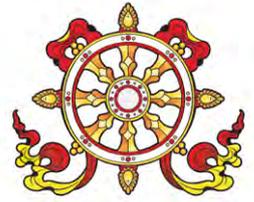


Thunlam



German Bhutan Himalaya Society | News & Reports from the Kingdom of Bhutan

Agriculture in Bhutan – Towards a sustainable future

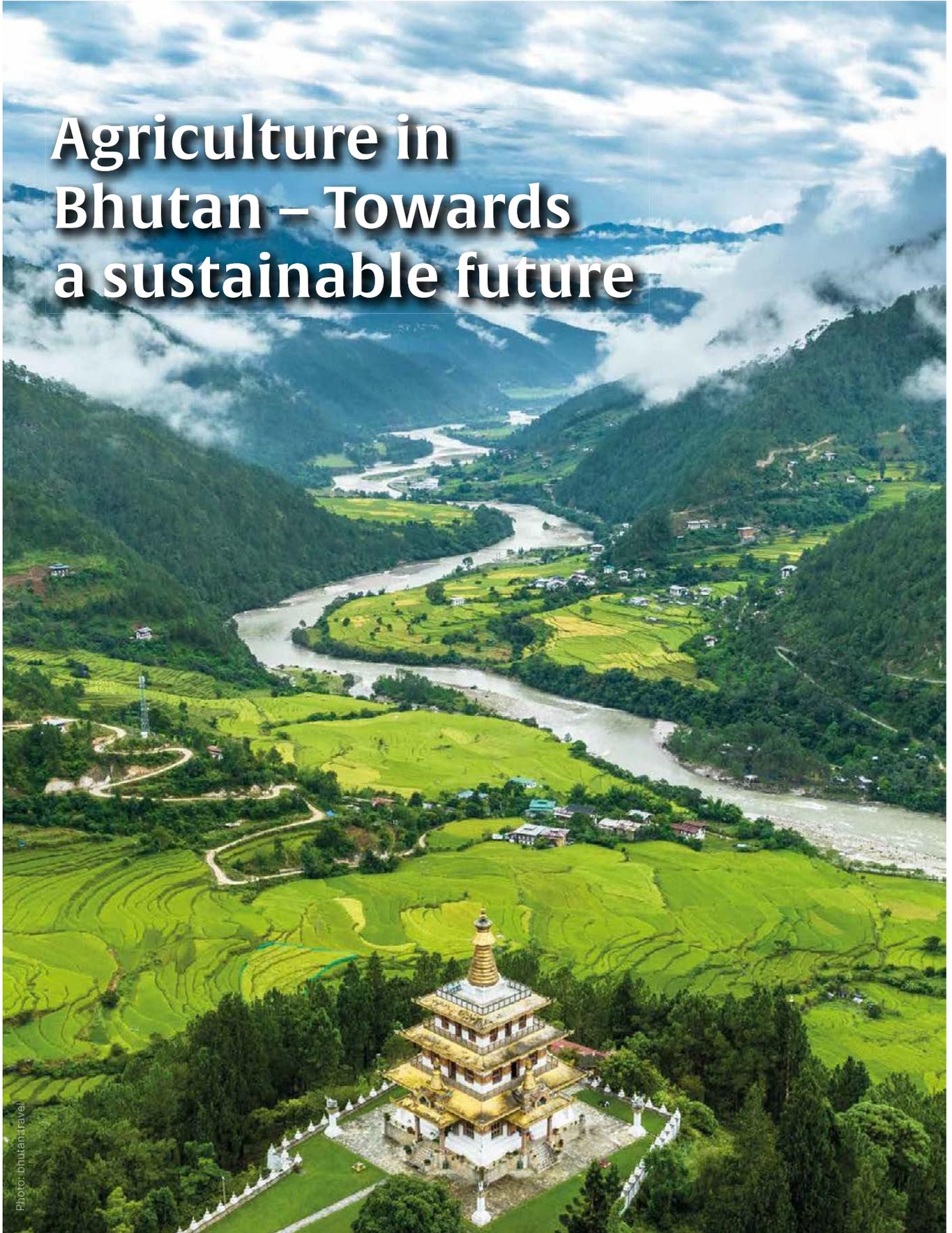


Photo: bhutan.travel

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Photo: private



Dear Friends of Bhutan,

in this edition of Thunlam, we take a look at the most important events in Bhutan in 2024. One focus is the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC), which is being built on 2,500 square kilometres on the border with India – with a focus on quality of life, renewable energies, modern infrastructure, education and Buddhist tradition.

Another highlight was the Bhutan Innovation Forum in October at the newly constructed Dungkhar Dzong near Paro. With 1,300 participants, including Nobel Prize winners and leading minds from business and science, it was the largest conference ever in Bhutan. The discussions about the future of GMC were broadcast worldwide. On 17 December 2024, His Majesty the King set out his vision for the GMC in his speech on the National Day.

Let us take a look at the activities and supported projects of the German Bhutan Himalaya Society in 2024 – made possible by your donations.

Our next Bhutan Day will take place on Saturday, 17 May 2025, at the wonderful Buddhist Dharma-Mati Centre in Berlin. This time, we have chosen 'Agriculture in Bhutan – Towards a Sustainable Future' as the main topic.

Almost half of Bhutan's working population works in agriculture, which, however, only contributes 15% to the GDP. Challenges such as rural exodus, low productivity and dependence on imports – about 75 percent of rice consumption is imported – characterise the sector. But Bhutan is focusing on innovative solutions for a more sustainable agriculture. What approaches are there and how can Bhutan meet these challenges? Discuss with us and our guests!

An invitation to the Bhutan Day and the general meeting, which will also take place at the **Dharma-Mati Centre in Berlin on the evening before Bhutan Day, 16 May 2025**, is enclosed with the printed version of this Thunlam and is available online on our website. We would be very pleased to welcome you to this special venue.

Kind regards on behalf of the board / Tashi Delek

Reinhard Wolf

President; German Bhutan Himalaya Society e.V.

DBHG strategy meeting: setting the course for the future

By Dr Klaus Neumann, Member of DBHG e.V.

Themed 'Together for Bhutan – a partnership with a future' the strategy conference of the DBHG took place on 31 January and 1 February 2024.



Photos: DBHG

From left to right: Sven Kaun-Feederle, Kalden Harz, Herbert Küster, Deki Wangmo, Brigitte Eisenack, Dr. Uwe Dräger, Dr. Irmela Harz, Reinhard Wolf, Sabine Wolf, Dr. Klaus Neumann and Klaus Nawarotzky

The extended board reviewed the vision, mission and values and discussed how the DBHG can be further developed as a strong voice for Bhutan in Germany. Key questions were: How do we better involve members and donors? How can we make projects more sustainable? Based on this, priority areas of action were defined and responsibilities assigned.

Communication:

The aim is to increase the reach of our activities, provide regular updates on current topics and intensify the use of social media.

Projects:

Which new projects or topics should the DBHG support in the future?

Efficiency:

Which measures can we take to make our work more effective?

Value creation:

How can the benefits for association members be increased in the long term in order to strengthen their loyalty to the association?

Increase reach: communication in focus

The English translation of our association magazine Thunlam was a great success. It was used at international meetings in Bhutan and beyond to raise awareness of our work – including among the growing community of Bhutanese in Europe who do not speak German.

Our reporting on Bhutan is intensified through social media such as Facebook and Instagram. This strengthens understanding of the country, further disseminates our activities and specifically addresses younger interested groups. High-quality and entertaining posts contribute to its attractiveness.

Our website remains a central element and has been restructured and redesigned. It offers quick access to projects supported, reports from the Bhutan Days, the Thunlam magazine and current topics. Our web

conferences have also got off to a successful start: Karma Ura's lecture on migration reached over 100 participants live and was viewed almost 4,000 times online. The series will continue in 2025.

Targeted support for new projects

In the past, many projects were made possible by the personal commitment of association members such as Prof. Gerner. However, developments in Bhutan and in the association made a reorientation necessary: Which projects do we want to and can we support in the future?

Four funding priorities were defined:

Cultural Preservation, Climate & Environment, Social Aid, Scientific Cooperation

A new catalogue of criteria based on OECD standards is used for objective evaluation. In 2024, two projects were selected and funded: Sky Hydrant Filter – clean water for schools and Choki Art School – preservation of traditional craftsmanship. Both projects are presented on the website with the option of making a targeted donation. The search for further initiatives worthy of funding remains an ongoing process – depending on the resources of the association and the support of its members.

Increase efficiency: More structure for a strong DBHG

In order to cope with the growing tasks, the board was expanded in 2024 so that responsibilities could be more widely distributed and key topics could be addressed in a more targeted manner. In addition, the revised website facilitates access to the association's work and offers a simple way to donate to further projects. The next step is to introduce a suitable association software. The catalogue of requirements has been drawn up, and the evaluation is now beginning.

Creating added value for members

The changes in Bhutan, the growing knowledge about the country and the fluctuation of members present the association with the challenge of creating added value for its members. A central element is the Bhutan Day, which highlights current topics such as climate in 2024 or agriculture in 2025. After the Klima-

haus Bremerhaven in 2024, it will take place at the Dharma Mati Centre in Berlin in 2025. By moving the Annual General Meeting to the evening before, an additional forum for exchange was created, while the Bhutan Day itself offers more room for the main topic. The delegation trips to Bhutan are also facing a reorientation. A new concept is being developed with external providers that simultaneously integrates the association's special approaches.

Together for Bhutan – with strong commitment

All these activities would not have been possible without the dedicated work of the association's members. Particular recognition is due to the extended board, whose commitment, time and patience have contributed significantly to the success. Constructive and goal-oriented discussions have created an excellent working atmosphere that allows us to look confidently to the tasks ahead. ■

In memoriam Andrea Jünke



Photo: private

It is with great sadness that we have to report the death of our long-standing member Andrea Jünke on 7 February 2025 at the age of 66. She worked at the Royal Technical Institute in Kharbandhi, Phuntsholing, in the 1990s as part of German development cooperation. She was particularly committed to vocational training in Bhutan, especially in the textile sector. Until recently, she was active as a cash auditor for DBHG. With Andrea Jünke's passing, we have lost a dedicated member and one of the few people with many years of experience in Bhutan. We will honour her memory.

Bhutan Day 2024 dedicated to climate change

(rw) 'Climate change in the climate-neutral kingdom' was the topic we had chosen for our Bhutan Day, which took place in Bremerhaven on 15 June 2024.



Photo: DBHG

We had chosen the Klimahaus as most appropriate venue for the topic. Our general meeting had already taken place the evening before. At first, we were unsure about how many people interested in Bhutan would make the long journey to Bremerhaven, but in the end we were pleasantly surprised by the high number of participants.

High-ranking visitors from Brussels

We were particularly pleased to welcome Ms Tshoki Choden, ambassador of the Embassy of the Kingdom of Bhutan, who travelled from Brussels with her team.

Bhutan: climate-neutral but severely affected

As a climate-neutral country, Bhutan is not responsible for global warming, but it is severely affected by its consequences. The region is warming faster than the global average. With a global temperature increase of 3°C, 75% of the glaciers in Bhutan and Nepal could melt by the end of the century. This would make access to water more difficult. It would also endanger food and energy security and lead to a significant loss of biodiversity.

Bhutan's development depends heavily on climate-

sensitive sectors such as agriculture, forestry and hydropower. The risk of glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) is increasing as the water levels of several glacial lakes approach critical thresholds and the ice-covered dams become unstable. Climate-induced glacial lake outbursts could cause significant destruction, as a large part of Bhutan's population and infrastructure is concentrated in the large river valleys.

Bhutan's National Environmental Strategy emphasises the expansion of hydropower for electricity generation, industrial growth and intensification of agriculture as the three most important ways of achieving sustainable development in Bhutan. Tourism is also an important economic sector. All these sectors are highly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. Hydropower depends on predictable and stable precipitation patterns.



Photo: Ralph Langer

QR code: video on Instagram about Bhutan Day.
The event venue, Klimahaus Bremerhaven, is a unique centre of knowledge and discovery dedicated to the topics of climate, climate change and weather.

Expert talks: Perspectives on climate change

The programme of the Bhutan Day included exciting lectures that addressed the aspects described above: After words of welcome from Ambassador Tshoki

Choden and Member of German Parliament Sandra Weeser, who visited Bhutan as part of a delegation trip, Ms Kunzang from the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in Kathmandu/Nepal talked about environmental and climate risks in the Hindu Kush Himalayan region.

The Bhutanese actor and filmmaker Jamyang Jamtsho Wangchuk reported on his climate campaign 'The Messenger - Ride for Action', which was financially supported by the DBHG.

Dr Uli F Wischnath from the Klimahaus Bremerhaven spoke about 'Global Climate Justice' and Dr Teresa Leyens from the federally-owned Zukunft – Umwelt – Gesellschaft (ZUG) gGmbH reported on Germany's support for numerous environmental and climate projects in Bhutan.

DBHG board member Dr. Uwe Dräger spoke about renewable energy in Bhutan and finally, ambassador (rtd.) Harald Nestroy, chairman of our sister association ProBhutan, gave a lecture on a project to restore the Galem House, a historic building near Punakha / Bhutan, which is also linked to the story of a Bhutanese couple in love, reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet.

An inspiring venue

Many participants took the opportunity to visit the impressive exhibitions at the Klimahaus in Bremerhaven before or after the event, which we can highly recommend to everyone. ■



Photo: DBHG



Clean drinking water for Bhutan's schools

(skf) Clean drinking water can not been taken for granted – especially not for many schools in Bhutan.

To improve children's health and provide them with a safe learning environment, DBHG and its partners are working together to provide access to clean water.

An important step in this direction was the inauguration of a SkyHydrant filter at the Yangchengatsel Higher Secondary School in Thimphu. Vice President Dr Irmela Harz, Board Member Sven Kaun-Feederle and Member Dr Klaus Neumann were at the site to personally support the project. The school received a SkyHydrant filter worth €4,000, which now provides the students with clean drinking water.

Why is clean water so important?

Many schools in Bhutan do not have access to clean drinking water. The consequences are serious: children often suffer from diarrhoea, which leads to high absenteeism and severely impacts their educational opportunities. Unsafe water not only puts a strain on families, but also on the healthcare system.

How does the SkyHydrant water filter work?

The SkyHydrant filter works without electricity or chemicals, filters out bacteria, viruses and suspended particles, delivers up to 10,000 litres of clean water per day, is easy to maintain and can be used for many years.

The project is being implemented in collaboration with the Rotary Club of Thimphu, Disaster Aid Australia (DAA) and the Bhutanese Ministry of Education. With your donation, we could finance more SkyHydrant filters and supply even more schools with clean water.

You can find donation options on our website at bhutan-gesellschaft.de/spenden/. ■

Video: *Instagram post about the project visit to Yangchengatsel Higher Secondary School*



Photo: privat

Photo: privat

Study trip to Bhutan and India – high-level encounters



Photo: FNS

(rw) Source: Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNS)

In September, DBHG President Reinhard Wolf took part in a study trip to Bhutan and India organised by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNS).

While in Bhutan, the delegation met with His Majesty the King of Bhutan, where the focus was on the much-publicised Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) project.

Other items on the programme included a regional media conference with a focus on press freedom, media ethics and the influence of artificial intelligence (AI) on elections in South Asia, as well as a visit to the Bhutanese parliament.

In India, the group experienced a special highlight: a meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, as well as with the Prime Minister and representatives of the Tibetan government-in-exile.

Bhutan and India: insights into two highly contrasting countries

The seven-day study trip took 17 participants from Germany, Austria and South Asia to Bhutan and India to learn about the different political, economic and

social structures of the two countries.

India, the world's fifth largest economy with a population of over 1.4 billion, stands in stark contrast to Bhutan, the world's first CO₂-neutral country with a population of around 700,000, which is known for its concept of Gross National Happiness.

The delegation included politicians, journalists and students from German universities. An initial overview of current developments took place in New Delhi at a dinner with Suhasini Haidar, a journalist, and Sujeet Kumar, an Indian member of parliament.

In Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, the focus was on politics, business and culture. In addition to political talks and company visits, the programme included the international conference on media freedom in Europe and South Asia. The event was held at the Thimphu Press Club, Bhutan's first journalists' club, which was founded with the support of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation.

One of the main aims of the visit was to strengthen co-operation between Germany and Bhutan and to promote parliamentary networks in support of democratic processes.

From Thimphu to Dharamsala: meeting with the Dalai Lama

After their stay in Bhutan, the delegation travelled to Dharamsala, India, the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile and the residence of the Dalai Lama, who will celebrate his 90th birthday in July 2025.

Dharamsala, also known as ‘Little Lhasa’, is the cultural centre of the Tibetan diaspora. The group met political representatives of the democratically constituted Tibetan government-in-exile, visited a cultural institute, a hospital and a school, and spoke with Tibetan refugees.

These encounters provided deeper insights into the current human rights situation in Tibet, whose status as an autonomous region of China is disputed under international law.

International Media Conference in Thimphu

A particular highlight was the conference on media freedom in Europe and South Asia, which took place on 17 September at the Thimphu Press Club. It was organised by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in cooperation with the Bhutan Media Foundation (BMF).

More than 100 guests intensively discussed freedom of expression, fake news and the influence of artificial intelligence on democratic processes in two international panels.

DBHG President Reinhard Wolf emphasised: ‘Freedom always goes hand in hand with responsibility.’

Frank Müller-Rosentritt (MdB) highlighted the opportunities and risks of new technologies: ‘Social media can promote engagement, but it also has the potential for manipulation.’

Namgyal Dorji, Bhutan's Minister of Economic Affairs, pointed to the growing danger of fake news and AI-generated content.

Kinley Tshering, Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper KUENSEL, explained that press freedom in Bhutan is strongly dependent on the social and cultural context.

Sujeet Kumar, an Indian member of parliament, pointed out the decline in newspaper readership and the increasing importance of social media.

The second panel discussed measures against disinformation and fake news. Experts emphasised the responsibility of governments, election commissions and social media when using AI in election processes.

Austrian journalist Dr Anna Sawerthal presented the European approaches to regulating AI tools and showed how these could serve as a model for other countries.

The floor agreed that that regulation alone is not enough – a vibrant democratic culture is essential to protect democratic institutions. ■



Meeting with Lungten Dorji, Speaker of the Bhutanese Parliament

Photo: FNS

Bhutan 'Imagine- Tour'

By Dr Sabine Schmidt

Twenty years later: a journey through the past, present and future of the 'Land of the Thunder Dragon'

I first visited Bhutan in 2005, almost 20 years ago, as a guest of my cousin Irmela Harz in Begana. At the time, I was travelling with my nine-year-old son, who was going to school with his cousins during our stay, as a guest student, so to speak. While he was attending school, I went on a research trip with forest expert Bill Buffum through Bumthang to the remote Tang Valley to evaluate a project. I saw villages without road access, without electricity and running water for the first time. It was cold, very cold – and I thought: it must have been like this in Europe in the Middle Ages.

How has Bhutan developed over the last twenty years?

This question was on my mind when I set off again. How do people live today? Has modernity arrived and has the original culture changed? I was excited.

A spiritual journey of discovery

Led by tour guides Irmela Harz and Karma Wangmo, we travelled through the Land of the Thunder

Dragon in a small bus with a local driver and our official guide, Tashi Wangchuk. It was to be a journey full of spiritual encounters – with the religion, nature, people and culture of Bhutan, but also with the country's future.

As soon as we landed in Paro, Tashi pointed out the main focus of the trip: we wanted to search for traces of important historical figures, including Guru Rinpoche, who brought Tantric Buddhism to Bhutan in the 8th century, and Thangtong Gyalpo, the ingenious bridge builder who built 58 iron chain bridges in Tibet and Bhutan. We also wanted to learn more about Drukpa Kunley, the 'Divine Madman', as well as about Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel, who unified Bhutan in the 17th century, and Pema Karpo, who is considered the reincarnation of Guru Rinpoche.

Yes, it was an educational trip, but also a journey of meditation and reflection. Thanks to our tour guides, we always had time for spontaneous encounters and unexpected moments – and it was precisely these that made the trip unforgettable.

Special encounters and experiences

In Paro, we met the artist Tshering Penjor, who creates impressive works of art from wind-blown prayer flags.

In the Phobjikha Valley, we happened to be part of a religious dance festival. We were sitting in the front row – right next to the monks.

In Trongsa, we danced with the wives of competing archery teams and later met one of the country's most senior religious leaders in the Dzong.

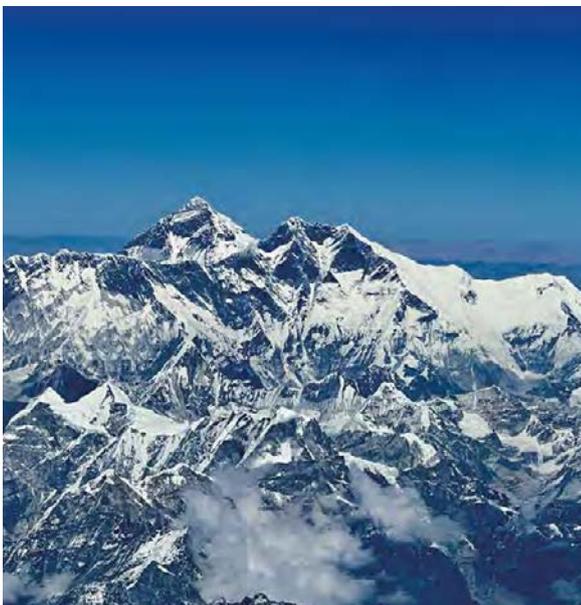
In Bumthang, we met 80-year-old Fritz Maurer, the Swiss invited by the Third King of Bhutan to introduce cheese production. Later, Fritz Maurer first promoted beekeeping and then founded a brewery a few years ago. While drinking Red Panda Beer at his 'Swiss Guest House' we listened to fascinating stories – material for a film!

In Thimphu, we crossed paths with Françoise Pomaret, one of the leading experts on Bhutanese culture. An elegant Parisian, she is a professor of Tibetan studies at the Sorbonne and the author of my travel guide – what a coincidence!

One highlight was the overnight stay in the new **Dechencholing Densa monastery**. Asha Khenpo, Karma's uncle, and Dawa, his nephew, welcomed us with warm hospitality. In the evening, we sat around the campfire and marvelled at the Milky Way. In the morning, Khenpo celebrated a fire puja for us – a powerful, purifying ceremony.

Shortly after the ceremony, we experienced a rare natural phenomenon at **Lake Samtengang**: a HALO effect with four different-sized rings of light. A sign? It was clear to us: we were on a very special journey.

The Rotary Club Thimphu invited us to the



ceremonial opening of a water filter sponsored by the German Bhutan Himalaya Society at the Yangchengtsel Higher Secondary School. This project has given children access to clean water – a measure with a great impact.

A visit to **Bio Bhutan** was a must. Where used to be a vegetable garden, there is now a small factory. Twenty-two employees distil essential oils and produce natural soap from mustard oil and natural flavours. What a success story!

The grand finale: Tiger's Nest

Our journey ended with a hike to the Tiger's Nest – the legendary monastery complex perched on a steep rock face. We meditated with Tashi in one of the temples. The energy of the countless tantric masters who had meditated here before us was physically tangible. A magical moment.

Bhutan today – a conclusion after 20 years

Yes, Bhutan has changed:

- The roads have improved, and new routes open up remote valleys.
- There is electricity everywhere, with the first solar panels and new hydroelectric power plants.
- Everyone is talking about 'Gelephu Mindfulness City', an ambitious future project.
- That time I stood alone on the on the Dochula Pass, it is now full of cars and mountain bikers – a small down-

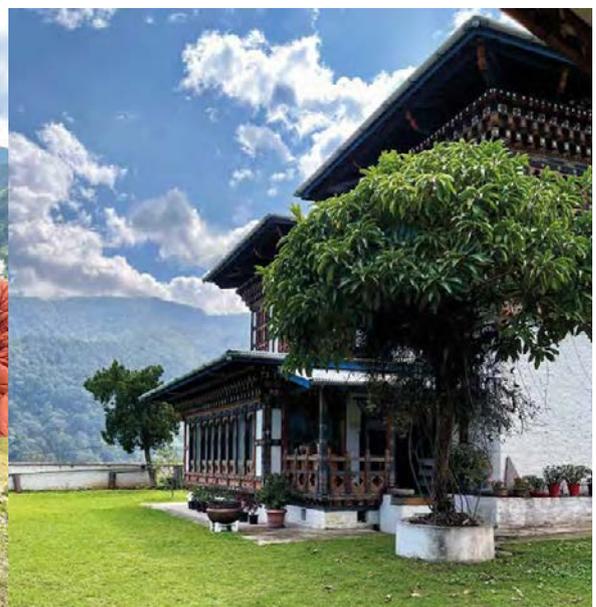
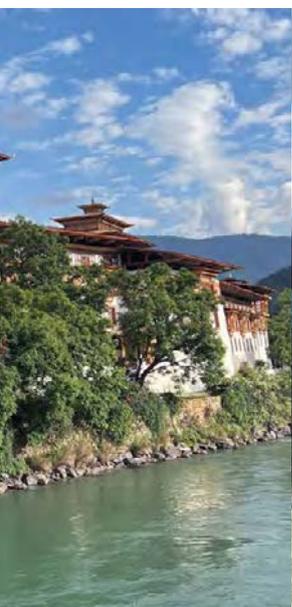
ner for me.

- Meat is now on almost every menu – back then, ema datsi with rice was the norm.
- The young Bhutanese are well educated, but many are drawn to foreign countries, especially Australia. The government faces the challenge of keeping life in Bhutan attractive.
- The number of monks seems to be declining, which is noticeable in the monasteries. But the wild nature, the deep friendliness of the Bhutanese, their closeness to nature and mindfulness – all that has remained.

Bhutan – from a philosophy of happiness to sustainable innovation

For a long time, Bhutan was considered the country with the 'happiness index'. Today, I see it as a country of sustainable innovation that brings people and nature into harmony. A country that has made protecting trees part of its constitution – truly worthy of imitation! Deeply moved by all these impressions, we began our journey home. Over Kathmandu, we caught a last glimpse of Mount Everest – majestic and unforgettable. We still rub our eyes when we think back on this trip. ■

Video: Impressions of the 14-day Bhutan Imagine Tour (27 October – 9 November 2024) on Instagram



Photos: Sven Kaun-Feederle

Bhutan on the road to participatory democracy

(rw) Source: FNS

Webinar by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNS), 11/2024

Each functioning democracy needs respectful, honest and open communication, emphasised Dasho Karma Ura, President of the Centre for Bhutan Studies. Civil society, indigenous peoples, scientists and media representatives are driving the democratic dialogue forward.

‘Don’t ask what your country can do for you, question yourself what you can contribute,’ said Reinhard Wolf, President of the German Bhutan Himalaya Society, quoting John F. Kennedy.

Democratic values in the education system

A new curriculum in Bhutan emphasises not only academic excellence but also civic engagement. Since the first democratic elections in 2008, the country has shown that democracy and tradition can coexist, according to Moritz Körner, a liberal member of the European Parliament.

Civil society and media as pillars of democracy

Like in Germany, a committed civil society and civic participation also strengthen democracy in Bhutan. The EU continues to support this process.

Kinley Tshering, editor-in-chief of KUENSEL, explained the development of the media landscape: alongside state media, private providers and digital platforms have emerged. Despite fake news and a backlog in media literacy, social media offer new spaces for democratic debate.



Graphic: FNS

Inclusion and participation strengthened

Dr Chencho Lhamu, Dean of the Royal Thimphu College, reported on the project ‘Democracy beyond elections’. It highlights ways in which young people, women and people with disabilities can be more closely involved in political participation.

Promoting digital skills and critical media use

Tshering Tshomo, a member of the National Council, explained that the government is providing additional funding to strengthen critical thinking in social media. The parliament wants to better involve civil society organisations in the legislative process, for example through public hearings.

Civil society as a driving force for democracy

Kampa Dupchen, a Bhutanese expert on sustainable investment, emphasised the importance of young people's engagement, especially that of women.

Dr Carsten Klein, director of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation's South Asia Regional Office, sees Bhutan as a role model for South Asia. The country's parliament, royal house, businesses and NGOs are committed to the rights of LGBTQ people and people with disabilities. ■

Is happiness really more important than money?

(ud) Source: ntv podcast, Andrea Sellmann, 19 December 2024

Bhutan and the good life

Gross National Happiness is priority in Bhutan. It is determined by the style of government, culture, environment and economy. However, the country lacks jobs. So what about happiness in Bhutan?

Happiness is a top priority in Bhutan. The kingdom regularly measures gross national happiness – from good governance and sustainability to cultural promotion. Even in remote villages, people's satisfaction is measured.

Uwe Dräger from the German Bhutan Himalaya Society knows how these surveys are conducted: '33 aspects

are surveyed,' he reports in the podcast 'Wirtschaft Welt & Weit'. For example, the work-life balance is surveyed, and educational opportunities also play a role. According to Dräger, Bhutan's happiness levels are impressive: they regularly exceed 90 per cent.

Money isn't the only thing that makes you happy, but a good job certainly helps. Many young Bhutanese seek their financial luck abroad – around 25,000 live in Australia, often in the hospitality industry, nursing or as harvest workers, reports Dräger in the podcast.

Bhutanese prefer office jobs

But there is plenty to do in Bhutan, for example in the skilled trades, although these jobs are not very popular. Instead, many aspire to office jobs, leaving the manual labour to the Indians. The government is now increasingly promoting vocational training.

This is also being done with German support. A Bhutanese delegation has already gathered ideas directly in Germany, for example during a visit to the Chamber of Crafts in Frankfurt am Main. Carpenters, joiners and electricians are now trained locally, explains Dräger, who also talks about his own work in various projects in the country in the new podcast episode.

So a little support for Bhutan's gross national happiness is actually coming from Germany. But we can also gain by looking at Bhutan – for example, when we reflect on what values really count for us personally. This has already worked for Uwe Dräger: he has found his happiness in the Himalayas. ■



ntv podcast

Graphic: ntv

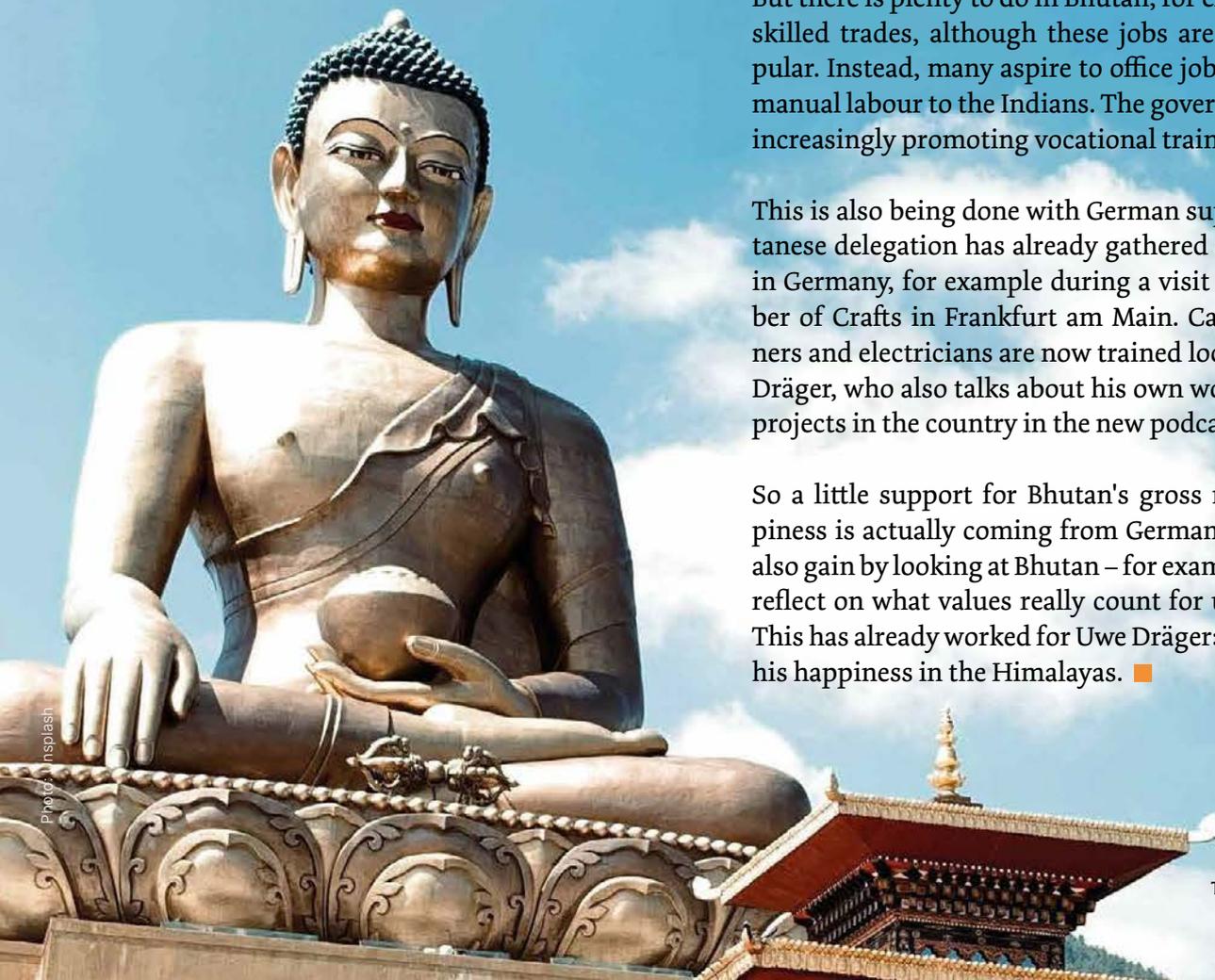


Photo: insplash

Playing with the elephant

By Irmela Harz, Vice President of DBHG

... or: 10 days holiday for the mind

Who doesn't dream of escaping the hustle and bustle of everyday life? No mobile phone, no messages – just silence. The idea for a silent retreat came to me during the Bhutan Day 2023 at the Kamalashila Institute in the Eifel region. A couple who regularly attend raved about it.

Taming the Mind – a Journey in Nine Steps

On 19 April, Lama Kelzang, who has been the resident lama and spiritual director of the institute for decades, introduced us to the retreat. What do we want to do? Seek and tame the mind. The mind is like a wild animal, restless and noisy. A Tibetan woodcut shows the process: the mind elephant chases after its thoughts, led by the monkey. A scene full of energy and tension, with obstacles everywhere. The gap between the meditator and the mind is wide; the mind tries to follow, far behind and helpless. In the second and third stages, the meditator approaches the elephant, practising mindfulness. The monkey is still leading, but more slowly. The blurring decreases, the first white spots break through the black. Step by step, the scene becomes calmer, the mind follows the meditator until there is hardly any darkness left. We go through nine stages:

From 'calm your mind' to enlightenment, when we have full control over our mind. Step by step, we discard ballast, our body becomes light and weightless.

Meditation begins with the sitting posture

The first session begins with the gong: 'Sit properly' - upright, on the chair, in the Bodhisattva or Vajra position. Sitting properly is the basis. The breath flows slowly and calmly, I concentrate on inhaling and exhaling, I am alert but do not analyse. I see, hear, feel. Slowly, calm, a sense of security and happiness spread. Ten days are not enough to climb all the levels

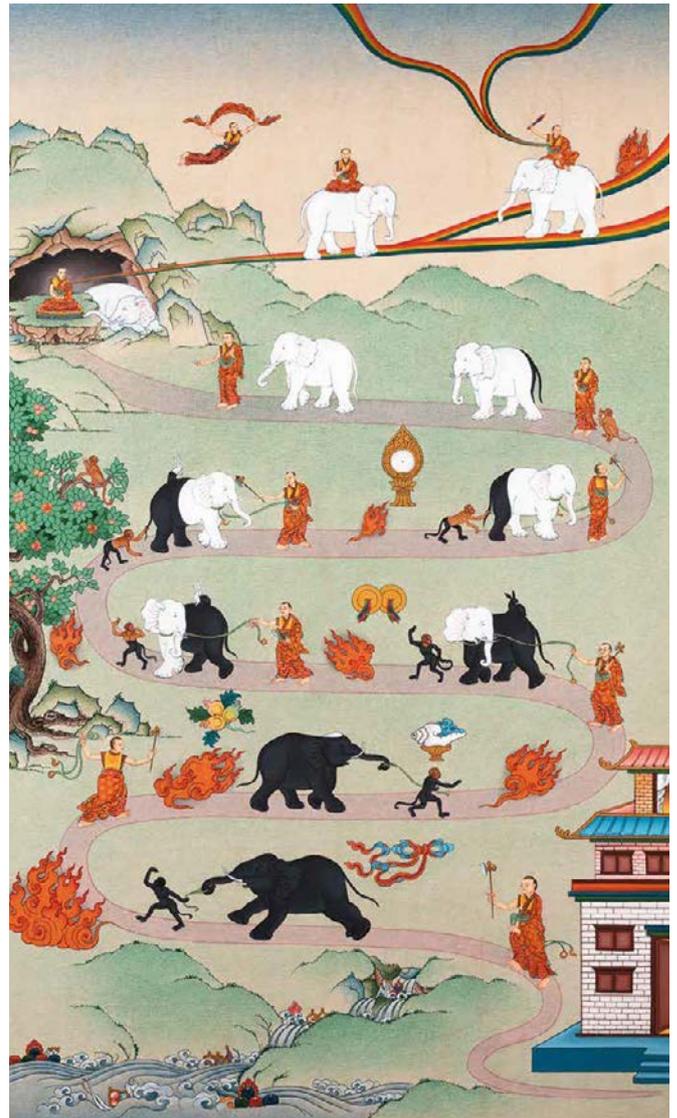


Photo: Irmela Harz

– it takes a lifetime of practice. But they show the way. Sometimes it is there, the moment of lightness: Shamata – the search for happiness.

Retreat for body and mind

The Kamalashila Institute has been offering the silent retreat for 15 years. More than 40 participants from all over Germany enjoyed not only the silence but also the excellent vegetarian and vegan cuisine – a holiday for body and mind.

Sustainable help for Bhutan

Addendum: In a wise move, the Bhutan Himalaya Gesellschaft e.V. has decreed that in the event of its dissolution, its assets should go to the Karma Kagyü Gemeinschaft Deutschland e.V. – exclusively for charitable purposes in Bhutan. ■

In memoriam Gregor Verhufen



Photo: DBHG

On 19 August 2024, a long-standing member of our board of directors and my predecessor in the office of vice president, Gregor Verhufen, passed away unexpectedly in Bonn. His sudden death has deeply shocked us and at the same time demonstrated the unpredictability of life.

Gregor Verhufen, was a graduate Tibetologist, Indian art historian and religious scholar from the University of Bonn. We met in 1995 in Bhutan, where he was digitising sacred scriptures at the National Library in Thimphu as part of a Danish-Bhutanese cooperation project.

For many years, Gregor was an active member of the board of the German Bhutan Himalaya Society. Anyone who heard Gregor's lectures on the religious history of Bhutan and the Himalayan region will not

forget his impressive descriptions!

One particular project that impressively reflects his expertise was the 'Preservation of the Written Culture'. Thanks to this project, a museum department was set up within the National Library in Thimphu, where the magnificent writing tradition of Bhutan is authentically displayed. Most recently, Gregor edited an article in the Thunlam entitled 'Tshechus – Bhutan's Soul: Tradition, Belief & Community'.

As a student of Tibetan and Bhutanese teachers and as someone who, with his knowledge of the language and the country, felt at home in the Vajrayana spiritual world of the Himalayas, Gregor Verhufen was more than just a scholar – he was a bridge-builder between cultures and generations.

It is with sadness that we say goodbye to a friend, a dedicated scholar and a passionate ambassador of Buddhist culture.

Gregor, we miss you,

Irmela Harz and the board of DBHG

Ambassador visits fruit growers

Source: District newspaper *Neue Buxtehuder* / *Neue Stader Wochenblatt*, 28 June 2024

At the Bhutan Day in Bremerhaven, the Bhutanese ambassador Tshoki Choden stopped in the Altes



Photo: Nicola Dultz

Land. She visited the Esteburg fruit-growing centre in Jork and two fruit farms to learn about cultivation methods, sustainable agriculture and technical innovations for small businesses in Bhutan.

Exchange on agriculture

She was invited by entrepreneur Gerd Pickenpack, who is encouraging cooperation with Bhutan – for example, by employing Bhutanese harvest workers. After a tour of the cherry orchard and talks with fruit growers, the delegation travelled on to Bremerhaven. ■

Visit by the German ambassador to Bhutan



On 8 May 2024, Dr. Philipp Ackermann, the German ambassador to India and Bhutan, presented his credentials to His Majesty King Jigme. Dr. Ackermann also visited the project on the writing culture of Bhutan, which was supported by the German Bhutan-Himalaya Society (DBHG) and funded by the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany. The National Library in Thimphu was the partner for this project, which has already been completed. The focus of the project was on the processing and documentation of the historical development and dissemination of the writing culture of Tibet and Bhutan. We have reported on the project several times in the past, including in the 2019 Thunlam. ■



Photos: Philipp Ackermann

German-South Asian Parliamentary Friendship Group visits Sri Lanka and Bhutan



Photos: National Assembly of Bhutan

From 1 to 10 March 2024, a delegation from the German-South Asian Parliamentary Friendship Group travelled to Sri Lanka and Bhutan under the leadership of the chairwoman Renate Künast. The other members of the delegation were Paul Lehrieder, Ria Schröder and Dr Malte Kaufmann. The focus of the trip was on talks about the current political situation in the countries visited. In Bhutan, the focus was on democratic development since the transformation to a constitutional monarchy. In addition, the delegation discussed issues of sustainable development, environmental protection and energy supply. During talks at a vocational school and with company representatives, the economic prospects of the younger generation were discussed. This was the first visit by a delegation of German MPs since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 2020. ■



Photos: Prime Minister's Office

Accreditation of the Bhutanese ambassador Tshoki Choden

(rw) Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Royal Government of Bhutan



The Bhutanese Ambassador Tshoki Choden presented her credentials to the Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Kingdom of Bhutan to the Federal Republic of Germany at Bellevue Palace in Berlin on 30 May 2024.

Ambassador Tshoki Choden conveyed the greetings of His Majesty the King, the people and the Royal Government of Bhutan to the Federal President and the German people. She expressed gratitude for the generous support that Bhutan has received from Germany over the past decades at the bilateral and multilateral level.

The Federal President expressed his hope that the friendly relations between the two countries would be further strengthened. During her visit on 30 and 31 May 2024, the ambassador met with representatives of the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry for the Environment. Both sides agreed to intensify cooperation in the areas of climate protection, biodiversity, tourism and economic partnerships.

Ambassador for several countries

Tshoki Choden is the resident ambassador to Belgium and the EU, with concurrent accreditation in Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Luxembourg. ■

Vocational training in Bhutan – for a better future

New project: PATRIZIA Vocational Training Centre Bumthang, Bhutan

Source: PATRIZIA Foundation

Bhutan – The Kingdom of the Dragon, nestled in the majestic mountains of the Himalayas. A country where happiness is enshrined in the constitution and gross national happiness is considered an official indicator of progress. But happiness alone does not solve problems. During the COVID 19 pandemic, youth unemployment in Bhutan almost doubled – an urgent problem for the small country between China and India.

To become economically independent and preserve its cultural identity, Bhutan urgently needs more training opportunities. In the remote regions of eastern and central Bhutan in particular, there is a lack of vocational training programmes, leaving many young people without the chance of a qualified vocational education.

In the rural district of Bumthang, there are over 2,000 school dropouts every year, mostly girls who grow up without educational or vocational training prospects. This is where the PATRIZIA Vocational Training Center Bumthang comes in: it offers young people the chance of a self-determined future. High-quality training, support and accommodation enable them to gain a vocational qualification – and thus to shape their own lives.

PATRIZIA Foundation is the royal family's preferred partner

The project is under the royal patronage of Her Majesty Gyalum Sangay Choden Wangchuck, the Queen Mother of Bhutan. Her organisation, the Gyalum Charitable Trust, represents the Queen Mother's charitable foundations. Together with its implementing partner RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women), an organisation that supports women and children in Bhutan, she has selected the PATRIZIA Foundation as her exclusive project partner.

The Bhutanese government has declared the creation of productive jobs a priority in its 13th five-year plan. Close cooperation with the relevant ministries ensures state acceptance and enables the training programmes to be designed to meet needs.



*Her Majesty
Gyalum Sangay
Choden Wangchuck*

Photos: Thoughts of Bhutan



Sustainable education for the youth of Bhutan

The education project is expected to reach more than 1,000 children and young people each year. Young people between the ages of 13 and 15 receive career guidance and preparatory courses in holiday camps. Young people between the ages of 16 and 24, many of whom are school dropouts, can complete an apprenticeship or job-related courses. Accommodation and supervision are provided for students from remote regions and children from difficult circumstances.

The centre offers basic training in textile crafts, food processing, floriculture, arts and crafts, and product design. Supplementary courses include entrepreneurship, IT, environmental education and the preservation of cultural heritage, such as Bhutanese arts and crafts and herbalism.



On a site of almost 2 hectares, around 4,000 square metres of floor space will be created – built ecologically and operated sustainably. Training and teaching rooms, common and sleeping rooms, multi-purpose rooms and an administrative building are planned.

Flagship project for the whole region

The PATRIZIA Vocational Training Center Bumthang is one of the largest and most ambitious institutions in the history of the foundation. As a flagship project, it is a unique opportunity for Bhutanese children, young people, parents and the whole of Bhutan to strengthen their own future, but also the country's overall economic independence and cultural identity. The PATRIZIA Foundation has completed a thorough needs assessment and feasibility study for this project and has established strong partnerships with national and local authorities and with the communities. However, for this project to be successful, we need additional financing partners. Support this educational project in Bhutan and get involved in the future of the young people there.

DBHG considers this ambitious project to be very important. Our board member Dr Uwe Dräger is committed to supporting this project, and above all, on a pro bono basis. For further information, please contact him (uwe.draeger@bhutan-gesellschaft) or Christina Eisenberg, Head of Fundraising and Communication (Christina.Eisenberg@Patrizia.Foundation). ■

'Support people in a country that is characterised by its unique philosophy of national happiness. Your donation will help to give young people there real prospects for the future.'

Christina Eisenberg,
Head of Fundraising and Communication



Celebrations of the 117th National Day

(skf) Reception in honour of Ambassador Tshoki Choden on the 117th national day in Brussels



Photo: Royal Bhutanese Embassy, Brussels

On 17 December, members of the German Bhutan Himalaya Society had the honour of attending a reception hosted by Ambassador Tshoki Choden in Brussels to mark the 117th National Day of the Kingdom of Bhutan. The following day, a warm invitation to lunch at the ambassador's residence provided an opportunity to deepen cultural and diplomatic relations between Bhutan and its friends in Europe.

The highlight of the celebrations was the inspiring speech by His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck in Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan. His Majesty's vision for the future reflects an unwavering commitment to unity, peace and prosperity.

Key messages from His Majesty's speech on the occasion of the National Day 2024

Peace and stability: With successful elections and the launch of the 13th Five-Year Plan, Bhutan remains a beacon of harmony amidst global uncertainty.

Engagement with the diaspora: His Majesty emphasised the importance of creating opportunities for Bhutanese nationals living abroad to return to and flourish in their home country, as he emphasised during his recent visit to Australia.

Empowering youth: Through programmes such as Gyalsung (national service) and Desuung, Bhutanese youth are equipped with skills, discipline and a purpose.

Innovation and vision: The development of Gelephu Mindfulness City as a centre for technology and economic growth highlights Bhutan's balance between progress and values.

Strategic reforms: Strengthening democracy, modernising the bureaucracy and improving education remain crucial to Bhutan's success in the 21st century.

As members of the German Bhutan-Himalaya Society, we were deeply inspired by His Majesty's forward-looking vision and to be able to participate in this meaningful celebration in the heart of Europe. Bhutan's values and aspirations continue to strengthen the bonds between the Kingdom and its friends around the world. We thank Ambassador Tshoki Choden and the Royal Bhutanese Embassy from the bottom of our hearts for their warm hospitality and the unique opportunity to celebrate Bhutan's national day.



Photo: Sven Kaun-Feederle

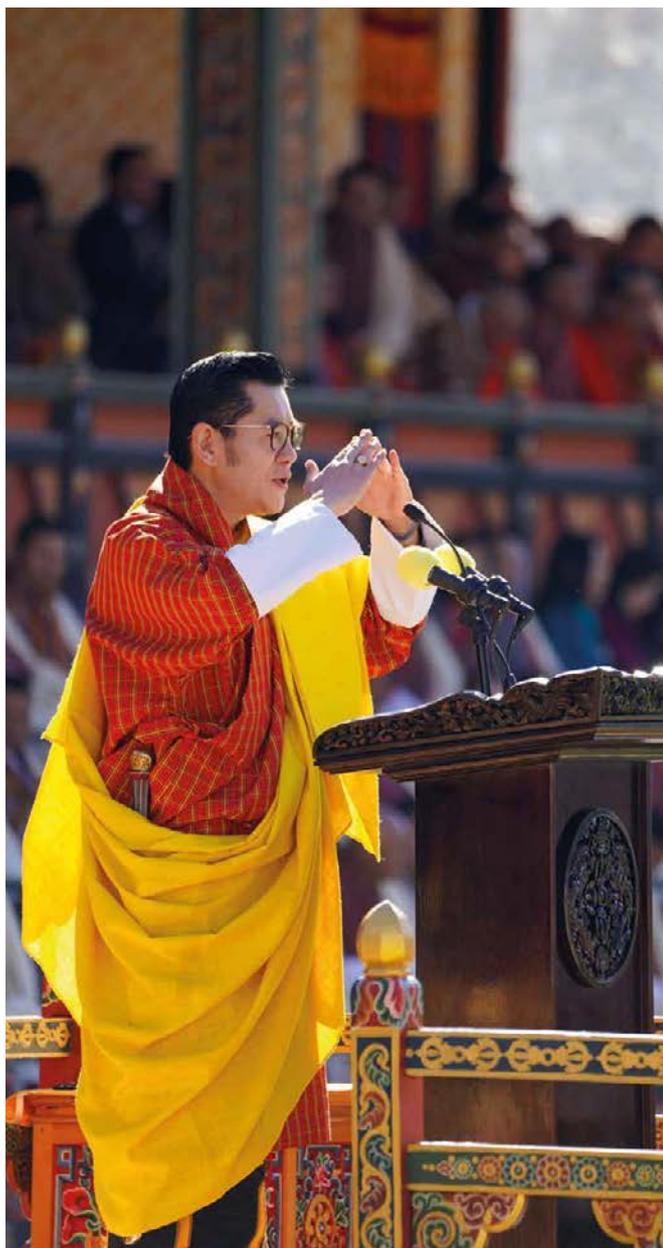


Photo: KUENSEL

In an editorial dated 18 December 2024, KUENSEL assesses the King's speech as follows:

As the 117th National Day celebrations draw to a close and thousands of people return to their duties and lives, there will be much to reflect on from what was conveyed in the King's address to the nation. The address gave Bhutanese a clear perspective to keep pace with the pace of changes in the country, especially with the royal vision of building the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC). As many left the festival ground, one message that was thought-provoking was the 10-year deadline for transforming our civil service and the necessary reforms in our legislation and policies that are vital to the success of our plans and to boos-

ting the sluggish economy. His Majesty said there is no rush, but in 10 years Bhutan should have an enlightened and entrepreneurial bureaucracy. The vision is that the civil service and the whole country will grow with the GMC. The strong message is that if the GMC is making progress, the rest of the country should not be left behind.

The call for transformation of the civil service is not new. His Majesty has, on many occasions in the past, referred to the need for civil service reform and repeatedly emphasised the urgency. We have seen changes in recent years. The civil service must evolve with changing times and needs. In the past, the bureaucracy was required to meet people's expectations, improve service delivery through efficiency and professionalism, meet the highest standards of ethics and integrity, and demonstrate qualities such as skill and compassion. Now it is about driving change and equipping the population with the necessary skills to take on major projects such as the GMC. A good start is to admit mistakes. Bureaucracy should not be seen as a barrier to ideas and initiatives. It is even better to recognise the failures of our system and seek solutions. Priorities are changing and it is not just public service that is expected to change. In recent years, organisations and institutions have been transformed, all with the expectation of better performance while improving service delivery and quality of life. The pressure for transformation has led to new ideas and initiatives, some of which may conflict with existing laws, policies or regulations.

In pointing out the shortcomings in our policies that restrict ideas, His Majesty has highlighted a deficiency that many are aware of but do not want to tackle. Some of our laws hinder growth because they are outdated or irrelevant to today's needs and ideas. Others use them as a tool to avoid risk at the expense of growth and progress. Even when organisations want to rise to the challenges and circumstances that change daily, or when institutions or companies want to manage according to the principles of multinationals – performance, efficiency, hire and fire – they are constrained by our regulations. If laws and policies are to help boost the economy, increase efficiency and benefit the country, they must keep pace with change. The 117th National Day is over. The King's Speech should mark the beginning of a discourse on the path to the future, in order to keep pace with constant change. ■

Bhutan receives largest Indian foreign aid

(rw) Source: KUENSEL, 27 July 2024

The Indian government has pledged the highest foreign aid to Bhutan for 2024-25, at INR 20.69 billion – INR 10.79 billion as a grant and INR 9.9 billion as a loan. This represents more than 40% of India's total foreign aid. In comparison, Nepal received INR 7 billion, followed by the Maldives (INR 4 billion), Mauritius (INR 3.7 billion), Myanmar (INR 2.5 billion), Sri Lanka (INR 2.45 billion) and Afghanistan (INR 2 billion). Bhutan received INR 23.99 billion the previous year and INR 24.67 billion the year before that.

India's long-term commitment to Bhutan

In the 12th five-year plan, India provided Bhutan with a grant of INR 45 billion. In March 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced INR 85 billion for the 13th five-year plan (2024-2028) to promote key areas such as governance, health, education, digitalisation, energy and the economy. Indian Ambassador Sudhakar Dalela emphasised that India would remain a reliable development partner for Bhutan. Bhutan plans to spend 89.15 billion Nu in 2024-25, of which 50.81 billion Nu is for running costs and 38.34 billion Nu for investments. With funds of 73.18 billion Nu available, this results in a budget deficit of 15.97 billion Nu (5.2% of GDP).

External assistance is estimated at Nu 16.52 billion, of which India provides Nu 12.21 billion. Other contributions come from the Asian Development Bank (Nu 818.65 million), the EU (Nu 636.92 million), the World Bank (Nu 508 million) and the WHO (Nu 409.93 million).

A deficit of 55.94 billion US dollars (2.97% of the GDP) is expected in the 13th five-year plan. India contributes the largest share of external support with 85 billion US dollars, with a further 40 billion US dollars coming from the EU, Japan, UN organisations and other partners. ■

India supports Bhutan's development plan with 100 billion INR

(rw) Source: KUENSEL, 23 March 2024



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced financial support of 100 billion INR (about 1.1 billion euros) for Bhutan's 13th five-year plan (2024-2028).

During his visit, His Majesty the King awarded him the Druk Gyalpo Order, Bhutan's highest civilian honour – the first foreigner ever to receive it. Modi praised Bhutan's progress and emphasised the close, trust-based relationship between the two countries.

In the face of global climate challenges, Modi praised Bhutan's carbon-neutral policies as a model for the world. He also emphasised the digital and technological transformation of Bhutan and the shared use of technology to promote economic growth and prosperity.

Modi pointed to Bhutan's Gelephu Special Administrative Region as a key project for partnerships and closer ties between the two countries, including through the expansion of rail infrastructure. ■

The government's ambitious plans for the fiscal year 2024-2025

(rw) Source: KUENSEL, 5 July 2024

In 2024-2025, eleven national roads are to be expanded and seven new ones built to strengthen public infrastructure, Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay announced. In addition, the credit moratorium is to be lifted as part of the economic stimulus package to strengthen the private sector. Low-interest loans are to be provided to facilitate business start-ups and implement business-friendly policies. Tourism is also to be expanded and new markets developed.

Agriculture, hydropower and digitalisation

In the area of rural development, 47 new irrigation projects are to be implemented and market access for agricultural products improved. Farmers will receive low-interest loans and insurance against crop and livestock losses is planned. The expansion of hydropower remains a priority. At the same time, digitalisation is being driven forward: the government wants to promote information and communication technology, set up a third internet gateway and reduce internet fees.

Education, health and public service

All vocational training institutions are to be modernised and supported. In addition, the national language Dzongkha is to be strengthened through digital technologies and special programmes for the performing arts are to be introduced. In the health sector, the government is planning a specialised cancer hospital and the expansion of the Health Trust Fund. In addition, 63 schools are to be converted into central schools. Public services are to become more efficient through an integrated service centre.

Visionary projects: Mindfulness City Gelephu and Gyalsung Programme

The government supports the Gelephu Mindfulness City project and is working with the project leaders to ensure broad support from the government and the population. It also pledges its support for the Gyalsung Programme (National Youth Service), which is scheduled to start in 2024. ■



Photo: National Assembly of Bhutan

Emigration is an existential threat to Bhutan

(rw) Source: KUENSEL, 5 July 2024

The Prime Minister sees the revitalisation and development of the economy as the only solution to the emigration.

In his first State of the Nation address, Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay identified the increasing emigration as the biggest challenge currently facing Bhutan. To date, 64,000 Bhutanese men and women – around 9% of the total population – have left the country to find better working and living conditions abroad.

He warned that this trend would have serious long-term consequences if the country failed to stabilise its economy and create attractive prospects at home. Labour is of critical importance for a small country with a small population. A further population decline could significantly affect the fundamentals of the economy and potentially lead to an economic downturn.

Impact on the economy and public services

The emigration of qualified workers puts a strain not only on the labour market but also on public services. The education and health care systems are particularly affected:

- The loss of teachers affects the quality of education and poses major challenges for the school system.
- The emigration of doctors and nursing staff leads to a deterioration in medical care and weakens the health system.
- There is an increasing shortage of skilled workers in the fields of engineering, finance, technology and law, which could stall the country's economic development.

Many well-educated young Bhutanese see more at-

tractive opportunities abroad, with the result that more and more of them are seeking their fortunes outside Bhutan. If this trend is not stopped, many of them could remain abroad permanently and not return.

Government measures to counteract emigration

The government sees the only solution in economic revitalisation and expansion. Prime Minister Tobgay emphasised that the Gelephu Mindfulness City, a large-scale special economic zone, is intended to create new prospects for Bhutan and advance the country economically.

In addition, the government has launched a 15 billion Nu economic stimulus package, which will be distributed to various sectors of the economy in the form of low-interest loans, including the private sector, small industry, tourism, agriculture, livestock farming, construction, transport, and the media and film industry.

Hydropower also plays a key role in economic development. The government plans to increase the installed hydropower capacity by 3,119 MW to a total of around 5,500 MW. To this end, the government has earmarked 527 billion Nu outside the regular budget of the 13th five-year plan.

Urgent action needed

In an editorial, KUENSEL emphasises that the problem of emigration is not new. Nevertheless, previous governments have not taken effective measu-

res to counteract the trend. Many professionals leave the country because they see better salaries and career opportunities abroad.

The health and education sectors are in particular need of urgent action. The emigration of doctors, nurses and teachers has serious consequences for the future of the country. Experts are therefore calling for better pay and more attractive working conditions for these professionals in order to keep them in Bhutan.

The big question remains: what is being done specifically to stop the emigration trend? Higher salaries

and better working conditions could persuade qualified specialists to stay. This is not only about individual careers, but also about the future of the country, the health care of the population and the education of the next generation.

Long-term plans are important, but there is an urgent need for action. If Bhutan does not soon find effective solutions, the massive emigration of skilled workers could pose a long-term threat to the country's economic and social foundations. ■



Royal audience for more than 27,000 Bhutanese in Australia

(rw) Source: KUENSEL, 19 October 2024

More than 5,000 Bhutanese gathered at the HBF Stadium in Perth for the second audience with His Majesty the King and the royal family.

From the centre of the square, His Majesty spoke (see photo) about the special connection between

the king and the Bhutanese people, which was particularly evident in Australia. He also spoke about Gelephu Mindfulness City as the key to Bhutan's future and to the development of the individual potential of the Bhutanese.

In addition to speeches and presentations, sacred relics (Nangten) from Bhutan were exhibited to bring blessings to the Bhutanese in Australia. The visit, during which the King met around 27,000 people in three cities, ended in Perth. During his stay, he also met with government and business representatives, as well as with Bhutanese people associated with Australia. ■

Rethink how you source your food

(ih) Based on an editorial published in KUENSEL, 30 August 2024

As we embark on the 13th Five-Year Plan, the largest and most ambitious to date, it is disconcerting to note that we are still wrestling with the same fundamental issues that have been on our plate since the 1960s. Food self-sufficiency has been a national priority from the outset, yet decades later, we are still not there. It is time to ask: why has so little changed?

Production capacity and the sustainability of agricultural practices

We focus on the farmers' marketing problems, but the real problem is the insufficient production capacity and sustainability of agriculture. The question is not just how we sell, but why we are not producing

enough. Despite numerous government initiatives to increase productivity, many measures are half-hearted and address the symptoms rather than the causes. The agricultural sector remains fragmented and inefficient, dominated by smallholdings that cannot meet national demand or export surpluses. These structural inefficiencies keep Bhutan mired in food import dependency and push the dream of self-sufficiency further out of reach.

The time for superficial measures is over

We need to think bigger, act bolder and advocate for a long-term vision that goes beyond subsidies and in-



centives. Our farmers need not only financial support but also the infrastructure and technology to increase their production. This includes modern irrigation systems and improved varieties that produce more from less land. Imagine a farming community that is empowered to invest in the future through affordable credit. Sustainability is another important issue that we can no longer ignore. The overuse of chemical fertilisers and pesticides is not only unsustainable, but also dangerous. These practices erode our soils and endanger public health, creating problems that will take generations to solve. There is an urgent need to promote sustainable farming methods, such as organic farming and crop rotation, that protect our environment while ensuring long-term agricultural productivity.

Our approach to agriculture must be backed up by serious investment in research and technologies that are suited to Bhutan's climate and topography. ■

Agriculture employs 50% of the labour force in Bhutan, but production is insufficient to provide the population with basic foodstuffs such as rice. Milk and meat production are also inadequate.

What are the alternatives? Is it foreign direct investment (FDI)? Is it contract farming? Is it organic farming? The following articles present various scenarios.

On 17 May 2025, the DBHG will hold the Bhutan Day 2025 in Berlin on the topic of 'Agriculture in Bhutan – Towards a sustainable future'.

More at: bhutan-gesellschaft.de/bhutantag-2025

BHUTAN DAY 2025

Saturday, 17 May, Dharma Mati Centre Berlin

(General assembly for members 16 May)

**Topic: Agriculture in Bhutan –
Towards a sustainable future**



100% foreign investment authorised in the agricultural sector

(ih) Source: KUENSEL, 30 August 2024



Photos: PM's Office

At the Bhutan Agrifood Trade and Investment Forum (BATIF), the government announced that 100% of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the agricultural sector is allowed. Investors are particularly sought after for mandarins, quinoa, rainbow trout, black pepper, asparagus and strawberries. Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay emphasised the need to invest in modern technologies and climate-friendly approaches. Agriculture Minister Younten Phuntsho emphasised that innovation, technology and sustainable practices are crucial to realising Bhutan's vision of an efficient, market-oriented agricultural system.

Framework and opportunities

A solid macropolitical framework should include sustainable agriculture, food security and economic prosperity. Industry Minister Namgyal Dorji emphasised that investment will empower farmers and that the employment of foreign workers will be unrestricted. However, Dr Tshering Samdrup warns in his dissertation that new technologies must be thoroughly evaluated before adoption to ensure that they actually promote local employment and equal market opportunities. ■

BATIF '24 showcases Bhutan's entrepreneurial spirit

(ih) Source: KUENSEL, 18 May 2024



Photos: KUENSEL

The Bhutan AgriFood Trade Investment Forum (BATIF) was organised by the Ministry of Agriculture in collaboration with international partners including FAO, the EU and the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry from 15 to 19 May 2024. 40 entrepreneurs presented new products, including cordyceps tea, organic tea, worm compost, processed cheese, agarwood products, coffee seedlings and cherries.

BATIF provides a platform for policymakers, entrepreneurs and investors to showcase investment opportunities, particularly for foreign investors and development banks. The Minister announced an easing of land-use regulations, including longer lease periods and greater access to government land for long-term leases.

There are currently two foreign direct investments in the agricultural sector:

- Mountain Hazelnut Venture works with 8,000 smallholder farmers in 19 districts.
- Druk Metho, an EU-certified organic farm, exports edible flowers to Europe. ■

Editor's note: Terra Himalaya is another example of foreign direct investment, a spin-off of Primavera Life, a company based in the Allgäu region of Germany. Read more here: primaveralife.com/qualitaet/bio-anbaupartner/terra-himalaya-bhutan





Agrotourism initiatives launched

(ih) Source: KUENSEL, 18 May 2024

Agritourism plays a central role in Bhutan in promoting self-sufficiency, reducing emissions and sustainability. Since 2009, Bhutan has been committed to climate-friendly agriculture (CSA), in line with national strategies such as the National Adaptation Plan (NAP), the NDCs and the Low-Emission Development Strategy (LEDS). According to Chencho Norbu, former director of the Asian Forest Organisation Cooperation (AFoCO), 76% of farmers use traditional methods, while only 24% of land is mechanised. He emphasised that climate change adaptation measures must be integrated into national plans and budgets before financing initiatives are launched.

Bhutan as a destination for sustainable tourism

The Director General of the Ministry of Tourism, Damcho Rinzin, explained that 80% of visitors to Bhutan are willing to pay more for local products. Ernest Bethe of the International Finance Corporation expressed interest in investing in commercially viable agricultural projects in Bhutan. ■

Feeding the nation sustainably.

(ih) Source: Business Bhutan, 5 September 2024

(ih) Migration and its consequences are a challenge for the success of the plans of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food:

Objectives of the 13th Five-Year Plan

The Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MoAL) aims to increase the agricultural sector's share of GDP from Nu. 31 billion (€342 million) in 2023 to Nu. 50 billion (€552 million) by 2029. The focus is on commercialisation and empowerment of smallholder farmers.

Rural migration and abandoned households

According to the Good Governance Committee (GGC), there are almost 6,000 abandoned households (Gung-tong), 75% of which are in six eastern Dzongkhags, while districts such as Thimphu and Paro are hardly affected.

Shrinking agricultural land

Between 2010 and 2019, the area under cultivation decreased by 7,000 hectares (10%) due to irrigation problems, wildlife conflicts and labour shortages. Forecasts predict that Bhutan will be a predominantly urban population by 2037.

Decline in rice production

In 2019, 8,958 hectares of wetlands were abandoned, with a loss of 14,322.5 tonnes of rice per year. Between 2017 and 2022, rice production fell by 50%, while rice imports rose to US\$3 billion (€33.4 million) in 2023. Self-sufficiency in rice fell from 40.8% (2018) to 25% (2022). ■

Do we believe in agriculture?

(ih) Source: Editorial, KUENSEL, 17 May 2024

Agriculture, with its potential and its importance, took a back seat.

In order to revive the country's agricultural sector, the government has declared its intention to allow 100 per cent foreign direct investment into the agricultural sector. The idea behind this is that Bhutan needs to invest in modern technologies and adopt climate-friendly approaches to improve agriculture in Bhutan.

Agriculture is the backbone of the country. At least that is what we were taught in school – including today's policymakers. Agriculture, with all its potential and importance, took a back seat when we started looking for new opportunities in mining, importing, and more recently in artificial intelligence, cryptocurrency, etc.

Market opportunities and challenges

It is good to stop and think about our potential. Agriculture, which has been the mainstay of our economy, is getting the recognition it deserves. Agriculture is a boring topic that does not appeal to the Tik-Tok generation at all, but it is what little Bhutan is known for. If there is one potential, it is agriculture, if we know how to produce and market.

Agriculture employs most people, but there isn't much that benefits the masses. If we can improve the sector and move it forward, we can make a difference. Agriculture in Bhutan is mostly subsistence farming, with farmers growing crops for their own needs and selling the small surplus as cash income.

The brand, whether Himalaya or Mountain Fresh, sells in a world where consumers have become more aware. For example, Bhutanese asparagus is

sold in the posh neighbourhoods of New Delhi for 500 rupees (€5.50) per bunch. They are not bothered by the price. They know that it is fresh and organic and comes from Bhutan. If marketing gurus could convince consumers that our asparagus is watered with fresh Himalayan snow water, the price could triple.

Investment and the future of agriculture

The Trade and Investment Forum for the Agricultural and Food Industry (BATIF) is a platform for recognising the potential of our agricultural products. We need investment in agriculture, in mechanisation, in sustainable agriculture. However, the framework





conditions must be right for this. If farmers become tired of agriculture because, for example, they have to protect their water supply or repel wild animals, many will look for alternatives. Foreign direct investment can work to some extent. Involving the farmers – at international conferences or fora – could make a difference. We suspect that it is not about favouring a few business people at the expense of hard-working farmers?

The Punakha-Wangdue Valley, not far from the capital, has enormous agricultural potential. From organic avocados to broccoli, almost anything can be produced in these fertile valleys with the right technology. However, what is decided at gala dinners or

major trade fairs often does not reach the producers and farmers.

Today, there are only a handful of clever business people who know what could work for the brand Bhutan. There are hardly any initiatives that address Bhutanese farmers. While we talk about converting to organic farming, every year farmers complain about the lack of water to irrigate their fields.

Decades after we made food self-sufficiency a national priority, we have become so dependent on imports that it is cheaper for farmers to buy than to produce. This is a disgrace for agriculture-based Bhutan. ■

Production of major crops is declining slightly.

(ih) Source: KUENSEL, 12 July 2024



Photo: bhutan.travel

In 2023, grain production fell by 2% to 68,786 tonnes. Punakha, Paro and Wangdue provided 30% of the total, with Punakha leading the way with 7,971 tonnes, mainly rice. Maize dominates in the east, while buckwheat, wheat, millet, barley and quinoa play a lesser role.

Vegetables and tubers slightly increased

Vegetable production increased slightly to 26,825 tonnes. The most popular varieties were pumpkin, cabbage, cauliflower, chilis, broccoli and beans. Tubers such as potatoes, cassava and ground apple reached 38,327 tonnes, mainly in Wangdue, Paro and Chukha.

Fruit and nut production stable

Bhutan harvested 42,780 tonnes of fruit, including 34,895 tonnes of apples, mandarins and areca nuts. Paro is the leading producer of apples, Samtse and Sarpang of areca nuts, while Dagan and Tsirang dominate mandarin production. ■

Coexistence with elephants – solutions sought

(ih) Source: KUENSEL, 28 August 2024



Photo: The Bhutanese

For decades, gewogs like Tashichhoeling in Samtse have been struggling with the human-elephant conflict. In 2020, 155 cases were reported, but according to forestry officials, the number of unreported cases is significantly higher. The spread of human settlements along the Bhutanese-Indian border is exacerbating the situation.

The forestry department in Samtse is now planning measures to provide a safe habitat for both humans and elephants. Protective fences, water points in the forests, grassland enrichment, fruit plantations and salt licks are to keep the elephants away from the farms. ‘Our goal is to transform conflicts into coexistence,’ says Kuenley Gyeltshen.

Challenges for the community

The Quick Reaction Team (QRT) with 50 volunteers was set up, but is often inactive. Lack of support and resources make the work difficult. Proposals such as physical walls fail due to the budget and could affect other wildlife.

Farmers also suffer: elephants destroy crops and houses and endanger safety. Many farmers have already abandoned their fertile land. It is particularly dangerous for children on their way to school. A solution is urgently needed. ■

‘Million Fruit Trees’ bears fruit

(ih) Source: KUENSEL, 9 July 2024



Photo: bhutan.travel

In Sarpang, farmers are benefiting from the ‘Million Fruit Trees’ initiative. Garja Man Rai from Woongchilo Chiwog has been growing mangoes, bananas and avocados on 2,000 square metres since 2022. ‘Last year, only four mango trees bore fruit; this year there are 30,’ he says optimistically. Other villagers are also enjoying fresh fruit for the first time, instead of imported goods.

Hope for better marketing

However, marketing remains a challenge. So far, smaller quantities have been sold, for example to the former Gyalsung Food Security Site. With the planned Gelephu Mindfulness City, the farmers hope for greater demand.

Expansion of the project continues

The project is being continued: 2,260 trees have already been planted in the Tareythang Gewog, with a further 50,000 to follow in the third phase. Depending on the altitude, almonds, pecans, walnuts, tangerines, avocados or macadamia nuts will be distributed. Dragon fruit, coffee and black pepper are also to be cultivated. ‘Marketing will be challenging at first, but that will change,’ says the Sarpang agriculture officer. ■



Photo: BBS

Growing without soil: Kinley Wangmo’s pioneering work in hydroponics

(ih) Source: BBS, 8 April 2024

In Bhutan, hydroponics – the cultivation of plants without soil in a nutrient-rich water solution – is still largely unknown. But Kinley Wangmo has made it her mission to establish this innovative method in the country. With her vision of promoting resource-efficient and sustainable farming methods, she could revolutionise agriculture in Bhutan.

New approaches in agriculture

The advantages of hydroponics are promising: lower water consumption, higher yields and the possibility of growing crops regardless of soil quality and climate. Kinley is applying hydroponics in the capital city with her company Bhutan Hydroponics. Her goal is to spread knowledge, develop technical solutions and inspire farmers to adopt this forward-looking method.

While traditional agriculture faces challenges such as limited arable land and climate fluctuations, hydroponics could offer a sustainable alternative. Kinley Wangmo is convinced that innovation is the key to a resilient and productive agriculture in Bhutan – and she is determined to drive this change. ■

Increase in local meat production

(ih) Source: KUENSEL, 31 August 2024



Photo: bhutan.travel

Bhutan imports large quantities of meat, which has a negative impact on the trade deficit. In 2023, imports amounted to 3.691 billion Nu (almost 40 million euros), while exports only amounted to 0.5 million euros. The Ministry of Agriculture is therefore planning to increase domestic production through large-scale enterprises.

More chicken and pork

The production of chicken meat is to be increased from 1,165 to 2,000 tonnes in five years. Large chicken farms are being built in Tsirang, Samdrupjongkhar and Samtse for this purpose. Chicken processing plants in Samtse and Dagana will ensure distribution. Pork production is also to be expanded. Plans include fattening farms in Dagana, Sarpang, Samtse and Samdrupjongkhar, as well as an artificial insemination programme. African swine fever remains a challenge.

Fish production and infrastructure

Fish production is to be increased from 43 to 250 million tonnes. Innovative techniques such as Bio-Floc fish farming are designed to save water. Closed fish farms are being reactivated, and new large-scale farms are being built in Dagana and Samdrupjongkhar. Cold chains for pork and the revitalisation of fish ponds are also planned. These measures are designed to improve the supply of meat and reduce imports. ■

Dragon fruit: an alternative with a future

(ih) Source: KUENSEL, 26 August 2024



Photo: pexels.com

In Samtse, a former wetland has been transformed into a thriving dragon fruit farm. The Kaushik Dragon Fruit Farm in the village of Singyegang covers 3,000 square metres, where 3,000 plants – both white- and red-leaved varieties – thrive on 734 trellises. Behind the farm is Khara Nanda Sharma, a 69-year-old retired farmer who founded the farm in 2022 with an investment of 1.83 million Nu (approx. €20,000).

Opportunities and challenges

After six months, Sharma had brought in the first harvest and sold fruit worth 150,000 Nu (about 1,600 €). The red variety fetches 400 Nu (4.40 €) per kilo, the white 250 Nu (2.80 €). For the time being, he is selling locally and hopes to establish a cooperation with the Food Corporation Bhutan.

Despite the challenges, Sharma is committed to sustainable agriculture. He is creating ideal conditions by using organic fertiliser, growing citrus fruits, avocados and legumes to improve the soil. Barbed wire keeps the elephants away. His goal is for each plant to bear up to 35 kilograms of fruit per season in the future – a sweet vision for Bhutan's agriculture. ■

Financing for tiger conservation

(rw) Source: Daily Bhutan, 24 April 2024

A conference entitled ‘Sustainable Finance for Tiger Landscapes’ took place in Bhutan on 22 and 23 April 2024 under the royal patronage of Her Majesty Queen Jetsun Pema Wangchuck. Experts, donor countries and NGOs came together to discuss sustainable financing models for the protection of tiger landscapes on the occasion of Earth Day 2024. The aim is to mobilise one billion US dollars over the next ten years for the conservation of these ecosystems – which are essential for biodiversity, climate protection and the livelihoods of over 100 million people.



Photo: undp.org

Innovative financing strategies for the protection of biodiversity

The conference, organised by the government of Bhutan and the Tiger Conservation Coalition, highlighted various financing approaches: expert panels discussed public-private partnerships, sustainable investments and the link to the global UN biodiversity framework. Participants developed solutions to secure tiger habitats in the long term. ■



Photo: undp.org

From water scarcity to prosperity



(rw) Source: KUENSEL, 27 April 2024

Now, after years of water scarcity, Matalungchu in Wangdue has a reliable water supply. Every house has its own tap, and water conflicts are a thing of the past.

Prospects for agriculture and the environment

The project, funded by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment through the International Climate Initiative (IKI), will run until 2026 and cover six districts, including Wangdue. The improved water supply will enable 150 hectares of arable land to be used more efficiently, increasing the cultivation of rice, vegetables and mustard oil, facilitating debt relief and reducing the rural exodus. The environment will also benefit. In the past, the water pumping process disturbed the habitat of the white-bellied heron. Now the ecosystem remains intact. ■

The labour market challenge:

Bhutan faces a growing challenge: a lack of qualified employment opportunities is driving many young people abroad – in addition to Australia, increasingly also to Europe and Germany. This brain drain endangers Bhutan's long-term economic development. The German Bhutan Himalaya Society is aware of this problem and will align its work accordingly to support sustainable solutions.

Energy, budget policy and economic development

A central issue remains the energy supply. While hydropower is the dominant energy source, it becomes a challenge during the dry winter months. Photovoltaics could help here – an area in which the EU and the EIB are cooperating with Bhutan.

The new government's budgetary policy also plays an important role. Targeted economic stimulus packages are designed to boost growth. To make the figures more tangible, we have used the exchange rate 1:90 (annual average) to convert from Ngultrum (Nu.) to euros.

Australia: Tough reality test for Bhutanese

(ud) Source: *The Bhutanese*, 13 April 2024



Photo: Unsplash

Though immigration numbers have been reduced, many Bhutanese continue to flock to Australia, while Canada and the United Kingdom are also tightening their visa requirements. However, the dream of a better life often turns out to be challenging: strict working time restrictions, high rents and rising living costs make it difficult to get established. Many students struggle for months to find poorly paid jobs and can often only finance their tuition fees with the support of local partners.

Long-term emigration and economic consequences

For Bhutan itself, one thing is clear: the majority will not return. A lack of jobs and prospects in their own country is causing more and more Bhutanese to transfer their savings abroad, sell property in Bhutan and bring their families over. While highly skilled migrants leave, less skilled workers in the Middle East will transfer money in the long term and later return with new skills. Germany is emerging as a new destination country, but without knowledge of German, job opportunities also remain limited. ■

Search for alternatives in the EU

(ud) Source: KUENSEL, 18 May 2024



Photo: Unsplash

With Australia tightening its immigration rules, interest in the EU as a new migration destination is growing. While concrete figures are lacking, success stories of visa applicants are piling up. Consultancy firms are increasingly promoting Europe, though it remains unclear whether the Australian changes actually affect Bhutanese nationals to a significant extent. The EU offers opportunities for Bhutanese, but also presents challenges: IELTS language tests, high tuition fees and limited working hours. Some countries are attracting with less stringent requirements and lower costs, making the region increasingly attractive.

Consultants and misinformation

The boom in European emigration destinations is leading to strong competition among consulting firms. Experts warn against misinformation, as exaggerated promises could create false expectations. Without clear government regulation, the risk remains high.

Malta as a new hotspot?

Malta is gaining in importance: a small group of Bhutanese received their visas in 35 days, with job opportunities in 27 EU countries and comparatively low tuition fees. However, critics emphasise that living and working in the EU is often more difficult than in Australia. The trend is also reflected in the DV lottery: the number of Bhutanese with visas rose from 115 (2023) to 347 (2024) – Europe is becoming a new prospect for many. ■

Misinformation as a risk

(ud) Source: KUENSEL, 25 May 2024

With Australia tightening its visa regulations, many consulting firms are now increasingly promoting the EU as an alternative. However, while some continue to promote Australia as a destination, others are intensively promoting Europe – often with contradictory messages. This lack of clarity is unsettling Bhutanese people seeking emigration. According to Palden Tshering, chairman of the Association of Bhutanese Education Consultations (ABEC), there are no objective criteria for assessing the success rate of visa applications. Many companies claim to be the ‘best’, but students should check whether a company is registered in Bhutan and a member of ABEC. Reputable consulting firms provide neutral information about study opportunities – without making false promises.

Europe as an alternative – but not necessarily easier

Countries like the EU, the UK, New Zealand and Ireland are considered as possible alternatives to Australia, but are not necessarily easier. Each destination country has its own requirements, including language certificates, financial requirements and labour laws. Students should inform themselves and ask the right questions before relying on promises.

Limits of advice

There are currently 80 education consultancy firms registered in Bhutan, 79 of which are ABEC members. Their role is limited to study counselling – they are not allowed to promote migration or permanent employment. According to Tshering, there are no special agreements in place that facilitate the visa process. Students should therefore pay attention to correct information and transparent communication. ■

EIB promotes renewable energies, start-ups, mobility & wastewater disposal in Bhutan.

(ud) Source: KUENSEL, 29 October 2024

The Vice President of the European Investment Bank (EIB), Nicola Beer, spoke to KUENSEL reporter Thukten Zangpo about the EIB's support for Bhutan.



Photo: BBS

The European Investment Bank (EIB) was established in 1958 and is the lending arm of the European Union. It is a multilateral development bank and one of the largest providers of climate finance. This is the first time that an EIB Vice President has visited Bhutan. What is the purpose of your visit?

We are the European Union (EU) bank, with the 27 member states as shareholders. As the EU Climate Bank, we are dedicated to green financing,

climate action and climate adaptation projects. Bhutan is a very special partner for us as it is one of the world's best climate role models and a carbon-negative country. This makes Bhutan the perfect partner to finance projects that support the country's climate goals and sustainable economic development.

Bhutan and the EIB recently signed an initial project for a 30-year loan of €150 million to release an estimated 310 MW of new renewable energy generation as part of the EU's Global Gateway initiative. How do you think this will help Bhutan with its energy challenges during the low season, especially in winter?

The EIB signed the loan with the Government of the Kingdom of Bhutan, through the Ministry of Finance, and will provide EUR 150 million to the Druk Green Power Corporation (DGPC) as the project promoter. The project pipeline consists mainly of small and medium-sized run-of-river and solar

photovoltaic plants that will diversify the country's renewable energy sources and address the adverse effects of climate change. In addition to the loan, the EIB will also provide €3.1 million for technical assistance.

Bhutan is rich in water and solar resources and has sufficient electricity during the summer and autumn months, but generating electricity from hydropower in winter is challenging due to a lack of water. We are here to help Bhutan increase solar power generation to fill the gap in winter. The project is expected to start with solar power because it can be installed quickly. We have already visited sites where the government of the Kingdom of Bhutan is testing various solar technologies. Installing solar panels would be beneficial for Bhutanese people and would help increase energy access for households in remote areas.

What were the talks with the ministries and agencies in Bhutan about?

We had fruitful discussions with Prime Minister Tsering Tobgay, as well as with ministers and state secretaries from the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport, the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests.

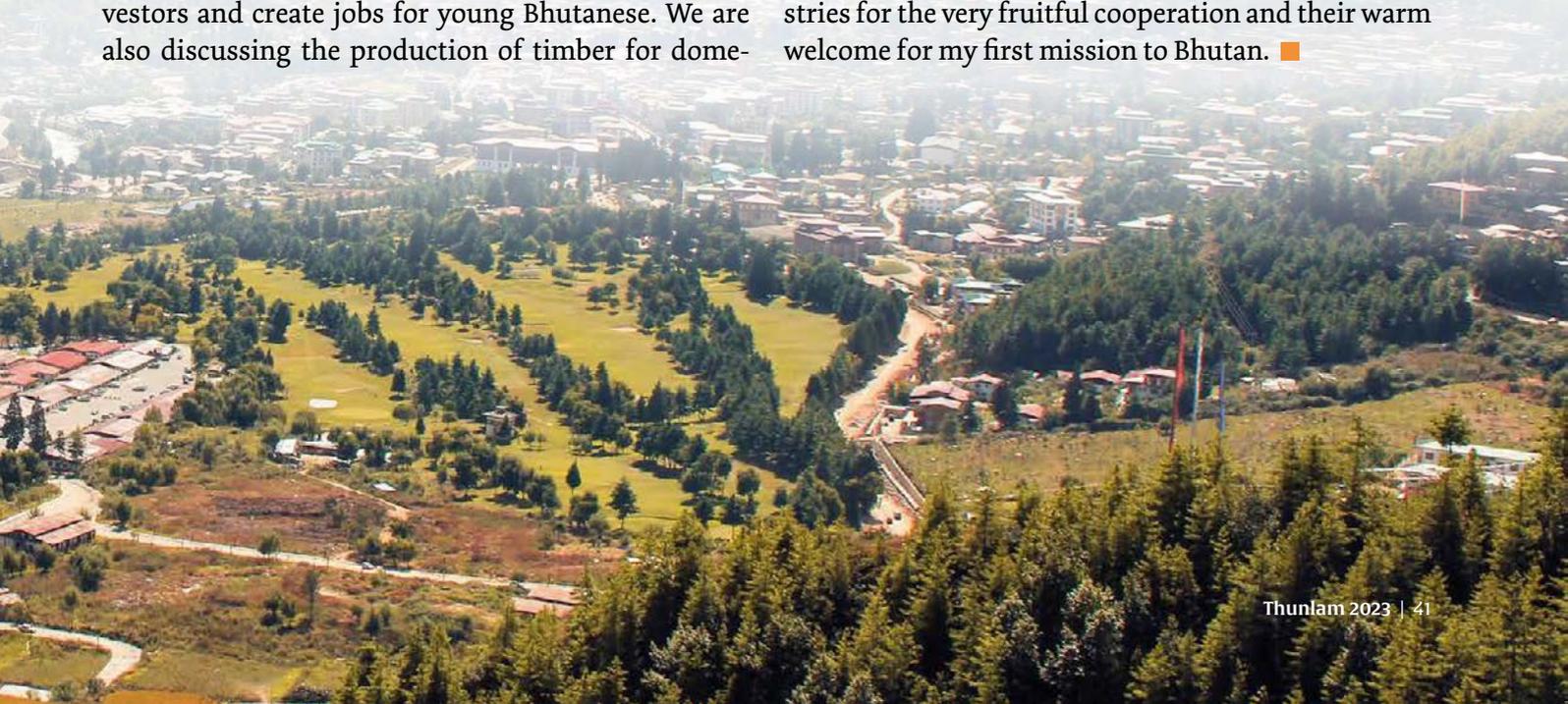
We are also exploring cooperation with the government of the Kingdom of Bhutan and the private sector in other sustainable projects, including the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC). This is an interesting project that combines innovation, technology, finance and mindfulness to attract international private investors and create jobs for young Bhutanese. We are also discussing the production of timber for dome-

stic construction and export. Other financing options such as access to water, wastewater treatment, urban development in mobility and the energy grid were also discussed. During the meetings with the Ministry of Finance, the Druk Green Power Corporation (DGPC) and Druk Holding and Investments (DHI), we considered possible solutions using various financial products that would boost the private sector.

What other investment opportunities can Bhutan take advantage of with the EIB?

We aim to be a long-term strategic partner for Bhutan in both the public and private sectors. The EIB Group can help Bhutan connect with private investors and can also support innovative companies, from startups and SMEs to large companies, whether through the European Investment Bank or the European Investment Fund. A wide range of financing solutions are possible here, including equity, venture capital, loans and guarantees. In addition, the EIB can help to bring together creative entrepreneurs from Bhutan and Europe to develop new technologies that are in line with the GMC's vision of combining innovative technologies with mindfulness, environmental protection and sustainability.

In terms of GMC, we have discussed with the CEO of Druk Holding and Investment (DHI) the possibility of setting up a fund and identifying projects for investment, as well as other ways of providing venture capital. We are also interested in the agricultural sector, where Bhutan has a master plan for exporting organic food. I would like to express my warm thanks to the government of the Kingdom of Bhutan and its ministries for the very fruitful cooperation and their warm welcome for my first mission to Bhutan. ■



Government sets ambitious FDI target of 500 billion

(ud) Source: BBS, 27 April 2024

Bhutan is raising its target for foreign direct investment (FDI) to Nu 500 billion (around 5.6 billion euros) – a significant increase from the previous target of Nu 100 billion (around 1.1 billion euros). To achieve this goal, the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Employment is revising the FDI policy for 2019.

During the ‘Meet the Press’ meeting, Minister Namgyal Dorji explained that the private sector will be involved in the revision process.

New priorities and measures to promote investment

The revised policy is intended to address investment obstacles such as foreign exchange regulations, payment gateways and immigration regulations. The priority sectors will also be reviewed. So far, the focus is on agriculture, forestry, education, IT services, hospitality, tourism and mining.

‘These areas are being evaluated and we are considering expanding to other investment areas, which will be presented in a detailed report,’ said Minister Dorji. The aim is to promote economic growth, create jobs, attract capital and technology to the country and strengthen foreign exchange reserves.

In addition, the ministry is developing an online portal that will provide investors with comprehensive information. Furthermore, Bhutan is seeking membership of the World Association of Investment Promotion Agencies (WAIPA), which networks investment promotion agencies worldwide. ■



Bhutan launches economic programme with India's support

(ud) Source: BBS, 18 May 2024



Premier Tshering Tobgay has launched the Nu 15 billion (approx. 170 million euros) Economic Stimulus Programme. The Indian government is fully financing the programme and has already released a first tranche of Nu 2.5 billion (27.8 million euros).

The programme provides immediate economic relief, creates jobs and promotes entrepreneurship. Despite the efforts to recover from the pandemic, the economy of Bhutan remains fragile, the Prime Minister emphasised. Of particular concern are the high unemployment, increasing emigration and the slow recovery of the tourism sector.

Loans, training & tourism incentives

The programme offers low-interest loans for farmers, start-ups, companies in need, training and home ownership. Planned measures include the promotion of the film industry and journalism, tourism through night markets and new attractions, Bhutan festivals in India, and new flight connections to key markets. A Cabinet Secretariat will coordinate the implementation. India's Ambassador Sudhakar Dalela emphasised that the programme will stabilise Bhutan's economy and put it on a growth path. ■

13th five-year plan: transformation to a high-wage economy

(ud) Source: KUENSEL, 14 June 2024

With a budget of 51.28 billion Nu (approx. 5.7 billion euros), Bhutan's 13th five-year plan is the largest to date – an increase of 63% over its predecessor.



Photo: Business Bhutan

The goal: to transform Bhutan into a high-wage economy by 2029 and achieve a gross domestic product (GDP) of USD 5 billion through innovation and sustainable development.

Finance Minister Lekey Dorji told parliament that 456.34 billion Nu (5.07 billion euros) would come from available resources, while 55.93 billion Nu (0.62 billion euros) would be covered by deficit financing. Domestic revenues are expected to contribute Nu 327.34 billion (3.64 billion euros), while Nu 125 billion (1.39 billion euros) will come from grants.

Economic growth through strategic investments

To achieve the targeted economic growth, Bhutan is focusing on increasing productivity, diversifying markets and developing strategic sectors. Investment spending will amount to 245 billion Nu (2.72 billion euros) and will be financed by revenue surpluses (24.5%), grants (51%) and external and domestic loans (24.5%).

Current expenditure amounts to Nu 267.28 billion (€2.97 billion) and covers salaries, allowances and interest payments on hydropower loans. Despite the planned debt, the government aims to reduce the external debt ratio from 92.9% to 78.5% of GDP.

Bhutan's international commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), environmental and human rights conventions, are integrated into the plan. Key measures also include promoting governance through digital infrastructure, data-based policy and citizen-oriented approaches.

Focus on social development and resilience

In addition to economic goals, Bhutan is investing heavily in the social sector:

- Healthcare: expansion of services and equal access.
- Education: expansion of opportunities and strengthening of vocational training.
- Social protection: introduction of a comprehensive security system.

The plan also focuses on disaster risk management, protection of critical infrastructure and strengthening national security. At the same time, Bhutan's cultural identity is to be promoted and the country's global reputation strengthened. With this ambitious plan, Bhutan is emphasising its strategy of creating a resilient and prosperous future through sustainable innovation and targeted investments. ■

Commercial real estate in Thimphu: vacancies and lost revenue

(ud) Source: *The Bhutanese*; 13 July 2024



Photos: The Bhutanese

Commercial properties in Thimphu are struggling with vacancies and up to 70% drops in revenue. Owners are struggling with loans, while demand is falling and competition is growing.

Namgay Dorji has experienced a vacancy lasting several months for the first time in 15 years. In the past, tenants could be found in a week. Loans prevent rent reductions, some owners are considering selling. Despite rent reductions at O Plaza, demand remains weak, and many pay late. The market is worse than ever, says manager Nima Lhamo.

Companies under pressure

Shop owners are facing major challenges: Tashi, a mobile phone and shoe retailer, is facing a rent increase to 36,500 Nu (€406) and declining profits. Textile retailer Tashi Wangmo is losing customers to cheaper markets and online shops. Grocer Pema is struggling with rising rents and falling sales. Fashion retailer Leki Choden is experiencing the worst slump in 20 years – 90% less sales.

While many shops are closing, some sectors such as hardware stores and shops for religious articles are holding steady. But for most, the situation remains tense. ■

Industry as Bhutan's economic engine

(ud) Source: *KUENSEL*, 17 August 2024



Photo: Bhutan Times

With a 50 per cent share of the gross domestic product, industry is a mainstay of the Bhutanese economy. In 2023, the sector generated 124.69 billion Ngultrum (1.39 billion euros). Medium and large enterprises made the largest contribution with 46 per cent, while micro and small enterprises contributed 3.96 per cent. Sole proprietorships dominate with a share of 95.91 per cent. The sector employs 76,768 people, 91 per cent of whom are Bhutanese.

Challenges and strategies for growth

Namgyal Dorji, Minister for Industry and Labour, sees an urgent need for action, as many companies struggle with market access (42 per cent), financing (33.5 per cent) and a lack of skilled workers (17.3 per cent). The government plans to double the number of jobs over the next five years. Tax breaks and targeted support measures are intended to strengthen small businesses. In addition, political decisions are needed to make industry more competitive and ensure sustainable growth. ■

Hydropower is the key to the economic future

(ud) Source: Business Bhutan, 21 July 2024



Photo: Renewable Energy World

Hydropower is the most important source of income and strategic resource in Bhutan. It ensures economic growth, stabilises the national budget and increases energy security. The government is therefore planning massive investments to complete ongoing projects and launch new initiatives. The aim is not only to expand the energy infrastructure, but also to promote industrial development and a diversified economy. The focus is on the completion of the major projects Punatsangchhu-I (1,200 MW) and Punatsangchhu-II (1,020 MW). In addition, new hydropower plants are to be built to increase electricity production and integrate modern energy storage systems.

Infrastructure expansion and sustainable development

The 13th Five-Year Plan envisages not only new power plants but also the modernisation of infrastructure to keep the sector efficient and competitive in the long term. This will ensure that hydropower remains not only a source of income but also a central element of national economic policy. These measures are designed to make the hydropower sector in Bhutan resilient and future-proof, with the aim of achieving a stable energy supply and sustainable economic development. ■

Drukair is expanding its fleet and international route network

(ud) Source: KUENSEL, 26 July 2024

Bhutan's national airline Drukair is investing in new Airbus aircraft to expand its international route network. On 22 July, Drukair signed a letter of intent with Airbus at the Farnborough Airshow to purchase three A320neo and two A321XLR aircraft. The new aircraft are scheduled for delivery from 2030 and will open up new destinations in Europe, Southeast Asia and Australia. Drukair will in future operate not only from Paro International Airport, but also from the planned Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) International Airport. CEO Tandi Wangchuk explained that the fleet expansion coincides with the development of GMC and the expansion of Gelephu Airport.

Sustainable growth with Airbus

Drukair currently operates four Airbus aircraft and flies to nine international destinations. With the new aircraft, the airline is focusing on greater range, higher efficiency and lower emissions. Airbus CEO Benoît de Saint-Exupéry emphasised the long-standing partnership: 'Our new aircraft will be a crucial part of the next chapter in Bhutan's development. With this investment, Drukair is not only strengthening its global connectivity, but also its economic future. ■



Photo: Bhutan Times

Bhutan's Bitcoin assets exceed \$1 billion

(ud) Source: KUENSEL, 18 November 2024

With the latest sale, Bhutan is the fifth most popular country worldwide for Bitcoin owners, after the United States, China, the United Kingdom and Ukraine.

Bhutan sold 367 Bitcoin (BTC) worth \$33.5 million on 14 November via the cryptocurrency exchange Binance. This is the second major sale in a few weeks, after BTC worth \$100 million had already been sold. The Bitcoin price was recently over \$90,000 per BTC.

Druk Holding and Investments (DHI), the state-owned company that manages Bhutan's Bitcoin holdings, continues to hold 12,206 BTCs worth \$1.11 billion – about 35 per cent of Bhutan's 2023 GDP. This makes Bhutan one of the five largest Bitcoin holders worldwide.

Video: crypto investments in Bhutan



Bitcoin mining with hydropower

Unlike many other countries that hold Bitcoin from confiscated assets, Bhutan relies on green mining with hydropower. Since 2019, the country has been operating mining facilities at several locations, including the former Education City project. Bitcoin's production costs depend on various factors, including electricity prices and infrastructure costs. The fourth Bitcoin halving in April 2024 reduced the block reward for miners to 3,125 BTC. By 2028, it will fall further to 1,5625 BTC.

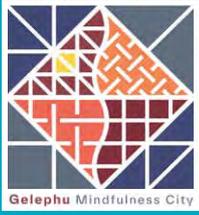
Expansion of mining capacities

Bhutan plans to increase its mining capacity to 600 megawatts by 2025. A key project is the partnership with Bitdeer, a Nasdaq-listed company. Together, DHI and Bitdeer have invested \$500 million in carbon-free mining facilities. The first 100 MW plant in Gedu will start operating in mid-2023. Another major project with 500 MW in the Jigmeling Industrial Park in Gelephu is to follow in 2025.

Investments weigh on currency reserves

Between July 2021 and June 2023, Bhutan invested 539 million US dollars in Bitcoin mining. According to the World Bank, this led to a decline in foreign exchange reserves from 1.27 billion US dollars in June 2021 to 573 million US dollars in June 2023. In addition, IT imports increased: In 2023, Bhutan purchased IT equipment worth 4 billion Nu (44 million euros), up from 11.91 billion Nu (132 million euros) in 2022. DHI financed this expansion with loans from the Royal Monetary Authority to drive Bhutan's digital transformation. ■





At the beginning of October 2024, the Bhutan Innovation Forum took place in the newly built Dungkhar Dzong near Paro – with 1,300 participants, the largest conference ever in Bhutan. Around 80 speakers, including Nobel Prize winners, discussed central topics of the planned Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC). The contributions were broadcast online worldwide. The following is a summary.

A vision takes shape.

(ud) Source: KUENSEL 2 and 4 October 2024

The Bhutan Innovation Forum (BIF) in early October turned a royal vision into a tangible reality. Since its announcement last December, it was unclear how the ambitious project would be implemented in practice. Many debates revolved around land ownership, economic opportunities and the impact on the population. But now the answers are in: the planned

Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) will be a unique model for sustainable economic and social development.

During the forum, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck appointed the board of the GMC, thus laying the foundation for its implementation. Particular attention was paid to the legal and financial framework. The GMC will adopt proven principles from Singapore and Abu Dhabi to establish a stable legal system and a modern financial structure.

One sign of the international orientation is the cooperation with the Changi Airport Group from Singapore, which is developing the Gelephu International Airport. The economic infrastructure is being revolutionised with the AI-supported Oro Bank and the blockchain currency Ter, which is backed by physical gold – a modern reinterpretation of the gold standard.

Sustainable city for a new Bhutan

GMC is more than an urban development project – it is a redefinition of urban planning in harmony with nature. Agriculture and high-tech innovations are harmoniously combined, modern architecture meets traditional elements. The goal is a ‘just and harmonious’ coexistence of people and ecosystem, which is deeply rooted in the values of Bhutan.

This city will not only be environmentally and economically forward-looking, but will also require a new way of thinking. The GMC embodies the principle of Gross National Happiness and calls for an adaptation to the ‘new Bhutan’, which wants to assert itself in a rapidly changing world. With this visionary project, Bhutan will maintain its unique identity while creating a model for sustainable urban development on a global scale. ■



Video:
the latest master plan
for GMC, designed by
BIG - Bjarke Ingels Group



King Jigme appoints strategic leaders for Gelephu Mindfulness City

(ud) Source: KUENSEL, 2 October 2024

His Majesty, the Chairman of the Board of Directors of GMC, appointed the CEO and other members of the Board of Directors



Photo: GMC

His Majesty the King has appointed Mun Leong Liew as CEO of Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC). As Chairman of the GMC Board of Directors,

he has also appointed other strategic leaders: Joichi 'Joi' Ito, Yee Ean Pang, Seow Hiang Lee, Arun Kapur and Lauren Chung.

These experts will work with Bhutanese partners to establish GMC as a model for sustainable urban development – a city that combines modern infrastructure with Bhutanese values.

Mun Leong Liew is an experienced urban and infrastructure planner who led the construction of the award-winning Jewel Changi Airport in Singapore and built CapitaLand into the largest real estate group in Southeast Asia. He will lead the GMC project strategically, manage investments and develop Bhutanese talent.

Investments, technology and sustainable development

Joichi 'Joi' Ito, Chairman of GIDC, is driving investment in green energy and digital infrastructure. His experience, including as a former director of the MIT Media Lab, makes him a key figure for the economic development of the GIDC. Yee Ean Pang, founder of Urbina Capital and former CEO of Surbana Jurong Capital, manages a portfolio worth USD 6 billion with a focus on renewable energies. He is responsible for the sustainable development of GMC. Seow

Hiang Lee, former CEO of Changi Airport Group, will contribute his expertise in urban development and public-private partnerships to establish GMC as an economic centre.

Education, communication and governance

Arun Kapur, founder of Druk Gyalpo's Institute (DGI), develops training programmes for Bhutanese leaders to strengthen GMC with local talent in the long term.

Lauren Chung, CEO for Asia-Pacific at Teneo and a specialist in international relations and strategic communications, is driving stakeholder engagement and global positioning for the GMC.



Photo: GMC

Governor for GMC

Former Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering was appointed as Governor of Gelephu Mindfulness City. Together with CEO Mun Leong Liew, he steers the city's development in accordance with the values of Bhutan and coordinates infrastructure projects to establish GMC as a model for sustainable growth.

Milestone for Bhutan's future

With this management team, Bhutan is laying the foundation for GMC as an economic centre and a global model for sustainable urban development. Visionary partners are being sought to advance this initiative and usher in a new era of growth. ■



GMC relies on Singaporean law

(ud) Source: KUENSEL, 2 October 2024

Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) adopts the Singaporean legal system as its primary framework to provide a stable foundation for the Special Administrative Region (SAR). Ben Gaw, Executive Director of Legal Affairs at GMC, warns of the uncertainties caused by a completely new legal system. He says that Singapore's proven law offers stability and is used worldwide. 'It makes GMC a safe place for business and strengthens the confidence of investors and residents,' says Gaw.

Step-by-step introduction and adaptation

Phase 1 focuses on company law and court proceedings, supplemented by civil and criminal law provisions to promote a legally secure environment. In Phase 2, tailored arbitration procedures and legislative adjustments will be introduced in collaboration with the business community to balance the growth and needs of the population. GMC also provides for environmentally friendly tax, customs and duty regimes to promote sustainable development.

Efficient implementation through proven frameworks

Governor Dr Lotay Tshering emphasises that Gelephu is able to set its own rules. However, the use of proven international frameworks accelerates the development process. In the long term, the GMC legal system will continue to develop and adapt flexibly to the city's needs – a model of stability and innovation. ■

Blockchain-based currency for GMC

(ud) Source: KUENSEL, 2 October 2024



Photo: Business Bhutan

At the Bhutan Innovation Forum in Paro, Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) presented its new currency, the ter, which means 'treasure' in Dzongkha. According to CFO HoBeng Lim, the ter is based on blockchain technology and is fully backed by physical gold. 'It is a return to the gold standard in a new form,' Lim explained. The aim is to create a financial ecosystem that goes beyond traditional banking and integrates digital assets.

Three principles of regulation

GMC pursues three principles in financial regulation: clarity (clear legal frameworks), co-creation (involving global experts) and customer-first (customer orientation). Bhutan is familiar with digital assets, and GMC plans to link traditional financial structures with crypto and digital technologies. In the long term, GMC aims to establish itself as an international financial hub, with a focus on asset management, digital technology and fund management. ■



Illustration GMC Airport, BIG | bhutan.travel

Crisis in nursing care: health service under pressure

(hm) Source: KUENSEL, 14 May 2024

With 25 per cent of experienced nursing staff leaving the Bhutanese healthcare system, those who remain suffer from a heavy workload.



Photo: Pexels

At the National Referral Hospital, the turnover rate among nursing staff is as high as 30%, which places a considerable additional burden on the staff there.

Appeal by the Minister of Health

At the celebrations for International Nurses Day, the Minister of Health expressed his concern about this development. On behalf of the population, he called on the nursing staff to remain at their workplaces to ensure the functioning of the health system. In recent years, a large number of experienced nurses and

midwives have migrated abroad; he asked them to return to Bhutan to guide younger and less experienced nurses. Only in this way can the necessary services be provided and the quality of health care for the population be ensured. Health Minister Tandin Wangchuk explained that although the number of nurses in the country remains constant at 1,500, increasing patient numbers and growing use of emergency rooms and other services are putting more pressure on nursing staff.

Measures to improve working conditions

Nurses are among the most likely workers in Bhutan to quit their jobs, along with doctors, dentists, medical technicians, pharmacists and other health professionals. The Ministry, through the National Medical Service, is conducting exit interviews with health workers to identify the exact reasons for their departure. Efforts are also being made to improve the working conditions of health workers and create further incentives, for example, by introducing overtime pay and setting out a clear career path.

Recruitment of foreign specialists

The International Nurses Day is a day to honour the tireless efforts of nurses. The Royal Civil Service Commission has approved the recruitment of 145 foreign nurses for the National Referral Hospital to address the acute shortage. In addition, the recruitment of three foreign anaesthetists has been approved. More local nursing staff are to be recruited over the course of the year to close the gap of currently 700 nursing staff. These are needed to ensure high-quality care. The relevant department of the Ministry of Health hopes to win back retired nurses and care workers by employing them on a contract basis. ■

Growing interest in Sowa Rigpa (traditional medicine)

(hm) Source: KUENSEL, 22 May 2024

First national Sorig conference



Photo: bhutan.travel

During the 1st National Sorig Conference in May 2024, the integration of traditional and modern medicine was discussed. Experts called for closer collaboration between the National Traditional Medicine Hospital and modern hospitals, so that patients can benefit from joint approaches.

Research into the effectiveness and safety of traditional healing methods

A key problem is the lack of comprehensive data and studies on the effectiveness of Sowa Rigpa. The safety and efficacy of combining traditional and modern medicines must be researched so that combined therapies can be used sensibly. Clinical studies, joint research, safety and quality studies, and formal exchange channels should promote integration.

Growing demand through training and specialised services

Growing public interest in Sowa Rigpa is also fuelled by new training programmes, including a three-year master's degree, and expanded therapy services, such as care packages for older patients and palliative

care. Some traditional treatments have already been integrated into the health system to address non-communicable diseases such as hypertension and diabetes. Courses have been developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Education to encourage interest in the therapeutic professions.

Structure of the traditional medicine sector

Bhutan's traditional medicine sector comprises 80 units, the National Traditional Medicine Hospital (NTMH), a faculty established in 1971, and the Menjong Sorig Pharmaceutical Corporation. The number of patients is steadily increasing - in 2023, 234,145 visits were recorded.

Successful treatment of chronic diseases

The National Hospital for Traditional Medicine (NTMH), founded during the reigns of the 2nd and 3rd kings, is rooted in Sowa Rigpa and is valued as an alternative to conventional medicine. It is effective for chronic illnesses such as arthritis, respiratory and skin diseases, as well as mental illnesses. Practitioners undergo rigorous training in diagnostic and therapeutic techniques, as well as in the use of natural remedies.

Opportunities for economic development and health care provision

Bhutan's natural resources, the growing number of potential skilled workers and the increasing demand for traditional health care provision offer opportunities to expand this sector and to promote economic development through investment. Improving infrastructure in hospitals is of crucial importance. The coexistence of traditional and modern medicine offers a unique opportunity to improve the health of the population. ■

Worrying study on chronic illnesses

(hm) Source: KUENSEL, 28 January 2024



Photo: Unsplash

Anationwide health screening by the Ministry of Health shows alarming results in relation to non-communicable diseases. The data collected in November and December 2024 shows an increased risk of high blood pressure, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and, in particular, obesity. People with elevated blood pressure, blood sugar and BMI values were referred to hospitals for further diagnosis. The 2023 National Health Survey had already shown a significant increase in these conditions.

Growing health risk due to changing lifestyles

Risk factors for these diseases include tobacco and alcohol consumption, lack of exercise and unhealthy eating habits. Health Minister Tandin Wangchuk emphasises that with increasing development, the population is becoming less active and unhealthy eating habits are on the rise. This favours heart disease, strokes, cancer, diabetes and chronic lung disease. The results of the screenings are intended to raise awareness of these health risks. ■

Declining birth rate

(hm) Source: KUENSEL, 2 August 2024



Photo: bhutan.travel

The birth rate in Bhutan, which was 6.6 births per woman in 1971, has dropped to 2.0 births per woman. This is below the replacement level of 2.1 births per woman needed to maintain a stable population. The Ministry of Health and WHO expect that it will take a concerted effort to raise the birth rate. So far, no country has managed to reverse the trend of a falling birth rate.

Causes: Economic and social factors

Several factors contribute to the low birth rate. High living costs and economic difficulties deter many people from starting a family. In addition, young people postpone starting a family to complete their education and careers. Rural-urban migration and the emigration of young Bhutanese also influence family planning.

Support for families

The government supports families with 10,000 Nu per month (about 111 EUR) for each child under three years of age and promotes childcare programmes. Since June 2023, foreign nannies have been allowed to enter the country to support working parents. Fertility counselling, the establishment of an in vitro fertilisation facility in Thimphu and specialised mother-child clinics are designed to support the desire to have children. ■

Bhutanese cuisine: simplicity, flavour & tradition

By Deki Wangmo, member of the board of DBHG

A culinary journey through authentic flavours, natural ingredients and deep-rooted food culture.

Bhutanese cuisine represents the beauty of simplicity, sustainability and hospitality. Meals are freshly prepared with a few local ingredients and enjoyed together whenever possible.

Less is more: natural flavours through simple preparation

Bhutanese cuisine follows the principle of 'less is more' – simple preparation with a few seasonal ingredients brings out the natural flavours. In the past, food was cooked on an open fire; today it is usually cooked on gas or electric stoves. Rice, chilli and cheese are the basic ingredients of Bhutanese cuisine. Red and white rice from the terraced fields form the basis of most dishes. Almost all dishes contain chilli, seasoned with ginger, garlic and Bhutanese pepper ('tingey').



Vegetarian specialities with datsi and wild vegetables

Vegetarian dishes are usually based on datsi, a local fresh cheese. Popular classics include ema datsi (chilli with cheese), kewa datsi (potatoes with cheese) and hoentsey datsi (mustard leaves with cheese). Fresh wild vegetables such as mushrooms, ferns, orchids and wild asparagus are a particular delicacy and give the dishes a unique flavour.



Hearty meat dishes: shakam, sikam and the popular 'curry'

Meat dishes are usually served in their own juices or with a gravy ('paa'). Shakam (dried beef) and sikam (air-dried pork belly) are particularly popular, either as paa or as a stew with chilli and vegetables. Bhutanese people's mouths water at the sight of succulent shakam and sikam with mustard leaves and red chillies. By the way, in Bhutan, every dish, vegetarian or not, is colloquially called 'curry'.

Aezey: the essential chilli spice

Another important ingredient of Bhutanese cuisine is aezey, a versatile chilli spice made from fresh, dried or ground chillies. It is an integral part of Bhutanese cuisine. Whether as a salsa, sauce or paste, it goes well with any meal, with alcohol or with snacks. Aezey is ubiquitous and indispensable in Bhutan.

Momos and noodle soups: popular snacks for any occasion

We can never get enough of momos, steamed dumplings with various fillings, which are a popular snack served with aezey. Also popular are bathuep and thukpa, savoury noodle soups with pork or beef, seasoned with Bhutanese pepper. They are a warming meal, especially on cool evenings.

Culinary tips: where to find the best traditional dishes

For an authentic experience, visit the small, hidden restaurants where you can get the freshest momos and noodle soups. A typical Bhutanese meal consists of rice with a small bowl of vegetables or meat, often topped off with aezey. Bhutanese people prefer hot meals, even for breakfast. The meal is accompanied by water, butter tea (suja) or milk tea (nga ja), occasionally buttermilk or whey. Desserts are rare in traditional cuisine.



Between tradition and modernity: the future of Bhutanese cuisine

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, eating with your hands and chatting with the family is all part of the Bhutanese dining experience. Despite international influences, traditional dishes and eating habits remain at the heart of the culture. As the cuisine continues to evolve with global trends, it is also gaining international recognition. It celebrates the freshness of nature and respect for the land – a return to simplicity, balance and harmony with nature. Let the natural flavours transport you to a world where less is more. Don't be afraid of chilli! Enjoy your meal! ■

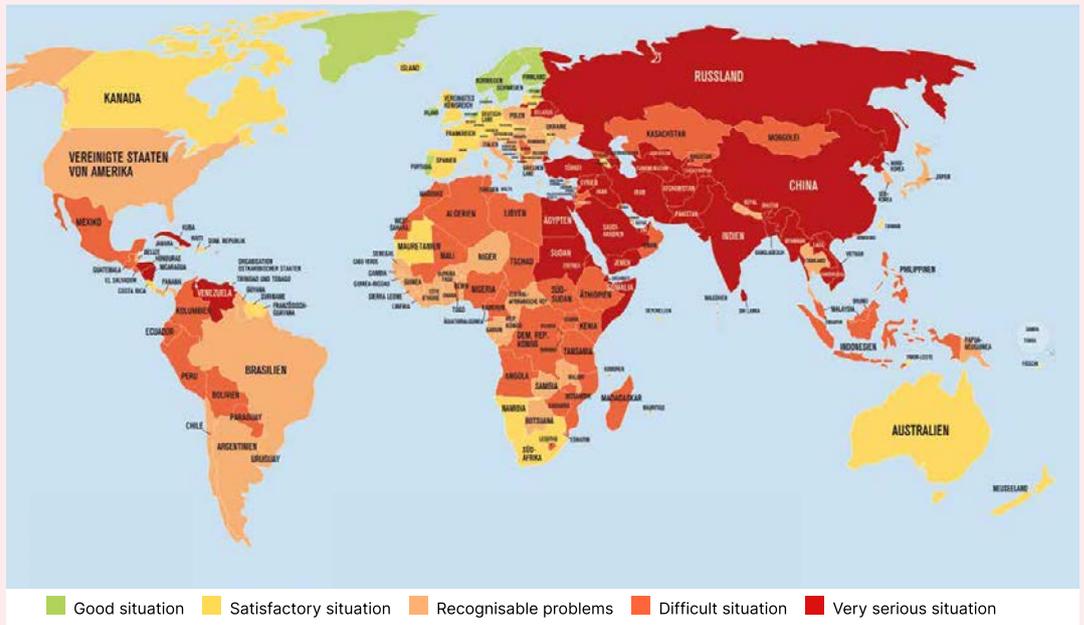


Bhutan drops to 147th place in the press freedom rankings.

(kne) Sources: KUENSEL and BBS, May 2024

Even though there is no direct repression of journalists in Bhutan, the media face major challenges.

Bhutan has slipped from 90th to 147th place out of 180 in Reporters Without Borders' press freedom ranking within a year. The index ranks countries on five indicators, including political, economic and security issues. Particularly alarming: the political indicator fell by 7.6 points worldwide.



Graphic: Reporter ohne Grenzen

Structural obstacles for independent journalism

Bhutan's constitution guarantees freedom of the press, but the reality is different. Journalists have great difficulty in obtaining official information. While politicians are more willing to be interviewed, well-founded information from authorities is rare. Many state institutions have little awareness of independent reporting.

Media landscape in transition

Since the liberalisation of the media in 2006, the Bhutanese media have shaped political reporting. Today, social media threaten their existence: they are faster, cheaper and more far-reaching, but they also promote disinformation and fraud. Many Bhutanese have already fallen victim to online fraud. In addition, social media are depriving traditional media houses of advertising revenue and endangering their economic base.

Lack of resources and emigration of journalists

Bhutanese media suffer from a lack of resources. Twenty-five per cent of journalists have less than a year of professional experience, and many leave the profession. According to a 2023 study, 32 out of 63 respondents cited low salaries, a lack of development opportunities and limited access to information as the main reasons.

The future of press freedom in Bhutan

Independent media depend on sustainable financing – but when money influences editorial independence, journalistic ethics suffer. Freedom of the press in Bhutan is not threatened by direct repression, but it is at great risk from structural constraints and economic uncertainty. Only if access to information is improved and the media can operate economically independent will the situation stabilise in the long term. ■

Prime Minister emphasises importance of freedom of the press

(kne) Source: BBS, 4 May 2024



Photo: BBS

On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day on 3 May, Prime Minister Dasho Tshering Tobgay spoke openly in Thimphu about the worrying decline in press freedom in Bhutan. Instead of merely lamenting the challenges, Tobgay called on media professionals to actively work on solutions. He emphasised the role of a free press for democracy and progress and promised government support.

Support for training and access to information

The Prime Minister called for specific proposals on how the government could better support the media. In particular, he said, there was room for improvement in journalistic training and access to information. Media experts welcomed his pledge. Dasho Kinley Dorji emphasised the need for professional training for young journalists. The Bhutanese editor-in-chief, Tenzin Lamsang, saw limited access to information as a major cause of the poor index value. Tobgay promised to work towards improvements – a glimmer of hope on World Press Freedom Day. ■

Hard work with great responsibility

(kne) Source: BBS, 3 May 2024



Photo: BBS

Despite the challenges to press freedom in Bhutan, female journalists are working tirelessly to tell stories that shape society. On World Press Freedom Day, BBS accompanied journalist Kinley Dem, who works as a reporter, camerawoman and editor all in one. On her way to Phuentsholing, she collects stories, films and edits her own reports – often under difficult conditions.

‘It’s physically and mentally exhausting to do everything myself. But I have taken on the challenge and I am proud to be an independent Camjo journalist,’ says Kinley, who is also the mother of a young son.

Access to information remains a challenge

In addition to the workload, access to information is a major problem. Many authorities avoid contact with the media, which makes journalistic work more difficult. However, there are also positive exceptions: in Phuentsholing, Kinley received a great deal of support from the local authorities, in contrast to her previous experiences. Such cooperation is important to strengthen the media landscape. In an environment often characterised by censorship and political pressure, female journalists like Kinley remain the guardians of democracy – with courage, dedication and an unwavering commitment to the truth. ■

Threatened with extinction: the incense tradition in Sakteng

(kne) Source: KUENSEL, 14 December 2024

In Jongkhar, Sakteng, a centuries-old tradition is in danger of disappearing.

Photo: KUENSEL



In the past, water mills (Chhuthag) were essential for the production of incense, but today there are only a few craftsmen who still preserve this knowledge. One of them is 68-year-old Dorji Phuntsho, who uses traditional water wheels to transform cypress wood into fine incense powder. ‘That’s how our ancestors did it – it’s laborious and time-consuming,’ he says.

From bartering to obscurity

In the past, the highlanders bartered their handcrafted incense for grain. But with the spread of imported

products and the decline of cypress trees, the craft fell into disuse. ‘Our incense sticks used to be in demand, but now imported incense dominates the market,’ explains Tshering Norbu, one of the few remaining craftsmen. He emphasises that the traditional method is free of chemicals and particularly suitable for ritual purposes.

The art of making incense sticks

The manufacturing process begins with grinding cypress wood in a water mill, followed by elaborate filtering and drying. The fine powder is mixed with water until the right consistency is achieved. ‘If the powder is not fine enough, the sticks will burn unevenly and lose their fragrance,’ explains Dorji Phuntsho. The traditional sticks are thicker than the imported varieties, which emphasises their authentic character.



Photo: Pexels

Uncertain future

The younger generation shows little interest in the centuries-old craftsmanship. In addition, the handcrafted millstones are in danger of dying out because hardly anyone still knows how they are made. ‘Without these tools, it will be difficult to continue the craft,’ fears Tshering Norbu. A new machine could make some processes easier, but it is questionable whether it can really preserve tradition. ■

Photo: bhutan.travel



Due to the dominance of imported incense, the traditional craft has largely disappeared.

Bamboo crafts as a new source of income

(kne) Source: KUENSEL; 19 December 2024

In Kalapang, Mongar, the Tarayana Foundation's initiative has brought new life to the traditional bamboo handicrafts.



Photo: KUENSEL

Thanks to the Bhutan Tsharzo Institute, 54-year-old Dorji Rinchen has been able to expand his skills and produce a wider range of products. He used to make only simple items such as bangchung (eating bowls), but now he produces baskets, mats and even furniture. ‘With these new skills, I can earn more and pass on my knowledge to others,’ says Rinchen, who now works at the institute as a master craftsman.

Tradition meets sustainability

Many villagers like 54-year-old Rinchen Dema have found a stable income through handicrafts. ‘Bamboo has always been part of our culture, but only now has it become our main source of income,’ she says. The growing interest in sustainable products has increased the demand for bamboo items. Tashi Lhamo from Kalapang explains that while handicrafts used to be considered a sideline, they are now seen as respectable work. This has also encouraged the sustainable cultivation of bamboo.

Future prospects for young people

Young people also benefit from the initiative. Sangay Choden, a school dropout, now works at the centre and sees her future in craftsmanship. ‘It’s not just about learning a technique, but also about a sustainable livelihood,’ she says. The institute offers workshops to pass on tradition and integrate modern manufacturing techniques. ‘Education is important, but manual skills are crucial in the highly competitive labour market,’ adds Tshering Lhamo, another participant.



Photo: KUENSEL

Sustainability through conscious management

To protect bamboo resources, the villagers in Kalapang, Daksa and Mangling have established their own plantations. Strict rules prevent uncontrolled deforestation. ‘In the past, bamboo was harvested indiscriminately, but today we ensure it is used sustainably,’ says Nakphel, 36. Households in the region earn more than 30,000 Nu a year from bamboo products – a secure living. ‘We use the money to buy everything from rice to salt,’ says Tashi Tenzin from Daksa. ■



From hobby to craft

(kne) Source: BBS, 20 December 2024

In Pema Gatshel's Shumar Gewog, Dorji Rinzin, a driver by profession, has turned his passion for archery into a thriving craft. He originally started making bows and arrows to avoid the high cost of purchased equipment. He learned the trade from the elders of his community and now spends his free time making them. Since the raw materials are available locally and demand is increasing, he sells bows for 3,000 Nu and arrows for 800 Nu. With this sideline, he earns about 7,000 Nu per month.

Looking to the future

Dorji Rinzin wants to develop his craft and is planning to open a traditional archery shop. In addition to selling his bows and arrows, he wants to create a place where the cultural heritage of archery is preserved and promoted. His goal is not only to make a living from his passion, but also to preserve the tradition for future generations. ■

Slow loss of a unique culture

(kne) Source: KUENSEL, 16 December 2024



Processing nettles for the production of Paga

Photo: KUENSEL

The Monpa are one of the oldest communities in Bhutan and are threatened with the loss of their cultural identity. Traditional garments such as the pagay have almost completely disappeared. A pagay is a traditional dress made out of nettle, worn only by Monpa. 67-year-old Nakari is the last person in Jangbi to still wear a pagay. In the past, this was a sign of poverty. The Monpa language is also becoming less important.

Low self-esteem as an obstacle

Many Monpa avoid their traditions because 'Monpa' is associated with poverty. The pagay is only worn on festive days, but the lack of resources and the shame of the youth are also causing the craft of making the pagay to almost die out.

Revival through new initiatives

The Tarayana Foundation and Yangphel Adventure Travel are promoting the revival of traditional crafts. 800 stinging nettle plants have been planted for pagay weaving, and 20 women are learning the craft. But without demand, it is in danger of disappearing. Bamboo products and wedding rituals have also been almost forgotten. The indigenous religion of Bonchhoe no longer involves animal sacrifice; eggs are used instead. The Monpa used to live from shifting cultivation, but now they live from cardamom and oranges. Their cultural roots are uncertain. ■

Dr Karma Phuntsho honoured with Ramon Magsaysay Award

(rw) Source: Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, 5 September 2024

Recognising outstanding contributions to the preservation of Bhutanese culture and the promotion of education and social entrepreneurship

In 2024, Dr Karma Phuntsho became the first Bhutanese national to be honoured with the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award, Asia's highest distinction. The award recognised his outstanding contribution to the preservation of Bhutanese culture and to the promotion of education and social entrepreneurship. As the founder of the Loden Foundation, he worked to preserve tradition and knowledge. His organisation supported educational initiatives, promoted start-ups and documented Bhutan's cultural heritage digitally.



Photo: Magsaysay Foundation

International recognition for great vision

The jury of the Ramon Magsaysay Award honoured Phuntsho for his commitment to connecting Bhutan's cultural heritage with the present and inspiring young people about their traditions. The award ceremony took place in Manila on 16 November. His work extends beyond Bhutan: he reminds cultures worldwide to preserve their history as they move into the future. ■



Video: *Dr Phuntsho's acceptance speech*

Education and entrepreneurship as the key

Since its establishment in 1999, the Loden Foundation has opened five preschools, funded 219 students and awarded 98 university scholarships. It has also supported young Bhutanese in setting up social enterprises. In total, 295 entrepreneurs – including 97 women – have been supported, 860 jobs created and 5,750 people trained. Phuntsho's commitment shows that economic progress and cultural identity can go hand in hand.

A life for knowledge and tradition

As a trained Buddhist monk and Oxford graduate, Phuntsho has published more than 100 books and articles, including *History of Bhutan* and *Mipham's Dialectic and the Void Debates*. These works connect Bhutan's past with the challenges of the present. His foundation documented 3,348 hours of oral tradition, digitised 4.55 million pages and captured 150,000 images of art and artefacts.

Dzongkha under threat: experts call for help

Bhutan's national language is facing challenges: the quality of Dzongkha teaching is declining, students are having difficulty learning the language and Dzongkha media are struggling with financial problems. A committee of experts recommends government action to halt the decline of the language. Despite the introduction of Dzongkha in schools since the 1970s, English remains the language of preference. A KU-ENSEL editorial calls for the modernisation of Dzongkha and a national language test for civil servants to encourage its use. ■

Bhutanese athletes celebrate personal successes at the Olympics

(kn) Source: KUENSEL, 5 August 2024

The 2024 Paris Olympics were an unforgettable experience for the athletes from Bhutan.

The 2024 Paris Olympics was an unforgettable experience for Bhutanese athletes. Archer Lam Dorji, swimmer Sangay Tenzin and marathon runner Kinzang Lhamo returned with new personal bests, valuable experiences and the honour of representing their country on the world's biggest sporting stage.

Lam Dorji sets new archery record

28-year-old recurve archer Lam Dorji surpassed his previous best performance and scored 663 points in the qualification – a new personal record. He was defeated by Alessandro Paoli of Italy 3:7 in the knock-out round, but for him, taking part was a special moment: ‘Being among the best in the world was an incredible honour for me’.



Photo: Bhutan Olympic Committee

Sangay Tenzin improves in swimming

20-year-old swimmer Sangay Tenzin competed in the 100-metre freestyle and came in 74th out of 79 participants in 56.08 seconds. Although he narrowly missed his personal best of 55.42 seconds, his performance was an improvement on the 2021 Tokyo Olympics: ‘The atmosphere in Paris was incredible. Competing against the best in the world was a great inspiration,’ he said.

Marathon runner Kinzang Lhamo defied all the odds

For Kinzang Lhamo, her Olympic debut was an extraordinary experience. She completed the 42-kilometre marathon in 3 hours, 52 minutes and 59 seconds, finishing in 80th place out of 91. Eleven runners abandoned the race, but she fought her way to the finish line, cheered on by fans along the



Video:

Kinzang Lhamo –
‘secret heroine of the
2024 sports year’

Ed Sheeran makes music history in Bhutan

(kn) Source: Bhutan Daily, 25 January 2025

On 24 January 2025, Ed Sheeran gave a historic concert in Thimphu, becoming the first international artist to perform in Bhutan.

The event was more than just a musical highlight – it marked a turning point for the country and its youth. Bhutan, known for its philosophy of Gross National Happiness, proved that it is ready to open up to global culture without losing its traditions.

A message beyond music

Sheeran's concert was a source of inspiration, especially for the young generation of Bhutan. In a country with limited opportunities and challenges such as unemployment and rural-urban migration, his performance showed that dreams know no geographical boundaries. On Instagram, Sheeran shared his enthusiasm: 'What a concert, what a country, what a wonderful place with incredible people.' His

words and music struck a chord – he spoke of persistence, hope and the power of going your own way.

Bhutan opens up to the world

The concert highlighted Bhutan's commitment to engage more with the global community. Known for its commitment to sustainability and preservation of its culture, Bhutan proved its ability to host global events without losing its identity. The success of the event showed that Bhutan is a place where tradition and innovation can coexist harmoniously.

Inspiring a new generation

Ed Sheeran's performance made a lasting impression on Bhutan's youth. His visit was a sign that even in a small country, big dreams can come true. It was a message to young people to recognise their potential, be ambitious and go their own way.

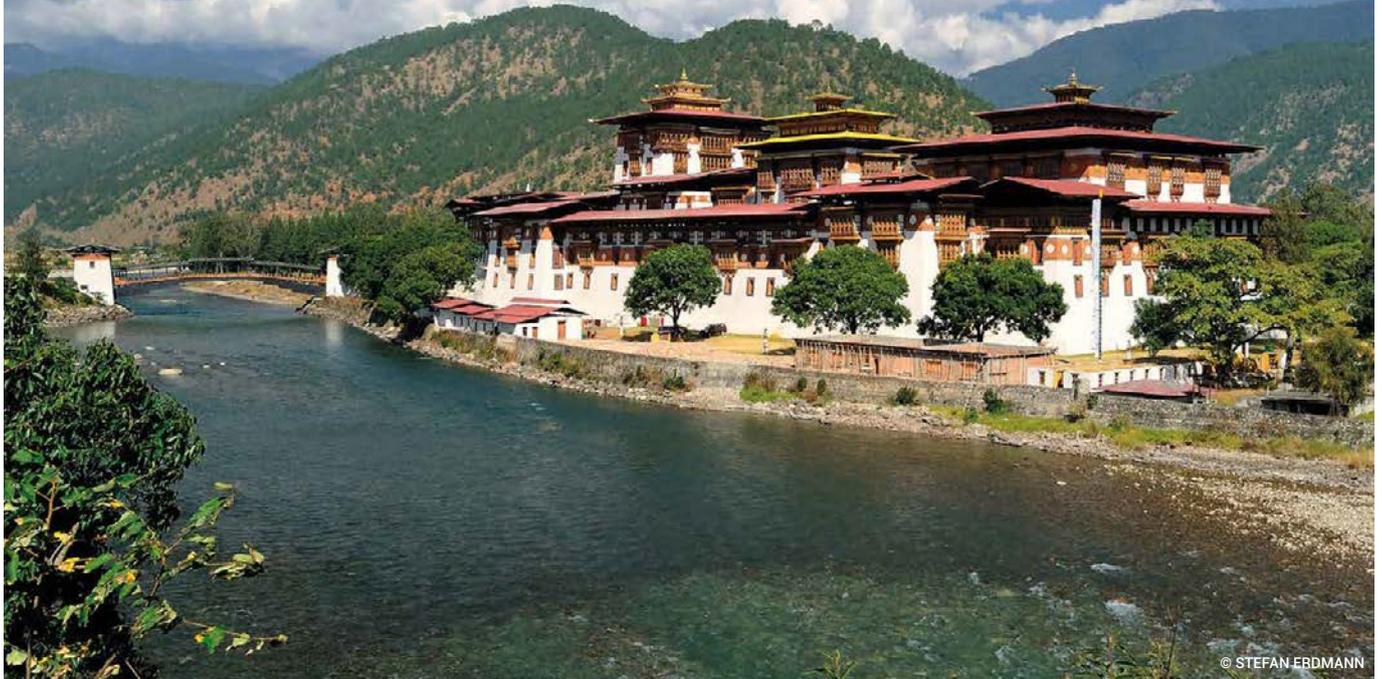
A milestone for Bhutan's future

Ed Sheeran's concert in Thimphu was more than just a show – it was a symbol of Bhutan's emergence onto the global stage. The country has proven that, despite its size, it can be a cultural stage for the world. Sheeran's performance was a first step towards a future in which Bhutan retains its identity while confidently taking its place in the international community. ■



Video:
Ed Sheeran
in Bhutan

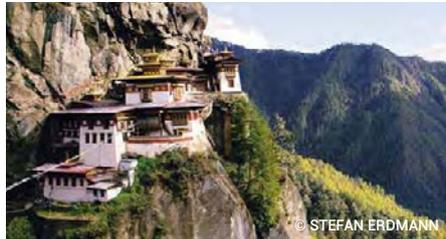
BHUTAN



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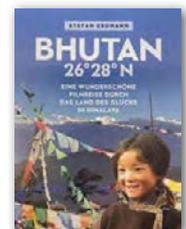
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Königreich im Himalaya

ERLEBEN SIE DIE EINZIGARTIGE KULTUR, LANDSCHAFT UND DIE MENSCHEN DIESES AUSSERGEWÖHNLICHEN LANDES

Wir kennen das Land seit über 40 Jahren durch intensive Reisen mit engen Kontakten zu den örtlichen Veranstaltern, den Fluglinien und zum Königshaus. Individuelle Reiseprogramme mit täglicher Anreise aus Nepal, Indien, Thailand und neuerdings Dubai. Private Trekkingtouren und Festival-Offerten wie zum Punakha- und Paro-Festival.

Eine begeisternde DVD von dem bekannten Filmemacher Stefan Erdman und „*Das Land des Glücks im Himalaya*“ senden wir Ihnen gegen eine Schutzgebühr von 20 Eur inklusive Versandkosten gerne zu.



GERNE SENDEN WIR IHNEN AKTUELLE INFORMATIONEN ÜBER BHUTAN

BHUTAN-REISEVERANSTALTER SEIT ÜBER 40 JAHREN

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Rosanna Buchauer wins the Snowman Race

(rw) Source: *Bhutan Times*, 28 October 2024

Photo: Snowman Race



The German ultra runner Rosanna Buchauer has won the Snowman Race 2024 in Bhutan – one of the toughest ultra races in the world. Over 175 km at an average altitude of 4,267 m, she mastered the demanding Himalayan terrain with impressive endurance, beating strong competition. The Snowman Race draws attention to the consequences of climate change in the Himalayas. The runners experience first-hand the impact on the highland communities in Bhutan. As a carbon-neutral country, Bhutan is promoting global environmental awareness – the race highlights the urgency of the climate crisis.

Exceptional talent with a mission

Buchauer, who has already won the Eiger Ultra Trail and the Grossglockner Ultra Trail, sees the sport as a mental challenge. ‘Winning is an incredible honour,’ she says. In addition to her sporting career, she is committed to sustainable decisions – her success in the Snowman Race combines top sporting performance with a strong message. ■



Photo: bhutan.travel

More and more female tour guides in Bhutan

(kn) Source: *The West Australian*, 4 May 2024



Photo: Department of Tourism

In Bhutan, more and more women are taking on the role of tour guides. There are currently 122 female guides officially certified and recognised by the Ministry of Tourism. They lead cultural tours, individual experiences and challenging trekking expeditions. Their goal goes beyond just travelling: they want to convey a deeper understanding of the traditions and natural beauty of their country.

A sign of equality and integration

The growing number of female tour guides is also an expression of Bhutan's commitment to gender equality. ‘In a society where women have always played an important role, this is a sign of increasing inclusion in the workplace,’ emphasises a spokesperson from the Ministry of Tourism. Since Bhutan reopened to tourism in September 2022, the number of female guides has increased by more than 25 per cent.

Female tour guides in demand

Dorji Bidha, an experienced tour guide, sees her job as a passion: ‘It's about inspiring others, discovering and connecting.’ Women travelling alone in particular appreciate the female guides for their companionship and sense of security. The growing demand shows that Bhutan is breaking new ground in tourism. ■



The documentary road movie *Agent of Happiness* follows one of Bhutan’s happiness agents, Amber Gurung, on his journey through the remote valleys of the Himalayas. The Hungarian-Bhutanese co-production by Arun Bhattarai and Dorottya Zurbó provides insights into a fascinating world and asks the universal question: What is happiness? The film shows that happiness does not only depend on external circumstances, but is often fragile and subjective. It invites the audience to reflect on their own happiness – and perhaps become a little happier themselves. ■

Film: „I, The Song“



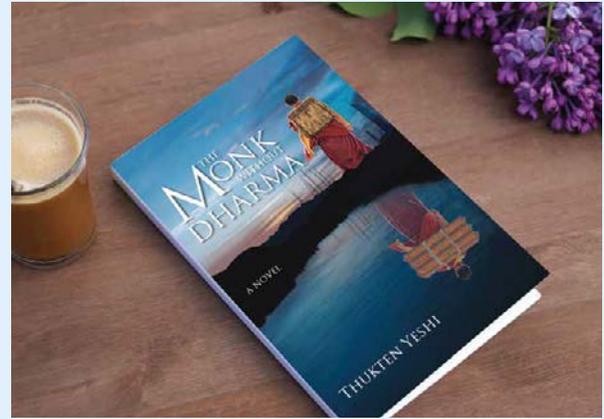
To the film's trailer



Dechen Roder’s film highlights the influence of digital technologies on privacy and relationships. Inspired by real cases, it tells the story of teacher Nima, whose life is turned upside down when a video of a woman who resembles her appears. In her search for the mysterious Meto, she enters a world between reality and mysticism. The film, which was financed with international funding, combines modern themes with the surreal mysticism of Bhutan – a trademark of Roder, who has already found international acclaim with *Honeygiver Among the Dogs*. ■

Novel: The Monk Without Dharma

(rw) Source: *Business Bhutan*, 24 May 2024

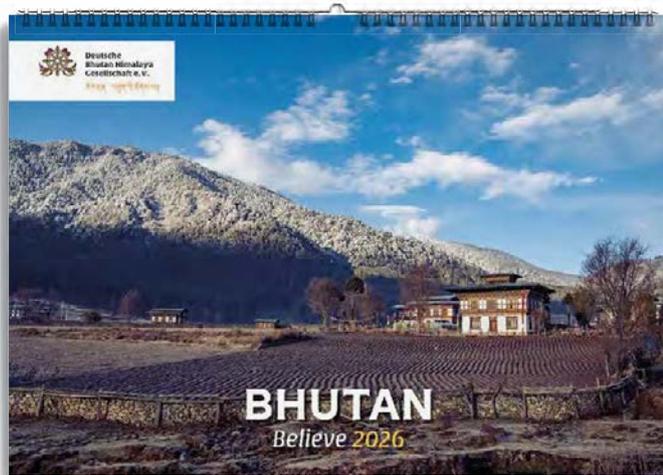


Pursuing a dream is fulfilling – realising it is indescribable. Thukten Yeshe, a freelance writer from Thimphu, has done just that. His work ‘The Monk Without Dharma’ originated as a film script and became a novel on the advice of international film studios. The story is based on ‘Nothing is as it Seems’ and explores karma. The protagonist encounters limitations while studying dharma, but discovers a unique state of being that allows him to break through tantra. The novel delves deep into Vajrayana Buddhism. ‘The narrative unfolds in the secret realm of Dzogchen and introduces the reader to the mystical world of Tantric Buddhism,’ says Thukten. Originally planned as a Dharma film, the project took a new direction through the Buddhist education.

Writing as Art and Discipline

Thukten Yeshe warns against the misconception that a good knowledge of English alone is enough to write a good script or a good novel. ‘Language proficiency is only one aspect – storytelling, creativity and intellectual depth are just as important.’ Discipline remains crucial: writing means constant revision. With degrees in screenwriting and literature, he has successfully made the transition from television to literature. ■

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Let us work together to bring Bhutan and its rich culture to life. We look forward to receiving your submissions!

Your team at the German Bhutan Himalaya Society

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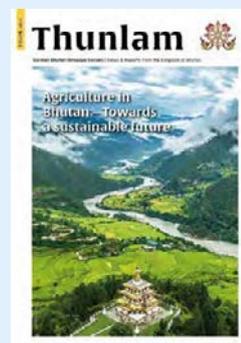
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*“Thunlam”
(phonetic = mthun lam)
means friendship,
friendly relations,
goodwill.*



**German-Bhutan
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