

## INTERVENTIONS WITH IMPACT:

# Microgrants to Support Entrepreneurship, Education, and Employment for Persons with Disabilities in Bhutan



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## Executive Summary

Located within a suite of interventions in a large-scale, multi-year project, a microgrant program was initiated in Bhutan in 2020 and 2021. The project – titled “Understanding, Developing, and Supporting Meaningful Work for Youth with Disabilities in Bhutan” and funded by the UK Global Challenges Research Fund – sought to explore innovative and inclusive solutions to the issues of employment and meaningful participation in society for persons with disabilities.

**In terms of tangible benefits, our microgrant program demonstrated that microgrants helped participants earn income, start businesses, learn new skills, receive full-time jobs, and sustain basic living conditions.**

**The results of the microgrant program in Bhutan provides evidence that microgrants are an effective microfinance intervention for persons with disabilities.** Our microgrant participants used the additional funds to start businesses, seek employment training and life skills development courses, and generate income including gaining full-time employment. With the support of Community Inclusion Coordinators, in tandem with receiving microgrant funding, participants experienced tangible and intangible benefits.

**In terms of intangible benefits that contribute to Gross National Happiness, our microgrant program demonstrated that microgrants helped participants feel more confident about themselves, explore their interests and identities, recognize their contribution to their communities, plan for the future, and assess their needs and locate resources.**

We supported 10 individuals with a disability and 2 small groups of persons with disabilities with a maximum microgrant of 50,000 Bhutanese Ngultrum (Nu.), the equivalent of about US\$655 / £500 per grant. These microgrant participants worked with Community Inclusion Coordinators to create business plans, set goals and planning targets, and locate necessary resources in their

communities. The participants created a wide variety of income-generating activities. Some participants used their additional resources for entrepreneurship activities, others for training that led to additional income, and some used the microgrant funds for more basic needs such as food, transportation, and household goods. The COVID-19 pandemic occurred during the microgrant program, which presented a significant challenge. Nonetheless, **our microgrant program produced the following tangible results:**

- Nu. 74,145 in income for 5 participants (aggregate)
- 2 full-time jobs
- 2 people received basic living expenses / poverty alleviation
- 2 groups of students (and their schools) received computers and multimedia equipment for training

Microgrant participants also reported that they gained important skills during the program. **The list of skills learned as a direct result of the microgrant, as indicated by our participants, include:**

- Computing and IT skills
- Printing skills
- Digital design skills
- Communication and language skills
- Marketing skills
- Food preparation and packaging skills
- Numeracy and accounting skills
- Weaving and craft-making skills
- Graphic design skills

**There were also important intangible gains experienced by our participants.** These included:

- Increased confidence and happiness
- Able to begin to support self and others such as family, friends, and community
- Able to provide a service and benefit to the community, sense of pride
- Increased sense of self-worth
- Increased motivation to be more active and engaged in the community
- Inspired to learn more, do more, contribute more, build larger projects

## Introduction<sup>i</sup>

Bhutan is a small country located in the Eastern Himalaya. The topography of Bhutan ranges from lowland jungles in the south that touch the Assamese plains of India and 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.

In 1959, Bhutan embarked on a path towards modern economic development with the First Five-Year Plan. Since then, great strides in modern healthcare, education, and infrastructure have been made in Bhutan. That being noted, Bhutan is still relatively low in terms of development, ranking 129th in the Human Development Index.<sup>ii</sup> Bhutan is known for Gross National Happiness (GNH), an alternative development philosophy that is an alternative to using macro-economic indicators to evaluate national development in favor of a more holistic and sustainable focus on social, cultural, and environmental happiness.

The conceptualization of ‘disability’ in Bhutan has evolved through the introduction of modern institutions such as education and healthcare. In Bhutanese society and culture, disability has traditionally been understood 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 Buddhist conceptualization of disability has blended with more modern views of medical pathology, social models, and human rights initiatives.<sup>iii</sup> This does not assume that ‘modernity’ is inherently positive for persons with disabilities. The introduction of modern schools and access to modern healthcare has also introduced social stratification, inequity, and ability-sorting into a Bhutanese society that – while never perfectly equal – had a large degree of equality built into its Buddhist socio-cultural ethos.

Students with disabilities attending mainstream schools in Bhutan are a more recent phenomenon.<sup>iv</sup> Many children with disabilities are out of school, mainly because parents do not want to send their children with disabilities to school citing an unfriendly school environment and bullying, a lack of individualized and accommodative curriculum, lack of trained teachers, inaccessible infrastructure, and a lack of sufficient positive outcomes and utility of going to school.<sup>v</sup> Nearly 85% of persons with disabilities have never attended school in Bhutan or attended only for a short while.<sup>vi</sup> However, societal attitudes 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.”<sup>vii</sup> 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.<sup>viii</sup>

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.

Linked with education access, participation, and outcomes; meaningful economic and social participation of adults 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.<sup>ix</sup> This is clearly an undercount. Most persons with disabilities in rural settings are “isolated and inactive.” This indicates that most persons with disabilities do not participate in meaningful economic and social activities and that they are dependent on their families and friends. Earlier research, 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.<sup>x</sup>

Bhutan has an overall unemployment rate of 5%, but it is very uneven as over 28% of working-age young adults are unemployed.<sup>xi</sup> There is lack of unemployment data for persons with disabilities. The report on the Population and Housing Census of Bhutan does not mention anything about the unemployment rate of persons with disabilities. For instance, the Draktsho Vocational Institutes, Wangsel Institute for the Deaf, and Muenselling Institute for the Visually Impaired have been providing some vocational skills to help persons with disabilities to find paid work.

There are very few resources available in Bhutan for persons with disabilities to avail in terms of start-up capital, tuition scholarships to attend post-secondary education and training, or a social safety net beyond basic universal healthcare. There is also very little support for persons with disabilities to learn employment skills, business management, and self-advocacy skills; and no supports for employers to understand and provide inclusive workplace accommodations. These are problems our project sought to address.

### ***The Work of This Project***

The work of this four-year project – “Understanding, Developing, and Supporting Meaningful Work for Youth with Disabilities in Bhutan”<sup>xii</sup> – was to both understand the current situation of youth and young adults with disabilities in Bhutan in a more significant way, as well as to implement community interventions to support persons with disabilities to gain meaningful employment, education, and social opportunities. A nationwide survey<sup>xiii</sup> and economic analysis<sup>xiv</sup> was performed in Phase One of the project, as well as activities to better understand the lived-experience of persons with disabilities in Bhutan through a variety of qualitative data collection modes.<sup>xv</sup> A documentary film was produced called *Dreams of Birds Flying in the Sky*, directed by Arun Bhattarai, and featured the stories and experiences of persons with disabilities in Bhutan. We also created an online training and resource hub called Disability-Inclusion Resources for Employment, Coaching, and Training (DIRECT).<sup>xvi</sup>

Through this project, Royal Thimphu College hired Community Inclusion Coordinators (CICs) to support persons with disabilities as they sought technical training and post-secondary learning opportunities, as well as mainstream employment and entrepreneurial activities.<sup>xvii</sup> In addition, the project team offered workshops and trainings at Royal Thimphu College, an employment skills assessment, as well as community outreach throughout Bhutan. We identified an additional 10 'Inclusion Champions' throughout Bhutan and gave them additional training and tools to further their own initiatives. Both the CICs and Inclusion Champions received a two-week training at the University of Minnesota, USA, as well as remained connected and supported in their community work by Royal Thimphu College, Bhutan.

A major initiative in Phase Two of our project was offering microgrants to persons with disabilities to support employment, training, and social initiatives. The maximum awarded grant was Nu.50,000, with a total grant budget of Nu.500,000.<sup>xviii</sup> There were no specific criteria for the microgrants, as we wanted to understand what would actually be desired and useful by persons with disabilities in Bhutan through iterative design, rather than assume what we thought was needed. The general philosophy of the microgrants was an emphasis on entrepreneurship, customized employment, and employment training opportunities. The amount of money that was offered was not life-altering but was enough that a seed investment could be made in supporting a person with a disability to embark down a path of meaningful employment and social participation in their communities. There was no expectation of repayment of the microgrant – this was *not* microcredit – and we also decided that if the funds were misused that we would not pursue repayment, choosing to view that as data to inform our understanding of the use of microgrants. However, there was no misuse of funds and every participant of a microgrant put their funds to good use.

The CICs – with additional support from the Inclusion Champions – served as mentors and facilitators to the microgrant participants; and helped participants in self-discovery and work interest exploration, performing community needs assessments, developing business plans, assessing their employment readiness, and implementing SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals. The work and impact of the CICs was crucial in the success of the microgrants and made a significant impact on the lives of persons with disabilities in general. The microgrants would not have been successful without the CICs.<sup>xix</sup>

Beneficiaries of the microgrants experienced both tangible and intangible benefits. Most of the grant participants that created entrepreneurship opportunities through the use of additional funds were able to earn some money that both benefitted them as well as their families and communities. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020, some of our grant participants did experience some economic setbacks, including difficult market situations and an inability to obtain certain imported goods and raw materials. Despite these unforeseen challenges, the intangible benefits were significant. Our grant participants experienced an increase in confidence and happiness, the ability to support themselves and their families/communities, an increased sense of self-worth, increased motivation; and were inspired to learn more, do more, contribute more, and build larger projects for additional funding opportunities. These findings and their wider implications will be presented in this report.

## Research on Microgrants and Impact for Persons with Disabilities

The use of microfinance, such as microcredit or microloans, has been used to help marginalized persons where traditional banking does not, or will not, provide support and there are very few resources or start-up capital available. While the use of microfinance or equivalent can be found throughout human history, a recent institutional use of microfinancing was chronicled by Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. The use of microfinance flourished in development practice in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century and there are many success stories,<sup>xx</sup> but microfinance has also faced significant criticism with issues such as predatory lending, exorbitant penalties and interest fees, and mixed-evidence of impact or small effect sizes.<sup>xxi</sup> Because of these issues, there was a shift in attention towards schemes such as direct cash transfer and microgrants. Microgrants are small amounts of money given to develop income-earning activities, or personal or community impact initiatives.<sup>xxii</sup> Often, supporting individuals to generate income goes hand-in-hand with personal and community impact, which our microgrant program demonstrates.

For persons with disabilities, microfinance and microgrants can be particularly useful because there is often very little opportunity for capital-investment from traditional financial institutions and societal expectations for the economic participation of persons with disabilities is significantly low. In fact, persons with disabilities are often excluded from even microcredit schemes because of discrimination.<sup>xxiii</sup> There is a lack of information and understanding about the benefits of microfinance and the capabilities of persons with disabilities from both the microfinance institutions as well as from persons with disabilities and Disabled Persons Organizations (DPOs) about available microfinance schemes.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Microgrants are an opportunity to circumvent institutional microcredit discrimination of persons with disabilities. While microgrants can sometimes be framed as charity or a philanthropic resource transfer, providing a microgrant for a person with a disability generally has entrepreneurial and income-generating intent in that it is meant to be a seed for socio-economic growth and participation. This can also mean the use of microgrants to provide additional supports and healthcare needs that persons with disabilities require in order to enable them to be socio-economic participants.<sup>xxv</sup> The use of microgrants has been found to have direct positive impact on both persons with disabilities and their communities.<sup>xxvi</sup> However, one issue that arises with microgrants is sustainability, in that often these kinds of microfinance schemes are one-off payments and do not provide a sustainable source of income or business capital. Microgrants should be viewed as enhancements that compliment systemic community economic investment, rather than as a replacement for systemic public and private-sector investment in marginalized populations such as persons with disabilities.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The intent behind microgrants, as mentioned above, is often entrepreneurship. This was a major focus of our microgrant scheme in Bhutan as well, particularly because of the Bhutanese context where there are very few large employers or industries and most of the economic activity in Bhutan is ad hoc, agricultural, cottage and small industry that account for 95% of all economic activity in the country.<sup>xxviii</sup> In many cases, economic activity in Bhutan does not involve the use of cash at all, but rather based on a more traditional model of goods and services exchange. Therefore, it is important to consider local context and whether or not a push for entrepreneurship and self-employment makes sense and does not shirk the responsibilities

of government, employers, and industries in providing inclusive employment.<sup>xxxix</sup> It is also worth noting that not every person with a disability wants to be independently employed or own a small business.

That being said, entrepreneurship and self-employment can provide powerful socio-economic impact for persons with disabilities for those that choose, and have the opportunity, to pursue it. Often, persons with disabilities are excluded from quality, inclusive, education and vocational training that can lead to mainstream inclusive employment<sup>xxx</sup> and, as mentioned above, are often discriminated against from traditional finance and even microfinance investment. Entrepreneurship is not easy for anyone regardless of ability, and often persons with disabilities need additional supports and training and face additional challenges and barriers.<sup>xxxi</sup> As the research literature<sup>xxxii</sup> and evidence from this project demonstrate, it is clear that entrepreneurship and self-employment opportunities afforded by microgrants provide significant tangible and intangible benefits to persons with disabilities, their families, and their communities.

## Microgrant Process

In order to implement our microgrant scheme as part of our larger project, and as a suite of intervention strategies that we implemented in Bhutan, we initiated a public open call for proposals in June 2020 and also at the same time worked with organizations in Bhutan that worked with persons with disabilities to identify potential candidates that could apply for the microgrant. The CICs and Inclusion Champions were also instrumental in supporting microgrant applications and seeking out candidates. The microgrant scheme was run through Royal Thimphu College and managed by college leadership and administration, as well as our project coordinator and co-investigator, Ura Sonam Tshewang.

We provided some description and criteria for the grants, including the following:

*This grant scheme is specifically for an individual person with a disability aged 16 to 30, living in Bhutan, that wishes to use funds for the purpose of supporting employment and other social and economic activities including start-up business capital, school fees and materials, transportation costs, entrepreneurship materials, scribes, assistive technology, support workers, and other related costs associated with increasing the person's social and economic participation in Bhutanese society.*

*The grant money cannot be used for personal use, which includes materials not deemed essential for living and working. The grant money cannot be used by organizations, nor go towards basic costs such as personal food consumption, living expenses (unless part of a justification for social and economic activity), and other personal uses. Grant money must be spent inside of Bhutan.*

*Ideally, the person with a disability themselves will apply for this grant opportunity. However, we will accept applications completed by others on the person with a disability's behalf.*

We also provided the following stipulations:<sup>xxxiii</sup>

*Participants of this grant will be expected to communicate and work with project coordinators and personnel. As a condition of the grant, you agree to be available to be interviewed by the project team and to participate in the research evaluation of this grant scheme. You will be separately asked to complete a research participant consent form, as well as given a participant information sheet. You may also be approached by a documentary filmmaker working on this project. If you wish to be a part of the documentary movie, you will be asked to complete an additional A/V consent form.*

Besides collecting all of the relevant personal details, in the microgrant application we had open sections that included the following:

**Background**

*In this section, provide some background information regarding your experience – personal, educational, economic, etc. Explain some of the difficulties that you have experienced as a person with a disability in Bhutan. You can expand this section as necessary. Expected word length: 500 words.*

**Proposed Use of Fund & Timeline**

*In this section, please explain your proposal in terms of how you will use the grant fund. Provide details regarding proposed activities, including a business plan where appropriate. It is important to include a proposed timeline, as well as to be very clear what your outcomes will be with this fund. You can expand this section as necessary. Expected word length: 500-1000 words.*

**Justification for the Use of Grant Funds**

*In this section, please justify why your proposed activities should be funded. Explain how a grant will help you achieve your personal and professional goals. You can expand this section as necessary. Expected word length: 500-1000 words.*

**Budget**

*In this section, please provide detail as to your proposed budget and how the funds will be used. Only applications that are able to go into detail will be approved. Your budget proposal needs not only the figures, but also justification.*

**Indicators for Success**

*In this section, please give at least 3 indicators to which you will evaluate yourself as having made successful use of these grant funds. For example, a training certificate obtained or a job position maintained because of additional transportation funds. These indicators should be as concrete as possible. You may wish for an indicator to be around, for example, increased self-esteem or self-advocacy. These are okay, but abstract. They need some definition so that you and the project team can evaluate whether or not it has been achieved. For example, an indicator for ‘increased self-advocacy’ could be a certain number of jobs applied for.*

In total, we received over 40 microgrant applications. Our criteria for selection were based on a scoring rubric<sup>xxxiv</sup> and all proposals were reviewed by the leadership of Royal Thimphu College and the multi-partner/multi-country team from our project. Based on the scoring rubrics, a decision meeting with stakeholders, and available funds, we selected 12 proposals – 10 individual proposals and 2 proposals that were a small group applying together. A microgrant award ceremony was conducted at Royal Thimphu College in September 2020.





## The Impact of Microgrants on Persons with Disabilities in Bhutan

We evaluated the impact of the microgrants on the lives of the participants through a variety of methods. The CICs and Inclusion Champions kept in constant contact with the microgrant participants through face-to-face meetings when possible, although given the COVID-19 internal travel restrictions that Bhutan experienced frequently during the time of implementation, much of the communication was through social media messaging apps such as WhatsApp, WeChat, Facebook, and the like. Evaluation 'exit' interviews were conducted for all microgrant participants 12 months after receiving the microgrant (Autumn 2021). One of our microgrant participants sadly passed away during the microgrant implementation phase due to a sudden stroke.

The CICs and Inclusion Champions were working with microgrant participants directly on their planned income-generating and training activities, so the effect of the microgrant itself cannot be separated from the effect of the CICs and Inclusion Champions giving time and attention to the participants. Our other interventions, including the Employment Assessment Toolkit and the creation of the DIRECT online training and resource center, were also administered and used with many of the microgrant participants. Several of our microgrant participants were also featured in the documentary film, *Dreams of Birds Flying in the Sky*.

Our microgrant program was not a randomized control trial. Microgrant participants had a suite of interventions and attention that was given to the microgrant participants. We argue that this 'Hawthorne Effect' or novelty bias is not a drawback, but actually a strength in demonstrating the impact of the microgrants and other accompanying interventions. Our project shows that by giving persons with disabilities extra attention, access to additional resources and capital, and additional support needs and training, they will experience positive tangible and intangible effects.

The remainder of this section will demonstrate the tangible and intangible benefits of offering microgrants to persons with disabilities. We also strongly encourage you to read the book ["I want to achieve more, so](#)

[that I can inspire more people”: Living and Working with a Disability in Bhutan](#) by Ura Sonam Tshewang, Matthew Schuelka, and Bhuwan Kafley, published by Fora Education and Royal Thimphu College.<sup>xxxv</sup> This free, online, book provides a profile of each microgrant participant: their story, their ambitions, their challenges, and their microgrant-enabled initiatives. In the book, we do use the microgrant participants real names (with their permission). In this report, we will refer to the microgrant participants by code designation.

### ***Tangible Benefits on the Lives of Microgrant Participants***

In Table 1 below, we have given the microgrant input amounts per participant, as well as the output or result of the microgrant.

**Table 1. Monetary Inputs and Outputs of Microgrant Participants**

Participant	Initial input	Outputs
MG1	Nu. 50,000 (grocery shop)	Unable to start because of pandemic restrictions but using funds to sustain himself.
MG2	Nu. 30,000 (vegetable shop)	Shifted to trying to sell phone vouchers and dairy products during pandemic lockdown. <b>Because of experience, was able to gain full employment at the Pepsi bottling factory.</b>
MG3	Nu. 50,000 (print shop startup capital)	<b>Income generated: Nu. 18, 000</b>
MG4	Nu. 40,000 (FabLab training)	<b>Received a full-time job (Nu. 15,000/month) as result of training.</b>
MG5	Nu. 50,000 (computers for training)	No direct monetary benefit but benefit in training and technology availability.
MG6	Nu. 30,000 (fruit drying machine)	Unable to start because of pandemic restrictions but using funds to sustain herself.
MG7	Nu. 50,000 (print shop startup capital)	<b>Income generated: Nu. 10,000</b>
MG8	Nu. 21,700 (weaving materials)	<b>Income generated: Nu. 11,000</b>
MG9	Nu. 25,000 (job interest discovery, then food-preparation materials)	<b>Income generated: Nu. 3,145</b>
MG10	Nu. 14,600 (computer for multimedia training)	No direct monetary benefit but benefit in training and technology availability.
MG11	Nu. 50,000 (loom, weaving materials)	<i>Deceased. We gave the money to her family with our condolences.</i>
MG12	Nu. 35,000 (baking materials)	<b>Income generated: Nu. 15,000</b>
<b>TOTAL:</b>	Nu. 446,300	<b>Nu. 74,145 (generated income aggregate for 5 participants)</b> <b>2 full-time jobs</b> <b>2 people received basic living expenses / poverty alleviation</b> <b>2 groups of students (and their schools) received computers and multimedia equipment for training</b>



As can be observed in Table 1, 5 out of 12 participants were able to generate income based on their planned entrepreneurial activities enabled by the microgrant. This means that they earned this money above the awarded amount that went towards raw materials and equipment. In all, just over Nu. 74,000 (US\$900/£750) was earned by individuals through the microgrant program.

Two of the microgrant participant groups did not have income-earning activities as an explicit part of their proposals. These two groups were comprised of upper secondary students in Thimphu and Phuentsholing, respectively, that used their funds to buy additional computers and multimedia equipment. They used this equipment to receive IT and multimedia training courses arranged by the Bhutan Foundation. The computers remain at the schools so that they can serve future students as well.

Another two microgrant participants were able to take their microgrant implementation experiences and turn it into full-time jobs. The first participant (MG2) had received Nu.30,000 to start a small vegetable shop. After obtaining vegetables during the pandemic lockdowns proved to be too challenging and costly, he then turned to selling phone vouchers and dairy goods. While this too proved difficult, MG2's business experiences and resume-boosting activities were able to land him a full-time job at the Pepsi bottling plant in Phuentsholing. In the case of MG4, he used his microgrant funds to receive training at FabLab, which is an IT and design entrepreneurship organization in Thimphu. MG4 was able to use his training experience and turn it into a full-time job at FabLab, buy a car, and has design plans to introduce a smart electronic-enabled walking stick to Bhutan.



*As a result of the microgrant, I could initially set myself up with Fablab. I could sign up for a course to enhance my skills. It helped me come to Thimphu from Mongar. Ultimately it ended up providing me with a job. I get Nu. 15,000 per month as my salary. I also earn extra with the private work that I get from my personal clients. With my salary savings, I could also buy a car. (MG4)*

The COVID-19 pandemic had an adverse effect on our participants, as it did on most people around the world. In Bhutan, the pandemic lockdowns were particularly strict and challenging. Internal movement in Bhutan was stopped for large periods of time, border crossings were halted, and the importation of goods restricted. Several of our microgrant participants were located in the southern border region with India, which was a 'red zone' that was constantly being isolated and quarantined. Because of these challenges, several of our participants had difficulty obtaining planned equipment and raw materials. In particular, this had an adverse effect on MG1 and MG6, but our microgrants were able to help support their basic living conditions which had deteriorated during the lockdowns.

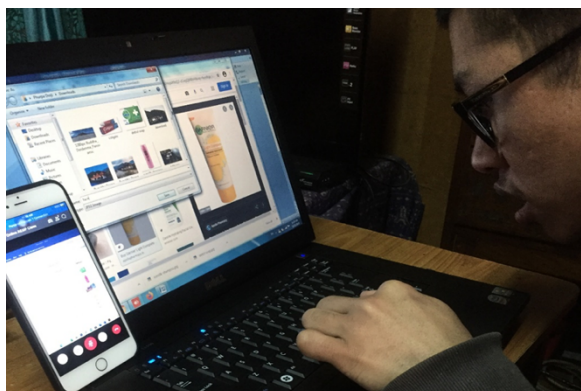


*I added on to my computer skills (I got support from my mentors and I also self-taught myself from watching Youtube videos). I could also improve my communication skills by dealing with a lot of customers. Finally, I got to practice my numeracy and accountancy skills. All these aforementioned skills would come handy in most of the jobs and these new added skills would give me advantage and open up more opportunities. (MG7)*

Participants also expressed that the process of developing a plan to use the microgrant funding, thinking through what was needed to implement that plan, and working with the CICs and Inclusive Champions, allowed them to gain skills that were useful beyond just the immediate microgrant plan. For example, MG8 reported, *"I got to practice my weaving skills. By also having to deal with money, I learned about financial management. I can always use these skills in the future in a similar way."* The list of skills learned as a direct result of the microgrant, as indicated by our participants, include:

- Computing and IT skills
- Printing skills
- Digital design skills
- Communication and language skills
- Marketing skills
- Food preparation and packaging skills
- Numeracy and accounting skills
- Weaving and craft-making skills
- Graphic design skills

These skills were learned through interactions with the CICs, Inclusion Champions, and other community mentors; other businesses and business-owners in the community; parents and family members; teachers; friends; online resources; and connections to schools, NGOs, and DPOs.



*Most importantly, we learned keyboarding skills. As many of us have difficulty communication due to language and speech impairment, we could communicate through typing what we want to communicate. These skills might help us to look for job in future and to express our needs and interest through typing if people do not understand what we communicate orally. (MG5)*

### **Intangible Benefits on the Lives of Microgrant Participants**

The microgrants provided a wide range of significant intangible benefits above and beyond the tangible benefits. Participants reported in summative evaluation interviews:

- An increased confidence and happiness
- More able to begin to support self and others such as family, friends, and community
- More able to provide a service and benefit to the community, sense of pride
- An increased sense of self-worth
- An increased motivation to be more active and engaged in the community
- Inspired to learn more, do more, contribute more, build larger projects



*Getting the grant increased my confidence and I also became more hopeful. I shared about the grant to my neighbors and encouraged them to do something like me. (MG1)*

*I felt very empowered. I felt one way closer to being independent. When I shared about the microgrant to others, they were very happy for me and encouraged me to do well. (MG2)*

*First of all, I became financially independent by getting self-employed. I am also able to support my family to buy essentials with the profit. Finally, I am able to help my brother studying at Paro College of Education [to become a teacher] with pocket money. (MG8)*

Microgrant participants also cited that the microgrant initiatives helped them expand their social and support networks. Participants also mentioned their connection to their CICs and how the project helped them become noticed positively in their communities.



*After I got trained, my mother was very supportive to allow and encouraged me to weave. I am very grateful for the micro-grant as well because it helped me start the business. I am also grateful to the community, especially my neighbor aunty as she guides me when I forget some procedures while weaving. (MG8)*

There were challenges that were reported by the participants. The biggest challenge was the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns in Bhutan. For example, MG4 stated, *"The main challenge has been Covid-19. It has been extremely hard to get the raw materials such as sensors for prototyping of my products,"* and MG7 reports, *"Despite receiving the microgrant resource and setting up the Printing shop, I struggled with less number of customers due to the pandemic. It was also very challenging to get the printing cartridges from Thimphu and other cities as number of vehicles drastically reduced due to the pandemic."* However, beyond the pandemic, other participants reported the inability to access buildings – for example, an embroidery/tailoring center – because of a lack of ramps for wheelchair users. No participant reported any direct disability discrimination from others, but a few participants did mention that their disabilities – physical and otherwise – made their work difficult at times. Another challenge that was mentioned was transportation for goods collection, product delivery, and generally working with vendors and suppliers.

Even though there were challenges, all of the participants reported feel very hopeful about their futures. Many of the microgrant participants were home-bound and inactive, so the experience of receiving a microgrant made them feel positive and encouraged.



*I feel my future will be good. With the start of a printing shop, I could experience being financially stable. I have saved some money from it which I hope to use it productively. I feel with these experiences; I could do something bigger in the future. I aspire to continue doing well. I have few aspirations such as getting a job at the hospital at Dagana or opening a sham shop in Thimphu after the pandemic situation gets better. (MG7)*



## Implications

Through our microgrant program, we were able to demonstrate that a small amount of investment in the lives and livelihoods of persons with disabilities can have a ripple effect that impacts not only individual lives, but also families and communities. The microgrant participants were able to use their funds for a wide variety of projects and initiatives – generating sustainable income in some cases and learning valuable life and employment skills and having more hope for the future in all cases. This was a small program and limited by a fixed budget. However, we believe that it provides significant evidence in support of similar microgrant programs in Bhutan and everywhere around the world. To conclude this report, we highlight the implications of our microgrant program and how to expand similar initiatives around the world.

**Connect Microgrants to Existing Supports and Training Programs.** The success of our microgrant program was largely because it was within a suite of interventions that included Community Inclusion Coordinators (paid) and Inclusion Champions (volunteer) that worked directly with microgrant participants. We recommend that microgrants be paired with other support personnel that exist or could be created in society such as job coaches, mentors, employers, inclusion facilitators, social workers, and case workers. Microgrants could also be connected with technical and vocational education and training (TVET) or other post-secondary education programs and be offered either during training or as a result of training as an incentive. Microgrants are most successful when part of a system of support, rather than as an isolated intervention.

**Include Persons with Disabilities in Existing Microgrant and Capital Start-Up Schemes.** Many existing microgrant and capital investment schemes exclude persons with disabilities from applying, which was also the case in Bhutan. Our microgrant program demonstrates that persons with disabilities will invest and engage in income-generating activities when provided the opportunity. Including persons with disabilities in all microfinance schemes may also benefit society by raising expectations for inclusion of persons with disabilities in meaningful work and social participation.

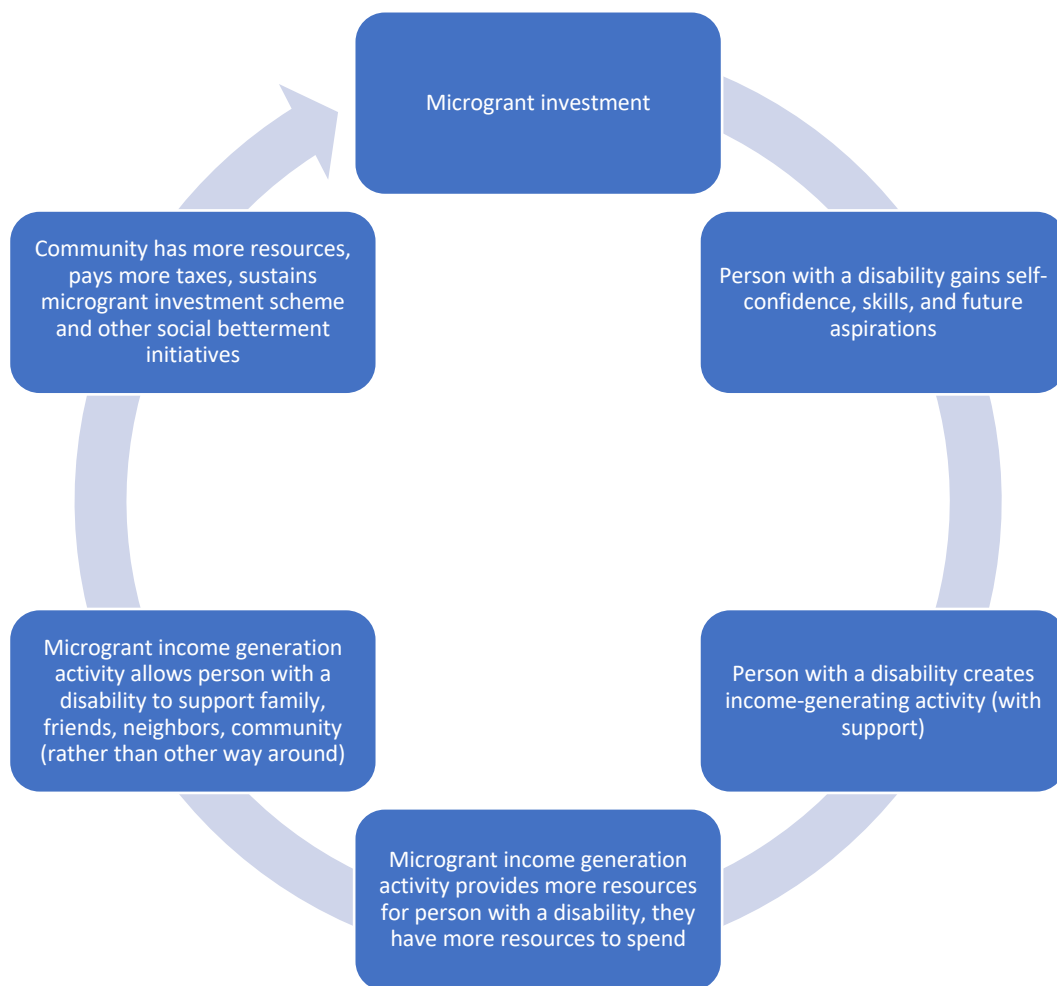
**Governments Should Invest in Persons with Disabilities.** This microgrant program provides evidence that investments of time and capital in persons with disabilities can produce tangible economic results. Rather than engage persons with disabilities through a charity or welfare lens, governments should actively support employment and entrepreneurship for persons with disabilities for the socio-economic benefit of the entire community. We caution, however, that microgrants should not replace government responsibility for the safety and basic needs of its citizens and should not be used as an inexpensive alternative to social services and protections. Rather, grants can be a way to supplement these services to support employment and entrepreneurship. There is still a great need for more basic resources to go into making education and post-secondary education inclusive and effective for persons with disabilities; and ensuring that persons with disabilities have the same legal protections, rights, healthcare access, and social safety net provisions as other citizens. Microgrants offer a way to fill gaps in self-determination around employment searches and self-employment.

**Sustain Microgrant Programs Through a Virtuous Cycle.** By providing persons with disabilities additional resources, our microgrant program demonstrates that it generates value and income for the entire community. Our microgrant participants were not only able to help themselves, but also supported their

family members, neighbors, friends, and the community as a whole. The initial investment in time and resources in a person with a disability provided a ripple of investment that lifted others that have potential to reinvest in their communities, pay more taxes, generate more income, and sustain the virtuous cycle of investment and reinvestment.

The virtuous cycle was our original theory of change when proposing and designing the microgrant program. We are happy to say that the evidence from the program suggests that this theory of change has some validity. A microgrant scheme might not always be so straight-forward, as the figure below presents, but is a worthy governmental investment. Programs should certainly be context specific and iteratively designed. Not all of our microgrant participants' experiences reflected all the elements of the virtuous cycle – at least in this first attempt – but every time new ideas and innovations are attempted, a seed can grow, provided it is given enough attention, energy, and investment.

### Microgrant Investment Theory of Change: The Virtuous Investment Cycle



*Now I feel that I could become Prime Minister! (MG10)*





UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM



Institute on Community Integration  
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

FORA  
E D U C A T I O N

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## End Notes and References

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- <sup>viii</sup> [UNICEF](#)
- <sup>ix</sup> [NSB \[National Statistics Bureau\]](#)
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xxxiii Our microgrant intervention had research ethics approval from the University of Birmingham (ERN\_18-1601) and the National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan (NSB/SDPD/Survey/2019-20/4870).

xxxiv See Appendix A Scoring Rubric for Microgrant Proposals

xxxv Ura Sonam Tshewang, Matthew J. Schuelka, and Bhuwan Kafley. 2022. "I Want to Achieve More So That I Can Inspire More People:" *Living and Working with a Disability in Bhutan*. Thimphu: Royal Thimphu College and Fora Education. <https://www.foraed.com/media-pubs/esrcgcrf-project-bhutan>

## Appendix A: Scoring Rubric for Microgrant Proposals

### Quality Criteria for Grant Proposal Selection

Name of Applicant: \_\_\_\_\_

- 5 = Strongly Agree / Excellent  
 4 = Agree / Good  
 3 = Okay  
 2 = Disagree / Poor  
 1 = Strongly Disagree / Very Poor

Personal Criteria / Background:

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5	Remarks
The age of the candidate is between 16 and 30 years-old.						(Either they are, or they are not)
Has parents/guardians or other family members to support when needed						
Has indicated a good mentor or demonstrated strong self-determination						
Has completed all sections of the proposal to a high standard						
Clearly explained the challenges and difficulties faced						
<b>Total:</b>						

Proposed Use of Fund

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5	Remarks
Proposal is realistic						
Proposal is clearly articulated						
Timeline is realistic						
Timeline is clearly articulated						
Outcomes are clear						
Proposed use of fund represents a novel approach or exciting new direction for persons with disabilities in Bhutan						
Proposed use of fund will benefit community as well as individual						
<b>Total:</b>						

Justification

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5	Remarks
Clearly explained how grant will benefit themselves (and communities)						
Provided a convincing justification for use of funds						
Articulated how money requested is connected to aims, objectives, and outcomes						
<b>Total:</b>						

Indicators for Success

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5	Remarks
Three indicators for success were provided						(Either yes or no)
Indicators are concrete and 'point-at-able'						
<b>Total:</b>						

Budget

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5	Remarks
Budget is realistic						
Budget is below Nu.50,000*						
Applicant is clear about the grant agreements and follow-ups						
<b>Total:</b>						

\* Exceptions are made for well-justified reasons. If you believe justification to be valid, rate highly.

Additional Notes:	<b>TOTAL SCORE (out of 100):</b>	
	<b>Dzongkhag location of applicant:</b>	
	<b>Budget amount requested:</b>	