



# MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT IN BHUTAN

A POLITICAL ECONOMY ASSESSMENT



# Meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in training and employment in Bhutan:

## A political economy assessment

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2019, the University of Minnesota, Royal Thimphu College, and the University of Birmingham initiated the project “Understanding, Developing, and Supporting Meaningful Work for Youth with Disabilities: Networks, Communities, and Transitions,” funded through a Global Challenges Research Grant by UK Official Development Assistance (ESRC ES/S004319/1). The project seeks to survey and share the current reality for inclusive employment and social participation for young adults with disabilities in Bhutan; provide advocacy, coordination, and interventions to support increased awareness and activity in this area; and also work towards sustained support and awareness for inclusive employment and social participation for young adults with disabilities around the world – particularly in countries with limited resources and that are significantly rural in nature.

As part of this project, a political economy assessment (PEA) was conducted to explore the economic and political sectors that influence inclusive employment and social participation for persons with disabilities in Bhutan. This effort was coordinated by Dr Luca Mannocchi (University of Birmingham) with assistance from Bhutanese project staff. The PEA was designed to collect multi-sector and multi-stakeholder data through interviews, focus groups, workshops, and document analysis.

Through the PEA research data and analysis, we conclude that there are several ‘entry points’ from a political economic perspective for improvement of inclusive employment and social participation opportunities for persons with disabilities in Bhutan.

<b>Entry points for improvement of inclusive employment and social participation for persons with disabilities in Bhutan</b>	
<b>Policy</b>	Considering the cross-cutting nature of the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD), create an interconnected and coherent path linking the NPPD to other relevant policies, to ease the direct participation of persons with disabilities in training and employment/self-employment opportunities.
	Use current or recent institutional arrangements (such as an adapted version of the Task-Force that assessed the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) as an initial working group to support the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) in discussing and adapting other policies, and with the objective to create a longer-term institutional arrangement for persons with disabilities.
	Better coordinate disability-specific policies, activities, and initiatives between the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) and civil society organisations (CSOs). One suggestion would be to have a central focal point agency that is cross-cutting across social sectors.
	Include CSOs and disabled persons organisations (DPOs) in all agendas, initiatives, and policy decision-making.
	Incentivise the private sector to offer more inclusive employment through the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) lever, as well as through foreign direct-investment (FDI) schemes.
	Similar to gender and poverty, include disability as a cross-cutting issue when considering donor and international engagement via the GNHC and Five-Year Plans.

	Provide awareness and advocacy to increase the expectations for persons with disabilities in social and economic activities to benefit all of Bhutan.
<b>National data collection</b>	Make anonymised data on people with disabilities (collected from the latest Census and other relevant research exercises) more readily available to national researchers and policymakers upon submission of meaningful research proposals.
	Systematise the surveys and the toolkits specifically designed by our project team to be used in research routines by the National Statistics Bureau (NSB) and/or other relevant agencies and ministries when possible.
	Review the definition of “inactive population” for some persons with disabilities to ease access to unemployment programmes. NSB/Ministry of Labour and Human Resources (MoLHR) should count persons with disabilities in unemployment statistics – rather than as being ‘economically inactive’ – so that they are more accurately considered within the labour market.
<b>Education and training</b>	Take advantage of the current reform of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) involving class IX to XII, to introduce special pilot programmes for persons with disabilities while still at school. The planned refurbishment of workshops and spaces within the piloted schools under the current TVET reform could be done by adopting disability-friendly criteria, improving physical accessibility, and improving curriculum for physical- and neuro-diversity.
	Establish a dialog with government funded Technical Training Institutes (TTIs) and other private providers to agree on specific programmes that can be designed in collaboration with donors and/or existing specialised institutions to expand availability of specialised curricula based on different disabilities.
<b>Labour market</b>	Map labour market programmes delivered by different ministries (school-to-work-transition programmes, beyond TVET) and identify programme managers to establish a dialog for the adaptation of specific lines of action for persons with disabilities.
	Consult DSOs as well as private sector training providers in relation to <i>ad-hoc</i> programmes, offering similar opportunities for persons with disabilities than those school-to-work-transition (STWT) programmes offered through government ministries.
	Pilot the creation of the professional roles of Inclusive Employment Coordinator, Inclusive Entrepreneurship Coordinator and School Transition Coordinator as new positions in Bhutan, with evaluation on sustainability and scalability.
	Introduce a grant scheme specifically to support youth with disabilities in entrepreneurship, customised employment, and inclusive employment. These grants can go to the youth themselves, or to private-sector businesses that commit to inclusive employment.

## Objectives and introductory remarks

The objective of this report is to outline key findings around the political economy assessment (PEA) exercise and their policy implications, looking at the opportunities and challenges that persons with disabilities face in Bhutan with regards to their access to vocational education, training, and labour market opportunities. Since our project launch on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2019, we have been working on the gaps represented by the transition from education and technical training to work for persons with disabilities.

Nonetheless, the PEA highlighted a series of systemic weaknesses that go beyond the sole mechanisms around transition to work. This report presents the findings in a way that they can open a channel for discussion, action, and reflection with policy-makers and with those members of the civil society who have been working on disability issues in Bhutan. After the analysis of primary and secondary data we can provide a good sense of what the issues are around employment of persons with disabilities in Bhutan. Fig.1 summarises the themes identified, visualising their interconnectedness.

**Figure 1. Themes and issues identified by the political economy assessment**



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

Policy landscapes are usually complex and fragmented with no central access point. The circular representation of the themes is not casual as the corresponding issues have been conceptualised in a way that action can be taken at any point in the circle both simultaneously and/or individually. This visual represents interconnected entry points for small but incremental changes in policy and practice, focusing on existing arrangements and on what it seemed doable.

For the purpose of the PEA, we have defined economic inclusion of people with disabilities as encompassing two elements: 1) direct participation *in*; and 2) 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.



Methodological notes and wider considerations on the policy context are provided in annexes 1 and 2 respectively.

## Mapping and adapting the policy framework

### ***Entry points for improvement:***

- **Considering the cross-cutting nature of the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD), create an interconnected and coherent path linking the NPPD to other relevant policies, to ease the direct participation of persons with disabilities in training and employment/self-employment opportunities.**
- **Use current or recent institutional arrangements (such as an adapted version of the Task-Force that assessed the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) as an initial working group to support the GNHC in discussing and adapting other policies, and with the objective to create a longer-term institutional arrangement for persons with disabilities.**

The 11th Five Year Plan (2013-2018) of Bhutan recognised as a priority to “[address] the needs of the vulnerable groups”. This was listed as one of the sixteen National Key Result Areas (GNHC, 2018, p. 3). In the current 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2018-2023), targeted interventions for vulnerable groups have been identified as a key performance indicator under the National Key Result Areas (NKRAs) “Healthy and Caring Society Enhanced”. Other NKRAs like quality education and skills, productive and gainful employment, and reduce poverty and inequality will also address vulnerable groups.

One positive aspect about claiming this level of priority is that a policy specifically considering the needs of persons with disabilities – the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) – has already been launched on 3rd December 2019 under the supervision and coordination of the Gross National Happiness Commission and approved by the National Assembly. This has happened alongside the drafting of other policies addressing the needs of vulnerable groups in Bhutan, for example the National Gender Equality Policy.

Bhutan is a signatory of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Yet, from a political economy perspective it seems that resource constraint might have been the main issue behind the slow process of ratification: both steps (the ratification of the Convention and the policy approval) carry commitments in terms of resource mobilization, possibly clashing with other competing development priorities.

These gaps have been progressively filled. Yet, the slow processes had a cascade effect on other aspects. For example, it helps to partially explain the lack of legislation on various aspects related to the lives of persons with disabilities. According to GNHC’s press release the new policy is “one of the most comprehensive”. An implementation plan has been drafted alongside, with activities prioritised around long-, medium-, and short-term interventions. In our view one of the exercises that should be included in the short-term interventions is the review of other relevant policies and associated legislation that are yet to be modified to consistently interconnect with the NPPD.

The NPPD, in fact, identifies various areas for intervention in relation to the needs of this particular target group, clearly showing the cross-cutting nature of disabilities. These include education, health, economic security, and physical accessibility; and access to justice, community, caregivers, and family relationships; with potential connections to many other policies in Bhutan. Please refer to Annex 4 for more details on the NPPD.

An example of disability needs awareness is the National Employment Policy. It mentions at point 2.6 that the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) “shall promote skills development to enable persons with disabilities to acquire training and skills to run their own businesses or be employed and participate more effectively in the workforce”. This certainly shows disability need awareness among policy-makers. Yet, this policy lacks in aspects such as “how” this should be achieved or in providing specific reference to other policies.

An example of the absence of explicit disability reference is the Labour Act of 2007. This act protects the right of the child against the worst forms of child labour, protects women from sexual harassment at workplaces, and it incorporates compensation and gratuity rights for employees working in private or government organizations. It also introduces prohibition against discrimination of employees and job seekers, but there is no explicit reference to persons with disabilities.

Beyond these examples, and considering the cross-cutting nature of the NPPD, we believe that to ease the economic inclusion of persons with disabilities a review should include not only the National Employment and the 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, and the National Youth Policy and the Tourism Policy. In terms of economic inclusion, they can provide major gateways that will be explained hereafter.

It is also important to note that the availability of disaggregated data on disability through the National Statistics Bureau (NSB) of Bhutan represents an opportunity for policy-makers to tailor policies and programmes (see following heading). Besides an overall disability prevalence rate, the recent Census also collected valuable information on disabilities and their geographical incidence. To provide an example, there are two statistics that go hand in hand: the disability incidence and the incidence of rural poverty as compared to urban. This information alone can have significant implications on policy and programmes and deserve further investigation. On the one hand, it provides an indication about health services and/or nutrition, and perhaps also education in rural areas. On the other hand, there are implications on policies that can mainstream economic inclusion for persons with disabilities such as the Cottage and Small Industry policy.

Thus, if we consider the significance of farm and non-farm work in rural areas and the well-documented fast-growing rural-urban migration of the last two decades – that sees persons with disabilities often left behind with the elderly and women in isolated rural areas – the importance to ease access to certain programmes for people having different functionalities can have considerable impacts on their rural economic livelihoods and of their family members if mainstreamed through the Cottage and Small Industry policy (Mannocchi, 2017). These can include training in organic farming techniques, which are much cheaper to implement than other methods, and may be particularly suitable for the Bhutanese context.

In addition, information systems can go beyond the Census. For example, the understanding of the attitudes of the private sector in Bhutan around employability of persons with disabilities will have important implications for the Economic Development Policy (including the Tourism Policy) and the Foreign Direct Investment Policy.

## Research on poverty, vulnerable groups, and persons with disabilities

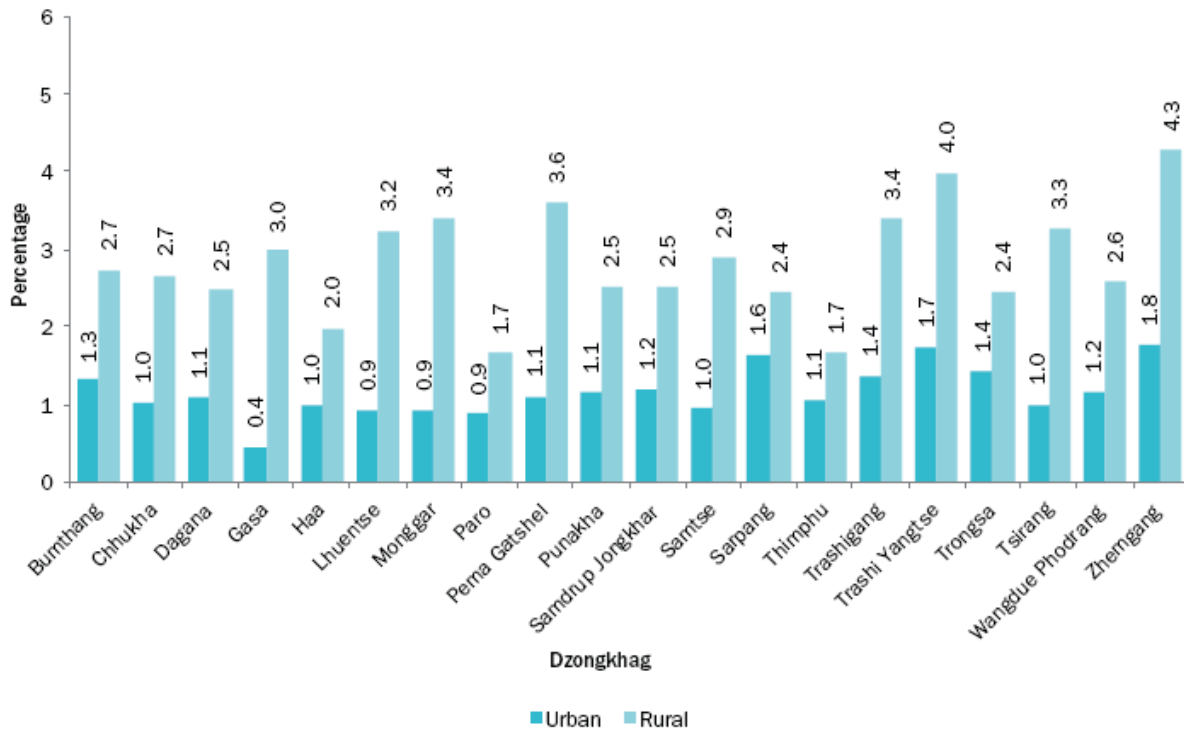
### **Entry points for improvement:**

- **Make anonymised disaggregated data (collected from the latest Census and other relevant research exercises) more readily available to national researchers and policymakers upon submission of meaningful research proposals. National data systems can now disaggregate by disability so disparities in employment, education, health, etc. can be identified.**
- **Systematise the surveys and the toolkits specifically designed by our project team to be used in research routines by the National Statistics Bureau (NSB) and/or other relevant agencies and ministries when possible.**

Consecutive five-year programmes (FYPs) focused on pro-poor initiatives (see annex 2 for a quick overview). The progressive shift from infrastructural development (of the first FYPs) to investments in social amenities, rural development, and income generation programmes (particularly in the last three FYPs) have supported a rapid pace in poverty eradication in Bhutan (e.g. Kezang Wangchuk, 2018). The two latest FYPs (11<sup>th</sup> Plan 2013-2018 & 12<sup>th</sup> Plan

2018-2023), focus on inclusive socio-economic development. This concept has been measured mainly through poverty reduction using different approaches and perspectives. Poverty in Bhutan is monitored with both multidimensional and more conventional measurements based on income and expenditure surveys, and income poverty lines. Using poverty lines, estimates have showed how poverty has declined to 8.2% of the population in 2017 (from 12% in 2012), with poverty in rural areas having a higher incidence (11.9%) than in urban areas (0.8%) for 2017 (NSB & The World Bank, 2017).

**Figure 2. Disability Prevalence Rate by Area.**



Source: NSB, 2018a. In Bhutan, the Census defines a person with disability if any one domain of seeing, hearing, walking, cognition, self-care, and communication is coded ‘Lot of Difficulty’ or ‘Cannot do at all.’ Using this cut off recommended by Washington Group, the prevalence rate for disability in Bhutan for 2017 is 2.1%, which corresponds to 15,567 persons. Out of the 15,567 persons, 8,111 are females and 7,456 are males (NSB, 2018a, p. 41).

Research specifically analysing vulnerable groups – including persons with disabilities – was conducted recently as part of a strategy to identify and define these groups within Bhutanese society. This was done in line with Bhutan’s global commitment to “Leave No One Behind”. Tackling issues related to vulnerable groups is also part of the strategy to support Bhutan’s graduation from the list of Least Developed Countries (LDC). The RGoB conducted the first Vulnerability Baseline Assessment on vulnerable groups in 2016 (GNHCS, 2016) and improved the Census by adopting the Washington Group Methodology in 2017 (NSB, 2018a). This allowed the collection of nation-wide data on persons with disabilities showing incidence, types, and severity of disabilities by *gewog* [local administrative blocks within districts]. Currently, disability prevalence rates in Bhutan are estimated at 2.1%, corresponding to 15,567 persons. The incidence is higher in rural areas than in urban. These statistics are based on the recommendation given by the Washington Group that defines a person to be disabled whenever one of the five domains identified is coded ‘Lot of Difficulty’ or ‘Cannot do at all’ (see figure 2).

The GNHC used this research exercise precisely to inform the new policy on persons with disabilities. One compelling aspect highlighted in the NPPD is, in fact, the need for more systematic research to gather reliable information on this particular population segment. The use of data to inform policy demonstrates a significant level of awareness among policy-makers to tackle issues related to persons with disabilities.

The Census represents an opportunity for policy-makers as disaggregated data are now available through the NSB. In fact, the Census has collected valuable information also on the various degrees of disabilities (from the most to the less severe forms) and their geographical incidence, potentially providing valuable insights that can certainly help shaping policy and programmes beyond the NPPD. The availability of data can allow targeted interventions in two key areas: education and access to labour market, whose challenges and opportunities are outlined below.

In general, we can see how knowing the communicative, physical- and neuro-diversity incidence, and geographical distribution of persons with disabilities can help identify for example the best location where to develop or improve infrastructure, or where and how to improve curriculum, or where to provide specific trainings or support schemes to improve work conditions and entrepreneurship opportunities for persons with disabilities. Yet, in this context, the challenges emerging for persons with disabilities come from different and interrelated aspects, which are articulated below.

## Challenges and opportunities from the educational system

### **Entry points for improvement:**

- **Take advantage of the current reform of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) involving class IX to XII, to introduce special pilot programmes for persons with disabilities while still at school. The planned refurbishment of workshops and spaces within the piloted schools under the current TVET reform could be done by adopting disability-friendly criteria, improving physical accessibility, and improving curriculum for communicative, physical- and neuro-diversity.**
- **Establish a dialog with government funded Technical Training Institutes (TTIs) and other private providers to agree on specific programmes that can be designed in collaboration with donors and/or existing specialised institutions to expand availability of specialised curricula based on different disabilities.**

Literacy and education attainment are widely recognized to be important for improving living standards. Education has huge implications for employment and productivity growth. Employment promotion policies, such as specialised trainings, have been seen as important for skill upgrade and access to job opportunities. Yet, access to education for persons with disabilities that require additional needs is a complex issue that goes along with several aspects, including: the severity of the disability, geography, availability and accessibility of schools and programmes, social networks, and social norms, among others. Even if persons with disabilities do gain access to schools, there are many conceptual and quality issues that serve to maintain disadvantages and social segregation (Schuelka, 2018).

For Bhutan, the long-standing narrative about education improving living standards may be weakening as the 2017 Census found a *positive* correlation between level of educational attainment and unemployment (NSB, 2018a). In other words, schooling is not a guarantee for employment. In relation to persons with disabilities, challenges in educational quality and access are still significant today (Kezang Sherab, et al. 2015; Schuelka, 2018). While there are schools and organisations in Thimphu and other parts of Bhutan that, at various levels, offer support to youth with disabilities, these are limited and polarised geographically; not easy to access to those residing in more remote rural areas, where the disability incidence (and poverty) is also higher. In addition, Bhutanese schools, including Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools, do not have the infrastructure and the resources required as they lack accessible physical infrastructure and specialised teaching and learning materials to engage properly with diverse student populations (Rinchen Dorji & Schuelka, 2016; Garner et al. 2018).

There are limited trained and equipped teachers that can provide specialised education for persons with different abilities. This implies that even those with additional educational needs that are still able to engage with formal cycle of education may lag behind with implications for their access to any further studies, including accessing TVETs. As observed by Schuelka (2018), imparting quality education to persons with disabilities is still mainly determined by the ability of teachers to create an environment that can meet the needs of persons with disabilities, often adapting the curriculum and developing their own pedagogy. This has led to disparities between schools and classes within schools.

This has implications for TVET, which is the focus of our research project. The current TVET system has been under scrutiny for its effectiveness and has been undergoing a reform to better match demand and supply of specialised technical labour in key areas. This has involved the Ministry of Labour and Human Resource (MoLHR) – upon which TVET programmes and Technical Training Institutes (TTIs) depend – as well as the Ministry of Education (MoE) (RGoB, 2016).

At present, we observed certain scepticism among policymakers to engage persons with disabilities or persons with additional learning needs in current TVET programmes. This does not come as a surprise. Beyond physical accessibility, there are two main challenges: 1. TVET cannot be accessed without having completed a formal cycle of education with X grade exams passed; 2. TVET was not designed for persons with disabilities and there is certain agreement among those policy-makers and programme managers interviewed that access to “skilling” should be specifically designed for the needs of youth with disabilities in specific subjects, implying that support through “skilling” programmes should be separated from current TVET programmes. This has implication because the labour market in Bhutan is still very much focused on formal qualifications.

We see two opportunities emerging from these challenges. The first one is that Technical Training Institutes (TTIs) can still accommodate special programmes and continue to work towards making all programmes inclusive. They are government institutes that can lead the way by mobilising funds with the support of international donors for ‘hardware’ (accessible infrastructure, rooms and workshops) and ‘software’ (curriculum and technical teaching tailored for specific disabilities, well-trained teachers) and in collaboration with existing organisations that have traditionally been working in this field. This can be done without crowding-out the private training institutes (see the following section), as access to funding streams can be competitive, generating improvements in infrastructure, curricula development and outcomes for persons with disabilities.

The other opportunity is related to a particular aspect of the TVET reform that includes the adoption of technical education as an optional subject from classes IX to XII. This initiative will start progressively from the next academic year 2019-2020 (and will continue throughout the following) and will involve seven pilot schools. The reform also includes the construction of TVET workshops in the piloted schools and the training of TVET instructors on teaching TVET curriculum (Yangchen C. Rinzin, 2019).

The TVET programme is financed through the STEP-UP project funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The whole initiative has the objective to develop an interest among students for TVET programmes and to motivate them to progress in technical studies offered by the Technical Training Institutes (TTIs). Yet, we think that similar initiatives can have a relatively smooth application for persons with disabilities, piloting specialised vocational training with their needs in mind. The construction of new TVET workshops can be done with accessibility in mind and the development of specialised technical curriculum for specific types of disabilities to improve inclusion. Other initiatives can include private training institutions building on the experience of existing specialised institutions.

Another important mechanism that can involve persons with disabilities is represented by transition-to-work programmes which are also an integral part of our project interventions. These are addressed in the following point as they fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources.

## Challenges and opportunities from the labour market

### **Entry points for improvement:**

- **Map labour market programmes delivered by different ministries (school-to-work-transition programmes, beyond TVET) and identify programme managers to establish a dialog for the adaptation of specific lines of action for persons with disabilities.**
- **Consult disabled persons organisations (DPOs) as well as private sector training providers in relation to *ad-hoc* programmes, offering similar opportunities for persons with disabilities than those school-to-work-transition (STWT) programmes offered through government ministries.**
- **Review the definition of “inactive population” for some persons with disabilities to ease access to unemployment programmes. NSB/MoLHR should count persons with disabilities in unemployment statistics – rather than as being ‘economically inactive’ – so that they are more accurately considered within the labour market.**
- **Pilot the creation of the professional roles of Inclusive Employment Coordinator, Inclusive Entrepreneurship Coordinator and School Transition Coordinator as new positions in Bhutan, with evaluation on sustainability and scalability.**
- **Introduce a grant scheme specifically to support youth with disabilities in entrepreneurship, customised employment, and inclusive employment. These grants can go to the youth themselves, or to private-sector businesses that commit to inclusive employment.**

Economic challenges for Bhutan are structural in nature, given its small markets and the agriculture-dominated economy. This translates into high unemployment rates, particularly among the youth. Currently, youth unemployment is around 15.7% and it is estimated that 25,000 jobseekers will enter the labour market during the five-year period of the 12th Plan. Other concerns include the quality and diversity of employment opportunities (NSB, 2018b). The latest labour-force survey found that the unemployed youth are concentrated more in urban areas than in rural areas (NSB, 2018b). The rural-urban migration is a well-documented driver contributing to these statistics. Hence, the RGoB believes that youth employment can be tackled through the promotion of the Renewable Natural Resources (RNR) sector and through private sector development. From one side, the development of the RNR sector will alleviate rural poverty, reduce rural-urban migration, and increase productivity of the farm by leveraging a new generation of farmers, skilled and well-educated. On the other side, supporting innovation and entrepreneurship in various sectors should contribute to the creation of new jobs within the private sector, creating completely new avenues for employment.

The RGoB has been matching these sectoral strategies with school-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 11<sup>th</sup> Plan, STWT programmes were framed under the Guaranteed Employment Program (GEP), designed to provide internships and match skills to the ever-changing requirements of the labour market. Three sub-programs were provided under the GEP program: 1. Direct Employment Scheme (DES), 2. Overseas Employment Scheme (OES) and 3. Employment Skills Scheme (ESS).

In addition, the ESS was composed by two other sub-programs: the Youth Employment Skills (YES), and the Graduate Skills Program (GSP). Both YES and GSP are interventions that address immediate skill shortages in the labour market through short-term vocational trainings for the unemployed youth. The GSP is specifically addressing skills after graduation to align them to the needs of the labour market. Both programmes are provided through Registered Training providers in the country.

Regarding entrepreneurship, the Skills for Employment and Entrepreneur Development (SEED) program was designed to provide core business skills. Other programmes offered through funds channelled by the RGoB include:

- Apprenticeship Training Program (ATP)
- Pre-Employment Engagement Program (PEEP)
- University Graduate Internship program (UGIP)
- Entrepreneurship training program (basic and advance levels)
- Construction/ Furniture training

While this represents a considerable effort to which costs and impacts have been estimated and evaluated in a 2017 National HRD Advisory report (Human Resource Development Division, 2017), some have questioned their effectiveness. Based on these evaluations, the Youth Engagement for Livelihood Programme (YELP) was conceived as the improved version of the DES, to be implemented during the 12<sup>th</sup> Plan. Yet, the fear among commentators is that it would once again fall short to create any outcome in terms of long-term employment opportunities (KuenselOnline, 2019).

Regarding the participation of persons with disabilities, a survey covering 1,861 beneficiaries of these programmes during the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan estimated that 3.7% of them had some form of disability (4% of STWT graduates and 3.3% of STWT trainees). It is unquestionable that opportunities for persons with disabilities may come from their participation to these programmes, and while it is encouraging to see individuals with disabilities benefiting, there is the need to further understand and improve STWT access for persons with disabilities.

In fact, there have been no specific suggestions on the advisory report or from the Advisory Team – and to our knowledge, no follow-up – on how to engage persons with disabilities more systematically in those programmes that were instituted for the successful transition of young people to the job market, nor in those aiming at creating meaningful jobs opportunities through entrepreneurship.

In addition, one possible threat that persons with disabilities may face in accessing these types of programmes is how they are considered statistically. Persons with disabilities are not considered as part of the labour force, hence they may not count in the unemployment statistics (NSB, 2018a). Depending on how they are surveyed this might have implications on accessibility of unemployment programmes as well as on the counting for unemployment figures.

Among those programme managers interviewed in the Ministries, we have found some lack of awareness about the potentials of engaging persons with disabilities directly through STWT, and on how to design or adapt STWT programmes. Nonetheless, we have found openness and predisposition to tap into the opportunity to target this segment of the population with tailored interventions.

So far, the only initiatives we have found with the objective to specifically train persons with disabilities for placements and job opportunities – beyond civil service organisations such as Draktsho – are represented by the training programmes offered by the partnership between Norbu Healing Arts Centre (a private training provider) and the Disabled Persons Association of Bhutan (DPAB). The programmes offered Bhutanese Traditional Music Training and Training on High Quality Healing Therapy with the support of various national and international contributors (Normisjon, Bhutan Foundation, Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, and the Austrian Development Agency) (DPAB, 2019, n.d.a).

Hence, by following the same “layout”, the private sector can be engaged through the existing associations (Disabled Persons' Association of Bhutan, Ability Bhutan Society, Bhutan Foundation, Draktsho, Tarayana, Bussi-En, etc.) in developing *ad hoc* programmes (e.g. DPAB, n.d.b). In this context, and to link to those issues identifies in the education section above, private training institutes had also developed their own expertise using unconventional approaches to teaching persons with disabilities and by developing their own hands-on methodologies and pedagogy. In this respect we see the longer-term opportunity to systematise these experiences to develop *ad-hoc* pedagogical tools.

## Other challenges and opportunities

### ***Entry points for improvement:***

- **Better coordinate disability-specific policies, activities, and initiatives between RGoB and CSOs. One suggestion would be to have a central focal point agency that is cross-cutting across relevant sectors.**
- **Include CSOs and DPOs in all agendas, initiatives, and policy decision-making.**
- **Incentivise the private sector to offer more inclusive employment through the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) lever, as well as through foreign direct-investment (FDI) schemes.**
- **Similar to gender and poverty, include disability as a cross-cutting issue when considering donor and international engagement via the GNHC and Five-Year Plans.**
- **Provide awareness and advocacy to increase the expectations for persons with disabilities in social and economic activities to benefit all of Bhutan.**

### *Institutional arrangements for policy design and implementation*

Currently there are at least three ministries in the RGoB that, at different levels, look after policy-making and programming in relation to persons with disabilities: the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Labour and Human



Resources, with the GNHC as leading agency for policy design and coordination. This also highlights the cross-cutting nature of disability in policy and programming. Yet, one of the issues that emerged during the interviews is the **lack of a focal point for disability**, implying the importance of having an agency with a special mandate on disability that could more easily coordinate and eventually mediate conflicting priorities in relation to policies, strategies and programmes.

One of the institutional arrangements used to assess the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was the High Level Task-Force composed by different experts (including legislators and ministries' representatives, chaired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Perhaps one entry point to fulfil this gap can be to establish a similar Task-Force as an initial working group to support the GNHC in adapting other policies and design/adapting programmes. This Task-Force should include also representatives from the existing Bhutanese CSOs working on disability. In later stages, the Task-Force could eventually be transformed into a Council or a Committee on Persons with Disabilities that would consolidate the initial Task-Force into a longer-term institution. Yet, these suggestions do not preclude the possibility to create a Council or a Committee without going through other intermediate institutional arrangements.

#### *Advocacy groups and CSOs*

Linked to the previous point are the presence (and the power to influence government actions) of advocacy groups and CSOs in Bhutan. Politicians often do not prioritise things when the benefits are diffuse and in the far future. They will only take action if the voters are behind them. That is why it is very important to sustain awareness campaigns and support the formation of groups to advocate for change. We found a number of associations that are active in Bhutan to support persons with disabilities. Some have a well-renowned presence, while others are newly formed. In both cases it is welcoming to see these associations motivated, active, and ready to share their views in relation to improving livelihoods for those living with disabilities. Yet, we observed that a more direct participation in policy making and programming is needed. Beyond the usual consultations, there is a need to include these groups in decision-making processes, improving their 'position' in decision-making structures. Many of the organizations that collaborate on this project are service-oriented and very much feel they are working for people with disabilities through their services but are not engaged in any sort of advocacy work to change policy or structural ableism as it exists. DPOs often have a more advocacy-oriented approach and are run by persons with disabilities themselves.

#### *Private sector*

As mentioned above, the Bhutanese labour market is already a challenging one due to the structural features typical of the Bhutanese economy. For the purpose of this research, we have divided the private sector into two: those that are private training institutes, and the rest of the private sector.

We would like to highlight that those interviewed so far see physical accessibility of the workplace and the investments in terms of time and resources to adapt workspaces, as a major challenge. Potential employers will have to incur extra costs to accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities in the work place, including working around issues of acceptance by colleagues. In addition, we have found that scepticism towards productivity and skills may also act as a bottleneck. Employers might require persons with disabilities to demonstrate their skills to verify whether they can match the required productivity *vis a vis* their needs during an ordinary working day. One private training provider has overcome these issues by proactively searching for job placements to allow them to demonstrate their abilities (an approach that is in line with our interventions). They also found persons with disabilities extremely motivated and self-confident when approaching a job placement.

Other opportunities may include tax incentives that can be used to increase employability, particularly where fixed-costs have to be covered to adapt office spaces and physical infrastructure, or overcome productivity issues. Another suggestion can be to use the Bhutanese national Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policy lever, using those funds more proactively towards the employability of persons with disabilities. In addition, most of the big corporations in Bhutan are state-owned and this can represent an additional advantage as they can be at the forefront of these actions.

It also emerged in our research that while some see specific sectors as better suited to employ people with disabilities, others see no particular limitation if the ability of an applicant meets the job requirements. Some have also commented positively on the opportunities coming from entrepreneurship and self-employment. This would allow persons with disabilities to work more flexibly, both individually or in groups/cooperatives. One issue emerging in relation to that is access to funding opportunities and credit streams. There are no particular lines of financing specifically bespoke for persons with disabilities, but this does not mean that opportunities offered to start-ups in Bhutan cannot be applied to ventures and business ideas coming from this specific segment of the population.



Additionally, opportunities may come for international companies that decide to invest in Bhutan. Many international reputed companies usually already have internal CSR policies to maximise their social impacts. The RGoB's FDI policy can be updated to make inclusion of vulnerable groups a welcomed aspect of the investment strategy.

#### *Donors and international partners*

International partners have a long history in supporting the Bhutanese development trajectory by providing development finance, development and technical assistance (directly or through grants), and advisory work. There are two key multilateral organisations active towards persons with disabilities in Bhutan, namely UNDP and UNICEF. The effort of these two multilateral organisations is matched by enduring bilateral development partners that, in different ways and following their chosen areas of expertise, have offered their support by financing or providing assistance around interventions involving persons with disabilities.

It would be difficult to compile an encompassing history of the international partners' interventions in relation to persons with disabilities in Bhutan (see Rinchen Dorji & Schuelka, 2016, for some history of this). At this stage we can clearly see how their involvement has been central in setting up the current 'infrastructure'. Both multilateral and bilateral organisations are supporting Bhutan graduating from the list of Least Developed Countries and matching the global commitment of "Leave No One Behind" can certainly help Bhutan to reach this goal.

The support from international partners is coordinated through the GNHC who also oversees the implementation of the Five-Year Plans and coordinates international partners' efforts towards the objectives set in each FYP. An interesting exercise in this sense could be to start moving beyond gender equality as a key crosscutting issue, to include other vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities as an additional transversal line in programming, allowing persons with disabilities to be considered in every stage of policy, programme, and project management cycle.

#### *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 can identify an ambivalent role of social norms in relation to disability. Both are to some extent linked to two important building blocks of Buddhist ethics (the dominant religion in Bhutan) and both can impact social relationships and socio-economic inclusion: *karuna* [compassion] and *karma*. *Karuna* [compassion] usually has a positive connotation. It has to do with helping, caring, and being emphatic to other beings. There is, however, a negative side of compassion which is associated to a "live and let be" attitude towards others, and when it comes to disability for example, may lead to inaction. *Karma* has mostly been associated as a negative connotation by the respondents. In fact, the term *karma*, meaning "the sum of a person's action", denotes the principle of ethical causation: there are actions and their 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. Buddhists believe that *karma* influences rebirth from one life to the next, suggesting that rebirth refers to the repetitious cycle of bad habits (O'Brien, 2019). Therefore, disability is often associated with immoral actions committed during a previous life, and persons with disabilities in Bhutan are often viewed with an equal measure of pity, suffering, and mistrust (Schuelka, 2015). The concepts of *karuna* and *karma* are not separated ones. We can be compassionate with reference to helping 'liberate' and supporting others from the suffering of the *karmic* cycles of birth and death.

Whilst Buddhist collectivism, egalitarianism, and compassion are key features of Bhutanese society, often the effect for a person with a disability that is deemed to be 'different' is low expectations and protectionism (Schuelka, 2015). There is increasing awareness and advocacy in Bhutan that persons with disabilities can positively contribute both socially and economically, rather than simple be 'cared for'. We observed this through this project and in our previous work, although it is also true that there are only a narrow band of 'acceptable' professions that a person with a disability in Bhutan can conceptually work towards. These professions include *zorig chusom* [traditional arts and crafts], massage therapy, singing, and a few other types of manual labour jobs. Interestingly, we have not found much agricultural involvement or expectations for persons with disabilities in Bhutan, even though this is the primary economic sector in the country. We see this as an opportunity for growth. Additionally, we also see opportunities in the IT sector.

From a policy perspective it is important to allow the positive aspects associated to 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 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 caring for persons with disabilities. 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 population, to the rural and most isolated communities, where the incidence of disability is also higher and where social norms may still be embedded in superstition and stigma. We believe that conducting targeted awareness campaigns at the local level by involving gups and lamas in the communities (through the monastic body, for example), would improve inclusion, not just in economic terms.

## **Concluding remarks**

The ideas in this report are based on an institutionalist approach to political economy focusing at the macro- and meso- levels of analysis. The “entry points” for improvement identified under each heading are subject to changes as the situation in Bhutan evolves. Yet, we consider them to be small but significant steps that can be taken into account as short- to medium- term strategies to ease the economic inclusion of persons with disabilities. Bhutan follows a five-year development programming and, in conjunction, policies provide a general framework through which the government operates its programmes. As such, we consider that an incrementalist approach to policy and programming would be better suited for the Bhutanese context. Our key advice, considering the political stability and cohesiveness of the Bhutanese society, is to review and adapt policies periodically to build on incrementally and respond to new or unforeseen needs as they arise.



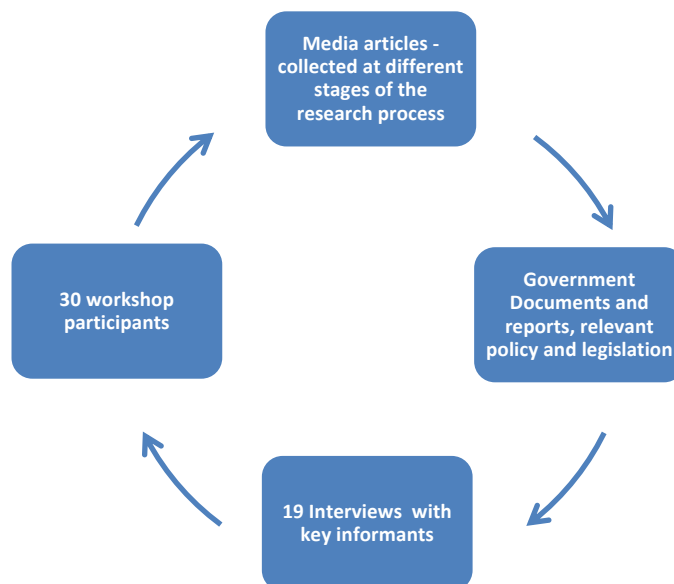
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## Annex 1 – Methodological notes

Regulatory frameworks, private sector agents, and social norms form the institutional complexity of markets dictating who can participate, in which market, and under what conditions (Chang, 2002). Hence, one approach for analysis is to divide the market in different levels: 1. the rules of the game (for instance, policies and regulations); 2. supporting market infrastructure (such as training institutions, government departments/agencies); 3. suppliers/providers (these can be a range of actors such as NGOs, private sector actors) and users (unemployed youth, persons with disabilities, NGOs); 4. social norms and conventions (as unwritten codes of conduct, but also becoming enforceable through the legal system if they are formally incorporated in it). We operationalised this approach collecting data from a variety of sources (figure 3). These included official reports, policy documents, and newspaper articles. A participatory workshop saw the participation of 30 Bhutanese belonging to different key stakeholder organisations and in-depth interviews with 19 key informants from the private, public, and voluntary/CSOs sectors were conducted between June and December 2019. Ethical research clearance was provided by the University of Birmingham and the National Statistics Bureau (NSB) of Bhutan.

**Figure 3.** Data collection and research design



Interview sampling was mixed-purposive and snowballing to ensure a diversity of participants. The interview protocol was piloted in June 2019 and applied by Bhutanese project partners. 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, the roles of the private sector, the role of social norms at different levels, the role of CSOs, and the role of international donors were also mapped to identify possible inclusion/exclusion mechanisms. This research process provided primary and secondary data. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the data and each theme (see Figure 2 above).

## **Annex 2 - Governmentality in Bhutan**

Bhutan is a young democracy, with the first democratically elected government chosen in 2008. The government follows a five-year development plan (FYP) development model, which represents a centralised approach to growth and development. Since the first democratic election took place in 2008, the FYPs have been arranged to coincide with the change in government that occurs on a similar five-year cycle. The present government tenure started on 1st November 2018 and will last until the 31st October 2023, and it will be marked by the implementation of the 12th FYP. Policies provide a general framework through which the government operates its programmes, although generally the individual government ministries oversee the actual realisation and implementation of FYP aims. The FYP provides an overarching operative structure with programmes and indicators against which policy-makers can monitor progress in policy implementation. Despite the centralised approach, Bhutan has witnessed a progressive empowerment of local administrations to meet the requirements for a more bottom-up approach to development, accompanied by an increased role of the private sector.

The FYP and the policy framework are overseen by the Planning Commission that has been renamed the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC). Gross National Happiness (GNH) was introduced as a guiding development philosophy by His Majesty, the 4th King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck. GNH, at the time of its introduction in the 1970s, was advocated as an alternative to economic development measures such as Gross National Income or Gross Domestic Product. According to the current (5th) King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck: “GNH measures the quality of a country in more holistic way and believes that the beneficial development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occurs side by side to complement and reinforce each other”. GNH is guided by four pillars: 1) sustainable and equitable socio-economic development; 2) preservation and promotion of cultural heritage; 3) preservation and sustainable use of the environment; and, 4) good governance.

Evolving from past evaluations and from emerging needs, more recent FYP objectives have progressively shifted their focus from infrastructure towards human development. International development partners have always played a major role in supporting the development plans with advisory work, technical assistance, programme and project support, as well as grants and development financing. As part of this shift, the two latest FYPs (the 11th Plan 2013-2018 & the 12th Plan 2018-2023) focus mainly on inclusive socio-economic development. The 11th FYP (2013-2018) recognised as a priority “[to address] the needs of the vulnerable groups”. This was listed as one of the sixteen National Key Result Areas (GNHC, 2018, p. 3). In Bhutan, socio-economic development and progresses have been measured mainly through poverty reduction using different approaches and perspectives. Poverty in Bhutan is monitored with both multidimensional (including a unique multidimensional index – the GNH Index) and more conventional measurements based on income and expenditure surveys and income poverty lines.

## Annex 3 – Interview protocol

### General questions

1. What opportunities do you think persons with disabilities have in accessing vocational education programmes in Bhutan? And, from where do these opportunities come?
2. What challenges do you think would persons with disabilities face in accessing vocational education programmes in Bhutan? And, from where do these challenges come?
3. What opportunities do you think persons with disabilities have in accessing labour market in Bhutan? And, from where do these opportunities come?
4. What challenges do you think would persons with disabilities face in accessing labour market in Bhutan? And, from where do these challenges come?

### Policy and programmes: awareness, availability and coordination

5. Are you aware of relevant policies, legislation, funding streams (or lack thereof) for training AND skilling for people with disabilities? Tell me more about it
6. Are you aware of relevant policies, legislation, funding streams (or lack thereof) for access to labour market for people with disabilities? Tell me more about it

We want to know the actual awareness from the different stakeholders' perspectives, we might expect higher awareness among CSOs working with disability, parents' associations as well as funding agencies and government (or maybe not), but less from the private sector organisations.

- 6.1 (IF YES) how well are these policies and programmes designed, implemented and monitored? AND in what areas do you think there is room for improvement?

Distinguishing between vocational training and labour market, we want to know the different stakeholders' perspectives about designing, implementation and monitoring... in general COORDINATION. We might expect a more critical perspective from the beneficiaries point of view (CSOs, schools and parents associations) working with disability as well as funding agencies... less from government (or maybe not) and from the private sector organisations involved in delivery services.

7. (IF NOT), are you aware of relevant policies, legislation, funding streams that can be (easily) adapted to facilitate access of people with disabilities to vocational trainings and people with disabilities? ... AND can you make example of HOW do you think these can be adapted (if possible in anyway)?

We want to know – especially if there is negative answer to the above questions – whether it is possible to adapt existing policies, legislation, funding streams. *What are the policies and programmes that are available to young people in Bhutan for transition to work and support to employment generation* and whether they can be easily adapted or they need a new institutional set-up... the question about the organizational setting follow.

8. Do you think programmes (your program) should/could be tailored to people with disabilities? If so, tell me more about how they can be tailored.
9. Are organisations (government and non-government) effective in delivering training and employment support programmes for people with disabilities? How can their effectiveness be improved?

We already know from reports that there is a constant mismatch between skills and what the private sector need. Perhaps training institutions and vocational training are reactive and not pro-active... Furthermore, global commitments and national governments have endorsed social protection programmes as a means to addressing poverty and inequality. This has resulted in a growing level of institutionalization of social protection within national government administrations. *What is the institutional configuration in Bhutan for relevant programmes for people with disabilities (training and labor market access?)*. Internationally the trajectory of institutionalization has in many cases entailed the establishment of new institutions in parallel to existing departmental systems, in other cases new programmes have been implemented by existing departments. Have new departments been created to

manage new programmes? and what is the number of departments across which functions related to training and access and labour market are distributed (as a proxy for the level of coordination between programmes).

10. To what extent is there awareness among other stakeholders (BE AWARE it depends on who you are interviewing) of relevant policies, legislation, funding streams (or lack thereof) for training and access to labour market for people with disabilities? AND to your knowledge is there demand for change?

We want to know if there is “demand” for change (to policy, legislation, funding streams) from stakeholders...

11. What is the role of parents’ association and/or other grassroots groups in influencing policy and programmes as well as mind-sets? How do you think they should do this?

We want to know whether pressure groups can be created and they can influence government policy.

#### Local level challenges and opportunities

12. To your knowledge are Dzongkhag able to tackle issues relevant to training and access to labour market for people with disabilities at the local level? Can you elaborate AND in which areas do you think they can improve?
13. What about local leaders (Gups and Lamas)? To what extent do they support people with disabilities in their communities? Can they be targeted with awareness campaigns?

#### Impact of social norms at all levels

14. How relevant are social norms and social networks to support or to hinder access to training and job opportunities for young people with disabilities?

#### Role of the private sector

15. What, if any, is the role of the private sector in Bhutan in supporting vocational training and employment for people with disabilities?

What we want to know is if the private sector and companies actively recruited people with disability? And if they possibly provide training.

16. What are the challenges that the private sector could face in supporting the employment for people with disabilities?

What are the costs involved in recruiting people with disability for companies in Bhutan. and in general other challenges... perhaps they will mentioned training and skilling that is common in Bhutan across young people

17. Which potential sectors/industries in Bhutan do you see that can support the meaningful employment of persons with disabilities, and why do you think those sectors/industries can be particularly receptive/viable?
18. Are you aware of financial instruments for training and/or employability/entrepreneurship that young people with disabilities can access? If so, do you think they are tailored to the needs of people with disabilities? How they can be better designed and implemented?

#### Role of donor agencies

19. What, if any, is the role of donors and international organisations in Bhutan in supporting vocational training and employment schemes for people with disabilities?

Questions about whether the process of getting these programmes is donor-driven or nationally owned: are donor agendas aligned or in conflict with national priorities?





## Annex 4 – National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2019

The final version of the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2019) can be downloaded from the website of the Gross National Happiness Commission [here](#)<sup>2</sup>. In this report we highlighted the cross-cutting nature of the policy and showed how interweaved it is with the economy and society in Bhutan. Some examples have been made of potentially important links with other policies and an argument has been provided for short- to medium- term interventions particularly in research, education and the labour market. Below we offer a snapshot of the spheres that will be impacted by the policy *versus* the relevance of the proposed action in the report:

	Spheres of policy action	Areas of proposed interventions
Research and institutional arrangements for policy implementation are cut across policy spheres	Education – Provide inclusive education through accessible infrastructures, relevant curriculum and service.	V – we have highlighted avenues for improvements of policies and programmes to increase educational inclusion.
	Health – Provide quality healthcare through accessible and appropriate health facilities and services.	
	Economic security – Enhance economic security by developing vocational & entrepreneurial skills and providing accessible work places.	V – we have highlighted avenues for improvements of policies and programmes to increase employability and entrepreneurship for persons with disabilities in the forms of advice as well as through specific pilot interventions.
	Caregivers, Families & Communities – Support caregivers, families & communities by providing financial and other services including awareness to help care for person with disabilities.	V – we advocate for avenues of financial support not just for help to care for persons with disabilities but also to help those that can to be more independent.
	Protection & Access to Justice – Enhance protection & access to justice by removing physical, informational, attitudinal barriers and developing capacities.	
	Disaster risk reduction & Management - Ensure disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction & management.	
	Built Environment & Public Transport - ensure access to new/existing infrastructures and public transport facilities through universal designs or reasonable modifications.	V – we advocate for improving infrastructure’s accessibility and whenever there is an opportunity through available funding streams from international partners (government’s TVET schools for example).
	Information, Communication & Technology – Ensure access to online services, public information & technology. Adopt a standardised Bhutanese Sign Language.	V – the pilot interventions, which are an integral part of the research project, include a microgrant to support various activities, including the purchases of online services and IT equipment, with the view to improve specific services that may be delivered by the State and/or other sectors.
	Participation in Cultural, Recreational & Sport Activities – Promote participation in cultural/recreational/sporting events by providing designated areas for sitting & parking. Support participation in Dzongkhag. National & international sporting events.	
	Political Participation, Policy and Planning - Promote participation in election & decision-making process through inclusive forums, venues & facilities.	V - we advocate for active participation in policy making (beyond consultation) of CSOs in Bhutan.
Research and institutional arrangements		V – we provide advice to improve information systems and their access, as well as advice of possible institutional arrangements beyond those included currently in the policy.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.gnhc.gov.bt/en/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/1.-Final-Draft\\_NPPWD\\_May\\_2019.pdf](https://www.gnhc.gov.bt/en/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/1.-Final-Draft_NPPWD_May_2019.pdf)

