

# Supporting Employment for Persons with Disabilities in Bhutan

Results from an Employer Survey



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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>The Context of Bhutan .....</i>	<i>2</i>
<b>Methods.....</b>	<b>6</b>
Survey Development .....	6
Survey Administration.....	7
Participant Recruitment .....	7
<b>Results .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Participant Characteristics .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Figure 1. Map of Bhutan with Districts and Population Density .....	8
Figure 2. Employer Respondent Job Title .....	8
Figure 3. Employer Respondent Type.....	9
Figure 4. Employer Respondent Gender .....	9
Figure 5. Employer Respondent Age .....	9
<b>Characteristics of Employment Settings.....</b>	<b>10</b>
Figure 6. Number of People Employed in Surveyed Employment Settings.....	10
<b>Employment Supports .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Employment Accessibility.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Attitudes toward Employing Persons with Disabilities .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Training Opportunity .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Employer Needs and Suggestions for Improvements Needed to Employ Persons with Disabilities..</b>	<b>12</b>
Figure 7. Employer Needs and Suggestions for Improvement to Employ Persons with Disabilities .....	13
<b>Discussion .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>2</b>

Cite as:

Tichá, R., Abery, B., Schuelka, M.J., Kezang Sherab & Ura Sonam Tshewang. (2022). *Supporting Employment for Persons with Disabilities in Bhutan: Results from an Employer Survey*. Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota.

## Introduction

Providing inclusive education, technical training, and employment for persons with disabilities is increasingly becoming part of the societal and policy discourse in Bhutan. While this is a positive trend, paid full-time employment for persons with disabilities in Bhutan continues to be infrequent (Schuelka, et al., 2022), and there has been very little support for – or rights to – employment for persons with disabilities. The national census of Bhutan considers persons with disabilities to be ‘economically inactive’ (NSB, 2018). Parents of youth with disabilities do not encourage their children to be employed in the community, fearing discrimination, bullying, and their children not being able to cope with the demands of work with little to no support offered (Kezang Sherab & Schuelka, *in press*). However, the recently implemented National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) (GNHC, 2019) does include language on equal access and equal protection for persons with disabilities in employment and participation in the labor market. Additionally, the NPPD discusses incentives for employment for both individuals and businesses, as well as encouraging employment programs and initiatives, although the policy is vague on the details. There is no national welfare support system for adults with disabilities in Bhutan, nor is there a disability employment quota requirement.

Bhutan is one of a handful of countries that has signed but not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (OHCHR, n.d.), although the new National Policy for Persons with Disabilities does cover much of what is contained in the CRPD. Article 27 of the CRPD prohibits hiring and work-based discrimination, protects the equal rights of persons with disabilities in employment and the labor market, encourages the promotion of training and entrepreneurship, and requires the provision reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities in the workplace, among other things (UN, 2007). While the NPPD in Bhutan mimics much of the language of the CRPD, the NPPD puts the onus squarely on the Royal Government of Bhutan and includes no specific requirements for the private sector, and also includes a provision for sheltered and supported employment that is not mentioned in the CRPD.

Employment of people with disabilities across different countries ranges from no employment, to segregated/sheltered employment, to customized and supported employment in community settings. Many people with disabilities who are employed only work part-time and engage only in certain types of low-paying jobs. More limited types and amount of work are especially common for people with more significant disabilities (USAID, 2022).

Sheltered employment is not an inclusive or evidence-based employment strategy for persons with disabilities, and is viewed as negatively in many countries, such as the United States (NDRN, 2011). Customized and supported employment and customized self-employment/entrepreneurship are considered a gold standard for a type of employment from the perspective of community inclusion of

people with disabilities (Wehman, et al., 2018). One of the key facilitators of persons with disabilities gaining inclusive employment is the preparedness of employers with the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes, procedures, and supports in place to be able to effectively recruit and retain employees with different types of disabilities and support needs. The purpose of this report is to share findings of a survey with a sample of employers focused on their attitudes, accessibility, supports, and training opportunities to employ persons with disabilities in the Bhutanese context.

Beyond policy discourse and increasing awareness that persons with disabilities can successfully participate in inclusive employment, the economic reality of Bhutan is of a different context than Global North countries with post-industrial economies. Much of the Bhutanese economy is informal and agricultural, with the majority of the working-age population engaged in subsistence farming in close and extended-family groupings (NSB, 2018). In other words, there are not many large corporations and large private employers in Bhutan compared to Global North countries. The youth unemployment rate is also quite high at over 21% (NSB, 2023). Persons with disabilities in Bhutan feel fairly discouraged to find work in their community, and most view farming, manual and industrial labor, and hospitality as the most likely places to get jobs (Schuelka, et al., 2022).

With this report, and the survey activity as a whole, we do not suggest that inclusive employment in Bhutan should attempt to look like Global North countries. However, we do believe that there is untapped potential for persons with disabilities to engage in employment and social participation that is in line with Bhutanese socio-cultural and religious values. It is imperative that policy initiatives and practices match with that of the societal values of Bhutan, such as promoting happiness and harmony, wellbeing of all sentient beings, compassion, and caring. There is often contradiction and complexity in expressing and inculcating these values as well. For instance, a recent study has shown that there is a huge gap between educational values and practices promoted in the Bhutanese schools versus societal values (Kezang Sherab & Schuelka, 2023). This is also the case in terms of employment opportunities and support systems for the persons with disabilities that we discuss in this report, and we suggest that these values misalignments can be overcome through systems-based reforms and initiatives.

### *The Context of Bhutan*

*Note: This section is reproduced from a previous report (Schuelka, et al., 2022).*

Bhutan is a small country located entirely in the Himalaya. The topography of Bhutan ranges from lowland jungles in the south that touch the Assamese plains of India, and then rising precipitously to the high Himalaya of the Tibetan plateau—topping out at 7,570 meters (24,836 ft). The population of Bhutan is just over 750,000 people (NSB, 2023).

Bhutan began the process of economic modernization into a planned capitalist economy with the First Five-Year Plan in 1959. In less than 100 years, Bhutan has made great strides in modern healthcare, education, and infrastructure. However, Bhutan is still relatively low in terms of development, ranking 129<sup>th</sup> in the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2020). Despite these economic indicators, Bhutan is well known for its alternative development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH). In the late 1970s, the Fourth *Druk Gyalpo* [King] of Bhutan famously criticized economic indicators such as Gross National Income in favor of a more holistic and sustainable focus on social, cultural, and environmental happiness. Since that time, the Bhutanese government has been working to operationalize this vision into its economic and social policies.

In Bhutan, the concept of “disability” has evolved into modern societal institutions such as education and healthcare. Before schools and hospitals existed, disability was seen through a Buddhist lens of *karmic* life-cycles of sin and rebirth, leading to a complex cultural attitude of pity and compassion. While it is still quite relevant in Bhutan today, this concept of disability has blended with more modern views of medical pathology, social models, and human rights initiatives (Schuelka, 2015). In many ways, as the concept of disability in Bhutan evolved, it became more negative. The introduction of schools and access to healthcare introduced social stratification and ability-sorting (Schuelka, 2018).

Modern education for children with disabilities in Bhutan is a fairly recent phenomenon. This is especially true for children with severe intellectual and developmental disabilities. Schuelka (2013, p. 67) concluded that these children were “marginalized and excluded.” This was confirmed by later research (e.g., Kezang Sherab, et al. 2015) that many children with disabilities were out of school, mainly because parents did not want to send their children with disabilities to school, citing an unfriendly school environment such as a lack of individualized and accommodative curriculum, lack of trained teachers, and inaccessible infrastructure. The registration of people with disabilities in Bhutan in 2015 found that 84.5% of people with disabilities have never attended school. However, societal attitude and ways of thinking about disabilities are changing. Bhutan has signed the United Nations’ (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Bhutan’s Ministry of Education (MoE) has been closely working with UN agencies such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to create educational opportunities for youth with disabilities. Recently, the Bhutan government also approved

the holistic national policy for persons with disabilities with a vision of “empowered persons with disabilities living in an inclusive society” (Gross National Happiness Commission [GNHC], 2019). This policy emphasizes education for youth with disabilities. For instance, Paro College of Education began offering its teaching students a post-graduate program on inclusive education. Furthermore, there are 22 Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools (at least one in each of the 20 *dzongkhags* [districts]) that integrate children with disabilities into mainstream schooling, two specialized institutes (Wangsel Institute for Deaf children and Muenselling Institute for students with visual impairments, established in 1973), and two Draktsho vocational training centers with a total of 997 students (MoE, 2020). There are also many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Ability Bhutan Society (ABS), Draktsho Vocational Training Centres, Disabled Persons Organisation of Bhutan (DPOB), Bhutan Foundation, and Phensem who are instrumental in supporting the education of youth with disabilities. Despite these developments, recent research has shown that persons with disabilities still face social stigma; cultural and religious beliefs; a lack of resources, caregiver and teacher preparedness; and a lack of awareness amongst the public (Dawa Dukpa et al., 2021; Rinchen Dorji, 2015; Kezang Sherab et al., 2015; MoE & UNICEF, 2017; Schuelka, 2018; UNICEF, 2013).

The economic and social participation of persons with disabilities is also an issue in Bhutan. According to the latest Population and Housing Census of Bhutan, 2.1% of the population are categorized as disabled (NSB, 2020). However, using alternative forms of data collection using a functioning model, UNICEF (2015) finds there could be up to 20% disability prevalence in Bhutanese youth. If this is true, there would be significant number of Bhutanese with some form of disability. Mannocchi and Schuelka (2021) also found that most persons with disabilities in rural settings are ‘isolated and inactive.’ This indicates that most persons with disabilities do not participate in economic and social activities and that they are dependent on their families and friends. Earlier research (Schuelka, 2015), as well as anecdotal evidence, also suggests that persons with disabilities are considered to be a family burden because it is believed that they cannot earn an income. A prevailing disability discourse in Bhutan is that a person with a disability can best serve their families and their communities by not being a burden and ‘staying out of the way’ (Johnstone, et al., 2023).

Bhutan has an overall unemployment rate of 5%, with 22.6% of that figure falling under the category of youth (15–24 years) unemployment (NSB, 2020). There is lack of unemployment data for persons with disabilities. Even the report on the Population and Housing Census of Bhutan does not mention anything about the unemployment rate of persons with disabilities. This suggests that persons with disabilities are a marginalized group without adequate attention to their health and well-being. However, recently some UN agencies such as UNICEF and NGOs have promoted the health and well-being of persons with disabilities. For instance, the Draktsho Institutes (NGO) and Wangsel Institute for the Deaf and Muenselling Institute for the Visually Impaired (Ministry of Education) have been providing some vocational skills to help persons with disabilities to find paid work. With such support systems in place, the economic and social participation of persons with disabilities is likely to improve in the near future.

As mentioned above, Bhutan started officially recognizing persons with disabilities as early as 1973. Bhutan's commitment towards persons with disabilities grew with the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2010. Consequently, the rights of the child have also been acknowledged in the Bhutan Building Rules of 2002, Labour and Employment Act of 2007, and the Constitution of Bhutan in 2008 (UNICEF, 2015). However, Bhutan's first national policy for persons with disabilities was launched only in August 2019 with a vision of "Empowered persons with disabilities living in an inclusive society" (GNHCS, 2019, p. 5). This policy framework is based on the following guiding principles: "non-discrimination, diversity and inclusiveness, disability mainstreaming, participation, and gross national happiness." With this policy in place, people with disabilities in Bhutan may face significantly less discrimination and social stigma. This is also likely help Bhutan meet its international commitments such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities.

This policy framework identifies policy interventions in critical areas such as in education (improving access to education, removing attitudinal barriers, early identification and intervention, and learning, assessment and examination); health (access to health services, prevention, early identification, intervention and rehabilitation, and healthy aging); economic security (employment, support and enabling environment for business opportunities, awareness, and advocacy); caregivers, families, and

communities (decision making, family/caregiver's involvement in service provision, support for family and caregivers, and community); protection and access to justice; disaster risk reduction and mitigation; built environment; public transport; information, communication, and technology ((access, portrayal, depiction, and use of persons with disabilities in the media); participation in cultural, spiritual, recreation, leisure, and sport activities; policy and planning; political participation; finance; human resource and capacity development; support and collaboration with NGOs/Civil Society Organizations/Disabled Persons Organizations; and data and information management. Until decided otherwise, the Gross National Happiness Commission Secretariat will be the lead agency to coordinate all disability-related policy, plans, and programs.

## Methods

### Survey Development

In order learn more about the employment of persons with disabilities in Bhutan, a survey for employers was developed by the project team. This group included researchers in the fields of disability and inclusion from the US, Bhutan, and the UK. Development efforts were guided by the team's expertise in survey generation, employment supports, and the community inclusion of persons with disabilities. The survey was designed to collect data from a variety of businesses and government agencies in Bhutan who employed at least one individual with a disability. The purpose of this effort was to assess employment opportunities and barriers for persons with disabilities in Bhutan through better understanding the perspectives of local employers.

Prior to use, the survey was reviewed by the project staff to ensure well designed questions and response options, as well as cultural sensitivity for the Bhutanese context in which it was intended to be used. This effort was designed to complement a parallel survey that focused on the experiences of persons with disabilities during the time period when they transitioned from school to employment or participation in other meaningful activities. The results of this phase of the project are described in a separate project report – as well as a more detailed explanation of the survey construction, fieldwork, and analysis – can be found at Schuelka, et al. (2022).



## Survey Administration

Following extensive review and refinement of survey items based upon a review by collaborating Bhutanese project staff, final survey questions were incorporated into the GIS software. The survey was subsequently administered as an in-person interview to employers who agreed to participate in the project. Project staff in Bhutan trained in survey administration conducted these interviews at locations convenient for employers.

## Participant Recruitment

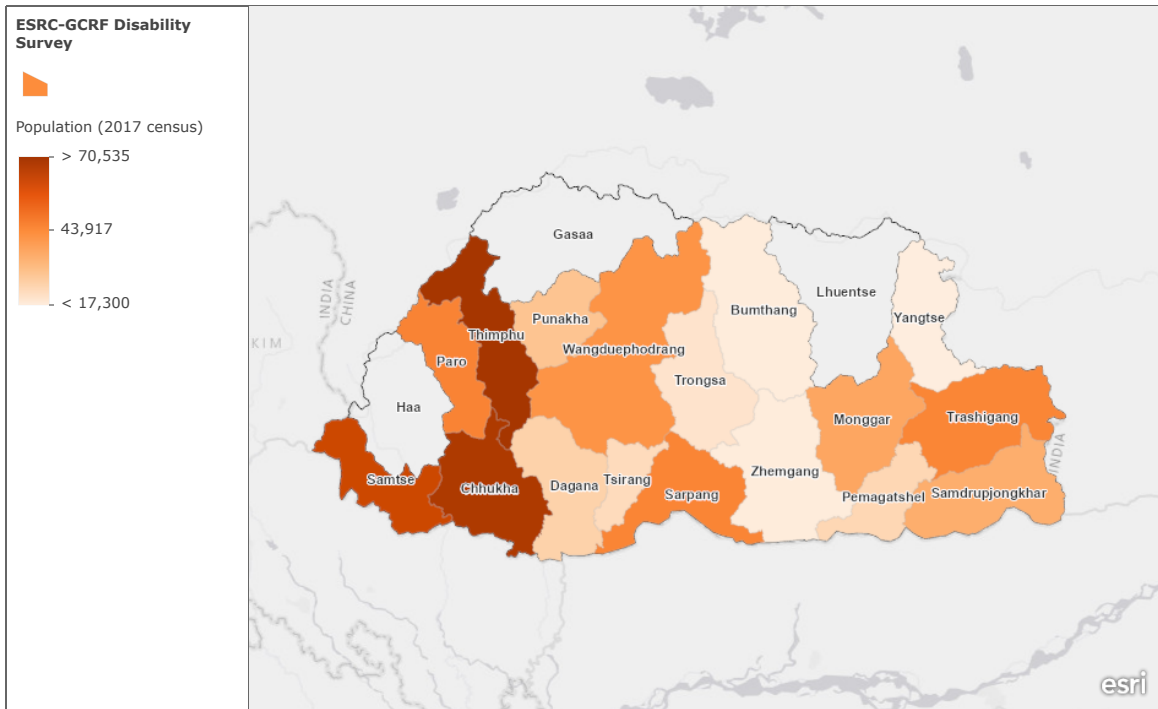
Employers were recruited from across Bhutan using convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Only those employers who currently had one or more persons with disabilities working for them or indicating that they were actively seeking to hire an employee with a disability were interviewed.

## Results

### Participant Characteristics

A total of 35 employers completed the survey. Forty-four percent were business owners, 41% managers, 9% farmers, 6% administrators, and 9% had another job title. Fifty-six percent of participants were male and 44% female. Twelve (34%) were from Thimphu, five (17%) were from Chhukkha, five (14%) from Punakha. Other represented *Dzongkhags* [districts] included Sarpang, Paro, Mongar, Samtse, Tsirang, Bumthang, and Zhemgang. In Figure 1 below, we include a map of Bhutan with population density. The *Dzongkhags* of Haa, Gasa, and Lhuentse were not included in this project.

Figure 1. Map of Bhutan with Districts and Population Density



Eighty-nine percent of respondents operated a private business, 4% represented a community-based employer, 4% represented a government office, and another 4% were a different type of employer. Twenty-two percent of employers responding to the survey were between the ages of 20 and 29, 30% percent between the ages of 30 and 39, 26% between the ages of 40 and 49, 19% were between the ages of 50 and 59. The remaining 4% of employers were older than 60 years. Figures 2–5 display participant employer characteristics.

Figure 2. Employer Respondent Job Title

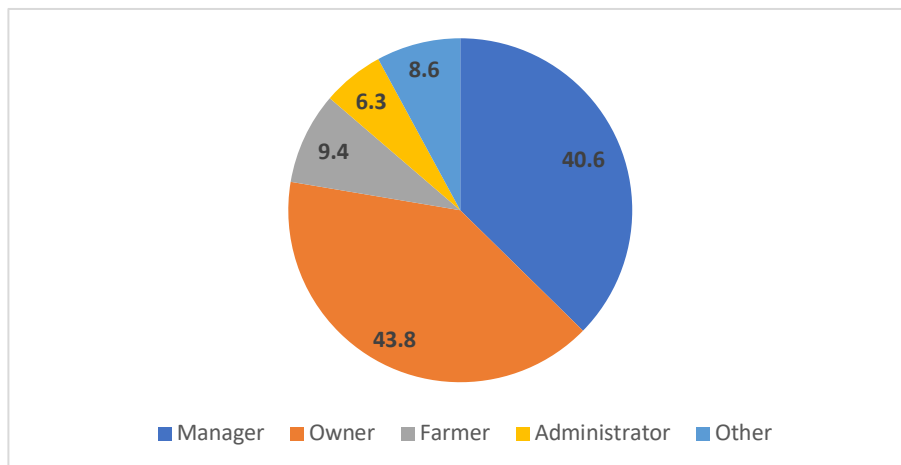


Figure 3. Employer Respondent Type

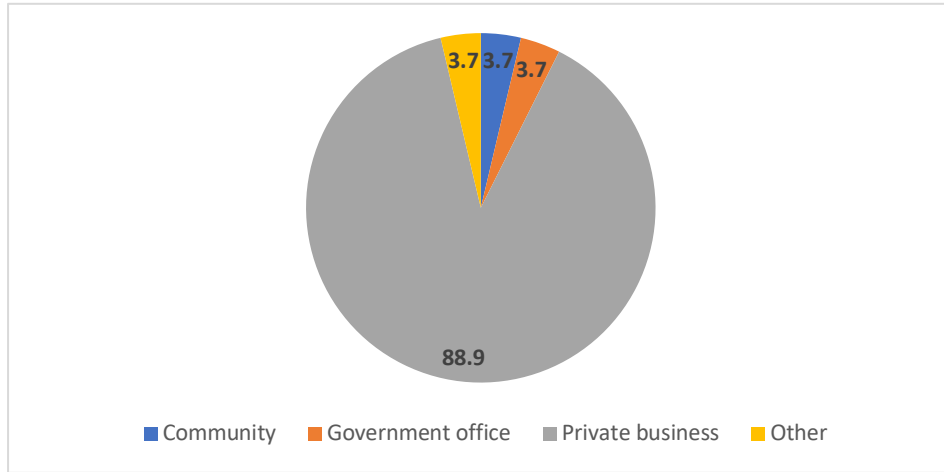


Figure 4. Employer Respondent Gender

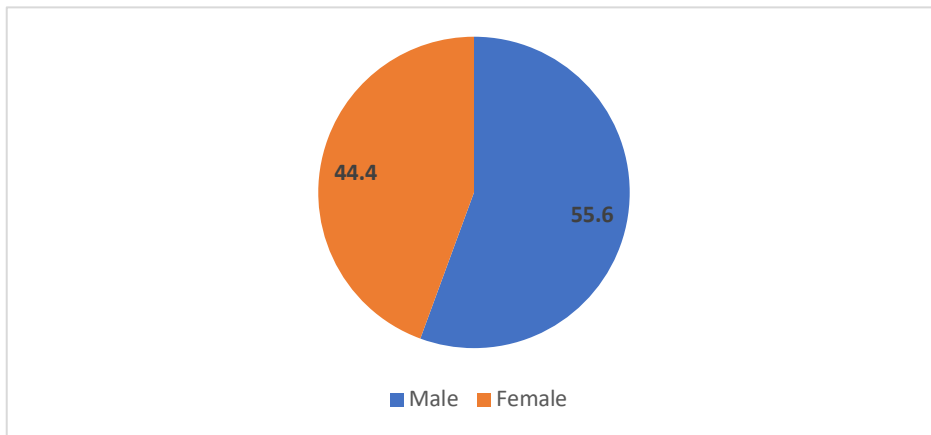
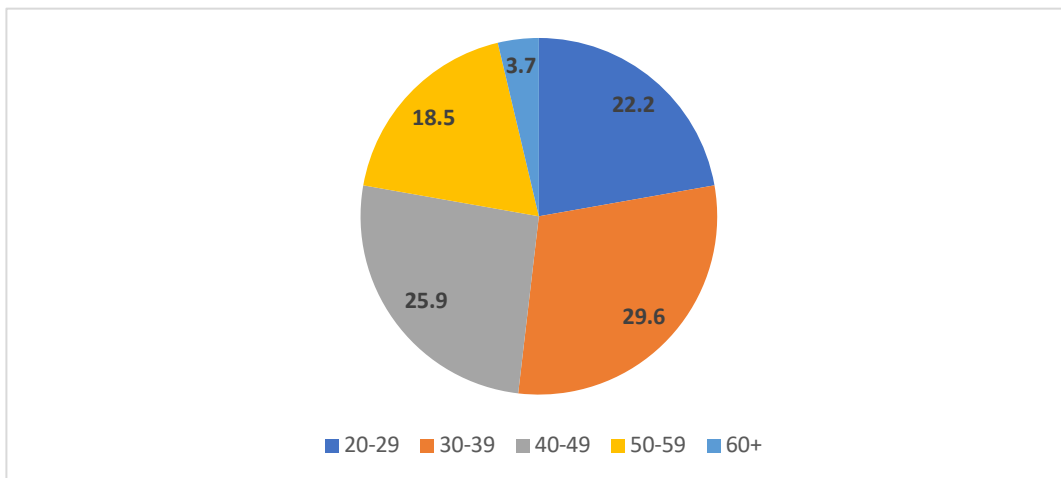


Figure 5. Employer Respondent Age

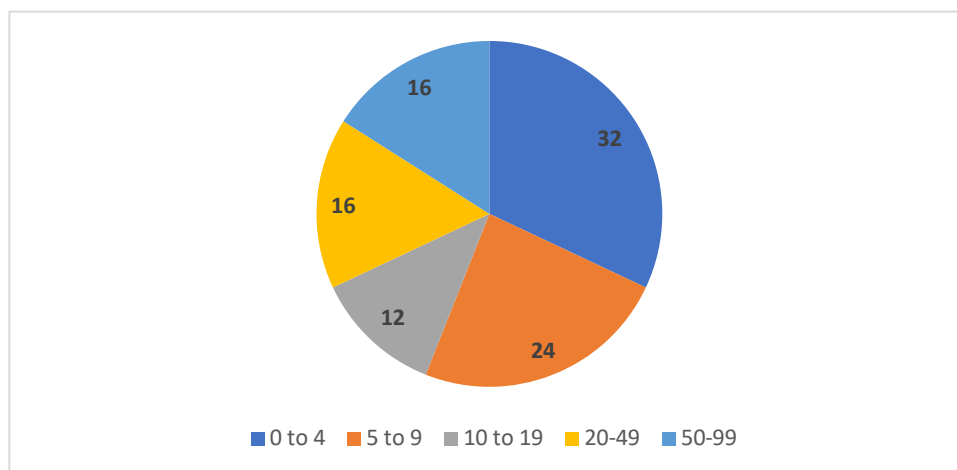


## Characteristics of Employment Settings

The majority of the participating employers (56%) were of a small size (0-9 employees). Twelve percent of employers had 10-19 employees. Thirty-two percent of employers had 20-99 employees. Figure 6 provides a visual representation of the size of participating employers. Most employers (75%) were local enterprises (as opposed to regional or national). The majority of participating employers specialized in IT/computing (40%) or healthcare (23%). Others had businesses focused on tourism, retail, agriculture, or government.

All respondents reported they have at least one person with a disability working at their company or actively seeking to hire an employee with a disability (1 employer). The majority had only 1 or 2 employees with a disability. One employer reported having 11. However, most of these employers indicated that these persons with disabilities were employed as a part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Figure 6. Number of People Employed in Surveyed Employment Settings



## Employment Supports

Fifty-nine percent of participating employers indicated that there was someone in the workplace designated to support the persons with disabilities who worked for the organization. Forty-one percent indicated that they were doing specific things in the workplace in an effort to accommodate the needs of employees with disabilities. When asked about the extent to which workplaces like theirs were supportive of employing persons with disabilities, most respondents (56%) indicated “little,” followed

by “much” (26%). When asked specifically about the resources that workplaces have available to support persons with disabilities, the most frequent response was related to the provision of natural supports by coworkers, followed by supports provided by supervisors. The majority of participating employers indicated that employers in Bhutan of whom they were aware know “little” (52%) or “not much” (22%) about how to effectively support persons with disabilities in a work setting.

### Employment Accessibility

When asked about the accessibility of the workplace only 4% of participating employers indicated that their place of business was fully accessible. Most respondents indicated that their workplace was accessible only a “little” (39%). Employers’ suggestions for improving workplace accessibility focused primarily on enhancing accessibility of the physical environment (50%). Forty-four percent of respondents indicated that the tools and technology their employees with disabilities needed in the workplace in order to effectively do their job were accessible “not much” or “little.” Only 15% of employers responded that the persons with disabilities they employed could use the tools and technology they needed “a great deal.”

### Attitudes toward Employing Persons with Disabilities

As part of the survey, participating employers were asked about those factors that make it difficult for them to employ persons with disabilities. The most frequent answer was that persons with disabilities did not have, or needed to be taught, the skills needed for the jobs they had available, followed by it being costly to adapt buildings to make them physically accessible to employees with disabilities, and potentially lower job performance on the part of persons with disabilities when compared to that of their coworkers without disability. Participants were also asked about prevailing attitudes associated with the low numbers few persons with disabilities being employed. The most frequent response was related to businesses and other potential employers being unsure as to how to effectively support persons with disabilities, followed by concerns related to a potentially higher incidence of work-related injuries among employees with disabilities, and employees who were members of this group needing extra attention.

## Training Opportunity

When asked about their interest in being contacted about future training to support the employment of persons with disabilities, 91% of employers responded in a positive manner indicating their openness to take part in educational opportunities in this area.

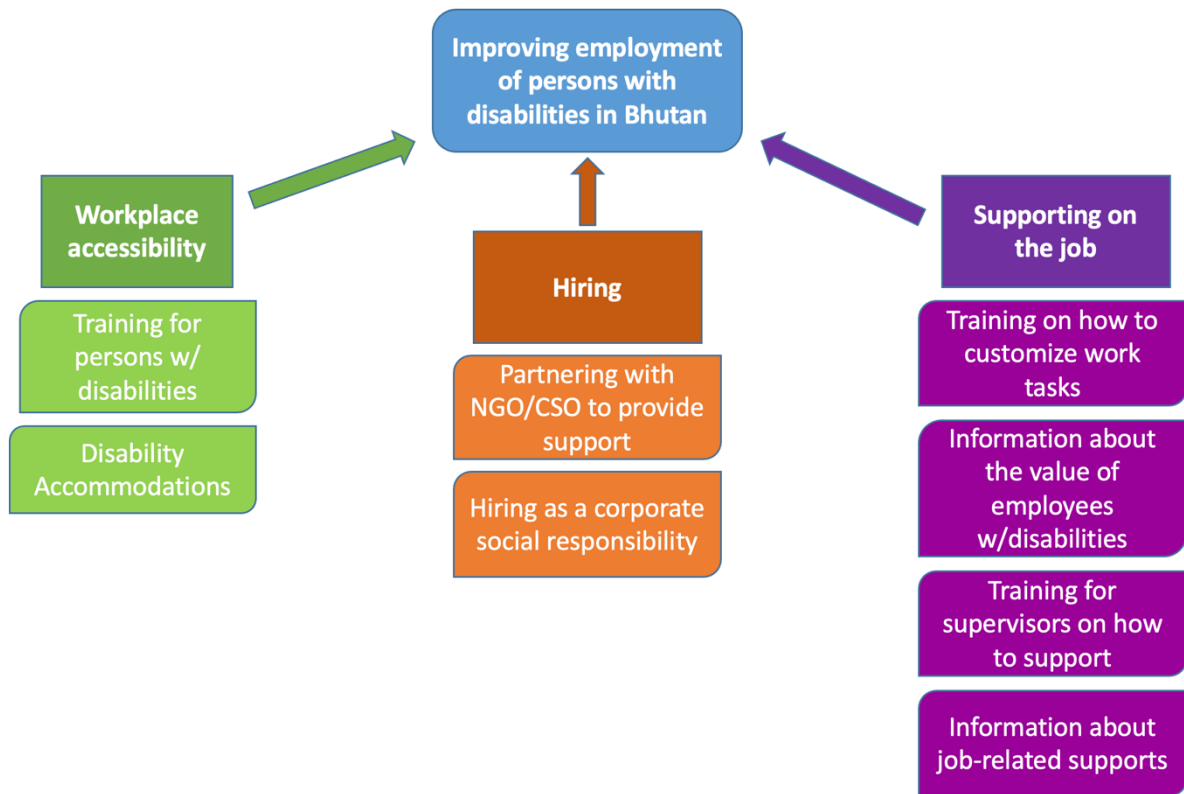
## Employer Needs and Suggestions for Improvements Needed to Employ Persons with Disabilities

*Workplace Accessibility.* Interview results indicated that employers had a number of currently unmet needs that if attended to could potentially open up additional opportunities for employment on the part of persons with disabilities. Suggestions primarily focused on making accommodations and modifications that would increase the accessibility of tools and technology that employees need to effectively carry out their job-related responsibilities. The two most frequently mentioned needs centered on training to make the workplace more accessible (31%) and specific disability accommodations (15%).

*Hiring persons with disabilities.* Most participating employers thought that partnering with an NGO/CSO that supports persons with disabilities would be an effective way to encourage persons with disabilities to apply for jobs. A second frequently mentioned approach focused on the society and government reframing the employment of persons with disabilities as a form of corporate social/community responsibility.

*Supporting persons with disabilities on the job.* A large number of employers believed that employer training with respect to how to customize work tasks for persons with disabilities was needed to support hiring of this population. Other frequent responses included the need to, more effectively train supervisors on how to support employees with disabilities, provide businesses and other organizations that might employ persons with disabilities with more and better information about the value of hiring such workers, and have greater information and training available with respect to job-related supports for members of this population.

Figure 7. Employer Needs and Suggestions for Improvement to Employ Persons with Disabilities



## Discussion

This investigation was to our knowledge the first survey of employers in Bhutan assessing the opportunities for and barriers to employment for persons with disabilities in the country. Although the sample size of the survey was not large (35 employers), there are some interesting and important findings with implications for employment of persons with disabilities and the employers who currently or in the future have a desire to support work opportunities for this segment of the population in the Bhutanese context.

The majority of the employers we interviewed were small local private businesses specializing in IT/computing and healthcare. Most owners were males in their 30s and 40s who employed one, or at most, a few persons with disabilities. There was a general consensus among the participating employers that their workplaces do not currently support the employment of persons with disabilities in an effective manner. Much of this focused on the lack of direct employment supports including the

provision of job accommodations and coaching supports). Supports that are currently available in the workplace appear to primarily be of an informal nature provided by co-workers and/or supervisors. Both of these sources of natural support were reported to have little training in how to effectively assist an employee with a disability. Employers also expressed considerable concerns about workplace accessibility; this included barriers consisting of both a lack of basic access to the place of employment and to accommodations and modifications that might be needed in order for an employee with a disability to effectively carry out his or her assigned job functions.

A number of, although by no means all, employers expressed biased attitudes toward persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities were in general viewed as less skilled and capable than their non-disabled peers with strongly held expectations that their job performance would be significantly lower than coworkers without disabilities. Employers also concerns about the costs associated with making their workplaces accessible and the need for provision of transportation to the workplace. Both the geography of Bhutan and its architecture make this barrier an especially challenging one to address. Hence, findings from this study indicate that the few persons with disabilities who were employed were mainly done as a part of the social corporate responsibility of the businesses.

The employers interviewed acknowledged that there are a number of additional factors associated with employers not hiring or seeking to hire more persons with disabilities. These include the lack of supports currently available to employers to ensure successful employment outcomes, a high potential for work-related injuries on the part of employees with disabilities, and the additional attention, instruction, and supervisions such employees would likely need.

As shown in Figure 7, participating employers had several ideas on how to improve the employment of persons with disabilities in Bhutan. These related to enhancing workplace accessibility, actively seeking out persons with disabilities to hire as a form of corporate responsibility, and more effectively supporting persons with disabilities on the job. There was an emphasis on the need for training both to better orient and transition persons with disabilities to the workplace, as well as for employers, support staff, coworkers, and supervisors to learn how to more effectively make accommodations and ensure necessary supports. Another theme that emerged concerned a need to change the attitudes of



employers with respect to the value of employees with disabilities and the need to take corporate social responsibility by employing persons with disabilities.

## Conclusion

It is apparent from the results of this survey that there is a need for significant change to be made if employers in Bhutan are to effectively support the employment of larger numbers of citizens with disabilities and ensure that their basic human right to employment is respected. At the societal level there is a need for attitudinal change on the part of employers and the society at large and the recognition that persons with disabilities have the potential to become as skilled, productive and successful employees as their coworkers without disabilities. Bhutan definitely needs to work on the alignment of policy and practices related to the persons with disabilities with that of the much-cherished societal values. There is also a great need to improve the accessibility of workplaces as well as to provide training for employers on how to effectively support persons with disabilities in the workplace.

## Acknowledgements

This research was funded by a Global Challenges Research Grant from UK Official Development Assistance, administered by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC ES/S004319/1).

We gratefully acknowledge our fieldwork team from Royal Thimphu College: Vanlallawmkimi (“Kimi”), Dip Raj Pradhan, Dago Palden, Jamyang Pelmo, Tshering Wangchuk, and Ura Sonam Tshewang. They collected data during the notorious monsoon season in Bhutan, fell in flooded rice paddies, and narrowly avoided dangerous landslides while still maintaining their sense of humor and dedication to improving the lives of persons with disabilities in Bhutan.

We were also supported by the following people and organizations in locating and contacting persons with disabilities in Bhutan and supporting the project in general: Dorji Norbu, Kinley Phytsho, Thinley Wangmo, Tamiki Nakishima (Bussi-En), Ability Bhutan Society, Sonam Yangden (Bhutan Foundation), Draktsho Vocational Training Centre, Tashi Choden, Gaden Chopel, Karma Lhamo, Phurpa Wangchuk, Chimi Lhamo, Beda Giri, Jayashree, Brian McDonough, Pooja Lepcha, Tshering Yangden, Bishnu Mishra, Phensem, and the Disabled Persons Organisation of Bhutan.

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