

INTERVENTIONS WITH IMPACT:

Community Inclusion Coordinators in Bhutan



Dr. Christopher J. Johnstone
University of Minnesota¹

Dr. Matthew J. Schuelka
University of Minnesota & Fora Education



¹ Corresponding author: john4810@umn.edu

Introduction

Finding rewarding work and meaningful social participation is an important aspect of community living for all adults, including those with disabilities. Worldwide, aspirational initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals call for “meaningful work” while Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness Index examines important facets of life such as time use and living standards. The context of disability-inclusive employment and social participation varies widely around the world, and yet similar themes exist. For example, in contexts as diverse as North Americaⁱ and South Asia,ⁱⁱ legal structures exist to protect the human rights of persons with disabilities, yet social exclusions and social stigmatization still prevent many people with disabilities from finding meaningful work and meaningful participation in their communities. Despite efforts toward individual rights and collective happiness, persons with disabilities remain among the poorest and most unemployed population groups in the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

In Bhutan, a national disability rights policy is only just beginning to be enacted. The Kingdom of Bhutan was a relatively early signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD),^{iv} although was one of the last countries to ratify the CRPD. In Bhutan, national policy focuses heavily on collective happiness dimensions and development philosophy, called Gross National Happiness (GNH), and all policies must first be approved by the GNH Commission before implementation. According to the Bhutan National Policy for Persons with Disabilities,^v persons with disabilities have a right to education (which is a right for all Bhutanese citizens), early intervention, health care (a right for all Bhutanese citizens), social protection, family decision-making, justice, accessible transportation, and accessible information communication technology (ICT).

While the National Disability Policy does not specifically give a right to employment or social participation, the policy does compel the Royal Government to provide the following (Section 9):

- **Incentives for businesses to employ persons with disabilities**
- **Encourage inclusive employment settings**
- **Self-employment and entrepreneurship programs**
- **Vocational training**
- **Equitable pay and working conditions**
- **Promotion of sheltered and supported employment**

The National Disability Policy also called for access for persons with disabilities to religious sites, cultural festivals, sports and recreational facilities, and public infrastructure; as well as building public disability awareness and inclusion campaigns.

Any national human rights policy is aspirational and not necessarily reflective of resources and realities in countries, but it does signal governmental values and intent.^{vi} We believe that Bhutan’s disability policy represents a significant leap forward for the rights of persons with disabilities in the country. While we do not support segregated settings for education and employment that are suggested as viable settings in Bhutan’s disability policy act – such as sheltered employment or special schools – on the whole this policy is largely inclusive and participatory in its approach.

The project that is reflected in this report was meant to respond to the challenges of inclusive employment and social participation in Bhutan, and to provide research that backs effective impact initiatives that can support the Royal Government of Bhutan to realize the promise of the National Disability Policy. In 2019, the University of Minnesota, Royal Thimphu College, and the University of Birmingham initiated the project “Understanding, Developing, and Supporting Meaningful Work for Youth with Disabilities: Networks, Communities, and Transitions,”² The project sought to survey and share the current reality for inclusive employment and social participation for young adults with disabilities in Bhutan; provide advocacy, coordination, and interventions to support increased awareness and activity in this area; and also work towards sustained support and awareness for inclusive employment and social participation for young adults with disabilities around the world – particularly in countries with limited resources and that are significantly rural in nature. The first intervention was a grants scheme that provided direct funds to persons with disabilities, which provided resources that could be used for professional development, entrepreneurship and self-employment investments (i.e., tools or supplies), or further training and education. This intervention is the subject of other published reports.^{vii,viii} The second intervention was a systems-based approach of coordination focused on disability-inclusive employment. This report provides information on the pilot Community Inclusion Coordinator (CIC) program – an employee group funded by the project grant aimed at understanding the impact of formal coordinator positions in a society such as Bhutan. Coordinators in this project focused on listening to, supporting, advocating for, and co-navigating employment, social participation, and entrepreneurial activities with persons with disabilities. The following section will provide an overview of the coordinator role. This Impact Report concludes with data from reflection interviews with coordinators and recommendations for the initiation of this role supported by the government.

A Systems Approach

The Community Inclusion Coordinator (CIC) positions had an explicit systems-focused approach. Rather than focus on the impairments or disabilities of persons interested in employment and entrepreneurial activities, CICs focused their efforts on making connections in communities, seeking pathways and opportunities for employment that had not yet existed, and advocating for change in public and private organizations. None of the three CICs employed in this pilot had backgrounds in rehabilitation or special education. Rather, the three CICs were selected for positions because of their community contacts, empathetic listening style, and motivation to advocate for community inclusion for persons with disabilities. The CICs received brief in-country and out-country training (provided at the University of Minnesota)^{ix} on person-centered planning and community advocacy from the United States’ perspective, and were supported by project personnel in the UK and the USA throughout their employment. The CICs were originally planned to be 12-month paid positions, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic these positions were extended to 18 months. The focus of the CIC role and their areas of impact are as follows:

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Focus of Impact for the Community Inclusion Coordinators



EMPLOYMENT

EDUCATIONAL
INCLUSIONENTREPRENEURIAL
OPPORTUNITIESCOMMUNITY
PARTICIPATION

Each CIC in the pilot worked with approximately 10 to 15 young adults with disabilities. Our project was specifically targeted at youth and young adults aged 16 to 30. CICs engaged with grant winners from the afore-mentioned grants scheme, known persons with disabilities in the greater Thimphu area and beyond, and a few students with disabilities at Royal Thimphu College that were provided with a scholarship as part of this project. Coordination always began with a discussion on the desires and dreams of the person with a disability. Similar to the “Person-Centered Planning” model,^x CICs spent much of their time attempting to connect persons with disabilities with opportunities that both reflected the person’s interests and could provide sustainable employment or entrepreneurial income. Coordinators also spent time in the community evaluating worksites that might not be supportive or empowering for new employees with disabilities. In general, the role of the coordinator was open-ended but had clear goals. Coordinators could meet with or engage with any community members they wished, but their conversations always needed to focus on community and workplace inclusion. Reflections by the three project CICs are summarized below. These summaries are organized into an approach we call the “Seven C’s” that help identify the reasons why coordinators were successful. These Seven C’s provide detail and further context on how a systems-based, inclusion-focused coordination position can support employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Navigating Inclusion Through Incorporation of the ‘Seven Cs’

Interviews with three of the CICs produced rich findings that informed how a systems-based, inclusion-focused coordination approach was successful in Bhutan that could be transferable to other settings. In these interviews, coordinators explained how they navigated community connections, made advocacy proclamations, and sewed together connections of supportive community members who set aside preconceived notions about disabilities. Employers or clients eventually benefitted from new employees or new services provided by entrepreneurs with disabilities.

Community
Mobilization

Compassion



Convincing



Communication



Creativity

Capacity-
BuildingCare
(indirect)

- **Community Mobilization** – CICs focused efforts on raising awareness and developing advocacy networks for disability-inclusive employment in communities. The CICs assisted their clients in identifying community resources, and facilitated both conceptually bringing their clients to those resources, and also mobilizing the community to conceptually meet the person with a disability where they were.
- **Compassion** – Acknowledging existing barriers of stigmatization and exclusion compassionately by the CICs allowed for a better understanding of new opportunities that may arise and how to access these with confidence.
- **Convincing** – Businesses and individual employers often have preconceived stereotypes about the capabilities of youth with disabilities as employees. Part of a coordinator's role was to convince businesses of the value of their prospective employees.
- **Communication** (with persons with disabilities) – CICs worked to understand the motivations and aspirations of youth with disabilities before presenting options or opportunities is crucial to success. This was the person-centered planning and self-determination model that was supported by the project.
- **Creativity** - Matches between youth aspirations and available opportunities are rarely perfect. Instead, CICs played an important role in creatively matching opportunities and aspirations by negotiating in both communities and with youth themselves about how to pursue new avenues of employment.
- **Capacity-Building** - Although CICs cannot possibly know all skills needed for all jobs, they helped build the capacity of would-be applicants by supporting communication skills, connecting youth to further training opportunities, and identifying strengths to build upon the capabilities that already exist in youth with disabilities.
- **Care (indirect)** - CICs were not direct service providers. Rather, they were *connectors* who cared for and advocated for youth with disabilities to be included in employment and entrepreneurial activities in their communities.

The Impact of the Coordinators on the Lives of Persons with Disabilities

CICs supported social inclusion by providing the glue that connects multiple elements of the system together.

In terms of direct impact – with the assistance of the project micro-grant intervention scheme, training and workshops, and an Employment Assessment Toolkit that was also developed as part of this project – the CICs were able to assist persons with disabilities in gaining full employment in an existing business, discovering meaningful social participation in their communities, starting their own businesses, increase their self-advocacy and self-determination skills, discover new hobbies; and learn more about themselves and their dreams, goals, and preferences. The CICs from the

project wrote their own reflections on working with their various clients. Below we will provide two accounts from the CIC's perspective. In the excerpts below, we have underlined some of the key impacts that the CIC brought to the case, providing support and services for the client that were not there before, as well as some of the key activities that the CIC employed in their role.

Case Study 1: Baking with Tshering, as told by Coordinator 1

The journey of mentorship with Tshering³ started in October 2020. I met her for the first time during the Micro-Grant Awarding ceremony. She seemed very calm yet very excited for the event. After the award ceremony, I went to her, introduced myself and learned a little bit about her. I also got to meet her father. On the same day, I planned to meet her soon to follow through her action plan - to start her Baking Business with the grant she received.

Before we kicked off with the purchase of the essentials, we had our first big meeting to lay out her plans. We also gave ourselves a week's time to study the market. The biggest purchase was going to be the Oven. Tshering had to strategically plan on buying all the essential items from the principal fund. Tshering's parents were very supportive to help her in this process. They collectively found a very good oven for a reasonable price. To give her an extra boost of encouragement, I assisted her for the first essential shopping. Before we purchased the items, we visited several big Marts and Wholesale retailers to compare the prizes of the goods.

After doing so, we bought all the basic goods to start with cupcakes and donuts. Everything was going to be on an experiment basis so we were very careful not to overbuy any one single item. As this was Tshering's first baking commercially, we also made sure to secure enough fund for plan B and plan C if incase the first plan doesn't work. We as a team decided to play very safe.

Tshering made her first batch of baked goods and used her mother's restaurant as an outlet to sell them. It was very encouraging to hear from Tshering that the baked goods sold really fast – within an hour. So, Tshering started baking in larger quantities. As she was baking every day, she was encouraged to note down the daily pattern of sale. Over the period of few weeks Tshering also started making new items as well as experimenting with icing and sprinkles on the muffins and donuts. She said it was very interesting to note that different baked items attracted different customers. After a few batches of muffins, Tshering also started labelling her products with date of manufacture and ingredients in the baked items as she started packaging them. The labels were carefully pasted on the packages.

As a part of learning and understanding business, Tshering agreed to note down the expenditure cost and profit earned. Tshering did it very sincerely. It indeed seems like an extra encouragement to do better and proper management of the resources. From the full grant money (Nu.35, 000), Tshering only used Nu. 19,000 approximately. The remaining money (~ Nu.16, 000) is carefully secured. She has been purchasing the new raw materials from the profit she is making.

³ Pseudonym

Tshering was very lucky to be able to bake and sell her goods even during the second national lockdown [from COVID-19]. Being located near a convenience store, she received orders for her baked items on a daily basis. She made over Nu.5000 profit⁴, just during the lockdown. Today, Tshering is popular amongst her neighbors, friends and her customers. She also receives private orders from them.

Working and knowing Tshering over 5 months now, I don't think my connection would end with the project. Meeting Tshering also got me a chance to meet with her family. Other than Tshering, I spent the most time with her mother who runs the restaurant and received treats from her. I learned about Tshering's story and her life story from her mum I heard only positive things about Tshering from her mother. I could sense a lot of support to Tshering from her mother and her family. After a few weeks I learned that Tshering's younger brother also has a disability and Tshering takes complete responsibility of taking care of him, more than her mother. I was really touched by this.

Case Study 2: Supporting Karma and Manoj in College, as told by Coordinator 2

Mentoring Manoj and Karma⁵ has been one of the most crucial parts of my experience as a coordinator. The mentoring journey started with getting to know the boys really well. It took quite some time for both of them to open up to me. Karma took a longer time to warm up than Manoj. Despite being in the same environment and in similar situations, mentoring two of them, gave me completely different experiences. They are very different in their needs, character, strengths and passion. I had to learn strategies and ways to work with both of them. This is when person-centered planning came in very handy. Manoj aims to become a self-advocate and work in media. Karma wants to become a Dzongkha language teacher. It took careful planning for both of them to acquire skills needed to help them be able to transition into their dream jobs.

Talking about transition, as Karma was already in his second year of college when I first met him, he said had gotten used to the college as a person with visual impairment and was comfortable. However, it was Manoj's first year (and first semester) in the college. It was quite challenging for him to adjust. It was Manoj's first time staying away from home, and sharing a room with a stranger. Manoj also experienced difficulties with food and his classes. With a role as a mentor, I had to carefully guide him navigate through all the challenges he was facing. Effective and over-communication was the key. As a mentor, I also had to be the bridge between them, the administration and most importantly with their teachers. It was only a matter of effective communication and some time that Manoj became well-adjusted to the college environment and also started doing well.

At the beginning of the new semester, we sat down to set goals together. Manoj set his goal to invest on his personal development and Karma set his to become more independent. Over time, in a couple of months, the outcomes and changes could be seen; not drastic changes but subtle improvements – most in terms of successful transition – from school to college. As the coordinator I hope that some of the activities and exposures they received from the mentoring program will helped them prepare for

⁴ Approximately US\$70 in 2021.

⁵ Pseudonyms

their next transition (after college) as well. I was very happy to see some of the students that were part of the exposure session that I led become friends with Karma and Manoj. I was told that these students reach out to Karma and Manoj occasionally and hang out with them. I was very happy to meet both of their roommates a couple of times. I could clearly make that they were very supportive and accommodating.

Mentoring both of them didn't stop with only working with them. It also required communicating with each of their teachers, college administration, roommates, class representatives, residence assistants, families and guardians. The most important entity that needed effective communication was the student's teachers. For some of the teachers, it was their first time having a student with a disability in their class. It was helpful to share general, basic information with them. It was also useful for teachers to share their experiences with one another internally. Having an international teacher in the group with a lot of experiences with students with disabilities (back at her home university) was useful for other teachers to hear stories and experiences and learn from it.

I really enjoyed working with both of them. Both of them taught me directly and indirectly – to appreciate life, be patient, and be grateful and passionate about one's goals and dreams. I wouldn't end my mentor-mentee relationship with both of them as the project ends but continue touching base and keep being friends and provide guidance if they need.

As evidenced by the two case study testimonials above – two out of dozens of such testimonials – the role of the CIC was vital to the success of the person with a disability. The CIC provided structure, support, and facilitation to help the person with a disability meaningfully engage in their community. They worked with their clients as well as the client's families. The CICs also worked with other community members – teachers, peers, neighbors – to help facilitate inclusion.

Conclusions

An important finding of this intervention is that Community Inclusion Coordinators did not need a specific background in therapy, rehabilitation, social work, or special education. Rather, CICs were successful in their work because they maintained a spirit of advocacy, were able to work across stakeholder groups, and listened carefully to the aspirations of the persons with disabilities with whom they worked. The Seven Cs listed above represent the ways in which CICs focused their efforts.

An important lesson learned from this project as a whole is that both inclusion and employment opportunities are context-driven. In the Bhutanese setting in which the project took place, there is little policy or financial support for disability employment initiatives, so youth with disabilities are often forced to advocate for themselves or take up the narrow set of vocational opportunities offered in schools, whether or not those opportunities align with their interests. In this case, CICs played a central role in disrupting assumptions about the capabilities of youth with disabilities. They did so through an **eighth and over-arching "C": Connection**. This project demonstrated that employment opportunities are not always linear or predictable, but rely on connections between employers with specific needs and would-be employees with talents that can be leveraged if workplaces are accessible. These connections rarely occur naturally, but can be facilitated.

Through community mobilization, compassionate engagement, convincing advocacy, open communication, creative problem-solving, capacity-building, and indirect care, coordinators in this project demonstrated that connections for employment could be made between those who had previously not considered the benefits of disability-inclusive employment and community members who were seeking meaningful work.

We recommend that the Community Inclusion Coordinator position be implemented and supported by Government.

The CIC intervention has demonstrated that the coordinator position plays a vital role in facilitating meaningful employment and community engagement for persons with disabilities in society. Because of additional challenges and barriers that persons with disabilities face in society – stigmatization, discrimination, physical access, conceptual access – persons with disabilities need equitable support so that they may fully realize their rights.

At issue are the frequently absent set of social services that are available to support adults with disabilities in society. These services, if they exist at all, are most often a mixture of public and private agencies and organizations. The CICs provide a crucial navigation of these services, advocating for their clients and helping coordinate what is available. The CICs also help to fill in the gaps of social support services, particularly in transition from school to adult life. We recommend that the Royal Government of Bhutan, as well as any government around the world, implement a CIC role and fully support them. As evidenced by our pilot program, if a CIC role exists in society, persons with disabilities are more likely to be meaningfully engaged in their community and also more likely to economically participate in their community.



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Project Personnel:

Matthew Schuelka, *University of Minnesota & Fora Education* (Principal Investigator)
Christopher Johnstone, *University of Minnesota*
Brian Aberly, *University of Minnesota*
Renata Ticha, *University of Minnesota*
Ura Sonam Tshewang, *Royal Thimphu College*
Kezang Sherab, *Royal University of Bhutan*
Paul Lynch, *University of Glasgow*
Luca Mannocchi, *University of Birmingham*
Sarah Benson, *University of Birmingham*

Community Inclusion Coordinators:

Bhuwan Kafley
Tashi Yetsho
Ura Sonam Tshewang
(Vijay Gurung)
(Dechen Pelden)

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