

“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 J. Schuelka,  
and Bhuwan Kafley

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# INTRODUCTION

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## *Background and Context*

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.<sup>1</sup>

In 1959, Bhutan embarked on a path towards economic modernization 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 129<sup>th</sup> in the Human Development Index.<sup>2</sup> Bhutan is known for Gross National Happiness (GNH), an alternative development philosophy that is an alternative to macro-economic indicators. In the 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.

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 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 Buddhist conceptualization of disability has blended with more modern views of medical pathology, social models, and human rights initiatives. 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. This is especially true for children with severe intellectual and developmental disabilities. 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, and inaccessible infrastructure. Nearly 85% of persons with disabilities have never attended school in Bhutan or attended only for a short while.<sup>3</sup> However, societal attitudes and ways of thinking

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this introduction have been borrowed from other reports and materials related to this project.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Development Programme: <https://hdr.undp.org/en/data>

<sup>3</sup> Kezang Sherab et al., “Opportunities and Challenges of Implementing Inclusive Education in Bhutanese Schools: A Case Study”: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303661279> Title [Opportunities and Challenges of Implementing Inclusive Education in Bhutanese Schools A Case Study](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303661279)

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>4</sup> This policy emphasizes education for youth with disabilities. There are now 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 children with hearing impairment and Muenselling Institute for students with visual impairments, established in 1973), and two Draktsho vocational training centers with a total of nearly 1,000 students.<sup>5</sup> There are also many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Ability Bhutan Society (ABS), Draktsho Vocational Training Centres, Disabled People's 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.<sup>6</sup>

Linked with education access, participation, and outcomes; 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>7</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 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>8</sup>

Bhutan has an overall unemployment rate of 5%, but very uneven as 22.6% of youth (15–24 years) are unemployed.<sup>9</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. 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, Wangsel Institute for the Deaf, and Muenselling Institute for the Visually Impaired have been providing some vocational skills to help

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<sup>4</sup> Gross National Happiness Commission: [https://www.gnhc.gov.bt/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/NPPWD\\_draft\\_23-5-2018.pdf](https://www.gnhc.gov.bt/en/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/NPPWD_draft_23-5-2018.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Education: <http://www.education.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/AES-2020-Final.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF: <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/16991/file/Country%20Profile%20-%20Bhutan.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> National Statistics Bureau: <https://www.nsb.gov.bt>

<sup>8</sup> Mannonchi & Schuelka: <https://www.foraed.com/media-pubs/esrcgrf-project-bhutan>

<sup>9</sup> NSB, *ibid*.

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 if it can be sustained.

### *The Work of This Project*

The work of this two-year project – “Understanding, Developing, and Supporting Meaningful Work for Youth with Disabilities in Bhutan: Networks, Communities, and Transitions” – 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 gain meaningful employment, education, and social opportunities. A nationwide survey and economic analysis 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. A documentary film was produced called *Dreams of Birds Flying in the Sky*, directed by Arun Bhattacharai, and featured the stories and experiences of persons with disabilities in Bhutan.

Through this project, Royal Thimphu College hired Community Inclusion Coordinators to support persons with disabilities as they seek technical training and post-secondary learning opportunities, as well as mainstream employment and entrepreneurial activities. In addition, the project team offered workshops and trainings at Royal Thimphu College, as well as community outreach throughout Bhutan. We identified an additional ten ‘Inclusion Champions’ throughout Bhutan and gave them additional training and tools to further their own initiatives. Both the Community Inclusion Coordinators 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 micro-grants 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>10</sup> It is the recipients of the micro-grants that are featured in this booklet. The reader will see and hear their stories below and will also note the various avenues to which the small amount of additional funding and investment in these persons with disabilities made a significant impact on their lives as well as their communities.

Beneficiaries of the micro-grants experienced both tangible and intangible benefits. Most of the grant recipients that created entrepreneurship opportunities through the use of additional funds were able to turn a profit that both benefitted them as well as their families and communities. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020, some of our grant recipients 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. The reader can note these in the stories throughout this booklet. In summary, our grant recipients experienced an increased confidence and happiness, the ability to support

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<sup>10</sup> In early 2022, at the time of writing, this equates to approximately US\$655 / £500 per grant, with a total budget of US\$6,600 / £5,000.

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 were the findings as reported by the grant recipients. In our evaluation interviews, one recipient told us, “*There was hope that people like me could do something ... the microgrant has changed everything in my life. I’m glad that I can make a change in my society.*” Another said, “*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.*”

There is a Buddhist parable about a Brave Little Parrot, attributed to the famous *Jataka Tales* containing the reincarnation stories of the Buddha.<sup>11</sup> In the story, a parrot encounters a forest fire and tries to put it out itself by dipping its wings in the lake and dropping small amounts of water on the raging fire. The parrot’s effort may be small compared to the larger fire, but still it tries to do what he can. Similarly, for persons with disabilities in Bhutan we were only able to do a small amount, and larger change in society and in the economy will take much more in terms of resources and coordination. Nonetheless, as the reader will see below, we were able to make an impact on these individual lives and communities. Just as the Brave Little Parrot tried to help in the way it could, we believe that we need to start somewhere and prove that even a little support can make a big impact. The stories of our micro-grant recipients may be inspiring, but that is not necessarily the point. What we hope that the reader will gain from reading about the lives and experiences of persons with disabilities in Bhutan is to realize that we can all make a difference in each other’s lives if we are just given an opportunity, set high expectations, and perhaps are given just a little bit of extra support to help us all realize our dreams and aspirations.

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<sup>11</sup> This story is a well-known Buddhist tale, but it is unclear exactly where this is located in *The Jatakas*. Nonetheless, it is frequently re-told, especially to children, and attributed to *The Jatakas*.

# SUK RAJ LEPCHA

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## **Starting a Print Shop**

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Suk Raj has a bundle of energy when he is with his friends. He enjoys their company and often spends his time with them. His interests are playing board games or any other game that suits his abilities and that brings him closer to his circle of friends and people in his community.

When the project personnel first met Suk Raj, he was seeking employment with organizations and actively applying for jobs such as a telephone operator, receptionist, or record keeper. He holds this ambition strongly and has convictions that he would gain experience in this field of work.

With the support of a Community Inclusion Coordinator, Suk Raj proposed to start a print shop in Gesarling, Dagana. He was awarded a micro-grant through the project to set-up his shop. He also received mentoring from the coordinators and support from his community.

After the inception of his print shop, Suk Raj learnt Microsoft office tools and photoshopping. With his higher secondary education qualification, it was enriching and empowering for Suk Raj to explore learning different skills. The Gesarling community supported his initiative to be self-employed and recognized his contributions. With the significant and unforeseen challenge of pandemic and limited scope for market, Suk Raj plans to seek employment and diversify his business ideas.

Suk Raj lives with his uncle who has taken care of him after his parents disowned him at birth. His uncle wishes Suk Raj to become independent and lead his own personal life.

Suk Raj has a keen interest in reading novels and interacting with people.

# TSHEWANG TENZIN

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## **Expanding Massage Business and New Printing Services**

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Tshewang was trained as a massage therapist but lived most of his day at home without work. He sought employment in the hospitality sector, but he could not continue working due to the hardship he encountered living in urban areas with visual impairment. He proposed to start a massage business, which later was converted into both a massage center as well as a print shop in Khaling. He often provides free massage services to people of his community. He aspires to become an excellent masseur and seeks to upgrade his skills. He hopes to help many with his massage therapy.

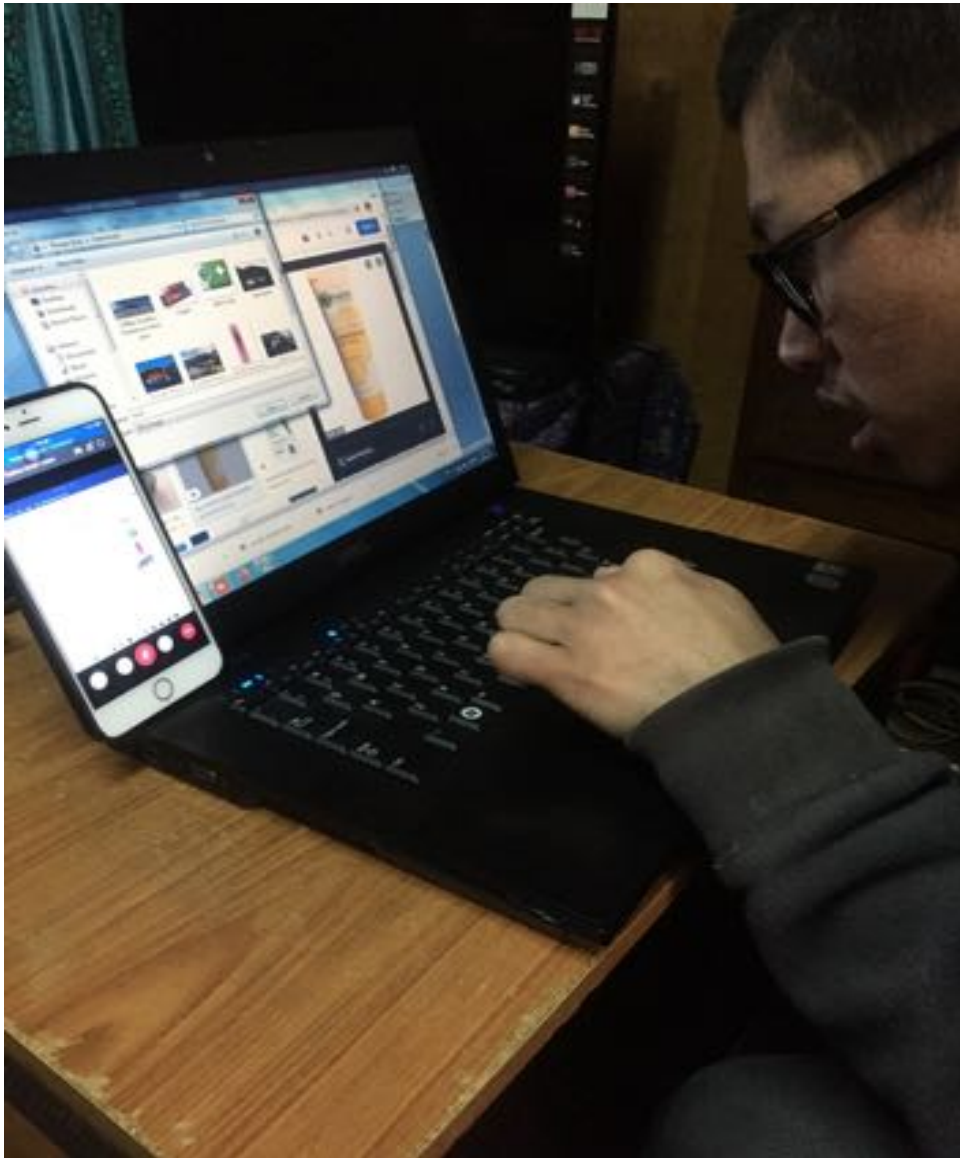
Tshewang has a passion for music and singing. He learnt how to play musical instruments during his schooling at Muenselling Institute [for visual impairment]. Tshewang is polite and soft-spoken and maintains his humility despite his recent success and abilities to support his family. He is also keenly interested in becoming independent and contributing towards community development and welfare.

The members of the Khaling community generously supported him with free shop rental for a year. Since the beginning of his business, Tshewang has been able to provide support for his economically marginalized family. Today, he is a regular earner in the family. He proudly says, “My life changed for the better after I began running my own business.” Tshewang walks eight kilometers every day between his shop and home. During his walks he spends his time singing and carrying out spiritual practices through chanting mantras.

Tshewang has been exploring how to refine his skills in Microsoft Office tools and photoshopping, besides venturing to become a professional massage therapist.

**SIDARTH PRADHAN, SANGAY WANGMO, and  
NGAWANG PEKAR**

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## **Learning New Multimedia Skills**

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Sidarth Pradhan, Sangay Wangmo, and Ngawang Pekar were jointly granted a micro-grant to support their multimedia studies. Together, they are pursuing an eighteen-month diploma in Learning Based AEMP (Ability Enhancement Multimedia Program) offered by AIMS Media through the support of the Bhutan Foundation.

Sidarth Pradhan is currently in grade 10 and attends functional skills classes. He loves to play and learn on the computer and has become quite competent at it. He also loves art. He is very sociable and vocal. If one meets him in person, he does not need an introduction. Sidarth starts introducing himself to any new person he meets in life.

Sangay Wangmo is currently in grade 8 and attends functional skills classes with Sidarth. She's very calm, quiet, and full of smiles. She loves to do art and her dream is to become a fashion designer one day.

Ngawang Pekar studied at Changangkha Middle Secondary School and later transitioned to Draktsho Vocational Training Centre for additional training. He is a very sociable young adult and full of smiles.

Besides their schooling, an online course helped them to enhance their learning through the use of a laptop computer. Sangay Wangmo has difficulty with her hands and cannot get control over the mouse. She prefers a laptop, so the school gave her a laptop till the end of her course.

Similarly, Ngawang uses equipment to print exam papers and other worksheets for his online course, although he has challenges getting direct access. Sidarth was taught printing works. He uses equipment for his class work and homework from his course.

The equipment provided through the micro-grant has greatly helped all the children with disabilities in the school as it has been made accessible to them. Teachers have used the technology resources provided to make worksheets and print them out for use in all their classes. Color printing has a greater impact on the children in their day-to-day learning. The remaining grant funds – after procuring the equipment – was used for paying monthly fees for their multimedia courses.

# MANISH KOIRALA

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## Starting a Grocery Shop

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Manish is 19 years old and lives in Gelephu. Due to his health conditions, he was not supported in school and could not continue his education. Despite his challenges, he helps his parents in running their small waste recycling business. He says that “doing business gives me joy and pleasure and gives me satisfaction and helps in keeping myself busy and active.” He hopes to become a businessman someday.

Manish has a passion for traveling to places whenever he gets an opportunity. It is thrilling for him to be in a new place and meet people from diverse backgrounds. Manish also enjoys singing. He is interested in Dzongkha songs and enjoys regularly watching Dzongkha movies. He learns a lot about life and people from these movies.

Manish was awarded a micro-grant that could help him establish a small grocery shop next to his parent’s business establishment in Gelephu. He feels that the micro-grant has helped him to become independent and exemplary to many youth with disabilities.

Receiving the grant has opened a window of opportunities for Manish and motivated him to become self-employed and independent. He initially planned to set-up a complete business venture on his own without realizing the full amount of funds and capital necessary. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, Manish dreams to establish his own business using the micro-grant as a seed fund.

Manish glows with pride and happiness when he says, “I am happy I made my parents happy when I received the grant from the project.” He is inspired to look for similar opportunities and has more confidence that he can make independent living.

Manish is close to his family and draws particular strength and inspiration from his mother. He loves visiting his grandparents and learning from them.



# TASHI YANGZOM

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## **Investing in Tailoring and Family**

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Tashi Yangzom was awarded a micro-grant and had proposed to buy a tailoring machine and a weaving loom set so that she could start off her own small home business after she completed her Class 10 Functional Learning Program Certificate by December 2020. She was a humble 21-year-old who wanted to start her own independent life. She underwent tailoring and weaving pre-vocational skills classes in Mongar school. She also took cooking, baking, and embroidery classes provided by the Special Educational Needs (SEN) department in the school.

She learnt to use a sewing machine, make measurements of a fabric to stitch into products, and make pouches, tea coasters, and aprons with support from local tailors. She was already introduced to weaving at home by her aunt. She knew how to prepare the yarn and lay it out for weaving at school. She also learnt numeracy for calculating the cost, quantity of materials to buy, and selling price and profit.

After receiving the grant, she opened her own bank account and deposited the amount in her account. The school, together with her aunt, had placed an order for a traditional weaving loom set and a sewing machine. However, with the pandemic situation, the equipment never reached her on time.

Sadly, Tashi suffered a sudden stroke in the beginning of 2021 and was admitted in the Intensive Care Unit in Mongar Referral Hospital. She never recovered and passed away at the hospital.

In her aspirations to become a productive youth and support her family, she left the grant money to her family.

# MAMTA BISWA

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## Starting a Baking Business

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Mamta Biswa is 26 years old. She has three younger brothers, making her the eldest in the family. Her father is a police officer and her mother runs a small restaurant in Changzamtog, Thimphu. She says, “I love my parents, they always encourage me and support me in every situation I face. Most of my life, I have spent time with my family, especially looking after my younger brother at home, who is also a special needs child. For me, the most important and valuable person is my younger brother who means the world to me.”

Mamta graduated Class 12 in 2017 from Kelki Higher Secondary School. She loves cooking, singing, playing games, and watching television. In school, she also loved participating in dance programs. Mamta recalls her school days to be memorable and remembers her teachers and friends very fondly. She is grateful for the love, care, and encouragement she received from them. “One thing, I will never forget about what my teachers said to me, that I inspire them to be a better teacher. They used to tell me that I am their inspiration and got to learn new things for me.” She said she thinks that she was not very good academically but always made sure she completed all my homework and was a very sincere student.

Mamta said she has faced difficulties and problems in her life including discouragement, mockery, and insults for her disability. Despite this, Mamta said she never gave up, “I never fought back but rather ignored them and moved on. I feel that has made me stronger.”

During free time, Mamta loves engaging in community services such as the Police Youth Partnership Program (PYPP). She is also invested in personal development and has gone through vocational training for skills development (for baking) and basic accountancy after she graduated from high school. Mamta aspires to be independent so that she can provide support to her parents, relatives, friends and make them feel proud. “I don’t want to depend on my parents forever.”

“With the help from the disability project, especially with the micro-grant and the mentorship program received from [the Community Inclusion Coordinators], and with basic ideas and knowledge about baking, I am doing small business at home and this is a big achievement for me, I want to achieve more, so that I can inspire more people,” says Mamta. She said the micro-grant helped her start her home baking business and the mentorship program provided her basic knowledge on business and kept her going. She is very grateful to the entire project team for helping and encouraging her to achieve and for motivating her to do her best. She commits and promises to keep up the hard work, hope, trust and give her best. Mamta believes in the saying, ‘The human spirit is one of ability, perseverance and courage that no disability can steal away.’

# YESHI CHODEN

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## Starting a Weaving Business

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Yeshe is 20 years old and used to train at Draktsho Vocational Center. Yeshe has been with the center for 14 years and has been training in weaving as well as learning basic sign language, literacy, and numeracy. She is enthusiastic, is motivated to learn, grow, and lead an independent life. Currently, she is staying with her parents and working at home. For the past 14 years, Yeshe has been unable to transition from the center to the workplace until this year. She and her mother were able to accept and move forward with the transition only after she was awarded a micro-grant from this project. Her proposal to start a small weaving business at home was accepted and she was provided with a grant to start a business. Business plans, monthly meetings, and marketing of the products were discussed with Yeshe and her mother. As per the business plan, her work started from the month of August 2020. She was able to weave but did not make much progress in August due to national pandemic lockdown. From September 2020 she resumed her weaving and was able to complete weaving a plain half-kira.

Ms. Tshering Dolker from Draktsho (Yeshe's mentor) found the Build Program at Bethel University in Minnesota<sup>12</sup> quite appealing in helping students transition successfully and applied it in Yeshe's life.

Since Yeshe has been training to weave for many years and she seemed to be ready to move out of the center, the plan was to use this opportunity to help her transition from Draktsho to the marketplace. She gained more confidence as the center assessed her skills and understanding of her abilities to be able to compete in the market area and make a living of her own by weaving. She and her mother were both confident with the transition plan that was established. Now, Yeshe stays at home and takes weaving orders from people in her locality and elsewhere. Her mother is also happy that Yeshe is able to support her financially at home. She said that, "this would not have been possible without this project through the mentorship program and the startup fund."

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.bethel.edu/academics/build/>



# STUDENTS OF TENDRUK SCHOOL

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## Supporting IT Skills Training

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The micro-grant received by students with disabilities at Tendruk School in Samtse have immensely helped all five of them to learn new IT skills to engage with the digital world. The impact the grant made on recipients varies from person to person; for some it was a first exposure to the digital world, whereas to others it was an opportunity to advance their acquired skills. For students with speech and writing difficulties, it gave access to an alternative means to express and communicate their needs and to others it gave a plethora of opportunities and platform to access information and improve their academic learning.

“Before, I struggled typing on a computer but now I can make a power-point presentation using a keyboarding skill. I can write project work on Microsoft Word and can create files and folders. I can save my write-ups and edit them without having to rewrite them, which used to consume a lot of time for a person with cerebral palsy like me. Now, I don’t have to write the whole thing again after correction,” says Pema Choki, one of the grant recipients in Class 11.

Ramesh Dahal of Class 10 said, “It saved my time and money, as I could download information, notes, past question papers, and save it on my laptop for referring to it when I needed it. Earlier I used to spend a lot of money printing past question papers.” He further stated, “I learnt how to write emails and respond to them. I can download photos and crop them. I can practice coding that I learn in computer class. I want to advance my IT skills further and I hope the skills will definitely help me to become an IT teacher in future. I hope to get similar support from donor agencies in helping students with disabilities like me to gain skills and independence in life.”

“Writing is such a difficult thing for me as I can’t hold a pen properly. But I’m so happy that I can type a little,” says Pratap Gurung of Class 7. “I have never written a sentence because of contracture on my hand but now I can write a paragraph myself for the first time. For every exam, I get a scribe to write on my behalf but in future, I hope to write the exam myself once my keyboarding skills improve. I was advised to practice keyboarding skills by a physiotherapist but it was never possible as I could not afford to buy a computer or a laptop. Thanks to the project, now I have a laptop to practice this skill. I am still struggling in keyboarding skills because of uncontrolled movement of my hand posed by my disabilities but I am hopeful I will overcome this one day.”

# TSHEWANG LHAMO

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## **Starting a Fruit Drying Business**

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“The micro-grant ensures me some independence in my life,” says Tshewang Lhamo, awarded a micro-grant to purchase fruit drying machine and start a business. “After graduating from Class 12, colleges didn’t enroll me. I could not fulfill the percentage set for admission into different colleges. I was frustrated and depressed as I could not do physical activities like others due to my disabilities. I was socially and emotionally down as I had no other alternatives. But this grant gave me another hope to do something for myself. Now, I want to venture into business and gradually move away from my dependence on my parents. I want to become financially independent by selling dried fruits. I aspire to open my own shop and want to expand my business and sell dried fruits to other districts as well.”

Tshewang was 12 years old when she was in an accident which led to her spinal injury. Despite many challenges related to her disability, she completed Class 12 from Tendruk Central School in 2019 with the help and support of her family and teachers. Tshewang enjoys weaving baskets and wants to learn baking in the future. She also hopes to open a baking business in her locality.

# SANGAY RINCHEN

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## **Becoming Fully Employed as a Digital Designer**

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Sangay Rinchen is 23 years old and from rural Mongar. He completed his higher secondary schooling but did not get admission in subjects of his choice for college education. He chose to work with his passion in innovation and technology. Sangay was fascinated by technology from a young age. He wanted to invent or innovate something out of toys and materials he had access or available.

Although his physical challenges have always been a deterrent for him to complete his studies and also to be part of the society, he was always focused and determined to achieve his goals with passion. He resolved his first challenge of commuting between school and home by learning how to ride a bicycle.

After completion of high school, Sangay was more interested in finding new things to learn, in the hope that it will help him find a career path and better his learning dimensions. Soon after high school, he wanted to accomplish something on his own. Unfortunately, Sangay did not have any capital start-up funds. He needed a small financial support and a working space, which led him to apply for a micro-grant from our project.

Sangay submitted a proposal for developing a smart sensor walking stick for people with visual impairment. He was awarded a grant to pursue his dream. His proposal was recognized by the project and also by FabLab Bhutan, an organization that supports inventors, makers, artists, and entrepreneurs. Our micro-grant to Sangay was matched and exceeded by FabLab Bhutan, which helped him financially and technically to kickstart his project.

Because of initial investment and interest by our project as well as FabLab Bhutan, Sangay is now working as a Digital Designer for FabLab Bhutan. He has developed a prototype model of his smart sensor walking stick and hopes to soon pilot test the stick.

# MONGAL SINGH SUBBA

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## **Gaining Entrepreneurship and Business Experience**

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Mongal Singh Subba is 29 years old. He completed Class 10 but with a lot of challenges as his physical discomfort increased over the years. After completing his studies, he enrolled himself for computer application training for six months. Mongal enjoys watching movies and hanging out with his family and friends.

The micro-grant helped him to try out his business idea. He sold phone vouchers and collected dairy products from the village and sold them in town. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, his business could not be executed as he had planned. However, it gave him a good experience.

Mongal has gained full employment in a Pepsi bottling factory in Phuentsholing. The money earned from the factory helps him lead an independent life and also helps him support his family. He hopes to start exploring entrepreneurship and other business opportunities when the pandemic situation gets better and is more relaxed in Phuentsholing.



# KINLEY DEM

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## **Developing Business Skills, Developing Self**

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Kinley Dem is from Wangdiphodrang. Although Kinley's parents wanted to send her to school, they could not as she needed a full-time caretaker due to her paralysis. Instead, Kinley's family sent her to Goenpa [a Buddhist Monastery] with her grandfather to learn Buddhist teachings.

Kinley said she couldn't believe it when she learnt that she was selected as one of the micro-grant recipients. With the micro-grant, Kinley explored the possibilities to learn tailoring and embroidery. Although these plans were unsuccessful, she said she is grateful for the exposure she received from it. As plan B, Kinley – with the help of her mentor (Community Inclusion Coordinator Ms. Tashi Yetsho) – started making potato chips and selling them. This opportunity helped her understand how business works and exposed her to better possibilities in her future. She is really grateful to her mentor who supported her and helped her by sharing ideas that would help her make a living for herself. Kinley also expressed her gratitude to Ms. Yetsho for teaching her yoga: “She also introduced me to my friends who were people with disabilities as well. Because of this interaction, I got many friends too. No one has ever done such deeds to me like Madam Yetsho did, so for that I am eternally grateful to her as well as Royal Thimphu College for their great support.”

Kinley is also part of the Bhutan Paralympic Committee (BPC). The opportunity came to her through a recommendation from BPC to join as a gun shooter. Kinley took up the opportunity and improved her skills over time. She also represented Bhutan in the Asian Games as a para-athlete from the country. She wishes to improve her skills and participate in more events. She said nothing would make her happier if she can win and bring a medal to the country. Kinley found it amazing that such opportunities existed solely for people with disabilities. She feels blessed to have found such an opportunity that has been life changing. “I don't have many dreams in life because I know that I won't be able to fulfill all of them. However, shooting came as a blessing, and I am ever grateful for it.”

Although Kinley's plan didn't work out for the first time, she still hopes to learn tailoring and embroidery. For now, she has been watching YouTube videos and learning basic sewing techniques. “I thought about buying a sewing machine which I could operate but have yet to find one. I decided to use the fund solely to start up a business or for me to learn some new skills. I have saved the remaining fund money [from the grant and the profit made from selling chips] in the bank for the future. After receiving the financial aid and after getting to meet and know so many people from different walks of life, my life has certainly changed. Just like me, I am sure that all those who were recipients of the grant are forever thankful. I am grateful to the project for coming out to help people with disabilities. Most of us have lived our lives within the four walls of our houses but you came like angels. You brought light into our lives.”

## About This Project

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In 2019, Royal Thimphu College, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Birmingham initiated the project “Understanding, Developing, and Supporting Meaningful Work for Youth with Disabilities in Bhutan: Networks, Communities, and Transitions,” funded through a Global Challenges Research Grant by UK Official Development Assistance (ESRC ES/S004319/1). 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 in areas with limited resources and that are significantly rural in nature.

This project also supported micro-grants to support entrepreneurship activities for persons with disabilities in Bhutan, as well as funded Community Inclusion Coordinators to oversee and support grant usage. The recipients of the micro-grants are the subject of this book.

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**Economic  
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**Foreign, Commonwealth  
& Development Office**



**Institute on Community Integration**  
**UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA**



**UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM**



