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# FINDING A COMMON NARRATIVE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS IN BHUTAN

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## A WORKSHOP REPORT

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## BACKGROUND

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The two-day workshop titled ‘Finding a Common Narrative for CSOs in Bhutan’ was held in Paro on 16 and 17 February 2023. A total of 20 executive directors of civil society organisations participated in the workshop.

This workshop was part of the Bhutan Media Foundation’s project titled ‘Developing the Interface between Civil Society and Media’ supported by the European Union through Helvetas Bhutan and International IDEA.

The workshop was a visioning exercise for the CSO leaders. The objective was to help them identify their challenges, opportunities, historical and contemporary significance, and find a common narrative.

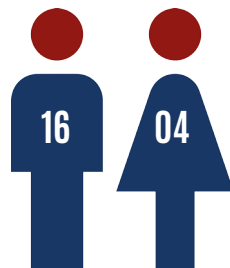
Civil society, as the third sector, is commonly understood as the weakest democratic link in Bhutan. Although Bhutan’s Civil Society is centuries old, the organised sector operating under the Civil Society Organisations Act 2007 is new, particularly in comparison with the public sector. Therefore, more than a decade after CSOs were formally registered, the sector is still trying to find a firm footing, gain public credibility, and build a united fraternity.

Among the many challenges facing the sector, the lack of a common narrative has been pointed out as a critical missing link in a number of CSO forums. A sector comprising CSOs working in diverse areas needs to be bound together by a coherent narrative, which is critical to building a strong fraternity. This was the idea behind the workshop.

## PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE

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The workshop participants included the executive directors of 20 civil society organisations (male: 16; female: 4). (See Annex 1 for list of participants)



## FACILITATOR'S PROFILE

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The workshop was facilitated by Chencho Lhamu (PhD). Chencho Lhamu is the executive director of the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy.



## VENUE AND DATE

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The workshop was conducted at Metta Resort in Paro from 16 to 17 February 2023. It is a quiet place for reflection and contemplation on serious subjects like a common narrative for CSOs.



## Day 1

Needrup Zangpo, the executive director of the Bhutan Media Foundation (BMF), opened the workshop with introductory remarks. He welcomed the participants to the workshop and thanked them for taking time off their busy schedules to attend the important workshop. Highlighting the objective of the workshop, he underlined the significance of a common narrative for CSOs in Bhutan. He said that in a rapidly expanding and shifting civil society landscape, building a united sector with a common purpose had become challenging.

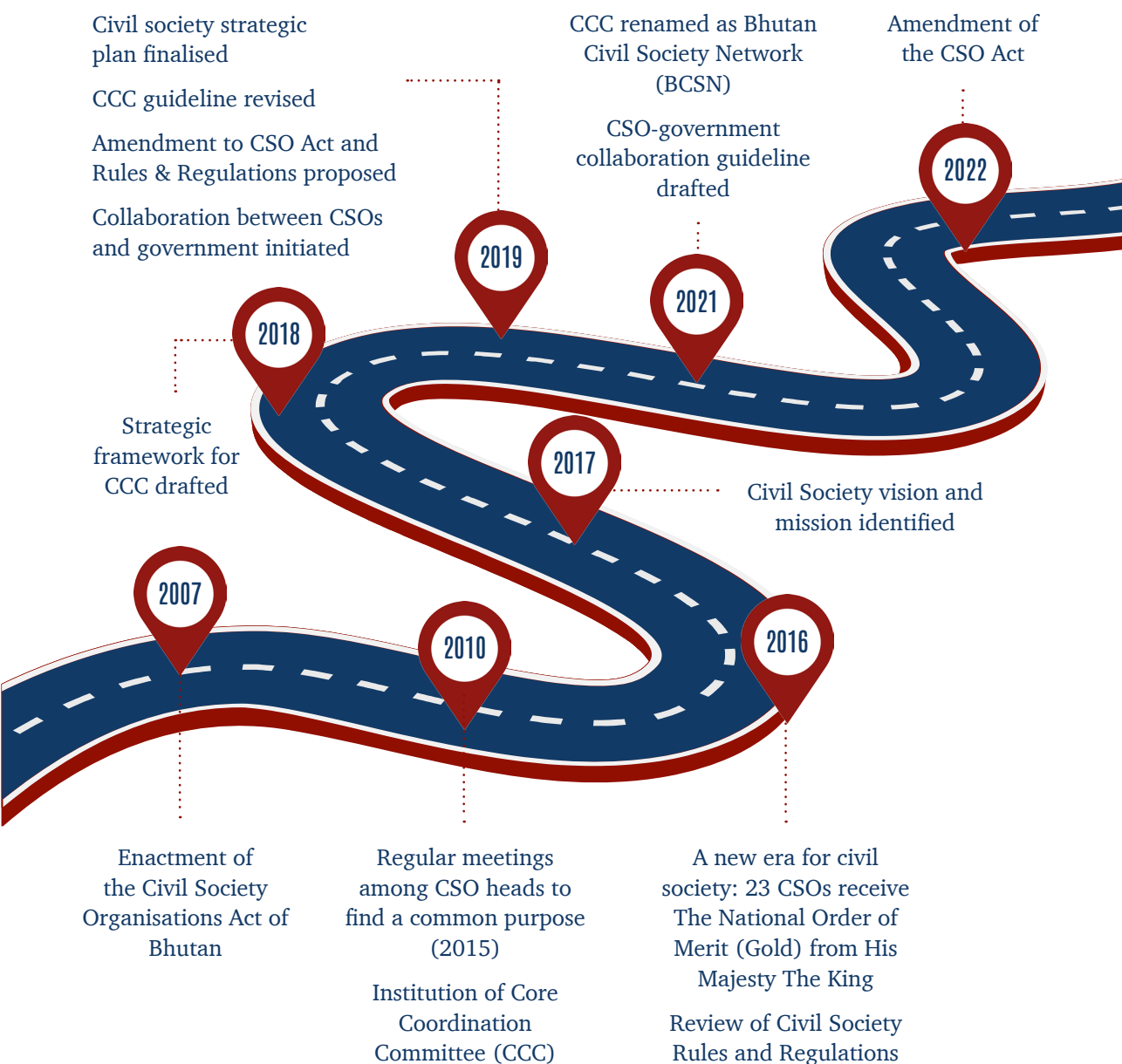


How could CSOs align their purpose with the grand national narrative? How could CSOs keep pace with the national transformation? How could CSOs, as the third sector between the government and the market, be strengthened to serve the nation better? A common narrative would be the beginning of an answer to these questions and more.

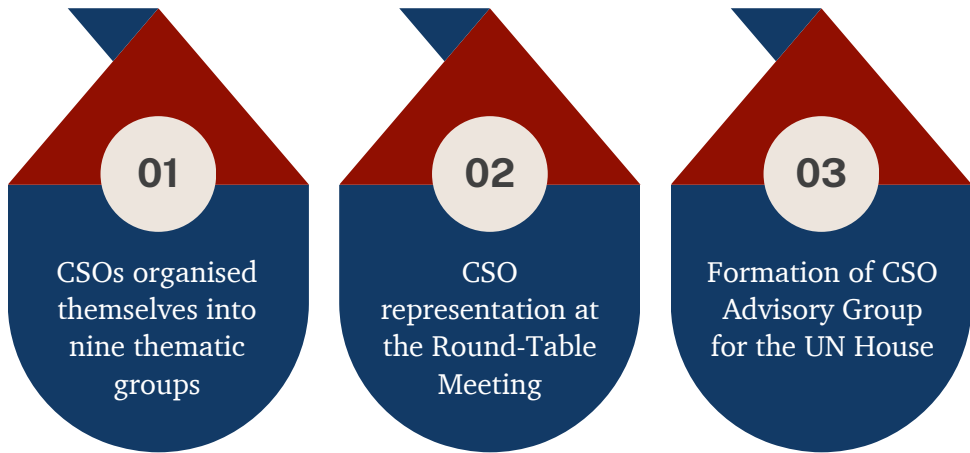
## Session 1: Looking back to look forward

In this session, the discussion revolved around what unifies CSOs in Bhutan. The facilitator said that narratives are stories. The stories are in the consensus that we build. Stories are encapsulated in our vision and mission, our conduct, our values, and our history. She said that CSOs are united in their vision.

The facilitator explained the vision and mission of civil society in Bhutan and took the participants through the milestones of CSOs.

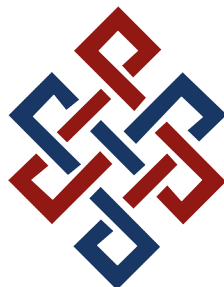


The participants discussed these milestones and suggested that the following be included in the milestones:



The facilitator stressed the importance of capturing these milestones. She said each of these milestones was an achievement, which had to be understood by people outside the civil society sector so that they could understand CSOs better. She added that it was important for the Bhutan Civil Society Network (BCSN) to keep documenting milestones, which would form the CSOs' narrative.

Sonam Dorji, the ED of ABTO, said that a few years earlier, there used to be a Development Partners' Group. The UN coordinated that group and brought together all donor agencies based in Bhutan and the CSOs in regular meetings. He said that BCSN could follow up with the UN and revive that platform.





## Session 2: Defining Self-Common Identity of CSOs

This session began by dividing the participants into five groups. The groups were asked to write a brief story about CSOs and present it to the plenary.

### GROUP 1

CSOs are credible, accountable, coordinated and well-regulated.

### GROUP 2

CSOs are traditional, organic and the Bhutanese way of service that has, over the years, evolved into a collective professional and legal entity complementing the government's development efforts.

### GROUP 3

A sense of volunteerism has always been there. Now, with the CSO Act, it has become more structured, accountable, transparent and visible. CSOs aspire to work closely with the government for the development of the country and the welfare of the people.

### GROUP 4

There are 54 CSOs in Bhutan that complement the government's efforts by reaching the unreached, guided by the principles of transparency, accountability and integrity by fostering collaboration, coordination and communication within the fraternity and with relevant partners and government agencies.

### GROUP 5

CSOs are the third sector because they complement and supplement the government's efforts in reaching services to the people. They have come together and formed the BCSN with a clear vision and mission. The CSOs have organised themselves into eight thematic groups. They are audited by the Royal Audit Authority and by the donors on a regular basis.

## Discussions

The facilitator observed that explaining the concept of CSOs depended on how one framed it and one's ability to tell a story. She said it was important to know that CSOs are united in their vision to promote an equitable, just, inclusive and compassionate society.

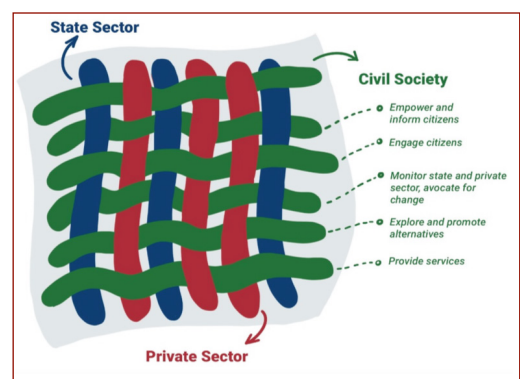
The CSOs are organised into thematic groups. They meet every quarterly and organise an annual retreat that reflects the coordination and a sense of solidarity among themselves. CSOs are audited every year, which shows transparency and accountability. They reach the unreached and complement and supplement the government's efforts, and they are recognised by the highest authority in the country.

The participants also shared that while the above narrative captures the story of CSOs very well, it is restrictive. It depends on who we are telling our story to. The story has to be framed in the listener's interest.

Next, the discussion was on how to explain the concept of civil society to a common person. According to the Civil Society Academy, there are three sectors – State Sector, Market Sector, and Civil Society Sector. An

elected government runs the State Sector. It collects taxes from citizens and redistributes them in the form of public services. The Market Sector is run by business people and is profit-oriented. The Civil Society Sector raises its fund through foundations, grants, and charity, which is ploughed back into the communities while sustaining itself. Civil society does not make any profit.

Civil society is like the thread that binds a society together. In the figure below, the blue thread is the state sector and the red thread is the private sector. Civil Society is the green thread that binds the entire society. It empowers and informs citizens, it engages citizens, it monitors the state and the private sector, advocates for change, it explores and promotes alternatives, and it provides services.



Source: <https://www.civilsocietyacademy.org/post/why-is-civil-society-important>

The facilitator then grouped the participants into thematic groups and asked them to discuss how the thematic groups frame their identity.

### Wellbeing Group

We are agents of change who believe that there is a safe space for people and animals towards a better and more compassionate Bhutan.

### Media, Democracy and Good Governance Group

We are the champions of good governance, promoting diversity, inclusivity, accountability, transparency, integrity and independent voice.

### Health and Sanitation Group

We are lifesavers promoting a healthy lifestyle and preventing diseases.

### Gender and Vulnerable Group

We are the agents that strive to eliminate stigma and discrimination through the generation of employment as the champions of equity. We are the advocates for gender and vulnerable population to transform their lives so that they can live with dignity.

### Socio-economic Group

We are MBOs formed for collective representation, protection, and promotion of our interest and advancement of our sector. *(The members of this group present at the workshop were all from MBOs, so this statement does not apply to the PBOs from this thematic group)*

### Session 3: The Civic Space within the Bhutanese Socio-political Ecosystem

The participants were again grouped into thematic groups and were asked to list down some common misconceptions about CSOs in Bhutan. The participants came up with the following misconceptions:

- 
- 1 CSOs are family business/self-serving
  - 2 CSOs are not monitored or regulated
  - 3 CSOs are not transparent
  - 4 CSOs misuse funds or they are corrupt
  - 5 CSOs are competitors to the government
  - 6 CSOs have a huge volunteer base
  - 7 CSOs are donor-driven
  - 8 CSOs are not credible/capable/professional
  - 9 There are too many CSOs
  - 10 CSOs are profit-oriented
  - 11 CSOs create disharmony
  - 12 There is confusion between PBOs and MBOs
  - 13 CBOs are CSOs
  - 14 Individual fund-raising confused with CSO fundraising
  - 15 Duplication of work

The participants were given four misconceptions each in groups and were asked to draw counter-narratives to address these misconceptions. Counter-narratives provide positive alternatives. They must be educative and not defensive.



**GROUP**  
**1**

**Misconceptions 1-4**

- We are a young sector, and we are aware that there may be concerns and misconceptions about how CSOs function. However, we abide by the Civil Society Organisations Authority (CSOA) regulations, and we are monitored and audited.
- We are responsible and accountable in fundraising and other areas. We have service guidelines in place. CSOs are now seen as potential employers.
- We are aware there were mistakes made in the past. They have made us more professional and accountable, and helped us put checks and balances mechanisms in place.



*CSOs are competitors to the government*

CSOs complement and supplement the government's efforts. His Majesty the King awarded the National Order of Merit (Gold) to 23 CSOs in 2016. His Majesty said that the award was to recognise and motivate the future generations to put effort into serving the country and society. The commendation on the plaque awarded to the CSOs stated, 'For volunteering time and effort towards promoting humanitarian values, our culture and tradition, and our national objectives; for working passionately and tirelessly for the benefit of others; for taking on the responsibility to provide support and assistance wherever the government is unable to reach, and for keeping alive the sacred values of compassion and empathy.'

*CSOs have a huge volunteer base*

CSOs have offices to run with overhead costs. Volunteers are mobilised for certain activities only. CSOs are cost-effective and we can do a cost analysis to prove our efficiency.

*CSOs are donor-driven*

CSOs are donor driven because they have to look for funds to carry out their activities. Most CSOs do not get funding support from the government or the private sector. CSOs do not have an enabling environment to have social enterprises. CSOs are donor-driven, but we do not drift away from our core mission.



*CSOs are not credible/capable/professional*

The formal CSOs in Bhutan are at a nascent stage. The networking and collaboration among the CSOs are strengthened with the establishment of the Bhutan Civil Society Network (BCSN). Therefore, more initiatives on capacity building and resource sharing are being organised.

Capacity can be equated to money. If CSOs have enough funding, capacity will automatically increase.

*There are too many CSOs*

The emergence of new and more CSOs with distinct and helpful activities will generate more employment, save government resources and ultimately contribute to nation-building. A flourishing number of CSOs is viewed as a good indication of democracy.

*CSOs are profit-oriented*

As CSOs are registered under the CSO Act as Not for Profit Organisations, the CSOA maintains their websites well to inform about CSOs' audit status. CSOs are not permitted to make profit for their trustees.

*CSOs create disharmony*

With the strengthening of the network among the CSOs, BCSN is mandated to educate the public on its vision and mission.





- We are conducting advocacy and awareness on the work of public-benefit organisations (PBOs), mutual-benefit organisations (MBOs), and community-based organisations (CBOs) should help the public understand the difference between these organisations.

- We are looking forward to have proper guidelines for fundraising streamlined by the CSOA.

- We promote good governance and accountability among CSOs, which will bring public trust in us.

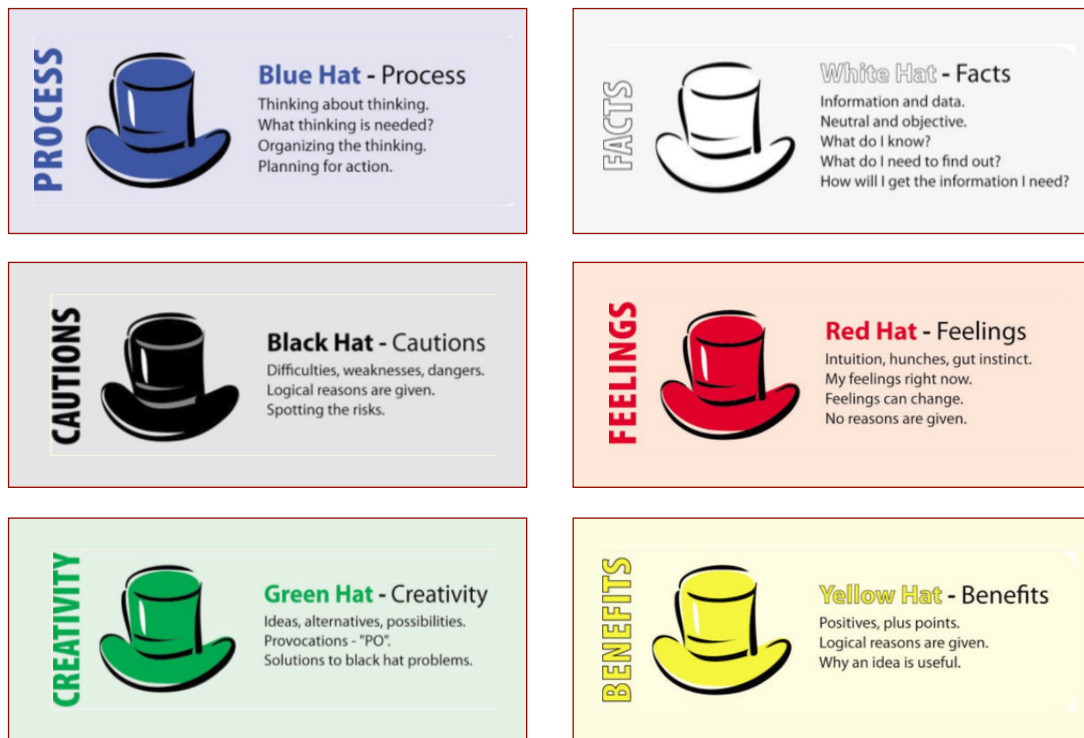


The final discussion was on the issue of a founder serving as the executive director. The participants said that it is all right for a founder to be the ED as long as he or she is capable. They added that founders had started the CSOs out of their passion and interest. If they found other people who are equally capable with the same passion, then they could bring them in as EDs. The facilitator said that the birth of a CSO was like a baby born of passion. It had to be nurtured until it was able to run on its own. She added that CSOs were not attractive like other sectors. So, it was not necessary to apply the lens that is used to monitor and evaluate other sectors on CSOs.



## Day 2

The second day of the workshop started with a self-reflection exercise. The participants were given a questionnaire to rate themselves. Based on the ratings, they were to find out which hat they belonged to.



Next, the participants were divided into groups and given the following scenario. Each member of the group was asked to pick a hat and discuss the scenario in the group wearing that hat.

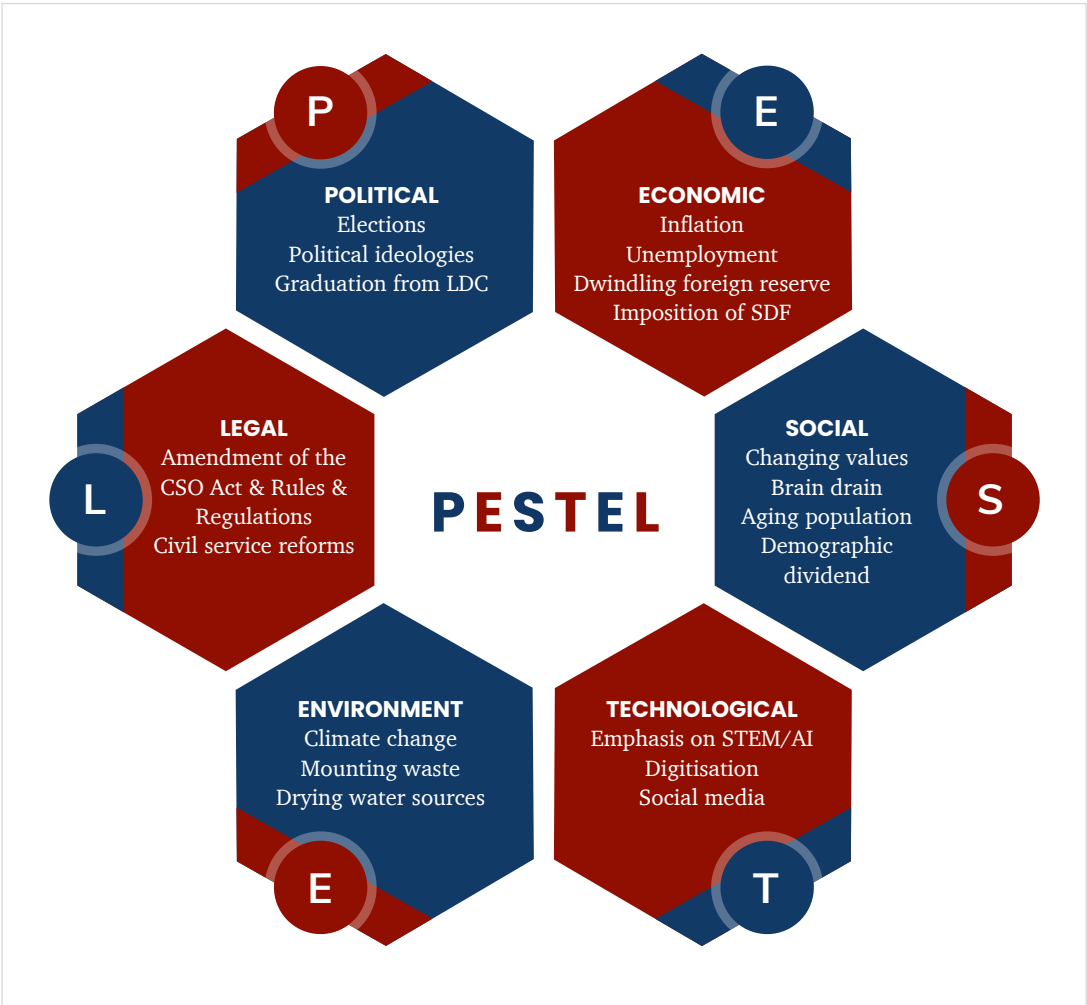
### Scenario

CSOA asks BCSN to either register under CSOA or dissolve the network since the mandates of BCSN and CSOA are overlapping.

The participants discussed the scenario wearing the given hat. After one round of discussion, they were asked to switch hats and discuss again. This exercise helped the participants to be more flexible to wear different hats and, as a leader, realise their ability to switch hats while handling any situation.

# Foresighting Civil Society

This exercise was to do foresighting using the tools ‘PESTEL’ and ‘OT Analysis’. The participants were divided into six groups. Each group was to look at changes in different environments such as political, economic, social, technological, environment, and legal space and analyse what those changes would mean for the CSOs. They were asked to list how to harness opportunities and counter threats.



New transformation resulted in the amendment of many Acts, the CSO Act being one of them.

### ● *Harness opportunities*

- CSO Authority is now chaired by a politician, who is more approachable and accountable than a bureaucrat. The Executive Committee can influence the minister's decision about CSOs.
- Graduation from LDC opens up opportunities for CSOs to bring in funds (donors interested in CSOs). The CSO Advisory Group for the UN could take up the issues through the UN and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### ● *Counter threats*

- Perceived politicisation of CSOs, especially through funding support for CSO activities. CSOs could keep reiterating the apolitical status of civil society during meetings and gatherings.

### ● *Changes*

- Bhutanese moving to Australia for education and a better future
- Decrease in the number of Bhutanese living abroad investing in Bhutan
- Nationalisation of most companies, so less opportunity for the private sector
- Credit facilities – no consideration for CSOs
- Trade deficit – we are importing more than what we are exporting
- Implication of SDF on CSOs

### ● *Harness opportunities*

- A public-private partnership policy has to be in place.
- Improved public services. We need to build trust between the government and CSOs.
- Transparency and accountability has to be improved. The government needs to share information and resources with CSOs
- National CSR policy required.

### ● *Counter threats*

- Loss of expertise because of people emigrating. Therefore, there is a need for constant capacity building.
- There is a need for domestic funding mechanism, which is in line with the CSR policy.
- Explore diversification of export.
- Introduce new financial schemes such as CSO-oriented schemes.
- Slow down the nationalisation craze. The government needs to outsource its work to CSOs.

## 3

### **Social Group**

### ● *Harness opportunities*

- Changing values – we can adopt international best practices and include them in our policy documents.
- Brain drain – potential and competent civil servants leaving their jobs because of pressure and joining CSOs. Brain drain is limited in CSOs because of passion for work.
- Aging population – there is no age limit for employees of CSOs, so CSOs can employ people with a pool of knowledge and experiences. CSOs can become more attractive employment sector.
- Dividend – even with LDC graduation, CSOs can continue getting external funding.

### ● *Counter threats*

- There is a chance of losing our culture while trying to adopt international practices.
- CSO employees leaving abroad and better job opportunities – CSOs could replace these employees with superannuated civil servants.
- CSOs with a lot of fund can be under the radar of various agencies – ensure that you are functioning in compliance with the rules and regulations.

## 4

### Technological Group

### ● *Harness opportunities*

- Bhutan has a huge opportunity for data centres.
- Networking and communication can be improved drastically through social media.
- Advocacy and awareness of CSOs can be improved.
- Social media also helps make society transparent because of social accountability.
- All CSOs could link their websites and social pages with BCSN platforms.
- Help share each other's stories for better reach.

### ● *Counter threats*

- Misinformation and disharmony can be created.
- Mental and physical health can be hampered.
- Loss of time and resources.
- The above threats give the CSOs an opportunity to dig deeper and create materials and knowledge to address these issues

- ***Harness opportunities***
  - Develop sensitisation programme (audio-visual) and broadcast it on BBS and social media.
  - Engage with government agencies for policy reviews and reforms pertaining to environmental issues.
- ***Counter threats***
  - Build the capacity of CSOs and entrepreneurs to tackle with environmental issues.
  - Introduce green products and technologies.

- ***Harness opportunities***
  - CSOs can influence the chairperson of the CSOA.
  - Possibility of another amendment of CSO Act.
  - Revision of rules and regulations in favour of CSOs.
- ***Counter threats***
  - CSOs to remain apolitical as per the code of ethics.
  - Ensure that there is more CSO representations on the CSOA board.

\*Since the environment affects everyone, the facilitator asked all the CSOs to make a pledge to protect the environment by reducing printing, by recycling paper and cartridges, and proper disposal of e-waste. A suggestion was made for the BCSN to develop an environment pledge, sanitation and hygiene guideline, and a social media conduct guideline.

## ANNEX. 1

### List of participants

Sl. No	Name	Organisation
1	Chencho Lhamu	Facilitator (Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy)
2	Dawa Tshering	Bhutan Stroke Foundation
3	Gyembo Dorji	Pel Drukdraling Foundation
4	Karma Tobgay	Bhutan Cancer Society
5	Kuenzang N Tshering	Ability Bhutan Society
6	Letho Wangchuk	Financial Institutions Association of Bhutan
7	Nima Gyeltshen	Organisation for Youth Empowerment
8	Needrup Zangpo	Bhutan Media Foundation
9	Passang Tshering	Bhutan Toilet Organisation
10	Rinzin Rinzin	Bhutan Transparency Initiative
11	Sangeeta Rana	Hotel and Restaurant Association of Bhutan
12	Sonam Dorji	All Bhutan Tour Operators
13	Sonam Tshoki Tenzin	GNH Centre Bhutan
14	Tashi Dhendup	Film Association of Bhutan
15	Tashi Namgay	Bhutan Kidney Foundation
16	Tashi Payden Tshering	Royal Society for Protection and Care of Animals
17	Thinley	Nazhoen Lamtoen
18	Tshering Namgay	Royal Society for Senior Citizens
19	Tshering Yonten	Construction Association of Bhutan
20	Wangda Dorji	Lhaksam

## ANNEX. 2

### Workshop Agenda

#### Day 1

Time	Session
9am-11am	Registration Introduction – River of Life Looking back to look forward A collective identity of CSOs
11am-11.30am	Tea
11.30am-1pm	The civic space within the Bhutanese socio-political ecosystem <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conceptions, perceptions &amp; misconception</li><li>• Unveiling the root causes of misconceptions</li></ul>
1pm-2pm	Lunch
2pm-4pm	Discovering my hat Reclaiming civic space <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Constructing counter narratives</li><li>• Strategies</li></ul>

#### Day 2

Time	Session
9am-11am	Registration Foresighting Civil Society <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Process &amp; tools</li><li>• The changing PESTEL space</li></ul>
11am-11.30am	Tea
11.30am-1pm	Foresighting Civil Society <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Process &amp; tools</li><li>• The changing PESTEL space</li></ul>
1pm-2pm	Lunch
2pm-4pm	Making sense of the changing PESTEL space for CSOs <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Opportunities</li><li>• Challenges</li></ul>







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