Youth civic engagement in Bhutan: Obedient citizens or social activists?

Source: Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy

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Abstract

People’s participation in their own development is at the core of Communication for Development. This study explores the potential and barriers for youth civic engagement especially among the urban youth in Bhutan, a newly democratised country in the Eastern Himalayas. Youth Initiative (YI), a project begun in the fall of 2013 by a group of local youth and mentored by a local civil society organisation, the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, was chosen as the case study.

The study analyses how and in which arenas youth enact their citizenship in Bhutan; how young people themselves see their opportunities to participate in democratic processes, analysing social, cultural and political factors influencing their participation; whether their civic participation is critical or conforming to the existing social structures; how could Facebook foster democratic culture and youth civic engagement; and what is the link between youth civic engagement and social capital.

Data were collected through three (3) focus group discussions with youth and nine (9) qualitative interviews with founders or steering committee members of the YI. The 19 young participants of the focus group discussions were between 17 to 28 years old, two of the groups consisting of YI representatives and one of unemployed youth. The interview data together with relevant textual sources were analysed through the conceptual framework of participatory democracy and social capital. Three distinct themes could be identified through the qualitative thematic analysis: 1. Youth agency in the public sphere; 2. Inequality and corruption; and 3. Cultural change. Particularly informal cultural barriers, such as respecting authorities and the lack of democratic culture to have an equal, critical dialogue in the public sphere were seen as main obstacles for youth civic engagement in Bhutan.

The findings indicate that youth civic engagement is a crucial component in strengthening social capital, particularly mutual trust across different groups and generations of people. The study argues that it is possible to create a space for inter-generational dialogue that encompasses and respects the diverse, but overlapping spheres of youth agency, democratic communication and social harmony.

Key words: youth participation, civic engagement, democratisation, citizenship, Bhutan
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<thead>
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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Corruption Commission</td>
<td>ACC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan Broadcasting Service</td>
<td>BBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy</td>
<td>BCMD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication for Development</td>
<td>C4D</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civil Society Organisation</td>
<td>CSO</td>
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<td>Focus group discussion</td>
<td>FGD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Go Youth Go</td>
<td>GYG</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
<td>GDP</td>
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<td>Gross National Happiness</td>
<td>GNH</td>
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<td>National Statistics Bureau</td>
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<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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<td>United Nations Volunteers</td>
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<td>Youth civic engagement</td>
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<td>Youth Initiative</td>
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1. Introduction

Informed and active citizens who communicate with each other about local, national and global issues, and act together for social change are essential for making the world a better place. This may sound simple and even naïve, but it is the premise of my own understanding of what development should be. This is also the reason for choosing participatory democracy, and more particularly youth civic engagement in Bhutan as the focus of my Master’s thesis in Communication for Development.

For democracy to work, citizens need to know what is happening in their society, respect the voices and rights of others and have skills in negotiation, self-discipline and cooperation. Building these civic skills is not an easy task, even in countries that have practiced democracy for hundreds of years. How does this work in a country that has experienced formal democracy only for six years?

Bhutan is a small Buddhist kingdom in the Eastern Himalayas, and one of the youngest democracies in the world with its first parliamentary elections held in 2008. The country has become famous due to its many particularities: staying isolated from the rest of the world until the 1970s; coining the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), holistic approach to development; being the last country in the world to allow television broadcasting in 1999; having a strong emphasis on preserving culture and traditions; and restricting the number of international tourists by setting the minimum daily tariff of 200 dollars. Yet, Bhutan is also a country struggling with the ordinary problems of rising youth unemployment, increasing consumerism among the urban middle class and changing cultural values.

1.1. Aim, objectives and research questions

I arrived in Bhutan to work as a United Nations Volunteer (UNV) in July 2013, only two days after the second parliamentary elections in history. The surprising defeat of the former ruling party was the hot topic for the next few months. The “youth issue”, rising number of graduates not able to find secure government jobs and their perceived delinquent behaviour in urban areas was another recurrent theme in the public discourse. The combination of these two led to the topic of this thesis: youth civic engagement and democratic participation in Bhutan. I wanted to find out what young people think about the expectations, stereotypes and accusations projected to them, and
how do they see themselves as citizens in this young democracy.

The aim of this study is to analyse youth civic engagement, obstacles and support towards youth participation especially among the urban youth in Bhutan. The following research questions are explored:

- How and in which arenas are the youth enacting their citizenship in Bhutan?
- How do young people see their opportunities to participate in democratic processes in Bhutan? Which environmental (social and political) reasons influence their civic participation? Is their participation critical or conforming to the existing social structures?
- How could Facebook foster democratic culture and youth civic engagement?
- What is the link between youth civic engagement and social capital?

Answering these research questions contributes to the field of youth civic engagement, particularly in the context of a newly democratised country in the global South. The study also analyses the connections social capital and youth civic engagement in Bhutan. Forms of social capital such as trust and collective action improve social cohesion and have been shown to correlate with individual happiness, making this topic relevant also for deepening the understanding on GNH.

1.2. **Communication for Development and civic engagement**

According to the United Nations definition, the aim of Communication for Development (C4D) is to strengthen people’s participation in their own development: to empower people, and to engage them in public discourse through understanding, discussing and negotiating issues and ideas that are important for their well-being and development (United Nations website; United Nations Development Programme 2011; Article 6 of General Assembly Resolution 51/172, 1997). The World Congress on Communication for Development defined the concept further in the Rome Consensus from 2006:

“...a social process...about seeking change at different levels, including listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change.”

These definitions of C4D are extremely relevant for the topic of youth civic engagement that aims at facilitating dialogue and building skills of young people to influence the conversations affecting their future. One specific type among the C4D approaches
identified by the United Nations is “Communication for Social Change” that stresses the importance of dialogue in development, and the need to facilitate people’s participation and empowerment. The case study of this project work, “Youth Initiative for Debate, Deliberation and Development” (YI) is aligned with this approach focusing on social change and moving away from individual behaviours towards collective community action and long-term social change, respecting the principles of tolerance, self-determination, equity, social justice and active participation. (UNDP 2011: 7; Thomas 2014: 26.)

1.3. Research design

The primary data collection methods are focus group interviews and selective qualitative single interviews, both with young people themselves, as well as with people involved in youth engagement programmes. This interview data, together with textual data is analysed through thematic analysis.

The number of interviewees is relatively small: nine individual interviews and in total 19 young participants in the three focus group discussions. This is why I try to avoid, as much as possible, generalizing this study to apply to all “Bhutanese youth”. “Youth” everywhere consist of highly diverse groups of people with different family backgrounds, education levels, genders and classes, with the only common denominator of belonging to a certain age group recognised by the country as “youth” – for example in Bhutan, those between the age of 15 and 24 years. Nevertheless, this study can enlarge the understanding of how a selected group of contemporary Bhutanese youth see their opportunities and possibilities to participate in their society.

The thesis begins with a short literature review on youth civic engagement (chapter 2). The third chapter introduces Bhutan and the socio-economic environment for this study. The theoretical framework focuses on the concepts of participatory democracy and social capital (chapter 4). The chapter on research methodology (chapter 5) describes the methods for data collection and analysis, and the chapter focusing on analysis of the data (chapter 6) presents the main findings and discusses them in relation with theoretical assumptions.
2. Youth civic engagement

This chapter summarises the definitions, history and main questions related to research on youth civic engagement (YCE) that is often used as an umbrella term for various forms of youth activities, ranging from political participation to volunteerism. The challenge of studying civic engagement lies in the fact that there is no single theory or accepted definition for it, but “theories about learning, development, political engagement, and identity are used to explain civic engagement” (Hollander and Burack 2009: 3). While this inter-disciplinarity has led to an interesting range of research, it has also created a complex, fragmented field of research where each researcher uses their own definitions, methods and classifications of civic engagement. UNESCO defines YCE as ”ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future”, and “exercise their rights and assume their responsibilities as citizens as social actors”. Civically engaged citizens use their skills to serve their communities, for example by addressing an issue, working together to solve problems, or interacting with democratic institutions. (UNESCO 2013.)

One of the best sources on YCE is the extensive Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth (2010) that covers topics such as the definition and types of youth civic engagement, or measurement and recommendations for future research. The history of research in this field starts from the 1960s, when political scientists in collaboration with psychologists first began studying “political socialisation”, as civic engagement was then called. After a silent period in the 1980s, the field was revived in the 1990s when it attracted again more interest from educational researchers, sociologists and psychologists. Firstly, particularly in the United States, policy-makers and educators were concerned over the political disengagement of young people, as well as their lack of knowledge on democratic principles. Secondly, as part of a global advocacy process led by UNICEF, governments increasingly recognised the rights of children and young people and the need to include them in decision-making. Thirdly, youth civic engagement was acknowledged as a valuable part of youth work that could contribute positively to youth development in terms of increasing human and social capital. (Sherrod et al. 2010: 2; Torney-Purta et al. 2010: 500; Brady et al. 2012: 2.)

To classify YCE activities, Brady et al. divide them into: a) community service
and volunteering; b) mutual aid, support to others within the same community or social group; c) advocacy and campaigning; d) youth media; e) social entrepreneurship; and f) leadership training and practice. Civic engagement activities can take place on local grassroots level, in schools or higher education institutions, through non-governmental organisations, political institutions or political parties. Another useful typology is to divide civic engagement into individual and collective forms. Individual forms comprise actions such as writing to an editor, giving money to charity, discussing politics and social issues with friends, following media coverage on political issues or recycling. Collective acts involve volunteering for social or charity work or being active in community-based organisations. (Brady et al. 2012: 4-7.)

Successful civic engagement programme can promote social inclusion and equal access to opportunities and decision-making, dialogue and non-discrimination (UNESCO 2013). Other expected benefits of youth civic engagement include reduced risky behaviour, better success in school and more active civic participation in later life. Through civic engagement young people can also gain work experience, learn new life and employment skills, responsibility and accountability while contributing to the community development. (CSSD 2011: 2; Campbell-Patton and Patton 2010: 609.) Although robust evidence on these benefits is still missing, studies affirm that young adults who have taken part in extracurricular activities or community learning programme in colleges have been found more likely to volunteer after their college time (Duke et al. 2009). The participation in youth organisations has been found to predict the political behaviour as adults, such as voting and membership in voluntary associations even 25 years later (Youniss et al. 2002: 125).

Nonetheless, it has to be noted that many other things besides civic engagement programmes affect young people’s attitudes and behaviours. Youth around the world are faced with huge global challenges: climate change, HIV/AIDS epidemic, financial crunch and the changing intergenerational relations, to name a few (Tuft and Enghel 2009: 11-12). Other environmental factors such as youth culture, schools, legal system, media and employment effect young people everywhere. Political environment, social and cultural norms influence the way in which society responds to the efforts of civic engagement by young people. (Campbell-Patton and Patton 2010: 609.)

Besides surveys and quantitative research on youth civic engagement, understanding on how youth themselves interpret their social contexts is lacking, something that this study attempts to tackle. There is scarcity of research on out-of-
school, less privileged youth – and even less so from the global South. Interactions between teacher and youth, youth and family, or youth and organisations would need to be looked more in detail. In general, a more holistic look at the process of civic engagement is called for. How do the general aspirations of the youth relate to and influence civic engagement? How do young people understand their social and political environment? How critical or conformist is their engagement? What kind of civic engagement contributes to different types of social capital, from supporting pluralism to political trust? Kirshner et al. believe that answering these questions through qualitative research would portray a more complex and accurate picture of what does an “engaged young citizen” stand for. (Kirshner, Strobel & Fernandez 2002: 1-4; Hollander and Burack 2009: 7-8; Mercy Corps 2012.)

3. Context: Bhutan

_We are not starting a party because we have an ideology. We're not starting a party because we have a vision for a better Bhutan. We are starting a party because the king has ordered us._

_Tshering Tobgay, Prime Minister since 2013, quoted before the first mock elections in Bhutan in 2007 (Sengupta 2007)_

First images greeting the visitor arriving in Bhutan are the picture of the royal couple outside the international airport, and a series of photo portraits of all the five monarchs at the arrival hall. One of the newest democracies in the world is peculiar in the sense that it was not Bhutanese citizens who wanted democracy – it was a decision made by the King, then an absolute monarch and leader of the country.

This chapter sets the foundation for this project work, the historical and social context in which the present generation of youth live in Bhutan. It will begin with a brief introduction to the history of Bhutan, followed by a focus on media and civil society, and ends with a description on youth realities in Bhutan.

3.1. Snapshot of Bhutan

The geo-political location of Bhutan, landlocked country with a population of 735,000 between India and China, is challenging to say the very least (Figure 1). Yet, Bhutan has never been colonised by foreign powers and remained isolated from the rest of the world until 1950s. Besides the national language Dzongkha and the second official
language English, there are at least two dozen other languages spoken in different regions of Bhutan.

Buddhism was introduced to Bhutan in the 7th century. Religion continues to be a visible part of Bhutanese everyday life: almost all homes have an altar or a shrine-room, people make offerings in monasteries regularly, put up prayer flags and go for pilgrimages. Television news frequently features both spiritual and political leaders in the daily news, and new-born babies get their names from a religious teacher, lama.

Until the early 17th century, Bhutan was divided into many warring fiefdoms before a leader from Tibet, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal unified the country and installed the dual system of administration of civil rulers (Desi) and spiritual ruler (Je Khenpo). After Zhabdrung, from 1651 until the establishment of monarchy in 1907, Bhutan experienced civil wars as well as two Anglo-Bhutan wars. The Third King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck who abolished serfdom and slavery in 1958 and established a 130-member national assembly in 1953. In international relations, Bhutan formed friendly relations with India in the 1950s and joined the United Nations in 1971. India is still Bhutan's most important trade and development partner, and Bhutanese currency, ngultrum, has a fixed exchange rate with the Indian rupee.

![Map of Bhutan](http://www.your-vector-maps.com/countries/-bhutan/-bhutan-free-vector-map/)

Figure 1. Map of Bhutan. Source: [http://www.your-vector-maps.com/countries/-bhutan/-bhutan-free-vector-map/](http://www.your-vector-maps.com/countries/-bhutan/-bhutan-free-vector-map/)
Before the first wave of modernisation in 1961, Bhutan had no roads, currency, electricity, postal services or telephones. In the 1960s, it was the least developed country in the world measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), then 51 dollars per capita. Currently Bhutan's GDP (2,336 USD) is among the highest in the South Asian region (UN 2011) and the country stands at 140 out of 187 countries in the Human Development Index in 2012. Main income generators for Bhutan are high-level tourism and hydropower sold to India. Agriculture still employs 60 percent of the population, but contributes only 16.8 percent of the overall GDP. (National Statistics Bureau 2013b.)

Bhutan's approach to development is epitomised by Gross National Happiness (GNH), a term coined by the Fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 1979, but more practiced on the policy level since the 1990s. Instead of focusing on material wealth and economic growth, GNH philosophy aspires for a more holistic understanding of development that encompasses environmental, spiritual, emotional and cultural dimensions. Bhutan has tried to preserve its unique culture of ceremonies, festivals, social conduct and traditional arts. Monks still perform the sacred masked dances during religious festivals; driglam namzha, the tight social etiquette is taught in schools; and all Bhutanese are obliged to wear the national dress during office hours in public institutions. To reach the ultimate goal of development – the happiness of people – decision-makers should design policies that improve the conditions necessary for the wellbeing of humans and other life forms. (NDP Steering Committee and Secretariat 2013.)

3.2. Democracy, civil society and media in Bhutan

The Fourth King initiated several changes: decentralising the decision-making in the 1980s and 1990s, opening up the media landscape in the 1990s and drafting the first written Constitution that was endorsed in 2008. To everyone's surprise, he announced that he will abdicate the throne in favour of his son Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, and that multi-party democracy will be introduced in Bhutan with first parliamentary elections in 2008. Many people voiced their concerns over democracy and having elected politicians making decisions instead of the monarch. Bhutanese were described to have embraced democracy very reluctantly, only obeying the order of the King to vote (Sengupta 2007; Dorjee 2012: 52). Despite this scepticism expressed towards democracy, elections were familiar for Bhutanese who had previously voted for their
community leaders (gup), representatives to National Assembly (chimi) and to the Royal Advisory Council (misaer kutshab). (Sithey 2013: 19-22; 188.)

Since 2008, Bhutan has a bicameral parliament whose lower house, the National Assembly has 47 members, and the upper house, the National Council has 20 elected nonpartisan members and five members appointed by His Majesty. Among some of the particularities in the Bhutanese democratic system is the requirement for a running candidate to have minimum a Bachelor's Degree "from a reputable university". This clause rules out the vast majority of the population: in total 4.2% of employed people above 15 years of age in Bhutan are college-educated (National Statistics Bureau 2013b: 67). In addition, the religious populace of more than 10,000 people, consisting of monks, nuns and spiritual leaders, are not allowed to vote.

**Media**

Soon after arriving to Bhutan, I asked my colleagues what is the best medium to follow in the country. I was told: “Twitter”. Although Bhutan was the last country in the world to allow televised broadcasting 1999, when also Internet was permitted, new communication methods have spread rapidly. Now 92.8% of Bhutanese own a mobile phone, 16.8% of households own a computer, and 11% use the Internet daily. More than one out of five mobile phone owners use their phone to access Internet (RGoB 2013: 27, 85-86). The use of social media has been embraced on the highest levels of leadership: His Majesty’s Facebook page is the most followed page among Bhutanese Facebook users; the current Prime Minister has been blogging since 2008 and uses Facebook (more than 31 000 likes) and Twitter (almost 8 000 followers) actively; and government is planning to increase social media interaction with the people in the coming years (Tshering Tobgay 2013: 10, Sithey 2013: 92). The following statistics (Table 1.) from the Media Impact study highlight the drastic changes in the Bhutanese media landscape:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2013</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobile phone users</td>
<td>2255</td>
<td>560980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio stations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet subscribers</td>
<td>2117</td>
<td>133289</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Statistics on the development of media in Bhutan. Source: RGoB 2013.
The media environment in Bhutan remains somewhat restricted. Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) is the state-owned public service broadcaster. The first and still the largest newspaper, Kuensel was started in the mid-1980s. Private newspapers were allowed licenses since 2006, but many of them have already vanished due to the lack of buyers and the dependency on revenues of government advertisements. (Wangchhuk 2010: 175-176; Freedom House 2013.) Although there are no reported cases of threats or intimidation against journalists, there is a high level of self-censorship. International issues, such as foreign relations with China or India are not critically covered in the media, and there is even less reporting on the “people in camps” in Nepal. The only government-censored website is “Bhutanomics” which criticised the previous government in a satirical manner. The “Bhutanomics” Facebook page has over 15 000 followers (1.6.2014), more than the BBS Facebook page. (Gyambo 2013: 180-181; Freedom House 2013.)

Space for civic action

Civil society organisations (CSO) were formally recognised in 2010 in Bhutan, after the CSO Act in 2007 and the establishment of CSO Authority in 2009. There are currently 38 registered CSOs (1.6.2014) which are meant to “strengthen civil society by developing human qualities and rendering humanitarian services”, supplementing or complementing the services provided by the government in areas such as poverty, knowledge and learning, and economic and cultural development (Civil Society Organisations Act 2007). It is said that there is no direct translation for the term “civil society” in Dzongkha, and terms used to explain it instead include “working groups”, “member-based” and “development” (Rosenberg 2010: 6).

Having a democratic space where people can articulate demands, raise out one’s voice or defend a cause is a very recent concept in Bhutan. The Tobacco Act (2010) stirred Bhutanese citizens to take action on policy and legislation. A Facebook page “Amend the Tobacco Act”, started by a journalist, mobilised people to voice out their dissatisfactions and collected hundreds of signatures for a petition submitted to the Parliament. Gyambo describes this as the first time when “people were openly questioning the government”. Another petition was organised by a CSO in December 2013, gathering more than 13,400 signatures in a few days demanding harsher punishments for drug peddlers and better treatment for drug users. (Gyambo 2013: 14-
3.3. Youth realities in Bhutan

Around half of the population is under the age of 25 years in Bhutan. The amount of “youth” – those between 15 and 24 years – is estimated to comprise one fifth of the whole population, around 150,000 people. (National Statistics Bureau 2013b: 4.) The current generation of youth is often described to be at the crossroads, obliged to choose between traditional, mainly rural way of life and modern, urban interconnected life. The youth are at the crossroads also in a very concrete way due to the high speed of rural-urban migration: Thimphu grows 12.5 percent each year, compared to the overall population growth rate of 1.3 percent. It is estimated that within the next decade over 70 percent of the population will live in the urban areas – the exact opposite of the current situation, where 70 percent of the population lives in rural areas. Majority of the people migrating to cities are young people who are looking for employment opportunities. (National Statistics Bureau 2012; National Statistics Bureau 2013b; Tobgay 2013: 22.)

Youth research

There is little youth-specific research done in Bhutan. The first major study by Lham Dorji and Sonam Kinga (2005), *Youth in Bhutan: Education, Employment, Development*, published by the National Statistics Bureau (NSB) includes articles based on surveys and interviews of youth in different parts of the country. It is largely based on the previous compilation work *Voices of Bhutanese Youth* (Dorji 2005) which contains an extensive collection of narratives and interviews from Bhutanese youth, including stories on their struggles with family, dropping out from education or difficulties in the job market. The interviews in this publication were conducted several years before the first democratic elections, and it does not delve into the young people’s perceptions of their surrounding society.

Another study on youth was commissioned by the Youth Development Fund, conducted in cooperation with the University of Melbourne in 2006. Unfortunately this study is not available online, and the paper copies were also hard to locate. Melissa Chua has written more of a descriptive article, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Issues facing Bhutanese youths and the challenges posed to Gross National Happiness* (2008). Chua delves with the issue of cultural change and problems faced by youth, such as unemployment and growing urban violence. The new think-tank, iGNHas under the
Royal University of Bhutan published a special book on youth in the spring of 2014, including excerpts of the literature review of this thesis as a starting point for discussion on youth civic engagement in Bhutan (Suhonen 2014). The new government has pledged to do a full study on the state of youth in Bhutan, particularly to inform policies related to employment (Tobgay 2013).

**Education and youth employment**

Until very recently, unemployment was an unknown phenomenon in Bhutan. Although the overall unemployment rate of 2.1 percent is very low, youth unemployment is much higher: of male youth (15-24 years) 9.5 percent, and of female 11.5 percent are unemployed. Urban unemployment is particularly worrisome, as 20.2 percent of young men, and 29.5 percent of young women are unemployed in urban areas. (United Nations Development Programme 2013.)

The growing number of unemployed people is closely related to the rural-urban migration and the rising education level in the country. The number of students taking part in modern education in Bhutan has increased exponentially: in the 1960s, the first modern schools had 400 students, while in 2011 there were 173,497 students in pre-primary, primary and secondary education in Bhutanese schools, and 6,245 students in tertiary education in Bhutan. On one hand, the civil service cannot absorb the number of graduates anymore, and on the other, university-educated youth do not feel suited to work on the farms either. The large cohorts of young people are thus feared to remain unemployed because of the mismatch between the jobs available and the aspirations and skills of the graduates. (Dorji 2005.)

**Youth and democracy**

Young Bhutanese have few formal channels to participate in democratic processes. Lack of participation mechanisms is recognised in the National Youth Policy (2010) which mentions “limited knowledge/opportunity in regard to civic education/participation” of the youth as one of the challenges. Consequently, promoting “an environment that encourages young people’s participation in decision making” and providing “platform for young people of all ages to contribute their views through development of youth leadership, civic duties, involvement in programmes and activities pertaining to national development” are suggested as objectives to pursue. (RGoB 2010.)
Instead of waiting for the Youth Action Plan of the government – still in its drafting stage after several years – to “empower” them, a group of Thimphu-based youth initiated their own pilot project that was originally called Model Youth Parliament, later renamed into “Youth Initiative for Debate, Deliberation and Development” (YI). Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD), a local CSO focusing on citizen participation, media and democracy education mentored the founders of the project. In November 2013, the information campaign and elections for YI representatives were held in various schools in Thimphu, with the final result of 19 selected, motivated individuals being trained for two weeks, followed by the first public sitting in January (Photo 1). The aim was to include a diverse group of people: youth from schools, CSOs, employed, unemployed and with special needs. (Dorji & Dorji 2013.) Many of the YI youth representatives, as well as the steering committee members of YI were interviewed for this project work, and YI can thus be regarded as a case study for looking at the emerging field of youth civic engagement in Bhutan.

Photo 1. Youth Initiative representatives during their training in Thimphu in January 2014. Source: Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy
4. Theoretical framework

This chapter discusses the main concepts underpinning the theoretical framework of this project work, namely participatory democracy, social capital and youth civic engagement, to provide the basis for discussing the role of civil society in democracy.

4.1. Participatory democracy

The monumental work *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville (1835/1840) has laid the foundation for understanding what participatory and inclusive democracy entails. De Tocqueville believed that modern democracy could wipe away most forms of social class or inherited status. According to his understanding, members of the aristocracy share sympathy only inside their own class, according to their professions, property, and birth, but that they do not share common understanding with other citizens outside their aristocratic class. He projected that if citizens neglect public affairs, the core idea of democracy – rule by the many – risks becoming rule by a few individuals or institutions that can tyrannise the apathetic, dispersed citizenry. In contrary, if citizens participate in associations, they can learn about public affairs and create hubs of political power independent of the state. Civil associations could make weak individuals strong, serving as “schools of citizenship” where individuals could learn about cooperation inside the association and eventually in the public life. According to de Tocqueville, this “treating public affairs in public” makes the citizen aware that “he is not so independent of his fellow man” and encourages individuals to think of their duties as citizens and participate in democratic governance. (De Tocqueville 1835/1840; Fukuyama 1999; Klein 1999.)

De Tocqueville names two distinctive methods to achieve a communication forum for democracy: the meeting hall and the newspaper. Although the meeting hall method has the benefit of direct, face-to-face contact and many-to-many communication, it is costly to organise and can also limit people’s participation due to geographical distance or other obstacles to a physical meeting. The newspaper method allows for dispersed members to communicate, and makes it easier to find and identify like-minded citizens. However, traditional newspaper only allows for one-to-many communication, and individual participation is less active than in the meeting hall method. De Tocqueville points out the reinforcing link between these two different forums: “newspapers make associations, and associations make newspapers”. Adapted
into present day, the phrase could be: “Facebook makes identity groups, and identity groups make Facebook”. Internet in general, and later social media in particular, have allowed for real-time, many-to-many and peer-to-peer communication as well as active participation of dispersed groups of people through online networks. These virtual public spaces provide alternatives to traditional media, and allow for citizen groups to create their own content, multiplying the diversity of voices and opinions. Social media offers particularly effective and low cost tools for motivating and mobilising people to take part in civic activities. (Klein 1999: 213-216; Hammelman 2011.)

Sociologist Jurgen Habermas continued de Tocqueville’s line of thought on the influence of communication on participatory democracy, and modern democracy being able to create a society of equals. Habermas argued that public sphere grew in the 18th century Europe with the help of mass communication – mostly newspapers – and having public meeting places, such as coffeehouses where bourgeois (well-educated men) could discuss current issues in equal dialogue where “merits of arguments, not the identities of the arguers were crucial” (Calhoun 1992: 2). This concept of “public sphere” has influenced the discussion of democratic theory by asking what conditions are needed for creating a public debate where private persons can let arguments instead of statuses to determine decisions (Calhoun 1992: 1).

Political theorist Hannah Arendt has described public realm as a space where people encounter the diversity of others, take action and build power through collective efforts. This is also what youth civic engagement programmes aspire for: bringing together different kinds of young people who have been strangers to each other before, but who can work together, express themselves and develop civic actions. Arendt dismisses the belief of “strong man” who could rule alone and make wise decisions in isolation as superstition, “based on the delusion that we can “make” something in the realm of human affairs – “make” institutions or laws, for instance, as we make tables and chairs or make men “better” or “worse”…” (Arendt 1958: 188). She argues that speech and action are fundamental aspects of being a human (Arendt 1958: 176). This emphasis on the need to work collectively, to share words and take action instead of the “strong man” unilaterally deciding what is best for everyone is particularly relevant in the case of Bhutan which has so recently shifted from absolute monarchy to democracy, and whose citizens are still grappling with understanding what democracy means in practice.
4.2. Social capital

Social capital has been described to be about cooperative norms, trust, associational activities or networks that enable people to act collectively (Baliamoune-Lutz 2011: 336). On individual or organisational levels, social capital is said to improve access to information and knowledge, having more influence and power, and leading to efficiency when organisations with high solidarity need less formal controls and monitoring (Kapucu 2011: 26). On the more societal level, social capital has been claimed to reduce poverty, encourage donations to community, keep children in school, reduce crime, or even strengthen public health – and most importantly for this study, social capital is seen as a necessary factor in sustaining democratic governance (Oxendine 2012).

Social capital can also have negative consequences. Time and resources are needed to develop and maintain relationships; new ideas and innovation can potentially be sacrificed to sustain the cohesion and harmony of the group; and networks can be used to destroy those outside the group, or to exclude those who do not behave according to the accepted group culture (Kapucu 2011: 26). The potential for social capital to lead to corruption and nepotism is described more in detail in the chapter 6.3.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu was one of the first well-known academics to describe social capital in his essay on forms of capital (1986). According to Bourdieu, social capital is “the aggregate of actual or potential resources” linked to membership in a group, that brings with it material and symbolic profits. He suggested measuring social capital in terms of the size of the network of connections that a person can affectively mobilise. This network is the result of individual or collective effort to establish or reproduce social relationships that create durable obligations which can either be subjective feelings – gratitude, respect or friendship – or institutionally guaranteed obligations, such as human rights. Bourdieu asserted that the reproduction of social capital requires continuous series of exchanges to constantly reaffirm this mutual recognition. (Bourdieu 1986.)

After Bourdieu another sociologist, James Coleman addressed the concept of social capital (1988). He described social capital as “changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action”, distinguishing it from the previously recognised human capital that would focus on the changes in skills and capabilities of a person, making him or her act in new ways. (Coleman 1988: S100.) Coleman also stressed the importance of norms in the creation of social capital. For example the social norm of acting in the interest of collective is crucial for social capital, and can be reinforced by
social support such as status, honor or rewards. Encouraging this kind of norm can lead people to work more for the common good than for themselves. (Coleman 1988: S104-105.)

Social capital can be divided into three types: bonding social capital that is formed between relatives and neighbours and often stays inside the community; bridging social capital that transcends communities and includes people with weaker connections, such as colleagues or friends of friends; and linking social capital that is generated vertically, among people with different levels of power in a hierarchy (UNICEF 2008: 11). This is important for civic engagement, as it is precisely generalised trust that enables connecting and cooperating with people who are different than us (Uslaner 2012: xviii).

The relevance of social capital – or social relations – to human development has been under attention since the 1990s through the work done by Deepa Narayan at the World Bank. Woolcock and Narayan propose using the lens of social capital in all development projects, particularly on ensuring the participation of poor communities in the design, implementation, management and evaluation of projects. They claim that “the nature and extent of the interactions between communities and institutions hold the key to understanding the prospects for development in a given society”. (Woolcock and Narayan 2000: 243-244.) This relationship between social capital, development and youth civic engagement will be discussed more in detail in the analysis part (chapter 6.5.)

5. Research methodology

Communication – and even more so Communication for Development, inspired by the three academic fields of communication, development and cultural studies – is a multidisciplinary field of research where different epistemological and methodological approaches are possible, from positivism to constructivism. In positivist approach, the objective researcher applies natural science methods, collects facts from the social and cultural world and then analyses them through quantifiable techniques. For example interview data is seen as giving 'facts' about the world through random sampling and standardised questions with multiple-choice answers. Interaction between the researcher
and the interviewee should be restricted by the research protocol. (Deacon et al. 2007: 2-11; Silverman 2012: 181.)

Constructionism sees research data as mutually constructed, and interviews as topics instead of a research resource. Instead of trying to find facts, the analysis聚焦s on the ways in which interviewees construct narratives of events and people. Moreover, these narratives are always “embedded in a social web of interpretation”: for example women's experience and narrative is structured within social, heterosexist or patriarchal discourses. (Silverman 2012: 181.)

This project work is founded on the paradigms of social constructivism and qualitative research traditions. Participants in my research are not regarded as the conveyers of pure information, but as members of complex social contexts that influence what they are saying, and how they say it. Most interview questions in individual and focus group discussions were open-ended, and the focus groups were handpicked, thus not representing the wider 'general' population.

This chapter explains in detail how the research data was chosen, collected and analysed, starting with the explanation of the work process and ethical considerations, and continuing by describing the collection and analysis of different forms of data. The aim is to enable the reader to understand the research process: who were the participants and how were they recruited, where and how they were interviewed, and how the interviews were recorded and analysed (Hansen et al. 1998: 281-282).

5.1. Work process

Qualitative research often starts with a single case. Also this project work began with the initial interest for one civil society organisation (CSO), Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, and their particular new project, the Youth Initiative. Another common characteristic for qualitative research is that hypotheses are usually not generated in the beginning, but they arise only during the analysis phase. Finding and understanding categories surfacing from the research data itself – from people’s experience and interpretations of their social realities – is typical for qualitative analysis. (Silverman 2012: 4-5; 42.)

Planning, compilation and analysis of the research data was completed in several overlapping phases. The first preparatory phase, from September to November 2013, consisted of collecting existing information and research on youth civic engagement (chapter 2) as well as on youth and democracy in Bhutan (chapter 3) to frame the
research topic and to design the questions and themes for the interview guides. The second phase, from October to December 2013, involved contacting relevant people and organisations in Bhutan to discuss the project work and its objectives, and to build a necessary network of “gatekeepers”, including some of the most active youth volunteers and officials from different organisations. During the third phase, from January to April 2014 interviewees were recruited, interviews were conducted and transcribed and some of the training sessions and meetings of the YI representatives were observed. Participation in such events was crucial not only for research purposes, but also for gaining trust: I was there for the common good, to spend time with them and to truly listen to what they had to say. The fourth and the final phase, from April to May 2014 included coding and analysing the collected data.

**Ethical considerations**

Especially in a foreign culture, reflexivity of the researcher together with the understanding of different social realities and power structures are essential elements in data collection and analysis. Taking part in events and discussions, listening to people, following the media or talking informally with people, from friends to acquaintances, taxi drivers, colleagues, foreigners and locals were not structured for the purposes of this research, but are essential for understanding a foreign culture and added to my own understanding of what are the main issues in Bhutan.

Although my understanding is that all interviewees participated voluntarily in this study, my background as a foreigner working for the UN constructs power relations. I had already worked with some of the youth related to my work in the fall of 2013, which facilitated common understanding and informal contacts. Since the BCMD Youth Initiative was chosen as a case study for this thesis, BCMD asked me to conduct a mid-evaluation of the Youth Initiative project to improve their programming and provide feedback. This YI mid-evaluation mainly focused on learning and changes in attitudes on the individual level, but it was beneficial to use the different data both for this thesis and for the BCMD report.

In retrospect, it would have been wise to reserve a moment each week to write down my main insights and developments related to the topic. Keeping a research diary was much less meticulous than it should have been, but I wrote notes during or after the interview to ensure that the main points were written down before the transcription phase. This also helped me to adjust the next interviews in terms of sequencing
questions or changing the format of the interview guide.

Personal insights and ideas for improvement appeared particularly when listening to the interview recordings. I was also reflecting on how my own reactions and examples given to the youth might have framed their thinking and answers in a certain way, such as when asking specifically about the gender bias in politics. I concluded that even a local researcher would have his/her own biases and interests, which is why recognising my own interests openly is important for the correct analysis of the interviews.

Covering costs
To compensate the participants of the focus groups for their time, I offered dinner for the first focus group. For the next two groups, I opted for tea and snacks instead to break the discussion in the middle, and offered them 100-150 ngultrums (1-2 euros) each to cover for their local travel costs. These small incentives were meant to enable equal participation of everyone, also those without large financial means.

Anonymity and protection of the participants
Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the youth participants in FGDs. I explained this at the beginning of each FGD and asked participants to read through carefully the consent form. The individual interviewees were also asked to sign a consent form and choose whether they wanted to appear under their own name or remain anonymous. Most interviewees chose to use their own names. Both consent forms are attached as an appendix.

Difficulty in doing research in a very small society is that people might be able guess the participants’ identity anyway. For example, the names of the YI representatives are readily available on their website. When reading the transcripts of the very honest focus group discussions, it even felt that perhaps participants felt more comfortable criticizing the nepotism or politicians in front of a foreigner/outsider than they would have if a Bhutanese researcher – who would have known at least some of the interviewees through his or her family or friend networks – had asked these same questions. I have used my own consideration on what should be left out to ensure the protection of the participants, and what should be included for the relevance of the study.
5.2. Collection of the research data

The main methods of data collection in this study are qualitative individual interviews, focus group discussions and textual analysis of documents related to youth civic engagement in Bhutan.

Qualitative interviews

In total nine individual interviews were conducted to better understand the personal experiences, opinions and ideas of the founders and steering committee members of the YI, interviewees ranging from 18 to 75 years of age. Each interview lasted for around 45 to 90 minutes and included questions on the Youth Initiative, general perceptions and stereotypes on youth in Bhutan, the role of media, or the main issues and barriers facing young people currently. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed after the interview.

Interview questions were partly pre-planned and partly spontaneous. Asking how the person interviewed got involved with the YI served as an introductory opening question. *Direct* questions introduce the topics and dimensions the researcher is looking for and should be left in the latter parts of the interview. Some of the direct questions in these interviews were: How would you define youth civic engagement? What role can young people play in national development? How could civic engagement be supported in Bhutan? *Indirect* questions can be projective, asking about the attitudes or behaviour of “others” where the interviewed can indirectly state their own attitudes. In these interviews, I asked about “general” attitudes of older generations, government officials or CSOs towards young people. (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 135-136.) The full interview guide is attached as an appendix.

Focus group discussions

Focus group discussion (FGD) is a method originally used for market research, with a small group of 5 to 12 people discussing around 60 to 90 minutes on pre-assigned topics, guided by a facilitator. There are various factors supporting the choice of focus group discussions as the primary method for this study: group interviews are more cost-efficient than individual interviews; they allow for interaction within the group; and they let people use their natural vocabulary instead of presupposed categories imposed by the researcher (Hansen et al. 1998: 263). Ideally focus group participants are free to frame the discussion using their own language, rationales and examples, something that
would not be possible through quantitative survey data. FGDs can address controversial topics such as inequality or privilege, and discover unanticipated topics, frames, or points of disagreement and agreement. (Torney-Purta, Amadeo and Andolina 2010: 509-511; 518.)

Three different focus group discussions were conducted for this project work, with three to nine participants in each session. Two of the groups consisted of YI representatives (25 January and 8 March, 2014), and one of unemployed youth in Thimphu, identified through one of the YI members (5 April 2014). I collected a preliminary list of interested and available participants during face-to-face meetings in January and March, and asked them to confirm their participation the day before via SMS. The location for the FGDs was based on convenience: a quiet – and in the wintertime, warm – room, with a catering opportunity and within an easy reach from the town.

The FGDs lasted from 90 to 120 minutes, with a tea break in the middle. During the pre-tape phase, I introduced myself and the purpose of the research. I also asked the participants to read through and sign the consent form as well as to fill in the background data form asking their basic personal data (sex, age, occupation, locality) as well as of some open questions, such as on their previous experience in volunteering or community service. A few ice-breaking exercises were done at the beginning to relax the atmosphere and to make the participants feel more comfortable. The discussions were all held in English, and although some participants might have been more at ease conversing in a local language, many noted that they feel more comfortable speaking in English, the main language of education.

The main thematic areas described in the original interview guide remained the same throughout the different FGDs, although time constraints limited the number of questions. Some questions were direct, and some were framed as indirect statements of “others” (eg. “It is said that youth are not listened to in decision-making – is this true in your opinion?”). An interesting exercise was to ask participants to come up with five major issues that youth are facing in Bhutan.

Group interviewing entails the risk of individuals dominating discussion, and the tendency to achieve a group consensus where dissenting voices are marginalised. For example, in the last FGD I tried to encourage everyone to speak in the beginning, but noticed that the most talkative participants were dominating again at the end of the discussion. Yet, it can be argued that these power dynamics and tendencies actually
confirm that a group discussion is a more natural form of data collection. (Hansen et al. 1998: 263.)

**Texts**

The main texts dealing with youth civic engagement in Bhutan include the National Youth Policy (2010), the diverse background material for the YI, such as the concept note from fall 2013 (Dorji and Dorji 2013) or handouts for their training in January 2014. I have also extracted some relevant sections of the survey conducted with the YI representatives after their training, in March 2014, particularly their answers to the questions on how they define citizenship and what they chose as the “most significant change” from their participation in the Youth Initiative.

**5.3. Data analysis and interpretation**

Data collected through these methods of individual and focus group interviews, observation and texts were transferred to NVivo qualitative analysis software programme to facilitate the thematic analysis. To have a more accurate interpretation in analysing the results, it would have been useful to go through the data and findings together with the youth themselves, or to have another researcher – preferable a local one – to code the same transcripts. Unfortunately, due to practical and time constraints this was not possible.

Silverman emphasises the need to understand how people use and construct categories in their speech. This can be done through three different approaches: quantitative content analysis, qualitative thematic analysis, or constructionist methods. Content analysis is often part of analysing focus group discussions: counting certain instances, such as words, phrases or meanings; labelling these instances as items, themes or discourses; and finally grouping the instances into larger units of categories. The developed coding system needs to be applied systematically across the transcripts of the interviews, and finally tabulating the instances of codes. The aim of the qualitative thematic analysis is to understand meanings of the participants’ speech, taken as a means of accessing people’s actual lives, and to illustrate these findings by extracts. The interactive quality of focus group data is ignored, and the focus is more on the individual contributions to the discussion. Constructionist method looks at the sequence of particular utterances and their positioning in the overall discussion. Silverman explains this through an example of order: there is an asymmetry between the
first and second speaker, as the first one has to put his or her opinion on the line, whereas the second speaker has the chance to either agree or challenge the first speaker. (Silverman 2012: 213-214; 220; 227.)

This project work analyses data mixing these various angles. Content analysis can be useful at the initial stage to see which concepts and words occur most often in the interviews, but qualitative thematic analysis and developing a scheme for categorising and labelling the responses is needed for a more in-depth analysis of what is meant by these concepts. The analysis phase was a mix of open coding (looking what the data says) and focused coding (looking for answers to the research questions). Reading through the transcripts several times gave a good basis for understanding and interpreting the participants’ views. If an interesting theme, such as corruption or difficulties at the job market emerged, it was coded under a new category.

Lilla Vicsek has noted several limitations that focus group discussions pose when analysing the data. Although a small, non-random sample does not allow generalizing the views presented to the whole youth population of Bhutan, focus groups can still demonstrate some general mechanisms that exist in the larger society. It would be necessary to look at the whole group as the unit of analysis, as participants also react to each others comments, diverting the discussion easily to unexpected directions. The same person could utter very different things when placed in different situations and with different people. This means that analysing focus groups has to rely less on numbers and quantitative content analysis, and more on interpreting the answers through the questions ‘why’ and ‘how’. (Vicsek 2010: 123-124; 137)
6. Changing Bhutanese youth: from preserving social harmony to questioning inequalities?

The adults have their own perception...they think young people...are having fun ...just spending all their whole day in a Playstation or with their friends hanging around and just wasting time. But I think...we have reached a time when they should also know that the young people aren’t what they have always thought about. We have reached a time when young people are more engaged, they are also thinking a lot. And the young people are being concerned about young people, their own friends.

Interview, Kencho Dorji, M21, January 2014

This chapter looks at the findings of the research data: What do the different sources tell about being a young person in Bhutan today? How do young Bhutanese perceive their opportunities and barriers to participate in democratic society? What kind of cultural stories do young people themselves narrate about their communities and about the (in)justice of economic or political order? Although the concept of youth participation has been gaining ground especially since the 1990s, it is still rare to ask young people to “look outward, toward the community where they live, and reflect on the justice of economic arrangements or of the political influence they observe” (Kirshner, Strobel & Fernandez 2002: 35). One of the objectives for this study is to listen how youth themselves depict the current societal situation in Bhutan. The real names of the FGD participants have been changed into pseudonyms, but their gender and age are indicated with each quote (eg. M21 = male, 21 years old). Except for one individual interviewee, indicated to as “anonymous”, all other eight individual interviewees are referred to under their own names.

Young people mentioned several sources of information in FGDs: statistics of unemployment, news from different media, hearsay examples, or their own experiences. Among the main issues facing young people in Bhutan today, a wide range of themes were mentioned: drugs, family problems, lack of ambition and encouragement to follow dreams, inequality in education and job market, quality of education, rural-urban divide, consumerism, lack of youth voice and participation, loss of culture, and as the biggest issue, youth unemployment. Youth expressed their pride in being Bhutanese, living in a country with unique culture and traditions, and having a government that looks after its people. However, after initial polite and positive comments of being lucky, blessed and free with many opportunities, especially the FGD with unemployed youth shifted
towards a more pessimistic expression of a sense of injustice and nepotism. Participants of other FGDs also pointed out the perceived corruption among those in power, with comments such as “politics is not dirty, people are”.

The composition of all three focus groups is described in the four figures below: Figure 1 depicts the age distribution of FGD participants, ranging from 17 to 28 years of age, with the average age of 21.3 years. The aim was to only interview young people under the age of 25 years, but as the YI representatives were of between 16 and 28 years, it was more important to interview anyone interested to take part. Figure 2 denotes the education level, “high school graduate” meaning either unemployed or applying for higher education. Figure 3 describes the geographical variation of which district (dzongkhag) the participants identified themselves coming from, divided into Western (4 participants), Southern (7 participants) and Eastern (8 participants) districts. In total 11 districts out of 20 were represented, although all of the participants were currently living in Thimphu. Figure 4 portrays the reported previous volunteering experiences of the participants: only two did not mention having any volunteering experience, whereas almost half had taken part in a school club involved with volunteerism, and one out of four were currently members of youth organisations. This proportion of volunteers does not represent a typical section of the Bhutanese youth – another reminder on the limitations to apply the results to all young people in general.

![Figure 2. Age distribution of FGD participants.](image)
Figure 3. Education level of FGD participants

- Finished secondary school: 53%
- In college: 16%
- Diploma: 5%
- In secondary school: 16%
- College graduate: 10%
- In college: 16%

In

- In secondary school: 16%
- Diploma: 5%
- College graduate: 10%
- Finished secondary school: 53%
- In college: 16%

Figure 4. The regions (dzongkhags) where FGD participants identified themselves coming from

- West
- South
- East
Figure 5. Previous experience in volunteering as reported by FGD participants

Despite the differences in the composition of the FGDs, thematic analysis showed three major themes and keywords recurring in the individual and focus group interviews:

1. **Youth agency in the public sphere**: role of the government, power relations, youth voice and participation, civil society, citizenship, politics and democracy in Bhutan, youth stereotypes in media
2. **Inequality and corruption**: rich and poor, power, rural-urban disparity, nepotism
3. **Cultural change**: generational gap, modernisation and social media

While the themes of public sphere and cultural change were already contained in the interview guide questions, the second major theme, inequality and corruption emerged only during the interviews. The **axis of trust-fear** (or mistrust) is a crosscutting element in all of these three major themes. Before continuing deeper with these thematic discussions and linking them to the key concepts of youth civic engagement and social capital, I will explore some of the main stereotypes of young people in Bhutan.
6.1. Stereotyping young people

Because people generalise. When they say “youth”, they go like “Drugs! Stabbing! Robbing!”...And they don’t give youth the power, the rights, the voice. So if we don’t get the voice, when we get it, when we are adults, we don’t utilise it the way we should.

“Priya”, F17 (FGD 8 March 2014)

To better understand the challenges young Bhutanese are facing, I will start the analysis by describing the different stereotyping of young people based on interviews, FGDs and observations. The three main stereotypes can be set on a scale from passive to active: firstly the most passive, “spoilt” young people; moving to the “ignorant” youth who are trying to act, but do not have enough knowledge and experience; and finally the “rebellious” young people who pose a threat to the current cultural norms by being perhaps too active and demanding.

Spoilt youth

There is a strong perception of young people as “spoilt”: who have been “spoon-fed” [sic] by the government and their parents since they were children, who have not worked hard and have no interest in learning beyond exams, who only look for civil service posts and refuse to take any blue-collar jobs, and who do not care about their own culture, but wear jeans, have Korean haircuts and watch Western television series. As pointed out by one of the interviewees, the dislike towards blue-collar jobs is not, however, something invented by the youth:

There's a contradiction – old people say “yeah, there are so many jobless people, why don't they do construction, we could replace Indians” - everybody says it. But if it was that easy, for example, why do the parents send their kids to school to get a job in Thimphu in the first place? (Interview, Anonymous, M28, January 2014)

These stereotypes are amplified in the media where youth are often represented as irresponsible, taking drugs, and blamed for their own unemployment (Interview, Fassihi, 6 January 2014). Youth are usually shown in a negative and superficial manner, either as “wallpaper shots” on local cable channels that use footage of dance numbers from school concerts, or portraying young people only interested in music, alcohol, drugs or sports (Interview, Pek, April 2014; Interview, Phub Dorji, January 2014.) Young participant shared an example from a youth debate on television, how youth see themselves portrayed in the media:

If they [youth] did a crime or something, it will come on the first page. If they did something good for the country, it will be on the second page...for ministers and
all, if they do something good, they will be on the front page. If they do something bad, it is not mentioned. (“Rinzin”, M26, FGD 7 April)

Young people can sometimes be shown in more positive roles, particularly in different volunteering activities, such as doing cleaning campaigns or helping elderly people, but they are rarely given the chance to speak their mind on issues that matter to them.

**Ignorant youth**

Interviewees accounted numerous attempts to engage with decision-makers or authorities, with the usual response of not being taken seriously, “immature youth talking nonsense” (“Dawa”, M21, FGD 27 January). Many participants felt that young people are taken for granted, “just a young guy talking”, although a few interviewees believed that with the right attitude, and with a clearly presented point, after several attempts and cautious preparation, older people might eventually listen to you (Interview, Anonymous). The ignorance attached to the youth is very much related to the cultural norm of only elders having the necessary wisdom and power to decide, and a young person expressing his or her views can be seen as trying to rebel against these norms. Several FGD participants concluded that although youth may be listened to, they would be ignored in the final decision-making where “experience” brought by age and years in the workforce is necessary.

**Rebellious youth**

The third stereotype is of young people as a huge, chaotic mass who demand their rights, rebel against the government and are potentially dangerous if they “get political”. Government officials and authorities are worried about young people mobilizing in a violent way as they have done in other parts of the South Asian region. Any kind of involvement of young people in decision-making carries this possible implication with it. This fear was felt particularly in relation to the Youth Initiative – originally called “The Youth Parliament” – which faced resistance from many authorities when the founders, one of them an 18-year-old young man, introduced the idea to different government organisations. (Interview, Fassihi; Interview, Phub Dorji, January 2014.)

*The thing in Bhutan is we have a very very rigid traditional society that still supports the hierarchy. And, uh...in their eyes the Youth Parliament is seen as something that is being organised to gather youth, to mobilise youth against some sort of authority...this idea that we are being radical...I think this is one of the main reasons why some of the people have not been supportive...they were convinced that I was going to start a revolution...* (Interview, Phub Dorji, M18)
Similar stereotypes of disrespectful, problematic youth are prevalent all over the world, as described by France: “while ‘hanging around’ in public places’, [youth] are perceived as unproductive, potentially threatening and unruly” (France 2007: 100). Older generations have always been worried about new fashions in consumption, music or dress that would corrupt the morals and behaviour of younger generations. Yet, it can be presumed that the accelerated pace of cultural change and urbanisation in Bhutan has widened the gap between generations in an unprecedented way. What is important for this study is that these different stereotypes of young people actually limit the space of youth participation in Bhutan, the topic that will be discussed in the next section.

6.2. **Youth agency in the public sphere**

Even in the family when the eldest talk...if they're talking over some serious matter and all, and if you get involved, they're like: “No no, get out of that, you’re not supposed to talk with the elders, you don’t know anything! You just back off!” So our voice is kind of suppressed, and that kind of mentality is there in our country, in our society. Not all of the people, but especially those who are very conservative and those who are not very literate...educated.

“Sonam”, F28, FGD 8 March

This part focuses on the research questions of **how and in which arenas are youth enacting their citizenship in Bhutan; how do young people see their opportunities to participate in democratic processes in Bhutan, and whether their participation is critical or conforming to the existing social structures.** Both formal and informal barriers, as well as opportunities for youth civic engagement will be looked at, with a strong focus on the cultural factors influencing youth participation in Bhutan.

To create a true Habermasian public sphere, a realm where citizens come together as equals to form a public opinion on a certain issue, the political system has to be open and tolerant, allow for citizens to express their thoughts, form associations and advocate for their viewpoints in public (Etra et al. 2010: 7). Although the introduction of democracy, private media, television and Internet has changed the surface of the society in many ways, cultural values change more slowly. Both individual interviews and FGDs strongly point out that having a regulatory framework, such as Constitution guaranteeing the freedom of speech, or formal civil society associations, is not enough to create democratic dialogue in a society. Without a democratic culture, people will not advocate their viewpoints in public even though they would be asked to, simply because
they have grown up in a different, very hierarchical society where decisions have been made by people on higher levels. Supporting structures for equal participation and open dialogue need to be embedded in different levels, from government officials to school children. Overall, the idea of a public sphere is very new in Bhutan where the long-standing tradition has been to follow the rules set by authorities or elders, and dissent has not been considered to be a healthy aspect of public life (Sithey 2013: 91). Being polite and humble is valued, whereas questioning seniors or expressing your own views is disrespectful. These kinds of informal cultural barriers – lack of dialogue and debate, critical thinking and questioning, or democratic culture in general – are typically mentioned as constraints to youth civic engagement in Bhutan. Some Bhutanese still associate the concept of democracy with violence or corruption due to the examples of some of the other countries of the region (Dolkar 2013).

Several interviewees described the space for youth agency as being restricted in Bhutan. Young people repeatedly tell the same story of not feeling confident or supported by the older generations, from parents to colleagues or senior government officials. Manny Fassihi, American programme officer at BCMD states that young people have been systematically excluded from decision-making in Bhutan (Interview, Fassihi). Namgay Zam, journalist and member of the YI Steering Committee, suggests that agency is missing because of the lack of confidence, and the lack of active civil society showing the way:

“You have this self-doubt, are you good enough to do this, will somebody approve? You know in India...I think from a young age they have been exposed to a lot of NGOs and CSOs that are doing these things and they actually feel they are belonging to this community that is affecting change” (Interview, Zam, February 2014)

There are not only barriers, but also factors supporting youth participation in Bhutan. The present cohort of young people is the most educated, best-informed generation in the history of Bhutan. Even the ruling King is still fairly young – 34 years of age – and his father, the Fourth King was only 17 years old when he acceded the throne. While acknowledging that ordinary youth population cannot be compared to the members of the royal family, this still provides a possible counter-argument to those claiming that someone without certain years of experience cannot take decisions in Bhutan. The openness to discuss certain matters, such as sexuality, was seen as another positive aspect in Bhutan. One of the participants exclaimed: “I think that’s why GNH
is possible, because our culture is very open and there’s no restriction at all. Everything’s possible in Bhutan!” (“Jigme”, M21, FGD 27 January)

**Government and youth**

Government policies have an immense impact on the nature and depth of youth civic engagement (Etra et al. 2010: 8). The Royal Government of Bhutan has promoted youth participation on the policy level for example by adopting the National Youth Policy (2010) and by including mentions of youth volunteerism in the 11th five-year-plan (2014-2018). Institutions working with youth engagement include the Department of Youth and Sports under the Ministry of Education, several youth-focused CSOs and many international development partners that support youth work, including UN agencies. Numerous participants felt that government is helping the youth by providing free services such as healthcare or education and by setting up youth centres: “Our government is here to look after us. Obviously our parents are always there, but government…I don’t think in the world any government is there to focus more on youth!” (“Yeshey”, F18, FGD 7 April.)

Despite all of these efforts, many interviewees generally expressed frustration and scepticism towards the bureaucrats. Michael Rutland, a British long-term expatriate in Bhutan since the 1970s states bluntly: “Government should facilitate activities for young people. Often they do the opposite” (Interview, Rutland, January 2014). Although moral support and trusting youth were seen as more important than financial resources, two of the interviewees suggested identifying budding youth leaders, listening to them and supporting them with small amounts of seed money, “to put them in the limelight, and then make them role models” (Interview, Anonymous). Several interviewees stressed the need to create possibilities for self-awareness and skills development, developing the creative potential of young people and connect young people to their community through volunteerism or other forms of civic engagement to harness their potential to propose “crazy ideas”, to question and to bring the necessary innovation that drives the development of a country (Interview, Fassihi; Interview, Kencho Dorji; Interview, Zam).

**Civil society and citizenship**

Civil society, “often the foundation on which youth civic engagement is built” (Etra et al. 2010: 8), is only a few years old in its formalised sense in Bhutan. It is far from clear
what kind of action an individual Bhutanese can take in a democratic society, and the greatest fear is to be seen as going against the law or protesting against the government.

According to Roholt, Hildreth and Baizerman, the “standard definition of a citizen is a member or formally equal member of a political community who enjoys certain rights and privileges; is responsible for certain duties; has certain skills, capacities, virtues or attributes; and is engaged in certain public activities” (Roholt, Hildreth & Baizerman 2008: 109). They divide this basic definition into three different aspects of citizenship. The first type, citizenship-as-legal-status only denotes the membership in a certain political community. Many of the YI representatives described their understanding of citizenship along these lines in the questionnaires filled before and after their induction training in January 2014. The second type, citizenship-as-desirable refers to the extent of participation in a community and having the necessary values, virtues and responsibilities affiliated with being a “good citizen”, such as critical, responsible, tolerant, knowledgeable, caring and justice-oriented (Roholt, Hildreth & Baizerman 2008: 110). These kinds of characteristics were also mentioned in FGDs on characteristics of a good citizen: caring for others, not only yourself, or “follow your heart and then if something is wrong, correct it” (“Sonam”, F28, FGD 8 March). What it means to be a “good citizen” has been rapidly changing in Bhutan:

...in the past our own Bhutanese concept of a good citizen was someone who would actually just listen whatever is being done...to just say ok to anything that is around. But we have been said that our responsibility isn't just to listen and to avail the services...we can also be service provider, not just to be service consumer...so I think with the change of time we are defining our own definition of good citizen (laughing). Good citizen...I think we cannot see much around. It's just these old things of people being silent, and just accepting whatever is around, what is going on in our country. (“Jigme”, M21, FGD 27 January)

Roholt et al. name the third aspect of citizenship as citizenship-as-identity: how individuals see themselves as members of the community, particularly in relation to different groups inside and outside the political community (Roholt, Hildreth & Baizerman 2008: 110). This aspect is less pronounced in Bhutan. Even the YI representatives who were trained in participatory democracy tended to describe citizenship in terms of political rights, such as voting, or rights and duties of an individual citizen. The vague understanding of the concept of democracy is depicted by Bharat Rana, a social worker and high school teacher who cited his students on the question what democracy is: “Sir, fighting for our right against the government is
democracy. And the other chap, he said: “Sir, asking for our freedom is democracy…” (Interview, Bharat Rana, February 2014).

Interviewees were divided over the question on whether young people in Bhutan are civically engaged. The main reasons given for why young people are not civically engaged were tradition, culture and recent history; the lack of family values and leadership; or the current education system not being conducive for youth participation. Fassihi noted that the current educational system does not encourage young people to care about “the whole collective plot”, as they have to compete and do well in exams to fulfil the expectations of their parents (Interview, Fassihi). A few interviewees believed that traditionally youth were more connected to their community in the rural areas, but with breaking family structures and rural-urban migration, there are less opportunities for young people to be engaged (Interview, Rutland; Interview, Pek). Rutland asserted that civic sense in general is lacking in Bhutan, not only among the young people:

*I think there is a lack of civic responsibility on every level. You try and get 12 civil servants on a Saturday morning to help out with some youth activity. God, you'd think you're asking them to give out their motorcars or something. So I think it begins not with the young people, I think it begins with the older generation.* (Interview, Rutland)

The understanding of what an active citizen means is central for youth civic engagement programmes whose objectives vary depending on what type of a citizen they aim at “creating”: personally responsible citizens, participatory citizens or justice-oriented citizens? (Finlay, Wray-Lake & Flanagan 2010: 295.) Based on the interviews, discussions and observations, the overall emphasis in Bhutan is more on personally responsible citizens who understand their civic rights and responsibilities on the individual level. This type of youth civic engagement programmes emphasise integrity and self-discipline and can be found in the educational system and in youth work done by many organisations in Bhutan. Most of the Bhutanese youth organisations tend to focus on problem youth, such as drug and alcohol addicts, or certain health issues, like reproductive health (Interview, Pek; Interview, Rutland). There is a consensus on neglecting activities geared towards “normal” youth, both in Thimphu and in rural areas; activities that would build on the aspirations of the young people and strengthen their confidence and awareness of themselves and of their community.

The second type of citizen prevalent in youth civic engagement programmes is participatory citizen who needs to learn skills to engage in civic life, for example
running community-based organisations or developing trust. Go Youth Go (GYG), a youth-led informal organisation would fall in this second category: its members initiate civic actions themselves and either learn by doing or by taking part in trainings and events organised by other CSOs. The third, more emancipatory version of civic engagement, “critical youth engagement” aims at producing **justice-oriented citizens** who are able to critically analyse social and political injustices and design strategies for change. This type of civic engagement incorporates a political or social change objective with an understanding of the root causes of social and community problems. The goal is to develop both self-awareness and social awareness through Freirean pedagogy of “naming the world”: exploring one’s own social situation as well as understanding inequalities present in the society to create “critical consciousness”. (Brady et al. 2012: 12-16; Finlay, Wray-Lake & Flanagan 2010: 295; Jensen, Hansen & Kromann-Larsen 2009: 146.)

According to the interview data, there were no evident examples of creating justice-oriented citizens through critical youth engagement in Bhutan – at least not before the BCMD Youth Initiative, which has elements of all the different approaches. Incidentally, one of the three committees created inside the YI is called “social justice”. Fassihi describes his understanding of youth engagement in Bhutan:

> I think people in some sense don't have that idea to raise consciousness for young people. I mean it's not their fault not saying that it's bad, that they want to keep young people oppressed, but there's not a real interest in empowering young people. (Interview, Fassihi)

YI is one of the few programmes offering young people the chance to express themselves, to work together with a diverse group of youth and to see the difference they can make through their own actions. Arendt argues that this kind of public realm, space of expression and collective control can make young people see themselves in a new light, as effective citizens. (Arendt 1958: 57-58, quoted in Roholt et al. 2008.) Surveys and interviews conducted with the YI representatives from January to March in 2014 show that participating in the Youth Initiative has had a positive effect both on developing skills, especially in communication, and on their understanding of democracy as an inclusive space for not only voting and debating, but also for listening and empathy towards others (Suhonen, forthcoming).

Based on these findings, it can be argued that youth civic engagement as currently exercised in Bhutan is more focused on raising personally responsible citizens
who know their rights and duties, with the exception of Youth Initiative which also includes aspects of critical youth engagement. However, to confirm this interpretation, a wider consultation with different stakeholders should take place: particularly government officials and other CSOs would need to be heard for more substantive clarity on the nature of youth civic engagement in Bhutan.

6.3. Inequality and corruption

*I think the current politicians, they are going after money. After joining politics they will get money, then they will build buildings, they will buy some lands...*

―*Norbu*, M21 (FGD 27 January 2014)

This section discusses the themes of success, power and inequality as perceived by the young people interviewed. These issues can also be seen as the more negative effects of social capital: using personal connections for corruption, to win competitions for jobs or contracts (Woolcock and Narayan 2000: 226).

Despite having had only two rounds of parliamentary elections so far, FGD participants’ perception of politics was fairly grim: politicians were described to be “corrupted and they are just earning for their stomach only”, or “all the MPs, one way or the other, they have greed behind their smiling faces” (FGD 8 March; FGD 7 April). There was a sense that even though the person would want to be honest in the beginning, eventually the system and the surrounding society would corrupt them: “…as soon as they step in any organisation or any jobs, they will be corrupted because of all the colleagues” (“Prakash”, M21, FGD 7 April). One participant asserted that “as long as you do greater things for the country, there is not harm in taking a few things for yourself”, suggesting that corruption to a certain extent is acceptable (“Sonam”, F28, FGD 8 March).

This perception of corruption is strengthened by a study done on students’ values in 2012. The report asserts that traditional Bhutanese values support this kind of mind-set where a cunning person is called ‘smart’ and honest or ethical person ‘stupid’. More than half of the respondents agreed with the statement “in order to do well in life, one has to lie or cheat occasionally”. Similar number also said to have witnessed corrupt actions in their community, but three out of four did not know how to report an act of corruption. The nature of these corrupt acts or specifying what students themselves understood as corruption was not described, but later questions focused on using someone’s influence or misusing government properties (eg. photocopying or using
office vehicles outside work). In total 91 percent of teachers agreed or very strongly agreed with the statement that values and integrity of the present youth are degenerating from the past. (Anti-Corruption Commission 2012: 4, 25-27, 36, 41, 59.) Yet, when looking at the international corruption perception index, Bhutan was ranking fairly high (31 among 177 countries) in 2013, and is a very incorrupt country when compared to other countries in the region (Transparency International website).

Young people interviewed for this study had generally a very negative view on human nature as greedy and selfish – interesting in a Buddhist country, as Buddhism sees people as inherently good, and altruism and caring for all sentient beings is at the core of the teachings. When inquired about role models, the single Bhutanese politician mentioned was the former Prime Minister, and only the monarchs were seen as inherently good and selfless:

He is like that person who thinks about the country more than himself...our King has a small cottage. He’s been humble. He’s kind...He comes and talks with us. Asks our problem, and tries to solve it. So my role model has always been my King and always will be my King. (“Priya”, F17, FGD 8 March)

A perfect MP was described to be someone who has experience; who has “risen because of his own hard work, not because he’s already like spoon-fed to go to college”; and preferably someone from “weaker background”, who would know about the problems of the community, not only living in the city with the required degree. One of the youth described his ideal MP as:

...a poor person who is in a village...he will know everything about the village. Like my brother used to say, he would even know the names of each dog, you know? (laughing) Who are only here in town, they don’t know anything about the village or seasons...but they are being part of decision-makers. (“Prakash”, M21, FGD 7 April)

Besides politicians, there was a general sense of resentment towards people who are successful because of their family background, without working for their position. The interviewed youth feared that they risk remaining unemployed because of nepotism and the lack of right connections, unlike those coming from more powerful families who do not need to struggle as much in their life to become “successful”:  

Riikka: What makes a person successful in Bhutan?
“Priya”, F17: It’s herited.
Riikka: Sorry?
“Sonam”, F28: Background.
“Priya”: Heritage. From which parents he comes from.
“Sonam”: That’s true.
Riikka: But can you become yourself successful then?
“Priya”: We can. We can, but...it costs lot of struggles. Obstacles. If you are already from a very big background, they see you as a successful person (others agreeing). It’s like a baby born with a silver spoon.
“Sonam”: Riikka, I must tell you, you have all this honest youth with you, who speak...more...and it should be very confidential! (laughing)
“Ugyen”, M22:...I was thinking that I won’t be becoming successful person. Because...as Priya said, to become successful person we have to be financially stable.
“Priya”: And have power.
“Ugyen”: Power and we should have someone who was successful before...someone who is related to us.... (FGD 8 March 2014)

This kind of discussion reveals underlying frustrations of the Bhutanese society that are rarely discussed in public. Accepting the old hierarchical order in the name of social harmony is breaking down, and a more contesting attitude towards inequality is emerging. Young people interviewed take many positions of “us versus them” in their narratives: us against the employers who only hire their relatives; us against uneducated parents who cannot understand the current realities of young people; us against the richer or more privileged people who have had everything easy; and us against the government officials and bureaucracy. The group of unemployed group asserted that nepotism makes it difficult to have a job without connections. Nepotism, meaning favouring own relatives for recruitment, promotion or transfer, was also the most recognised form of corruption in a corruption survey in 2008 (Anti-Corruption Commission 2008: 17).

Focus group participants expressed their concern on the growing income gap and the inequality in education, employment, and even in the judicial system:

“Chimi”, F20: Like the rich they’re getting richer and the poor they still remain the same. The rich people, they can afford to...if for example, if I don’t qualify, if I’m rich, I can go for further studies. And when it comes to employment, they get easily employed because they have links with higher officials. And when it comes to poor people, in the first place they can’t afford to go study further. And...they remain jobless...

“Rinzin”, M26: And one thing, the rich, like if I’m from a rich family, I can do whatever I like...I can drive a car in full speed and make accidents, and easily they can come out from that. If they are taken to jail, they can easily come out. But in case of poor, they are...like they suffer a lot. And difference between rich and poor leads to drug and crime issues. (FGD 7 April 2014)

Studies have proven that the school enrolment rate is lower in rural areas and among the poor. In the youth study from 2005, the main reasons for non-enrolment or dropping out
from school were "parents could not afford it" (34 %) and "was needed at home" (33 %). Rural children are required to work more at home and in the fields compared to urban children who can dedicate more time for studying. (Dorji 2005: 6, 13, 15.) The competition for best grades is tough, as there is not enough space for everyone in the public higher education. Those who have not succeeded academically and who do not have parents that can afford to pay for private institutions in Bhutan or abroad are not able to continue their studies. Many well-to-do families send their children to study abroad already starting from lower secondary school. Modernisation has brought with it many advances, but it has also increased social and economic inequality: although education and health care are free, many well-to-do families send their children to study abroad already in lower secondary school or seek for medical treatment in Delhi or Bangkok.

Economic inequality, or relative deprivation has been shown to have severe consequences on social capital: people trust less each other and the government; crime rates tend to soar; and lack of job opportunities leads to frustration (Oxendine 2012: 11). More importantly for civic engagement, Putnam has argued that financial worries have a depressing effect on social involvement (Putnam 2000, quoted in Oxendine 2012: 23). The type of social capital matters: merely having strong internal solidarity inside the community or informal self-help groups do not inevitably lead for economic development if the groups do not have resources or access to power. Different types of social capital can actually create more inequality: poor may have plenty of “bonding” social capital inside their close circles of friends and relatives, but they mainly use it for their survival or for managing risks in their lives. This usage is different compared to the nonpoor who use their “bridging” social capital more strategically to get ahead and become more successful. (Woolcock and Narayan 2000: 227-230; Oxendine 2012: 13.)

Rural–urban disparity

Inequalities between rural and urban youth had two different viewpoints: language and family background, and the absence of facilities or opportunities for youth in the countryside. Particularly young people from Southern Bhutan – the Lhotsampa, population of ethnically Nepalese origin – felt that they did not have equal chances because of their ethnic and language background:

*People really insult the people of south, Southern Bhutanese, because they are really poor in Dzongkha...They never speak Dzongkha with any neighbour, because...*
Southern...because from small background itself, our family background itself, our language is Nepali. Lhotsampa, not Nepali (laughing) and because...I think...people who are staying here, permanent citizens of Thimphu or some other location, Eastern or Western, I think they are really good in Dzongkha. (“Vijay”, M20, FGD 27 January)

The language forms a barrier in further education or employment, as both fluent English and Dzongkha are required for most positions. Many participants noted that the lack of facilities and opportunities in rural areas is one of the main reasons for migrating to cities, and in their view this leads to further crime in the urban areas. In Thimphu, youth can attend different forums, events and trainings, but these kinds of activities are very rare in the rural areas. Rural youth lack platforms to develop themselves, and people have less confidence on the capabilities of young people: “when we go out of the capital…it will take some more time people will start believing in young people” (Interview, Kencho Dorji). Social media can influence this slow cultural change, an issue that will be discussed further in the next section.

6.4. Cultural change

Cultural barrier? For youth...it is...misunderstanding that takes place, for example youth raises his voice with a good concern, with a good intention, let's say. But if that idea contradicts the senior people in the society, they would be like...that the young people are going against the norm of respecting elders in the society.

“Barun”, M21 (FGD 27 January)

A central topic throughout the interviews was the rapid change that has taken place during the last fifteen years. Development in all its forms has penetrated Bhutan, from education and healthcare to buildings, consumer products, airplanes, media and communication. This change is said to have created a generational gap between the young and the old, the educated and the illiterate people, and between the rural and urban populations. A few participants questioned the ability of current decision-makers to understand the new generation grown up with Facebook and has been exposed to the outside world. This section will delve into the last research question on the how Facebook can foster democratic culture and civic youth engagement during this transitional phase in Bhutan.

Young FGD participants listed vanishing culture as one of the top issues, but “when it comes to practical, I think it is going all opposite direction” (“Rinzin”, M26, FGD 7 April). Modern influences and cultural change are usually regarded as negative
phenomena in Bhutan. *Bhutan Information and Media Impact Survey* (2013) notes that people are concerned over the influence of foreign media on youth, believing that it leads “to the depletion of cultural values”. The increase in gang fights and drug addiction is also attributed to youth trying to imitate the behaviour in Western television programmes (RGoB 2013: 70). This bleak image of media is, however, not new. Radio was blamed for weakening the social ties and ruining the society in the US already in the 1920s; later it was television, then video games and finally Internet. It is easy to demonise the media and blame it for the ills of the society, but to solve the problems caused by social and cultural change – of which media is a part – a more analytical approach is required to better understand the change taking place.

Although the full impact of global media on Bhutanese culture is a question outside this thesis, mass communication research has established a link between more tolerant and egalitarian moral and social values, and exposure to the news media (Norris and Inglehart 2012: 34). Unlike the general public discourse (RGoB 2013; Chua 2008), many of the young people themselves see the abundance of information available through the Internet as a very positive thing: it has opened up different worlds and new thinking, or access to “different kinds of values”, as termed by the interviewees. (Interview, Fassihi; Interview, Phub Dorji; Interview, Kencho Dorji.) This awareness on issues beyond your own immediate environment, “of the bigger picture” is one of the positive changes social media can facilitate, particularly among the urban youth (Interview, Zam).

A very positive aspect in Bhutan, mentioned by several female participants, was the notion of gender equality when compared to Arabic countries or other countries in the South Asian region. Yet, there are very few Bhutanese women in leading political roles. One of the FGD participants explained her reasoning for gender disparity in the political arena:

*That’s like a very wrong perception saying that “girls are not interested in politics”... girls have to do the housework. They are in charge of the families. They have to go to schools. And if they have children, people will criticise: “she’s not a good mother, she wants to be a politician so she’s like leaving her child and going for campaigning”. People are very negative to a girl who wants to become someone in her life and wants to bring changes. So I think because girls don’t want that criticism, they don’t come in front... Guys are dominating and they’re not giving chance to the girls... If the guys step back, the girls will be able to take the responsibility.* (“Priya”, F17, FGD 8 March)
Bhutan has now its first female minister, but otherwise the female representation in the parliament dropped to 6.9 percent in the 2013 elections, compared to 13.9 percent in 2008. Out of 10 ministries, only one has a female secretary serving as the highest public official. Women are more shy to contest for leadership positions: for example in the student government elections observed at the Royal Thimphu College in May 2014, all candidates running for the post of the president were male. The lack of female role models was evident also in the FGDs, where Mother Teresa was the only female role model chosen – by a male participant.

**Facebooking change**

There was a great variety how participants talked about their media use: some were extremely active on Facebook, others confessed of not having any understanding of it. Young interviewees explained that among social media, they mostly use Facebook instead of Twitter which is more used by media professionals and older generations. Many young people do not use their e-mail account for sending e-mails, but only for being able to log in to Facebook. Through Facebook it is much easier to reach out to people to invite them to events, for example. Facebook penetration in Bhutan is relatively high, with around 18 percent of the population using Facebook, compared to other countries in the region, for example Nepal (12 percent) or Bangladesh (5 percent) (Socialdaily.com). Young people themselves see Facebook more as a networking and chatting platform than as a space for social change or even information-sharing.

As the majority of Bhutanese Facebook users are in the age group of 16 to 30, it provides a particularly effective channel to improve communication between decision-makers and the youth. It is a normal to ask politician to become your Facebook friend, and this is also how young people would like to see their politicians, accessible:

...*whenever I see our current PM, I always feel, although he wasn’t born in the time when there was Facebook, but he IS really active in Facebook. And he is really...he likes to be really approachable and accessible to everyone. So I think that’s the way a parliamentarian should try to be. Very flexible and...because now you can go to Facebook and meet almost 50% of the parliamentarians.* (“Jigme”, M21, FGD 27 January)

Several interviewees stressed that media can be a powerful tool for democracy education, encouraging critical thinking and informing about the current issues in the country. Furthermore, media can set an example on how to have a dialogue with people who have different points of view, without becoming negative or aggressive, but
respecting others. (Interview, Zam.) Freeing oneself of status and hierarchy restrictions – to discuss things openly in the ‘public sphere’ – can currently only happen in online discussions, with the usual results:

...one of the problems with debates on TV here in Bhutan is that people are very reluctant to speak their mind...It has to be understood as a reflection of the cultural inheritance of Bhutan...as a reflection of the respect for hierarchy...Sadly, because Bhutanese are not used to expressing their views – if somebody expresses their view, they will be met by a tirade of abuse. And you see this very much in Kuensel online...you get a whole lot of people saying you're an idiot, you're rubbish, that sort of thing. (Interview, Rutland)

Many interviewees believed that the disconnect between rural and urban youth could be partly overcome through common social media platforms. One participant described how he encouraged his cousins in the village to buy smartphones, created them Facebook accounts and suggested which pages to like and follow. This was described as one of the responsibilities being a youth leader, letting also friends in rural areas to stay updated of what is happening in Thimphu. (“Jigme”, M21, FGD 27 January.) One of the YI representatives tells a very vivid example from his village how during the first elections in 2008, people simply voted who they were told to vote by the village elder, but by the second elections in 2013, they were more informed by the media, including social media:

Social media serves the people, I think. Because in the first election there was not that much advance in social media...remote places, people there are going to listen to elder, whoever the head of the family, like father: you vote such party, they give the order...After, second election where there is advance in media, where people get awareness, even in the rural area.... (“Vijay”, M21, FGD 27 January)

Due to the adverse effects of online anonymity, there is a vibrant debate on whether social media is good or bad for Bhutan. It has been shown that when used only for entertainment, any media, from television to Internet, decreases social trust. However, if media is used for communication and information purposes, it can actually have a positive effect on trust and social capital. (Delli Carpini 2004: 404.) Young people interviewed for this study, belonging to the more informed, active generation, were hoping for a more approachable and open government and decision-making where they can play their part. Woolcock and Narayan pointed out the complementary function of modern communications technology to face-to-face interaction several years before the explosion of social media (2000: 242). So far there is little practical evidence of how Facebook, or any form of media for that matter, has been able to connect rural and
urban youth, politicians and youth or to increase generalised trust in Bhutan, but based on the very positive perceptions of some of the interviewees, this is certainly an area worth exploring.

6.5. Bridging the gap

...we already have the social gap between younger people and the older generation, it is only going to widen. You feel that sense of alienation, you know, you don't understand each other anymore. When Bhutan reaches that stage, it's going to be really really sad...if you are not letting the voice of these younger people to come in, it will be very difficult for Bhutan.

Interview, Namgay Zam

This final part of the analysis aims at synthesizing the discussion above and linking it with the concepts of social capital, mutual trust and youth civic engagement, particularly answering the last research question on what is the link between youth civic engagement and social capital.

The National Statistics Bureau (NSB) of Bhutan has included social capital as a component in the National Living Standards Survey (NLSS) since 2012, and published a separate monograph called Bhutan’s Case: Social Capital, Household Welfare and Happiness where social capital is defined as:

...interpersonal relationship built on mutual trust (blo ted) and the norms of reciprocity (phen tshun nyam phen) that facilitate collective (mnyam rub) action to achieve common goals (spyi mthun dmigs don).

(National Statistics Bureau 2013a: 1)

The main researcher of the study, Lham Dorji aptly describes the differences between rural and urban areas in Bhutan: “Social capital in rural community is all about interaction between individual personally or physically, and in case of urbanites, it is through Facebook and mobile” (The Bhutanese, 29 July 2013).

Small society such as Bhutan should be able to effectively capitalise its existing social networks to develop some of the most important facets of social capital such as trust, sense of belonging, access to information, or efficiency of getting things done. This close-knit society can also facilitate the more adverse effects discussed in previous sections, such as high level of nepotism, or the unwillingness to speak in public to avoid hurting anybody’s feelings or endangering one’s own image.

Social trust

Mutual (or generalised) trust is described to be “a more individual-level, psychological measure of the more behavioural and collective concept of social capital” (Delli Carpini
Mutual trust denotes the feeling of connectedness and faith in fellow citizens, even in strangers. According to the data in the GNH Survey done in Bhutan in 2010, Bhutanese trust more their neighbours than people in general, but both figures are relatively low: out of all the respondents, 30.1 percent trusted most people in general and 40.5 percent trusted most of their neighbours (Figure 6, from Chophel 2012: 126). Urban residents had markedly lower levels of trust, 13.2 percent saying they trust most people, dropping to 12.5 percent in the district of Thimphu (Chophel 2012: 129). Comparisons across age groups show that young people, from 18 to 30 years of age were least trusting, and across occupational groups businessmen trusted other people least, followed by civil servants, monks and students (Figure 7).

The element of trust seems to be lacking on many levels in Bhutan. Based on the interviews done for this study, older generation does not trust the younger ones; people do not trust the politicians; young people do not trust the employers nor the bureaucrats. The only instances that have gained full trust are His Majesty and the government as an institution, providing free healthcare, education and many other services to Bhutanese citizens. When translated into action, the lack of trust turns into fear. A general perception among the interviewees was that government authorities are afraid of engaging young people in serious conversations in order not to challenge the existing social structures. There is a fear of mobilizing the youth bulge, particularly the growing number of unemployed youth to demand for their rights and turning into a youth movement, potentially a violent one that would conflict with the cultural values of modesty, humbleness and respecting elders.

Figure 6. Trust in people in Bhutan, rural and urban areas. Source: Chophel 2012.
Neither the study on social capital (National Statistics Bureau 2013a) nor the article on community vitality in the GNH survey (Chophel 2012) were able to determine what factors contribute to high social trust that is lacking particularly in the urban areas in Bhutan. According to Putnam, civic action reinforces mutual trust: “the more we connect with other people, the more we trust them, and vice versa” (Putnam 1995: 65, quoted in National Statistics Bureau 2013a: 7). The link between social trust, sense of belonging and volunteering is also visible in the Figure 8: compared to 55.2 percent of respondents in rural areas, only 35.4 percent in urban areas had volunteered during the past 12 months; and 67.6 percent in rural, and 29.6 percent in urban areas said they have a very strong sense of belonging to their local community (Chophel 2012: 116, 121). This survey data on social trust, sense of belonging and volunteering is affirmed by a large amount of international research on volunteering that has shown the positive relationship between sense of belonging and volunteering, as well as between volunteering and individual happiness (Chophel 2012: 117, 122-123; United Nations Volunteers 2011).

The study on social capital in Bhutan concluded that the presence of trust in the neighbourhood was the strongest predictor of reported individual happiness, a result that has been confirmed also in international research (National Statistics Bureau 2013a: 103-104). Thinking of how to support civic action, and through it mutual trust in urban
areas could thus be a crucial area of focus for policy-makers and ordinary citizens of Bhutan.

![Trust, sense of belonging and volunteering](image)

*Figure 8. Comparing the responses for social trust, sense of belonging and volunteering in the past 12 months between rural and urban areas. Source: Chophel 2012.*

Based on the data presented above, it can be assumed that the bonding type of social capital is most predominant in Bhutan. The question is: how to move from this community-focused type of social capital to more bridging or linking types of social capital in Bhutan that could also influence the level of social trust?

Woolcock and Narayan assert that for development to happen, common forums for pursuing common goals should be established for the representatives of the state, the private sector, and civil society. They also emphasise the need to “build bridges between communities and social groups”. (Woolcock and Narayan 2000: 235; 238; 242.) These points made by Woolcock and Narayan on the implications of social capital to development are also vital questions in Bhutan: how to create a space for people from different ranks and walks of life to communicate with each other? To overcome the perceived mistrust and fear, there is a need to create common spaces for better understanding: both a platform for the youth to express themselves, but also to learn from and respect the older generations. The survey conducted with the YI representatives included a question on the most significant change they had experienced when being a part of the Youth Initiative. One of the respondents described his experience in terms of trust:

*I had never had or experienced such moment where people trusted each other and spoke honestly about their personal issues at home or their past*
experiences...[never believed that] there would be a platform where people could be so open, considering the fact that Bhutanese hardly share their personal issues with people fearing embarrassment. (M21)

Figure 9 depicts the potential for finding a space for democratic dialogue across the generations. The seemingly clash between youth agency and social harmony (stereotype of “spoilt youth” and the misunderstanding between generations), between youth agency and democratic communication (stereotype of “rebellious youth” attempting to voice out issues), and between social harmony and democratic communication (stereotype of “ignorant youth”, challenging the power of elders) can be transformed into an overlapping space for building mutual trust and dialogue across generations. However, this requires cooperation and understanding from both sides: patience and respect for the existing cultural dynamics by the younger generation; and openness and ability to empathise with the youth by the older generation.

Figure 9. Finding space for democratic dialogue between generations in Bhutan.
This study explored the socio-cultural context for youth civic engagement in Bhutan: what really influences young people’s participation, and what could be done to enhance it both through face-to-face communication as well as through social media, particularly Facebook. Although half of the Bhutanese population are under 25 years of age, there is little research on youth, and even less on how young people perceive the societal, economic and political arrangements in their society. In my thesis it became evident how young Bhutanese are balancing between the tradition – particularly being humble and respecting elders – and the modernity, the need to critically question some of the existing injustices for a positive social change. The following research questions were addressed:

- How and in which arenas are the youth enacting their citizenship in Bhutan?
- How do young people see their opportunities to participate in democratic processes in Bhutan? Which environmental reasons influence their civic participation? Is their participation critical or conforming to the existing social structures?
- How could Facebook foster democratic culture and youth civic engagement?
- What is the link between youth civic engagement and social capital?

The findings based on the interview data suggest that although youth civic engagement in its formal sense is a new concept in Bhutan – such as volunteering, civil society or active citizenship, all closely related concepts to civic engagement – youth have been connected to their communities in the rural areas. Young people interviewed were immensely positive and proud to be Bhutanese, and at the same time equally aware of the societal injustice and the widening gap between the rich and the poor in Bhutan. Youth have, however, few channels to voice out their concerns outside of charity activities focusing on the symptoms instead of on the causes of these inequalities. While youth participation is stressed as an important objective on the policy level, the actual space for youth civic engagement is still very restricted due to reasons ranging from a
non-supportive educational system to cultural barriers. Generalised trust and sense of belonging are particularly lacking in the urban areas where youth are becoming disconnected and frustrated towards the decision-makers unable to improve their lot.

The interviewees were divided on the role of Facebook in youth civic engagement. Some very active Facebook users were convinced that social media could help in raising awareness and inspiring youth across the country, whereas most youth interviewed used Facebook as a chatting platform instead of acquiring information from the wide world or organising themselves for a social purpose. Yet, the enthusiastic use of Facebook and other social media by some of the highest political instances demonstrates that Facebook can be a meaningful tool to improve communication between politicians and their constituencies, particularly the youth.

**Theoretical and policy implications**

Some of the findings are almost too evident for anyone living in Bhutan: it is common knowledge that people, particularly youth, are not keen on speaking in public or questioning the authorities. The study suggests that to bridge the gap of mistrust, platforms for inter-generational dialogue should be provided to discuss issues democratically and in a constructive manner, valuing the socio-cultural context of respecting elders. Youth civic engagement is a crucial component of social capital, especially in creating mutual trust across different groups and generations of people.

The development of youth participation should be a collective responsibility taken seriously by families, schools, governmental agencies and youth organisations alike. Although providing seed fund to inspire youth participation was suggested, showing moral support and confidence in youth were deemed more important than financial resources. The mainstream Anglo-American research on youth civic engagement has been more concerned on youth apathy and their unwillingness to participate in democracy. In Bhutan, the fear is opposite: trying to prevent youth becoming political along the party lines. Yet, without providing opportunities for young Bhutanese to meaningfully participate in their communities, to build their capacity and to have more young role models, it will be hard to avoid the usual path of youth disengaging from democracy and politics.
Limitations and future research

In general, young people with disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be less civically engaged than those with a middle-class, well-educated background. Also the participants of this study consisted of a small, pre-selected group of already active and motivated young people. It can still be argued that despite the urban-centric views provided by the 19 young participants, they also represent diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds and offer an insight into the realities of Bhutanese youth today. Nonetheless, to better support youth civic engagement of those with rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, an in-depth understanding of their situation and perspectives is necessary. This would be an area for further research in Bhutan.

Another topic could be on the changing cultural values, only superficially looked at in this thesis. It would be interesting to delve into the perceived and real disparities between the values and morals of different generations: are young people’s values really degenerating, or are they perhaps adding a new layer to the traditional worldview?

The immersion of Bhutan into the global systems of cultural exchange, market economy and communication has mainly taken place during the last 15 years. Although there are still no traffic lights and very little street advertisements in the capital, people describe the mental change – of the way of living in general – as rapid and significant. Furthermore, the polarisation between rural and urban areas continues to aggravate and may potentially harm the general sense of belonging and understanding of what is just in Bhutanese society. Without engaging citizens, particularly the large amount of youth in these discussions on globalisation changing Bhutan, there is a real risk of losing some of the most valuable aspects of Bhutanese cultures to the temptations of the modern world. As suggested in this thesis, the youth population can be seen as a possibility instead of as a problem to be addressed by authorities: How to harness their energy and creativity through using new and old communication methods to come up with innovative, youth-led solutions?

Social change always faces resistance of those benefitting from the existing order, but proving their doubts and stereotypes wrong through action is one of the best ways to foster social change. Based on the data collected for this study, the BCMD Youth Initiative has already in its initial stages demonstrated how training a group of young people in a “school for citizenship” can effectively transform not only the minds of the youth, but also those of the elders after seeing what young people are capable of.
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Democracy (6), 65-78. Available at: 

Roholt et al. (2008). "Learning and Youth Civic Engagement”. Child & Youth Services, 29:3-4, pp. 91-106.


**Government publications**


Civil Society Organizations Act. (2007). Available at:


**Newspapers**


Websites


Interviews

Focus group interviews


Youth Civic Engagement in Bhutan. (2014, April 7). [Focus group 3]. Bhutan Suites, Thimphu. Nine trainees from the Youth Media Centre, four female and five male participants.

Individual interviews


Fasshihi, Manny. (2014, January 6). [Interview.]. Programme Officer at the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, member of the YI Steering Committee. Male, 26 years old.

Pek-Dorji, Siok-Sian. (2014, April 7). [Interview.] Founder/Director of the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, member of the YI Steering Committee. Female.


Zam, Namgay. (2014, February 23). [Interview.] Independent journalist, member of the YI Steering Committee. Female, 28 years old.
## Appendices

### Interview guides

#### a. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Observations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation to become a youth representative</td>
<td>How do you feel about the YIDDD right now?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How did your parents, friends and relatives react to you becoming a Youth Representative?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What is the best part so far?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you think this initiative can benefit your community? How?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How do you think this participation can benefit yourself?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democracy and youth participation</td>
<td>How is it like to be a young person in Bhutan right now? How would you describe it?</td>
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<td>How do you feel about politics in general?</td>
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<td>What do you think about the National Council move to require at least 10 years of experience for NC candidates?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Are you familiar with the Youth Policy? Do you know of any (other) initiatives by the government or civil society that are meant to support young people’s participation and youth empowerment?</td>
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<td>It is said that youth are not listened to in Bhutan (in decision-making). Is this true? Why?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you feel that young people’s views on development are taken seriously? Why? Why not?</td>
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<td>Through which channels is it possible to participate or influence decision-makers?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Have you ever spoken with local or national decision makers before?</td>
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<td>What would be the perfect MP for you?</td>
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<td>What, in your opinion, makes a good citizen?</td>
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<td>How do you feel about direct citizen action (e.g., demonstration on the street to support or object a cause)?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What kind of support would young people need to become more engaged in democracy? From where? (government, parents, education)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Culture and modernisation, relations between generations in Bhutan | How would you describe the attitudes of older generations towards the present youth? How is your relationship with the older generations?  
It is said that there is a conflict between different generations in Bhutan. Is this true in your opinion? In which issues, for example?  
What do you appreciate most in Bhutanese culture(s)?  
Which cultural things or social norms can support youth engagement in Bhutan?  
Which norms can make it more difficult?  
Who is your role model in Bhutan? Why?  
What is a successful person like in Bhutan?  
What do you think has been the biggest change in Bhutan during your lifetime? |
|---|---|
| New media | Are you familiar with the term new media? What would you include there?  
Which media do you follow regularly?  
For which purposes do you use internet (blogs, social media)? Only for social and entertainment purposes or also to discuss societal and political issues?  
What are the positive effects of new media (internet, mobile phones, online games, social media)?  
How about negative effects?  
How do your parents react / feel about you using new media?  
Which Facebook sites do you follow? Do they encourage you to act or join their cause?  
How can social media help to engage more youth in Bhutan (eg. YIDDD)? |
| Impact of youth civic engagement | How is youth represented in the media (press, tv, radio, internet) in Bhutan?  
Is Bhutan youth friendly?  
If not, which issues would need to change, in your opinion, for Bhutan to become more youth-friendly?  
Choose 5 top issues affecting youth in Bhutan. Discuss how these issues are currently treated in Bhutan, if they have enough attention, or what could be done to address them.  
For which issue would you be ready to take action? How would you do it?  
What do you think is the best way to try to change or influence things in Bhutan? |
b. INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Time:
Date:
Place:
Name:
Age:
Workplace:

Introduction
1. Could you introduce yourself?
2. Do you have any previous background in youth work or youth volunteerism, or youth civic engagement?

Youth Initiative
3. How did you get involved with the Youth Initiative?
4. Why did you want to start this? Why is Youth Initiative needed in Bhutan?
5. How much have you been involved in the planning or guidance of the YIDDD?
6. What do you expect from the first year? What do you expect to see or hope to see?
7. How about in more long-term, like in 5 years, where could Youth Initiative be?

Youth in Bhutan
8. How are young people viewed by adults in their communities? What are the stereotypes or general perceptions of youth?
9. How about civil society organisations. Are you familiar with the NGOs that work with youth? How do they feel about youth?
10. How about government officials (people in the ministries, etc), what’s your experience on working with them in youth-related issues? How do they view youth?
11. How about young people, how do they view older people / other generations?
12. What would you see, what could be the role of media in engaging youth, especially social media?
13. How would you define the concept of "youth civic engagement"?
14. Are young people civically engaged in Bhutan?
If no...
   1. Why not?
   2. What could be done to involve more youth? How would you change the system?
15. What kind of obstacles are there for youth engagement in Bhutan?
16. What do you think, what issues matter to young people most in Bhutan?
17. What role can young people play in national development?
18. Should the government support youth volunteering and youth civic engagement? In what role?
19. Is Bhutan youth-friendly? What would need to change for Bhutan to become more youth-friendly?
20. How do you see that the YIDDD could affect the status of youth in Bhutan?

Consent forms

Informed Consent Form for focus groups
A) Information sheet

Full title of Project: Youth Civic Engagement in Bhutan
Name and position of researcher:
Riikka Suhonen (Ms)
MA student in Communication for Development at Malmö University

Background and purpose
As part of the requirements for Master’s degree in Communication for Development at the Malmo University, I will carry out project work in Bhutan. This purpose of this research project is to learn more about youth civic engagement and its effects on community development and social capital, especially among the urban youth in Bhutan.

The results of the study will be presented in a Master's thesis. The results will be seen by my supervisor, fellow students and a second examiner. The thesis will be available online, and key results of the study may be published later in a research journal.

Why have you been asked to take part?
As an active volunteer in youth civic engagement, you are in a position to provide me with insight into the current situation in Bhutan.

In addition to individual interviews, the study will involve focus group interviews of youth. Interviews, both individual and focus group discussions form the core of my research.

Procedures
The focus group interviews are facilitated discussions where participants can freely express their opinions, experiences and knowledge on the raised topics. The discussion lasts around 90 minutes, with a refreshment break in the middle. If further questions arise, you might be contacted after the discussion to clarify certain issues.

I will audiotape the discussion solely for the purposes of accurately transcribing the conversation.

Confidentiality and risk
The focus group discussions will be kept anonymous, with pseudonyms covering individual participants’ identity. However, as the composition of the Youth Initiative representatives is public information, there is some risk involved if, for example, you divulge confidential or sensitive information. If any questions or topics make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them.

Further queries
If you have any questions about this study at any time, please feel free to contact either me, Riikka Suhonen, at +975-171-252-66 (Bhutan) / +358-50-517-7636 (Finland) or riikka.suhonen@gmail.com, or my supervisor, Dr Michael Krona at michael.krona@mah.se.

B) Consent for Participation in Focus Group Discussion and Background Data

I, ____________________________ , agree to participate in Ms Riikka Suhonen’s research.

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the focus group session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to leave the session.

3. I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the focus group discussion, in which case the material will be deleted.

4. I agree to the discussion being audio recorded.
5. I understand that I will remain anonymous in the research.

6. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

I understand that extracts from the focus group discussion may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick if you agree:)
I agree to quotation/publication of extracts anonymously, using a pseudonym

Name of participant ___________________________ Date ___________________________ Signature ___________________________

Signature of the researcher ___________________________

Youth Civic Engagement in Bhutan
Focus Group Participant Survey

Name: ___________________________
Age: ___________________________
Gender: ___________________________
Contact information (phone and/or e-mail): ___________________________

What is your education level? If studying currently, what grade or subject? ___________________________
Where do you live now (town and/or neighbourhood)? ___________________________
Where are you from originally? ___________________________
What kind of volunteer, advocacy or other service activities have you been involved in at school, in your community, or with other young people previously? ___________________________
Why did you want to join the Youth Initiative? ___________________________
What do you expect from the Youth Initiative? ___________________________

Informed Consent Form for individual interviews

A) Information sheet

Full title of Project: Youth Civic Engagement in Bhutan
Name and position of researcher: Riikka Suhonen (Ms)
MA student in Communication for Development at Malmö University

Background and purpose
As part of the requirements for Master’s degree in Communication for Development at the Malmö University, I will carry out project work in Bhutan. This purpose of this research project is to learn more about youth civic engagement and its effects on community development and social capital, especially among the urban youth in Bhutan.

The results of the study will be presented in a Master's thesis. The results will be seen by my supervisor, fellow students and a second examiner. The thesis will be available online, and key results of the study may be published later in a research journal.

Why have you been asked to take part?
As an expert / working practitioner / active volunteer in youth civic engagement, you are in a position to provide me with insight into the current situation in Bhutan. In addition to individual interviews, the study will involve focus group interviews of youth. Interviews, both individual and focus group discussions form the core of my research.

**Procedures**
The format of the interview is semi-structured, with some prepared topics and questions, but the aim is to have an open discussion rather than a set of strict questions. The interview lasts around 45-60 minutes. If further questions arise, you might be contacted after the interview to clarify certain issues. I will audiotape the interview solely for the purposes of accurately transcribing the conversation.

**Confidentiality and risk**
There is some risk involved if, for example, you divulge confidential or sensitive information. Therefore, if you wish pseudonyms to be used to protect your anonymity, I will be happy to do so. Alternately, if you wish to be quoted by name, that is also possible. If any questions or topics make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them.

**Further queries**
If you have any questions about this study at any time, please feel free to contact either me, Riikka Suhonen, at +975-171-252-66 (Bhutan) / +358-5-517-7636 (Finland) or riikka.suhonen@gmail.com, or my supervisor, Dr Michael Krona at michael.krona@mah.se.

**B) Consent of participation**

Similar to the focus group discussion consent form, with the option to be quoted under own name or pseudonym.