



PARLIAMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS - A STRATEGY DOCUMENT



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NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF BHUTAN



SPEAKER

Foreword

The Parliament of Bhutan is pleased to present a strategy document on collaboration with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) recognizing the significance of CSOs in the transformation process of the country.

As Bhutan continues to undergo significant transformation towards efficiency, the importance of harnessing the potentiality of CSOs in increasing citizen interest and participation in the transformation processes has also grown. Parliament on its part recognizes the vital role CSOs as an institution can play in sensitizing community responsibilities, raising awareness and drawing attention to new developments, promoting accountabilities, mobilizing resources and in contributing expertise. Therefore, it is imperative to create an enabling environment for the CSOs to effectively participate in the transformation process for which, this shared strategy document is expected to facilitate.

A broad range of CSOs and stakeholders have participated and provided suggestions in developing this strategy document. The Members of Parliament on its part have also contributed their wisdoms in developing the strategy document providing immense opportunity for collaboration between the Parliament and CSOs.

We would like to wish success in the implementation. We thank the European Union for the support and Project *'Nyamdrel* and International IDEA for their assistance in the coordination.

(Wangchuk Namgyel)

Speaker

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parliament is the highest legislative institution in the country, vested with powers to conduct public review of policies and issues of national importance, enact bills and other legislation, and scrutinise the functions of state to ensure and safeguard the interests of the nation and fulfil the aspirations of the people (Article 10 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan). Civil society Organisations (CSOs) play an important role in complementing the government's efforts in diverse fields such as education, health, gender equality and women empowerment, childcare and youth development, environmental and cultural protection, and private sector development.

In 2007, guided by the Constitution of Bhutan and the government's Five-year Plans, Parliament passed the Civil Society Organisations Act of Bhutan to promote the establishment and growth of CSOs to 'strengthen civil society', promote social welfare and improve conditions and the quality of life in Bhutan. Parliament's Strategic Development Plans (SDPs) clearly acknowledges the importance of collaboration with CSOs to effectively achieve their aims, the limited existing interactions between Parliament and CSOs, and the advantages of such engagement to overcome inherent challenges. Parliament is required to maintain formal operational procedures to guarantee the highest degree of objectivity and quality of law making. In contrast, they represent diverse sections of the Bhutanese society, CSOs often lack knowledge of policy processes and expertise in conducting and drawing on research and evidence to inform legislative procedures, which presents challenges for legislative engagement.

Parliament's main roles are legislation, representation and oversight. CSOs' downstream role is representation of and engagement with different sections of society that experience first-hand the results of implementation of government policy and services. Globally, CSOs are recognised as advocates and watchdogs, providing opportunities to contribute to and expand the roles and responsibilities of both parties. By fulfilling their respective roles in a democracy, there is a general consensus that collaboration between Parliament and civil society can prove beneficial as each provides complementary forums for representation that is otherwise constrained by its selective structures and operations. A strategy document that effectively provides for and guides Parliament's collaboration with CSOs, while also promoting the importance and relevance of Parliament as an institution at the centre of the democratic system in Bhutan, is seen as key to forging a way forward. This strategy document was developed in consultation with key officials at the National Assembly (NA) and National Council (NC) of Bhutan secretariats, their committees and Members of Parliament (MPs), the Bhutan Civil Society Network (BCSN) and the representatives of CSOs.

The strategy aims to promote collaboration between the Parliament of Bhutan and Bhutanese civil society through the establishment and strengthening of channels already defined in the NC and the NA SDPs. It draws guidance from their values of professionalism, integrity, fairness, accountability and consensus-building to create strengthened mutual political participation that reinforces the mandates of a representative, transparent and accessible Parliament. To enhance democratisation and sustainable development in Bhutan, the specific objectives of the collaboration aim to create a highly responsive and inclusive legislative arm of governance through collaboration with CSOs in various forums of representation, such as campaigning and advocacy, information and awareness-raising, expertise and guidance, service and resource provision, monitoring and evaluation, and networking.

To sustain this collaboration based on global best practices, the strategy outlines the creation of a conducive legal environment with a favourable framework for Parliament-CSO collaboration to achieve a strong and reliable partnership with civil society; and the adoption of models of cooperation such as policy documents (memorandums of understanding, strategies) to provide a strategic framework that sets out the vision, highlights the roles of Parliament and CSOs, outlines the principles of cooperation and, most importantly, lays the ground and sets the direction for future collaboration and development. It also establishes mechanisms for facilitating cooperation, such as assigning a contact person with a mandate to foster cooperation, and/or a cross-sector advisory body for continuous and sustainable dialogue. Effective and gainful engagement between Parliament and CSOs in Bhutan will require capacity building of Parliamentarians, secretariats of both the houses, and CSOs to develop the conditions, capacity and skills of both parties in the areas of policy formulation, service provision and digital literacy. It will also require an agreed framework for engagement, including memorandums of understanding, that outlines roles and responsibilities, procedures for cooperation and a structure for cooperation that incorporates systems for facilitating and fostering relations. These should allow CSO engagement in consultations and briefings on key issues or reports, and provide written information to complement proposals and deliberations.

The focus of the collaboration is on the areas of legislation, representation and oversight through CSO participation in roundtable discussions, committee meetings/consultations, public hearings, petitions and an annual Parliament-CSO meeting. The respective committees and secretariats are identified as focal points for inviting engagement with relevant CSOs through established channels based on the agendas, dates and timing of parliamentary sessions. The mechanisms aim to ensure that stakeholders are properly engaged with to enable robust discussions and ensure that decisions are properly monitored. Agendas will be shared with the Civil Society Organisations Authority, the BCSN, CSOs, institutes and other relevant stakeholders.

The timeline allocated to supporting the collaboration is 1–5 years, depending on the type of activity. Capacity building activities for both Parliament and CSOs will be implemented in a staggered way throughout the five years, while the signing of an agreed framework/Memorandum of Understanding on engagement and putting systems and structures in place to facilitate and foster relations is planned for the initial 1–2 years. Resources and a budget for the activities are considered integral to the success of the collaboration but allocating funds or a budget is considered premature before a strategy document is agreed upon. Responsible agencies are expected to collaborate on seeking funding opportunities collectively, while also making this work part of their annual plans and budgets once the framework is in place. The key milestones under each channel of engagement are clearly outlined in the strategy. The deliverables broadly outlined in the document are an important mechanism for the institutionalisation and development of systemic approaches to public relations processes between Parliament and civil society in Bhutan.

Section 1 introduces and provides brief background to the key stakeholders in the collaboration. Section 2 presents the guiding principles for the collaboration. Section 3 presents the vision and mission of the collaboration. Section 4 outlines the rationale for the collaboration and the specific forums for representation. Section 5 sets out the goals and objectives. Section 6 outlines priority areas, and the conditions required and channels for establishing collaboration.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------|---------------------------------------|
| BCSN | Bhutan Civil Society Network |
| CSOA | Civil Society Organisations Authority |
| CSO | Civil Society Organisations |
| EC | Executive Committee |
| FYP | Five-Year Plan |
| MP | Member of Parliament |
| NA | National Assembly (of Bhutan) |
| NC | National Council (of Bhutan) |
| SDG | Sustainable Development Goal |
| SDP | Strategic Development Plan |

Section 1

Introduction

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Parliament - Review policies and issues of national importance, legislation and scrutinise functions of the State to safeguard the interest of the nation and fulfil the aspiration of the people (Article 10 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan).

2007- The CSO Act of Bhutan passed to promote establishment and growth of CSOs to “strengthen civil society”, promote social welfare, and improve the conditions and quality of life in Bhutan.

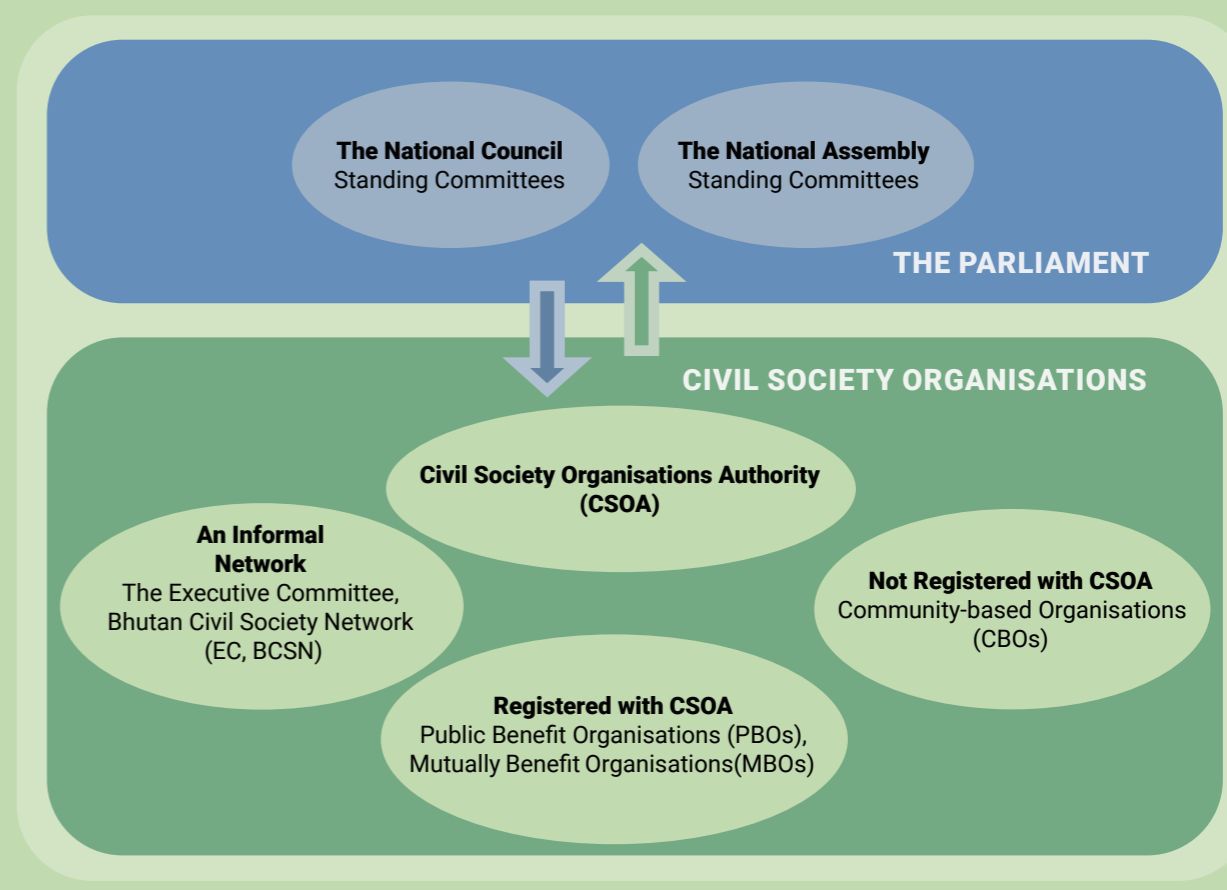
2016 His Majesty awarded National Order of Merit (Gold) to 22 CSOs in recognition of their contribution to the nation, including “taking responsibility to support and assist wherever the government is unable to reach”.

The CSOs continue role in complementing and supporting the government’s efforts in wide range of issues and fields.

The legislation of ACC, RAA, NCWC and EC - recognise and promote closer collaboration with CSOs by nature of their mandate.

The strategic plans (2019-2023) of Parliament (NC & NA) establishes the importance of collaboration with CSOs to effectively carry out their mandate. Documents point out the limited existing interaction and need for more engagement with civil society.

The Strategy Document - developed in consultation with the NA and NC Secretariat, Committees and MPs, Bhutan Civil Society Network (BCSN) and CSOs.



1.1 BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The Parliament of Bhutan comprises the Druk Gyalpo, the National Council (NC) and the National Assembly (NA). Parliament is the highest legislative institution in the country vested with powers to conduct public review of policies and issues of national importance, enact bills and other legislation, and scrutinise the functions of the state to ensure and safeguard the interests of the nation and fulfil the aspirations of the people (Article 10 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan).

In 2007, Parliament passed the Civil Society Organisations Act of Bhutan to promote the establishment and growth of civil society Organisations (CSOs) and to ‘strengthen civil society’, promote social welfare and improve conditions and the quality of life in Bhutan ‘by developing human qualities and rendering humanitarian services’. His Majesty the King awarded the National Order of Merit (Gold) to 22 CSOs in 2016, in recognition of their contribution to the nation and ‘for taking on the responsibility to provide support and assistance wherever the government is unable to reach’. CSOs continue to play an important role in complementing the government’s efforts in diverse fields such as education, health, gender equality and women’s empowerment, childcare and youth development, environmental and cultural preservation, and private sector development. Due to the nature of their mandate, the Anti-corruption Commission, Royal Audit Authority, National Commission for Women and Children and Election Commission of Bhutan also recognise and promote closer collaboration with CSOs.

Parliament’s five-year strategic development plans clearly establish the importance of collaboration with CSOs in order to carry out their mandate effectively. These documents highlight the limited nature of existing interaction and the need to foster engagement between Parliament and civil society:

The National Council of Bhutan states that ‘democratic institutions such as the media and civil society Organisations are crucial platforms through which the NC could provide information to the people about its work’ and that it will ‘engage with civil society Organisations in its efforts to create awareness among the people of decisions and the work it undertakes’ and ‘arrange programs to foster interaction between the members and CSOs.’

The National Assembly of Bhutan acknowledges that ‘interaction and collaboration between the Parliament and civil society Organisations in Bhutan are absent’ but ‘that civil society Organisations are effective channels and space for Parliamentarians to communicate and interact with the people’, and ‘will play an important role in the

implementation of the [Sustainable Development Goals] SDGs and the priorities of the 12th [Five-year Plan] FYP’

This strategy document has been developed in consultation with key officials at the National Assembly and National Council secretariats, their Committees and Members of Parliament (MPs), the Bhutan Civil Society Network (BCSN) and CSOs. Both parliamentary chambers have agreed on the need for a strategy that effectively guides Parliament’s collaboration with CSOs while promoting the importance and relevance of Parliament as an institution at the centre of the democratic system in Bhutan.

1.2. KEY STAKEHOLDERS

1.2.1 THE PARLIAMENT OF BHUTAN

Bhutan’s democratically elected Parliament is bicameral. Its members are elected for a term of five years. The NC and the NA are each supported by its own secretariat.

1.2.1.1. THE NATIONAL COUNCIL

The non-partisan NC has 25 members, 20 of whom are directly elected by 20 districts. Five eminent members are nominated by His Majesty the King. In addition to its legislative functions, the NC acts as the House of review on matters affecting the security and sovereignty of the country and the interests of the nation and the people’. The National Council of Bhutan has seven standing committees that carry out parliamentary business: the House Committee, the Legislative Committee, the Economic Affairs Committee, the Social and Cultural Affairs Committee, the Natural Resources and Environment Committee, the Good Governance Committee, and the Foreign Relations Committee.

1.2.1.2. THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

The National Assembly comprises members from the ruling party and the opposition party. Its 47 members are elected by the people from 47 constituencies. Members of the National Assembly carry out legislative, oversight and representative roles to meet the aspirations of the Bhutanese people. The Assembly’s nine committees carry out parliamentary business: the Legislative Committee, the Public Accounts Committee (a Joint committee), the Social and Cultural Committee, the Good Governance Committee, the Environment and Climate Change Committee, the Women, Children

and Youth Committee, the House Committee, the Human Rights and Foreign Relations Committee, and the Economic and Finance Committee.

Each committee examines, reviews, deliberates on, investigates and considers any legislation or policy issue assigned to it. Both the NA and the NC have a Legislative Committee to provide procedural and technical advice on legislative matters. The Public Accounts Committee is a joint committee that reviews audit reports and the use of public resources. The committees are central to carrying out the business of both chambers and provide avenues for the MPs to examine complex policy matters and garner public opinion. Parliament can also establish special, ad hoc select committees and appoint sub-committees.

1.2.2 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS IN BHUTAN

Since the enactment of the Civil Society Organisations Act in 2007, 54 CSOs (42 PBOs & 12 MBOs) have registered with the Civil Society Organisations Authority (CSOA) under the thematic areas of livelihoods, caregiving & rehabilitation, youth, good governance, the arts, heritage & culture, the environment, and animal welfare and recreation, among others. Existing community-based associations and Organisations, such as formal farmers' groups and cooperatives registered under the Cooperatives Act of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests or informal youth and women's groups, can be registered/formal or unregistered/informal CSOs. In the context of Bhutan, CSOs can be categorised as Organisations registered under the CSO Act or community-based Organisations.

1.2.3 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AUTHORITY (CSOA)

In pursuit of the aims of the CSO Act 2007 to promote the establishment and growth of CSOs, the CSOA was established as a regulatory agency in 2009. To further facilitate the role of CSOs and also to strengthen the existing regulatory framework, Parliament amended the CSO Act in 2022. The CSOA comprises representatives from the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and CSOs. The CSOA has a Secretariat whose head serves as the Member Secretary to the Authority. It is responsible for the facilitation and support of CSOs in Bhutan, which includes the registration and monitoring of such Organisations. It also advises the government on topics related to CSOs. It is currently supported by a secretariat of around 10 civil servants who provide programming, legal, financial and administrative services.

1.2.4 BHUTAN CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORK (EC, BCSN)

The Bhutan Civil Society Network is an informal organisation that serves as a platform for networking, collaboration on and coordination of CSO joint action. It has an Executive

Committee (EC) of 10 CSO representatives, 8 of whom are elected among the CSOs and 2 are the eminent members to the CSOA. The EC aims to build the CSO fraternity and represent the wider interests of the CSO sector in Bhutan. It is a new entity with a small secretariat to perform its day-to-day functions. As such, it is still defining its role while working hard to be recognised by the state and other actors beyond the sector. Within the CSO fraternity, there is recognition of the EC's role in bringing CSOs together and forging a united front.

Section 2

Guiding Principles

PARLIAMENT - CSO Collaboration : GUIDING PRINCIPLES:

| Constitution of Bhutan | 12th FYP (2018-2023) | NC's SDP (2015-2019) | NA's SDP (2019-2023) |
|--|---|--|---|
| <p>Article 9:</p> <p>"[t]he State shall endeavour to create a civil society free of oppression, discrimination and violence, based on the rule of law, protection of human rights and dignity, and to ensure the fundamental rights and freedoms of the people."</p> <p>Article 10:</p> <p>"Parliament shall ensure that the Government safeguards the interests of the nation and fulfils the aspirations of the people through public review of policies and issues, Bills and other legislations, and scrutiny of State functions."</p> | <p>12th FYP of RGOB seek to achieve::</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a "just, harmonious and sustainable society through enhanced decentralisation" and calls on "civil society organisations and citizens to work together to achieve the noble aspirations of the 12th FYP" - Strengthened role of CSOs in development areas of health, education, women, children, culture and environment protection are highlighted in both the 11th and 12th FYPs. | <p>Strategic Development Plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the House "strongly believes in collective wisdom" "the existing practice of involving government agencies and the people in the law-making process" "more efforts in bringing stakeholders onboard [sic] for soliciting inputs and feedback for bills and other issues on NC's agenda" "ensure that the laws that the House enacts are reflective" "will engage civil society organisations in its efforts to create awareness among the people of decisions and the work it undertakes" "will arrange programs to foster interaction between the members and CSOs." | <p>Strategic Development Plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "creating an open, transparent and participatory legislative process" in line with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels; - Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms; - Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels. Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life; By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status; |

The Parliament in SDPs also state - the committees will deepen their relationship with CSOs as they conduct oversight and the secretariat will provide training on ways in which committees can engage and collaborate with CSOs when conducting oversight

The strategic direction of Parliament-CSO collaboration is derived from the Constitution of Bhutan. Article 9 of the Constitution states that '[t]he State shall endeavour to create a civil society free of oppression, discrimination and violence, based on the rule of law, protection of human rights and dignity, and to ensure the fundamental rights and freedoms of the people'. Similarly, Article 10 of the Constitution states that 'Parliament shall ensure that the Government safeguards the interests of the nation and fulfils the aspirations of the people through public review of policies and issues, Bills and other legislation, and scrutiny of State functions.'

The strategy also aligns with the overarching goals of the 12th Five-year Plan (2018–23), which seeks to achieve a 'just, harmonious and sustainable society through enhanced decentralisation' and calls on 'civil society organisations and citizens to work together to achieve the noble aspirations of the 12th FYP'. Both the 11th and the 12th Five-year Plans emphasise the role of local government and a strengthened role for CSOs in developing policy on the areas of health, education, women, children and youth, culture and environmental protection.

The NC SDP, 2015–19, states that it 'strongly believes in collective wisdom' and plans to professionalise and institutionalise 'the existing practice of involving government agencies and the people in the law-making process' by making more effort to bring stakeholders onboard and to solicit input and feedback on bills and other issues on the NC agenda to 'ensure that the laws that the House enacts are reflective'. It also states that it will engage with civil CSOs in its efforts to 'create awareness among the people of decisions and the work it undertakes' and will initiate programmes 'to foster interaction between the members and CSOs' (NC SDP: 24).

Similarly, the NA SDP, 2019–23, emphasises 'creating an open, transparent and participatory legislative process' in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to:

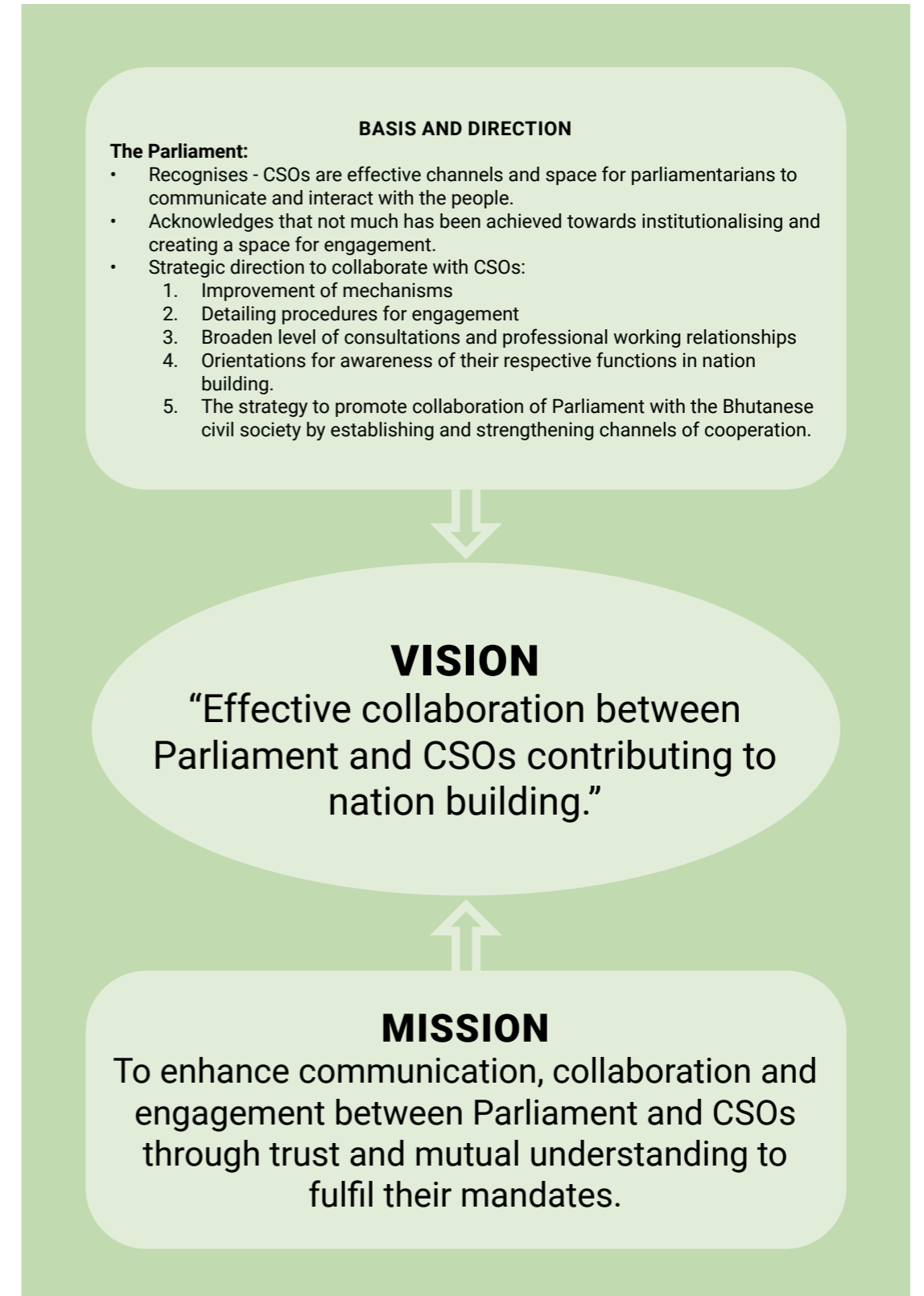
- 16.6. Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels;
- 16.10. Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms; and
- 16.7. Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels.

The strategy also contributes to SDG targets 5.5 and 10.2 to:

- 5.5. Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life;
- 10.2. By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.

Overall, Parliament’s SDPs state that its committees will deepen their relationships with CSOs as part of parliamentary oversight, and that the secretariats will provide training on the ways in which committees can engage and collaborate with CSOs when conducting such oversight (NA SDP: 40).

Section 3 Vision & Mission



The National Assembly of Bhutan recognises that CSOs are effective channels and spaces for Parliamentarians to communicate and interact with people. It also acknowledges that not much has been achieved to institutionalise and create space for engagement.

As part of their strategic direction, both the NA and the NC secretariats plan to collaborate with CSOs on improving the mechanisms and detailing the procedures for engagement, with the aim of broadening the ‘level of consultations and professional working relationships between Parliamentarians, the committees, and CSOs’. This will also include reorientation of awareness-raising of their respective functions in nation building. The vision and mission of the strategy were drafted to encapsulate each chamber’s values of professionalism, integrity, fairness, accountability, and consensus building as set out in their respective Strategic Development Plans. The strategy aims to promote collaboration between the Parliament of Bhutan and Bhutanese civil society by establishing and strengthening channels of cooperation on fulfilling their important roles.

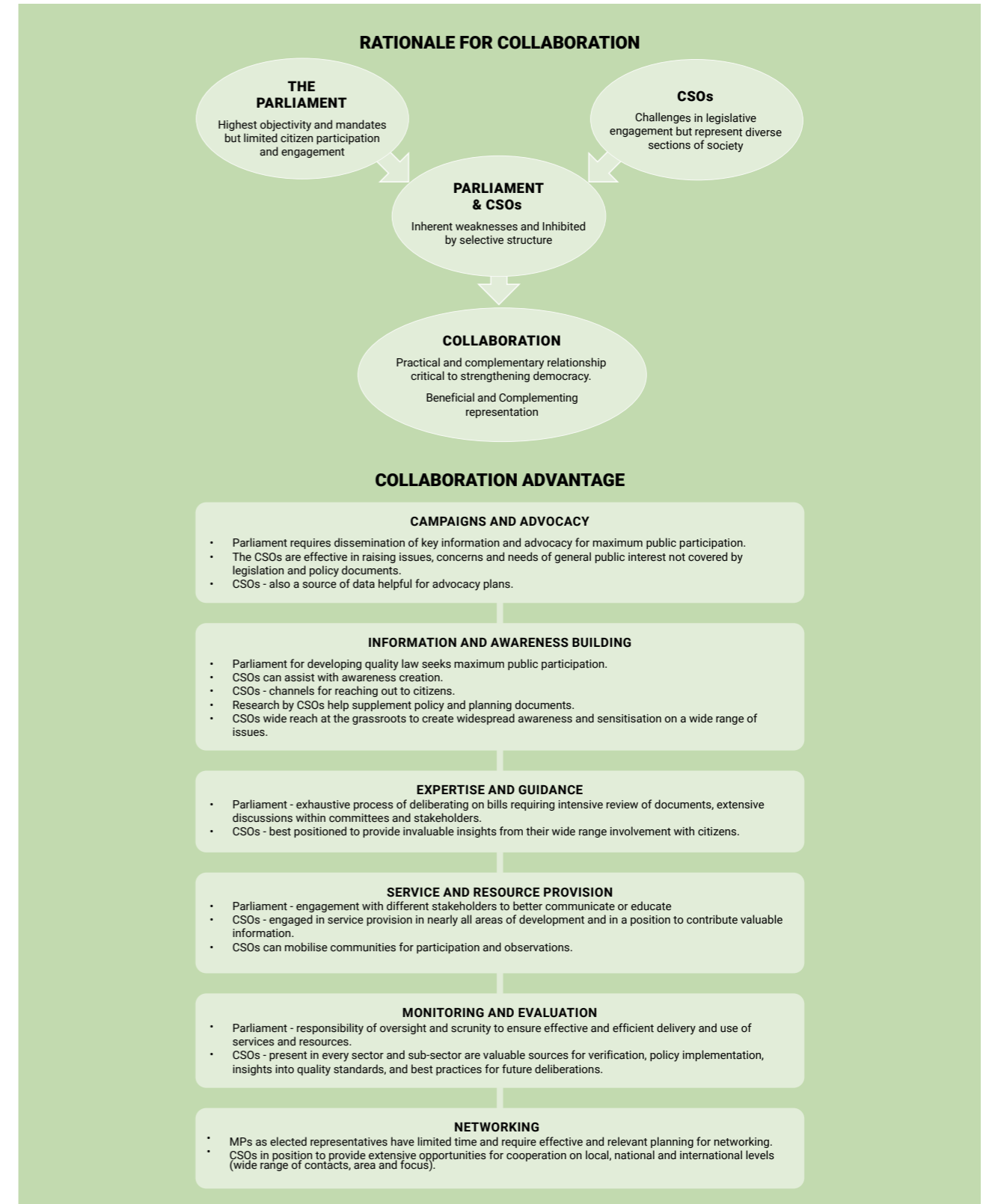
Vision

Effective collaboration between Parliament and CSOs, contributing to nation building.

Mission

To enhance communication, collaboration and engagement between Parliament and CSOs through trust and mutual understanding to fulfil their mandates.

Section 4 Rationale



The Parliament of Bhutan seeks closer collaboration with CSOs, cognisant of the fact that it is a practical and complementary relationship critical to strengthening our democracy. Parliament abides by a set of formal operational guidelines to ensure the highest degree of objectivity and quality when fulfilling its mandate. While it is extremely important to promote high-quality law making, this can limit citizen participation and engagement. By contrast, in spite of the fact that they represent diverse sections of the Bhutanese society, CSOs often lack knowledge of and expertise in policy processes and research support. Therefore, they face challenges with legislative engagement. Their structure and functions mean that both Parliament and CSOs suffer from inherent weaknesses that can be addressed by engaging with each other. Such collaborations will prove beneficial by complementing forums for representation that are otherwise inhibited by their selective structures:

- **Campaigning and advocacy:** Parliament is required to disseminate key information related to its deliberations on bills. This requires advocacy to encourage maximum public participation. CSOs have been effective in raising issues, concerns and needs, as well as highlighting a point of view or general public interest that is not yet covered in legislation or other policy documents. CSOs are also a source of data or they can be engaged to generate or curate data. This is helpful for advocacy or plans that combine narratives with data, something in which they are highly effective.
- **Provision of information and awareness-raising:** Parliament is tasked with developing high-quality law. It, therefore, seeks maximum public participation to inform and create awareness. Awareness-raising within communities is a slow process that CSOs can assist with. CSOs are channels for reaching out to citizens and effecting social change early on. At the same time, the research conducted by CSOs helps to supplement policy and planning documents. Their wide reach at the grassroots can help to create widespread awareness and sensitise communities on a wide range of issues, such as policies, rules and regulations, laws, strategies and technology.
- **Expertise and guidance:** Parliament follows an exhaustive process of deliberating on bills, which involves intensive review of documents, and extensive discussions in committees and with stakeholders to ensure that the laws passed are beneficial and long-lasting. CSOs are well positioned because of their wide range of activities and engagement to provide invaluable insights,

experience and understanding. This can contribute richly to law-making processes.

- **Service and resource provision:** Parliament develops and plans its engagement with different stakeholders to better communicate with or inform them. CSOs are engaged in service provision in nearly all areas of development and are often in a position to contribute valuable information on how policies and laws are implemented or perform. They can also mobilise communities for participation and observation.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Parliament has the important responsibility for oversight and scrutiny to ensure effective and efficient delivery and use of government services and resources. Since CSOs are present in almost every sector and sub-sector, they are a valuable source of verification as they follow up and document policy implementation, and provide insights into quality standards and best practices for future deliberations.
- **Networking:** Time constraints mean that Members of Parliament require effective planning and networking, depending on the type of office and constituency responsibilities. Their wide range of contacts, areas and focus puts CSOs in a position to provide extensive opportunities for cooperation at the local, national and international levels.

Section 5

Goals and Objectives

1. REPRESENTATIVE PARLIAMENT

- Ensure representation and political participation of minorities.
- Collaboration with CSOs will strengthen public outreach strategies and expand engagement.

2. TRANSPARENT PARLIAMENT

- Maintain constant contact with the citizens and constituencies.
- Access to information
- Creation of an information management system
- Enable timely dissemination of information and ensure a wider coverage

3. ACCESSIBLE PARLIAMENT

- Legal and formal structure of Parliament intimidating for citizens and may inhibit upstream engagement.
- Collaboration and establishment of focal contact points to allow accessibility and engagement.
- Engaging with CSOs to link different sections of society in policy debates.
- CSO-Beneficiaries accessibility will enable Parliament to engage and mobilise communities towards quality legislation.

1.1. The objective of the collaboration between Parliament and CSOs is to strengthen mutual political participation that reinforces the mandate of a **representative, transparent and accessible Parliament**. To enhance democratisation and sustainable development in Bhutan, the specific objectives of the collaboration will aim to create a highly responsive and inclusive legislative arm of governance that achieves a:

- **Representative Parliament:** Parliaments are uniquely positioned to promote empowerment as they represent a cross-section of society. As elected representatives, parliamentarians aim to ensure the representation and political participation of minorities. Parliamentarians are aware that collaboration with CSOs will help to strengthen public outreach strategies and expand engagement.
- **Transparent Parliament:** To fulfil its mandate to represent citizens and their constituencies, Parliament is required to maintain constant contact with both. More importantly, society demands greater access to information. Operational mechanisms for collaboration between Parliament and CSOs should enable easy access to information, data and records for citizens. The creation of an information management system to enable timely dissemination of information to relevant stakeholders, including CSOs, will ensure wider coverage.
- **Accessible Parliament:** The legal and formal structure of Parliament can seem intimidating to citizens, which often inhibits upstream engagement. Operationalising collaboration through the establishment of focal contact points mandated to collect, aggregate and organise information on Parliament/CSOs and sharing it through channels such as websites and email, allows accessibility and engagement. In addition, engaging with CSOs will link different sections of society to policy debates. CSOs' access to their supporters and service users will enable Parliament to participate in and mobilise communities to observe deliberations and to enable quality legislation.

Section 6

PRIORITY AREAS

PRIORITY AREA

BACKGROUND

- Parliament - legislation, representation and oversight.
- CSOs - representation of and engagement with different sections of society.
- Globally, CSOs recognised as advocates and watchdogs of the government contributing to expanded roles and responsibilities of both parties.
- Differing perspectives can lead to misconceptions and prejudices.
- Consensus building, identifying prejudices, accepting different roles in nation building key to collaboration.
- Sustain collaboration, derive equal participation, trust, accountability, autonomy and independence.

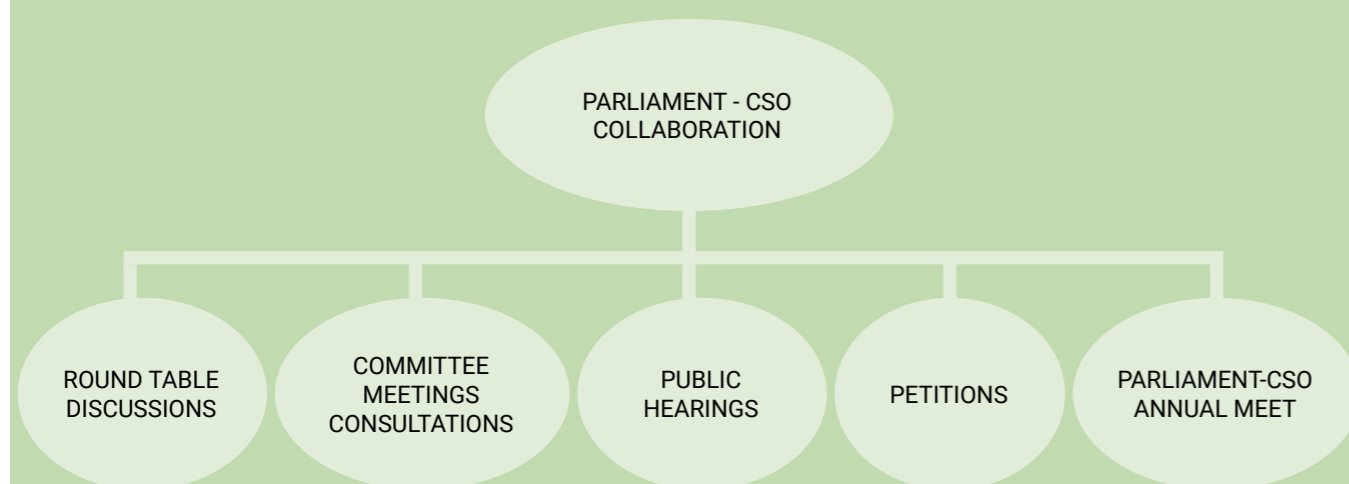
GLOBAL BEST PRACTICES OUTLINE

- Creation of a conducive legal environment with a favourable framework key to Parliament- CSO collaboration.
- Strategic Framework -Adoption of models of cooperation (MOU, strategies, etc.)
- Establishment of mechanisms to facilitate cooperation

CRUCIAL STEPS FOR EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

- Capacity building - develop conditions, capacity and skills to improve the understanding of the reciprocal roles.
- Agreed Framework/MOUs of engagement.
- Systems and structures in place to facilitate and foster the relation.

CHANNELS TO ESTABLISH COLLABORATION



6.1 PRIORITY AREAS

Parliament's major roles are legislation, representation and oversight. The downstream roles of CSOs are representation of and engagement with different sections of society directly affected by the implementation of government policies and the provision of services. CSOs are recognised globally as advocates and watchdogs that provide opportunities to contribute to and expand the roles and responsibilities of both CSOs and Parliament.

Parliament acknowledges, however, that differing perspectives can lead to misconceptions and prejudices. Consensus building activities to identify prejudices, accept the different roles that Parliament and CSOs play in nation building, and understand the inherent limitations to identifying common perspectives and aims within their mandates will be key to collaboration between Parliament and CSOs. To sustain this collaboration, awareness-raising will be required to derive equal participation, trust and accountability, and autonomy and independence.

Global best practices to strengthen and sustain collaboration

- i) **Creation of a conducive legal environment** with a favourable framework as key for Parliament- CSO collaboration to enable the creation of strong and reliable partners in the civil society who are able to effectively contribute.
- ii) **Adoption of models of cooperation** such as policy documents (MoU, strategies, etc.) would provide a strategic framework (that outlines the vision, highlights roles of Parliament/CSOs, sets out framework and principles of cooperation, and most importantly, lays down the grounds and direction for future collaboration and development.
- iii) **Establishment of mechanisms to facilitate cooperation** such as assigning a contact person with a mandate to foster cooperation, or a cross-sector advisory body to create a platform for continuous and sustainable dialogue are considered important.

Examples of global best practices outline the **creation of a conducive legal environment** within a favourable framework as key to Parliament-CSO collaboration that enables the creation of strong and reliable partners in civil society that can contribute effectively. In addition, the **adoption of models of cooperation**, such as policy documents, Memorandums of Understanding, and strategies, provides a strategic framework that outlines the vision, highlights the respective roles of Parliament and CSOs, sets out the framework for and principles of cooperation and, most importantly, lays the ground and sets the direction for future collaboration and development. Finally, **establishing mechanisms to facilitate cooperation**, such as assigning a contact person with a mandate to foster cooperation, or a cross-sector advisory body to create a platform for continuing and sustainable dialogue, is also seen as important. Thus, effective and fruitful engagement between Parliament and CSOs in Bhutan will require:

Capacity building of Secretariats of both chambers, MPs, and CSOs: should be in the areas of policy formulation, service provision and digital literacy. Training, seminars and exchange programmes will go a long way in improving reciprocal understanding of the roles of Parliament and CSOs.

An agreed framework for engagement: that outlines roles and responsibilities, the procedures for cooperation and a structure for cooperation, setting out a clear basis for collaboration and facilitating dialogue and mutual understanding among the actors.

Systems and structures in place to facilitate and foster relations: The existence of CSOA demonstrates a way forward for putting systems and structures in place in Parliament that facilitate and foster relations. Since both chambers have various standing committees, CSOs may be able to participate in committee sessions as required. This would create CSO involvement in consultations and briefings on key issues or reports, and provide them with written information to complement their proposals and deliberations.

6.2. CHANNELS TO ESTABLISH COLLABORATION

There are many channels that Parliament and CSOs can use to engage with each other throughout the various stages of legislative review, representation, and oversight. Charting out the channels for engagement, the National Assembly's 2019–23 Strategic Development Plan states that the NA 'will develop a strategy detailing the procedures and mechanisms for collaboration between the National Assembly and civil society Organisations' to 'broaden the level of consultations and professional working relationship between Parliamentarians, the Committees and CSOs'. It states that 'the Secretariat will initiate dialogue with CSOs to

orient them on the National Assembly's work and to explore how best they can get engaged in improving its functions'. Thus, the focus of Parliament-CSO collaboration is on legislation, representation, and oversight.

6.2.1 ROUND TABLE DISCUSSIONS:

Parliament organises roundtable discussions on relevant issues from time to time. This provides opportunities for cooperation in which MPs, academics, media representatives, civil society actors and industry leaders, among others, share their perspectives on a particular theme. A commitment to greater engagement is highlighted in the NA SDP: 'the Secretariat will work with development partners, CSOs, universities and experts in Bhutan to develop a vigorous and ongoing program of workshops, roundtables, and symposia on the issues of greatest importance to Bhutan especially on issues relating to SDGs and the FYPs.'

In turn, CSOs are able to contribute to chosen themes due to their wide network of expertise. This presents opportunities for Parliament to reaffirm its commitment to strategic priorities of strengthened oversight and accountability, enhanced public involvement, deepened engagement, and strengthened legislative capacity. Global best practice indicates that roundtables on chosen themes should be planned at least annually to identify steps for engagement.

The Committee/s secretariat may:

- i. Identify relevant CSOs to participate in the roundtable discussions and share written invitations to participate.
- ii. Disseminate the date, time and place of the roundtable, which may be in person or virtual, after agreement to participate.
- iii. Share the agenda with the CSOA, the BCSN, CSOs, institutes and other relevant stakeholders.
- iv. Involve stakeholders to ensure that matters arising from the discussions are properly debated and processed in the relevant committees.
- v. Engage stakeholders to ensure that roundtable outcomes are shared in committees and that parliamentary committees drive the implementation and monitoring of any resolutions.

6.2.2 COMMITTEE MEETINGS/CONSULTATIONS:

The parliamentary committees are mandated to review specific matters of policy, government

administration or performance. Committee inquiries serve several important functions: to report to and advise Parliament on a bill or other matter; to complement deliberative powers by furnishing information and evidence on issues before Parliament; and to scrutinise and report on the activities and performance of government agencies through their active participation in committee meetings and public hearings.

The NA Rules of Procedure states that committees have the power to take evidence and call on persons or for documents as required. The committee can ‘decide the mode of procedure and nature of questions that may be asked of the witness’ (National Assembly 2022: 326-327).

CSO engagement in Committee Meetings:

The National Assembly and the National Council have nine and seven committees respectively. Parliamentary Committees provide an opportunity for Organisations such as CSOs, and individuals to participate in law-making and policymaking by putting their views on public record to be considered as part of the decision-making process.

In view of the commitment of both chambers to support the committees ‘to become vibrant and effective’ in their deliberations, inquiries and investigations, as well as their review of legislation, and to draw attention to matters of national importance, channels for CSO engagement in committee meetings are vital. Global best practices indicate that committee meeting consultations should be planned regularly according to their relevance to planned discussions and the agenda for deliberations.

The Committee/s secretariat may:

- i. Identify CSOs to participate in consultation meetings.
- ii. Disseminate the date, time and place of the meeting, which may be in person or virtual, after agreement to participate.
- iii. Disseminate and share information

6.2.3 PUBLIC HEARINGS:

Parliamentary committees hold public hearings to hear from people with experience or expertise on subjects relevant to their inquiries. This information gathering mechanism helps the committee to gain a better understanding of policies and legislation, inform the public and conduct effective oversight and scrutiny of parliamentary and governmental processes. CSOs offer a vast network of people with first-hand experience or expertise from their engagement

with wider sections of Bhutanese society. They also offer platforms for Parliament to educate the public on legislation.

The NA SDP states that ‘the House Committee (or appropriate body) will undertake a review of the rules of procedure that pertain to conduct of public hearings, especially as they relate to the rights of witnesses. The Secretariat will also convene regular meets with Committee Secretaries and interested members to discuss issues that arise during the conduct of public hearings. It is important to have such a peer-to-peer forum especially as the usage of public hearings increases.’

Since 2008, only one public hearing has been conducted by the National Assembly. To engender a culture of knowledge and information gathering, it should be emphasised that regular public hearings are part of legislative oversight. Channels for effective planning, preparation and coordination should be explored to introduce regular public hearings.

Action for effective public hearings:

Channels should be institutionalised between Parliament and CSOs to ensure effective public hearings. This will require Parliament and CSOs to agree on criteria for public hearing participation, and on continuing capacity building in staggered stages for both the parties. Once established, coordination will involve incremental steps. Global best practices indicate that public hearings should be planned annually on chosen themes and identifies steps for engagement:

The committee/s secretariat may invite relevant CSOs:

- i. Identify CSOs to participate in relevant public hearings.
- ii. Disseminate the date, time and place of a hearing, which may be in person or virtual, after agreement to participate.
- iii. Disseminate and share reports

6.2.4 PETITIONS

Signing a petition is an important way for citizens and groups such as CSOs to make their concerns known to Parliament, become involved in the legislative process and inform the decision-making process. Petitions cannot compel action, but they do raise awareness of issues in the community and allow MPs to learn what actions the community wants Parliament to take. MPs present petitions to Parliament (both the NC and the NA) on most sitting days.

The NA Rules of Procedure (2022) states that ‘it shall be the duty of the committee to report to the House on specific complaints made in the petition referred to it after taking such evidence as it deems fit and to suggest remedial measures to prevent such cases in future’. This indicates room for consultations with relevant stakeholders and petitioners. Almost all CSOs deal with issues at the policy and implementation level and strive to achieve positive change in their respective fields. There are various ways of educating CSOs to better enable them to make submissions.

Global best practices indicate that petitions/e-petitions are key to the ability of the general public and CSOs to raise pertinent issues at the legislative level. Effective engagement requires appropriate capacity in both Parliament and CSOs:

The committee/s secretariat can invite relevant CSOs to attend:

- i. Workshops on petition procedures for CSOs and other relevant stakeholders.
- ii. Formal events with committees/MPs and CSOs to foster relations.

6.2.5 PARLIAMENT-CSO ANNUAL MEET

Like the Government-CSO meeting, there is potential for a Parliament-CSO annual meeting, which the CSOA could coordinate and facilitate. An annual meet would provide increased opportunities to discuss topics and initiatives to strengthen and chart out long-term partnerships between the two parties. Since the numbers of CSOs are increasing, the platform would also help MPs, secretariats and Assistant Research Officers to keep track of the programmes and initiatives CSOs are involved in.

Global best practices indicate that annual meetings should be planned on chosen themes and identify the following steps to enable the fruitful exchange of ideas between the relevant stakeholders:

- i. Make written theme submissions for a Parliament-CSO meeting.
- ii. Identify the relevant CSOs to make presentations at the meeting and distribute written invitations to participants.
- iii. Discuss and finalise the date, time and place of the annual meeting in advance, in person or as a virtual conference, to encourage maximum participation.
- iv. Share and discuss the agenda with CSOs, Parliament and other relevant stakeholders.
- v. Ensure that the matters that arise from the discussions are properly recorded and shared with relevant committees.

FIGURE: COLLABORATION STRATEGY IN A PAGE

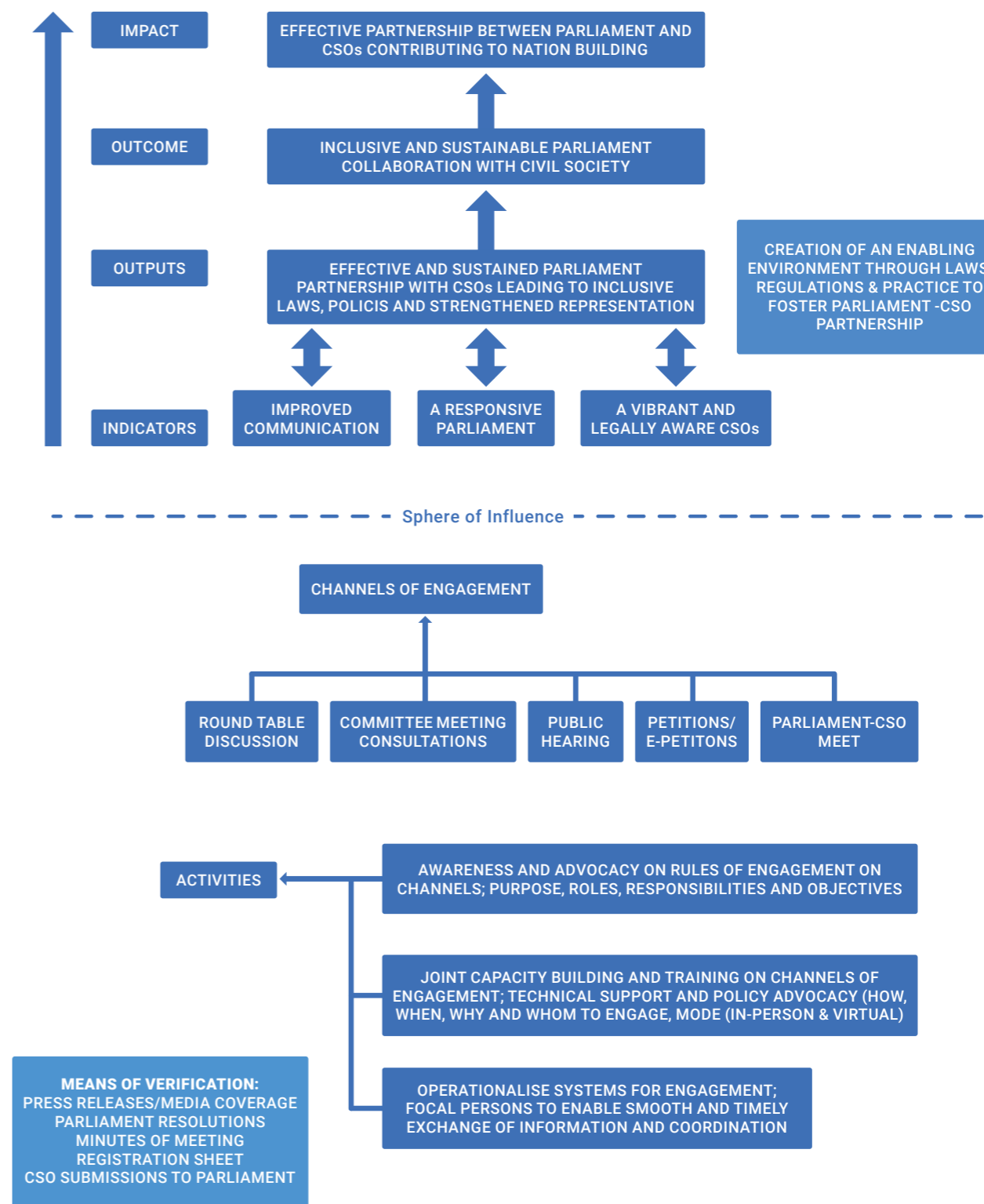


TABLE: ACTION PLAN FOR PARLIAMENT-CSO COLLABORATION

| IMPACT | Effective collaboration between Parliament and CSOs on contributing to nation building | | | | | |
|---|--|---|--|---|--|-----------|
| OUTCOME | Inclusive and Sustainable Parliament Collaboration with Civil Society (Parliament/CSO collaboration) | | | | | |
| OUTPUT | Effective Parliamentary partnership with CSOs leading to inclusive laws, policies and strengthened representation (Improved communication between Parliament and CSOs; A civil society-responsive Parliament; A vibrant and legally aware civil society) | | | | | |
| Channels/Action | Rationale | Activities | | Frequency/ Interval | Responsible Agencies | Timeframe |
| 1. Round Table Discussions | To provide more opportunities for cooperation between MPs and CSO actors, academics, media entities, industry leaders, etc. and share ideas and perspectives on chosen themes. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness and advocacy on roundtable engagement with Parliament; purpose, rules, roles, responsibilities and objectives; Joint capacity building and training on Roundtable engagement: how, when, why and who to engage with; technical support and policy advocacy for CSOs to engage with Parliament through Roundtable meeting channel (virtual/in-person, etc.); Establish or operationalise systems between Parliament and CSOs; focal persons with roles and responsibilities to enable smooth and timely exchange of information and coordination, etc.; <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Create guidelines and steps for engagement in line with rules of procedures of the two chambers; revamp or develop; Circulate guidelines and steps for engagement. | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Once every five years At regular intervals Once (initially) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Once At regular intervals <p>Round Table Discussions: annual symposium</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> NA & NC Secretariats Parliament, CSOA, EC, BCSN & CSOs, Parliament Secretariats, CSOA & EC, BCSN | 1-5 years |
| 2. Committee Meetings or Consultations | <p>Provides a platform for Organisations, such as CSOs, and individuals to participate in policymaking by having their views placed on public record and considered as part of the decision-making process; and facilitates MPs representation of a wider network of society through meetings by discussing/debating on specific issues.</p> <p>CSOs function under eight thematic areas and have a wealth of insight to contribute through consultations.</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness of and sensitisation on committee meeting consultations; purpose, procedures and rules for engagement, roles and responsibilities and objectives; Capacity building and training on committee meetings: how, when, why and who to engage with; technical support and policy advocacy for CSOs to engage with Parliament through committee meeting channel (how to prepare written submissions, opinions on bills and testimonials, etc. for issues under deliberation, virtual/in-person, etc.); Establish or operationalise systems between Parliament and CSOs; focal persons with roles and responsibilities to enable smooth exchange of information and coordination, etc.; <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Create guidelines and steps for engagement in line with rules of procedure of the two chambers; revamp or develop; Circulate guidelines/steps, updated calendars, venue, duration, etc. to allow engagement. | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Once every five years At regular intervals Once (initially) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Once At regular intervals <p>Committee meeting consultation at regular intervals</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> NA & NC Secretariats Parliament, CSOA, EC, BCSN & CSOs, etc. Parliament Secretariats, relevant Committees, CSOA & EC, BCSN through focal persons | 1-5 years |

TABLE: ACTION PLAN FOR PARLIAMENT-CSO COLLABORATION

| Channels/Action | Rationale | Activities | | Frequency/Interval | Responsible Agencies | Timeframe |
|-------------------------------|---|--|--|---|---|-----------|
| 3. Public Hearings | Helps Parliamentary committees to gain a better understanding of policies & legislation, educate the public and conduct effective oversight and scrutiny of parliamentary and governance processes. Provides a platform for CSOs to represent and raise issues with a wider network of society through meetings to discuss/debate specific issues | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness and sensitisation on public hearing engagement with Parliament; purpose, rules, roles, responsibilities and objectives; Joint capacity building and training on public hearing engagement: how, when, why and whom to engage; technical support and policy advocacy for CSOs to engage with Parliament through public hearing channel (role of Witness, virtual/in-person, etc.); Establish or operationalise systems between Parliament and CSOs; focal persons with roles and responsibilities to enable smooth exchange of information and coordination, etc.; <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Create guidelines and steps for engagement in line with rules of procedure of the two chambers; revamp or develop; Circulate guidelines and steps for engagement.. | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Once every five years At regular intervals Once (initially) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Once At regular intervals <p>Public Hearings as and when deemed necessary</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> NA & NC Secretariats Parliament, CSOA, EC, BCSN & CSOs, etc. Parliament Secretariats, CSOA & EC, BCSN through focal persons | 1-5 years |
| 4. Petitions | Supports citizens and groups to make their concerns known to Parliament, be involved in the legislative process and be informed on the decision-making process. Allows the Members of Parliament (MPs) to feel the pulse of the community. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness and sensitisation on petition/e-petition to engage with Parliament; purpose, rules, roles, responsibilities and objectives; Joint capacity building and training on petition and e-petition: how, when and why it is used and who to engage with; technical support and policy advocacy for CSOs to engage with Parliament through petition/e-petition channel (screening of petitions, virtual/in-person, etc.); Establish or operationalise systems between Parliament and CSOs; focal persons with roles and responsibilities to enable smooth exchange of information and coordination, etc.; <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Create guidelines and steps for engagement in line with rules of procedure of the two chambers; revamp or develop; Circulate guidelines on and steps for engagement. | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Once every five years At regular intervals Once (initially) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Once At regular intervals <p>Petition and e-petition as and when deemed required</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> NA & NC Secretariats Parliament, CSOA, EC, BCSN & CSOs, etc. Parliament Secretariats, CSOA & EC, BCSN through focal persons | 1-5 years |
| 5. Parliament-CSO Meet | Provide increased opportunities to discuss topics and initiatives to strengthen and chart long-term partnership. The platform helps MPs, Committee Secretariats, Assistant Research Officers to effectively keep track of the programmes and initiatives CSOs are involved in. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness and sensitisation on Parliament-CSO annual meet; purpose, rules, roles, responsibilities and objectives; Joint capacity building to create awareness on annual meet; how, when and why and who to engage; technical support and policy advocacy for CSOs to engage with Parliament through the annual channel (virtual/in-person, etc.); Establish or operationalise systems between Parliament and CSOs; focal persons with roles and responsibilities to enable smooth exchange of information and coordination, etc.; <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Create guidelines and steps for engagement in line with the rules of procedure of the two chambers; revamp or develop; Circulate guidelines and steps for engagement. | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Once every five years At regular intervals Once (initially) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Once At regular intervals <p>Parliament-CSO Meet Annually</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> NA & NC Secretariats Parliament, CSOA, EC, BCSN & CSOs, etc. Parliament Secretariats, CSOA & EC, BCSN through focal persons | 1-5 years |

TABLE: ACTION PLAN FOR PARLIAMENT-CSO COLLABORATION

| Traversing priorities | | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|---------------------------|-----------|
| Channels/Action | Rationale | Activities | | Frequency/Interval | Responsible Agencies | Timeframe |
| 1. Capacity Building | To create an enabling environment for stronger Parliamentary/CSO collaboration | Training on rules and procedures for CSO engagement in committee meetings, public hearings, roundtable discussions, rights of witness. Training on policy advocacy, legislature, finance & budget, oversight. Training on filing petitions, e-petitions, etc. | | At regular intervals | All relevant stakeholders | 1-5 years |
| 2. Advocacy, Outreach and Civic Education | To increase public awareness of the role of Parliament, and the rights of citizens in a democracy, thereby strengthening their legitimacy | Develop education packages on the role of Parliament and CSOs Develop/revamp Parliamentary website to make it accessible and user friendly Produce publications on the joint initiatives Develop visitor information centres Work with media personnel to improve their understanding of Parliament's and CSO's joint roles Develop channels of engagement for meetings with constituents and target groups (separate and joint) Train Parliament & CSOs to interact with constituencies to strengthen relations | | Continuous or in staggered sets | All relevant stakeholders | 1-5 years |
| 3. Information management system | A structure for dissemination should be instituted in Parliament to promote CSO and general public engagement. This will enable dissemination of timely news. | Establish circulation channels (CSOA & BCSN) for CSOs and media and assign focal persons in Parliament to enable the smooth and fast information sharing of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> sitting days, agenda with issues being discussed, observing sittings updating on any decisions taken by Parliament. include order papers, bills tabled, summaries of bills, annual reports tabled, committee reports tabled, Parliamentary decisions and debates as well as ministerial statements. | | Continuous | All relevant stakeholders | 1-5 years |
| INDICATORS | Parliament's increased engagement in the review process through consultation meetings, roundtable discussions, public hearings, etc.: how often, processes, frequency, quality, effectiveness of engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased correspondence between Parliament and CSOs. Increased participation of CSOs in the Parliamentary committee meetings Efficient Parliament Information Management System incorporated and Focal Persons identified. Increased number of written submissions to Parliament/ representatives of constituencies (MPs) Parliament-CSO meet conducted annually. Increased engagement of CSOs through digital engagement platform | | | KEY ASSUMPTIONS <ol style="list-style-type: none"> There are conducive laws, regulations and practices that enable Parliament and CSOs to engage in advocacy Both Parliament and CSOs are willing to work together The communities are aware of the benefits of Parliament-CSO engagement. | | |
| MEANS OF VERIFICATION | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Press releases/media coverage Parliament resolutions Minutes of Meeting Registration sheet CSO submissions to Parliament | | | | | |

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01: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY IN BHUTAN

CSOs in Bhutan are local non-profit Organisations that aim to complement the government by playing a significant role in the development of the country. They play an important role in ensuring that vulnerable sections of society are not neglected through the mobilisation and sensitisation of communities in effecting change. Inputs from CSOs have created added value to the policy planning and implementation process while enhancing the legitimacy, awareness of and longer-term applicability of policy and planning initiatives through a wide range of contributions. They have played an essential role in the context of state services or lack of services; and challenges in the development of areas such as education, health, governance, transparency and accountability. Among the many areas they serve, strengthening democracy and contributing to development are the most crucial. Over the past decade, the legitimacy of CSOs has been strengthened among the general public. A study measuring public perceptions of CSOs found a high approval rate of CSOs for the value they create: 70% of the survey respondents perceived a positive impact with the ability to resolve problems at the local, district and national levels.

Democracy: Most respondents perceive CSOs as a driving force in the promotion of democracy; around 80% believe that they promote democracy at the national level and 59.3% perceive that CSOs play a significant role in the promotion of a democratic society at the local level.

Transparency: About 48% perceive CSOs to be the driving force in promoting transparency in governance and corporate conduct; 43.3% believe that CSOs contribute to promoting transparency in governance.

Poverty Eradication: One in every four individuals (25%) strongly believe that CSOs are a driving force in preventing and alleviating human poverty while 40% view their role in poverty alleviation to be key.

Environmental Sustainability: About a quarter of respondents (26.4%) perceived CSOs as a constant driving force in environmental conservation and sustainability, while 44 % viewed CSOs as very often engaged in conservation efforts.

The findings also indicate that the CSOs have been involved in and contributed to the development of key documents, such as the 21st Century Economic Roadmap, revisions of and amendment to the Information, Communication and Media (ICM) Act 2018, LGBTQI issues, the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2019, the National Sanitation & Hygiene Policy 2017, and Rules & Regulations for Entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the CSOs have

sourced Nu. 3.31 billion over the past two decades, indicating a high degree of innovation, effectiveness and agility in their various programmes.

Existing challenges for CSOs

Notwithstanding these contributions from CSOs, there are inherent challenges with regard to limited capacity and operational set-up, sustainability due to high dependency on external funding, lack of clarity in direction, weak research and advocacy capacity, and limited cooperation among CSOs that affect CSO functions.

- The limited capacity of CSOs in terms of experienced staff and resources due to the inability to attract highly qualified professionals and the high rate of attrition among staff mean that research capacity is low.
- Limited funding is an enduring obstacle for the CSOs, which restricts their capacity to expand and deliver services across the country. Their size and inability to generate membership leads to twin problems of strong dependency on donors and lack of a proper strategy for fund generation and fundraising.
- Limited cooperation among CSOs points to a lack of proactive moves towards interaction and collaboration, despite improvement during the COVID-19 pandemic which brought about exemplary cooperation among some CSOs. The lack of a united front among CSOs affects meaningful exchanges with government.

Externally, their legitimacy with the government is considered a stumbling block to effective collaboration. Despite improved frequency of interaction, the quality and nature of CSO-government relations are lower than desired, since CSOs still rely on government inclusion.

- There is no policy framework or standard procedure for engagement between CSOs and the government, which means that there is a lack of clarity on action and interaction.
- The visibility of CSOs is limited to a few (urban) pockets in the country, leading to a decreasing understanding and awareness of their work among a large section of the Bhutanese population and thus to decreased influence.

In brief, the external and environmental challenges are:

- Limited domestic resources to tap into

- Changes in the international development landscape and donor funds
- Absence of policy to foster CSO growth
- Limited platforms for CSO-government dialogue, though increasing in recent years.

02. EXISTING COLLABORATION BETWEEN PARLIAMENT AND CSOs

Parliament acknowledges that CSOs are effective channels and spaces for Parliamentarians to communicate and interact with the people, although not much has been achieved to institutionalise and create a space for engagement. Despite a strong legislative direction for engagement, CSOs are not invited to Parliamentary oversight committees or public consultations to facilitate discussion on deliberations, results or findings. Similarly, there appears to be no mechanism in place to record, receive or demonstrate action on the feedback Parliament receives from CSOs.

In turn, the CSOs' efforts to engage with Parliament have been limited due to the lack of mechanisms in place. There are recorded instances of interaction on legislative matters whereby CSOs have raised concerns regarding proposals and deliberations in Parliamentary sessions. Certain recent actions by the CSOs are commendable and evidence of their growing visibility in the country:

1. Proposal and Deliberation on lowering the Age of Consent in 2019 Penal Code (Section 183) amendment: CSOs such as the NCWC, RENEW, alongside activists and concerned citizens, raised their concerns on the proposal to lower the age of consent from 18 years to 16 years in the light of increasing crimes such as rape and the exploitation of children, and that the ramifications of lowering the age of consent and removal of legal protections. Parliament had previously decriminalised sex between two consenting minors above the age of 16 years in 2011.
2. Decriminalisation of same-sex sexual activity: Section 213 of the Bhutan Penal Code penalised same-sex relationships and lawmakers voted to amend 'sodomy or any other sexual conduct that is against the order of nature'. Efforts to repeal the sodomy ban began in 2019, and were passed in December 2020 and signed into law on 17 February 2021. This was possible due to increasing political support among political parties (inclusion in party manifestos of Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party) and politicians, as well as through awareness created by Rainbow Bhutan, Lhaksam+ (a network of people living with HIV).

3. The CSO (Amendment) Bill 2021

4. Other CSO events such as the CSO Fair 2016, CSO-Government Meet, where Members of Parliament were also consulted.

Challenges in Parliament-CSO collaboration

The limited compatibility between Parliament and CSO can be explained by their different mandates, roles and responsibilities, operational structures and management. Different objectives and aims mean that this incompatibility is an enduring problem manifest in all past attempts and efforts to cooperate and collaborate. Similarly, the operational management and budget structures differ considerably between the two, which means that the nature of cooperation differs among local, district and national actors. This is exacerbated by prejudices, perceptions and the limited understanding of each other's important roles, which adversely affects the ability to cooperate. Among the barriers to cooperation and coordination are:

- A lack of long-term strategy: cooperation is ad hoc, short-lived and ineffective as it cannot be sustained to realise its full potential.
- Different mandates and diverging expectations, and a lack of methodological knowledge on cooperation.
- A sense of distrust can be observed sometimes, which makes commitment difficult to achieve.
- Diverging interests as well as a lack of structural and procedural compatibility, leading to limited knowledge on how to cooperate.

For both sides to engage with each other on plans, policies and representation would require sustained planning efforts that record and take account of the institutional role of Parliaments and CSOs, notwithstanding the high rate of attrition (changes among politicians and staff) in both agencies, in order to identify areas of cooperation.

Pathways for Engagement: In order to encourage and build collaboration between Parliament and CSOs, strong understanding should be created to derive:

- **Equal Participation:** The parameters for participation should be agreed and based on

equal participation by Parliament and CSOs. Participation should be open and accessible in order to collect and channel views from across groups and concerned citizens.

- **Trust and Accountability:** Taking into consideration that the Parliament and CSOs play different roles in a democratic society, a shared understanding of goals to improve the lives of people should be achieved based on respect, mutual trust, clarity and transparency at every stage.
- **Autonomy and Independence:** The parameters for engagement with CSOs should be to recognise them as independent bodies with a right to their aims, activities and decisions. They should have the right to advocate positions counter to other authorities, including Parliament, and their right to act independently should be respected.

This would lead to a:

1. **Representative Parliament:** Parliaments are uniquely positioned to promote empowerment as they represent a cross-section of society. Since they are elected representatives, MPs can ensure the representation and political participation of women and minorities, such as LGBTQI and special interest groups. Structures should be developed for public outreach strategies in cooperation with CSOs as this will strengthen Parliamentarians' capacity to engage with their constituencies on such issues.
2. **Transparent Parliament:** A structure of dissemination should be instituted in Parliament to promote engagement with CSOs and general public. A Parliament information management system should be created to enable the timely dissemination of news:
 - This will keep CSOs updated on sitting days and issues to be discussed, and to observe sittings and decisions taken by Parliament.
 - Circulate information to CSOs through the EC, the BCSN or the CSOA. Information should include order papers, bills tabled, summaries of bills, annual reports tabled, committee reports tabled, Parliament decisions and debates, as well as ministerial statements.
 - Circulate the timetables of the standing committees to CSOs and information on bills and papers that are open for public consultation as well as acceptance of submissions before announced deadlines.

- Clarify the national budget process to CSOs and disseminate publicly available analyses of the budget
 - Explain legislative and oversight processes by developing tools, methodologies and mechanism to facilitate interaction between MPs and CSOs, including convening meetings between them to engage in debates on specific issues.
3. Information should be provided to CSOs on how to engage with the work of Parliament by sharing:
- Contacts for specific subject issues as well as focal contacts for committees. CSOs should also share their focal contacts with Parliament. There should be responsibilities to collect, aggregate and organise information about Parliament/CSOs and share them through various channels, such as websites.

03: STAKEHOLDERS INTERVIEWED

Officials interviewed during development of the strategy document: Thimphu, July-August 2022.

| Sl. | Name & Position | Organisation |
|-----|--|-----------------------------|
| 1 | H. E. Wangchuk Namgyel, Hon'ble Speaker | National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 2 | H.E. Dorji Wangdi, Opposition Leader | National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 3 | Hon. Kinga Penjor, Chairperson of Economic & Finance Committee & Member of Legislative Committee and House Committee | National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 4 | Hon. Passang Dorji, Member of Human Rights & Foreign Relations Committee and Public Accounts Committee (Joint) | National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 5 | Hon. Kinley Wangchuk, Member of Economic & Finance Committee and House Committee | National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 6 | H.E. Tashi Dorji, Hon'ble Chairperson | National Council of Bhutan |

| Sl. | Name & Position | Organisation |
|-----|--|--|
| 7 | Hon. Ugyen Namgay, Member of Social and Cultural Affairs Committee and House Committee | National Council of Bhutan |
| 8 | Hon. Lhatu, Chairperson of Foreign Relation Committee and Member of Good Governance Committee | National Council of Bhutan |
| 9 | Hon. Ugyen Tshering, Chairperson of Economic Affairs Committee and Member of Public Accounts Committee (Joint) | National Council of Bhutan |
| 10 | Hon. Lhaki Dolma, Member of Social and Cultural Affairs Committee | National Council of Bhutan |
| 11 | Tandin Tshering, Secretary General | Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 12 | Pem Zam, Committee Secretary | Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 13 | Sonam Lhamo, Chief Information & Media Officer | Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 14 | Tshering Wangchuk, Legal Officer | Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 15 | Sonam Choki, Committee Secretary | Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 16 | Thinley Wangchuk, Officiating Director | Secretariat, National Council of Bhutan |
| 17 | Tendrel Gyeltshen, Sr. Legislative Officer | Secretariat, National Council of Bhutan |
| 18 | Karma, Committee Secretary | Secretariat, National Council of Bhutan |
| 19 | Tshering Wangmo, Sr. Information & Media Officer | Secretariat, National Council of Bhutan |
| 20 | Sherab Dorji, Member Secretary | CSO Authority |

| Sl. | Name & Position | Organisation |
|-----|---|--|
| 21 | Rinzin Rinzin, Executive Director (Chairperson of EC, BCSN) | Bhutan Transparency Initiative |
| 22 | Tashi Payden Tshering, Executive Director | Royal Society for Protection & Care of Animals |
| 23 | Sonam Dorji, General Secretary | Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators (ABTO) |
| 24 | Chencho Lhamu, Executive Director | Bhutan Center for Media & Democracy |
| 25 | Needrup Zangpo, Executive Director | Bhutan Media Foundation |
| 26 | Deki Zam, Executive Director | Draktsho Vocational Skills for Special Needs |
| 27 | Tashi Namgay, Executive Director | Bhutan Kidney Foundation |
| 28 | Dhan K. Bhujel, Executive Director | Evaluation Association of Bhutan |
| 29 | Passang Dorji, Executive Director | Bhutan Toilet Organisation |
| 30 | Kencho Zam, Asst. Programme Officer | RENEW |
| 31 | Yangchen Dorji, Programme Officer | HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation |
| 32 | Tshering Phuntsho, Monitoring, Evaluation & Logistics Officer | HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation |
| 33 | Pema Tenzin, Project Manager, Project 'Nyamdrel | International IDEA |
| 34 | Karma Dema, Programme Officer | International IDEA |

04: STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTED FOR VALIDATION OF FINDINGS

Participants engaged in the validation of findings and consultation workshop on strategy document, Thimphu, 9 September 2022

| Sl. | Name & Position | Organisation |
|-----|--|--|
| 1 | Hon. Passang Dorji, Member of Human Rights & Foreign Relations Committee and Public Accounts Committee (Joint) | National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 2 | Hon. Dupthob, Member of Human Rights & Foreign Relations Committee and Economic and Finance Committee | National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 3 | Hon. Hemant Gurung, Member of Public Accounts Committee (Joint) and Good Governance Committee | National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 4 | Hon. Ugyen Namgay, Member of Social and Cultural Affairs Committee and House Committee | National Council of Bhutan |
| 5 | Hon. Sonam Pelzom, Member of Social and Cultural Affairs Committee | National Council of Bhutan |
| 6 | Hon. Anand Rai, Member of House Committee and Economic Affairs Committee | National Council of Bhutan |
| 7 | Hon. Tirtha Man Rai, Member of Natural Resources and Environment Committee | National Council of Bhutan |
| 8 | Karma Drupchen, Committee Secretary | Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 9 | Sonam Choki, Committee Secretary | Secretariat, National Assembly of Bhutan |
| 10 | Tshewang Tashi (Mr.), Officiating Secretary General | Secretariat, National Council of Bhutan |
| 11 | Thinley Wangchuk, Officiating Director | Secretariat, National Council of Bhutan |

| Sl. | Name & Position | Organisation |
|-----|---|--|
| 12 | Tendrel Gyeltshen, Sr. Legislative Officer | Secretariat, National Council of Bhutan |
| 13 | Phuntsho Wangdi, Sr. Language Development Officer | Secretariat, National Council of Bhutan |
| 14 | Karma, Committee Secretary | Secretariat, National Council of Bhutan |
| 15 | Khandu Om, Sr. Information & Communications Officer | Secretariat, National Council of Bhutan |
| 16 | Sherab Dorji, Member Secretary | CSO Authority |
| 17 | Kinley Drukpa, Programme Officer | Bhutan Transparency Initiative |
| 18 | Tshewang Tashi (Ms.), Officiating Chairperson of EC, BCSN, & ED of Loden Foundation | Bhutan Civil Society Network |
| 19 | Chencho Lhamu, Executive Director | Bhutan Center for Media & Democracy (BCMD) |
| 20 | Needrup Zangpo, Executive Director | Bhutan Media Foundation (BMF) |
| 21 | Pema Eden, AFD Head | Bhutan Ecological Society |
| 22 | Sonam Pem, Executive Director | Tarayana Foundation |
| 23 | Tshering Phuntsho, Monitoring, Evaluation & Logistics Officer | HELVETAS Swiss Cooperation |
| 24 | Choyang Namgay Dolma, Programme Intern | International IDEA |
| 25 | Ugyen Lhaden, Programme Intern | International IDEA |
| 26 | Pema Tenzin, Project Manager, Project 'Nyamdrel | International IDEA |
| 27 | Karma Dema, Programme Officer | International IDEA |
| 28 | Pema Yangzome, Finance & Adm Officer | International IDEA |

