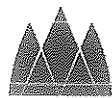


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June 2016

## The Youth Initiative - a report

### A. Overview

YI is an informal, non-party affiliated association that gives a select group of youth practical, hands-on experience in deliberating on national issues and taking community-based action. BCMD started the YI as a pilot activity in 2013.

The overall goal is to build a strong community of active citizens in Bhutan who work to make democracy happen. To do this, YI aspires to strengthen youth awareness and skills in political and news literacy, teach youth how to research and assess policy, debate and discuss issues, and take on democratic action. (This was the final model we adopted after our first attempt to create a model youth parliament met with resistance at the time.)

The environment in 2013 was one characterized by a lack of clarity and suspicion around involving youth in political discourse. Several bureaucrats questioned our intent of starting a youth parliament. They asked us why we were "politicizing" youth. The education ministry refused to give a written endorsement for BCMD to go into schools to recruit YI members through elections. We were, however, able to get into a few institutions that believed in our mission to test YI.

We re-oriented our model from a mock youth parliament modeled on the non-partisan upper house, to one that turned out to provide a deeper and richer experience for our first cohort of 20 youth. Thus, YI was started with emphasis on learning the skills of inquiry, debate and discourse that a citizen needs. This was later supplemented with opportunity to associate and take action on issues of common concern.

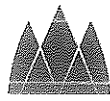
The growing presence of YI, including their public presentations on issues of concern to youth, and their local action to show that youth can organize to take action to make change have paved the way for a growing acceptance of youth-led discourse and action in the public domain.

### B. YI in 2014

In 2014, 19 youth representatives from different schools and institutions attended a two-week winter residential training and a weeklong summer training. They learned research, debating and deliberating skills, how to engage in a dialogue, taking community-based action (local action), public speaking skills and communication skills.

The YI in 2014 constituted of three committees, namely, the Community Welfare committee, the Social Justice committee and the Education committee. The committees researched and deliberated on three different issues in line with their committees.

- ❖ Community Welfare Committee: Bhutan should reduce the imports of junk food in order to promote local industry and lower non-biodegradable waste production.
- ❖ Social Justice Committee: The public and private sectors need to take collaborative measures to improve the employment opportunities for differently-abled persons.



- ❖ Education Committee: The National Teaching Council of Bhutan should be formed to improve the quality of education in Bhutan.

The Community Welfare Committee and the Education Committee led advocacy campaigns to promote local produce in schools and widespread reading. The Social Justice Committee intended to create ramps at the Memorial Chorten in Thimphu but the action remained incomplete although the Municipality took it on and is still working on it.

Two public sittings in 2014 and one in 2015 were held after each training. The youth had deliberated on their committee issues and proposed their local action in front of representatives from the government, parliament, civil society organizations, media agencies, political parties, youth and individuals. (About 50 participants attended in 2014, and more than 75 came in 2015.)

### C. The Second Year: YI in 2015

In 2015, there are 28 youth representatives from schools and colleges within and outside of Thimphu. The winter training covered the same topics.

The YI in 2015 consisted of three committees: namely, the Education committee, the Sustainable Development and the Social Media committee. The committees researched and deliberated on three different issues in line with their committees during the public sitting. Again, the stances that drove each resultant project were:

- ❖ Education Committee: A central schooling system is not necessarily ideal for Bhutan.
- ❖ Sustainable Development Committee: Bhutan should promote resource efficiency among local communities, institutions like schools, and individuals.
- ❖ Social Media Committee: Schools in Bhutan need social media guidelines to encourage responsible use of that medium.

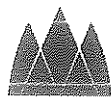
The three local action projects proposed this year are to promoting the reading habit in Bhutan to celebrate the National Reading year, planting tree saplings in a Thromde designated area, and guiding social media conversations and developing social media guidelines in schools in Thimphu.

### D. Demonstrated Impact

The YI has had positive impact in the communities through three means. First, its local actions have positively affected the local environment. Second, sections of Thimphu society has changed its perception of the capabilities of the youth through public sittings held with adults and decision-makers. Finally, the program has strengthened partnership and collaboration among people from different walks of life.

#### 1. Empowering young, emergent leaders

- ❖ **Ngawang Gyeltshen**: This nineteen year-old was a member of our first cohort of YI. During his time in YI he was actively involved in promoting the sale of local produce. He took on this task with his fellow YI members by persuading his school canteen to sell local produce. He also initiated the sale of local potato chips and other produce in school. These projects and his own



passion prompted him to start a youth co-op independently of BCMD. Although the co-op is not visibly active at this stage as Nawang and his friends are in college or school, it has demonstrated the ability of youth to form associations to pursue issues of interest.

- ❖ **Sangay Thinley:** This young man drove three key activities that spread through sections of society; specifically, he participated in a reading campaign and reading music video, and spearheaded an alcohol compliance campaign. Sangay was in his last year in college when he joined YI. He participated actively in promoting reading as part of the Educational Committee, and together with BCMD, he produced a reading video to promote reading as part of the national reading year. With some funding from OSF/BCMD, he took on an advocacy campaign visited nearly 500 bars in Thimphu to promote awareness of alcohol license rules and the prohibition of alcohol sales to youth. His team later conducted more research on this issue with parents and youth, and he was invited to a consultative meeting on alcohol control and licensing at the Health Ministry. It was the first time youth have been invited to share their views on a growing social problem.

## 2. The strength of a citizen initiative

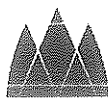
- ❖ **Citizens filling the gaps:** At the end of the YI reading campaign in Thimphu, the education minister noted that the education ministry was missing in the list of organizations who assisted with the event in the vote of thanks. BCMD's rejoinder explained that this was a citizen led initiative. This project thus shows that people outside the bureaucracy cared enough to organize an event whereby representatives from schools and youth came together to promote reading and the pleasure of reading. This action is a significant statement in a country where a strong state exists and where government tend to be the main driver of events, especially in terms of youth and schools.
- ❖ **Wide reach across the country:** The campaign prompted the YI members and BCMD to produce a video to advocate for reading in the reading year. Teachers have used it to promote reading, even requesting the lyrics and copies of the song. The Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative director and video trainer at Sherubtse College said the youth in Dewathang were repeatedly singing the song. ILCS, Mothithang High school and other schools used the video to open their reading year event. Moreover, it's one of the most watched videos on our YouTube site (more than 3,000 views) and has received many compliments from people from all walks of life.

### *Sample feedback from on-line sources on the video distributed.*

WOW!...Thank you BCMD...I'm going use it in my school to inspire my students...simply GREAT! - Kinley Wangchuck

Dear Madam,

The Democracy In Action CD had various information catering to the needs of the youth to be more proactive and undertake advocacy progs to bring positive changes in society...We at Druk School thoroughly enjoyed watching...Thank you once again la. Hoping to recieve such informative and educating CDs in future too. Tashi Delek. Best Wishes. - Gayatri Bhandari, Democracy Club Coordinator.



### 3. New horizons for youth

- ❖ The shift in the approach of moving towards local action has created an opportunity for the youths to practice what they have been advocating for during their time in YI. In short, it gave them hands-on experience on making a difference.

*"The shift in our approach from very broad and ambitious issues to a simple local action is a great movement because I feel we are doing something for the country instead of asking what the country can do for us. And I personally feel that by carrying out these local actions I will be able to learn the process of change and how the system works. For example, going around offices to get approvals teaches us that change is not easy and that we should not give up." – Sangay Thinley*

- ❖ The training allowed the youths to go beyond just debating. It allowed them to learn that while it is important to debate, it is much more important to have a consensus through dialogue.

*"In a society with different opinions and voices all colliding to make some sense, I believe finding mutual consensus is very important. And even more so as members of a team aimed at making democracy work, it is a very important skill. Debating skills were covered in the first training, and since we all have good skills to express our opinions, a chance to put ourselves in someone else's shoe and see the other side of the argument was indeed a good move." – Ngawang Gyeltshen*

- ❖ The public session that the YI led twice a year allows the youths to interact with people from different walks of life and get to hear different opinions even while they are stating their own views. It is important to hold such sittings for two reasons; firstly, it helps in the personal development of the youth and secondly, it allows others to understand that youth are capable of reviewing issues and proposing change.

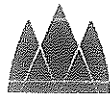
*"Personally, the sittings were really of great help to me in terms of building the exposure of delivering in the public and gaining the confidence to talk in front of huge number of people. I'm sure that the audience also learned about the issues by observing our public sittings. We have also received really good feedback from the audience which we hope to consider as much as we can." – Ziwang Gurung*

### 4. Cementing youth as partners in the democratic process

Most importantly, the increasing publicity on YI, the debates and action they took, and BCMD's constant media stories on the need to engage youth in democratic discussions and action have helped pave the way for a gradual acceptance of youth engagement in democracy. By late 2014, BCMD was invited by both the Election Commission and the National Assembly of Bhutan to share feedback on and discussion possibilities of partnership in the Children's Parliament of Bhutan (ECB) and the mock youth parliament.

We are supporting the ECB through creation of content (print and audio-visual) for their children's parliament. We also persuaded the NA's mock youth parliament not to provide scripted text for the parliament sessions that are still being tried out.

The youth involved in the education committee have become much more confident and have learnt what it means to infuse their voices and values into public interests and lives and changing the tendency in Bhutan for all action to be initiated by the government. The various developments represent a tangible shift in responsibility from the bureaucracy to the people,



and is a clear example of citizen action in a country where people have rarely exercised their abilities to change things. This is an important lesson and has impacted on our YI members.

This draft was prepared by BCMD/ ED for our partners in summer 2015.

Meeting with reviewer and BCMD's adviser, Prof Mark Mancall.

In a separate meeting with professor Mark Mancall in July 2015, YI members validated the usefulness of the programme in giving youth confidence, in enabling them to review issues of concern, and learn to seek solutions to these issues. The participants present voiced their interest in making the YI a membership organisation with a formal structure. To date, only a few former members have been active in responding to YI meetings and workshops. The most visible impact of YI is that it has been able to show other organisations and decision-makers that working with youth is possible and important in Bhutan's democratic evolution.

Current scenario:

1. Changing environment with new stakeholders
2. Emergence of youth summit
3. How to reach other areas/districts?