

Developing the Interface between Civil Society and Media: Civil Society Reporting Grant Stories



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Background

This publication on ‘Civil Society Reporting Grant Stories’ is produced under Bhutan Media Foundation’s project titled ‘Developing the Interface between Civil Society and Media’. The main objective of the civil society reporting grant is to produce a critical number of well-researched stories on civil society for the first time in Bhutan.

Seven reporters who have attended one of or both the workshops titled ‘Understanding Civil Society: The Third Sector’, and ‘Understanding CBOs: The Grassroots Changemakers’ were awarded the civil society reporting grant.

A total of seven stories, including two video stories, were produced and published across the Bhutanese media. The grant stories covered significant roles of the CSOs and CBOs and their contributions to society, mostly focusing on women, youth, and vulnerable people.

The Civil Society Reporting Grant is supported by European Union, Helvetas Bhutan, and International IDEA.





Machinery house of Chuzagang Saving Group at Shawapong village, Sarpang

Lack of legal framework daunts community group to operate

Sangay Rabten, Reporter
Business Bhutan
27 August 2022

Legal landscapes at both the national and local levels are crucial to create an enabling environment for community groups. Having rules and regulations will acknowledge local organizations for specifying and ensuring a level playing field with different types of enterprise, who can support the groups. Lack of a specific legal framework or a weak legal framework for Community Based Organizations (CBOs) may impede their development in a given territory. Bhutan does not have any legal framework to govern CBOs. A CBO is an organisation operating at a local level to promote the wellbeing of the members of the community.

The legal framework would not only monitor cooperative legislation in the country, but also provide a constructive assessment and recommendations to improve the recognition and support given to cooperatives. For business to thrive, it needs to be underpinned by a strong legal framework with certain feasible parameters.

However, business law for local organization is one of those elements that are taken for granted until something goes wrong. Local business too contributes towards the economic growth and it is part of the fabric of a successful economy.

Rooted in Buddhist values such as the non-government organizations or volunteerism, the Bhutanese society is depended very much on helping each other. The traditional belief systems and community practices emphasize is placed on the principles of national self-reliance, community participation, and social cohesion.

Again, with development, Civil Society Organizations, cooperatives and CBOs have increased in Bhutan for different purpose. CBOs play vital role in community development and contributes towards achieving national goal of self-reliant and Sustainable Development Goals.

However, CBOs in Bhutan are discouraged to operate with no laws to govern themselves in accordance with the Act. With fear of possible legal complications in future, some CBOs had become defunct.

One case is Chuzagang Saving Group (SSG). It is a CBO under Chuzagang gewog, Sarpang. It is sort of local cooperative set up in 2004. This CBO focused on financial elements in the community, like lending and savings. The

sole objective of establishing this group was to improve the livelihood of community through scaling to commercial farming. It was operated from homes with no appropriate office.

During the resettlement in the southern foothills of Bhutan, starting a new life after migration was hard. People from different dzongkhags with different culture had to resettle together. The land were not green orchards and fields like today. The wilderness of area gave tough life with no proper roads and electricity. Gradually, the livelihood of people improved.

The local administration managed to facilitate the welfare of people. Agriculture extension officers for better farming trained the people of nine chiwogs of Chuzagang. People were encouraged to form agriculture cooperative to benefit villagers by the gewog and agriculture officials. Inspired and understanding the scope of the mutual cooperative, from the 50 villagers attended the training, 13 members came to form SSG initially. There were six male and five female members. The members deposited Nu 50 as monthly member fees for three months and later it raised to Nu 100 to broaden the scope. After few years, the monthly deposit ceiling was raised to Nu 100.

It was reviewed in 2009 and the members sought for registration from the concern agency to operate with legal rights. However, registration was not granted. After the setup, the group provided loans to the villagers with the highest ceiling of Nu 1,000 per an individual. The interest rate was at par with the Bhutan Development Bank Limited, (BDBL).

The chairperson of CSG, Yangzom said that the status of the CSG is in “indescribable stage.” She stated that the group could not continue its operation due to certification failure adding it also lacks educated human resource. “If there were strong and educated members, the group would have succeeded,” she said.

The chairperson pointed out that there are no proper records and no proper management system nor “the relevant agencies supported the group.” There were misunderstanding among the members and about Nu 0.6 million are defalcated according to the information from non-members. Few years back, the members shared about Nu 15,000 each and there is still controversy on sharing the remaining amount. Few people have borrowed the money from the group and still did not pay back.

In initial state of resettlement, the secretary of the group, Nima said that the loans had benefited the villagers. “There were no crops nor fruits grown at the time of new settlement. Loans from CSG benefited the members and others as well to buy stationeries and dresses, and pay school fees of school going children,” he added.

To benefit the community in formal way, the group approached the gewog office to obtain the licence. The group had Standard Operating Procedures

(SOPs). For the time being, CSG was instructed to operate with internal service rule until the legal permission is granted according to the secretary. “It never happened,” he added.

The former chairperson of the group, Ap Sangay said that upon members lacking literacy, the saving group did not get any appropriate support. He too pointed out that the group lacked coordination and members were discouraged to work.

Another group member Nima Dorji said that after change of chairperson, the monthly collections were discontinued. “The clients did not pay the loan even after the maturity date,” he said.

Later the group with the assistance from the ministry of agriculture and forests procured the rice and maize pounding machines. The members hired the operator and provided the service to the villagers at minimal rate. However, with the dwindling financial state, the group could not pay salary to the operators. The milling machines set up for agriculture improvement infrastructure are kept idle since the start of pandemic at machinery house-Shawapong village.

Meanwhile, the agriculture extension officer of Chuzagang gewog, Tashi Dawa said that gewog officials, particularly from the agriculture sector pushed and provided necessary help. He said that the group was asked to show records and allow auditing.

However, the agriculture extension officer pointed out that no one was found accountable and responsible. “The flaw in the management must had led to failure of functioning of the CSG,” he added.

Chuzagang Gup Karma Tshering said that the group is in the dilemma status. However, he said that being newly elected Local Governance (LG) leader, he does not have much understanding about the group and need to study further should there be, any possible help can be extended by the gewog administration.

Nimaling-Shawapong Tshogpa Nima Dorji said that the present LG leaders did not get any written or verbal complaint from any of the CSG members.

Some members from the group had filed case against the management on fund misuse in the gewog office. However, the gewog dismissed the case after finding inadmissible.

Bhutan do not have specific laws for CBO and it does not empower CBOs to function without fear for possible litigations. Though Royal Monetary Authority approved the private money lending rules and regulation in 2017 which restricts private money to Nu 500,000 per person, there is need for separate rules for CBOs for a local level in small amount. The need is felt by the CBOs.



Protecting vulnerable bird species and empowering rural communities

Chhimi Dema, Reporter
Kuensel
30 August 2022



Protecting vulnerable bird species and empowering rural communities

The Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN) is renowned for successful black-necked crane conservation since its establishment in 1987.

For more than three decades, RSPN has brought an increasing number of wintering cranes with its conservation efforts and included the community in safeguarding the cranes.

Through its community-based sustainable tourism (CBST) programme in Phobjikha, the local community is financially empowered and sees more and better opportunities.

The programme offered packaged facilities which included homestays, local guides, rental bicycles, exploring local culture, nature and farm activities.

Among these, homestays have brought immense changes to their earning opportunities.

Gangtey Gup Kinley Gyaltshen said that RSPN for more than two decades provided the local communities in Phobjikha support in strengthening their livelihoods.

Before home stays were established, RSPN provided the communities with financial support to build toilets and organised training in cooking for the farmers, he said.

“RSPN empowered the communities here by giving the people opportunities to make income from how they lived their lives,” Gup Kinley said.

While making efforts to conserve the black-necked crane thoroughly, RSPN ensured that the community was not left behind, Gup Kinley added. “The skills the people learned years ago are still benefiting them, such as comfortable hospitality to the guests which helps us bring more guests.”

According to the focal agency for managing the Phobjikha Conservation Area, little was known about the cranes in Bhutan before the efforts of Dasho Paljor Jigme Dorji in Phobjikha Valley in 1986.

Recognising the importance of the habitat for wintering cranes, Phobjikha valley was designated as a conservation area in 1999.

RSPN’s national coordinator for black-necked cranes conservation, Jigme Tshering, said that the community’s support and participation were critical for a successful conservation effort. “Acquiring such support entails raising awareness among the community on the importance of conservation and applying crane conducive livelihood options.”

As a first step in engaging the local community, RSPN formed the Gangtey-Phobji Environmental Management Committee and Phobjikha Environmental Management Committee. The group was formed to promote transparent decision-making and implementation process based on community participation and collaborative efforts.

The committee was established to “effectively liaison between the interest of the local communities, government and environmental agencies”, Jigme Tshering said.

The committee currently oversees the waste management system and coordinates the annual crane festival.

The local communities also earn from the yearly crane festival celebrated in Gangtey. People with skills in wood carving, weaving or painting sell their artistic works.

Hotels and homestays are packed during the crane festival.

Passang Tobgay, 36, from Nyemphey, said that during the crane festival his homestay is always booked. “People come to live with us for a few days and the income from that helps to make extra income which can be spent on my children’s education.”

He said: “We don’t have to borrow or loan money to make daily expenses or while renovating our homes.”

RSPN initially provided solar panel to the community before electricity.

An individual from a household with a homestay was trained in housekeeping and cooking continental dishes as well.

Sati, a homestay owner, said that each household got Nu 15,000 to buy blankets and mattresses and make other investments to provide better and hygienic services to the guests.

“To even take out Nu 1,000 from our pockets is difficult for us. So, such support is beneficial,” Sati said.

Running a homestay does not require too much sweat, he said. “We have to ensure that our houses are clean and serve the meals on time.”

The locals are excited to receive guests in September.

Another homestay owner, Tshewang Lhamo, said that an extra income from homestays comes in handy. “We are grateful to RSPN for their support. Their encouragement has made us connect with people from other parts of the country and find means to make extra income.”

Locals charge from Nu 800 to Nu 1,500 for a night including two meals.

“Our children also get more exposure from interacting with other people and they work harder in schools,” Tshewang Lhamo said.

Since RSPN's effort, records show that crane wintering has doubled from around 300 in the 1990s to about 600 because of increased protective mechanisms, conservation intervention, and improved population monitoring and counting protocols.

There are 545 black-necked cranes (BNC) in the country today. The highest number of BNC is in Phobjikha with 465 cranes, followed by 64 in Bumdeling in Trashiyangtse.

The global black-necked crane population has increased from around 7,000 to 11,000 birds since 1990.

Jigme Tshering said that cranes need fallow or post-harvest farmland as their roosting sites. He said, that the changing attitude of the people seeking development would affect the long-term survival of these birds.

“Local people may feel that crane conservation has limited their economic opportunities and is an obstacle to their future prosperity. To counter this, there is the need to strike a balance between the conservation of the crane's ecosystem and the use of the local environment for economic development,” Jigme Tshering said.

He added that the CBST programme in Phobjikha provides the right opportunity for RSPN to enhance conservation, improve the economic welfare and promote local community participation.





Milk Processing Unit (MPU) of Khemdro Kuenphen Dairy Group (KKDG) in Phobjikha

Churning out a livelihood

Lhakpa Tshering, Reporter
Bhutan Times
31 August 2022

Dairy farming is no child's play. Over the past decade, many dairy farms called it quits and switch to other less laborious and more lucrative farm businesses like potato cultivation.

However, a dairy cooperative in Phobjikha beat the odds and endured which eventually turned out to be a blessing in disguise albeit with challenges.

Khemdro Kuenphen Dairy Group (KKDG) which today collects milk from over 60 households in Khemdro, Tangchey, and Nimphey villages stands out as a bright spot, bringing hope to a shrinking market that promises to offer financial stability in the long run for dairy farmers.

With the priority being the community, the milk processing unit (MPU) attempts to create a vibrant community for dairy farmers and seeks to economically empower women.

The members say milk production is now an important secondary source of livelihood in the village, whose main source of living is otherwise producing potatoes, which are sometimes barely enough to make ends meet.

“From the time the dairy farm started about five years ago, we are immensely benefited,” said Phub Gyem, a member who lives at a stone-throwing distance from the MPU. “Initiatives like this will bring significant financial advantages in the long run.”

She said that in the past cheese and butter were sold through local shopkeepers while, at times, middlemen took the produce to urban centers for extra profit.

“There were no marketing opportunities and we could hardly sell our dairy products which discouraged us,” she said, adding that today they don't need to worry about marketing the products as the factory provides them with reliable market access.

Gyalmo is another member who says that in a remote place where marketing is

the biggest challenge, it offers income generation and empowerment pathways for rural women. “The income generated through selling the milk at the MPU ensures that I have a constant income to support my family,” she said.

Gyalmo is confident and optimistic about the support they receive. She supplies 17 to 20 liters of milk every day to the milk collection unit and gets a monthly income of Nu 20,000 to Nu 25,000.

She said that it serves as an important source of income that helps keep her heart burning. “We use income from milk to purchase other food items such as rice, meat, vegetables, cooking oil, sugar, and kitchen accessories,” she said, adding that selling milk is a sustainable source of income for smallholder dairy farmers.

Like Phub Gyem and Gyalmo, many other women also supplement their income by engaging in dairy farming and actively supplying milk to the MPU, which makes them encouraged to work hard even more.

As the native cattle breeds do not yield enough milk, more farmers purchase crossbred cows from other dzongkhags to improve the cattle breed and increase milk production.

The story behind dairy farming

The dairy cooperative is the brainchild of an ordinary youth, Sherub Dorji, with an extraordinary dream who headed home to embark on this ambitious project.

Sherub earned a Youth Development Fund (YDF) scholarship to study at the United World College in Maastricht, a world-class high school in the Netherlands.

In May 2017, after receiving the Social Innovation Fellowship from the college with support from the Wangdue Phodrang Dzongkhag livestock sector, he took a full year’s leave from the college to work with local farmers in his hometown Phobjikha.

A recipient of the 2012 Golden Youth Award, Sherub also secured the third position in the Bhutan Certificate of Secondary Examination (BCSE). He is currently pursuing Environmental Science and Economics at Brown University in the USA.

Sherub Dorji familiarizes his plans with the dairy farmers in Phobjikha. Speaking to Bhutan Times, Sherub Dorji said he pursued the idea when he

encountered a small dairy farmers group in Rongthong while on his internship for a company in eastern Bhutan.

“I was inspired by the many promises the dairy farmers group was capable of – in terms of financially benefiting the farmers, supplying quality local milk, and rallying a community around a common economic goal,” he said.

Growing up in the rural village of Phobjikha, he has shown means to the village folks to supplement their income. “Dairy farming in Bhutan is a traditionally feminine enterprise and the stable market for milk helps elevate women’s household economic leverage,” he said.

“Promoting dairy farms can help supplement their income should potato harvest fail. Moreover, I have a strong urge to contribute to community development through sustainable grassroots actions,” says Sherub Dorji.

Apart from being a viable source of income for farmers, Sherub says the dairy social enterprise has grown and continues to deliver some positive impact to our community.

“We will do our best to improve over the years and hope that this initiative will be emulated by other farmers and youth who are planning to venture into the dairy world,” he added.

After having so much of his energy focused on just cheese and butter, the story of his dairy farming reveals some of the promises of the dairy products for the community.

“We are now diversifying our products into all sorts of dairy products such as desserts and drinks,” Sherub said. “We use a non-hierarchical approach to running and managing our business to facilitate trust and interest among farmers and staff.”

Going forward, he plans to have a whole network of groups in the vicinity of Phobjikha valley. “We have plans to reach to more farmers in Phobjikha so that the benefits will trickle unto them,” he said.

As farmers still need to bring their milk to the collection center, Sherub hopes to change this by investing in milk pickup facilities to collect it from the farmers’ doorsteps.

The initiative was enabled with the support from the Wangdue Dzongkhag livestock sector, HELVETAS, Bhutan Foundation, and Mountain Grassroots

Association, including the interest and loyalty of the member farmers.

Another way dairy farms contribute to communities is by creating job opportunities. The factory employed three school dropout youths from the locality.

The dzongkhag livestock sector also supports dairy farmers by facilitating the subsidized purchase of crossbred cows, supplying of dairy processing equipment to the unit, feed and fodder development, and training, among others.

Farmers sourcing high-yielding dairy cows from other places are also rapidly growing among the members and beneficiaries.

Wangdue Phodrang dzongkhag livestock officer Ugyen said that the dzongkhag livestock sector has been actively supporting dairy farmers including linking marketing products to Bhutan Livestock Development Corporation.

He said that Phobjikha has the potential to engage in dairy farming and the MPU in the community is one of the most progressive farms in the dzongkhag. “Most of the group members earn Nu 15,000 to Nu 30,000 a month while some even earn more,” he said.

“We support them through providing training, equipment, and technical aspects including giving new ideas for sustainability,” Ugyen said, adding that they have achieved almost 100 percent of dairy self-sufficiency for the dzongkhag.

And the journey has just begun.





Drachukha edible flowers: taste as good as they look

Kinley Yonten, Reporter
Business Bhutan
31 August 2022

Drachukha edible flowers: taste as good as they look

The three women who decided to stay back in their community after their studies have come up with new ideas to create sustainable livelihoods for themselves and their families

There is a Japanese saying, if the flower is to be beautiful, it must be cultivated.” This was one of the many things about growing flowers that Choki Selden, from Goen Shari, Punakha, heard from her grandparents. It inspired her to take up organic floriculture cultivation in her village.

One such place where the flowers are grown for commercial purposes is Drachukha village, on the way to Gasa, opposite side of Tsephu Nye.

A place is usually abuzz with excitement at this time of the year. With the harvesting season just around the corner, Choki and her two friends will be busy plucking beautiful flowers from their fields.

These three women who decided to stay back in their community after their studies have come up with new ideas to create sustainable livelihoods for themselves and their families, which made into a source of income in since 2017.

Choki Selden is the founder of the Drachukha flower group, three women including Choki, Wangchuck, and Yangden have pulled together a passionate, inspired, and dedicated team. They have drawn up plans to help the community.

“Creating authentic food products with naturally grown herbs, spices, and vegetables from their community, completed with precious edible flowers,” Choki said adding that not only has the flower business prospered but also provided a source of livelihood to the women group.

Choki shared that two years ago, they planted flowers on three different farmlands named A, B, and C. They cultivate flowers on a rotational basis. “As the farmlands stretch wide, we hired the villagers and plant the seeding in the fields,” she said.

Around June, the flower group starts to plant the seeds. “We keep two years gap to cultivate the flowers for each field, so, after two years again we are planting it varieties of flowers,” she said adding after harvesting the flowers, they plant soya beans.

Once the plantation is done, Choki shared that they have to weed often and it takes almost seven to eight months to fully bloom.

“It is the Buddhist belief that not only one can accumulate merits by doing goods but taking good care of flowers. It does have other benefits too,” she said.

After seven months, the flower bloomed into a variety of colors such as Red, Pink, and Blue were beautiful adorning the place in the early spring.

“Once the flowers have completely bloomed, the women group hires workers from the village and starts to harvest the flowers,” Choki said adding Bhutan has the ambition to become the organically farmed country in the world, resonating with the Buddhist philosophy of living in harmony with nature and all sentient beings.

However, the flower plantation works in Drachukha village have also immensely benefited the community. The Drachukha Flower Group will grow, dry, and market organic edible flowers.

“We are earning Nu 20-30,000 per month and we are giving almost Nu 70-75,000 to the community for various work in the village. Most of the funds were used to make farm roads in the village,” she said.

Through this project, Choki said that she wants to empower women and young people in the villages and help reverse rural-urban migration in the country.

“One of the unique products of the community helps us build a wooden processing unit. These have taken part in establishing the first organically-certified flower farm in Bhutan,” she said.

Choki said that she will prove that farming can provide a colorful and exciting future for Bhutan’s young people, who are currently leaving farms and flooding the towns.

According to the Drachukha community, our country wants to go organic and self-sufficient in food, community needs to make our farms more resilient and more productive.

“The products that can help to drive this change, we discovered the great potential of dried petals of flowers, which traditionally grow in our communities.”

One of the farmers who helped the flowers group during harvesting time said that the dried petals have an increasing demand in markets in other countries as ingredients in innovative food and beverage products.

“Growing these valuable flowers among many other crops for our home consumption and the local market has helped us to transition our community into a place where young people stay here and work in the village,” he said.

Drachukha is a remote farming village located in the middle of a dense and wild highland old-growth forest in central Bhutan. Drachukha has almost 20 households, 53 farmers, and a total of 114 family members.

Meanwhile, most of the fertile farmland is used to cultivate a variety of crops for household consumption, so villagers depend less on imported foods.

Wangchuck Dema, another woman in the group said that life in the village is hard. But our strong sense of community and growing edible flowers gives us more than enough reason to try sustaining ourselves and our families in our village.

“Cornflowers, marigolds, sunflowers, and roses grow in our village. These same flowers could also serve as a valuable source of income,” she said adding they use compost and cow dung as a fertilizer and no chemicals.

She shared that our goal is to organically grow, dry, and bring to market the flower petals that already grow naturally in our village, in crop rotation with other organic grains, vegetables, and herbs.

“Our farm has been an EU-certified organic farm in Bhutan, making an important contribution to the country’s goal to go 100% organic,” she said.

Further, Tshering Yangden and Wangchuck Dema two young women from Drachukha graduated class XII but decided to go back to our community to farm our parents’ lands. “We are the three sole remaining women of our generation farming in our village,” they said.

Tshering Yangden said that three of us have been part of a Farmers’ Cooperative for a couple of years, and we have been growing spices and herbs in the village on a small scale for a local food business in Thimphu.

“With successfully demonstrating the feasibility of this project, we will encourage other households in the village to join us in growing flowers on a larger scale,” she said.

She shared that flowers will be used as ingredients in food products but it is believed to have medicinal qualities. “In the village, we have a long tradition of using flowers as immune boosters as well,” she said.

However, the flower group has developed a partnership with Druk Meto. Where part of the harvest is exported to Switzerland and another part is the value added to products for the local market.

Choki Selden, the founder of the Drachukha flower group said that if you want to improve agriculture practices in the country and support farmers to be sustainably self-sufficient, we need to help each other to work together.





The bitter tale of a community-based organisation

Sangay Rabten, Reporter
Business Bhutan
Article published in Bhutan Times
28 August 2022

The bitter tale of a community-based organisation

Even today, Bhutan does not have a legal framework to govern Community Based Organizations (CBOs). A CBO is an organisation operating at the grassroots level to promote the wellbeing of the members of the community.

The legal framework would not only monitor cooperative legislation in the country, but will provide a constructive assessment and recommendations to improve the recognition and support given to cooperatives.

Rooted in Buddhist values, the non-Government Organizations or volunteerism in Bhutanese society today is governed by traditional belief systems, and not within a legal framework.

In addition, with development, Civil Society Organizations, cooperatives and CBOs have multiplied in Bhutan.

While CBOs play a vital role in community development and contribute towards achieving national goal of self-reliance and Sustainable Development Goals, however, CBOs in Bhutan are handicapped with no proper laws to function. With fear of possible legal complications, some CBOs had closed shop.

One such organization is the Chuzagang Saving Group (CSG), a CBO under Chuzagang gewog, Sarpang set up in 2004.

This CBO focused on financial elements in the community, like lending and savings and the sole objective of establishing this group was to improve the livelihood of communities through scaling to commercial farming. It was operated from homes with no proper office.

Over time the local administration managed to facilitate the welfare of people. The agriculture extension office trained the people of nine chiwogs of Chuzagang. Villagers were also encouraged to form agriculture cooperative to help uplift their lives.

Inspired by the move, about 50 villagers attended the training of which 13 members decided to form a Savings Group. Initially, there were six male and five female members. The members deposited Nu 50 as monthly member

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It was reviewed in 2009 and the members sought for registration from the concern agency to operate with legal rights. However, registration was not granted.

After setting up the Chuzagang Savings Group, the group provided loans to the villagers with the highest ceiling of Nu 1,000 per individual. The interest rate was at par with the Bhutan Development Bank Limited (BDBL).

The chairperson of CSG, Yangzom said that the status of the CSG is in a limbo today. She stated that the group could not continue its operation due to certification issues, adding that it also lacked educated human resource.

“If there were strong and educated members, the group would have succeeded,” she said, adding that there were no proper book keeping and no proper management system nor did the relevant agencies rendered any support to the group.

There was a misunderstanding among the members that about Nu 0.6 million was defaulted according to the information from non-members. Few years back, the members shared about Nu 15,000 each and there is still controversy on sharing the remaining amount.

In addition, few people who had borrowed money from the group have still not paid back.

In initial state of resettlement, the secretary of the group, Nima said that the loans had benefited the villagers. “Loans from CSG benefited the members and others as well to buy stationeries and school uniforms and to pay school fees,” he added.

To further their scope of business, the group approached the gewog office to obtain the licence after drawing a Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). But the group was instructed to operate with internal service rule until the legal permission was granted which never happened.

The former chairperson of the group, Ap Sangay said that upon members lacking literacy, the saving group did not get any appropriate support. He too pointed out that the group lacked coordination and members were discouraged to work.

Another group member Nima Dorji said that after change of chairperson, the monthly collections were discontinued. Moreover, the clients did not pay the loan even after the maturity date.

Later, the group with the assistance from the ministry of agriculture and forests procured rice and maize pounding machines. The members hired the operator and provided the service to the villagers at minimal rate.

However, with dwindling financial returns the group could not pay salary to the operators. The milling machines set up for agriculture improvement infrastructure are kept idle at Shawapong since the start of pandemic.

Meanwhile, the agriculture extension officer of Chuzagang gewog, Tashi Dawa said that gewog officials, particularly from the agriculture sector pushed and provided necessary help. He said that the group was asked to show records and allow auditing.

However, the agriculture extension officer pointed out that no one was found accountable and responsible. “The flaw in the management must have led to failure of functioning of the CSG,” he added.

Chuzang gup Karma Tshering said that the group is in a dilemma today. However, he said that being newly elected Local Governance (LG) leader, he does not have much understanding about the group and need to study further and see if the gewog can intervene.

The tshogpa of Nimaling-Shawapong chiwog, Nima Dorji said that the present LG leaders did not get any written or verbal complaint from any of the CSG members.

Some members from the group had filed a case against the management on misuse of funds in the gewog office. However, the gewog administration dismissed the case after finding it had no grounds.

As of today, Bhutan does not have specific laws for CBOs which has stifled its growth.

Though the Royal Monetary Authority approved the private money lending rules and regulation in 2017, there is need for separate rules for CBOs for a local level in small amount.

Until then grass root organizations like the Chuzergang Savings Group will have to struggle for an identity.





The challenges of children living with HIV

Deki Choden, Reporter
Gyalchi Sarshog
Article published in Bhutan Times
15 September 2022

The challenges of children living with HIV

A 20-year-old Tashi Dema (Name Changed) tested positive for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) at the age of six, almost 15 years ago. However, she is married and living a happy life with her husband today.

She contracted the virus through mother-to-child transmission. She tested positive in 2008. Tashi recalls learning about HIV for the first time from the infographics in the school. She also shared with her friends about herself having tested positive for HIV.

She started to face stigma when her friends started avoiding her. Friends refrained from being around her in school. In one of the parent-teacher meetings in the school, some of the parents raised the dangers of Tashi spreading the virus to other children in the school. This forced the young Tashi to leave the school.

Tashi Dema said, initially, although all the students in the school were aware of her being HIV positive, she was not bothered because she was too young then. "I was also not aware that I had contracted the virus from my mother." She said that even the people in the village refused to talk and the relatives kept separate mugs and plates for her. "However, the Lhaksam's support made it possible for me to live a normal life like others."

"We can also live a normal life like others if we take medicines and get timely medications. People should support the children living with HIV rather than stigmatising them," Tashi Dema said.

Meanwhile, the country today has 835 HIV-positive cases until June this year since 1993, of which 433- 52 percent were male and 402- 48 percent were women.

The mother-to-child transmission case was first detected in 2002. One hundred and thirty-nine mothers tested positive for HIV. Of the 139 mothers, 42 mother-to-child transmission cases were detected.

The Ministry of Health's (MoH) national HIV, AIDs and STI control programme's programme manager under the department of public health, Lekey Khandu, said the ministry conducted preventative measures through advocacies such as PMTCT in 2006.

He said that some of the mother-to-child transmission cases were detected before the introduction of the PMTCT, especially those who did not avail of those services and were already pregnant.

He said the pregnant mothers usually got only one round of HIV check-ups which failed to detect the virus from 2006 to 2007 while some of the children contracted the virus during breastfeeding.

Lhaksam's Executive Director, Wangda Dorji, said of the 42 mother-to-child transmission cases in the country, 23 were registered with the Lhaksam, adding that they provide them with advocacy and awareness programmes on the medication to deal with stereotypes.

He said such programmes would encourage the children with HIV to build confidence and guide them on the medication procedures, adding that the Lhaksam also supported the stationery and other necessary items for those children since 2011.

Lekey Khandu said although there is no financial support from the government as of now, the VCT focal persons are stationed in all the dzongkhags to support the people with free consultation, medication and testing facilities.

Lekey Khandu said HIV is not a disease which is transmitted from just sitting next to each other but the people with HIV have to face social stigma. "However, the pre-validation assessment will curve the mother-to-child transmission by 2030."





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