to promote natural and organic farming by supporting farmers in the preparation of compost and providing subsidies for agricultural inputs. He said that when farmers are involved in natural or




organic farming, they have to totally give up using chemical fertilizers and pesticides. For making this trade-off, the government needs to support organic farmers through subsidy and also training on how to prepare composts (vermiculture) etcetera.

Mr Lama said that the government must support the establishment of appropriate warehouses and cold storage facilities in different regions as per climatic conditions and products. He shared the example of how truckloads of potatoes were exported to India recently and then there was a shortage of potatoes in Bhutan. He said that this happened mainly because there are no storage facilities to store potatoes for domestic consumption.

He said that the government can construct public warehouses and a minimal rent can be levied from farmers using the facility. The revenue can be ploughed back into maintaining the facility. He also suggested that relevant agencies must conduct cost analysis of agriculture products and fix the minimum selling price for farmers. He said that if cost analysis of products is properly done, farm gate prices can be fixed. This will control fluctuation of prices and inflation in the market. He said that some products are highly priced while others are not, and farmers do not get the right price. He added that at times vendors and brokers decide the price, and eventually consumers end up paying more.

Mr Lama raised the importance of promoting farming cooperatives to involve more youth so as to increase production and to supply adequate commodities in the market. Citing the example of Sarpang Layers Cooperative (poultry cooperative), of which he is the chairperson, Mr. Lama said that the cooperative model helps in meeting the economy of scale and access to the market. He added while there are around 70 cooperatives in Bhutan, many are not functioning properly. He said that given the small population and small landholdings, cooperative business model is feasible in Bhutan.

Mr Lama also said that the procedures to acquire government land for agricultural purposes must be reviewed and made simpler. He said that



the current procedures are lengthy and cumbersome and this discourages youth from taking up farming. As such, most fallow land remains fallow. He suggested that reforms in the procedures would be vital in transforming large areas of fallow land into cultivable land and to achieve the national vision of food security.

He recommended that there should be exemption of tax on agriculture products. While he appreciated the government's fiscal incentives like tax holidays for 10 years, taxes on revenue from agriculture products need to be reviewed. In concluding, Mr. Lama highlighted the government's role in facilitating export and import of plants and issuance of phytosanitary certificates. He suggested that government also needs to intervene in fixing a minimum price for export commodities such as potatoes, oranges, cardamom, ginger, betel nuts, and others to ensure farmers get a fair price for their products.



**Mr Naiten Wangchuk, Chief Executive Officer, Food Corporation of Bhutan Limited (FCBL)**

Mr Naiten Wangchuk started by providing a rationale for why it is important to adopt market-driven agro-enterprises. He said that the primary reason for doing so is because it is high time for Bhutan to transition from subsistence farming to commercial farming, and that the country should be self-sufficient to meet the increasing food demand of the growing population, especially during an unforeseen crisis.

He said that COVID exposed the country's vulnerability in terms of food trade. The global food trade and networking that was supposed to facilitate access to food was irrelevant when every international border was sealed and the movement of people was restrained. Exporting countries banned export of certain food commodities; for example, Indian banned the export of onions. He said that when lockdown was declared in India, FCBL had a tough time sourcing food for about two weeks.

He asked whether in such circumstances Bhutan can continue to be import dependent? He also asked if Bhutan can achieve food security



without food self-sufficiency? He stressed that Bhutan has been pursuing food security and food self-sufficiency for four decades now but somehow that goal has remained elusive. It is time to reassess the approach and reverse the perspective. Instead of fork to farm, the perspective change could be from farm to fork.

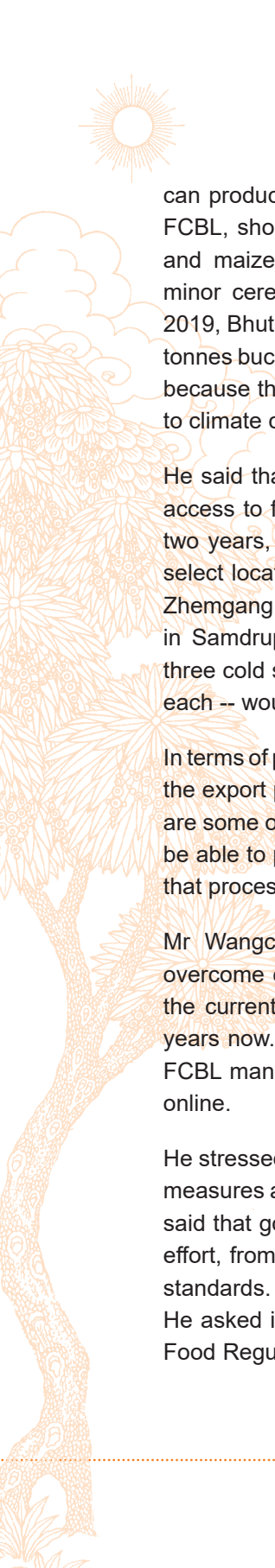
Mr Wangchuk pointed out that the market is the endpoint in agriculture and it is a starting point for innovation in agriculture as it will set the rhythm of farming systems, determine production systems, and the type of logistics that need to be put in place. Looking at production systems, logistics, and the processing systems, accordingly the quality control and certification measures can be defined. He said that since the market plays a critical role, innovation has to start from the endpoint of the market, and thus, policy is determined by the market.

He highlighted that the national trade deficit was around Nu 21.6 billion in 2019, and in the same year, Bhutan imported Nu 7.1 billion worth of food against Nu 3 billion worth of exports. The food sector on its own contributes Nu 4.1 billion to the trade deficit. He said that planners, policy makers, farmers, and technical professionals must bear this in mind.

He said that the self-sufficiency ratio of rice is 28 percent, pulses is 42 percent, maize is 74 percent, and vegetables is 85 percent. He said that while vegetable self-sufficiency is quite comfortable, there are vegetable shortages during the lean season. Similarly, he said that Bhutan produces excess fruits, and this points out that there is a need for processing centres.

Mr Wangchuk said that if Bhutan were to attain self-sufficiency in rice, the production has to increase by three and half times. Is that possible? Bhutan has roughly over 40,000 acres of paddy land and another 8,000 acres of fallow paddy land. He said that even if the entire paddy land is taken into account, Bhutan would be able to attain only 43 percent of the total rice demand.

He said that what Bhutan needs is a green revolution, which maximizes the yield but does so without compromising on the ecology. He suggested that organic farming could be a solution but expressed his doubts if it



can produce the yield. He also pointed out that policymakers, including FCBL, should pay attention to self-sufficiency of major cereals like rice and maize, which show a decreasing trend. He also suggested that minor cereals like buckwheat, wheat, and barley must be revived. In 2019, Bhutan produced 6,300 metric tonnes of rice and only 1,900 metric tonnes buckwheat. Mr. Wangchuk said that minor cereals must be revived because they are high-nutrient crops, resistant to diseases, and resilient to climate change.

He said that FCBL has placed a high importance on logistics to ensure access to food and consistent supply of food to the market. In the past two years, FCBL has been planning to set up integrated cold stores at select locations, mainly Samtse, Dagana, Wangduephodrang, Sarpang, Zhemgang, Mongar, Pemagatshel, and Trashigang. There are cold stores in Samdrup Jongkhar, Chukha, Paro, and Thimphu. He informed that three cold stores -- one in Sarpang, Wangduephodrang, and Trashigang each -- would be established within this fiscal year.

In terms of processing, he said that looking at the volume of production and the export potential, potato, cardamom, quinoa, and summer vegetables are some of the priority produce. With proper branding, such produce will be able to penetrate into the regional and international markets. He said that processing will also help reserve produce for the lean season.

Mr Wangchuk recommended online trading as the way forward to overcome challenges posed by the country's geographical location and the current pandemic. FCBL has been pursuing online trading for four years now. Although it is still at a nascent stage, in the past four years, FCBL managed to trade around 4 percent of the total volume of potato online.

He stressed that attention must be paid to quality control and certification measures as this is in line with the organic production vision. However, he said that going organic is easier said than done. It requires a mammoth effort, from input, land preparation, and farming practices, to the quality standards. He said that as of now Bhutan is not ready to go organic. He asked if certification institutions like BAFRA (Bhutan Agriculture and Food Regulatory Authority) and BSB (Bhutan Standard Bureau) are well





equipped? *“Do we have accredited labs? Do we have the skills to provide the technical services? Is our phytosanitary certificate recognized by our trading partners?”*

Taking about policy attunement, Mr Wangchuk pointed out that while there is a good policy in place, implementation of the policy is a problem. He said that human resources development in agriculture sector should shift from academic to vocation skills. He pointed out that about 26 percent of total farmland in the country is fallow while Bhutan faces food shortages. Policymakers should look at how to make effective use of this fallow land. Further, crops and livestock are vulnerable to natural calamities and wildlife predation. Affordable insurance schemes based on 50-50 cost sharing model must be explored. He suggested that the government must initiate new subsidy policies to supports farmers. *“Subsidy plays a big role in making the products more competitive in the international market.”*

Touching on the policy aspect to enhance access to capital, he said that the National Cottage Small Industry (CSI) Bank has allocated funds Revolving Fund-1 and Revolving Fund-2, but the other banks must also provide access to capital for the agriculture sector. Following His Majesty's National Day address in Trongsa on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2016, financial institutions started priority sector lending but this is losing steam. He said that other commercial banks must also provide loans. He pointed out that the fund allocation for agriculture sector has to be increased since food is a need, not a want. The highest share of the fund was given during the 4<sup>th</sup> FYP in 1976-81, which was around 38.9 percent and thereafter it has been decreasing, year upon year. In the 12<sup>th</sup> FYP (2018-2023), the agriculture sector received a mere 2.6 percent of the total budget outlay.

He also stressed on the need to establish vocational agriculture schools to provide technical skills to farmers. To start with, he suggested that the technical institute in Zhemgang must be revamped to effectively deliver technical skills to farmers.

In concluding, Mr Wangchuk made the following suggestions:

- Procedures on leasing of government land should be made simpler through one-window services.

- Investment in irrigation facilities for both dry and paddy fields.
- Enhancing the laboratory skills and technical skills of food safety regulators.
- Enhancing the technical capacity of Bhutan Standard Bureau.
- Promoting online trading.
- Revival of minor cereals like buckwheat, wheat, and barley.
- Formalization of trade with trading partners to address the trade barriers.

### Q&A Session

#### Moderator Mr Nima

*One of the questions that came to my mind when **Mr Sherab Wangchuk** was talking about the future of domestic production is whether we are on the right track? Are we right in terms of our policies and planning as we go forward preparing for food self-sufficiency?*

#### Response by Mr Sherab Wangchuk

Basically, you are asking: are we on the right track in terms of domestic production and self-sufficiency? From the perspective of policy, priorities, and lessons that we have learnt during this COVID-19, I particularly feel that MoAF has been working towards the creation of enabling environment. The ministry has been working towards self-sufficiency objectives. Toward that end, MoAF has started several commercial farms in collaboration with local governments and state-owned enterprises. We have started to increase the economy of scale. So, while we are not right there yet, I would, to a certain extent, say that our goals and objectives are clear.

#### Moderator Mr Nima

*Another thing I am tempted to ask is, during the first lockdown, it was the peak production season and therefore, we did not have any problems. But now we are under second lockdown, especially in Thimphu. In terms of vegetable supply, are we going to face problems?*

**Response by Mr Sherab Wangchuk**

The first lockdown happened during the peak vegetable production season. If it had happened in winter months, there would have been a huge shortage of vegetables. I think the COVID-19 lockdown happened to some extent at the right time, which made the agriculture sector prepare for a lockdown that might happen in winter months. That's why one of the key initiatives of MoAF has been aggressive acceleration of winter vegetable production. So, if everything goes right and as planned, I am confident that the production and the supply of vegetables will continue. I am saying this because if you look at the winter vegetable production plan, the expected outcome is over 8,000 metric tonnes of winter vegetables, which has never been produced in the past.

**Moderator Mr Nima**

*When younger generations want to move from rural areas to urban areas in search of jobs, Nima Lama decided to leave your job and take up farming. What prompted you to go back to farming?*

**Response by Mr. Nima Lama**

Actually, I thought of going for further studies but due to certain circumstances, I remained here. My intention is to inspire our youth and fellow villagers to start modernizing, especially mechanized farming. Since I became a farmer in 2017, a lot of my friends have also felt inspired, including youth and taxi drivers. I wanted to be an example to the younger generation. I also wanted to contribute to our country's self-sufficiency goals.

**Moderator Mr Nima**

*You talked about organic farming and promoting the concept of organic farming. When farmers in my village talk about organic farming, one major issue is that quantity is less, which shoots up the price of the produce. Also, when we talk about organic farming, we cannot think about farming on a very big scale. There is no economy of scale. So, in a situation like COVID-19, how can you ensure affordability, accessibility, and economy of scale?*

**Response by Mr Nima Lama**

That's why we need to replace some chemical fertilizers by encouraging our farmers to use manure compost. If we use compost and manure, the production quantity will not be less than the one produced in farms using chemical fertilizers. The value addition is the nutritional value, which will be high. In terms of price, organic products will be more expensive.

**Moderator Mr Nima**

*How has your business been affected by COVID-19?*

**Response by Mr Nima Lama**

In fact, we are quite fortunate since vegetables, eggs, and meat are essential items and we are able to sell them. However, we are not able to get seeds and inputs on time. Other than that, the business hasn't been affected much.

**Moderator Mr Nima**

*When farmers move from subsistence to commercial farming, it is very important that they have access to market but one of the problems our farmers have been facing is access to market. Since you are the Chief Executive Officer of FCBL, how are you going to resolve this issue of market accessibility?*

**Response by Mr Naiten Wangchuk**

This year, we faced problems with access to the market due to the pandemic. Under normal circumstances, there is no dearth of market access because we have about three million people who live in the neighbouring border areas of Siliguri, Jaigaon and Cooch Bihar in India. The only challenge is bringing the product, from the source of production to the market because they are at distant places. That's why we need to come up with logistics arrangements like integrated cold chain facilities. FCBL has been facilitating auctioning and trading for oranges and apples, which are carried out by Bhutan Export Association. We need to strengthen these institutions. For international markets, we need to set standards. We need quality. So, we need to strengthen the quality standards and FCBL has been trying to do that. We have set up grading and packaging



facilities and in future we are coming up with the processing for cardamom and quinoa. These are some of the innovations that FCBL is trying to put in place to ensure our products enjoy a good image.

**Moderator Mr Nima**

*It is very worrying that in the agriculture sector there is a trade deficit of Nu 4.1 billion. What role do you think your organization can play in terms of reducing trade deficit in the agriculture sector?*

**Response by Mr Naiten Wangchuk**

Our main role is to facilitate market access. We are also encouraging youths to take up agriculture in the commercial mode. We have established future contracts with youths. For instance, we do price discovery of the commodity in the market and convey the price for this year to the farmers and ask them to produce a certain volume. If the pricing goes with the volume, it is interrelated. If they can produce more, we can afford a better price. If the volume is too low, then it will increase the overhead costs and we will not get the price. Accordingly, we have to set up the futures contracts with the youths. But FCBL alone can't do everything. We need input suppliers, seed suppliers, fertilizer suppliers, and farm machineries suppliers. All of us have to come and work together.

**Closing remarks by Mr Naiten Wangchuk**

Mr Wangchuk said that it is important for decision makers such as parliamentarians, bureaucrats, and those in the commercial world to come together and place an emphasis on food production. He said that Bhutan's plans to graduate from LDC to middle income country wouldn't be easy without the emphasis on agriculture. He stressed on the need for Bhutan to achieve food self-sufficiency. He said that it would be a shame if Bhutan were not able to feed its 700,000 people. He said that while Bhutan does have enough resources, the problem really is with the implementation of plans and policies.

**Closing remarks by Mr Nima Lama**

Mr Lama thanked the organisers for giving him the opportunity to be part of the forum.





**Closing remarks by Mr Sherab Wangchuk**

Mr Wangchuk said that food is an important aspect to tackle the COVID situation and everyone should work hard to reach the expected goals of food security and self-sufficiency.





## SESSION 2: Panel on Employment, Hydropower and Tourism

*(Mr Damcho Rinzin, Head of Tourism Promotion Division, Tourism Council of Bhutan; Ms Tashi Dema, Assignment Editor, Kuensel; and Honorable National Council (NC) member, Mr Tempa Dorji)*



Moderator, Mr Jigme Rinzin, former National Council Member from Pemagatshel, highlighted how the COVID pandemic has hit the entire world hard and that the Bhutanese were fortunate to be taken care of by His Majesty the King with an uninterrupted supply of essentials and public service delivery. However, he said that the pandemic hasn't been easy. The government hasn't been able to utilize the capital budget, which basically means there has been a reduction on spending on infrastructure development. And this has a recurring impact on the economy. The revenue likely went down by more than 40 percent, with many key economic sectors such as tourism coming to an abrupt halt. The moderator said that Bhutanese have a resilient character and will come out stronger from the pandemic.

The moderator introduced the speakers: Mr Damcho Rinzin, Head of Tourism Promotion Division, Tourism Council of Bhutan; Ms Tashi Dema, Assignment Editor of the national newspaper Kuensel; and Honorable National Council (NC) member from Lhuentse Dzongkhag, Mr Tempa Dorji.



### Presentation by Speakers

#### **Mr Damcho Rinzin, Head of Tourism Promotion Division, Tourism Council of Bhutan**

Mr Damcho Rinzin started his presentation by explaining the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector, which left 50,000 people jobless as visitor arrival receipts and revenue dropped by more than 90 percent. He said that initially, and even now, people are shocked and stressed by COVID-19. Amidst the confusion and chaos, Druk Gyalpo's Kidu Relief Fund came as a light in the darkness. The Relief Kidus provided generous monthly amounts to affected people to sustain and meet their daily expenses. His Majesty also granted interest waivers and loan deferrals. He said that all these Royal initiatives provided a breathing space to the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB) and some 50,000 people and around 12,000 tourism businesses that were impacted overnight.

Mr Rinzin said that as part of the government's Economic Contingency Plan, TCB developed an engagement programme through which around 1,330 people were engaged in infrastructure and manufacturing, service training, re-skilling, and risk management (in two phases starting in April 2020). He added that the next challenge was to ensure long-term employment of these people.

Speaking on the lessons to be learnt from the pandemic, Mr Rinzin said that many people working in the industry had put all the eggs in one basket and that there was no diversification. He said that the pandemic also offered some opportunities, of which domestic tourism is a big one. The other opportunity was in reskilling, up-scaling, and professionalising industry people and in enhancing tourism infrastructure. He also added that they have been working on digitilisation and diversification. Another big opportunity, he felt, was virtual tourism.

Mr Rinzin also raised the question of when and how to reopen tourism. Should Bhutan reopen slowly? And how to prepare as Bhutan reopens? He said that humanpower, resources and attractions should be taken into



account. He said that when Bhutan does open, not everyone could be engaged at one go.

The tourism policy and incentives will also need a relook. The government has opened Samdrup Jongkhar and Gelephu as entry points for tourists but infrastructure in these areas is minimal. Policy interventions should also look at how to engage guides in these areas; something which could actually address rural-urban migration as well. He also highlighted the challenge of access and the limited domestic air transport services in the country.

Mr Rinzin said that the pandemic has given stakeholders the time to rethink tourism solutions and explore areas of collaboration between and amongst each other. *“Where does Brand Bhutan fit in when we talk about opening up? How do we ensure that the ‘high value low volume’ tourism is actually well protected?”*

He said that domestic tourism is one of the solutions for now. TCB has launched *Druk Kora*, a platform to promote domestic tourism. He said that this would probably have a small impact initially but might gradually have a bigger impact.

Mr Rinzin said that while more than 12,000 tourism businesses that have been impacted by COVID are waiting for tourism to open, tourism is going to open slowly and only a small number of tourists may visit. He cautioned that since travellers would be concerned about their health and safety, only niche tourism is likely to open.

He said that while people impacted in the tourism industry probably do not have any solution, it is going to take some time for tourism to pick up, with some suggesting four to five years. He said that the conversation around revival of tourism and employment issues should look at both sides of the coin.



**Ms Tashi Dema, Assignment Editor, Kuensel**

Ms Tashi Dema said that COVID-19 pandemic had hit Bhutan's highest employment sector, tourism and hospitality sector very hard, impacting lots of people directly or indirectly. The pandemic crippled the economy, resulting in layoffs and leave without salary, and salary reductions. The pandemic worsened the unemployment situation in the country. She said that the unemployment rate in 2020 is projected to be around 14 percent an increase from 2.7 percent in 2019.

She said that many Bhutanese returning home from overseas further aggravated the unemployment situation. Some 50,000 people were affected in the tourism sector but there are more in the hospitality and entertainment sector who were also affected, including those working in 665 budget or non-certified hotels and 4,200 restaurants and cafes in the country. In addition, hundreds of people working in drayang (dance bars), handicraft shops, porter services, rafting and trekking companies, and small businesses were affected.

Ms Dema also pointed out that as much as the global pandemic left many jobless, it exposed how dependent Bhutan was on foreign workers. Hydropower construction companies and construction sector in the country faced shortages of labour as many foreign workers left for home, delaying the completion of construction projects. The pandemic revealed that there was a shortage of humanpower of more than 14,000 foreign workers (including more than 7,000 skilled workers in the construction sector) due to the restrictions imposed in response to COVID-19.

She said that the major hydropower construction works such as Punatsangchhu I and II, which are already behind schedule, have been impacted. She said that the delay in hydropower construction would have severe economic impacts. She also observed that the pandemic exposed the mismatch of jobs and the skills of job seekers in the labour market. Most job seekers were graduates or class X or XII graduates who did not have the required vocational skills. The types of skills that were lacking in the construction sector were masons, carpenters, steel fabricators,





plumbers, electricians, building painters, and operators, etcetera. She pointed out that these issues are not new yet they have never been resolved, stating that Bhutan never managed to replace foreign workers and never created its own pool of skilled and unskilled workers.

Ms Dema stated that the pandemic has increased the country's vulnerability, exposed the lack of food security, economic and social security systems, and the lack of coping capacity. She said that the immediate response was that many affected people got into agriculture and some moved back to their villagers. Drayang dancers took up construction works and tour guides became waged workers. Druk Gyalpo's Relief Kidu fund came as a huge blessing, helping people working in tourism and hospitality sectors, small restaurants, and so on.

Ms Dema highlighted that the COVID response comprised a stimulus plan for agriculture sector (Nu. 944 million) and the Build Bhutan project in the construction sector (which was initiated to reskill unemployed, laid off employees, and returnees from overseas, and match demand and supply of skilled workforce).

Speaking about the lessons learnt from the pandemic, she said that it is too early to say if the response has been effective, be it in agriculture or construction sectors. She said that Build Bhutan Project has not been able to attract big numbers and some who took up jobs in the hydropower sector have already quit. She said that low wage was one of the reasons why many left their jobs in the construction sector. She said that the stark irony is that there is a shortage of manpower and yet people who returned from overseas have again gone back abroad at their own risk. She said that this calls for reforms in wage rates, incentives, and work environment.

Ms Dema pointed out that the hydropower sector generated undisrupted revenue during the crisis, adding that the country would have benefitted if Punatsangchhu I and II were completed on time. She also emphasised on the need to build one hydropower project at a time to ensure timely completion. She pointed out that tourism industry must be resilient and sustainable in the face of health and climate crises.

She stressed upon the need to invest in agriculture and encourage people to return to the farms to produce food and strengthen the country's food security. She said that agriculture stimulus plan is only focused on increasing the production but it should also focus on processing and packaging, storing and marketing. It is important to establish linkage between market and farms.

She said that there is a need for social protection schemes and employment security schemes for those in the private sector. She pointed out that while labour laws require private firms and agencies to have pension schemes for their employees, the pandemic revealed that it was only on paper and not implemented.

In conclusion, Ms Dema emphasised the need to create awareness and encourage people to save but she was also quick to point out that this could happen only if people have multiple sources of income. She said that most office rules and policies disallow people to do multiple jobs, and as such, there is a need to review such policies to encourage people to save and have a secure future. Finally, she said that all decision makers in the bureaucracy, private sector and the media must implement all the wonderful plans and policies on paper and rework on those plans and policies that are not working.



**Mr Tempa Dorji, Honourable NC member, Lhuentse Dzongkhag**

Honourable NC member Tempa Dorji stated that unemployment is a growing concern not only in Bhutan but also across the world. He said that it is the responsibility of the government to create employment opportunities and conducive work environment for everyone to earn and sustain their lives. He said that unemployment situation in Bhutan emerged in the 1990s, starting at 1.4 percent. In 2019, the unemployment rate was 2.7 percent, which is projected to drastically shoot up to 14 percent in 2021 due to the pandemic.

The Honourable NC member said that youth unemployment is a unique feature in Bhutan's context. Youth unemployment rate for 15-24 years age



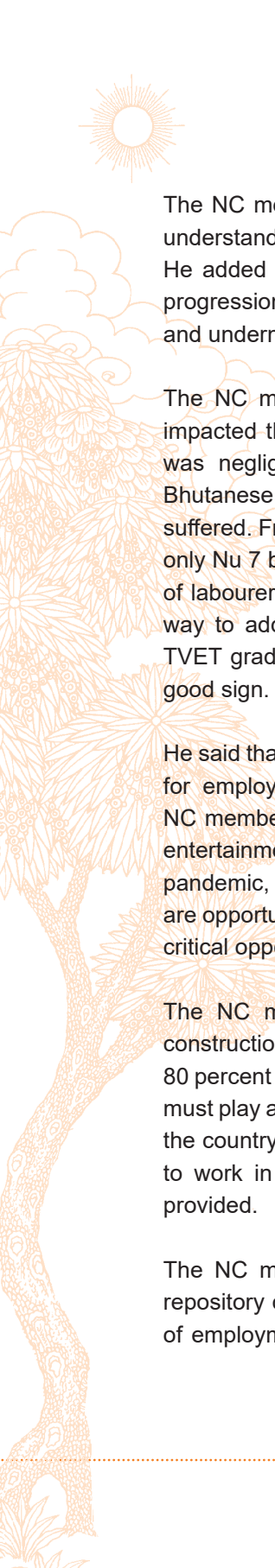
group stood at 11.9 percent in 2019 while unemployment rate for middle and higher cohort education was reported as high as 21.3 percent as of 2016. The employment rate for bachelor degree graduates is around 64.94 percent. The employment opportunities for TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) graduates are higher than the general graduates, almost 88 percent as of 2018. This is a good sign for TVET graduates. He said that a few graduates have, in fact, even joined TVET programme to acquire skills and knowledge and to enhance their employability.

The Honourable NC Member said that the importance of job creation has been explicitly expressed in the Constitution and Employment act and policies, and the National Council has reviewed many policies and programmes to enhance the skilling and reskilling of the present generation. He also stated that the current education system needs to change with the times so that the young people coming out of schools and colleges are ready for work.

The NC member pointed out that Bhutan doesn't have a shortage of humanpower. In fact, by the end the 12<sup>th</sup> FYP in 2023, 70,000 job seekers are expected to enter the labour market. However, he questioned whether the job seekers would have the required skills to work in the construction, hydropower or non-hydropower sectors.

He said that during the review of hydropower development policy and programmes, the NC observed that there was no actual transfer of knowledge and technology to Bhutanese counterparts from foreign experts. There is a need to review these strategies in the post-pandemic era.

According to the review of agriculture policy, more than 43 percent of youth are employed in the agriculture sector. The enabling conditions to encourage youth to take up agriculture are however still missing. This is followed by the service sector but the pandemic has severely affected people employed in the service sector, particularly in tourism and entertainment sectors.



The NC member pointed out that TVET policies should be reviewed to understand why young people are not taking up TVET programmes. He added that the primary reason could be because of lack of career progression in the TVET field, and secondly because Bhutanese question and undermine the abilities of TVET graduates.

The NC member reiterated that while the COVID pandemic severely impacted the construction sector, the employment issue for Bhutanese was negligible because most persons in this sector had not been Bhutanese. However, he said that national development activities have suffered. From the capital outlay of Nu 36.2 billion for fiscal year 2019-20, only Nu 7 billion was spent. This was mainly triggered by non-availability of labourers and skilled workforce. He suggested that TVET is the only way to address this problem. He observed that almost 90 percent of TVET graduates have been employed during the pandemic, which is a good sign.

He said that agriculture sector must be recognized as an important sector for employment generation and to achieve food self-sufficiency. The NC member said that since quite a number of people from tourism and entertainment sectors joined agriculture sector to earn a living during the pandemic, this indicates that people are willing to take up jobs if there are opportunities. The development of agriculture value chain will provide critical opportunities.

The NC member stated that mega hydropower projects during the construction phase employ only around 20 percent of Bhutanese while 80 percent are foreign workers. Therefore, he suggested that hydropower must play a bigger role in generating employment and not just revenue for the country. He said that to encourage more homegrown skilled workers to work in the construction sector, incentives and subsidies must be provided.

The NC member suggested that TVET should be recognised as the repository of skilled human resources that will shape the future patterns of employment, both in terms of quality and quantity, in the country. *“If*



*education is the key to effective development strategies, then TVET is the master key to alleviate poverty and to help achieve sustainable development.”*

## **Q&A Session**

### **Moderator Mr Jigme Rinzin**

*The moment we talk about tourism activities, it is either cultural tours or trekking. Beyond these two areas of trekking and cultural tours, what are the other diversifications that TCB has started?*

### **Response by Mr Damcho Rinzin**

One good news is that the tourism policy of Bhutan has been endorsed by the cabinet and approved in principle. The policy looks into product diversification, for instance wellness and medical tourism, MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions), agro-tourism etcetera. So, the focus now with the written policy is that we will probably move away from just culture and trekking tours. With COVID-19, niche tourism is going to be important since people may not want to come en masse now. TCB (Tourism Council of Bhutan) has been doing a lot of work in ensuring that we adapt to the current situation of COVID.

TCB in collaboration with United Nations Development Programme in Bhutan is working on an overall digitisation plan for the tourism sector. The other thing is to address the seasonality issue, which has been a long-standing challenge for the tourism industry in Bhutan. The very reason that we have lower minimum daily package rate for summer and winter is to actually address the seasonality issue. But is it working? Sometimes it is difficult to promote our country as a year-round destination when we actually have a low price for low season. So, we may have to look at one price for the whole year. TCB has been working on promoting domestic tourism. The future is going to be virtual, so innovation in the areas of virtual tourism is also very important.

### **Moderator Mr Jigme Rinzin**

*Dasho Tempa mentioned that we have a different mentality towards domestic workers and foreign workers. We tend to think that foreign*



*experts are always better than the domestic workers such as masons, carpenters, electricians etcetera. So, Tashi, what is your take on this?*

### **Response by Ms Tashi Dema**

Blue-collar jobs are called skilled jobs in other countries. Our youth are not taking up skilled jobs because we are not encouraging them to do so. Most parents want their children to graduate, complete some general degrees. Similarly, even in the villages, parents don't encourage children to return and work in the farms. That's the main problem. The whole society doesn't see skilled jobs in a favorable light. Instead of blaming the youth, we should incentivize skilled jobs. TVET is the starting point. We need policies that support vocational education and training. Stipends for vocational trainees should be better than others. Parents and family members need to encourage youth to take up TVET programme and skilled jobs. We need to skill our youth first, only then will we be able to trust our own skilled workforce.

### **Moderator Mr Jigme Rinzin**

*Honourable Tempa subtly mentioned about the quality of education – how our students go to schools and colleges to pass exams and not really to prepare for life. I remember when I was in the Council, we were in the Education Review Committee and we worked on and submitted a report. If you could give us the latest update us on education reforms from the National Council perspective?*

### **Response by Honourable Tempa Dorji**

The main reason why our youth are not engaged in the construction sector or taking up other skilled jobs is because of the low wage rate. The second reason is the problem of image associated with such jobs. So, we need to increase the wage rate and improve the image of the skilled workforce and provide equal opportunities for career progression for skilled workers as well. In fact, the NC has made this recommendation.

Coming to the issue of education system, the TVET curriculum has been included as part of the mainstream curriculum from class IX. While this is a good start, I feel we may have to introduce it from class V or VII. In a few years, we will have a large number of graduates coming out of colleges



and universities and many may not get employment. So, the government must come up with a clear strategy or plan to address this. Around 19,000 graduates will enter the labour market by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> FYP. We need to create employment opportunities. There has to be a paradigm shift in the government planning system. We need to come with a clear plan.

**Moderator Mr Jigme Rinzin**


*In the 12th FYP and also the National Contingency Plan, TCB has been allotted Nu 232 billion budget to make the tourism sector resilient, to address seasonality, and to take tourism to all 20 districts. However, to echo some of the questions raised by our virtual audience, not many activities are happening beyond Bumthang. So, Damcho, what is being done to spread out tourism to 20 districts and 205 gewogs?*

**Response by Mr Damcho Rinzin**

The overall tourism flagship program is actually geared towards tourism deficient areas, which is the east and the south and some parts of north. Economic Contingency Plan and Tourism flagship are two different things. The flagship is the bigger component, which includes making Bhutan a year-round destination and to tackle seasonality. The objective of Economic Contingency Plan is to engage those affected by COVID-19 and most of them are located in the west. The other aspect of Contingency Plan was to beautify and enhance the infrastructure at the sites. So, our focus in the west under the tourism flagship program is actually to look at the management issues and less in terms of investment in infrastructure and other products. For other areas, especially in tourism deficient areas, we are looking at investing in new products and new infrastructures such as trekking routes, campsites, festivals etcetera.

**Concluding remarks by Mr Damcho Rinzin**

In conclusion, Mr. Rinzin said that TCB gets asked two frequent questions: When would Bhutan open and how would Bhutan open? He said that even the government would find it difficult to answer the first question due to the constantly changing pandemic situation. However, he informed that TCB in collaboration with the government is working on coming up with a conditional opening date so that tourism industry can stop guessing and work towards the date. On the question of how will Bhutan open, Mr. Rinzin



opined that it would probably be through air routes. He emphasised that internationally, people now prefer to travel in smaller groups, and that could be a future that Bhutanese tour operators should prepare for. He also said that virtual experience is very much part of tourism now and post-COVID.

Mr. Rinzin also reiterated that TCB is working on the digitisation programme with support of UNDP and this programme will likely produce good solutions for the tourism industry. He said that with the policy formally endorsed, TCB is also looking at the overall governance structure to address the key issues and challenges confronting the tourism sector.

### **Concluding remarks by Ms Tashi Dema**

Ms Dema said that the pandemic has provided an opportunity to relook and address long-standing issues such as unemployment and mismatch of skills and jobs. She said that media can only create awareness and give a positive spin to the stories to encourage youth to take up skilled jobs. She added that those in the authority have the responsibility to improve the working environment in skilled sector through incentives and high wages and salaries.

### **Concluding remarks by Honourable Tempa Dorji**

Honourable Council member reiterated the significance of His Majesty's Royal address during the 113<sup>th</sup> National Day on December 17, 2020, where the King categorically emphasised upon the need to revamp the civil service and the education system in Bhutan. The Council Member said that His Majesty's command is to make the civil service more creative and dynamic rather than just a system where decisions are taken. Speaking of reforms in the education system, he said that the reform process must take a long-range view, rethinking its strategies starting from ECCD (Early Childhood Care and Development) level to colleges and universities. The Honourable NC member also emphasised that TVET should be a primary focus since most of the employment opportunities are in the TVET sector. He stressed that hydropower has been key to revenue generation during the pandemic and as such the government must re-strategize hydropower development to maximise the benefits. Linking hydropower and climate change, he said that Bhutan might have only a short duration to fully harness and optimise the hydropower potential due to retreating glaciers and drying up of rivers.



## Roundtable Discussion



The two-day conference concluded with a round table discussion, which brought together all the moderators to reflect on a wide array of themes and issues discussed during the conference. Mr Sangay Khandu, from the CLG, moderated the session. He stated that the goal of the roundtable discussion was to have the moderators highlight some of the main takeaways from their respective panel discussions.


### **Ms Namgay Choden, Moderator, Panel on Economic Vulnerability and Climate Change**

Ms Namgay Choden presented three key takeaways from the first panel on the theme 'Economic Vulnerability and Climate Change'. The first takeaway was the clear relationship between the economic health and future of the country and climate change. Ms. Choden said that climate change is still very abstract to many people, including policymakers. She highlighted ethics and interdependence as the second key takeaway, reiterating the importance of public policy to be grounded in ethics. She added that public policy must have people at its centre and must be based on love, compassion and kindness. Her third key takeaway was the importance of hope and the need to boost public morale especially in times of crisis. She said that economy is a self-fulfilling prophecy and when people are optimistic, things to get better.

### **Dr Karma Tenzin, Moderator, Panel on Volunteerism and Public health**

Dr Karma Tenzin said that first takeaway was the significance of desuups as a core example of volunteerism in the country and the pivotal role that they have played during the COVID pandemic. The second takeaway was the pivotal role volunteers played in the delivery of public health services in the country during COVID. Dr Tenzin also emphasised upon the need to





revisit and explore people-centric approaches to health service delivery in Bhutan. He also stressed on the need to improve implementation of plans and programmes.

**Mr Lekey Wangdi, Moderator, Panel on Local Governance**

Mr Lekey Wangdi said that Local Government functionaries have played a critical role during the pandemic in terms of preparedness, recovery, surveillance, and awareness programmes. Underlining the importance of effective implementation, Mr Wangdi said that the concept of triple C - coordination, collaboration and consolidation – an approach promoted in the 12<sup>th</sup> FYP, requires more focus. He pointed out that there should be better linkages between the central plans and the local government plans and this is especially important in the implementation process. He also highlighted the need to bridge the human resources gap in the Local Government, adding that there is an opportunity to collaborate, understand the local governance system better, and also give due recognition to the Local Governments. Mr. Wangdi also pointed out that Local Government also should shift their role from being only implementer to being facilitators.

**Mr Tharchen, Executive Director, CLG, Panel on Agriculture**

Speaking in place of moderator Honourable NC member, Mr Nima (who had to be away for work), Mr Tharchen underlined the dichotomy in the country's high unemployment rate; more than 70,000 acres of barren private farmland and Nu 7.1 billion annual food import bill. He said that youth must take up large-scale commercial farming to address the unemployment issues and food security.

He highlighted the challenges faced by youth interested in taking up commercial farming. Some of these challenges include unclear definition of commercial farming, which is based on the size of land (five acres and above); licensing requirements; bureaucratic red tape such as requirement of clearance from gewog, district, and ministry; and lack of access to finance and credit. He said that one of the challenges youths interested in commercial farming face is public attitude and resistance as the community members do not trust and believe in young people interested in starting commercial farms.





Mr Tharchen said that local government must prioritise commercial farming to promote food security and self-sufficiency. He said that most Local Government grants are allocated for renovation of lhakhangs, *goendheys*, and farm roads. He also highlighted that the support services of Ministry of Agriculture and Forests are dispersed both in terms of location and governance.

### **Mr Jigme Rinzin, Moderator, Panel on Employment, Hydropower and Tourism**

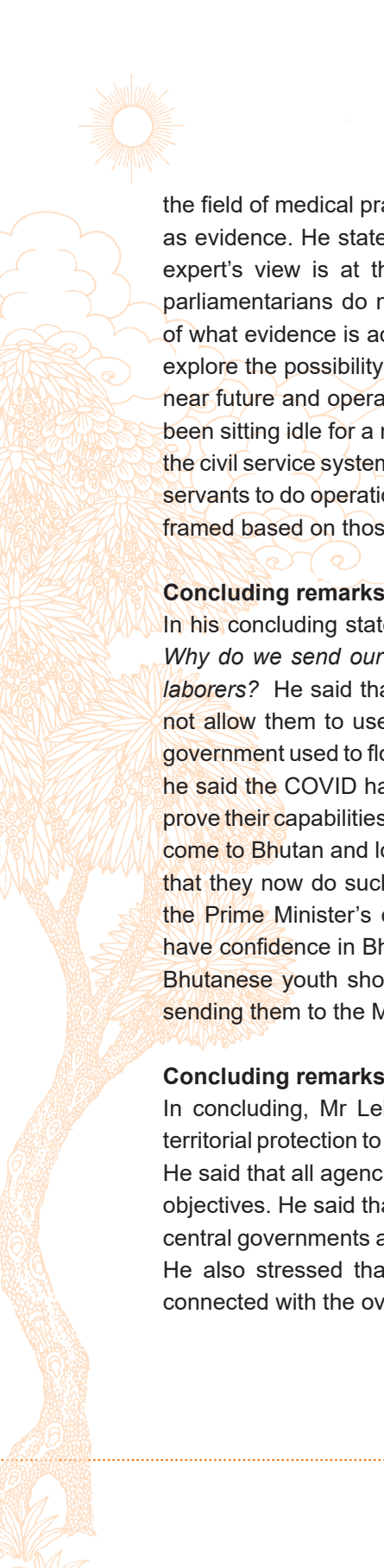
Mr Jigme Rinzin reiterated the impact of COVID on the tourism sector, which resulted in a drastic reduction in tourist arrivals and a steep plunge in government revenue from this sector. Further, livelihoods of some 50,000 people in the industry were directly affected. He said that the government had to step in to help the affected people. He said that tourism benefits are not spread across the country and there was a need to equitably distribute tourism benefits country-wide.

Mr Rinzin highlighted the need to diversify the economy, quoting the oft repeated phrase 'all eggs in one basket' to describe Bhutan's singular focus on sectors such as hydropower or tourism. He said that even within the tourism sector, there was too much focus on specific areas like cultural tours and trekking. He pointed out that the hydropower sector has been a consistent source of revenue during the pandemic, and thus, significant to the country's economy. He also said that in the wake of climate change, with rivers drying up and glaciers retreating at an accelerated pace, there are also quarters who believe that this is not the time to capitalise the water resources.

Mr Rinzin pointed out that importance of skilling the youth to fill in the vacuum created by the outflow of foreign workers. He added that TVET program is therefore a priority at the present. He said that policies, rules, and regulations should facilitate the skilling of youth.

### **Concluding remarks by Dr Karma Tenzin**

In his closing remarks, Dr Karma Tenzin highlighted the existing practices in relation to research and policy in Bhutan. He said that many decisions are often made based on assumptions and personal observations. Even in



the field of medical practice, the specialist's expertise is often considered as evidence. He stated that in the pyramid of the hierarchy of research, expert's view is at the bottom. Dr Tenzin also pointed out that even parliamentarians do not conduct thorough research or critical appraisal of what evidence is actually there. He recommended that Bhutan should explore the possibility of establishing a National Research Council in the near future and operationalise the research endowment fund, which has been sitting idle for a number of years. Dr Tenzin also recommended that the civil service system should put in place mechanisms to encourage civil servants to do operational research on a smaller scale so that policies are framed based on those operational results.

### **Concluding remarks by Mr Jigme Rinzin**

In his concluding statement, Mr Jigme Rinzin reflected on the question: *Why do we send our youth to the Middle East while we import foreign laborers?* He said that Bhutanese are able people but the system does not allow them to use their full potential. Citing an example of how the government used to float international tenders for accounting consultancy, he said the COVID has given an opportunity to local accounting firms to prove their capabilities. Due to COVID restrictions, foreign experts couldn't come to Bhutan and local consulting agencies jumped in. Mr. Rinzin said that they now do such jobs. He exhorted all levels of government, from the Prime Minister's office to the Local Government level, to trust and have confidence in Bhutanese people, especially the youth. He said that Bhutanese youth should be trained in a wide range of skills instead of sending them to the Middle East or elsewhere.

### **Concluding remarks by Mr Lekey Wangdi**

In concluding, Mr Lekey Wangdi said that there is a need to remove territorial protection to improve coordination among government agencies. He said that all agencies should work more collaboratively to achieve the objectives. He said that it is important to build synergy between local and central governments and they should avoid working in silos or in isolation. He also stressed that any sectoral or policy reform initiative must be connected with the overall objective and not done in isolation.



**Concluding remarks by Ms Namgay Choden:**

Concluding on an optimistic note, Ms. Namgay Choden said that this crisis has been a good opportunity to radically change so many things. She said that people are also much more open to new ideas and solutions and receptive to new paradigms. She urged all the participants to go back to their respective workplaces and think about how they can do things differently.

**Concluding remarks by Mr Tharchen**

Mr Tharchen said that advocacy at policy, youth and community level is key in connecting youth to farming and to encourage them to take up commercial farming, otherwise the road ahead for commercial farming and food self-sufficiency would be a rough one.





## Overview concluding statement by Dr Nitasha Kaul, Centre for the Study of Democracy, London, University of Westminster



Dr Nitasha Kaul expressed her gratitude to all the panelists, moderators, and participants. She said it has been a great privilege for her to be a part of the conversation where people were deeply engaged with policy and governance issues. Dr Kaul said that in many places these issues have become so distanced from everyday people's lives that they are not the things that people talk about when they talk about politics or economy in the public sphere.

She said that the Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster is pleased with this kind of partnership that looks at critical social and political challenges and put them in an interdisciplinary context, have dialogues with scholars, policymakers, and activists, and bring research into people's lives in a way that it matters so that there is interconnectivity between the knowledge that is produced and the ways in which it is used.

Dr Kaul informed that just as the first Biodemocracy conference that she had organised with CLG last year explored a whole range of interdisciplinary areas, this year's conference too brought together a diverse set of participants that comprised practitioners, people with different kinds of experiences, men, women, people from rural and urban areas, and people from different regions of the country. She said that the whole idea of the conference is to bring in different perspectives.

Dr Kaul also briefly talked about her association with Bhutan, affirming that of the 23 years of her academic life, she has known Bhutan for 16



years. She said that she first came to Bhutan in 2006, just as Bhutan was transitioning to democracy with elections soon to happen. She said that this experience, observing the elections and seeing the country successfully embrace democracy, was vital in shaping her relationship with Bhutan.

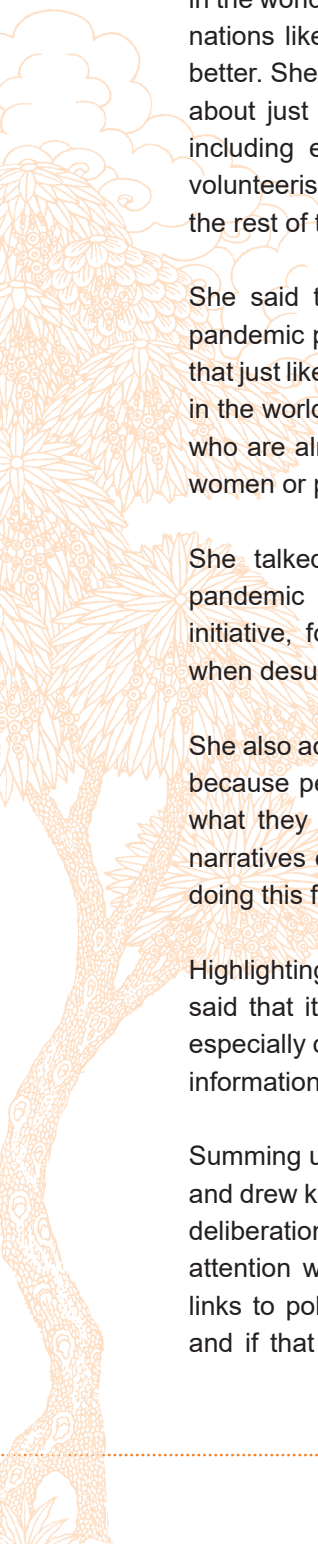
Explaining why she had conceptualised the project in terms of a 'biodemocracy', she said that the idea behind it is to talk about the political and the ecological issues together and to highlight the inter-linkages between the two. She explained how doing so also explores how consent is created and how people give consensus to policies that may lead to good or bad outcomes. She said that for a small country like Bhutan, located at a high altitude with a fragile natural environment, politics and ecology and the inter-linkages of those two are really important.

Dr Kaul read out excerpts from her article 'Power to People' published in 2008 (link at [www.nitashakaul.com](http://www.nitashakaul.com)) where she talks about Bhutan's fascinating journey toward democracy which involved setting up of constitutional bodies and conducting mock elections to make sure everything works. She also touched on the issues that are important to the Bhutanese people such as distance between settlements and the nearest road head, maintenance of water channels and *lhakhangs*, mule tracks, rural electrification and crop insurance, unemployment, rural-urban migration, pollution, and the need for government policies in the future to focus on reducing dependence by diversifying the economy, lowering unemployment amongst urban youth, and generating revenue by developing private sector enterprises, among others. She said that despite the challenges and public policy tradeoffs, there is space for hope and optimism.

She is also highlighted the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge and the importance to look at issues from what she called the 'contextual social political economy' point of view. Dr Kaul said that a really important point that gets amplified in discussions in Bhutan is that people have to be at the heart of it all, and this is what makes Bhutan unique and worth emulating.

Dr Kaul said that the pandemic has revealed how many powerful countries





in the world could not provide for the security of their people while smaller nations like New Zealand, South Korea, Taiwan, and Bhutan did much better. She said that this shows how pandemic management is not really about just resources. Praising Bhutan for its swift response to COVID including extension of quarantine period, taking border controls and volunteerism seriously, among others, she said that these are few things the rest of the world can learn from Bhutan.

She said that instead of enlightened public policy and deliberations, pandemic profiteering is what happened in many countries. Dr Kaul said that just like the recession that happened in 2008 that hit many economies in the world badly, the effects of the pandemic are exacerbated for those who are already vulnerable, for example, single parent households and women or people who are engaged in the informal sector.

She talked about how Bhutanese people's cooperation during the pandemic is about creating and facilitating endogenous internal civic initiative, for instance, people using masks and washing hands even when desuups aren't around.

She also added that a lot of the times, conflict and problems don't happen because people are bad but because they really genuinely believe that what they are doing is good. The challenge is to bridge the different narratives of different groups of people, each of who think that they are doing this for the common good.

Highlighting social media challenges and problem of fake news, she said that it is important for people to understand, in any situation and especially during a public health crisis, social media can amplify incorrect information. Fake news has globally been a negative driving force.

Summing up, Dr Kaul reiterated several issues covered by the panelists, and drew key points for further thought that emerged from the conference deliberations. She said that the issues that needed more focus and attention were as follows -- prioritization of research and capturing its links to policy; how to encourage savings in a macroeconomic context and if that required a rethink on regulations around part time jobs for



government workers; how to ensure the continued welfare and wellbeing of desuup volunteers as they face arduous circumstances; how to meet the challenges of increasing unemployment; how to find the right path to economic diversification and food security as it requires choices between food import and self-sufficiency tradeoffs; and finally, how to square the good intentions of plans versus the issues that arise in implementation. Dr Kaul said that there are positive and negative externalities during the pandemic, which simply mean interdependence in the Buddhist context. She concluded with the popular Second World War saying: *“Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.”*

She urged that the conversations and deliberations of BBR conferences in 2019 and 2020 are the start of an engaged longer-term project. Those interested should follow the project pages online.

#### **Final remarks by the Roundtable Moderator, Mr Sangay Khandu, CLG**

The Moderator Mr Sangay Khandu said that there were always challenges but the COVID-19 pandemic had magnified these challenges. However, he said that this has also given an opportunity to have a deeper reflection on what needs to be done to move forward. The Moderator thanked His Excellency Lyonpo Ugyen Dorji for agreeing to be part of the conference and for delivering the keynote address. He also thanked the Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster, and Dr Kaul for the guidance and support. He thanked all the moderators for their thoughtful contributions to the discussions. He also thanked the CLG team for the excellent backend service. Lastly, he thanked all the participants on Zoom and Facebook. The Moderator said that there would be more such discussions on diverse themes and topics in the future with people who make decisions, who influence decisions, and also track the progress of issues discussed at the conference.



Home News Business Editorial Sports Opinions Videos Diversion COVID -19



Advertisement



**LEARN MORE! Post Study Work Visas in CANADA**

**CLICK HERE!**

## CLG conference engages hundreds of people

December 23, 2020

Post Views: 669

**Chhimi Dema**

Now that Thimphu is under the second lockdown, people are finding ways to keep themselves engaged through various means — reading, attending online conferences, and watching television.

Bhutan Biodemocracy and Resilience Conference, for example, saw more than 300 people attend through zoom on Monday.

The conference's Facebook page had more than 100 shares and 30,000 views.

The conference was organised by the centre for local governance and research (CLG) in collaboration with the University of Westminster, the UK.

The thematic areas of discussions in the conference were economic vulnerability and climate change, volunteerism and public health, local governments, agriculture, employment, hydropower and tourism

The conference organiser, Tharchen from CLG, said that the thematic areas for the conference were on the sectors impacted by the pandemic situation and highlights the preparation, reflections and recovery in these areas.

### Business

#### Ferrosilicon price hits a record high

January 30, 2021

#### Govt. expects strong economic recovery next fiscal year

January 30, 2021

#### Inflation slows in the third quarter

January 27, 2021

### Editorial

#### No, we don't need more bars

April 28, 2021

#### His Holiness Trulku Jigme Chhoeda

April 27, 2021

#### Dangerous Japan?

<https://kuenselonline.com/clg-conference-engages-hundreds-of-people/>

(23/12/20)


[Log in](#) | [Register](#) | [UK](#) | [US](#) | [Contact us](#)

[Home](#) | [News](#) | [Business](#) | [Editorial](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinions](#) | [Videos](#) | [Diversions](#) | [COVID-19](#)


Advertisement


**LEARN MORE! Post Study Work Visas in CANADA**
**CLICK HERE!**

## Market-driven agriculture to help achieve food security

December 24, 2020

Post Views: 806

Chhimi Dema

For Bhutan which has been struggling to achieve food self-sufficiency, shifting its focus to market-driven agriculture could be the best answer. This is what came out of Bhutan Biodemocracy and Resilience Conference discussion on Wednesday.

The conference highlighted the preparation, reflections and recoveries in the sectors impacted by the pandemic.

Chief executive officer of Food Corporation of Bhutan (FCB), Naiten Wangchuk, said that food security and sufficiency continue to elude the country even after four decades of prioritised development "which calls for a reassessment of the approach the country takes in agriculture."

The global trade and networking which was supposed to facilitate access to food was found to be irrelevant when borders closed due to the pandemic, Naiten Wangchuk said.

"Under such circumstances, what we need to ask is, can we continue to be an import-driven society knowing our vulnerability? And can we have food security without food self-sufficiency?" he asked.

To address the ageing population and unprecedented crisis, current generation of subsistence farming

### Business

#### Ferrosilicon price hits a record high

January 30, 2021

#### Govt. expects strong economic recovery next fiscal year

January 30, 2021

#### Inflation slows in the third quarter

January 27, 2021

### Editorial

#### No, we don't need more bars

April 28, 2021

#### His Holiness Trulku Jigme Chhoeda

April 27, 2021

#### Dangerous Japan?

<https://kuenselonline.com/market-driven-agriculture-to-help-achieve-food-security/>  
(24/12/20)



[Log in](#) | [Register](#) | | | [Contact us](#)

[Home](#) | [News](#) | [Business](#) | [Editorial](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinions](#) | [Videos](#) | [Diversion](#) | [COVID -19](#)

Advertisement

**LEARN MORE! Post Study Work Visas in CANADA**

[CLICK HERE!](#)

## Panel discussion delves on employment opportunities

December 26, 2020

Post Views: 916

**MB Subba**

A panel discussion held yesterday on “employment, hydropower and tourism” delved into the various aspects of unemployment issue when the country is experiencing a shortage of workers in the development projects.

One of the panellists, National Council member from Lhuentse, Tempa Dorji, said that development activities in many cases could not be completed on time due to a shortage of workers and that unemployment was a major problem.

Organised by the Centre for Local Governance and Research in Thimphu, the virtual panel discussion was part of the Biodemocracy and Resilience Conference that concluded earlier this week.

Tempa Dorji stressed on the need to promote Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) to meet the workforce needs in the country. He said that almost all TVET graduates were employed and stressed on the need to prepare youth beyond for exams.

Highlighting the issues facing the TVET, he said that there was no proper career ladder for TVET

### Business

#### Ferrosilicon price hits a record high

January 30, 2021

#### Govt. expects strong economic recovery next fiscal year

January 30, 2021

#### Inflation slows in the third quarter

January 27, 2021

### Editorial

#### No, we don't need more bars

April 28, 2021

#### His Holiness Trulku Jigme Chhoeda

April 27, 2021

<https://kuenselonline.com/panel-discussion-delves-on-employment-opportunities/>  
(26/12/20)



UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTMINSTER

STUDY INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH BUSINESS SERVICES NEWS EVENTS ABOUT US

## Dr Nitasha Kaul hosts second Bhutan Biodemocracy and Resilience Conference to discuss the effects of the coronavirus pandemic

Dr Nitasha Kaul, from the [Centre for the Study of Democracy \(CSD\)](#), hosted the second [Bhutan Biodemocracy and Resilience Conference \(BBR 2020\)](#) in Bhutan online on December 21 and 22 in partnership with the Centre for Local Governance & Research in Thimphu.



The two-day conference focused on the coronavirus pandemic, with panel discussions on the effects of the crisis in relation to economic vulnerability and climate change, volunteerism and public health, local governments, agriculture, employment, hydropower and tourism.

A keynote address from Lyonpo Ugyen Dorji, Minister of Labour and Human Resources of the Royal Government of Bhutan, began the two days of panel discussions on the pandemic, public policy and development. The talks were livestreamed and watched by thousands of people and were covered nationally.

The BBR 2020 conference built upon the first conference titled 'Bhutan as Biodemocracy: Building Socioeconomic and Environmental Resilience' which was held in July 2019.

The conference builds on Dr Kaul's previous work on Bhutan, spanning over a decade. Following on from the insights gained by her British Academy-funded research on democratic transition in 2008 and democratic consolidation in 2018, she conceived the overall Bhutan as Biodemocracy project in 2019 as part of her initiative under the Global Challenges Research Fund Scheme.

This further links to her work as [Principal Investigator on the ongoing AHRC Networking project on Narratives of a Sustainable Biodemocracy: Bhutan and Beyond](#), which focuses on connecting political and ecological concerns through activities that create an understanding of planning and policy-making. Using a narrative-based approach, the project concentrates on responsible consumption and production, also known as the Sustainable Development Goal 12 of the United Nations.

Talking about the conference, Dr Kaul said: "Resulting from sustained online and offline work across cities, we brought together perspectives of a diverse range of people: policymakers, bureaucrats, local government officials, farmers, medics, entrepreneurs and frontline volunteers, to provide original reflections on the cross-sectoral effects of the pandemic. This knowledge-sharing can help address the challenges facing development priorities and pathways.

"During a time of crisis, it is vital that we learn from each other. I am convinced that research with impact beyond academia can make a difference by enabling greater engagements between communities of policymakers, development practitioners, and people."

Dr Kaul teaches on the [International Relations MA](#), [International Relations and Security MA](#) and the [Politics and International Relations BA Honours](#) courses. She welcomes doctoral students in the [areas of her expertise](#).

Find out more about [Politics and International Relations courses](#) at the University of Westminster.

<https://www.westminster.ac.uk/news/dr-nitasha-kaul-hosts-second-bhutan-biodemocracy-and-resilience-conference-to-discuss-the-effects-of>

(14/1/21)

UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

HOMEAUTHORS & CREATORSRESEARCH AREASLATEST ADDITIONS

Project report

## Proceedings of Bhutan: Biodemocracy & Resilience Conference 2019

Kaul, N. and Khandu, S. 2020. *Proceedings of Bhutan: Biodemocracy & Resilience Conference 2019*. Bhutan Centre for Local Governance & Research

TITLE	Proceedings of Bhutan: Biodemocracy & Resilience Conference 2019
AUTHORS	<a href="#">Kaul, N.</a> and Khandu, S.
TYPE	Project report
ABSTRACT	<p>In this report of the 'Bhutan Biodemocracy and Resilience 2019 Conference' proceedings, we aim to provide an overview of intellectual and practical ideas that were exchanged on 19 July 2019. The summaries provided in this report are just that – summaries; they are meant to give the reader an idea of the discussions that traversed a wide variety of topics. As you will see, the panels ranged from 'rethinking the economy mindfully' to 'contemporary challenges' to 'education' to focusing on 'specific policy domains'. We were honoured that all our speakers had worked hard on their presentations and that the audience was appreciative and appropriately inquisitive. We hope that in due course we would be able to put together a larger volume with the scholarly and referenced versions of these papers.</p>
KEYWORDS	Bhutan, Democracy, Biodemocracy, Resilience
YEAR	2020
PUBLISHER	Centre for Local Governance & Research
PLACE OF PUBLICATION	Bhutan
PUBLICATION DATES	
<i>PUBLISHED</i>	19 Jul 2019
PAGE RANGE	76
WEB ADDRESS (URL)	<a href="http://clg.bhutan.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Report-Final_3.pdf">http://clg.bhutan.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Report-Final_3.pdf</a>

BBR conference 2019 Report -- <https://westminsterresearch.westminster.ac.uk/item/v13w3/proceedings-of-bhutan-biodemocracy-resilience-conference-2019>



[Log in](#) | [Register](#) | | | [Contact us](#)

[Home](#) | [News](#) | [Business](#) | [Editorial](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinions](#) | [Videos](#) | [Diversions](#) | [COVID-19](#)

Advertisement

**LEARN MORE! Post Study Work Visas in CANADA**
[CLICK HERE!](#)

## Biodemocracy, balancing political and ecological democracy

July 20, 2019

Post Views: 731

For many participants, who attended the daylong conference on biodemocracy and resilience in Thimphu yesterday, biodemocracy was a new term.

Most of the 111 participants were new faces, comprising mostly of teachers.

It was the chief guest, Speaker Wangchuk Namgyel, who defined biodemocracy as a balance between political and ecological democracy.

He said the conference would deepen democracy, as it would discuss about harmonious coexistence. "We have been talking about human democracy but through this conference, we would learn about how to live in harmony with ecology."

According to the Speaker, Article 5 of the Constitution emphasises on the protection of the natural environment, conservation of the rich biodiversity and prevention of all forms of ecological degradation including noise, visual and physical pollution through the adoption and support of environment friendly practices and policies. "The conference is expected to play a vital role in translating the laws and provisions in place for ecological conservation."

Executive director for the centre for local governance and research (CLG), Tharchen, said biodemocracy is about the responsibility of all politically fulfilling citizens to respect the environment.

Nitasha Kaul (PhD) from the University of Westminster, London, who is co-organising the conference with CLG said that as a small high altitude country rich in natural resources but surrounded by fast urbanising, often environmentally unsustainable resource hungry and populous neighbours, Bhutan needs to find its best balance between a fragile natural ecosystem and a democratising GNH welfare state that functions in the digital era.

"Like any other country in the contemporary world, it is a tough challenge to find the right balance between economic and livelihood opportunities and a socioeconomic trajectory that combines sustainable organisation of space and resources in order to build resilient cities, communities and ecosystems," she said.

She said that in the first decade of democracy— which itself was the result of a unique and beautiful transition led by an enlightened monarchy – Bhutanese thinkers and policymakers, as well as politicians, students, and other engaged citizens think of finding the best balance between creating employment, rural livelihood generation, fostering private sector growth, while maintaining biological

Media reports from 2019 conference -- <https://kuenselonline.com/biodemocracy-balancing-political-and-ecological-democracy/> <https://www.dailybhutan.com/article/conference-on-biodemocracy-balancing-political-and-ecological-democracy-held-in-bhutan>



# DAILY BHUTAN

YOUR GATEWAY TO THE KINGDOM



Welcome to  
**DRUKAIR**  
ROYAL BHUTAN

HOME **NEWS** FEATURES SPORTS BUSINESS TRAVEL LIFESTYLE UPCOMING EVENTS Q ≡

Home > News

20  
JUL, 2019

## Conference On Biodemocracy - Balancing Political And Ecological Democracy Held In Bhutan

Like Share Tweet Email

The conference helped to deepen democracy through discussions on harmonious coexistence.



Yak herders pitch their tents in Laya, Bhutan. (Source: Zahariz)

By Tashi Dema | Kuensel

For many participants who attended the daylong conference on 'Biodemocracy and Resilience' in Thimphu on 19 July, the term - Biodemocracy was new to them.

Among the Chief Guest, Speaker, Monks, and Nepalese, the defined Biodemocracy was

<https://dailybhutan.com/article/conference-on-biodemocracy-balancing-political-and-ecological-democracy-held-in-bhutan>





## Profile of Moderators and Speakers



**Ms NAMGAY CHODEN**

**Moderator: Panel on Economic Vulnerability and Climate Change**

Ms Namgay Choden is a foreign service officer with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She studied sociology and global economic development at the National University of Singapore. She is interested in innovation in government and the creation of knowledge networks. As a World Economic Forum Global Shaper and a Climate Reality Leader, she also commits her time to write, spread awareness and initiate community projects for climate action. She loves reading and a good conversation.



**Mr GOPAL GIRI**

**Speaker: Mr Gopal Giri** is the Director of Department of Macroeconomic Research and Statistics at the Royal Monetary Authority (RMA) of Bhutan. He works as an economist at the RMA in the areas of central banking, including monetary policy, liquidity management, external sector and reserve management, among others. He has a master's degree in Economics (with specialization in Economics and Econometrics) from the University of Sydney and Honors undergraduate degree from Sherubtse College, Bhutan.







### Speaker: ANI CHOPHAL PALMO

Ani Chophal Palmo became a nun in 1999 after completing her higher secondary education from Jigme Sherabling High School in Eastern Bhutan. She has been pursuing her further studies in Buddhist Philosophy in a Tibetan non-sectarian institute in Himachal Pradesh the northern India for almost 12 years. Currently, she is in Bhutan due to the pandemic. She completed her diploma in *Abhisamayalankara* and will complete her diploma in *Madhyamaka* in two years from now, after which she will return to Bhutan to teach the nuns here.



### Speaker: Ms PEM LAMA

Ms Pem Lam is Director of the Landscapes, Enterprise, Agriculture and Forests Program at the Bhutan Ecological Society (BES). She has worked at the Asian Development Bank (ADB), International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), Secretariat for the New Development Paradigm (SNDP) and Bhutan Foundation in areas of economic development, green public procurement, sustainable consumption and production, societal wellbeing and Gross National Happiness (GNH). She has an MBA from Aarhus Business School in Denmark and a BA in Economics and International Relations from Tufts University in the United States.



### DR KARMA TENZIN

#### Moderator: Panel on Volunteerism and Public Health

Dr Karma Tenzin is the Deputy Dean of Academic Affairs at Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan. He completed his MBBS from Sri Lanka, MD in Basic and clinical Physiology from Bangladesh, and Fellowship in medical education from India. He has authored and co-authored over 25 scientific and research publications in various areas in the health and medical field. His special interest is in the field of medical education, addiction and health systems with special focus on people centric approach to health services.

**Speaker: Mr SHERUB DORJI**

Sherub Dorji is a reporter with Bhutan Broadcasting Service, currently stationed in Samtse as a bureau correspondent. He has degree in Bachelor of Arts in English and Environmental Studies from Sherubtse College, Bhutan. He worked as a programme assistant with the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy before joining BBS in 2017. A Desuup himself, he volunteered to serve on the frontlines and has seen volunteerism in action through his work as a journalist.

**Speaker: Dr CHHIMI WANGMO**

Dr Chhimi Wangmo is an Ophthalmologist at the Central Regional Referral Hospital in Gelephu, Sarpang. She has a Doctor of Medicine in Ophthalmology from Faculty of Postgraduate Medicine, Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan. She completed her MBBS from the University of Colombo in Srilanka in 2008. She also served for a year as a Medical Officer in Tsirang. Apart from her personal career, she is the Assistant Editor of Bhutan Health Journal and an active participant for Public Health and Safety.

**Speaker: Mr TSHERING WANGCHEN**

Mr Tshering Wangchen, who is a Desuup, is the Regional Coordinator for Desuup Regional Office in Mongar. He is actively involved in Desuup related activities of the six eastern dzongkhags. He graduated from Sherubtse College and has served in various positions in various agencies before taking up the current post as the Program Manager at Chithuen Phendhay Association of Bhutan, a non-governmental organisation that works towards promoting alcohol and drug free GNH society in Bhutan.





**Mr LEKEY WANGDI**

**Moderator: Panel on Local Governance**

Mr Lekey Wangdi is a local governance advisor with HELVETAS Country Office in Bhutan. Prior to the current position, he worked as Research Officer with Gross National Happiness Commission Secretariat and as Planning Officer in Local Government Administration. He holds a Master's degree in Population Studies from the University of Philippines, Diliman. He has rich experience working in the field of planning and evaluation, project management, local governance, community development and poverty reduction programmes.



**Speaker: Mr TSHERING DORJI**

Mr Tshering Dorji is the Chairperson (Thrizin) of Paro Dzongkhag Tshogdu since 2016. He is the Gup of Shari Gewog in Paro. He ran a travel agency prior to contesting the Local Government elections. He has extensive experience in the private sector.



**Speaker: Mr PHUB DORJI**

Mr Phub Dorji is the Chief Election Officer with the Election Commission of Bhutan. A seasoned civil servant, he started his career in the field of education. He joined the Election Commission of Bhutan in 2010.



**Speaker: Ms PEMA LHAMO**

Ms Pema Lhamo is the Mangmi of Nubi Gewog in Trongsa. A mother of four, she is among the few female local leaders in the country. She participated in the Local Government election 2016 and got elected to this position.

**Mr NIMA****Moderator: Panel on Agriculture**

Mr Nima is a Member of Parliament serving his second term with the National Council of Bhutan. He represents Bumthang Dzongkhag. He has a Master's degree in Human Services Counseling from Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Western Australia. He is currently serving as a member of the Good Governance Committee in the National Council. He worked as a lecturer at Paro College of Education before contesting the National Council elections.

**Speaker: Mr SHERAB WANGCHUK**

Mr Sherab Wangchuk is currently working as a Senior Planning Officer at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Royal Government of Bhutan. He has been working with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests since 2005. He has a Master's Degree in Management with specialisation in public policy.

**Speaker: Mr NIMA LAMA**

Mr Nima Lama started his career as a teacher. He has a bachelor's degree in education from Samtse College of Education. He also served as a Head Teacher and later became a Principal. In 2017 he resigned to take up commercial farming as fulltime career. Today he runs a commercial farm in Sarpang.





### **Speaker: Mr NAITEN WANGCHUK**

Mr Naiten Wangchuk is the Chief Executive Officer of Food Corporation of Bhutan Limited. Earlier, he served in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests as Chief Research Officer. He has a Master's degree in Agricultural Science and Sustainable Development from Wageningen University and Research Center in the Netherlands; and Bachelor's Degree on Agriculture Science from Central Luzon State University in the Philippines.



### **Mr JIGMI RINZIN**

#### **Moderator: Panel on Employment, Hydropower and Tourism**

Mr Jigmi Rinzin is a co-founder of Centre for Local Governance & Research (CLG). He is also the managing partner of M/s JIGMI Audit & Financials Private Limited. He was a Member of Parliament in the National Council from Pemagatshel Dzongkhag for two terms from 2008 to 2018. Earlier to 2008, he was a civil servant from 1995 till 2007, having worked in Anti-Corruption Commission as a Chief Investigation Officer, Royal Audit Authority as Chief Auditor and as General Manager in Kuensel Corporation Limited. He has Bachelor's degree in Commerce from Sherubtse College and is a Fellow Chartered Certified Accountant from the United Kingdom.



### **Speaker: Mr DAMCHO RINZIN**

Mr Damcho Rinzin is the Head of Tourism Promotion Division, Tourism Council of Bhutan. He studied Bachelor of Applied Management in Hospitality and Tourism from the University of New Brunswick, Canada and started his career with the then Department of Tourism, Ministry of Trade and Industry as a researcher and marketing officer. He also has a double master's degree in international tourism and business from Australia.



**Speaker: Ms TASHI DEMA**

Ms Tashi Dema is an Assignment Editor with Kuensel, Bhutan's national newspaper. She has a Master's degree in International Journalism from the University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia. She did her Post Graduate Diploma in Print Journalism from Asian College of Journalism, India. In her 15 years of career in Kuensel, she has reported on issues that matter most to the people.

**Speaker: Mr TEMPA DORJI**

Mr Tempa Dorji is a member of the National Council of Bhutan from Lhuentse Dzongkhag. He also served as the National Council member from 2013 to 2018. He holds a Master's degree of Science in Electrical Power Engineering. He worked as a divisional manager at Bhutan Power Corporation before joining the National Council.







CENTRE FOR THE  
STUDY OF  
DEMOCRACY  
  
UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTMINSTER

ས་གནས་གཞུང་གྲོང་ཁྱེད་ཞིབ་འཛོལ་སྒྲེ་བ།  
Center for Local Governance & Research  
[www.clgbhutan.com](http://www.clgbhutan.com)



Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/Bhutan-Biodemocracy-106556427973375>



@CSDWestminster  
@bhbtbiodemocracy  
@clgbhutan

**ADDRESS:**

**Changangkha, Thimphu, Bhutan**  
Post Box no. 1273  
Phone no. 17126478 or 17111154  
Email: [info@clgbhutan.com](mailto:info@clgbhutan.com)  
Website: [clgbhutan.com](http://clgbhutan.com)

[www.bhutanbiodemocracy.com](http://www.bhutanbiodemocracy.com)