

The challenges and opportunities for the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in training and employment in Bhutan

Dr. Luca Mannocchi
University of Birmingham, School of Education¹

Dr. Matthew J. Schuelka
*University of Minnesota, Institute on Community Integration
 Fora Education*

Research questions and objectives	Key findings	Implications
<p>What are the challenges and opportunities that people with disabilities (PWDs) face in Bhutan for their meaningful participation in vocational training and the labour market? How can incentives be better aligned among stakeholders to improve the quality and quantity of such opportunities?</p> <p>Our objective is to outline the opportunities and challenges while providing ‘entry points’ for improvement through the realigning of incentives between different stakeholders.</p>	<p>Despite the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) that has been recently approved by the Royal Government of Bhutan, this represents just a first step towards the economic inclusion of PWDs. The access to vocational education and to the labour market for PWDs needs to move away from a charity approach; changing to a more systematic approach for social and economic inclusion. Fig.1 summarises the themes identified regarding the challenges and opportunities and their interconnectedness.</p>	<p>Policy, programme, and strategy advice for near-term implementation were identified that can help to realign the incentives of different stakeholders – Government agencies and Ministries, the private sector, civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as supplier institutions and final users – to favour the economic inclusion of PWDs in Bhutan. This is done by leveraging existing formal and informal arrangements involving CSOs, vocational training and job/entrepreneurship support schemes, but also on social norms and culture.</p>

Approach

In order to address the research questions and objectives, we conducted a Political Economy Assessment. For the purpose of the political economy assessment, we defined economic inclusion of people with disabilities (PWDs) as encompassing two elements: direct participation in, and meaningful opportunities for, vocational training, employment/self-employment. We define *meaningful* in point 2 as providing the chance to improve one’s skills to get a better job, and/or to have the opportunity to work and earn enough to meet at least the basic needs.

To identify ‘entry points’ for improvement we analysed the institutional complexity of markets by looking at different levels: 1.) the rules of the game (for instance, policy and regulation); 2.) supporting market infrastructure (such as training institutions, government departments/agencies); 3.) suppliers/providers (these can be a range of actors such as CSOs, private sector actors) and users (PWDs, CSOs); 4.) Social norms and conventions (as they can play a role in terms of unwritten codes of conduct).

¹ Corresponding author: l.mannocchi@bham.ac.uk

Research tools included a participatory workshop and semi-structured interviews. Questions were asked about the role of policies and programmes – particularly their design, implementation, and monitoring; including coordination among government agencies and effectiveness of government and non-government organisations. In addition, we also mapped the role of the private sector, the role of social norms, the role of CSOs and the role of international donors. This strategy was used to identify possible inclusion/exclusion mechanisms and ‘entry points’ for improvement.

Fig. 1 Themes and issues identified for the economic inclusion for PWDs in Bhutan



Source: Own photograph. Results of the participatory workshop held on 7th of June 2019 at Royal Thimphu College.

Framing the Challenge

Persons with disabilities in Bhutan face significant challenges in education, employment, and social participation. According to the 2017 Census, the disability prevalence rate is 2.1%, of which the highest incidences of disability are visual impairment, hearing impairment, and physical impairment (NSB 2018). Disability prevalence increases significantly with age, as is expected within any population, but the degree to which accidents ‘cause’ disabilities is quite significant in Bhutan and suggests challenges in terms of access to emergency health care, safe infrastructure, and the relative and inherent dangers of life in the Himalayas. While the Washington Group questions were used in the national census (see further below), conceptually ‘disability’ in Bhutan is still very much considered a set of physical impairments, rather than a range of functional difficulties (Schuelka 2015). Therefore, we believe that the disability prevalence rate to be much higher than officially reported; probably in the range of 10–20%, which would align with the prevalence rate found by UNICEF (2012) in school-age children.

The rural and agricultural character of Bhutan presents opportunities and challenges for economic participation from PWDs. Whilst rural unemployment is low, there are not many opportunities for wage labour and a majority of the rural population engage in subsistence agricultural practices. According to our findings, in rural settings most PWDs are not utilised for their labour and often remain isolated and inactive. Urban unemployment is an increasing issue in Bhutan, particularly with youth where the unemployment rate is above 16% in urban areas (NSB 2018). Interestingly, the rate of unemployment *increases* with educational attainment –

the more schooling that a person has completed, the more likely they are to be unemployed. This points to challenges in matching school skill supply with labour market skill demand. It is difficult to fully understand unemployment for PWDs in Bhutan because they are officially counted in the census as being ‘economically inactive’, which is problematic.

Findings & Policy and Programming Implications

Adapting the policy framework. Disability is a crosscutting and multidimensional phenomenon. Considering the crosscutting nature of the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD), it is important to create a coherent ‘path’ connecting different policies and agencies. This will require mapping and adapting the entire policy framework and linking the NPPD to other relevant policies. To ease the direct participation of PWDs in training and employment/self-employment opportunities, policies to be reviewed may include not only the national employment and education policies, but particularly the National Human Resource Development Policy, the Economic Development Policy, the Cottage and Small Industry Policy, the Foreign Direct Investment Policy, the National Youth Policy, and the Tourism Policy. These policies can provide major gateways in terms of economic inclusion. Institutional arrangements that have been used in the past – such as an adapted version of the Task-Force that assessed the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – can be used as an initial working group to support the GNHC in discussing and adapting relevant policies, with the possibility to create a consolidated institution in the near-term such as a Council or a Permanent Committee or focal point/s in relevant ministries for PWDs, or any other arrangement that would enable agile and cross-cutting policy-making.

Recommendations:

- ***Integrate, harmonise, and coordinate the NPPD with other existing policies.***
- ***Create a council or permanent committee for the rights of PWDs that works across government agencies and sectors to reduce agency ‘siloes’.***

Research on poverty, vulnerable groups and PWDs. The availability of data can be eased by making anonymised data on PWDs (collected from the latest Census) more readily available and shared with national researchers, CSOs, and policy-makers. We advocate for the use of complex and nuanced data on disability to be collected in Bhutan by all data collection agencies, in line with the United Nations Statistical Commission ‘Washington Group on Disability Statistics’ (<http://www.washingtongroup-disability.com>). Having more accurate census data on PWDs using a functionality approach on disability statistics greatly aids the ability of government policies and initiatives to more efficiently and effectively target specific challenges related to poverty, vulnerability, and disability. The Washington Group (short form) questions were used in the 2017 Census, (NSB 2018) and this should set the standard across all census-gathering tools in Bhutan, including the GNH Survey.

Recommendations:

- ***Further collect disability data in Bhutan, using a sophisticated functionality approach, and integrate within existing population collection tools such as the National Census and the Gross National Happiness Survey.***
- ***Form a national guideline on the appropriate collection and use of disability statistics in line with international standards.***

The vocational education system. Access to education for PWDs is a complex issue. In Bhutan, it goes along with several aspects including the severity and the type of disability/ies, geography, availability and accessibility of schools and programmes, social networks, and social norms, among others. We identified four main challenges:

- 1) ***Reliance on quality inclusion in Basic Education.*** TVETs cannot be accessed without having completed a formal cycle of education with Grade X exams (BCSE) passed under Bhutanese government rules;

- 2) *Belief in 'special' educational settings and narrow expectations.* TVET was not intended or designed for PWDs. There is agreement among those policy-makers interviewed that access to 'skilling' should be specifically designed for the needs of youth with disabilities in specific subjects, implying that support through programmes should be separated from current TVET programmes;
- 3) *Conceptualizing TVET for PWDs in non-formal terms.* Even though the National Human Resource Development Policy states that "disabled and other special groups shall be supported to develop vocational skills," this statement is noted under the section "Non-formal Vocational Training" (probably the most significant bottleneck);
- 4) *Culture of charity.* Some level of complacency that resemble a culture of charity approaches to social and economic inclusion for PWDs was observed across informants.

An important 'entry point' for improvement is represented by the current reform of vocational education system (TVET). In particular, the projects involving class IX to XII that aim at introducing special pilot programmes for vocational training for youths while still at school.

Recommendations:

- ***TVET should be better designed and conceived as an inclusive opportunity for all adults to gain employable skills regardless of ability.***
- ***The integration of, and transition between, Secondary Education and TVET should continue to be supported.***

The labour market. The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) has been matching sectoral strategies with schools-to-work-transition (STWT) programmes for a number of years; offering career counselling, prospective labour market information and guidance to those individuals who are still in school, and providing 'skilling', internships and employment facilitation supports for those in transition to the job market. In the 12th Five-Year Plan, the Youth Engagement for Livelihood Programme (YELP) was conceived as the improved version of the Direct Employment Scheme of the 11th Plan. Regarding PWDs, challenges to accessing these programmes may arise from the way they are considered statistically. PWDs are not considered as part of the labour force, hence they do not count in unemployment statistics (NSB 2018). Depending on how they are surveyed, this has implications on the accessibility of unemployment programmes as well as on the counting for unemployment figures. As part of this project, the professional roles of the Inclusive Employment Coordinator, Inclusive Entrepreneurship Coordinator and School Transition Coordinator will be piloted to support the access of PWDs to the labour market. To this, a pilot grant scheme specifically designed for youth with disabilities will also be rolled out. Opportunities may arise from mapping labour market programmes delivered by different ministries to spot possibilities for adapting – or developing – specific lines of action for PWDs. This can be done in consultation with relevant programme managers at the ministries, disabled persons/civil society organisations, as well as private training providers.

Recommendations:

- ***Create and support coordinators and professional advocates for inclusive participation in the labour market.***
- ***NSB/MoLHR should count PWDs in unemployment statistics – rather than as being 'economically inactive' – so that they are more accurately considered within the labour market.***

Advocacy groups and CSOs. There are a number of associations that are active in Bhutan that support PWDs. Some have a well-renowned and historical presence, while others are more newly formed. These are ready to share their views and approaches to contribute and ameliorate the conditions of those living with disabilities that are marginalised in Bhutanese society. Yet, we observed that a more direct participation in policy making and programming is needed. Beyond the consultations, there is a need to include these groups in decision-making processes through a direct participation, improving and consolidating their 'position' in decision-making structures.

Recommendations:

Better utilise and integrate already existing disability advocacy groups and CSOs within government decision-making, as these groups have direct experience and knowledge of local issues facing PWDs.

The private sector. A survey and an employment tool-kit were designed as an integral part of this project to understand the attitudes of the private sector in Bhutan in relation to the employability of PWDs. So far, physical accessibility of the workplace and investments in terms of time and resources to adapt workspaces and organisational set-ups, seem to be major challenges. There might also be scepticism towards productivity and skill level that may act as bottlenecks. Job placements and internships may be a good way to demonstrate abilities. Key informants have noted how those that have tried to acquire new skills are extremely motivated and self-confident when approaching a new job. Another important support for PWDs is incentivising entrepreneurship and self-employment. Entrepreneurship would allow PWDs to work more flexibly both individually or in groups/cooperatives. A bottleneck can be represented by the access to funding opportunities and credit streams. There are no particular lines of financing specifically tailored to PWDs, but this does not mean that opportunities offered to start-ups in Bhutan cannot be given to ventures and business ideas coming from this specific segment of the population.

Recommendations:

The private sector is the most under-utilised sector in terms of supporting PWDs in employment. Suggested opportunities include:

- ***Job trial and internship schemes.***
- ***Tax incentives.***
- ***The Bhutanese Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policy lever.***
- ***Bhutanese state-owned enterprises.***
- ***Internal CSR policies of international reputed companies that have invested in Bhutan.***
- ***Entrepreneurship and self-employment.***
- ***Customised employment support.***

Social norms. Within Bhutanese society, social norms and social networks are very important. A monograph on social capital by Lham Dorji (2013) provides a description of the mechanisms at play when it comes to social norms and social relationships, and their impact on socio-economic inclusion in Bhutan. At this stage, we identify an ambivalent role of social norms in relation to disability linked to two important building blocks of Buddhist ethics and both can impact social relationships and socio-economic inclusion: compassion and *karma* (Schuelka 2015). The first concept has usually a positive connotation. It has to do with helping, caring, compassion and empathy towards other beings. The negative side of compassion is associated with a ‘live and let live’ attitude, and when it comes to disability, for example, this may lead to inaction. The second concept has mostly been associated with a negative connotation by respondents. In fact, the term *karma* denotes the principle of ethical causation: actions and their *samsaric* consequences. To Buddhists, *karma* is non-linear. *Karma* acts in multiple feedback loops, with the present moment being shaped both by past and by present actions; hence present actions shape not only the present but also the future. Therefore, disability is often associated with actions committed during a previous life. The concepts of compassion and *karma* are not separate. We can be compassionate with reference to helping ‘liberate’ and support others from the suffering of the cycle of birth and death. From a policy perspective it is important to allow the positive aspects associated with social norms to emerge. This, of course, is not a minor issue or an easy task. Shore and Wright (1997) argue that “not only do policies codify social norms and values, and articulate fundamental organizing principles of society; they also contain implicit (and sometimes explicit) models of society” (p. 7). The Gross National Happiness (GNH) philosophy and the GNH Commission place Bhutan a step ahead in designing policies that can take social norms into account in a way that the positive values underpinning such unique culture can be nurtured. An example can be compassion. It can be instrumental to action, alleviating

and actively advocating for PWDs. Yet, it is important that values contained in policies, strategies, and programmes trickle down to all the different layers of the society – from the central government and the urban (and literate) population, to the rural and most isolated communities, where the incidence of disability (and illiteracy) is also higher and where social norms may still be embedded in superstition and stigma.

It is also appropriate to recognise that a great deal of informal and ‘unpaid’ economic activity occurs in Bhutan without the formality of wage labour. There are numerous examples of reciprocal economic arrangements that are made, particularly in rural and agricultural settings, where labour or goods are exchanged without cash (Mannocchi 2017). This is important to keep in the contextual background of all of our recommendations. In this Policy Brief, we are highlighting some particular ‘entry points’ that can be made for the participation of PWDs in wage-based employment, but we advocate for a wider lens in considering and recognising what it means to economically ‘participate’ in Bhutanese society as long as they are constructive engagements for the most vulnerable.

Recommendations:

- **Conduct targeted awareness campaigns at the local level by involving gups and lamas in the communities (through the monastic body, for example) that would improve social inclusion, not just in economic terms.**
- **Encourage and incentivise economic and social participation for PWDs in rural families and communities through schemes such as micro-grants, inclusion coordinators/social workers; and training and support for families in economic skills development and household labour accommodations and adaptations.**

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Project Personnel:

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

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