



This project is funded by  
the European Union

**‘SUPPORT TO CIVIL SOCIETY IN BHUTAN’**  
A Project Funded by the European Union

**RESEARCH REPORT**

Public Perception of Civil Society Contributions to Local  
and National Development in Bhutan

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*Commissioned by Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation Bhutan Office 2020*

*The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the implementing partner and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.*

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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACC	Anti-Corruption Commission
AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
BAOWE	Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs
BKF	Bhutan Kidney Foundation
BNEW	Bhutan Network for Empowering Women
CBO	Community-Based Organisations
CCC	Core Coordination Committee
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CS	Civil Society
CSI	Civil Society Index
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
CSOA	Civil Society Organization Act
EA	Enumeration Area
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICM	Information Communications and Media
IDI	In-Depth Interview
KII	Key Information Interview
LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning
MIP	Multi-indicative program
MMR	Mixed-Method Research
NSB	National Statistics Bureau
ODK	Open Data Kit
PHCB	Population and housing census of Bhutan
RAA	Royal Audit Authority
RENEW	Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women
RSPN	Royal Society for Protection of Nature
SD	Standard Deviation
YDF	Youth Development Fund



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European Union (EU) funded Project, “Support to Civil Society in Bhutan” (SCSB) is aimed at improving the environment and operational capacity for Civil Society engagement in sustainable development and good governance by promoting an inclusive approach to strengthen Civil Society actors. The Project was implemented over the course of 52 months from its launch in August 2017 to December 2021. Its primary outcome indicators included improvement in Civil Society engagement in sustainable development and good governance; Strengthened capacity in Civil Society operational capacity; and improvement in the enabling environment for Civil Society.

This study was commissioned by the Project in 2020 to better understand the perception of the public and changes over time on the contributions of Civil Society to local and national development by a way of generating robust empirical evidence.

A Mixed-Method Research was employed wherein a quantitative questionnaire was designed to describe and analyze the empirical contours of the public’s perception of Civil Society. “The Civil Society Diamond” Approach was used, and a qualitative questionnaire was designed based on a Perception Study of Civil Society conducted in 2017 to ensure certain comparability.

There has been a marked increase in the awareness and understanding of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) among the public when compared to the CSO Perception Report 2017 which had reported a complete lack of understanding or awareness of CSO. Almost all the respondents in 2020 were able to distinguish CSOs, their role, and space within which they perform. To an extent, this can be attributed to the impact of the EU-SCSB Project.

The study findings reinforced the need for CSOs to involve in policymaking decisions more proactively as they can provide a wealth of information from the ground up. The findings also reconfirmed the confidence of donors and government agencies to engage CSOs in their program implementation because of their perceived reach and impact on different sections of the society, in addition to their proven track record of successful outcomes.

A significant difference in the perception of CSOs in 2017 vis-à-vis 2020 was that the findings of the latter reported that CSOs should be able to provide check and balance – offering non-partisan and objective assessment that could contribute to improved transparency and accountability at various levels of national outcomes. This is a deviation from 2017 whereby the perception was that the roles and responsibilities of other monitoring agencies such as RAA and ACC should not be replicated.

There is no reported change in the perception of Government-Civil Society relationship. However, the challenges for CSOs to serve as development partners, and contribute to accountability and transparency were highlighted, including the need to work in close collaboration with government agencies to supplement and complement their initiatives, and their reliance on government’s support for long term sustainability.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

### 1.1 Civil Society in Bhutan

“**Civil Society**” is defined and understood in different ways by different individuals and organizations. It is a “**space**” for collective action around shared interests, purposes, and values, generally distinct from government and commercial for-profit actors or businesses<sup>1</sup> and described as a “third”<sup>2</sup>, “voluntary”, “non-profit” “**sector**”.<sup>3</sup>

This “space” or “sector” is made up of various types of organizations. The terminology “**Civil Society Organisations**” (CSOs) generally embraces a wide range of actors with different roles<sup>4</sup> and mandates. Definitions vary over time and across institutions and countries. In the EU communication on “The Roots of Democracy and Sustainable Development: Europe’s Engagement with Civil Society in International Relations” e.g., “CSOs” are described as “including all non-State, not-for-profit structures, non-partisan and non-violent, through which people organize to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, social or economic. Operating from the local to the national, regional, and international levels, they comprise urban and rural, formal, and informal organizations. CSOs include membership-based, cause-based, and service-oriented CSOs. Among them, community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, foundations, research institutions, Gender and LGBTQ organizations, cooperatives, professional and business associations, and the not-for-profit media. Trade unions and employers’ organizations, the so-called social partners, constitute a specific category of CSOs.” The EU communication also points out “that it values CSOs’ diversity and specificities; it engages with accountable and transparent CSOs which share its commitment to social progress and the fundamental values of peace, freedom, equal rights, and human dignity.”

**In the context of Bhutan “Civil Society Organisations” can be clustered into two categories of organizations:**

- A. Organizations registered with the CSO Act** i.e. associations, societies, foundations, charitable trust, not-for-profit organizations that do not distribute any income or profit to their members, founders, donors, directors, and trustees (Civil Society Organizations Authority of Bhutan, 2007) categorized as:
- (i) Public Benefit Organizations - to benefit a section of society or as a whole;
  - (ii) Mutual Benefit Organizations - to advance the shared interests of their members or supporters;

<sup>1</sup>[https://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/themes/civilsociety/en/](https://www.who.int/social_determinants/themes/civilsociety/en/)

<sup>2</sup>Civil Society International, 2003,

<sup>3</sup>International Centre for Non-Profit Law v). (INCL - Civil Society - Principles and Protections - The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law – September 2012

<sup>4</sup>e.g. informer, advocate, researcher, opinion leader, mobiliser, campaigner, representative, priority setter, resource allocator, incubator, innovator, expert, standard setter, capacity builder, partner, decision-maker, service provider, co-producer citizen champion, watchdog, auditor, evaluator, whistle-blower

**B. Community-Based Organizations:**

- (iii) Farmer groups and cooperatives registered under the Cooperatives Act within the framework of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests
- (iv) Organized but non-registered groups and associations - like youth and women groups.

The scope of this research covers organizations as described in the categories of organizations “A and B” and exclude trade unions, political parties, and the religious organizations that are devoted primarily to religious worship. This research will further refer to these organizations as “civil society” and/or “civil society organizations”.

## 1.2 Rationale

The EU-SCSB Project is implemented by HELVETAS Bhutan in close partnership with CSOs, cooperatives, farmers groups and government stakeholders. The Project is part of the EU Multi-annual Indicative program (MIP) 2014-2020 in the area of Good Governance. The specific objective of the Project is to improve the environment and operational capacity for Civil Society engagement in sustainable development and good governance.

The broader system in which CSOs operate in Bhutan is built up by various elements as well as their interconnections and interactions. They shape the incentives (and constraints) for an enabling environment for CSOs to promote collective action and citizen participation. The emergence of an increasingly diverse Civil Society, a rising number of organizations operating in the third space in the last decade since the passing of the CSO Act, and the establishment of a CSO Authority and Secretariat, combined with an active Core Coordination Committee (CCC) of CSOs suggests positive progress in the operating conditions for CSOs in Bhutan.

A few encouraging trends reveal a progressively favorable enabling environment for the third space to fully play its role as a development actor in the Bhutanese democracy. This includes the organization of a high-level State-Civil Society meeting, expected to take place on an annual or biennial basis, as well as a functional CCC of CSOs that has the potential to become a strong catalyst for meaningful civic participation and collective action.

As a part of the EU- SCSB Project, 53 formal and informal CSOs, including Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) such as youth groups, cooperatives, and farmers' groups have been directly reached through a grant fund facility as of December 2020. Of these 53, 22 were CSO standalone projects, 27 were CBO projects and 4 CSO-CBO joint projects. 49% of the projects have been under the theme of socio-economic empowerment, especially those of youth and women since the primary priority of community groups is to improve livelihoods; 28% of the projects consist of vulnerability reduction initiatives targeted at people living with HIV AIDS, the network of the LGBTQ community in the country, women, youth, people living with various diseases, and parents of children with

disabilities; 15% of the projects were directed at building civic awareness, and the remaining 8% focused on women's political and social empowerment.

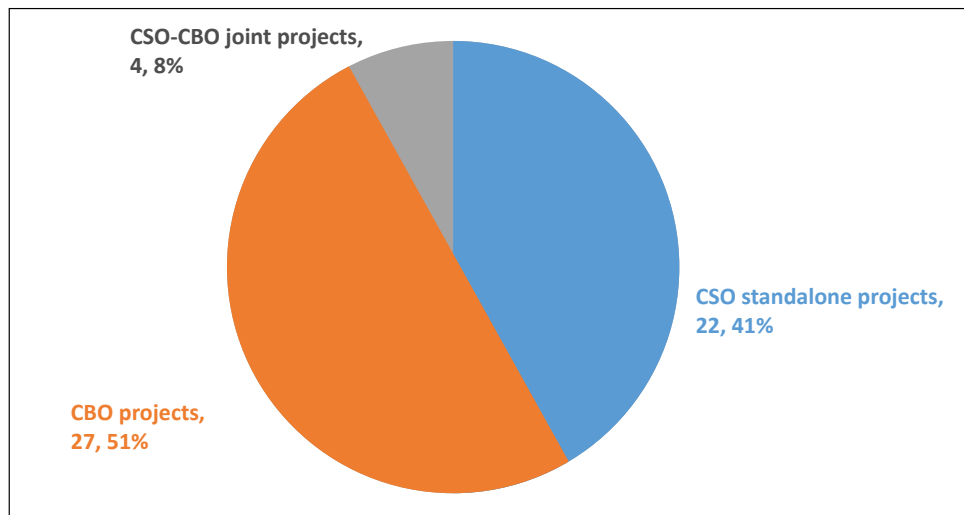


Figure 1: Distribution of grant fund facility

Aside from the grant facility, a larger number of CSOs have been reached through the capacity building components, and through events aimed at building supportive perceptions and policies for Civil Society. Enhancing the enabling environment for Civil Society is indeed dependent on the government agencies and the public's understanding of the role of Civil Society at large in contributing to national development – however, it cannot be reduced to this factor alone. It is useful here to refer to the Open Forum's five dimensions of an enabling environment:

- 1) The fulfilment of human rights obligations affecting CSOs
- 2) CSO as development actors in their own right
- 3) Democratic political and policy dialogue
- 4) Accountability and transparency for development
- 5) Enabling sources of financing

The current perception of Civil Society is predominantly limited to filling service delivery gaps. While service delivery can be important to serve the needs of society, it is also key to tap into the strength and diversity of Bhutanese society at large. Democracy supports Civil Society as an arena of diverse interests and points of view where values of tolerance, compromise, and respect for different and opposing views are cultivated. It is not a monolithic bloc where consensus can be expected on all topics. The diversity within Civil Society brings in multiple perspectives and expertise. Certain CSOs are, furthermore, legitimate representatives of marginalized or vulnerable groups. They can be important allies for these groups as well as partners of government to support their outreach to those groups, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs/rights represented.

### 1.3 Objectives

This study was commissioned through the EU- SCSB Project in 2020 and its findings are presented in this report to provide robust empirical evidence and lessons learned to help identify priorities for the Civil Society sector and the partners and stakeholders involved.

The specific objective of the study was to better understand the public's perception of the contributions of Civil Society to local and national development, and changes in the perception over time. This entailed the following criteria:

- Ensuring a certain comparability of methodologies used by a Perception Study carried out in 2017 while applying appropriate modifications where possible.
- Outlining changes in perception over time, and factors that may have contributed to the same.
- Documenting the role of the Project, if any, in the changes in perception.

Based on the findings, identifying recommendations to develop accurate responses where relevant.

## CHAPTER 2: STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out using a Concurrent Triangulation Design of Mixed-Method Research wherein both quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently in one phase, analyzed separately, and then the findings synthesized to produce a final report. Quantitative data were collected via a structured questionnaire while the qualitative data were gathered through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key informant interviews (KIIs), and In-depth Interviews (IDIs).

A quantitative questionnaire was designed to describe and analyze the empirical contours of Civil Society from the public's perception using "the Civil Society Diamond" Approach (Heinrich, 2007). A qualitative questionnaire was designed based on the Perception Study of Civil Society in Bhutan carried out in 2017 (Penjor, 2017) to ensure certain comparability. The FGDs comprised of representatives from government, international organizations, local government, and the private sector. For KIIs and IDIs, participants were invited from the CSO Authority (CSOA), Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD), Loden Foundation, Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs (BAOWE), Bhutan Kidney Foundation (BKF), and Clean Bhutan.

For technical details on the study methodology and sampling procedures, refer to Annex 1: Study Methodology.

## CHAPTER 3: QUANTITATIVE BASELINE SURVEY FINDINGS

### 3.1 Sample Characteristics

Slightly more than half of the respondents were male (54.1%). An equivalent proportion of them were married (54.7%), followed by 29.4% who were not married, and 8.6% were divorcees (Figure 4). The average age of the respondents was 37.7 years, and the median age was 35. More than seven-tenth (73.6%) of the respondents resided in urban areas and the remaining 26.39% in rural areas (Figure 3). About one in every 10 respondents (11.7%) had no education background; almost one-fifth had higher secondary, 31.0% had a bachelor's degree, 10% had a post-graduate degree, and 10.4% had a diploma or certificate level qualifications (Table 1). About 5.0% of the respondents attended either a non-formal education program or monastic education.

The respondents were also from various occupational backgrounds. About one-fifth of them were farmers/homemakers, 16.5% were businesspeople, 16.5% civil servants, 14.1% unemployed, 13.8% private-sector employees, 7.8% students, 5% corporate employees, 2.6% retirees, 2.4% religious professionals, 1.3% from armed force, and 0.2% from NGO/CSOs (Table 1 & Figure 9).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

Characteristics	Number	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	247	45.91
Male	291	54.09
<b>Area</b>		
Rural	142	26.39
Urban	396	73.61
<b>Dzongkhag</b>		
Bumthang	28	5.2
Chukha	26	4.83
Monger	50	9.29
Punakha	45	8.36
Samdrup Jongkhar	40	7.43
Tashigang	63	11.71
Thimphu	175	32.53
Wangdue Phodrang	44	8.18
Zhemgang	67	12.45
<b>Marital status</b>		
Never married	158	29.37

Living together	18	3.35
Married	294	54.65
Divorced	46	8.55
Widowed	17	3.16
Separated	5	0.93
<b>Age</b>		
≤19	4	0.74
20-24	83	15.43
25-29	79	14.68
30-34	80	14.87
35-39	74	13.75
40-44	58	10.78
45-49	54	10.04
50-54	48	8.92
55-59	27	5.02
≥60	31	5.76
<b>Education</b>		
No education	63	11.71
Non-formal education	12	2.23
Monastic education	16	2.97
Primary education (vi)	3	0.56
Lower Secondary (viii)	21	3.9
Middle Secondary (x)	43	7.99
Higher Secondary (xii)	103	19.14
Diploma/certificate	56	10.41
Bachelor's degree	167	31.04
Postgraduate	54	10.04
<b>Occupation</b>		
Farmer/housewife	106	19.7
Business	89	16.5
Civil servant	89	16.5
Unemployed	76	14.1
Private sector employee	74	13.8
Student	42	7.81
Corporate employee	27	5.02
Retired	14	2.6
Monk/Nun/Gomchen	13	2.42
Armed force personnel	7	1.3
NGO/CSO employee	1	0.19



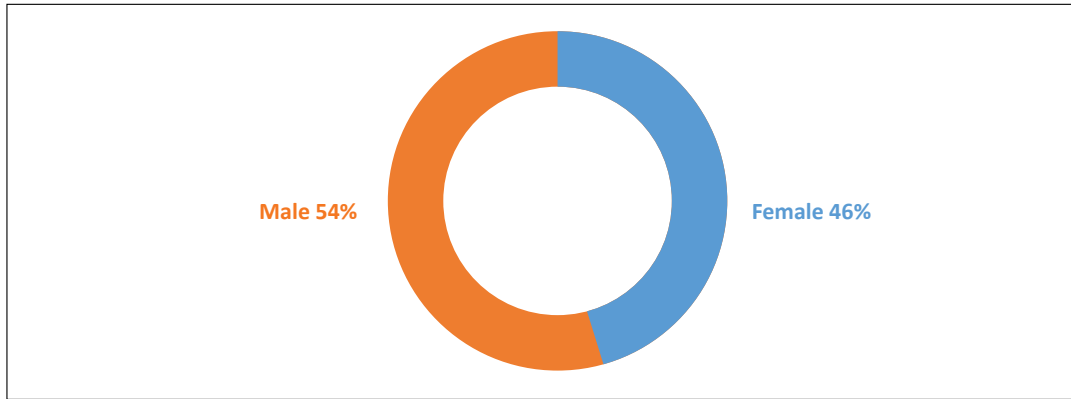


Figure 2: Respondents by gender

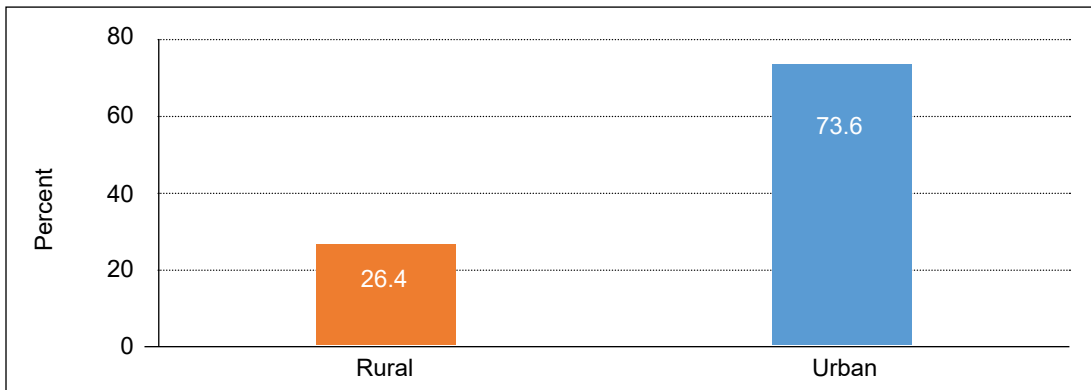


Figure 3: Respondents by area of residence

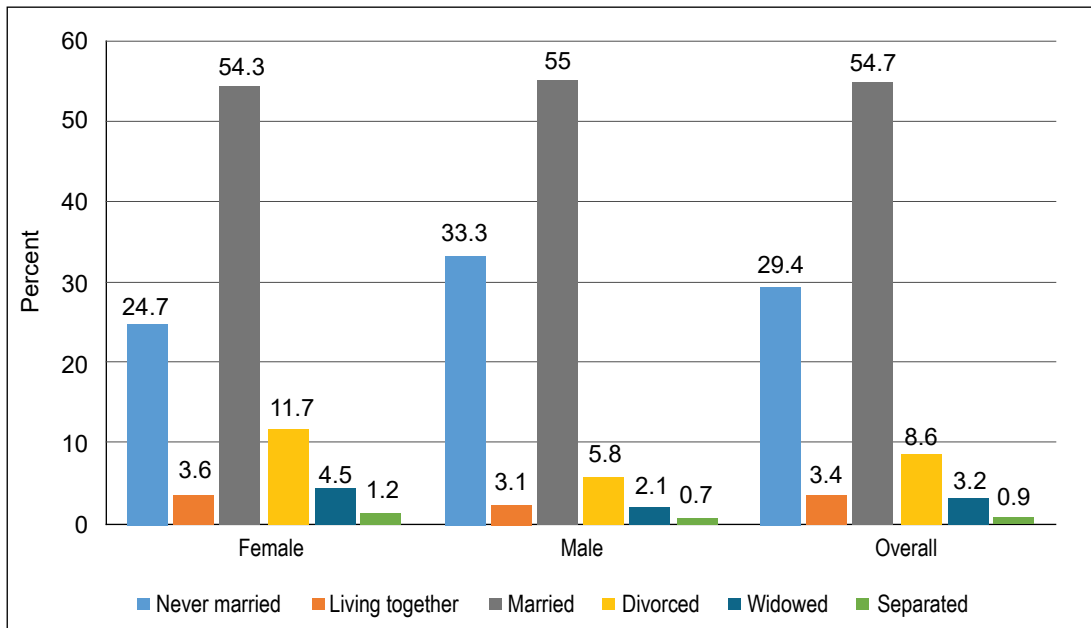


Figure 4: Respondents by marital status and gender

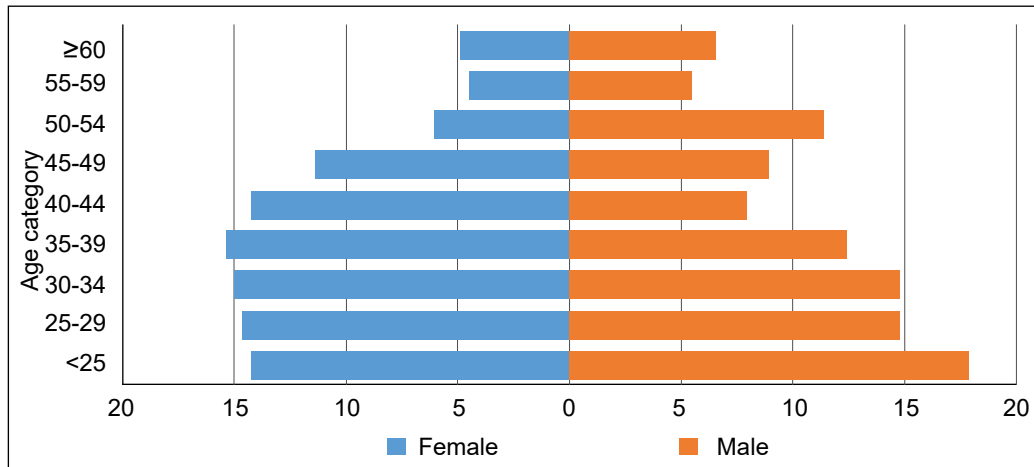


Figure 5: Distribution of respondents by age and gender

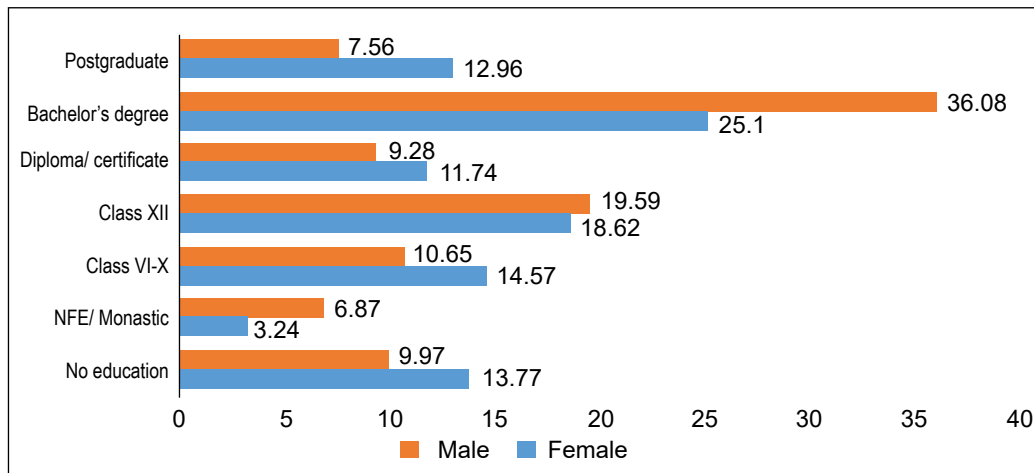


Figure 6: Respondents by qualification and gender

Compared to rural areas, there is a higher proportion of respondents below 40 years in urban areas (Figure 7). The percentage of respondents 40 years and above is higher in rural areas.

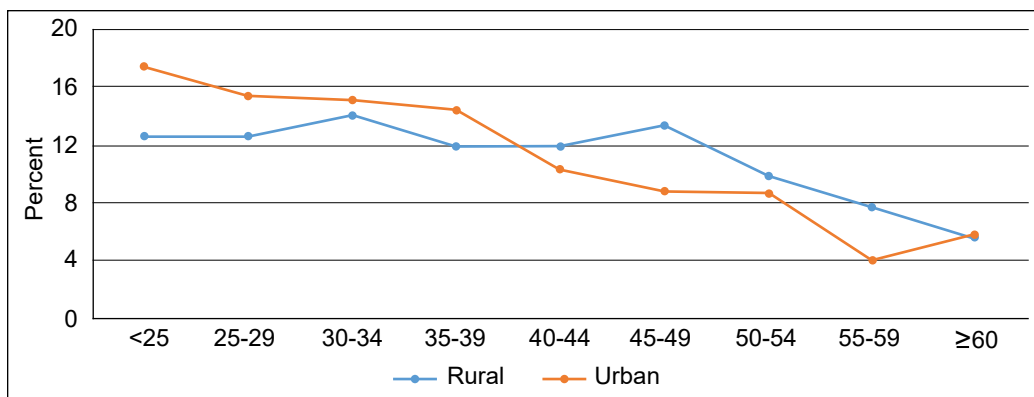


Figure 7: Respondents by age and area

Urban samples have a higher proportion of persons with a bachelor’s degree qualification (Figure 8). The proportion of persons with a postgraduate degree, diploma/certificate holders, and class VI-X pass-outs is also higher in urban areas whereas the rural sample has a disproportionately higher proportion of respondents who did not attend any formal education.

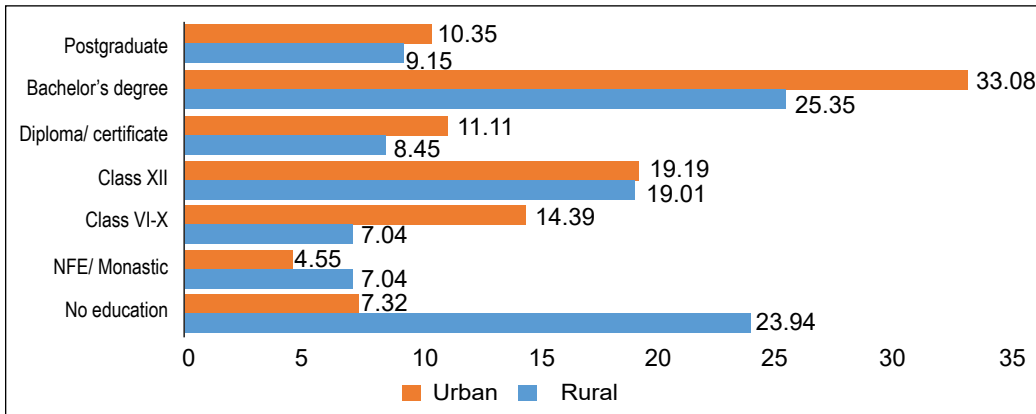


Figure 8: Respondents by education level and area

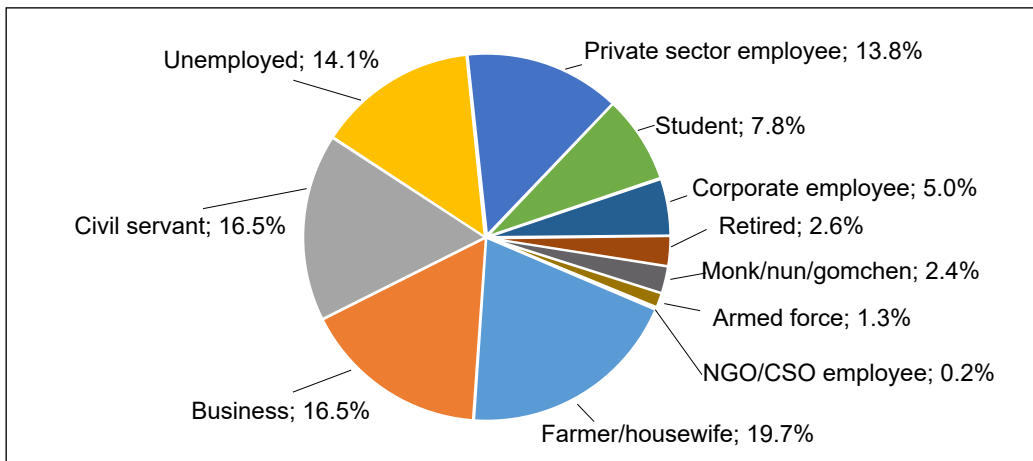


Figure 9: Respondents by occupation

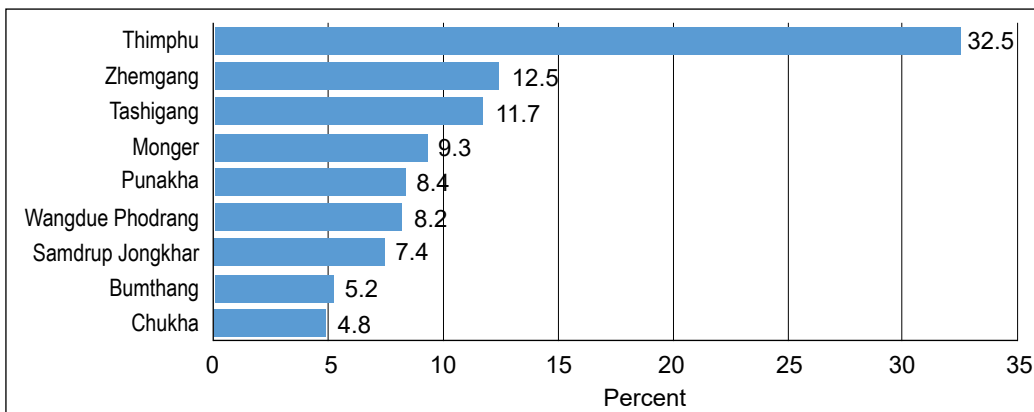


Figure 10: Respondents by dzongkhags

Almost one-fifth of the respondents spent their entire life in the place they currently reside (19.3%) (Table 2). About the same proportion, 18.2% lived in their current location for the last 15 years and 18.4% lived in the same location for more than five years but less than 10 years respectively. More than one-tenth (11.9%) of respondents lived in the current location for more than 10 years but less than 15. 18.4% of respondents reported lengths of stay between five to 10 year, 7% for four years, and 2.2% for less than six months.

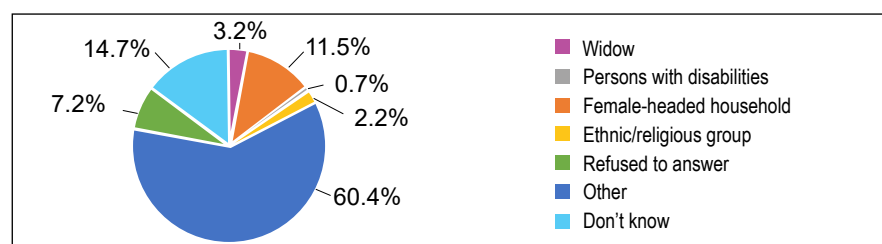
*Table 2: Length of stay in the current location*

Length of stay	Freq.	Percent
For my entire life	104	19.33
For more than 15 years	98	18.22
For more than 10 years but less than 15 years	64	11.9
For more than 5 years but less than 10 years	99	18.4
For 4 years	63	11.71
For 3 years	32	5.95
For 2 years	36	6.69
For 6 months to 1 year	30	5.58
Less than 6 months	12	2.23
Total	538	100

Around 18.0% of the respondents belonged to vulnerable groups – 11.52% were from female-headed households, 3.4% were widowed, 2.2% were from ethnic/religious groups, and 0.74% were persons with disabilities (Table 3).

*Table 3: Vulnerable groups*

Vulnerable groups	Freq	Percent
Female-headed households	62	11.52
Widow	18	3.35
Ethnic/religious group	12	2.23
Persons with disabilities	4	0.74
Other	324	60.22
Refused to answer	39	7.25
Don't know	79	14.68
Total	538	100



*Figure 11: Respondents by vulnerable groups*

### 3.2 Awareness of CSOs

More than half of the respondents perceived CSOs to be either: media groups, activists, religious leaders and groups, local organizations working on human rights, youth groups, and local organizations working on the development and basic services. This highlights an understanding of the fact that “the third space” (broader definition of Civil Society as defined internationally) has something to do with “Civil Society” organizations. However, the general populace does not seem to differentiate and know what place CSOs take up in this broader concept of “the third space”.

The findings also reported a lack of clarity from respondents in distinguishing between private sector organizations from CSOs. Similarly, respondents were unsure whether tribal groups and unions/syndicates were “classified” under Civil Society, with 35-36% responding ‘don’t know’. This indicates a need to better communicate with the broader population, the different roles organizations can take up in society or democracy, their characteristics, and their formal status in Bhutan.

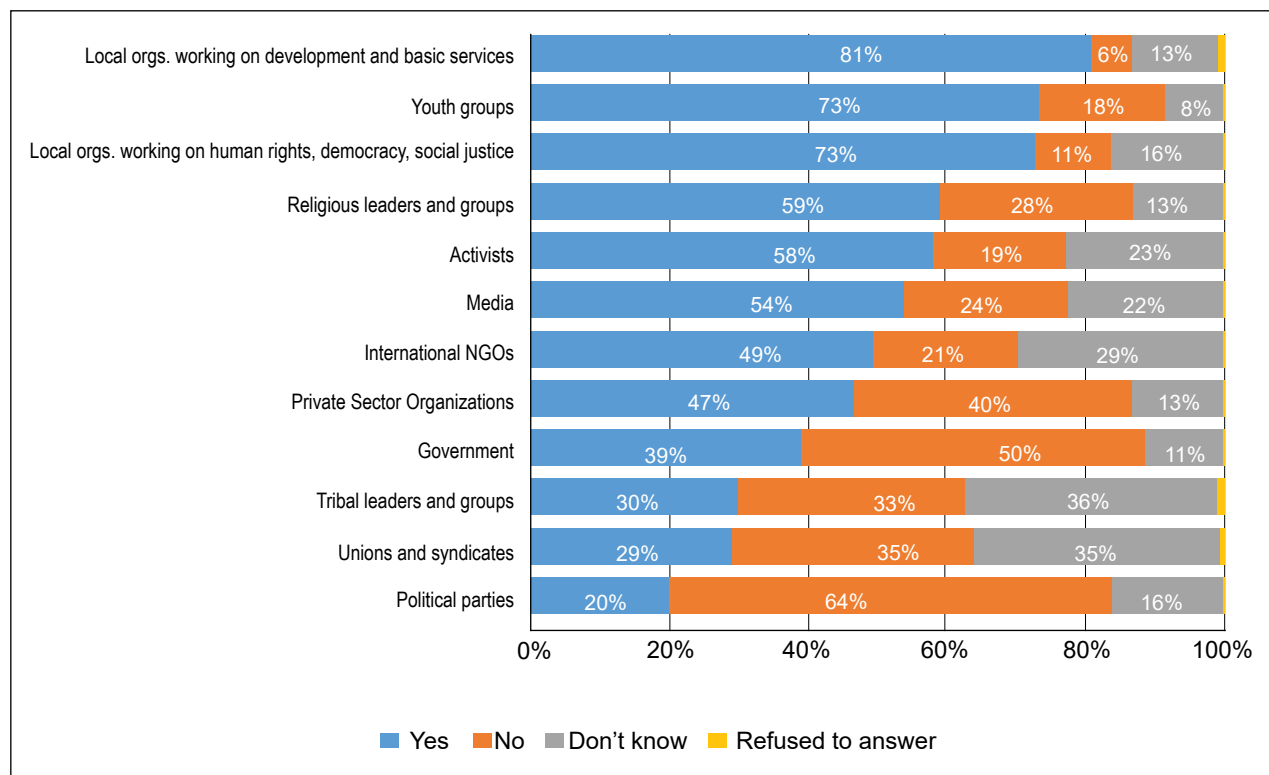


Figure 12: Meaning of CSO

A large majority of the respondents reported that CSOs are engaged in humanitarian assistance (87.9%), training and capacity building of citizens (87.4%), prevention and alleviation of human suffering and poverty (86.6%), protection of human life and health (86.6%) and helping the government to understand the needs of the common people (74.2%). A large proportion of the responses also considered CSOs as organizations that pay citizens to work for the community (74%) (Figure 13).

It is worth noting that 74.2% of respondents reported that CSOs help the government to understand the needs of people. Also, more than 50% of respondents were aware that CSOs conduct research to improve policies (51.9%), support wholesome development of the media industry (59.5%), and are engaged in training and capacity building of government officials (67.5%). Only 41.4% of respondents indicated that CSOs play a large role in creating new policies with the majority expressing in the negative. The responses also highlighted considerable doubt surrounding CSOs' role in monitoring government and its policies (33.8%) and holding government accountable (38.1%) (Figure 13). Less than a third of respondents perceived CSOs as generating profit for their leaders, while more than 40.0% of respondents were aware that this is not the case.

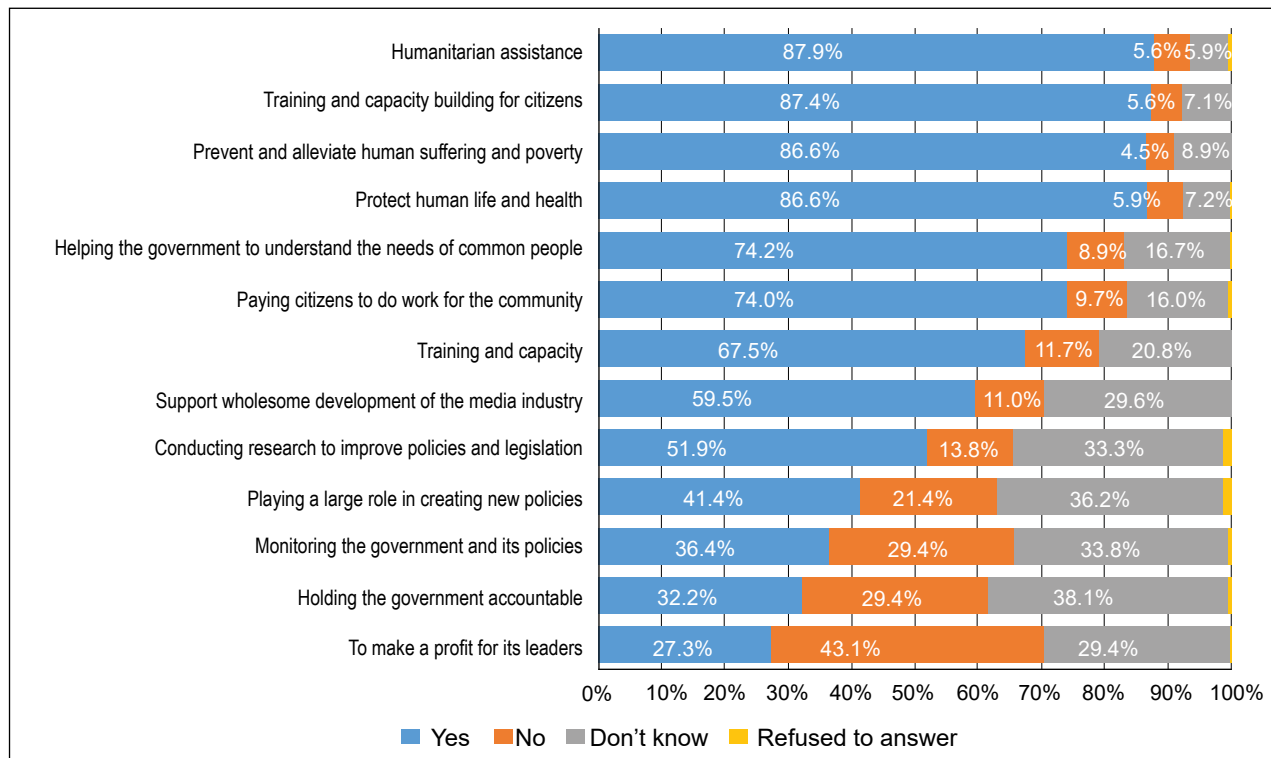


Figure 13: Scope of CSOs activities

Some 37.0% of the respondents reported that they know at least one CSO that is currently active in their community while two-thirds (62.5%) of the respondents were not aware of CSO activity in the community. Among respondents who were aware of an active CSO, the most common names referred to were RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower), Tarayana, Loden Foundation, Bhutan Kidney Foundation (BKF), and Youth Development Fund (YDF).

### 3.3 Perception of CSOs

After the respondents were informed about the definition of CSO, they were asked the likelihood of CSOs improving socio-economic conditions in their communities. The results indicated that CSOs are perceived as being highly likely to solve issues related to gender equality (58.6% reported very likely, 35.1% somewhat likely), youths (52% very likely, 38.5% somewhat likely), animal welfare (49.1% very likely, 42.2% somewhat likely), education and skills development (46.7% very likely, 46.1% somewhat likely), persons with disabilities (45.9% very likely, 43.1% somewhat likely), and agriculture and rural development (43.5% very likely, 43.7% somewhat likely) (Figure 14). More than 70.0% of respondents were confident that CSOs could effectively solve issues related to rehabilitation and addiction, health, economic growth and employment, poverty reduction, and the environment. Conversely, more than one-fifth responded that it was not likely that CSOs could successfully address issues related to the culture, water supply, security, electricity, governance, and public administration.

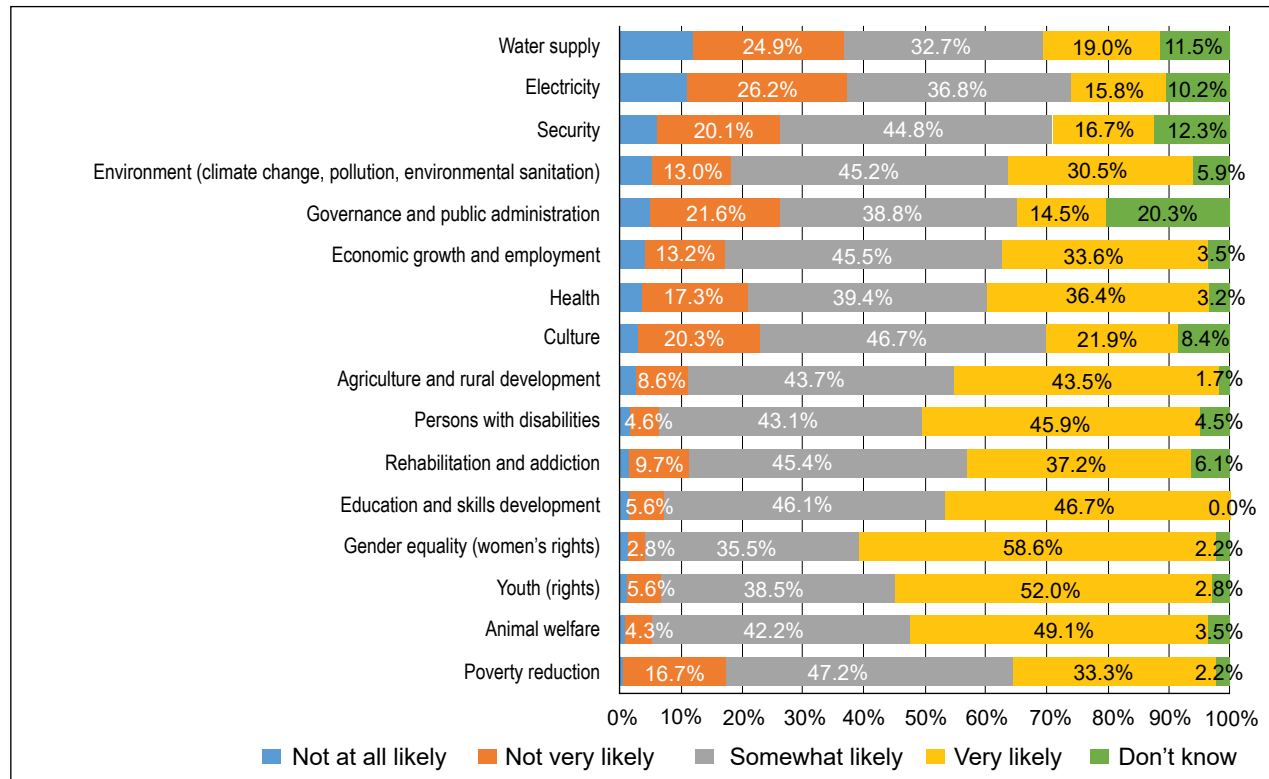
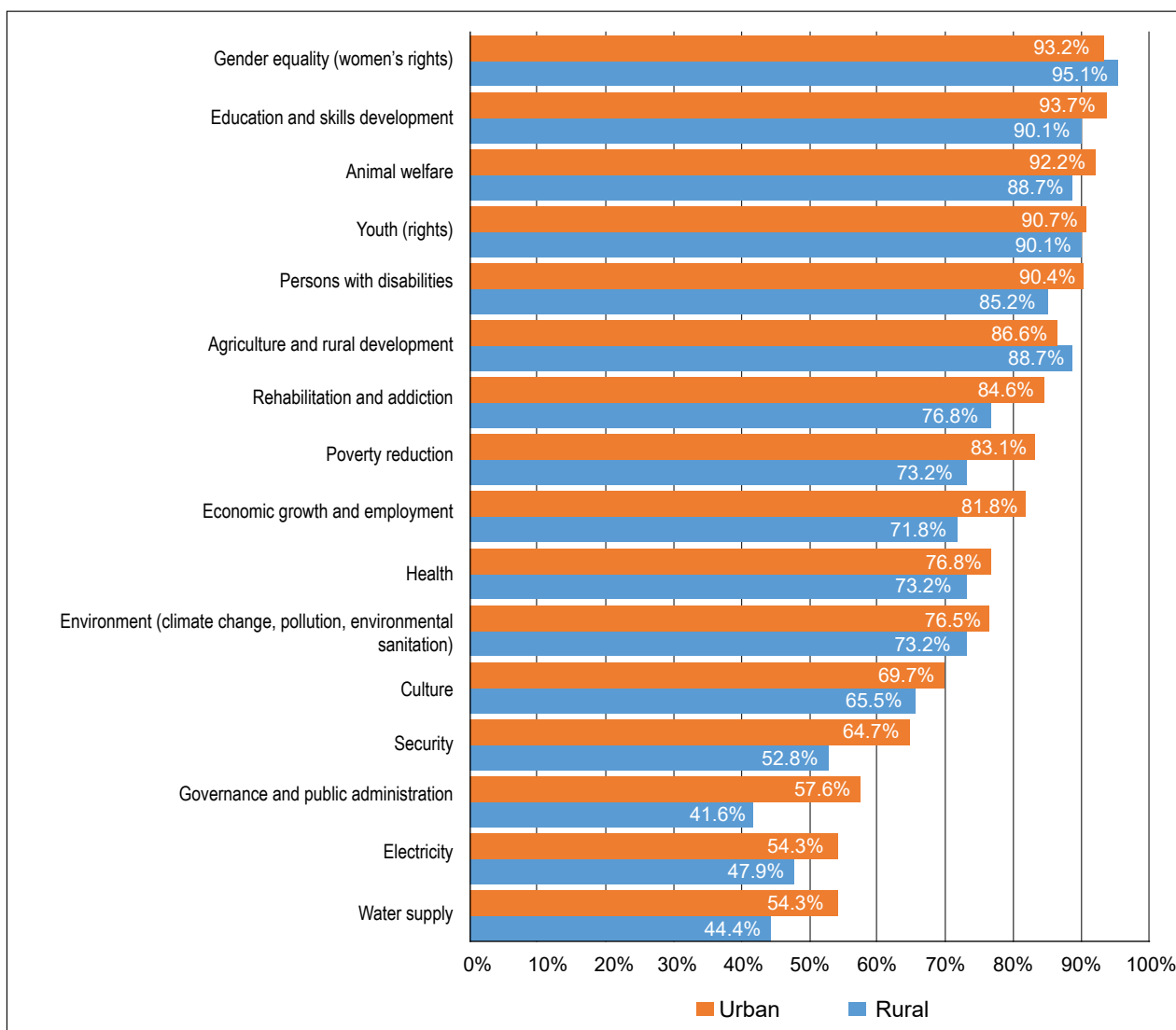


Figure 14: Likelihood of CSOs to solve different societal issues

There is no substantial difference between rural and urban respondents with respect to their opinion on the effectiveness of CSOs in various socio-economic areas (Figure 15). However, a slightly higher proportion of urban respondents think that CSOs are more likely to successfully address issues related to governance and public administration, security, water supply, electricity, poverty reduction,

economic growth and employment, and rehabilitation and addiction. One-third of the respondents (33.6%) have reported that they know of at least one CSO that is successfully advocating for them and their community.



**Figure 15: Percentage of the respondents who reported CSOs are likely to improve the conditions in their respective districts and blocks**

The survey also explored respondent's impression of the performance of CSOs. Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 7 - with higher values indicating better performance. Overall, the respondents have rated that CSO employees who deal with their clients are competent and professional (5.52), honest and fair with people (5.32), open and honest about their work (5.26), willing to share information about their work (5.22) and are accountable to the public for their performance (5.18) (Table 4).



In comparison, CSOs scored lower in terms of their competencies in social skills such as interaction or engagement with people, listening to what people have to say, working for the interest of the people – keeping aside their self-interest, and their awareness on issues that are of concern to larger sections of the society.

Table 4: Performance of CSOs

Performance of CSOs	Mean	SD <sup>5</sup>	N
They are competent and professional in performing their jobs	5.52	1.31	495
They are honest and fair with the people	5.32	1.38	504
Are open and honest about their work	5.26	1.29	503
Are willing to share information about their work	5.22	1.37	476
Are accountable to the public for their performance	5.18	1.29	491
Are actively working to solve the problem and meet the needs of people	4.71	1.49	512
They are available when I want to express my opinion or solve a problem	4.59	1.52	499
Try their best to listen to what people like me have to say	4.58	1.46	504
Are aware of the issues that are of most concern to people	4.55	1.47	507
Are working for the interest of the people, and not their self-interest	4.48	1.68	430
Engage with people like me and interact with us	4.36	1.47	506

The respondents’ impression of the performance of CSO on a 1 to 7 scale – 7 being the best and 1 being the worst.

Table 5: Performance of CSOs

Performance of CSOs	Scale						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Are competent and professional in performing their jobs.	0.2	1.41	6.87	13.33	22.63	27.27	28.28
Honest and fair with the people of Bhutan	0.6	1.79	7.94	17.66	25	20.63	26.39
Are open and honest about their work	0.4	1.79	8.95	14.91	25.45	31.21	17.3
Are willing to share information	1.47	1.26	10.71	13.87	22.69	32.98	17.02
Are working for the interest of the people	3.72	10.47	16.05	19.3	19.07	17.44	13.95
Are accountable to the public	0.41	2.65	9.37	14.05	26.07	34.22	13.24
Available to me if I want to express my opinion	3.41	6.01	13.83	22.04	24.85	19.24	10.62
Are actively working to solve problems	1.95	5.47	15.82	18.55	23.24	24.41	10.55
Are aware of the issues of most concern to people like me	1.58	7.3	18.74	16.57	26.23	21.7	7.89

<sup>5</sup>Note: Mean values range from 1 to 7; higher values indicate better performance. SD refers to standard deviation. Lower the SD, the more reliable is the mean value. N refers to sample size. Respondents who reported “don’t know” and “refused to answer” are discarded from this analysis.

Try their best to listen to what people like me have to say	3.17	5.75	13.89	21.03	26.98	21.43	7.74
Engage with people like me and interact with us	3.36	8.7	16.21	21.34	26.48	18.77	5.14

Responses indicated that CSOs have a greater ability to solve problems at the local and grassroots level: 37.0% of the respondents think that CSOs are very likely to solve problems at the Gewog level; 31.6% feel the same about CSOs' effectiveness in solving problems at the national level and 27.7% at the District/Dzongkhag level (Figure 16). However, notably, a large portion of the respondents believed that CSOs can solve larger issues at all levels of governance as indicated by more than three-fourth of the respondents reporting either "very likely" or "somewhat likely" in the figure below (Figure 16).

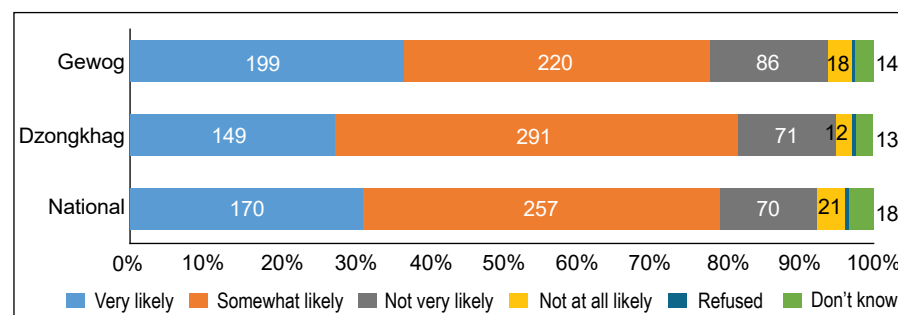


Figure 16: CSOs ability to solve the biggest problems at different levels

The respondents had the impression that CSOs have a greater voice in government decision making at the Gewog, District and National levels compared to citizens (Figure 17). The percentage of people who agreed with this was higher than those who disagreed. The gap between the perceived ability of CSOs compared to citizens in influencing decision-making was largest at the national level.

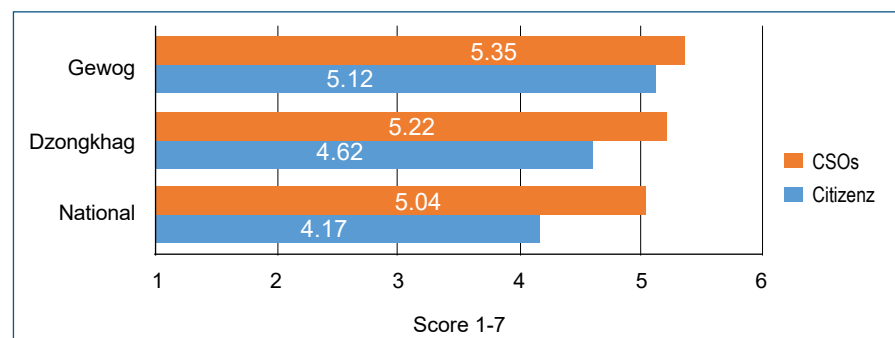


Figure 17: The ability of CSOs versus citizens to have a voice in government decision making

A very high number of respondents (70.07%) reported that CSOs did/do make a difference in their lives (Table 6). A very high proportion of respondents who are members of a CSO agreed more to this (78.3%) as compared to those who are not members of CSOs (64.9%). However the latter is a relatively high proportion as well. There is no notable difference in the responses between males and females, or between the respondents residing in rural and urban areas (Table 6).

Table 6: Impact of CSOs

Impact of CSOs	Percent
CSO did/does make a difference in my life	70.07
CSO did/does not make a difference	29.93

Table 7 lists some of the perceived principal barriers that CSOs could face related to their engagement in policy processes. The most common, as identified across respondents, is the lack of sufficient funds among CSOs to engage in the process (61.7%) and not having sufficient knowledge about policy processes (45.2%). Some 44.2% of the respondents believed that policy processes are not conducive to CSO engagement and that evidence produced by CSOs are not perceived as credible. About one-third of the respondents argued that CSO engagement in policy processes is limited because of the lack of adequate capacities of CSOs.

Respondents who felt that CSOs make a difference in their lives more strongly believed that CSOs suffer from challenges such as inconducive policy environment for CSO engagement, lack of sufficient knowledge about policy processes, lack of credible evidence from CSOs. The respondents who believed that CSOs do not make a difference in their lives agreed more with the challenges of inadequate staff and the lack of capacity within CSOs. The need to invest in capacity building of staff working in CSOs is clear from these findings besides the urgency to address other challenges. The majority on both sides agreed that inadequate fund is the greatest challenge faced by CSOs currently.

The respondents’ perception highlights several changes that have come about in the roles and responsibilities of CSOs with 44.1% of the respondents perceiving CSOs’ roles and responsibilities to have increased considerably in the past five years. Another 44.1% responded that Civil Society’s role has increased slightly. Approximately one-tenth (11.2%) believed that their roles and responsibilities have remained the same, while 0.74% felt that it had decreased (Figure 18). The responses indicate an overwhelming consensus on the rise of CSOs’ role in the country over the last half-decade. The proportion of people who reported that the role of CSOs have increased significantly in the past five years is higher among the urban residents (47.5%) compared to their rural counterparts (34.5%). A little more than one-sixth of the rural respondents (16.9%) and 9.1% of urban respondents felt that the roles have remained the same (Table 7).

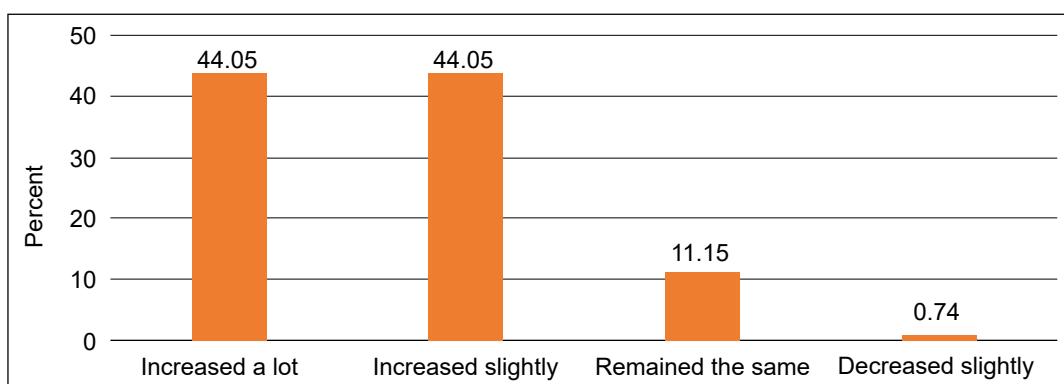


Figure 18: Change in CSOs’ roles and responsibilities over the past five years

Table 7. Change in CSOs' roles by area

Change in CSO's roles	Rural	Urban
Increased a lot	34.51	47.47
Increased slightly	46.48	43.18
Remained the same	16.9	9.09
Decreased slightly	2.11	0.25

### 3.4 Dimensions of Civil Society Index (CSI)

To assess the state of civil society, the Civil Society Index (CSI) examines it along four main dimensions of:

- **Structure:** breadth and depth of citizen participation; diversity within civil society; the level of organization; interrelations; resources.
- **Space/environment:** political context; basic freedoms and rights; socioeconomic context; socio-cultural context; legal environment; state-civil society relations; private sector-civil society relations.
- **Values (of civil society):** democracy; transparency; tolerance; non-violence; gender equity; poverty eradication; environmental sustainability.
- **Impact:** influencing public policy; holding state and private corporations accountable; responding to social interests; empowering citizens; meeting societal needs.

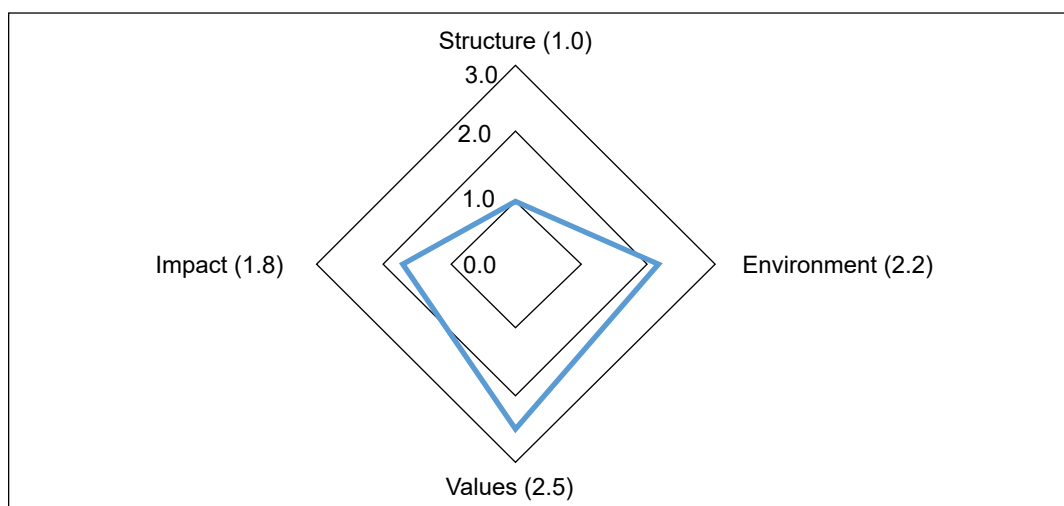


Figure 19: The Civil Society Index Diamond for Bhutan

The Civil Society Index Diamond for Bhutan shown above is the result of the individual indicator scores (0 to 3) aggregated into subdimension and then dimension scores.

The diagram depicts a moderate lack of the breath and depth of citizen participation. The **Structure** dimension score is computed by taking the indicators of: 'Non-Partisan Political Action (0.54)', 'Charitable Giving (2.00)', 'CSO Membership (0.00)', 'Volunteering (2.00)', 'Collective Community Action

(1.00), and ‘Diversity of CSOs (3.00)’ into account. Likewise, the **Environment** dimension comprised of the following indicators: ‘Political Rights (3),’ ‘Corruption (2),’ ‘State Effectiveness (2),’ ‘Trust (1),’ ‘Tolerance (3),’ and ‘Public Spiritedness (2)’. The individual indicators for the dimension **Values (of civil society)** are ‘Democracy (2),’ ‘Transparency (3),’ ‘Poverty Eradication (3),’ and ‘Environmental Sustainability (2)’ while the indicators for **Impact** dimension are ‘Responding to Social Interests (2),’ ‘Public Trust (2),’ ‘Empowering Citizens (2),’ and ‘meeting pressing societal needs (1).’

### 3.4.1 Structure (Visibility and Awareness of CSOs)

This section covers a broad range of areas where people can participate in building and sustaining their societies. CSOs can only thrive in societies where everyone welcomes keen participation and heightened engagement towards causes that further their collective interest and are not limited to narrow and individual issues.

#### 3.4.1.1 Non-partisan political action

There are different approaches in helping and contributing to the process of nation-building or in taking preemptive measures against forces that endanger community vitality and harmony. For instance, in the past 12 months, about one-third of the respondents (34%) have posted or shared, via social media and other online platforms, issues that concern their communities or society at large. It is a significantly high number and indicates that in the future, civic participation and collective action, if managed well through responsible use of social media, has the potential to expand and converge through online platforms. A little less than one-eighth (12.6%) of respondents participated in Civil Society-organized activities; 10.6% met with government officials to find ways to solve a societal problem; 7.1% took part in local or national advocacy campaigns, and 6.1% have written a letter or made a call to government officials to seek solutions for a shared problem in the community (Table 8). A small proportion of respondents also participated in signing a petition (2.4%) or writing to a member of parliament (0.6%).

Table 8: Non-partisan political actions to improve society.

Political actions	Yes	No	Don't know	Re-fused
Written a letter to a government official or called by phone for help in solving a problem or to share your views	6.1%	91.4%	0.6%	1.9%
Met with a government official for help in solving a problem or to share your opinion	10.6%	87.2%	0.9%	1.3%
Signed a petition	2.4%	96.1%	0.7%	0.7%
Written a letter to a parliament member	0.6%	98.0%	0.6%	0.9%
Participating in a local or national advocacy campaign	7.1%	91.1%	0.6%	1.3%
Participating in a civil society-organized activity	12.6%	86.1%	0.2%	1.1%
Posted or shared anything online, for example on blogs, via email, or on social media such as Facebook or Twitter	34.0%	63.0%	0.7%	2.2%

### 3.4.1.2 Charitable giving

In the past 12 months, almost half of the respondents (49%) have given money or possessions to a non-political and non-religious group or organization, such as a charity, school, or religious entity (Figure 20). This demonstrates a strong culture of giving and solidarity in Bhutan that CSOs can tap into. A higher proportion of the respondents living in rural areas have donated (54.9%) as compared to urban respondents (47.5%). Nearly two-thirds of respondents who are members of a CSO (65.2%) have made such charitable contributions as compared to 42.2% of non-member respondents. Donation seems to be partly a function of income as people of middle-age who are likely to be in a better financial position have contributed more (Figure 21).

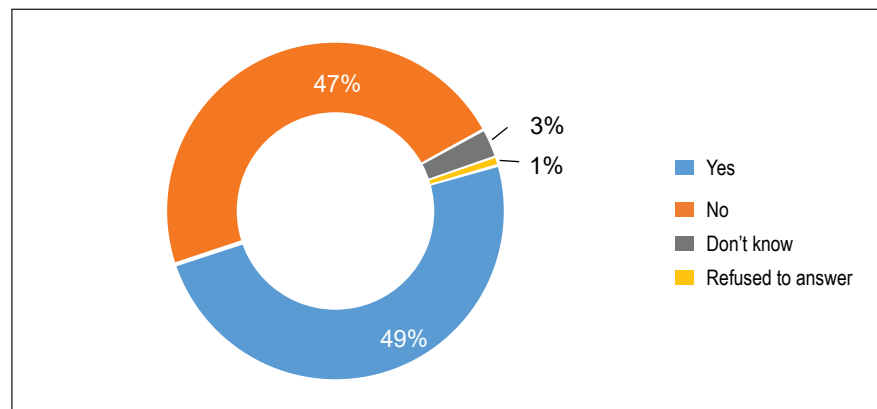


Figure 20: Charitable giving

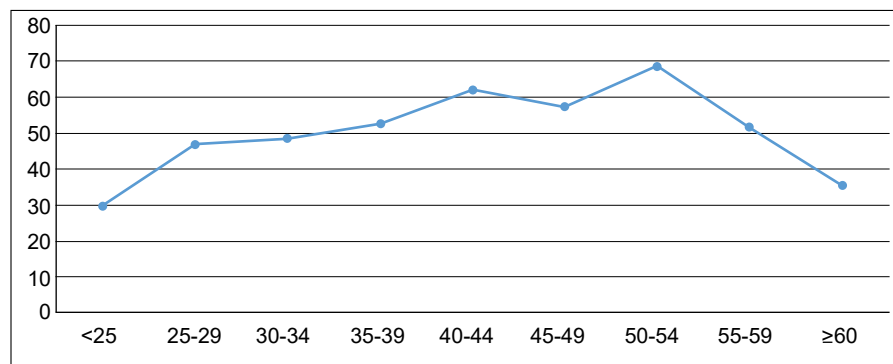


Figure 21: Charitable giving by age

Among the respondents who have donated, 39.5% donated several times a year, followed closely by those who donated only on certain occasions (37.2%). About 13.0% donated once a year, and 6.0% donated less than once a year (Figure 23). Overall, the average amount of contribution made in one year is Nu. 2,898. The figure is much higher in urban areas (Nu. 3,303) when compared to rural areas (Nu. 1,861). However, this could be due to the higher average income earned by urban respondents. There is a strong co-relation between the

amount of donation and respondent's income level with people earning higher income contributing more than those with lower income.

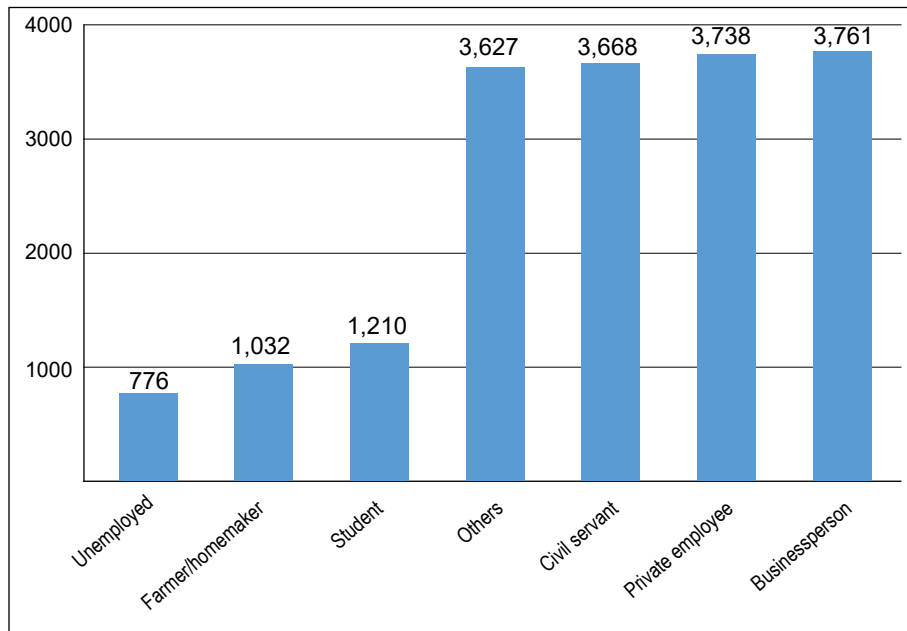


Figure 22: Average donation by occupation (Nu.)

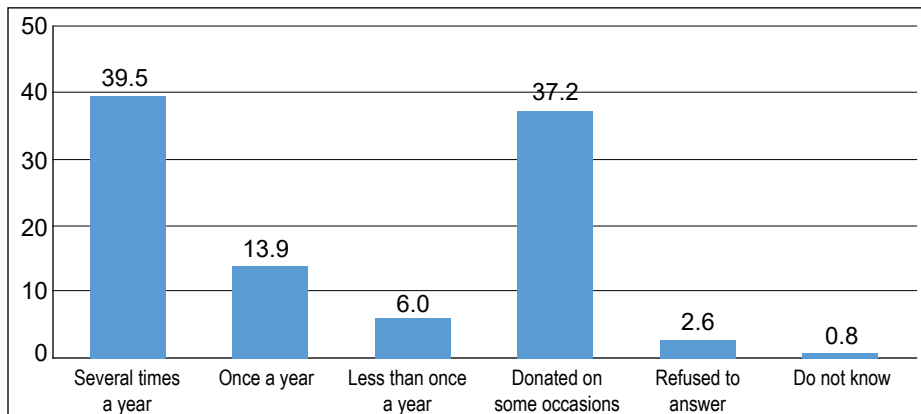


Figure 23: Frequency of charitable-giving

There is some difference in the frequency of rural and urban respondents in relation to providing charitable donations. Nearly one-fifth (18.1%) of urban respondents have donated once in a year as compared to 3.9% of rural respondents who did the same (Figure 24). On the other hand, 47.4% of rural respondents claimed to have donated on some occasions as against 33.0% doing the same in urban areas.

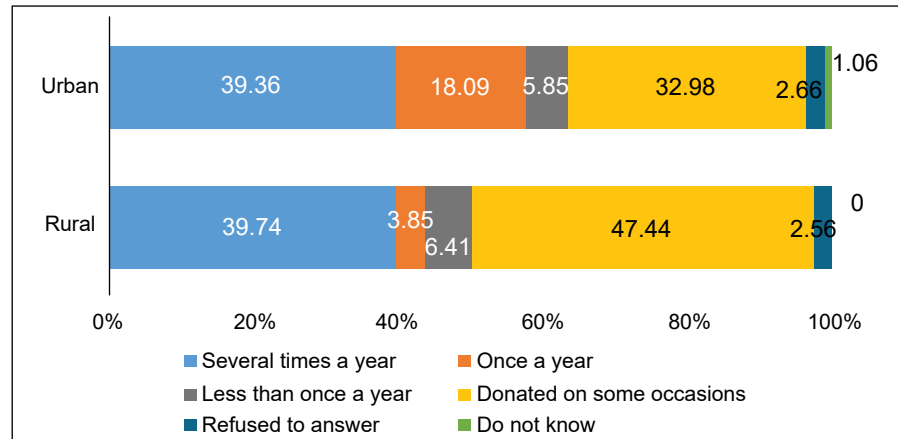


Figure 24: Frequency of charity giving by urban and rural areas

### 3.4.1.3 CSO membership

Overall, the membership of CSOs is low in Bhutan with less than 10.0% of respondents registered as active members in a public benefit or mutual benefit organization. The highest proportion of respondents were members of religious groups, followed by membership in farmer groups and cooperatives as well as PBOs (Figure 25). Alongside the small proportion of Bhutanese registered as members of CSOs, the proportion of respondents who are actively engaged in these organizations is even lower.

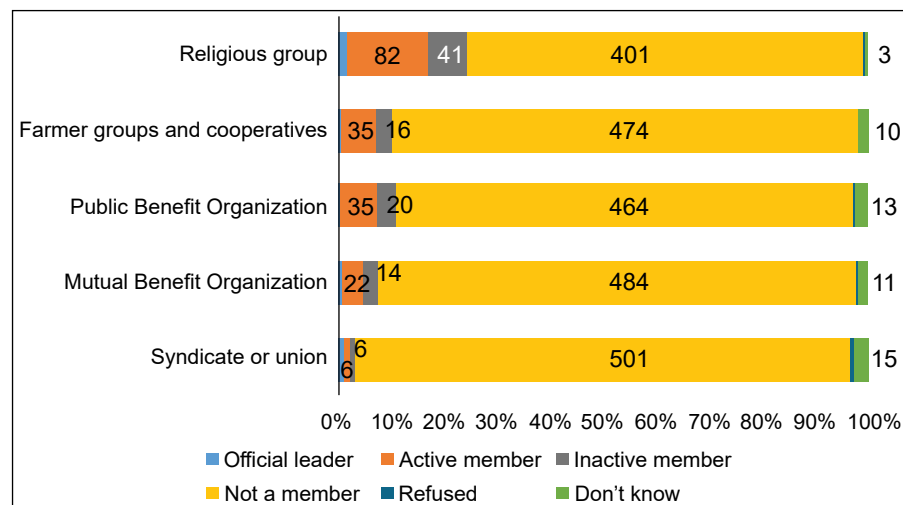


Figure 25: Membership in CSOs

### 3.4.1.4 Volunteering

While memberships in CSOs do not seem to be the norm, the findings indicate that volunteering is a strong feature of Bhutanese culture whether as a percentage of people



volunteering or as a proportion of time spent as a volunteer. An impressive 48.0% of the respondents have volunteered in the past 12 months (Figure 26). This includes volunteering in their community or volunteering for any organization or association. The proportion of respondents who volunteered is substantially higher among the members of CSOs (63.8%) as compared to those who are not members of any CSO (38.4%).

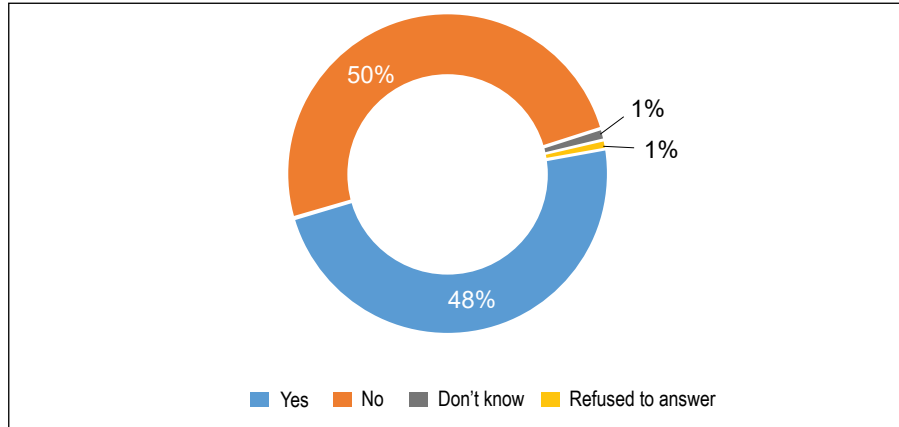


Figure 26: Volunteerism

As depicted in Figure 27, amongst those who have volunteered, 46.3% volunteered for less than once a month. About one-third of them (32.9%) volunteered a few times a month, and 19.2% volunteered once a month.

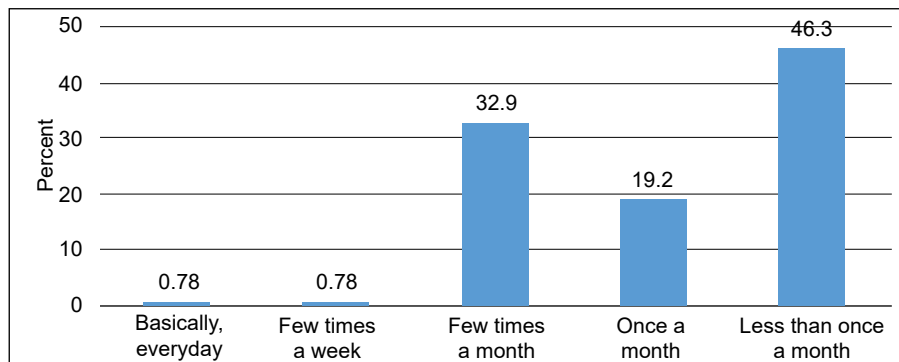


Figure 27: Frequency of volunteerism

The practice of volunteerism is higher in rural areas (54.9%) than in urban settings, although the latter is still a considerable proportion, with 45.7% of respondents having volunteered in the past 12 months (Figure 28). A higher proportion of rural respondents have volunteered a few times a month (42.1%) than their urban counterparts. More urban respondents volunteered once a month (22.4% compared to 11.8% for rural).

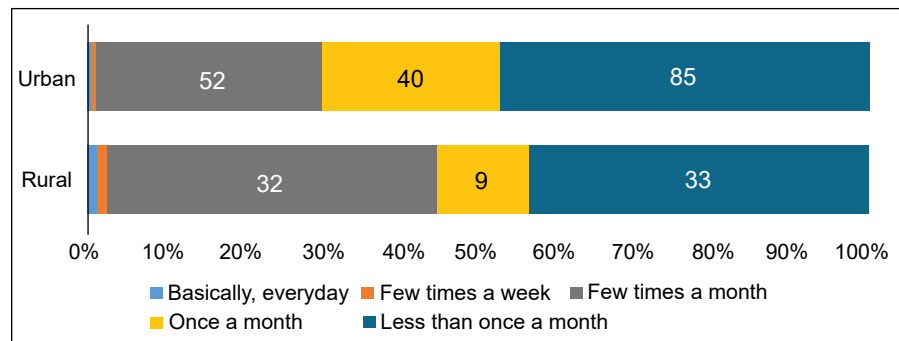


Figure 28: Frequency of volunteerism by urban and rural areas

Of the respondents who had volunteered during the past 12 months, the majority contributed to social or community services (63.7%) followed by environmental or animal care (49%), educational or youth services (38.6%), religious causes (37.8%), and public safety (31.3%) as illustrated in Figure 29.

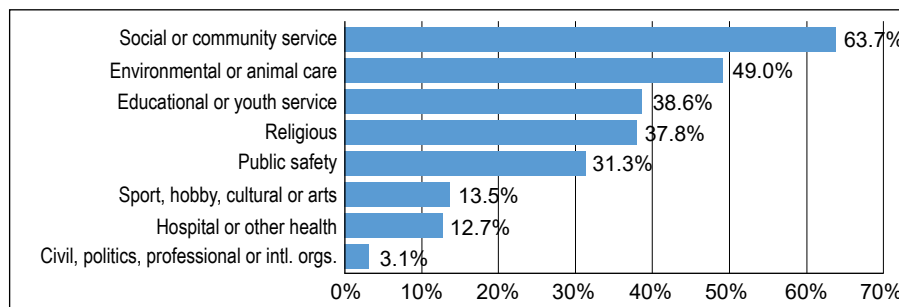


Figure 29: Areas of volunteering

### 3.4.1.5 Collective Community Action

More than one-third (31.8%) of respondents have participated in collective community action in the past 12 months, such as attending a community meeting, community-organized event, or a collective effort to solve a community's problem. This indicates that certain times there is a high percentage of active participation in community events. Community participation is higher among people dwelling in rural areas (39.4%) compared to urban areas (29%). It is higher among members (44.9%) in comparison to non-members (23.6%) of CSOs.

Among those who have participated, 15.8% of them have been active members in the meetings most of the time. About 68.0% were active sometimes, while 15.8% did not contribute at all. There was a substantial difference between males and females concerning active participation. While 19.6% of the male respondents reported that they participate in community events most of the time, only 9.4% of females reported so. On the other hand, 28.1% of females responded that they never speak at community meetings, compared to 8.4% of males (Figure 30).

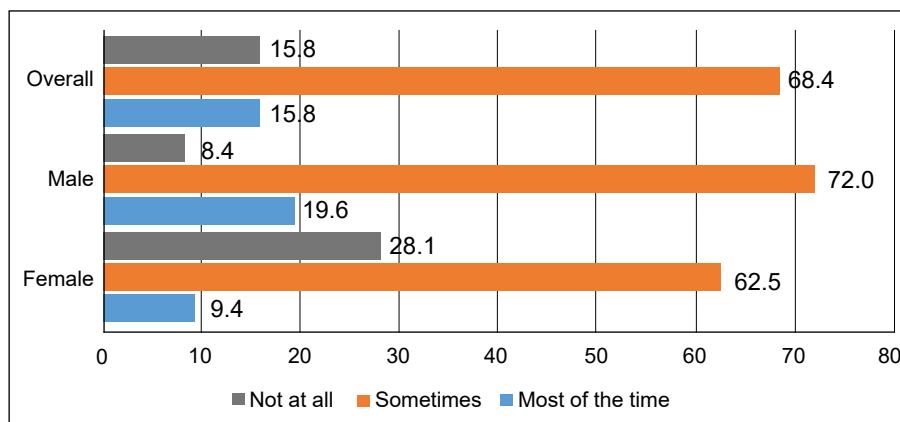


Figure 30: Active participation in community events

### 3.4.1.6 Diversity of CSOs

An overwhelming majority of the respondents believed that all social groups are equitably represented in CSO leadership. Only around one-sixth (14.9%) felt that some social groups were under-represented.

### 3.4.1.7 Conclusion

Civic participation can take place in numerous ways. Findings from this survey suggest that in Bhutan respondents engage more through acts of charitable giving and volunteering time. About half of the respondents have engaged themselves in the past 12 months. Nearly, a third of the respondents have participated in collective community actions such as community meetings, community-organized events, or collective efforts to solve community problems. Political engagement in the traditional manner is low, but there is a notable proportion of respondents who engage through social media. This is potentially a new area where government and CSOs could tap into. Formal membership of CSOs is low with less than 10.0% of the citizens being members of a CSO or MBO. However, membership of religious associations is quite high with about one-fifth of the respondents as its members.

## 3.4.2 Environment

This section discusses the political and socio-economic environment which is instrumental to the success of Civil Society. It starts with public participation in elections and their perception of the electoral process. The section also covers citizen perception of government performance and the level of public integrity, trust, acceptance, and public-spiritedness of the community.

### 3.4.2.1 Political Rights

A little more than 91.0% of the respondents reported that they “always” vote in elections at the national level while 79.0% of them reported that they “always” vote in the local elections (Figure 31).

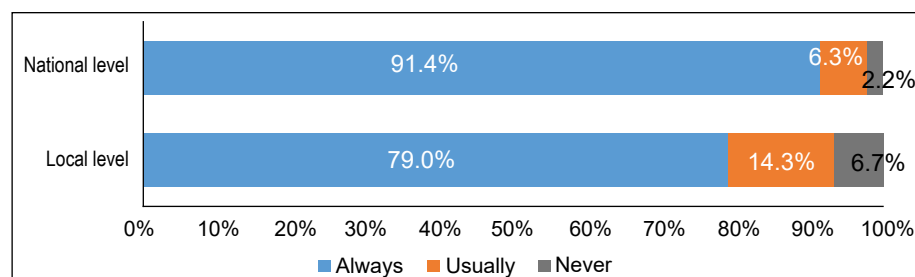


Figure 31: Voting at the national and local level

There is a marked difference between rural and urban dwellers concerning voting behavior in local elections. Against 88.7% of rural people who reported that they always vote in local government elections, the proportion of urban people who always vote in such elections is 75.5% (Table 9).

Table 9: Voting at the local level by area

Election	Rural	Urban	Total
Always	88.73	75.51	79
Usually	7.75	16.67	14.31
Never	3.52	7.83	6.69
Total	100	100	100

People also demonstrated a high confidence in the electoral system. A little more than 80.0% of the respondents reported that votes are “very often” or “fairly often” counted fairly. 71.5% responded that voters are offered a genuine choice in the elections.

About 13.0% of the respondents indicated that the current political system allows people to have an extensive say in government plans and policies. Nearly half of them (48.8%) responded that people are allowed to have some say in what the government does; 27.7% indicated that the level of public participation in government plans and policies was low, while 6.3% reported that there were no opportunities to contribute to government plans and policies (Figure 32).

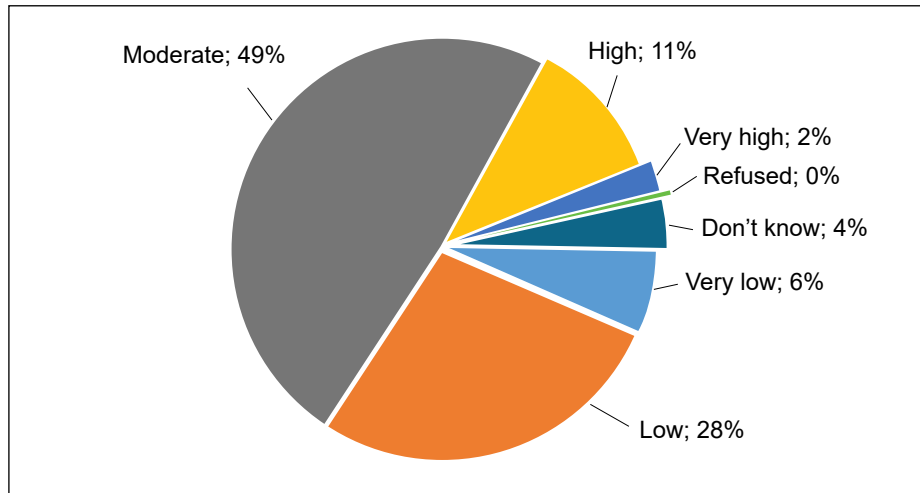


Figure 32: Perception of the level of public participation in government plans and policies under current political system

### 3.4.2.2 Perceived Corruption

40% of the responses indicated that the corruption in public service was moderate, followed by 16.5% that perceived a high level of corruption and 5.8% indicating very high (Figure 33). One-third of the respondents perceived a low level of corruption, and only 3.9% perceived corruption to be very low.

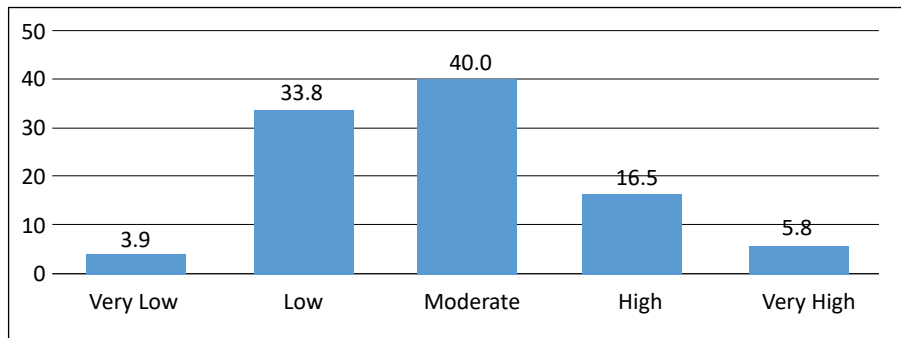


Figure 33: Perception of Corruption in public service

### 3.4.2.3 State Effectiveness

Overall, the data illustrates a high level of satisfaction with the government’s performance. On a scale of 1 to 7 (7 being extremely satisfied and 1 being extremely dissatisfied), majority of respondents (82,4%) were satisfied with the government of which almost 40% were extremely satisfied. Only a small proportion of respondents were less satisfied with 1.3% extremely dissatisfied.

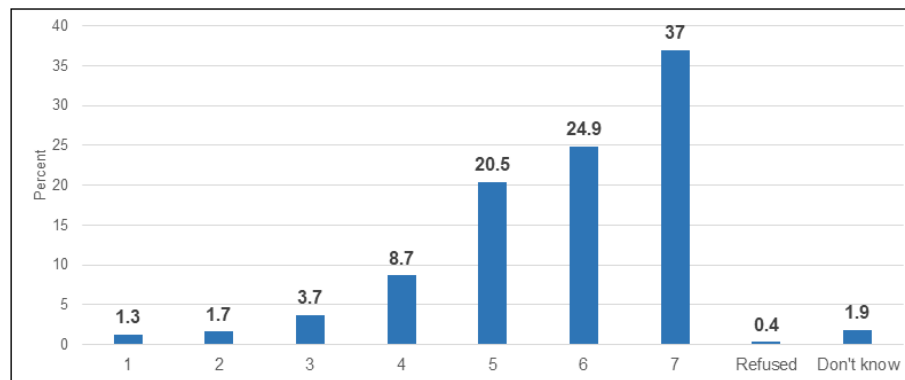


Figure 34: Satisfaction with the government

### 3.4.2.4 Trust

The data indicates a low rate of trust among the people. Only one out of five respondents reported that most people can be trusted (Figure 35) while 80% indicated a low level of trust. There is increased trust among people in rural areas than in urban areas. Compared to urban dwellers (15.3%), twice the proportion of respondents in rural areas (31.4%) believed that most people could be trusted (Figure 36).

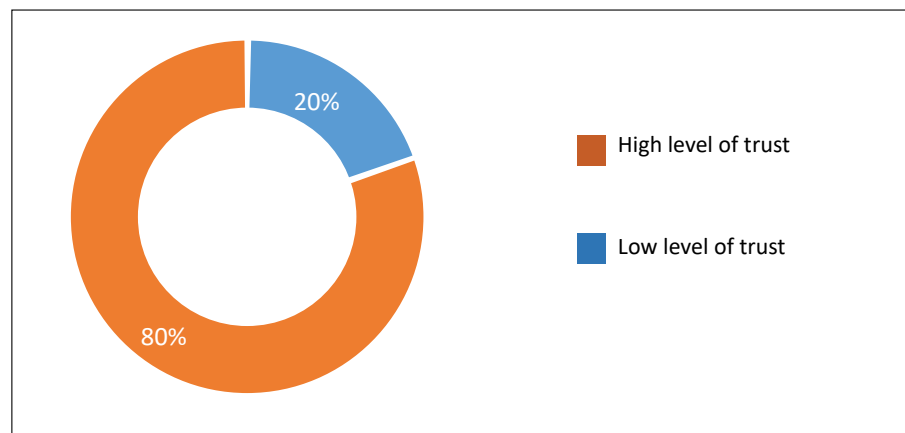


Figure 35: Social trust

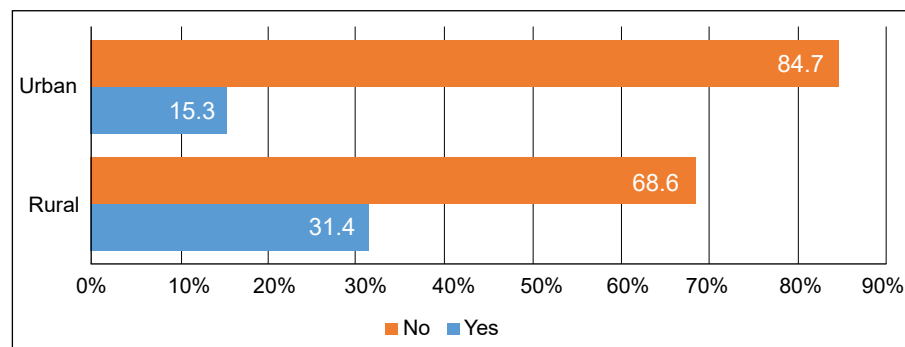


Figure 36: Social trust by area of residence

### 3.4.2.5 Tolerance and Acceptance

More than 90% of respondents indicated that Bhutanese are generally accepting of those who speak a different language and practice a different religion. Between 70% to 90% of them are also open-minded towards immigrants, people with HIV/AIDS, and the LGBTQIA community (Figure 37). Conversely, the findings indicate less acceptance towards people struggling with addiction. About 54.0% and 47.9% of the respondents reported reservations with living near persons with substance use disorder and alcohol use disorder, respectively. This could be attributed to the potential risks of violence related to the use of drugs or alcohol. With increasing reports of alcohol and drug abuse associated issues, low acceptance towards these groups of people is a cause of concern.

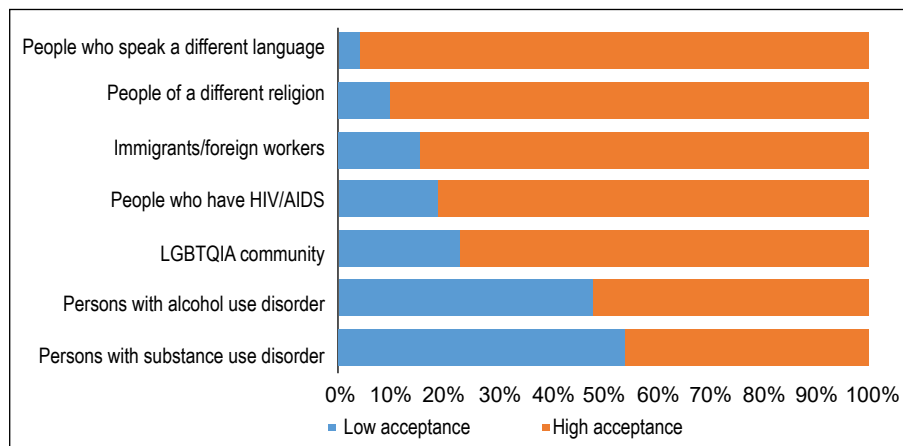


Figure 37: Acceptance

There is no substantial difference between people living in rural and urban areas in terms of their acceptance. The only difference was that a greater proportion of urban residents' (55.4%) were tolerant of alcohol consumption compared to rural residents (43%) as indicated in Figure 38.

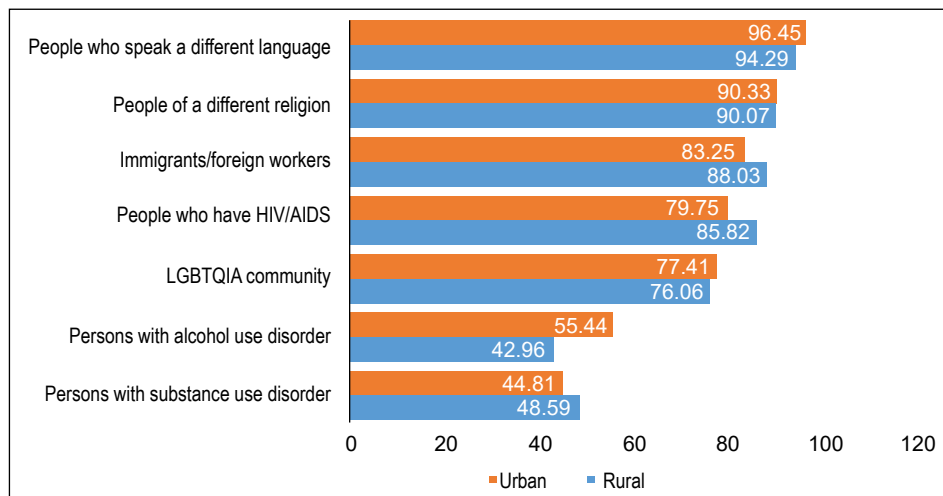


Figure 38: Tolerance by area

### 3.4.2.6 Public Spiritedness

The figures below (Table 10) suggest that Bhutanese people demonstrate interest in public welfare. An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that stealing and violence were not justifiable. About three-fourth of the respondents were against: claiming government benefits to which they were not entitled, tax evasion, and accepting bribes in the course of their duties.

Table 10: Public spiritedness

Public spirit	Justified	Neutral	Not justified	Refused	Don't know	Total
Claiming unentitled government benefits	4.7%	12.7%	75.4%	0.2%	7.1%	100%
Violence	5.6%	9.0%	78.9%	0.2%	6.3%	100%
Stealing	7.6%	7.1%	79.1%	0.6%	5.6%	100%
Tax evasion	7.6%	8.0%	75.9%	0.6%	7.8%	100%
Bribery in the course of their duties	7.8%	8.2%	74.8%	0.7%	8.4%	100%

### 3.4.2.7 Conclusion

The findings indicate that a large proportion of Bhutanese have participated in voting, which can be construed as the simplest act of citizenship. The responses illustrate a high confidence in the electoral process. One third of respondents perceived corruption in public service which is a major impediment to good governance and socio-economic progress to be moderately low in the country. Satisfaction with government performance is high. All these conditions indicate a political situation that is moderately conducive to Civil Society.

The social environment was evaluated in terms of three factors: trust, tolerance/acceptance, and public-spiritedness. The responses indicate a low level of trust with only about one in five individuals reporting that “most people can be trusted”. A greater proportion of respondents living in rural areas (31.4%), compared to urban areas (15.3%) have a higher level of trust. These findings, underpinned by the rapid growth in the urban population, is a cause for concern. Bhutanese are generally accepting of people with different language, religion, nationality, health conditions, and sexuality. However, a significant proportion reported reservations against living near persons struggling with alcohol and drug addiction (54.2% and 47.9%, respectively). Given the rise of these social issues, CSOs are playing a crucial role in sensitizing the general population and providing services for their beneficiary groups.

### 3.4.3 Values

This section reviews the role of Civil Society in promoting values of democracy and transparency. Results on how often CSOs engage in poverty eradication and environmental sustainability are also included.



### 3.4.3.1 Democracy

The data shows that most Bhutanese perceive CSOs as a driving force in the promotion of democracy. An impressive 81.5% believe this is the case at the national level while almost six out of ten respondents (59.3%) perceive CSOs as playing a significant role in the promotion of a democratic society at the local level (Table 11).

Table 11: Democracy at local and national levels

Level	Yes	No	Total
Local	59.3%	40.7%	100%
National	81.5%	18.5%	100%

### 3.4.3.2 Transparency

Respondents’ perceived corruption in CSOs to be low with 44.4% of the respondents reporting that the level of corruption in CSOs was low (Figure 39).

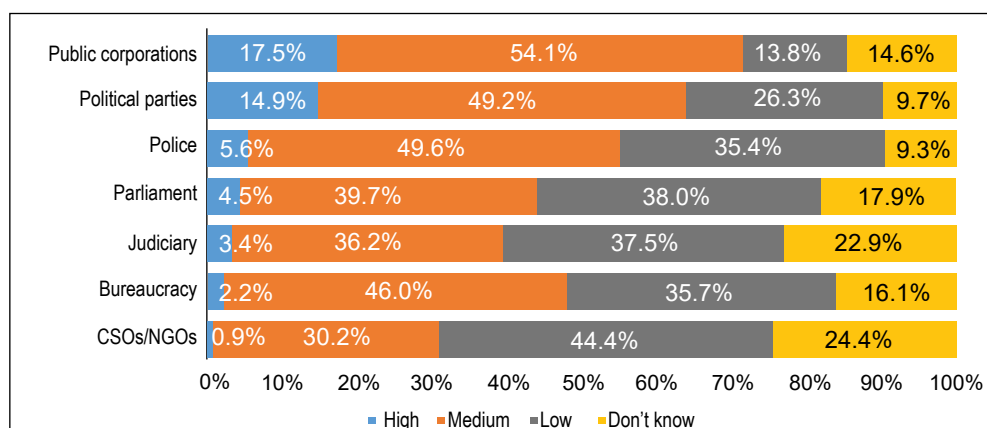


Figure 39: Perception of the level of corruption

CSOs undertake various actions to reduce corruption by promoting the principles of transparency. Notable CSOs in this area are Bhutan Transparency Initiative, Bhutan Media Foundation, etc. Almost half (48.5%) of the respondents perceived CSOs as a driving force in promoting transparency in governance and corporate conduct (Table 12). Another 43.3% believed that CSOs at times contributed to promoting transparency in governance. Only 6.7% and 1.5% respectively believed that CSOs rarely or never contributed to promoting transparency in governance and corporate conduct.

Table 12: CSOs promoting transparency

	Always	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Promote transparency	18.2%	30.3%	43.3%	6.7%	1.5%

### 3.4.3.3 Poverty Eradication

CSOs are playing an increasingly important role in preventing and alleviating poverty. About one in every four individuals (25.9%) strongly believed that CSOs are a driving force in preventing and alleviating human poverty. About 40.0% viewed CSOs as a key player in poverty alleviation, and 28.5% perceived CSOs as sporadically contributing to poverty alleviation efforts. Overall, Figure 40 shows that both rural and urban respondents shared a broad consensus on CSOs' role in poverty alleviation.

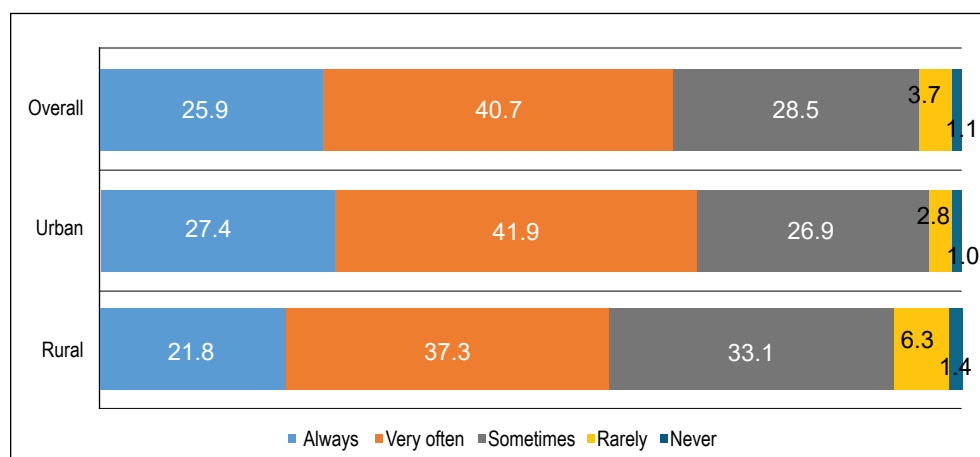


Figure 40. CSOs in Poverty Alleviation

### 3.4.3.4 Environmental Sustainability

About one-fourth of the respondents (26.4%) perceived CSOs as a constant driving force in environment conservation and sustainability (Table 13). About 44.3 and 22.9% viewed CSOs as very often or sometimes engaging in conservation efforts. A few examples of CSOs actively engaged in this area include Bhutan Ecological Society, Clean Bhutan, and Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN).

Table 13: CSOs protecting environment

	Always	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Environment sustainability	26.4%	44.3%	22.9%	5.8%	0.6%

### 3.4.3.5 Conclusion

The success of democracy largely depends on a vibrant and engaging Civil Society. CSOs represent the interests of diverse sections of the society, particularly the marginalized. Majority of the respondents surveyed agreed that CSOs are a driving force in the promotion of democracy. Their role in fighting corruption and promoting transparency was also well recognized. CSOs were perceived to be the least corrupt compared to other institutions and

bodies. People strongly believed that CSOs work towards alleviating poverty and promoting environmental sustainability.

### 3.4.4 Impact

This section questions the effectiveness of CSOs in influencing public policy, responding to social interests, empowering citizens, and meeting societal needs.

#### 3.4.4.1 Responding to social interests

This section covers topics on the public perception of how Civil Society actors respond to social interests. Respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement: “CSOs are out of touch with the crucial concerns of the citizens”. One in four respondents (24.5%) did not agree with this statement, while almost 38.3% of the respondents agreed (Figure 40). The percentage of people who agree with this was higher in rural areas (47.2%) compared to the urban (35.1%) (Figure 41). This may indicate that CSOs have a larger impact or are perceived to be more impactful in urban areas.

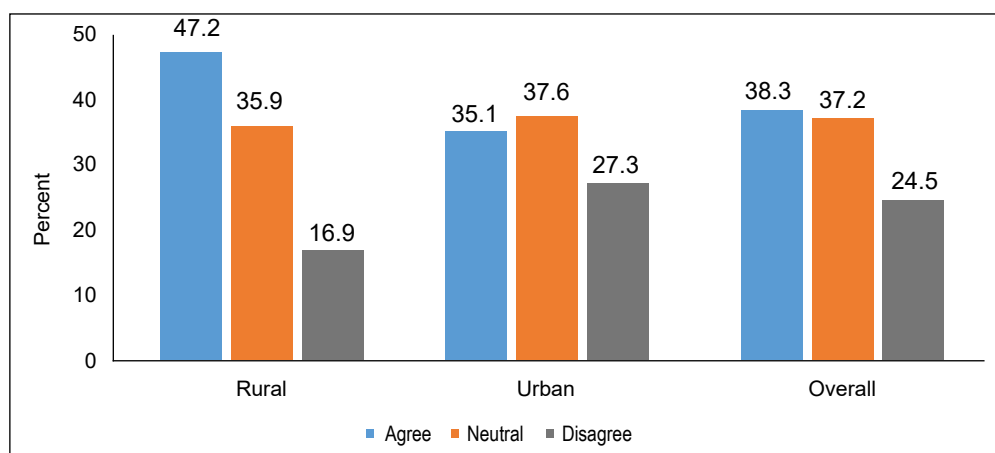


Figure 41: Responsiveness

#### 3.4.4.2 Public Trust

The findings indicate that the general population has a high level of trust in public institutions and CSOs. On a 10-point scale, respondents were asked how much they trusted a range of institutions with 0 indicating no trust the institution and 10 indicating they have complete trust in it (Figure 42). The results revealed that people have the greatest trust in CSOs (mean=7.64), followed by trust in parliament (7.23), the legal system (6.96), police (6.87), bureaucracy (6.85), politicians (6.03), and political parties (6.01). Despite political parties and politicians having scored the least, the responses indicate a generally high level of trust in all the institutions concerned, with all of the institutions and bodies scoring above the mid-value of 4.

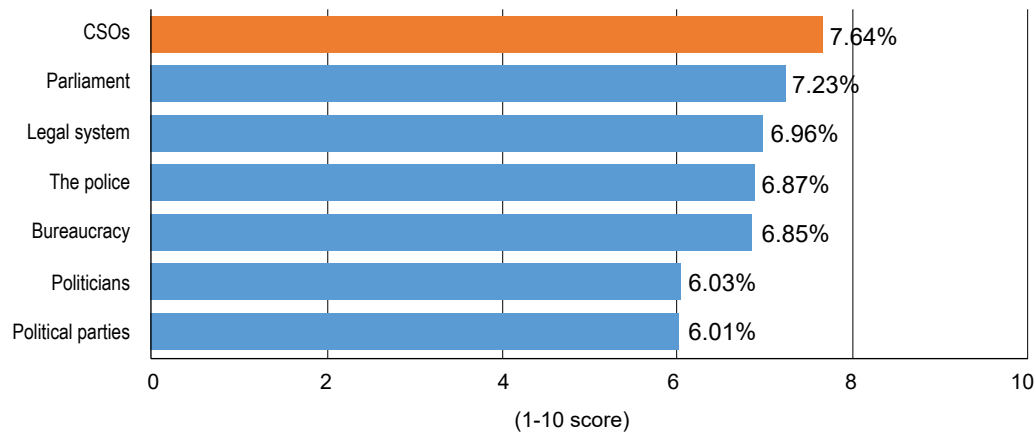


Figure 42: Public trust in different institutions

### 3.4.4.3 Empowering citizens

This section includes CSO's effectiveness in informing or educating citizens, empowering marginalized people, empowering women, supporting livelihoods, and building capacity for collective action. Figure 43 shows the percentage of respondents who agree that CSOs play an important role in each of the aforementioned areas.

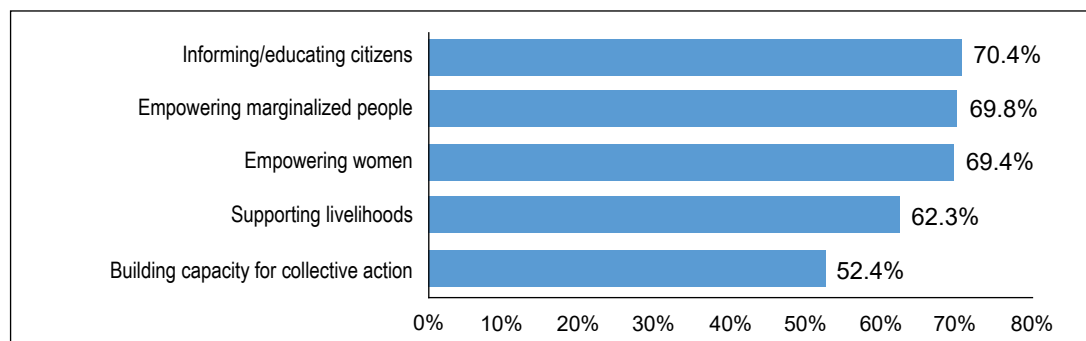


Figure 43: Percentage of respondents who agree that CSOs play an important role in empowering citizens

In terms of impact, respondents rated CSOs as most effective in creating awareness or educating citizens on public issues (70.4%), empowering marginalized groups (69.8%), and empowering women (69.4%). More than half of them also agreed that CSOs play an important role in supporting livelihoods (62.3%) and building capacity of citizens to organize themselves, mobilize resources, and work collectively to address the common problem (52.4%). Livelihood support includes providing employment and/or income-generating opportunities, especially for women and the poor.

Majority of both men and women believed that CSOs play a vital role in empowering women. The proportion is slightly higher for males (70.3%) than female respondents (68.3%) with a remarkably high level of consensus on the subject (Table 14). There are several CSOs that specialize in this domain, notably, RENEW, Bhutan Network for Empowering Women (BNEW), Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs (BAOWE), SABAH Bhutan, to mention a few.

*Table 14: CSOs play a vital role in empowering women*

	Female	Male	Total
Agree	68.3	70.3	69.4
Neutral	31.3	29.7	30.4
Disagree	0.41	0	0.19
Total	100	100	100

Some seven in ten respondents residing in urban areas agreed that CSOs play an important role in creating awareness to people in society. A slightly lesser proportion of respondents in rural areas agreed so (67.6% as indicated in Table 15). This could be attributed to higher engagement by CSOs in urban areas.

*Table 15: CSOs play a vital role in creating awareness*

	Rural	Urban	Total
Agree	67.6	71.5	70.5
Neutral	32.4	27.3	28.6
Disagree	0	1.3	0.9
Total	100	100	100

As evident from the table below (Table 16) a higher proportion of respondents in urban areas were optimistic about CSOs’ role in empowering marginalized people than in rural areas.

*Table 16: CSOs play a vital role in empowering marginalized people*

	Rural	Urban	Total
Agree	66.19	71.07	69.79
Neutral	32.37	28.43	29.46
Disagree	1.44	0.51	0.75
Total	100	100	100

Likewise, the percentage of respondents who agreed that CSOs play a major role in supporting livelihoods was higher among urban residents (65.0%) than rural (54.7%) as shown in Table 17. Some of the prominent CSOs that are engaged in promoting livelihood are the Tarayana Foundation and Loden Foundation, among others.

Table 17: CSOs play a vital role in supporting the livelihood

	Rural	Urban	Total
Agree	54.68	64.96	62.26
Neutral	43.17	32.48	35.28
Disagree	2.16	2.56	2.45
Total	100	100	100

#### 3.4.4.4 Meeting pressing societal needs

Approximately four-tenth of the respondents agreed that CSOs are active and successful in meeting pressing societal needs through service delivery or promotion of self-help initiatives (Figure 44). In delivering services to marginalized groups, 38.9% of the people surveyed felt that CSOs are as effective as the government. A higher proportion of people residing in urban areas (40.6%) agreed on CSOs' effectiveness compared to rural residents (34.3%). In rural areas, close to one in four people (23.36%) disagreed while only about one in ten urban residents (13.52%) disagreed.

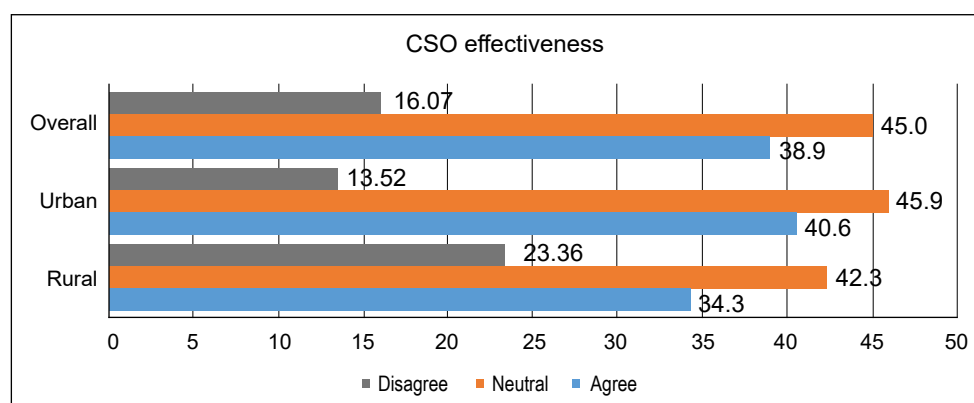


Figure 44: CSOs meeting pressing societal needs

#### 3.4.4.5 Conclusion

Nearly four in every ten respondents believed that CSOs are out of touch with the crucial concerns of citizens. A somewhat equal proportion of respondents chose to remain 'neutral' while about one-fourth of them disagreed. The results suggest a need for CSOs to constantly align their priorities with that of the general population. Nonetheless, CSOs enjoy a high level of public trust with respondents scoring CSOs the highest among other institutions, followed closely by the Parliament. Majority of respondents believed that CSOs play an important role in informing or educating citizens, empowering marginalized groups, and women. More than half of the respondents also agreed that CSOs are effective in supporting livelihoods and building capacities of citizens for collective action.

## CHAPTER 4: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW FINDINGS

### 4.1 Perception of CSOs

The qualitative interviews on the general perception of CSOs have captured the local context of how CSOs and their functioning is “understood”, “regarded” and “interpreted” in Bhutan, and specifically how an individual or group might “see”, “hear”, or “become aware” of CSOs in the Bhutanese Civil Society landscape. The interview findings are categorized into three sections: General Public, Experts and Stakeholders, and Key Informants as follows.

#### 4.1.1 The General Public

Representatives from the general population comprise individuals from various government offices, local government leaders, college students, etc. including respondents across various professions such as lawyers, businesswomen, salon owners, village/community heads and so on, to represent all sections of Bhutanese society.

##### 4.1.1.1 Visibility and Awareness of CSOs

There is a marked increase in the awareness and understanding of CSOs among the public when compared to the CSO Perception Report 2017 which had reported a complete lack of understanding or awareness of CSO amongst most of its respondents. Almost all the respondents in 2020 were able to distinguish CSOs, their role, and space within which they perform.

*My understanding of CSOs is that they play a role where the government cannot reach people and where people cannot reach the government. – (Community/Village Head, individual participant)*

A respondent who was illiterate, when provided with a translation of the questionnaire, related CSOs to agencies like RENEW, a local CSO that provides support services for women and children in difficult circumstances, and recognized that CSOs are “not part of the government”. Majority of respondents, were cognizant of CSOs’ roles and values in society. They were able to describe CSOs as organizations that are not affiliated with the government and often function in areas not reached by the government, uplifting the lives of vulnerable people.

Despite a marked regional disparity with most of the CSOs physically operating only from Thimphu, there is a positive indication of increased visibility of Civil Society among the public through outreach programs as well as the use of social and mainstream media in advocating

and promoting their mandates. The increase in program activities and the expansion to other districts by some CSOs have had a positive impact on beneficiaries, thereby resulting in increased trust and public recognition within these communities. It was also evident that despite having no direct contact with CSOs, most respondents were aware of them, primarily through their work and not due to the individuals associated with the CSOs. The increased legitimacy of CSOs within the communities could be attributed to the snowball effect of positive word-of-mouth.

Respondents also stated that since most CSOs are smaller organizations with fund constraints, any form of donor support would have been instrumental in their work to support their respective beneficiaries.

The responses indicated that the combined effect of increased CSO activities and crucial donor support towards CSO programs and their long-term sustainability, has contributed to raising the visibility and recognition of Civil Society in Bhutan within a relatively short period of time.

#### **4.1.1.2 Effectiveness and Performance of CSOs**

There is a consensus among majority of respondents that CSOs have been effective in their program activities and are inclusive of vulnerable groups within their thematic areas of focus. However, respondents were more aware of well-established CSOs with a focus on socio-economic empowerment such as RENEW, Tarayana Foundation, Draktsho, Loden Foundation, RSPCA, etc. compared to CSOs that mainly operate in the knowledge field. Most of these CSO programs have had a direct impact on the lives of their beneficiaries as evident from the following statement when asked whether CSOs were effective:

*Yes, especially for survivors of domestic violence. Now, we can report directly. Even domestic violence incidents are reduced. After reporting to RENEW, husbands are scared to hit wives again. – (Salon Owner, individual respondent)*

CSOs operating in the “intellectual” or “knowledge” field, involved in the promotion of thought creation, policy dialogue, and knowledge generation were seldom mentioned by respondents when asked to gauge effectiveness. It is challenging for such CSOs to validate the impact of their work. However, despite the infrequent mention of these CSOs while gauging effectiveness, they were perceived to have a positive impact on policy by more than 50% of respondents and support holistic development by 59.5% as per the findings of the quantitative interviews.

A significant number of respondents, though satisfied by the effectiveness of CSOs’ performance, expressed concerns on the outreach of their programs since most are concentrated in the capital. This is illustrated by the following statement when asked if CSOs



were reaching their target constituents:

*...but I do not know how far for the rest of the country since they are concentrated in Thimphu.  
– (College student, female individual participant)*

Although CSOs benefit the community significantly, most respondents indicated the need to explore locations outside Thimphu to operate their programs and improve access to those in dire need of assistance.

On whether they found the CSOs beneficial to the government, most respondents agreed that CSOs supplemented and complemented the government by providing direct intervention for its target beneficiaries. They also stated that CSOs interaction with government agencies have improved in recent years, with the government extending due recognition to the role CSOs play in society.

#### **4.1.1.3 Engagement and Influence on Public Policy**

As in the findings of the CSO Perception Report 2017, almost all the respondents in this study were of the view that CSOs should be more involved in policymaking decisions as they can provide a wealth of information from the ground up. Due to the specificity of their focus, CSOs are considered better equipped to provide policymakers with information that is both quantitatively comprehensive and anecdotal. Some respondents also stated that the independent nature of CSOs and their reach within the communities should be taken into consideration by the government while planning policies that eventually impact people's lives.

*Cohesion between CSO and government is important in policy-making decisions. - (Lawyer, individual participant)*

The opinions of respondents towards more engagement of CSOs in policy-making decisions are indicative of the gap that still exists in this arena.

#### **4.1.1.4 Exploring new CSO opportunities**

Most respondents were not aware of the different types of CSOs already existing in the country and therefore were unable to suggest new areas of opportunity for CSOs.

However, a few respondents believed that if new CSOs were to emerge, their focus should be in rural areas where the need for an independent organization to enhance transparency is widely felt. Apart from fulfilling a watchdog role, CSOs could provide support to victims of domestic violence and abuse, which many considered prevalent in rural areas. The presence of CSOs would reinforce the accountability and responsibility of other informal groups and

associations functioning in rural areas.

A few respondents suggested that CSOs should focus on economic empowerment with the aim to create self-sufficiency in communities. One respondent identified an opportunity for CSOs to create legislative awareness on social issues because of the existing gap - with most citizens unable to understand the law and its interpretation vis-à-vis different issues. Another respondent stated that a CSO that focuses on the maintenance of public infrastructure would benefit the nation as it would save substantial costs. According to the respondent, since state infrastructures are “neglected, shortening their life and utility,” it creates pressure on government coffers to build new ones.

#### **4.1.1.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, respondents from the general population indicated a marked increase in the awareness and visibility of CSOs and their effectiveness and performance from 2017 to 2020. The CSO Perception Study 2017 reported that majority of respondents of a similar composition could not understand the term “CSO” and thereby expressed a complete lack of awareness of the role CSOs in the country. The respondents understood their roles only after being “explained that CSOs and NGOs are similar in nature” and needed citation of examples. In 2020, almost all the respondents could distinguish the term, understood CSOs’ role and were aware that they operated in a space outside of the government.

Along with the increased awareness of CSOs among the public in 2020, there was also consensus on the effectiveness of CSO programs and their inclusion of vulnerable groups. These respondents were of the view that CSOs supplemented and complemented government efforts and also contributed to increased government efficiency. This indicates progress relative to the findings from the 2017 report which stated that though the respondents were “of the opinion that CSOs do contribute to social development they were unsure of the contribution to the government and development policies”. The marked increase in awareness and understanding of CSOs’ evolving role can also be gauged from the concerns raised by respondents in 2020 on the lack of physical CSO presence outside of Thimphu, with majority citing the need for increased CSO interventions in rural areas. Further, the impact of CSOs in the communities can be also gleaned from majority of respondents in 2020 being aware of CSOs primarily through their work despite having no personal or direct interaction with individuals working for these CSOs. However, despite the increased awareness and understanding, both sets of respondents from 2017 and 2020 were only able to name well-established CSOs that demonstrated direct and tangible results through their activities amongst target beneficiaries. On the contrary, there was less mention of CSOs that provide intangible benefits such as policy advocacy, research, promotion of civic participation, and so on, indicating a need for initiatives and efforts toward increasing greater awareness of the larger role of Civil Society.

On the topic of greater involvement of CSOs in policy-making decisions, the findings of the 2017 and 2020 study were similar. Both sets of respondents indicated that CSOs could offer the government a wealth of relevant information due to their grass-root experience at the community level. The respondents from the 2017 study had reservations against CSOs' involvement in politics although there was positive consensus on CSOs' role in generating awareness on democracy. For 2020, 81.5% of respondents in the quantitative survey acknowledged CSOs as a driving force in the promotion of a democratic society at the local level.

#### **4.1.2 Expert/Stakeholder Group**

The expert group consisted of participants that included high-level government officials. Their positions in the government offered a unique perspective whereby they have been part of the implementation of policies, engagement, and interaction with CSOs, and/or monitoring of CSO programs.

##### **4.1.2.1 Effectiveness and Performance of CSO**

Most CSOs are formed to address the needs of the society and fill “gaps” within existing delivery mechanisms. In alignment with this, most respondents agreed that the role of Civil Society is becoming increasingly important and relevant. There was also a consensus among respondents that CSOs were effective in their program and service delivery, despite operational, financial, and technical challenges. Some respondents credited the increased legitimacy of CSOs in the country to the recognition bestowed by His Majesty the King to the Civil Society community during the 109th National Day on 17th December 2016. This recognition of CSOs' work from the highest office may have led to increased initiatives among government agencies to include and engage targeted CSOs in recent years.

Similar to the Perception Report 2017, the findings of 2020 indicated confidence among donors and government agencies to engage CSOs in their programs due to their perceived reach and impact on different sections of society, as well as their proven track record of successful outcomes.

Likewise, CSOs that provide critical services that directly impact the lives of people, particularly women, children, and youth, were found to be seen as more effective by the respondents. Almost all respondents mentioned well-established CSOs like Tarayana Foundation, Draktsho, RENEW, Lhaksam, etc. and were confident in sharing their views about these CSOs. They were not able to share their views on the lesser-known CSOs. Respondents suggested the need for lesser-known CSOs to communicate more strategically and increase focus on their public relations to garner more recognition and support. When asked to gauge the contribution of CSOs to societal needs and development, most responses were positive, as evidenced in the statement below:

*With CSOs providing critical services: shelter homes; awareness and prevention programs; counseling; reintegration programs for clients including skill-building and micro-credit support; the contributions made by the CSOs is valued and recognized till the grassroots level.*

The respondents also stated that CSOs have been able to bring to the forefront issues that have not been a priority for the government. A case in point was the successful promotion of basic toilet hygiene by a CSO - an issue that was discussed widely in society without any specific initiatives prior.

Most respondents stated that CSOs would be able to increase their relevance as well as impact if they operated from more rural areas. It was highlighted that majority of CSOs were based in the capital whereas their target beneficiaries are vulnerable groups in far-flung districts. According to the respondents, although CSOs have created positive impact through their work, extending their programmes by exploring locations outside Thimphu would increase accessibility for those in dire need of assistance. Some of the respondents attributed the lack of “awareness in distinguishing CSOs from the government” to the lack of their physical presence in remote districts, which would be counterproductive in the long run.

On the effectiveness of CSOs’ programmatic activities, some respondents highlighted the limited operational and technical capacity of some CSOs but attributed those limitations to the lack of funds. There were suggestions to identify synergies between CSOs to increase their organizational capacity, particularly if fund constraints continue for CSOs, majority of whom are heavily reliant on external funding. Some of the respondents suggested government intervention to support CSOs through “regular program funds” and explore a framework for government-CSO collaboration to “achieve better results”. Respondents also suggested that CSOs identify their specific target groups to avoid redundancies of efforts and increasing the effectiveness of their work. There was consensus among respondents on compiling and publishing an annual performance of CSOs to disseminate information on CSO programs and achievements to the public, and create a sense of accountability and transparency.

#### **4.1.2.2 Engagement and Influence on Public Policy**

Despite increased recognition and engagement, most agreed that CSOs’ role in policymaking decisions were non-existent. They stated that currently CSOs had no influence on public policy and that CSO engagement with government agencies were “unsuccessful and weak”. Although respondents stated that CSOs were not fully engaged in any important policy framing decisions such as the Five-Year Plans or the national budget, it was highlighted that CSOs were considered key stakeholders for consultations during policy framing more regularly in recent years. Almost all the respondents expressed a similar view of the value

that CSOs' bring towards policy development due to their varied first-hand experiences from the field and exposure to issues.

Some respondents recognized that a few CSOs have a slight influence in advocating for legislation and expressing views on emerging social concerns. They agreed that CSOs can play a greater role in further advocating for issues related to women, children and youth, and issues of people living with disabilities, HIV/AIDs, LGBTQIA and those working in risky occupations. Some suggested that there are already opportunities for bringing such issues to the attention of the Parliament through the various thematic committees, social media and policy debates. A few others expressed that CSOs can play a role in the decision-making process by lobbying to influence policymakers and their decisions.

A few respondents shared that CSOs should be allowed to participate as observers to understand the policy framing process since currently experience is lacking. To engage meaningfully with the government, CSOs may be required to increase their research capacities along with their monitoring capacities - which according to a respondent was "not active and successful" yet.

#### **4.1.2.3 Role of Watchdog**

Considering that an important role of CSOs globally is that of a watchdog, most respondents were of the view that this would similarly be a natural transition for Bhutan as CSOs embrace their role of creating greater accountability in the future. Many agreed that this would provide check and balance, offering increased independent objectivity in assessments that would lead to transparency and accountability. This denotes a departure from the CSO Perception Report 2017 where half the respondents were of the view that it was not a necessity for CSOs to duplicate the role of other monitoring agencies such as the Royal Audit Authority, Anti-Corruption Commission, and legal departments.

Some respondents viewed a few CSOs as already embracing this role by compiling and submitting shadow reports on the status of vulnerable sections in society through periodic country reports such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), as well as through indirect engagement and communication on social media platforms. A few respondents were of the view that there was a complete lack of monitoring by CSOs currently.

In the focus group discussions, a few respondents stated that for Bhutan, the context is slightly different as CSOs tend to work very closely with the government, to supplement and complement government initiatives. As in the findings of the CSO Perception Report 2017, there is a risk of conflict of interest for CSOs to fulfil its accountability and transparency roles if they were fully reliant on government funding. Since funding source is limited in the country, the government is still considered a reliable source of program-tied funding.

This could indicate internal regulation and censorship among CSOs to ensure continuation of funding. Currently, the lack of capacity, especially research capacity, in most CSOs could also indicate a lack of evidence to advocate for change and contribute to policy processes.

Despite the current situation, most respondents agreed that in the long-term CSO serving the role of a watchdog, including monitoring and reporting on progress and achievements of the Five-Year Plans and international commitments, would be eventually benefit the country at large. However, to do so, respondents stated that CSOs' capacity in research, policy dialogue and negotiation would have to be strengthened in the foreseeable future.

#### **4.1.2.4 Structure and Management in CSOs**

According to the CSO Rules & Regulations 2017, CSOs are required to have a supervisory Board of Trustees that shall govern and an Executive Director that shall manage the affairs of CSOs under the supervisory authority of the Board. Therefore, most respondents in the focus groups were confident that CSOs operate within the guidelines prescribed by the CSO Authority and maintain the organizational and operational structure.

The CSOs are also stipulated to submit annual reports and are subjected to annual audits by the Royal Audit Authority. In this regard, most respondents were also of the opinion that financial corruption might be low. However, some respondents raised concerns about transparency in recruitment and selection. Due to the increasing number of CSOs in the country, a few respondents also raised concerns as to the motives behind the formation of some CSOs.

#### **4.1.2.5 Changing Perception in Society**

When CSOs began operating in the early 2000s, there was no awareness of the roles of such organizations. For a long time, CSOs were considered part of the government or government-owned agencies by the people. Toward this, respondents gave due credit to the "older" CSOs for paving the path and creating a space for Civil Society where both the State and the public acknowledged and trusted CSOs.

Most respondents stated that CSO's active role in socio-economic development programs and contribution to nation-building is being recognized by both citizens and the State. Some also mentioned that the only deterrent to the increasing popularity of CSOs could be their location since their role, the space that they occupy and their different roles from the government and private sector might not be clear in rural areas. This sentiment is plausible as it is supported by the findings of the quantitative interviews where 47.2% of respondents in rural areas agreed to the statement that "CSOs are out of touch with the crucial concerns of the citizens". There is a strong indication that CSOs are perceived to have a larger impact in urban areas with only 35.1% of urban respondents agreeing to the above statement.

Most of the respondents in the focus groups credited CSOs' hard work which has led to value creation in society, while a few others pointed out that there were CSOs who did good work but were not widely known, underlining again the importance and need of strategic CSO public relations and communications. Similarly for well-known CSOs, respondents credited their advocacy efforts over various platforms including social media, as a factor in changing the perception of society and gradually leading to a more informed public. The mobilization of community-based volunteers and field officers by some CSOs, as part of their program strategies, was also given due credit for changing perception in these communities. The government and development partners were also credited for supporting CSO in their development and particularly, donor-assisted programme funds were highly regarded as an important catalyst for their success.

Most of the respondents were aware that the EU-funded Project 'Support to Civil Society in Bhutan' was geared towards strengthening organizational, technical and program capacities of CSOs. According to the statement of a focus group participant from CSO Authority:

*With the help of the EU project, we have completed a very important activity of developing a strategic plan for the Authority for the next three years. We have also developed a manual on governance for CSO Authority members from the government agencies. When others were pulling out, the EU support has been very meaningful and most projects of CSOs & CBOs and joint projects of CBOs & CSOs have been implemented through the fund.*

A respondent also stated that CSO collaboration and engagement with respective Local Government institutions for projects may also contribute to effective and long-lasting outcomes.

#### **4.1.2.6 Current CSO programmes**

The CSO Core Coordinating Committee (CCC), a coordinating body for CSOs in Bhutan categorizes PBOs and MBOs via eight different thematic groups. These themes are 1) Good Governance, Media, Democracy 2) Caregiving and Rehabilitation 3) Sanitation and Health 4) Environment and Climate Change 5) Socio-economic Development and Livelihood 6) Gender and Vulnerable Groups 7) Art, Culture and Recreation, and 8) Education and Youth Development. Within the scope of these thematic areas, CSO interventions often consist of a combination of training, entrepreneurship, programs enhancing creativity, awareness creation on emerging issues and policy review.

Although there were concerns raised by some respondents on the rising number of CSOs for a small country like Bhutan, most were not able to ascertain what programs were being implemented by which CSO, unless they were well-known or the specificity of the CSO focus were apparent, such as Bhutan Toilet Organization, Bhutan Cancer Society, Bhutan Kidney Foundation, etc.

As presented in earlier sections of the Qualitative interview findings, respondents were more aware of programs that created direct and tangible benefits for different sections of society. Within that, respondents stated that the socio-economic empowerment programs for women and youths were adequate and well implemented. According to most, these programs have created numerous skill-building and vocational training opportunities for women and youths, and that the support could have propelled women to form self-help groups that uplifted the lives of households within communities. A few respondents were of the view that much more needed to be done to uplift and empower women.

On efforts on the political front, the role of Bhutan Network for Empowering Women (BNEW) was given due credit by some respondents for increasing participation and representation of women in decision-making and leadership platforms at the local government and national level, and the subsequent launch of Bhutan Women Parliamentary Caucus (BWPC). Despite these inroads, some respondents pointed out that limited women leaders in important positions in the professional and political arena indicates that much more work is needed to achieve gender equality in governance, decision-making, and leadership roles.

#### **4.1.2.7 Exploring new CSO opportunities**

More than half of the respondents believed that for CSOs to grow and expand, they need to strengthen their fundraising capacities to continue delivering their mandates. Sustainability was viewed as a major problem for most CSOs, affecting their capacity to recruit skilled and experienced personnel as well as the quality and coverage of their programmes. Until these fundamental issues are addressed, respondents did not see CSO roles within the society evolving for a long time.

Some respondents were of the view that government support should be provided as well as clarity in roles and responsibilities for both parties to achieve a stronger direction for Civil Society. A strong coordination framework between the government and CSOs was seen as integral to “how they should work together and support each other” to achieve national and international targets. They stated that the CSOs of the future would be “strong and accountable” if both the government and society “recognize[d] their roles in greater terms and [recognized] their contributions.”

A few respondents also stated that more assistance should be directed, both by government and donors, towards smaller and upcoming CSOs that focus on critical issues within society. Others felt that the reliance on donor funds and ‘external’ funds was unsustainable and highlighted the need for inclusion of CSO within government programs. Without the support of the government and donors, these few respondents identified sustainability and scalability as a pertinent problem for CSOs.



In terms of strengthening CSOs' position for the long-term, most respondents reiterated that CSOs should expand or operate from rural areas as a way to integrate themselves in communities and subsequently increasing their credibility as strong development partners. A few respondents also expressed that CSOs should continue to clarify their mandate, streamline their activities, and scale-up their existing programmes. Responses also suggested increased coordination and collaboration with other CSOs and CBOS and finding innovative ways to traverse issues despite different mandates. In terms of collaboration, while most CSOs established contact at the central government level, respondents also suggested exploring avenues at the local government level.

The other half of the respondents stated that the future for CSOs was bright with the potential to become "a pillar for nation-building" provided there is continued efforts towards filling gaps in society and catering to the overall development of the country. A respondent also suggested that there is scope for future CSOs in environmental conservation as currently the number of CSOs focusing on environmental sustainability is limited. When asked where they envision CSOs to be in the future, a respondent stated:

*In the next 10 to 20 years, I see CSOs partnering with the government to uplift the lives of the people through proper planning, targeting and application of skills and knowledge.*

#### **4.1.2.8 Conclusion**

In conclusion, there is a degree of similarity between the findings of the CSO Perception Report 2017 and this study with regards to the confidence among donors and government agencies to engage with CSOs. This has been attributed to their perceived reach and impact in society and their proven track record. Another similarity that exists in both studies is that respondents were more aware of CSOs that demonstrated direct impact through the provision of critical services. They were hesitant to share their views on lesser-known CSOs when asked to gauge their effectiveness in society. This indicates the necessity of strategic public relations and communications among most CSOs. There was consensus among respondents in 2020 on the role of CSOs as valuable in society to champion issues that may not be a priority for the government.

Concerning CSO structure and management, there is a slight departure from the 2017 findings that indicate a growing awareness of Civil Society. The CSO Perception Report 2017 found that a respondent believed CSOs to have disorganized management, unclear rules & regulations and a lack of clarity towards their purpose. Among the 2020 respondents, almost all were aware and confident that CSOs operate as per the CSO Rules & Regulations 2017, had clear organizational structures and submitted annual reports after being annually audited. The concerns of financial corruption were thought to be low due to annual auditing. However, respondents in 2020 raised concerns about the transparency of recruitment and selection of staff and Executive Directors. Due to the rising number of CSOs in a relatively short span of time, there were also concerns on the legitimacy of CSO formation.

There is also a departure in the responses between 2017 and 2020 towards the engagement of CSOs in policy-making decisions. In 2017, respondents were concerned that CSOs would only raise issues pertinent to their line of work that may not be relevant to the public. In contrast the respondents of this study were concerned with the weaker role of CSOs in this area. Despite their increased engagement with the government and the value they could bring in policy framing, only a few CSOs seem to have the capacity and influence to express their views on emerging social issues and advocate for legislative reviews, while the majority lacked understanding of the policy framing process.

Similar to the CSO Perception Report 2017, the findings of this report also suggest that the current modus operandi of the government-CSO relationship could hamper the watchdog role CSOs need to play. Limited sources of funding and the lack of capacity of CSOs in research and policy advocacy to generate evidence-based material are highlighted as barriers for Civil Society to fulfill its larger roles. However, some findings were a departure from the CSO Perception Report 2017 with most respondents in 2020 stating the importance of CSOs to embrace this role to create greater accountability.

The new findings in 2020 point towards more awareness of Civil Society's role in the Bhutanese society. Their dedication, hard work and advocacy as well as the impact of donor-funded Projects, such as the EU Support to Civil Society in Bhutan Project, were attributed to this change in perception. However, there were repeated concerns as to the concentration of CSOs in Thimphu that might hinder widespread awareness across the country.

### **4.1.3 Key Informant Interviews**

The respondents for the key informant interviews included members of the CSO community. To ensure comprehensive collection of information, the study design focused on interviewing CSOs across key thematic areas, number of years in operation, and size of their establishment to ensure inclusivity of a diverse range of CSOs. This design enabled the study to capture the views of not just the well-oiled CSOs but also that of fledging and smaller CSOs. The interviews also specifically included founders and Executive Directors of CSOs.

#### **4.1.3.1 Current State of CSOs**

Most of the respondents were of the view that the current state of CSOs has improved significantly. Despite the challenges of attracting highly skilled individuals due to fund constraints, they have been able to capitalize on their budget in recruiting talent that can multitask. According to them, their staff are now more professional, able to execute their responsibilities well, and competent in networking and fundraising. However, the attrition rate in CSOs is substantially high with employees perceived to be using the opportunity as a steppingstone in their career.

Those who remain are primarily trained on the job and through training provided by donor agencies aimed at building operational capacities. Respondents believed that adequate training opportunities are offered by donor agencies and through projects such as the EU-SCSB Project. Despite this, some CSO respondents expressed their inability to spare their limited staff to fully avail such training opportunities as they lead to disruption of their programmatic activities. Though the training is adequate, they looked forward to more specific skills training that address individual CSO's needs.

Some respondents were of the view that despite the growth in numbers, CSOs are still weak in organizational and fundraising capacities. They added that the majority of CSOs currently operate from rented apartments except for a few established and larger CSOs that possess fixed assets. Additionally, their ICT needs are only adequately met in terms of equipment in the offices, along with not having a designated ICT personnel.

#### **4.1.3.2 Effectiveness and Performance of CSO**

Despite fund and human resource constraints, most respondents stated that CSOs have performed efficiently by employing strategies focused on doubling the impact of their programmes. CSOs' successes were also attributed to their outreach and inclusiveness of different sections of society as well as their agenda in education, health, poverty alleviation, environment, and political life. Respondents agreed that Civil Society work has amounted to a positive impact on society and most CSOs have performed well in their area of focus.

Despite a few concerns raised on the large number of CSOs (53) operating in a small nation like Bhutan and their concentration in the capital, largely respondents were confident that this would benefit beneficiaries given the limitations of an individual CSO to reach out to an entire vulnerable target group. Respondents were of the view that although there were overlapping mandates and activities among some CSOs, their targets groups/clients were different. All the CSOs in the socio-economic empowerment arena felt they have had the opportunity to serve and improve the livelihood of many. Similarly, CSOs focused on "thought creation" and knowledge generation also stated that they have made inroads within their area of influence.

In terms of effectiveness, most respondents attributed their increased efficiency to "multi-tasking to optimize limited resources". All the respondents acknowledged the support of the EU Project that allowed them to conduct "knowledge and experience" sharing programmes, workshops and trainings, and in the process empowered their beneficiaries, which for most CSOs is the ultimate goal. They drew a positive correlation between the support from the EU Project and the increase in delivery and reach of CSO programmes since the Project started in 2014.

*What I feel is with EU Project's contribution, the CSOs now have come up with more activities... they equally take into consideration both the registered CSOs as well as informal CSOs. This is good because they can reach out to many more sections of society.*

On the effectiveness to influence government policies, some CSO respondents were of the view that they were able to successfully lobby and advocate their views partially through collaboration with international development and government partners. Most stated that they have contributed to policy decisions through various consultation platforms. Due to their first-hand knowledge and the grassroots experiences a few CSOs shared their involvement and contributions toward the 21st Century Economic Roadmap, revisions and amendment of the Information, Communications and Media (ICM) Act 2018, LGBTQ issues, National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2019, National Sanitation & Hygiene Policy 2017, Rules & Regulations for Entrepreneurs, and so on.

#### **4.1.3.3 Perceived Value of CSOs**

Most respondents believed that they have been able to create a positive impact in the lives of people in need and made continued efforts to complement and supplement government initiatives by aligning their programmes with national priorities. There is a growing awareness on CSOs' role which has, subsequently, increased their overall legitimacy and influence. Particularly "small CSOs such as Bhutan Toilet Organization, Bhutan Kidney Foundation and Clean Bhutan have done very well". All the respondents were of the view that the public could now distinguish CSOs as a separate entity from the government and private sector and recognize them as "social entities" unlike the past perception of them as "business entities".

They also attributed this increased awareness to their ability to capitalize on social media and the art of storytelling to share success stories of beneficiaries. They underscored the value of such stories as an integral part of their fundraising strategy, in approaching different agencies, corporations and private individuals for collaboration and support. They also felt that the active participation of CSOs in panel discussions on national TV and radio, has also made a positive impact on society. They credited, to a certain extent, the success of some CSOs to their leadership for garnering public support and recognition, though this alone could not be the attributing factor. Due to the nature of their work that intersects all levels of society, most respondents were of the view that there is a better understanding and increased recognition of CSOs among the public as a result of beneficiaries who played key roles in demonstrating and promoting the impact of CSOs amongst communities, and subsequently contributed to increased trust and acceptance of Civil Society.

All the respondents were also of the view that the EU Project contributed significantly to the implementation of their programmes and, for some CSOs, facilitated travel across the country which enabled them to meet beneficiaries from different sections of society. The

support from development partners was also considered instrumental in validating CSOs and their roles as much as it raised CSO's organizational profile. According to a statement of the respondent:

*The association of an international development partner adds real value, authenticity, reliability, and trust for CSOs.*

With regards to the government's perception of CSOs, a few respondents were of the view that more awareness was required particularly among parliamentarians and bureaucrats with limited or no interaction or engagement with CSOs.

Some of the respondents also recognized the positive change in the government's perception of CSOs as development partners to collaborate with, towards local and national goals. A few of CSOs have worked on successful programmes in partnership with the government, thereby proving their capabilities. They also credited the CCC for its facilitation role in bridging the gap with government organizations. Further, they reiterated the importance of the CSO Authority, and emphasized the larger roles it can play in effectively supporting "CSO growth" in the country.

#### **4.1.3.4 Sustainability among CSOs**

In the key informant interviews, most CSOs reported that funding has been an enduring challenge disrupting their programme delivery and advocacy activities. The inability to hire skilled professionals, expand their programme activities to other regions, produce communication materials and conduct advocacy programs were some of the ramifications of fund shortage.

As with the CSO Perception Report 2017, the participants reported the strong dependency of most CSOs on donor assistance. Lack of proper strategies for fund generation and fundraising for most CSOs has deterred them from achieving their full potential, and the reliance on donor assistance could disrupt consistency in the implementation of their activities, particularly since these funds are time-bound. Some respondents believed that there is little avenue for fundraising in the country as most Bhutanese tend to support religious causes rather than social or development causes. Some CSOs sourced funding from abroad through larger foundations that support their work in Bhutan, while others have found ways to tap into programme-tied offshoots of the government. Though CSOs can periodically roll-out their activities through such project-tied funds, they remain strictly for activities and do not permit office operational expenses. For smaller CSOs, this can be a big bottleneck as some of them do not have the basic funds for office operations, as reported by a respondent of a new CSO.

Some of the respondents were also of the opinion that despite the reliance on donor assistance, CSOs have become proactive in sourcing funds prior to COVID-19. These CSOs continuously explored new avenues for raising funds by writing proposals and connecting with various agencies to plan programmes for grant support. Some CSOs were also able to generate funds through an increased membership base as well as domestic donations.

As per findings of the CSO Mapping Report 2019, the sustainability of Civil Society was dire even prior to the pandemic with 68% of CSOs reported as unable to sustain without external funding support. The concern is only growing among CSO participants with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-2023 scenario of Bhutan graduating from the Least Developed Countries (LDC) category and donors re-appropriating funds towards more needy countries. They expressed concerns over the expected shrinking of funds due to the economic slump caused by the pandemic and its effect on CSOs in Bhutan.

Currently, there is continued support from international development partners in the country that have been extending project-related assistance towards strengthening institutional and programme capacities. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, these international agencies have bolstered their support for CSOs through several approaches, for instance, the UNDP Covid-19 Response Fund that targeted increasing resilience of women and promoting well-being and livelihood of young people in the face of COVID-19.

Since donor assistance and fund support are key to the success of CSOs, they largely attributed their ability to carry out their activities and increase efficiency, to the EU-SCSB Project implemented by HELVETAS Bhutan.

Some of the respondents expressed a need to review the CSO Act by the current government as the Act is restrictive in its scope. A few respondents stated that there is ambiguity in the CSO Act whereby it does not explicitly prohibit income generation by CSOs for their growth, while opposing views are that CSOs should not be allowed to engage in profit-driven endeavors.

In the aftermath of COVID-19 that will exacerbate socio-economic conditions around the world, respondents expected Bhutanese CSOs to face a shortage of funds as most are reliant on external funding. Majority were of the view that external socio-economic conditions outside of Bhutan would have greater impact than variances in internal/domestic sources of funding.

Another respondent believed that Bhutan's economic stability due to efficient leadership and strong governance structures, would mitigate the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and the approaching graduation and subsequent reduced external funding.

However majority of respondents expressed concerns for CSO financial sustainability following the Bhutan's graduation to a middle-income country in 2023.

#### 4.1.3.5 Communication & Collaboration among CSOs

In terms of collaboration and communication among CSOs, opinions were divided among respondents. One group of respondents believed that the interaction among CSOs has improved and that these interactions are consistent; with regular communication through email and social media for CSO heads as well as the bi-annual meetings that enable inter-CSO communication and networking.

Respondents also mentioned that collaboration among CSOs is increasing with a diverse range of CSOs collaborating on projects. This is more prevalent among CSOs that share similar thematic areas of focus and mutual concerns, such as collaborations between Lhaksam (BNP+) and informal CSOs and support groups such as LGBTQ Bhutan and Red Purse.

Most respondents in this group also referred to the “face mask production” project in response to COVID-19 challenges, where CSOs collaborated to meet the face mask shortage in the country by pooling resources and employing more than 200 women<sup>6</sup> in face mask production. The CSOs that came together for this project were Tarayana Foundation, SABAH Bhutan, BNEW, GNHCB, BCMD, etc. Similarly, the Loden-UNDP COVID-19 Response Fund also brought together CSOs like YDF and RENEW to provide training services for people displaced by the pandemic –particularly young adults who returned from the Middle East (YDF) and victims of domestic violence (RENEW).

Another group of respondents were of the view that meaningful interaction and coordination in the CSO community could be improved if individual CSOs overcome their differences - in mandates, size and challenges - and recognize the larger benefits of collaborating and presenting a united front. This included expectations of larger well-established CSOs providing degree of guidance and support for smaller entities. However, in the current scenario, respondents indicated that cooperation between CSOs was guided by personal relations rather than a spirit of collaboration.

However, both groups believed that the establishment of the CCC has complemented the role of the CSO Authority to bring the CSOs together and initiatives such as the CSO Retreat has improved communication and coordination among CSOs. The CSO Retreat is conducted annually with fund support from the EU-SCSB Project and aimed at increasing collaboration and coordination among CSOs in Bhutan.

A few respondents thought that CSOs were partly responsible for the perceived lack of community spirit and solidarity. Responses indicated that the onus lies with CSOs to support, encourage and strengthen relations within the CSO fraternity and with CSO partners.

<sup>6</sup>Business Bhutan, July 15 2020 “CSOs employ more than 200 women to produce facemasks.”

#### 4.1.3.6 Relations with the Government

All CSO respondents mentioned that their relationship with the government has improved considerably with increased frequency of engagement. Most CSOs expressed that their visibility and reach in communities through their interventions are the primary factors leading to increased legitimacy. The international development partners in the country were also credited as being a catalyst for improved relations between the two as they ensured the participation of CSOs as key stakeholders in their programmes alongside government involvement.

A few respondents indicated that relations with the government has improved significantly, however with no defined space to operate in, the interactions continue to be sporadic. A few respondents said that despite a few larger CSOs' strong relationship with the government, there is still a need for policy and procedures on how "CSOs can engage with the government." Respondents further added that most CSOs have struggled to identify a practical framework for collaboration.

In terms of the *quality* of the relationship with government, almost all respondents expressed that CSOs were viewed as "as secondary development partners". Despite this, some CSO respondents expressed appreciation - acknowledging the government's inclusivity, further underscoring that the impetus to "prove our worth as partners" lies with CSOs. The same respondents were of the view that CSOs can no longer expect the same degree of support due to their large numbers and emphasized the need to strengthen their position with the government.

As for the *nature* of the relationship between the government and CSOs, respondents likened it to that of a "big brother and small brother" with complexities due to the overlap of program activities "in the areas of health, poverty, women empowerment, etc.," and the risk of appearing as though "CSOs are competing with the government". A respondent also stated that CSOs have been very effective in raising funds for developmental activities in Bhutan through their mandates, yet these efforts have never been acknowledged in any of the reports. According to the CSO Mapping Report 2019, a total sum of Nu. 3.31 billion has been sourced and spent in the country by the CSO sector over the last 19 years. A few others expressed that the nature of the relationship could improve if the efforts of CSOs are recognized as complementing and supplementing government efforts towards the same end goal.

In terms of *support* from the government, all respondents agreed that there is an appreciation of CSO efforts and that "moral support" is extended to CSOs but views were divided as to the kind of "concrete" support received by CSOs. A few said that there is financial support from the government while some held that there was not.



While relations between government and CSOs has improved over the years, participants expressed a need the nurture more sustained engagements. A few of them mentioned and appreciated the hosting of the first CSO symposium by the CSO Authority in 2019, demonstrating the government’s support towards CSOs, as well as providing a platform for sharing the status, performance, opportunities and challenges of CSOs and their interventions in the community. Due to the importance of such platforms, respondents felt that such national-level platforms need to be conducted on an annual basis by the CSO Authority to be more effective and sustainable.

#### 4.1.3.7 Relation with CSO Authority

The CSO Authority was established in 2009 to promote the “establishment and growth of CSOs to strengthen Civil Society, promote social welfare and improve the conditions and quality of life in Bhutan”.<sup>7</sup> Most CSO respondents expressed that when it comes to achieving its defined goals, CSO Authority is highly focused on regulations and that greater efforts are required towards creating an enabling environment to promote CSOs in the country.

According to respondents, CSOs are required to submit their Annual Report and a three-year strategy for the annual renewal of CSO licenses. Respondents perceived such regulations i.e., renewing their license annually, could be extended considering the requirement to submit a three-year strategy.

Respondents saw substantial opportunity for improvement in CSOA’s role of fostering cooperation and collaboration among CSOs and facilitating their engagement with the government. The authority could also effectively redress and strengthen relations between CSOs and CSOA. Additionally, respondents attributed the CCC for the gradual improvement in relations and bridging the gap between CSOs and the CSOA.

When asked about the *registration process*, responses varied among the participants. Some felt that the process was straight-forward and took less time while others felt that the registration process lacked clarity and was a “lengthy process” taking “anywhere between five months to a year.” Though the registration itself did not entail any cost, the process was “time-consuming” and expensive due to the “legal consultancy fees” involved in fulfilling the submission requirements.

Despite the reported challenges, a few respondents believed that there is a need to review the status of the CSOA as “a fully autonomous organization” and “make the positions attractive”. Respondents also stated that the CSOA only has “limited HR capacity” which affects the fulfillment of their mandate. If the role is strengthened with increased autonomy, respondents were optimistic that CSOA could become “an organization that...bridges the gaps, represents CSOs, understands issues and challenges [and] supports us.” A respondent was of the view that CSOA could be proactive in seeking support from international development partners

<sup>7</sup><https://www.csoa.org.bt/public/w/csoaauthority>

for the CSO community, such as the “continuation of the EU project” or facilitate meetings on the side-lines of important high-level forums with internal representatives that could lead to garnering donor support. Some respondents also commented that the first successful CSO Symposium by the CSOA should become a flagship program for the organization.

#### **4.1.3.8 Freedom for CSOs**

While gauging CSOs’ level of engagement in advocating and critiquing the government, the views were neutral. Some respondents were of the view that the advocacy efforts by CSOs were “medium to low” and that their advocacy approach with the government has been “non-confrontational, taken through dialogues, discussion and deliberations” that involved all stakeholders assuming a “non-partisan approach” to avoid political associations. A single respondent held that the word “advocacy” itself was “sensitive as these initiatives are often interpreted negatively” and therefore the use of such terms are limited in their communications. According to a respondent, the role of a CSO is multiple for which there should be due appreciation:

*Elsewhere in the world, you have CSOs that focus only on advocacy. When we go for regional meetings or attend global platforms, most are quite surprised that we are doing a host of things. In Bhutan... [CSOs] are doing the work on the ground at the constituency level, in the rural pockets, in whatever space they have selected as their mandate. They look at the CSOs of Bhutan that are doing all of that and advocacy work, and that CSOs should be better appreciated...*

On whether there is freedom to criticize the government, some respondents were of the view that “Bhutanese CSOs do not take an activist role as in other countries due to our inherent culture”, and that there is “no need for criticism” because it would be counterproductive and instead believed that the core issues should be addressed and awareness raised through social media.

A few respondents agreed that criticism has begun though still in early stages. Others were of the view that CSOs would have to take a stronger stand in the future. For CSOs to fully embrace their role to provide constructive criticism, the respondents commented that ultimately relations with all the concerned stakeholders would need to improve.

#### **4.1.3.9 Exploring new CSO opportunities**

Most respondents thought that though there were enough CSOs in the country, the need of the people vis-a-vis the gaps in services would determine the formation of new CSOs. Some expressed concerns as to whether a few CSOs were “started with the same good intent”. Others believed that all CSO programs currently being undertaken in the country are towards fulfilling gaps they have seen and experienced. A few respondents did express that CSOs with programmes that are a duplication of other existing CSOs should not be encouraged.

They also felt that CSOs should not be permitted to run like a “family venture” and that there should be efforts towards monitoring whether income generating activities are not purely profit-oriented.

The suggestions on the scope for new CSOs were varied and numerous, though there may be overlaps with existing CSOs mandates. A respondent suggested that there was scope for a CSO in consumer protection rights as the current lack of consumer protection has led to inflated and unmonitored produce rates throughout the country. Another suggestion was for CSOs focused on stray dog population management, while another respondent thought there was a need for a CSO that focused solely on capacity development.

Another suggestion was for CSOs that catered to simplifying the legal and justice system concerning human rights, privacy issues, procedures, policy and laws, etc., and benefit not only the public but most CSOs too. A few others suggested CSOs in climate justice and resource management as there would be a future need for Bhutan. Scope for CSOs were also identified in health and catering to patients of various diseases, as well as on spirituality.

A suggestion from a respondent underscored the need for CSOs to focus on a specific area for efficiency rather than a broad area of work. Irrespective of the area, some respondents stated that CSOs should be “focused on the cause” for them to carve out a place in society.

#### **4.1.3.10 Conclusion**

In conclusion, there is much more confidence among the CSO respondents with the current state of CSOs having improved manifold and organizational set-ups improving for CSOs. They attribute this to the continued hard work, persistence, and creativity in maximizing results, partly fueled by the need to raise visibility and recognition of Civil Society. For the growth and development of CSOs, findings attributed donor support for the increased program delivery and in-house capacity building. Persistent challenges mostly included attracting skilled staff as well as a high rate of attrition among staff mainly due to fund constraints.

There was not much change in opinion between 2017 and 2020 on the value and effectiveness of CSOs. Both studies were positive that they are better and effective in reaching out to the communities due to their specific focus, and that they understand the needs of the communities very well and can initiate corresponding interventions while complementing and supplementing the services provided by the government. Most respondents in 2020 felt that the growing number of CSOs could indicate that more beneficiaries are being identified and catered to, and that they are creating positive impact in the lives of people.

Funding and sustainability have not seen much change between 2017 and 2020 with both studies indicating funding as an enduring challenge that disrupts their delivery. The inability

to hire skilled professionals, extend their program activities to other regions, and conduct and produce advocacy and communication materials were some of the ramifications of fund shortage. The inability to raise domestic funding and the dwindling external resources due to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the imminent LDC graduation in 2023 were huge concerns for respondents in 2020. There are similar suggestions towards the creation of an endowment fund from the government, though respondents in 2020 believed that funding should be tied to CSOs that have demonstrated success and impact. Another setback reported in the CSO Perception Report 2017 was the inability to improve popular participation, which was also echoed by respondents in 2020. However, the reasons differ with respondents in 2017 alluding to the incomplete involvement of people since CSOs were more of an emerging and unfamiliar concept. In 2020, the view was that the domestic population is not likely to donate to causes that do not demonstrate a direct impact or reflect religious endeavors.

All CSO respondents believed that their relationship with the government has improved considerably with increased frequency of engagement. Most CSOs credited their increased visibility and reach in communities as reflective of their persistence which in turn has been a key factor providing legitimacy to CSOs and their work. The international development partners in the country were also in part credited as being a catalyst for improved relations between the two with development partners ensuring the participation of CSOs as key stakeholders in their programmes alongside government involvement.

There were both similarities and differences between the 2017 and 2020 responses in terms of relations with and support from the government. In 2017, the respondents stated that support was received in forms that covered technical, mentoring, consultations, and financial aspects as well as CSO friendly policies. In 2020, most respondents felt that support extended was limited and that they were perceived as secondary development partners. Like the respondents from 2017 who found government bureaucratic procedures a serious challenge, the respondents in 2020 also highlighted the lack of a CSO policy to standardize engagement procedures, the absence of which leads to ambiguity in interacting with the government. This is particularly important in the current scenario when involvement with the government has increased. Further, respondents in 2020 indicated that relations between the CSOA and CSOs could be improved.

A finding that has remained consistent is the limited communication and collaboration among CSOs. In 2017, the findings pointed towards a complete lack of interaction, apart from quarterly meetings. In 2020, while some respondents were of the view that there was no change, others saw an improvement in collaboration and regular interaction among CSOs, virtually as well as through various channels of communication such as the CCC, the bi-annual meetings and the annual CSO retreat to facilitate networking. CSOs with similar focus areas were known to come together more often than CSOs with different mandates.

## 4.2 Analysis

Based on the findings of the qualitative interviews conducted with representatives of the general population, expert/stakeholder group (comprising of government officials), and Key Informant Interviews (with members of the CSO fraternity), the following table summarizes the perceived SWOT analysis of CSOs:

<p><b>STRENGTH</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good grasp of local conditions &amp; issues</li> <li>• Good presence &amp; collaboration with communities</li> <li>• Direct contact with beneficiaries</li> <li>• Diverse area of work</li> <li>• Commitment of CSO workers</li> <li>• Legal status of CSOs</li> <li>• Voluntary work</li> <li>• Complement and supplement government efforts</li> <li>• Dedication to work despite challenges</li> </ul>	<p><b>WEAKNESS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weak operational set-up &amp; limited experience</li> <li>• Limited human resources</li> <li>• Lack of coordination among CSOs</li> <li>• High dependency on external funding</li> <li>• Limited Funds</li> <li>• Lack of identity for most CSOs (due to broad mandates and lack of focus)</li> <li>• Financial Instability</li> <li>• Lack of clarity in mission and objectives</li> <li>• Lack of leadership for some CSOs</li> <li>• Lack of proper succession and sustainability plans</li> <li>• Weak or limited monitoring capacity</li> <li>• Weak research and advocacy capacity</li> </ul>
<p><b>THREATS/CHALLENGES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial support from Government</li> <li>• Changes in international development landscape and donor funds</li> <li>• Limited recognition of the role of CSO in nation-building by stakeholders</li> <li>• Restrictive legal framework for CSOs</li> <li>• Absence of policy to foster CSO growth</li> <li>• Inconducive government Procurement Policy</li> <li>• Lack of platforms for CSO-government dialogue</li> </ul>	<p><b>OPPORTUNITIES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major contributor to national goals</li> <li>• Synergies through collaboration between CSOs and with the government</li> <li>• Impactful change through policy advocacy</li> <li>• Economic contribution through fundraising</li> <li>• Represent the marginalized and champion social causes</li> <li>• Enhance national accountability and transparency through periodic reviews</li> <li>• Bridging the gap between government and communities</li> </ul>

The following sections delve further into a few of the primary factors affecting CSOs in Bhutan:

### 4.2.1 Limited Capacity of CSOs

Despite the improved organizational and management capacity of CSOs, the inability to attract highly qualified professionals due to uncompetitive remuneration is a persistent problem across CSOs irrespective of their size. Most of them continue to experience a high rate of attrition due to

lower salaries and benefits compared to other sectors despite the substantial workload. Another shortfall due to fund constraints is the inability to expand their programs.

To create more awareness among the public and government, CSOs may be required to explore expansion of their existing programs as well as strategize for enhanced visibility. The inability to scale-up or sustain their programmes could hamper their position in society which in turn could affect the organizational capacities of CSOs in the long run.

Despite their improved legitimacy and credibility, most CSOs are constrained by limited capacity in research which again is further exacerbated by limited human capital and fund shortages. CSOs have only been in existence in Bhutan from the early 2000s and are still nascent compared to other institutions. This is further compounded by weak institutional memory due to the high rate of attrition, which in turn affects various aspect of their function, particularly their ability to engage with the government in policy processes. Currently, CSOs have limited experience and knowledge in the policy framing process and this lack of research capacity could be attributed to the lack of fund allocation for research initiatives in the context of resource constraints and other programmes priorities. It was observed that CSOs involved in the promotion of thought creation, policy discourse, and knowledge generation fare better in their engagements with the government, largely due to their ability to base their premises on well-researched initiatives.

It should be noted that despite these various challenges, the diversity of CSOs that have emerged have been able to address gaps in various areas of Bhutanese society. The acknowledgment of their work by the public further validates their contributions and justifies the necessity to foster further effectiveness among CSOs.

#### **4.2.2 Sustainability of CSOs**

Funding has been an enduring challenge that continues to disrupt Bhutanese CSOs' performance and contribution to society. Almost every CSO is grappling with fund constraints that restrict them from increasing their capacities to expand and deliver. Most CSOs do not have the capacity to generate funds with membership fees and small domestic fund drives making collections that are too marginal to make any significant impact. Instead, there is a strong dependency on donor assistance which funds almost all CSO programmes. Despite a reliance on external funding, there is no proper strategy for fund generation and fundraising.

The domestic source for funding is limited with the public mostly disinclined to donate to CSO causes. However, CSOs with a charitable mandate such as the Bhutan Cancer Society or Bhutan Kidney Society, etc., have proven to be more successful in raising local funds as they can demonstrate the direct impact of those funds on their beneficiaries. Most CSOs have been successful in raising funds, generally by securing grant proposals. Towards this, international development partners have made significant contributions through program-tied assistance. The CSOs have also sourced funding from the government by tapping into program-tied offshoots to fund their activities.

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt across the world with a heavy toll on economies everywhere. It will not be long before Bhutanese CSOs face the impact when external funds dwindle. Their sustainability will be further tested when Bhutan graduates into a middle-income country following which donor attention and assistance will shift to other needy LDC countries.

### **4.2.3 Environment for CSOs**

The environment within which CSOs operate in Bhutan has improved considerably with greater understanding of the roles of CSOs by the public, government, and international development partners. The role of the international development partners for fast-tracking CSO validity with the government by ensuring CSO involvement as key stakeholders in program activities cannot be discounted. The association of these development partners with CSOs have also raised the profile of CSOs in the country as being relevant and credible.

The relationship of CSOs with the government has improved with increased frequency of engagements. Though these engagements have incrementally improved the environment within which CSOs operate, there is still room for progress in advancing the nature and quality of this relationship. The lack of a policy or procedure on how CSOs and the government engage with each other may have been a deterrent to that development, leading to ambiguity. This lack of clarity could be promoting views amongst CSOs that they are only considered secondary development partners. The relationship between CSO Authority and CSOs could also be further strengthened. CSOA was created to promote and strengthen CSOs, but their role currently, was perceived to be more regulatory in nature.

Public perception of CSOs is also instrumental in creating a conducive environment for Civil Society to operate and thrive in. The increased recognition among the public, through beneficiaries and advocacy programmes, has managed to create a positive image of CSOs. This recognition is more evident for CSOs that can demonstrate tangible and direct impacts of their programmes in uplifting the lives of the people. It is less so for CSOs operating in the knowledge/thought generation field as their impacts are difficult to either demonstrate or seem intangible in the short-term. However, these CSOs are found to have made inroads within their area of influence, such as the promotion of media literacy, environment conservation, etc.

CSO recognition may not have extended throughout the country since they are mostly based in Thimphu which could have an adverse impact on their visibility and promotion in other parts of the country. Apart from a few CSOs, many do not have a presence in other districts. To foster an equal partnership with the government, it may be vital for CSOs to exhibit commitment through the expansion and scaling-up of their programs into wider rural communities.

#### 4.2.4 Cooperation and Collaboration among CSOs

Unlike in the past, cooperation and collaboration among CSOs have increased substantially. Communication channels among CSOs include both informal and formal routes such as through instant messaging platforms where group chats have been created for quicker exchange of ideas or through official emails and biannual meetings. The level of interaction is more consistent among CSOs that share similar thematic areas of focus. Overlapping mandates have enabled some CSOs to also collaborate on programme activities. The creation of the CCC and the CSO retreats have brought about further interactions and coordination among CSOs on a formal level.

More recently, due to the COVID-19, CSOs were able to demonstrate a sense of community by collaborating on the production of face masks as a direct response to the pandemic. Several CSOs from different backgrounds were able to pool resources and expertise to meet face mask shortages in the country. The international development partners' role in increasing collaboration cannot be overlooked as they have been influential in bringing together CSOs of different backgrounds.

Despite these improvements, some gaps require attention. For community spirit to thrive, the onus, in the end, lies with CSOs to nurture sustained coordination and collaboration. Currently, findings indicated a lack of proactiveness and participation in interactions unless it is tied to certain programmes. The CCC, established to foster increased interaction and communication among CSOs, acts as the converging point of contact for all CSOs and provide certain direction in the interests of the larger CSO fraternity. Proactiveness by CSOs in maintaining communication with the CCC is essential for nurturing cooperation among CSOs and creating a space where CSOs of all shapes and sizes can interact informally and organically to exchange insights and ideas.



## CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

### Build Capacity for CSOs

For CSOs to demonstrate their efficiency and grow, there are a few areas within CSOs that require attention. Their internal capacity requires bolstering to enable CSOs to fully embrace their role in society.

1. An area of focus could be enhancing CSOs' research capacity to increase experience and knowledge in policy framing processes. Lack of research capacity underscores the need for specific trainings in conducting studies, financial management, fundraising, strategic branding and negotiation, among others, to reinforce a well-rounded approach to research.
2. The government could also play a critical role by extending technical support along with programme support for CSOs. This could be explored as a form of knowledge transfer as most CSOs are understaffed in technical capacity in contrast to government agencies that have highly trained professionals.
3. The government could institute capacity building mechanisms for CSOs such as, incorporating it as part of their Annual Performance Agreement (APA) targets. This would go a long way in reaffirming government support as well as ensuring CSO performance.

### Address Long-Term Sustainability of CSOs

There is an urgent need to take a hard look at sustainability of CSOs in the country. Without a proper strategy on how best funds can be raised and assured, the future for CSOs looks bleak as reported in the CSO Mapping Report 2019. The heavy reliance on external funding coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic fueled economic slumps presents a precarious future unless addressed. Further, the 2023 LDC graduation for Bhutan is expected to significantly change the international development landscape in the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity for CSOs and the government to collaborate on a combined strategy for sustainability. If Bhutan graduates into a middle-income country, the reduction in donor assistance would also impact the government's ability to deliver services to its people. This necessitates exploring how best CSOs could be positioned to attract donations and assistance to continue and collaborate on overlapping local and national development mandates. For the immediate future, suggestions towards the creation of an endowment fund could be explored to keep the CSOs afloat. Criteria for eligibility of the endowment fund could be explored based on the CSOs' annual performance, programme reach, etc.

## Improve the Enabling Environment for CSOs

1. There is a need for a policy to enable a standard procedure for engagement between CSOs and the government. The policy framework could help cement the relationship and remove ambiguity associated with potential future engagement for both parties. Such a framework could also provide clarity for government officials at various levels since presently there is evidence of uncertainty in delineation of responsibilities when engaging with CSOs.
2. The government could also explore ways to strengthen the CSO Authority and its capacity. An expansion of CSOA's role is necessary to actively coordinate and facilitate CSO advocacy and improve the quality of relations between the government and CSOs. The need to strengthen CSOA's capacity vis-à-vis facilitating CSO growth and promotion is also necessary to fulfill its overall mandate.
3. For increased and balanced public awareness throughout the country, CSOs may need to rethink their operation strategies to include the rest of the country, either by setting up extension offices or expanding programmes to a wider audience.
4. For CSOs that operate in the "knowledge" space, it may be appropriate to explore combining their agenda with programmes that have more tangible benefits for increased visibility and engagement from the public.
5. Broader and diverse pathways for transformation could be explored by Civil Society as a sector to appeal to sections of society that are outside their purview. It may become necessary for CSOs to scale up their programmes into rural communities and conduct themselves as equal partners with the government in achieving combined targets.

## Increase Cooperation & Collaboration among CSO

1. To foster a sense of community, CSOs should explore ways to sustain the exemplary cooperation and collaboration exhibited by CSOs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. CSOs from different backgrounds could also explore various models of collaboration and develop joint proposals for grants to explore support from government and international development partners.
2. The CCC can also play an integral role in fulfilling its mandate by increasing cooperation and collaboration among the CSO actors. It could explore avenues for increasing visibility of CSOs in the country such as, by initiating a publication on annual performance of CSOs. The creation of a space for CSOs to convene and network could also be undertaken by the CCC where meaningful exchanges could foster stronger relations among CSOs and thereby lead to a unified and vibrant Civil Society in Bhutan.

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## ANNEXES

### Annex 1: Study Methodology

#### 1.1 Study design

This study was carried out using a Concurrent Triangulation Design of Mixed Method Research wherein both quantitative and qualitative data was collected concurrently in one phase, analyzed separately, and then the findings were synthesized to produce a final report. Quantitative data was collected via a structured questionnaire while the qualitative data was gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs), Key informant interviews (KIIs), and in-depth interviews (IDIs).

Mixed Method Research (MMR) – a way of combining both quantitative and qualitative data and information would empower a researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon under study while offsetting the weakness inherent to using each approach by itself. Another advantage of this method is that the concurrent triangulation helps in timely convergence, corroboration, and correspondence of results from both quantitative and qualitative methods.

A quantitative questionnaire was designed to describe and analyze the empirical contours of civil society from public perception using an approach by the name of “the Civil Society Diamond” (Heinrich, 2007).

A qualitative questionnaire was designed based on a Perception Study of CSOs in Bhutan (Penjor, 2017) to ensure certain comparability. FGDs comprised of representatives from government, international organizations, local government, and private sector (Gross National Happiness Commission, Agricultural Cooperatives, Ministry of Labor and Human Resource, National Commission for Women and Children, UNICEF, UNDP, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Department of Culture, Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry). For KIIs and IDIs, participants were invited from CSOA, Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD), Loden Foundation, Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs (BAOWE), Bhutan Kidney Foundation (BKF), and Clean Bhutan.

#### Gender-responsive

Both qualitative and quantitative researchers attempted to be gender-responsive considering the differences between men and women in all aspects of the research – from inception report to the final report. The LGBTQIA population of society were also taken into account.

## Inclusivity

This study included participants regardless of their age, sex, disability, ethnicity, socio-economic and political background.

## Participatory

The approach to data and information gathering in this study was largely participatory. The participants were provided with a favourable environment to express themselves freely and openly. The researchers, in no way, influenced their thoughts and opinions.

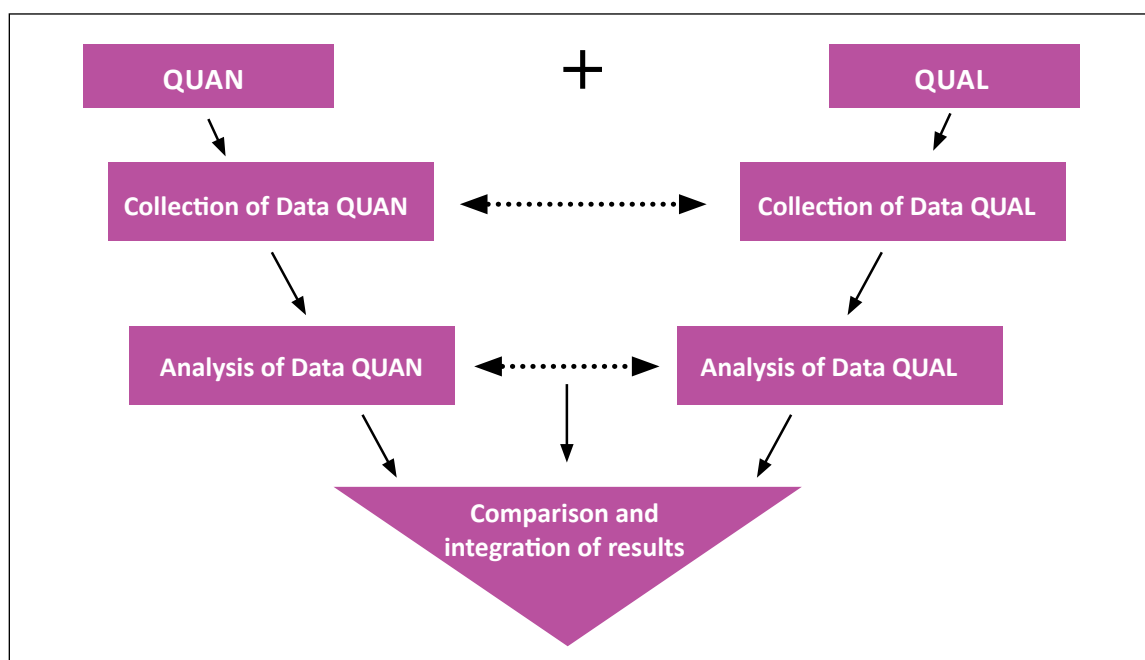


Figure 45: Concurrent strategy of triangulation

## 1.2 Target population and study sample

A quantitative questionnaire was administered to the sample individuals drawn from all sections of the Bhutanese society whereas a qualitative questionnaire was administered to the individuals selected in the last perception study (Penjor, 2017) or at least the participants having the same characteristics.

### 1.2.1 Sampling procedures

For the quantitative component, the sampling was designed to be representative at the national level with districts as sampling units and an individual citizen as a unit of analysis. A stratified multi-stage cluster sampling approach of probability sampling was adopted based on the Master Sampling Frame which was obtained from the National Statistics Bureau (NSB).

**Strata:** Stratified the whole country of 20 districts into 3 regions based on the number of households

and their geographic location (NSB's classification of districts into regions):

**Western Region:** Thimphu, Paro, Ha, Samtse, Chhukha, Punakha and Gasa.

**Central Region:** Wangduephodrang, Daga, Tsirang, Sarpang, Zhemgang, Trongsa and Bumthang.

**Eastern Region:** Lhuntse, Mongar, Pemagatsel, Samdrup Jongkhar, Trashigang, and Trashigang Yangtse.

**First stage:** Using Probability Proportion to Size and With Replacement (PPSWR), at least 3 districts from each of Western, Central, and Eastern strata were selected based on the number of households. *Larger districts had a bigger probability of being sampled.*

**Second stage:** From each of the districts selected in the first stage, an equal number of individuals were selected using Simple Random Sampling Without Replacement (SRSWOR). *Individuals from larger districts had a smaller probability of being sampled.*

**Overall:** Individuals in the population had the same probability of being sampled as the second stage compensates for the first stage.

Maintaining consistency with the perception study of 2017, for the qualitative component a purposive sampling technique was employed to invite participants for FGDs, KIIs, and IDIs.

### 1.2.2 Sampling precision and size

The sample size for the quantitative component was estimated assuming a 95% confidence level, 0.5 standard deviations, and a margin of error (confidence interval) of +/-5%.

Sample 'representativity': National

Since a stratified multi-stage cluster sampling method was employed, the sample size was estimated adjusting for design effect as under:

$$n = \text{deff} \frac{X^2 NP(1-P)}{ME^2 (N-1) + (X^2 P(1-P))}$$

= 576 (Total population of Bhutan in 2019 as per population projections 2017-2047 = 741,672)

Where:

n = sample size

X<sup>2</sup> = Chi-square for the specified confidence level at 1 degree of freedom

N = population size (projected population of Bhutan in 2019 is 741,672)

P = population proportion

ME = desired margin of error

Deff = design effect (1.5)

As for qualitative component, the sample size was the same as that of the 2017 Perception Study.

### 1.2.3 Sample allocation and distribution

As per the Master Sampling Frame developed based on the Population and Housing Census of Bhutan (PHCB) 2017, only 36% of Bhutanese lived in urban areas and the remaining 64% resided in rural areas. Accordingly, a total of 25 respondents were selected from each of the rural EA and a total of 15 from urban EA because of its relatively smaller size.

The estimated samples were proportionately distributed across respective districts. 50% of the population in western Bhutan resided in urban areas. In central and eastern Bhutan, the percentages of the population residing in urban areas were 22.0% and 24.0% respectively. The samples were then allocated and distributed according to these population percentages.

Table 18: Sample allocation and distribution (quantitative component)

Region	Urban/ Rural	Population (%)	No. of samples	No. of PSUs * no. of respondents	Adjusted no. of respondents	Samples per district
Western (Chukha, Thimphu, Punakha)	Urban	50	96	6*15	96	32
	Rural	50	96	4*25	96	32
Central (Wangdue-phodrang, Zhemgang, Bumthang)	Urban	22	42.24	3*15	42	14
	Rural	78	149.76	6*25	150	50
Eastern (S/Jongkhar, Tashigang, Mongar)	Urban	24	46.08	3*15	48	16
	Rural	76	145.92	6*25	78	26
Total:		300	576		510	170*3=510

Table 19: Sample allocation by control and treatment areas (quantitative component)

Dzongkhag	Gewog	Enumeration Area	Treatment	Control
Chukha	Bongo	Bongo	Inside	Outside
	Chang	Thimthrom		
Thimphu	Thimthrom	Oncology ward, JDWNRH, Thimphu		
		TTI Thimphu		
		Pelkyi Losel ECCD; Karma Norsoey ECCD; Rigpa Pre-schoolers ECCD; Hejo ECCD		
Punakha	Goenshari	Drachukha		
Wangduephodrang		CNR Lobesa		
Zhemgang	Ngangla	Sonamthang		
	Trong	Tingtibi		
	Trong	Trong		
Bumthang	Ura	Shingneer		
Samdrup Jongkhar	Dewathang	Menchari, Phajo Goenpa, Rikhay		

Samdrup Jongkhar	Orong	Pheluma		
Tashigang		TTI Rangjung		
Monger	Monger	Themangbi, Tongseng, Kilikhar, Phosorong, Jamcholing, Redaza, Wangling, Barpang		
		Mongar: Drepong, Kengkhar, Jurmey, Gongdue, Silambi		

Table 20: Sample allocation and distribution (qualitative component (Penjor, 2017))

Respondent type	Male	Female	Total
FDGs (5 FDGs)	18	12	30
KIIs (3 KIIs)	4	5	9
IDIs (6 IDIs)	2	4	6
	24	21	45

### 1.3 Data collection and management

Quantitative data and information were collected via mobile tablets using an open-source software called Open Data Kit (ODK) technology. This method was used because of its comparative advantages over the conventional paper-based data collection method, namely, ease of management, enhanced data quality, cost and time effectiveness, and the ease of collecting new data types like location, media, etc.

Qualitative interviews were recorded on voice recorders and then transcribed and analyzed.

### 1.4 Questionnaire development

Before finalizing questionnaires, a thorough review of a variety of existing sources (for example, documents, reports, data files, and other written artifacts, etc.) to collect independently verifiable data and information was carried out. To gain an informed perspective from valued experts, expert reviews were also sought. The questionnaires developed were pre-tested and necessary changes were made accordingly before its deployment in the field.

The following prior documents were reviewed:

- a. CSO Act 2007
- b. Cooperative Act of 2009
- c. CSO Rules and Regulations 2017
- d. Regulation of Cooperatives Rules and Regulations of Bhutan 2010.
- e. CSO Mapping Report 2019
- f. EU-funded CSO Grant Fund Facility - <http://csogrant.bt/>
- g. Grant recipient list (CSOs & CBOs)
- h. CSO Perception Report 2017 by BCMD & RIM
- i. Report for Services related to CSO-Policy in Bhutan



- j. Bhutanese context of civil society
- k. Civil Society Briefs – Bhutan

The Civil Society Diamond Tool (Nina Belyaeva, 2008) was used to comprehensively assess the understanding of the perception of the public, and changes over time, on the contributions of civil society to local and national development. An array of indicators were adapted (L. Proskuryakova, 2005) to measure the four different dimensions of Civil Society as per the Civil Society Diamond tool:

### ***Dimension 1: Structure***

- 1. The Extent of Citizen Participation in Civil Society
- 2. Depth of Citizen Participation in Civil Society
- 3. Diversity of Civil Society Participants
- 4. Level of Organization
- 5. Inter-Relations within Civil Society
- 6. Civil Society Resources

### ***Dimension 2: Environment***

- 1. Political Context
- 2. Basic Rights and Freedoms
- 3. Socio-economic
- 4. Socio-cultural Context
- 5. Legal Environment
- 6. State-civil Society Relations
- 7. Private Sector - Civil Society Relations

### ***Dimension 3: Values***

- 1. Democracy
- 2. Transparency
- 3. Tolerance
- 4. Gender Equity
- 5. Poverty Eradication
- 6. Environmental Sustainability

### ***Dimension 4: Impact***

- 1. Influencing Public Policy
- 2. Holding the State and Private Corporations Accountable
- 3. Responding to Social Interests
- 4. Empowering Citizens
- 5. Meeting Societal Needs

## 1.5 Limitations

- No baseline was carried out before the commissioning of the project.
- The perception study conducted in 2016/2017 was limited to FGD and KII only. Furthermore, it was conducted in 2016/2017 while the EU-SCSB Project was commissioned from 2014 – 2020.
- Inaccuracies of the survey responses as respondents were asked to recall events before 2014.

## Annexe 2: Qualitative Interview Participants

### 2.1 Key Informant Interview (KII) – CSO/CBO representatives

Sl. No.	CSO/CBO	No. of participant(s)
1	Tarayana Foundation	1
2	Bhutan Media Foundation	1
3	Draktsho	1
4	Phensem Parent's Group	1
5	BCMD	1
6	Bhutan Toilet Association	1
7	Bhutan Cancer Society	1
8	Loden Foundation	1
9	Lhaksam BNP+	1
10	Ability Bhutan Society	1
<b>Total:</b>		<b>10</b>

### 2.2 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) – Expert Groups

Sl. No.	CSO/CBO	No. of participant(s)
1	CSO Authority	5
2	Bhutan Chamber of Commerce & Industry	1
3	World Wildlife Fund	2
4	National Commission for Women & Children	1
5	Royal University of Bhutan	1
6	Ministry of Education	1
7	Ministry of Economic Affairs	1
8	Center for Local Governance & Research	1
<b>Total:</b>		<b>13</b>

### 2.3 In-Depth Interviews (IDI) – General Public

Sl. No.	CSO/CBO	Sex	No. of participant(s)
1	Illiterate housewife	Female	1
2	Lawyer	Male	1
3	Private Business Owner	Female	2
4	Private Firm Workers	Female	1
5	College Students	Female and male	2
6	Village Heads	Male	1
7	Educated Self-employed	Female, male, and male	3
8	Teachers	Male, male, and male	3
9	Public Servants	Male and female	2
<b>Total:</b>			<b>16</b>