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Working with the grain: economic inclusion of persons with disabilities in Bhutan

Luca Mannocchi  and Matthew J. Schuelka 

ABSTRACT

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has put the most vulnerable at the centre of a global effort to improve the lives of those living in poverty. This paper analyses the mechanisms underpinning economic inclusion of youth with disabilities in Bhutan through an institutionalist approach. Using evidence from various sources, we provide policy, program, and strategy advice for near-term implementation based on current formal and informal institutional arrangements. In our conclusions, we advocate for a wide angle on institutions to identify mechanisms of economic inclusion and overcome fragmented approaches for people with disabilities.

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Economic inclusion; youth employment; disability; Bhutan

Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the global campaign “Leave No One Behind” in development and humanitarian action have contributed to mainstreaming vulnerable groups and disabilities in donors’ agendas (e.g. World Bank 2021). The notions of equality of opportunities, direct participation, productive employment, and productivity growth have also been gaining prominence (e.g. Ranieri and Ramos 2013).

Goal 8 of the SDGs, for example, seeks to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value. This is a considerable challenge. First, persons with disabilities comprise a significant proportion of the world’s population, with some estimates counting one billion people experiencing some form of disability. The UN estimates that at least 80% of that billion are in developing countries (UN Enable n.d.) where stigmatisation is high, and governance structures and public services are weak (e.g. Adjei-Amoako 2016; Polu, Mong, and Nelson 2015).

Evidence has also shown that persons with disabilities are more likely to experience deprivation as they are less likely to attend formal education, more likely to be unemployed, and, if they are in employment, more likely to earn less than non-disabled persons while facing a higher cost of living (Banks et al. 2020; Simeu and Mitra 2019; Trani and Loeb 2012). Poverty and disability have also been found to be mutually reinforcing mechanisms (Banks and Polack 2019). In this article, we use an institutionalist approach to investigate the challenges and opportunities faced by persons with disabilities – particularly youth – regarding their economic inclusion. We argue that to understand the mechanisms of economic inclusion/exclusion of persons with disabilities – in Bhutan or elsewhere – we need to acknowledge a complex and interdependent range of social, cultural, economic, and governance factors.

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Engaging effectively with local political and institutional realities to find “entry points” for improvement to a specific *status quo* have been proven to require a wider angle on institutions, with history and culture having a strong influence on institutional evolution (Grindle 2011; Dutraive 2009; Williamson 2009; Boettke, Coyne, and Leeson 2008). Hence, economic inclusion/exclusion mechanisms may encompass a range of issues from policy and legislation to socio-cultural norms that can be instrumental in determining what is feasible based on the historical evolutions of current formal institutions or on informal practices that may help introduce plausible and sustainable reforms (Johnson and Williams 2016).

Methodology

We used Chang’s (2002) approach to unpack and analyse different “institutional layers”: the rules of the game (for instance, policies and regulations); supporting market infrastructure (such as training institutions, government departments/agencies); suppliers/providers (these can be a range of actors, such as NGOs, private sector actors) and users (unemployed youth, persons with disabilities, CSOs); and social norms and conventions (as unwritten codes of conduct).

Our working definition of economic inclusion encompasses two elements: the “direct participation” in, and “meaningful opportunities” from, vocational training, employment promotion programs (that include employment training, start-up incentives, or job search assistance), and employment/self-employment. “Meaningful” is defined as enabling the chances to improve one’s skills to get a better job and/or to have the opportunity to work and earn enough to meet at least the basic needs. Our definition of a “person with a disability” is framed within a functional and socially constructed model of “disability”, and we defer to the Bhutanese government’s definition, as informed by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics (2021).

Our initial data sources included policy documents, legislative texts, official reports, and newspaper articles. One participatory workshop with different key stakeholders, including persons with disabilities (33 participants from various organisations), was held in Bhutan on 7 June 2019. The workshop was designed to obtain a preliminary understanding of the context with two questions exploring issues around vocational education programs and the labour market, followed by a question on what participants perceived as the sectors/industries that could support meaningful employment opportunities and why. The discussion was semi-facilitated by the research team, and the analysis identified preliminary themes which were further explored with the interviews.

In-depth interviews with key informants ($n = 19$) from the private (6), public (10), and voluntary/CSOs sectors (3) were conducted between the end of June 2019 and January 2020. Interview sampling was both purposive and snowballing to ensure a balanced representation of participants and meaningful perspectives. The full details of the interview protocol, including interview questions, can be found in Mannocci and Schuelka (2021) as part of a larger-scale political economy assessment report. The interview questions explored:

- the role of policies and programs (particularly their design and implementation);
- the role of the private sector;
- the role of social norms;
- the role of civil-society organisations (CSOs) and the role of international donors.

This research design yielded primary and secondary data analysed using thematic analysis. Ethical research clearance was granted by the University of Birmingham and the National Statistics Bureau (NSB) of Bhutan. The institutionalist approach highlighted bottlenecks to participation at macro- and meso-levels of analysis, which are valid for a specific segment of the Bhutanese population, regardless of the type or severity of disabilities. This article does not specifically disaggregate findings, analysis, or recommendations by gender and disability.

Findings and discussion

Theme 1: research and policy on vulnerable groups

A lack of robust statistical data is commonplace in many developing countries (Jerven 2013), particularly on persons with disabilities (Mwendwa, Murangira, and Lang 2009). In Bhutan, research specifically analysing vulnerable groups – including persons with disabilities – was conducted as part of a strategy to identify and define these groups within the Bhutanese society.

The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) conducted the first Vulnerability Baseline Assessment on vulnerable groups in 2016 (GNHCS 2016). The Census was also improved by adopting the Washington Group Methodology on disability statistics in 2017 (NSB 2018a), allowing the collection of nationwide data on persons with disabilities showing incidence, types, and severity of disabilities by *Dzongkhag* [district] and *Gewog* [municipality]. The new Census defines a person as with disability if any one domain of seeing, hearing, walking, cognition, self-care, and communication is coded “Lot of Difficulty” or “Cannot do at all”. Using this cut-off, as recommended by the Washington Group, the prevalence rate for disability in Bhutan for 2017 is 2.1%, corresponding to 15,567 persons: roughly even between males and females (NSB 2018a, 41).

The RGoB used this research exercise to inform the development of the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD). The use of data to inform policy and programs demonstrates a significant awareness among policy-makers to tackle issues related to persons with disabilities. As noted by one key informant, “we need to improve our databases. We need to understand the various kinds of disabilities ... and what is possible for [persons with disabilities]”. Nevertheless, challenges for persons with disabilities and their economic inclusion come from different and inter-related aspects.

First, the NPPD was approved after a long drafting-stage phase, although it is not yet fully implemented by the RGoB. From the interview data, it emerged that resource constraints can explain why Bhutan, a signatory of the CRPD, has yet to ratify it. The ratification of the CRPD and the policy approval would have brought obligations in terms of resource mobilisation. Hence, competing development priorities vis-à-vis limited resources seem to have acted as a bottleneck. As noted by one key informant:

everyone supports the idea of helping people with disabilities ... but unfortunately [in Bhutan there are] two schools of thought, one ... that we have to put everything in place before [ratifying]; the other is to ratify first and then [act] accordingly to what it is mandated ... because of that nothing concrete happened but ... ratifying [would provide] the legal backing for whatever policy, [and] programme. [However] not having a law ... does not necessarily mean that we do not support or we are not concerned about rights and welfare. [of persons with disabilities]

The above had a cascade effect on other aspects, affecting the effectiveness of the policy. For example, it helps to explain the lack of legislation on various aspects of the lives of persons with disabilities. It also explained the lack of interconnectedness to other relevant policies despite the NPPD identifying various areas for intervention. These areas include education, health and economic security, physical accessibility and access to justice, community, caregivers, and family relationships, potentially interconnecting with many other policies in Bhutan (GNHC 2019).

An example is the National Employment Policy. It mentions at point 2.6 that the RGoB “shall promote skills development to enable persons with disabilities to acquire training and skills to run their own businesses or be employed and participate more effectively in the workforce” (MoLHR 2013, 4). The above shows awareness among policy-makers. However, this policy needs additional guidelines, such as “how” this should be achieved or providing specific reference to other policies. The Labour Act (RGoB 2007) protects the right of the child against the worst forms of child labour, protects women from sexual harassment at workplaces, incorporates compensation and gratuity rights for employees working in private or government organisations, and also

introduces the prohibition against discrimination of employees and job seekers, but there is no explicit reference to disability.

Beyond these examples, a review of policies that can provide gateways for the economic inclusion of persons with disabilities should comprise the National Employment and Education Policies, the National Human Resource Development Policy, the Economic Development Policy, the Cottage and Small Industry Policy, the Foreign Direct Investment Policy, the National Youth Policy, and the Tourism Policy.

In connection with policy reform or amendment, it is also important to note that the availability of disaggregated data on disability through the NSB represents an opportunity for policy-makers to tailor policies and programs. In fact, besides the overall disability prevalence rate, the Census collected valuable information on less severe forms of disabilities and their geographical incidence that can be used to devise the policies that can mainstream economic inclusion for persons with disabilities.

In addition, *ad hoc* qualitative and/or quantitative research at the micro-level can significantly improve policy and program design (e.g. Sherab et al. 2017 on the paucity of mental health research in Bhutan). For example, understanding the attitudes of the private sector in Bhutan around employability of persons with disabilities can inform the Economic Development Policy, the Tourism Policy, and the Foreign Direct Investment Policy.

A comprehensive study on education, training, employment, and social participation of youth adults with disabilities in Bhutan was conducted as part of our project (Schuelka et al. 2022). The study found no statistical significance when disaggregating by gender between male and female outcomes. Yet, this does not mean that women with disability face no issues compared to men; they “face myriad challenges for social inclusion and participation”, particularly access to information and services, but also participation in decision-making processes in their communities (Lhaden 2020).

In the following section, we analyse in greater detail two key areas for the economic inclusion of persons with disabilities in Bhutan: the vocational education system and access to the labour market that includes transition-to-work programs.

Theme 2: the educational system

Access to education for persons with disabilities is a complex issue. In Bhutan, it goes along with several aspects, including the severity and types of disabilities, geography, availability and accessibility of schools and programs, social networks, and social norms, among others. Even if persons with disabilities gain access to schools, many conceptual and quality issues serve to maintain disadvantages and social segregation (Schuelka 2018). In fact, while there are schools and organisations in Thimphu and other parts of Bhutan that, at various levels, offer support to youth with disabilities – which are gradually expanding (e.g. Yangchen 2021) – these are still limited and polarised geographically.

In addition, Bhutanese schools, including Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools, do not have the infrastructure and the resources required as they lack accessible physical infrastructure and specialised teaching and learning materials to engage with diverse student populations (Dorji and Schuelka 2016). The challenges for an effective and inclusive basic education also have implications for vocational education for those with special educational needs who are still able to engage with formal education, as they may be unable to complete any cycle of formal education with implications to access any further studies, including Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

Nevertheless, some schools that support SEN programs have implemented a prevocational training service for disabled children following the Guidelines on Assessment, Examination, Promotion, and Transition for Students with Disabilities (MoE 2018). The guidelines’ objective on TVET is to make vocational programs accessible to students with disabilities through preferential enrolment

and ensure this opportunity is available to them through an adequate transition. For example, The Wangsel Institute for the Deaf offers vocational programs as clubs from grades 4 to 6 and a four-year comprehensive program from grades 7 to 10 on students' chosen field. With the successful completion, a national certificate in line with the TVET master plan of the Ministry of Education is awarded.

The above are key elements for employability, considering that many skilled sectors of the labour market require formal qualifications for employment. However, we found four interconnected challenges emerging from interview and desk research data: (1). TVET can only be accessed after completing a formal cycle of education with grade 10 (end of Basic Education) exams passed under Bhutanese government rules; (2).TVET was not designed for persons with disabilities, and there is agreement among those policy-makers interviewed that access to “skilling¹” should be specifically designed for the needs of youth with disabilities in specific subjects, implying that support through programs should be separated from current TVET programs. For example, one key informant stated “... government should be able to give priority to [persons with disabilities] but we don't need formal TVET for that. We can organize special classes – either on our own or in conjunction with Drak-tsho [a CSO for persons with disabilities].”; (3) even though the National Human Resource Development Policy states that “disabled and other special groups shall be supported to develop vocational skills”, this statement is noted under the section “Non-formal Vocational Training” (MoLHR 2010, 11), limiting access to training streams by design; (4) finally, some level of complacency that resembles a culture of charity approaches to social and economic inclusion for persons with disabilities was observed across informants when talking about the presence of longstanding training institutes for persons with disabilities in Bhutan. This shows, to some extent, a lack of knowledge of the real needs, specific vulnerabilities, and the potential to engage persons with disabilities. For example, one informant told us,

if we interview the disabled, they will say that [the policy] should be implemented. I am sure they would say [this] because we usually talk with them ... It is not because they can't live independently; it is because people look down. These kinds of policies would definitely help them in their life.

The current system for TVET has been under scrutiny for its effectiveness for several years (e.g. “The Gap is Still Huge in TVET” 2021). As a result, the RGoB defined a blueprint for policy reform and planning in skills development to address existing and future labour market demands. The blueprint is expected to reform “skilling” programs to match better demand and supply of specialised technical labour (RGoB 2016).

Two opportunities are linked to this reform. First Technical Training Institutes (TTIs) – vocational state schools that deliver TVET programs – can work towards making all programs inclusive. They are government institutes that can lead the way by mobilising funds with the support of international donors for “hardware” (accessible infrastructure and workshops) and “software” (curriculum and technical teaching tailored for specific disabilities, well-trained teachers) and in collaboration with existing organisations that have traditionally been working in this field. This can be done without crowding out the private training institutes (see the following section), as access to funding streams can be competitive, generating improvements in infrastructure, curricula development, and outcomes for persons with disabilities.

The second opportunity relates to a particular aspect of the TVET reform that includes adopting technical education as an optional subject for Classes 9–12. This initiative started progressively from the academic year 2019–2020 and involved seven pilot schools. The reform also includes constructing TVET workshops in the piloted schools and training instructors on teaching the TVET curriculum (Yangchen 2019). These initiatives can have a relatively smooth application for persons with disabilities. For example, the construction of new TVET workshops can be done with accessibility in mind, and the redesign of the technical curriculum can improve inclusion.

Transition-to-work programs represent another important mechanism that can involve persons with disabilities. Greater attention is now placed on connecting vocational training with income-

generating opportunities through placement and mentoring services. This reform may represent an important mechanism for those persons with disabilities regardless of whether they accessed formal or informal vocational education. The reasons are highlighted in the section related to the challenges and opportunities from the private sector, while employment promotion programs are analysed in the following section.

Theme 3: the labour market

Bhutan's economic challenges are associated with its geography, small markets, and agriculture-dominated economy, which translate into high unemployment rates, particularly among the youth. The labour force survey found that the unemployed youth in Bhutan are concentrated more in urban areas than rural areas (NSB 2018b). The rural-urban migration contributes to these statistics. Hence, the RGoB believes that youth employment can be tackled by promoting the Renewable Natural Resources (RNR) sector and private sector development. The development of the RNR sector has the potential to alleviate rural poverty, reduce rural-urban migration, and increase the productivity of the farm by leveraging on a new generation of farmers. In parallel, supporting innovation and entrepreneurship in various sectors should contribute to creating new jobs within the private sector and new avenues for employment.²

The RGoB has been matching these sectoral strategies with schools-to-work-transition (STWT) programs for several years, offering career counselling, prospective labour market information, and guidance to those still in school. It has also provided "skilling", internships, and employment facilitation supports for those transitioning to the job market. In the 11th Plan, STWT programs were framed under the Guaranteed Employment Program (GEP), designed to provide internships and match skills to the ever-changing requirements of the labour market.

Three sub-programs were provided under the GEP: (1) Direct Employment Scheme (DES), (2) Overseas Employment Scheme (OES), and (3) Employment Skills Scheme (ESS). In addition, the ESS was composed of two other sub-programs: the Youth Employment Skills (YES) and the Graduate Skills Program (GSP). YES and GSP are interventions that address immediate skill shortages in the labour market through short-term vocational training for unemployed youth. The GSP is specifically addressing skills after graduation to align them to the needs of the labour market. Both programs are provided through registered training providers in the country.

Regarding entrepreneurship, the Skills for Employment and Entrepreneur Development (SEED) program was designed to provide core business skills. The above represents a considerable effort whose costs and impacts have been estimated and evaluated in a 2017 National HRD Advisory report (HRDD 2017). Based on these evaluations, the Youth Engagement for Livelihood Programme (YELP) was conceived as an improved version of the DES, to be implemented during the 12th FYP.

A survey covering 1,861 beneficiaries from these programs during the 11th FYP estimated that 3.7% of the total had some form of disability.³ While it is encouraging to see individuals with disabilities benefitting, there are no specific suggestions from this advisory report on how to engage more systematically persons with disabilities in STWT programs. However, government officials interviewed in two different key ministries showed openness to adapt such programs to persons with disabilities.

Few initiatives were found to specifically train persons with disabilities for placements and job opportunities involving CSOs and private training providers. For example, the training programs offered by the partnership between Norbu Healing Arts Centre (a private training provider) and the Disabled People's Organisation of Bhutan (DPOB) offered Bhutanese traditional music training and training on high quality healing therapy with the support of various national and international contributors: Normisjon, Bhutan Foundation, Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, and the Austrian Development Agency. Other examples include training in massage and spa specialists offered by the DPOB and an international luxury hotel in Bhutan supported by the Bhutan Foundation, and

the Big Bakery in the capital city, which offers sheltered employment for youth with disabilities, initiated by Drak-tsho Vocational Training Center for Special Children and Youth.

The approach above offers the potential for the private sector to engage existing CSOs in developing *ad hoc* programs. Private training institutes have also developed their pedagogy using unconventional approaches to teaching persons with disabilities. One informant said “[at the training institute] we do not have [Braille] textbooks for [persons with disabilities] to get trained [or] to do homework. Mainly we have hands-on practice during training”. It has to be noted how these training are designed to provide placements and are followed by active support in “job-hunting”. In this respect, an opportunity may come from the systematisation of these experiences to develop context-specific pedagogical tools.

Other themes identified

Institutional arrangements for policy design and program implementation

At least three ministries of the RGoB, were responsible for programming in relation to persons with disabilities: the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources, with the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) – previously known as Planning Commission – as coordinating agency. However, one of the issues emerging from the interviews is the lack of a focal point for disability that could more easily coordinate and mediate conflicting priorities concerning policies, strategies, and programs. In that respect, one informant commented “one of the problems that I have been experiencing is that we do lack coordination amongst various agencies... if there is a lead agency to bring others together that is where collaboration happens”. The RGoB recently changed ministerial structures. The GNHC has been dissolved; MoLHR has become the Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Employment; and the MoE is now the Ministry of Education and Skills Development. In addition, oversight of the TVET system is moving to the Ministry of Education and Skills Development. Because of these changes and the uncertainties in the RGoB, we believe that government coordination will remain a challenge.

One of the arrangements used to assess the ratification of the CRPD was the High-Level Task-Force composed of different experts (including legislators and ministries’ representatives, chaired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). One “entry point” to fill the coordination gap would be establishing a similar Task-Force as an initial working group of ministerial focal points to support the adaptation of policies and the design of specific programs. This Task-Force should include representatives from the existing Bhutanese CSOs working on disability. In the long term, the Task-Force could eventually transform into a Council or a Committee with a mandate on disability without precluding the possibility of creating a Council or a Committee directly.

Advocacy groups and CSOs

Politicians do not prioritise things when the benefits are diffuse and in the far future. That is why it is important to sustain awareness campaigns and support the formation of groups to advocate for change. We found many organisations active in Bhutan to support persons with disabilities. These associations are well-motivated, active, and ready to share their views and approaches. Nevertheless, we observed a need to consolidate their “position” in policy-making structures. One informant said: “if [persons with disabilities] are given a chance to participate in framing policies, I think they would definitely bring up employment [as a priority]. They feel that they want to go further, study further and improve their skills”.

The private sector

Those interviewed see the physical accessibility of the workplace and the investments – in terms of time and resources to adapt workspaces and organisational set-ups – as a major challenge. Potential employers perceive that they will have to incur extra costs to accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities in the workplace, including working around issues of acceptance by colleagues.

One key informant among training providers commented “[persons with disabilities] are confident and they feel they can do well, but employers, they are not confident”.

However, levers like tax incentives can increase employability, particularly where fixed costs must be met to adapt office spaces and physical infrastructure. Another opportunity can be found in the Bhutanese Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policy, using those funds more proactively towards the employability of persons with disabilities. In addition, most of the most prominent employers in Bhutan are state-owned enterprises, representing an additional advantage as they can be at the forefront of these actions. Opportunities may also come from international companies that decide to invest in Bhutan. Many internationally reputed companies operating in Bhutan have internal CSR policies to maximise social impacts. The Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) policy can be updated to make the inclusion of vulnerable groups a welcomed aspect as part of an investment strategy.

While some see specific sectors as better suited to employ people with disabilities, others see no specific limitations. Some have commented positively on the opportunities coming from entrepreneurship and self-employment. Entrepreneurship would allow persons with disabilities to work more flexibly both individually or in groups/cooperatives

... skilling is where the focus should be. If you cannot find employment you start an independent job and you do not have to have a shop ... you can stay home. This practice is still very prevalent here. I think we need to go for the kind of skills that will give [persons with disabilities] a lot of independence – in terms of where you’ll operate.

One issue emerging in relation to that is access to funding opportunities and credit. There are no particular lines of financing specifically tailored to persons with disabilities, but this does not mean that opportunities offered to start-ups in Bhutan cannot be given to ventures and business ideas from this specific population segment. An example is the support given to group businesses created by persons with disabilities through grants by Korea International Cooperation Agency (Lhaden 2021).

Social norms

The monograph on social capital by Dorji (2013) offers a detailed account of the significance of social norms and social relationships on socio-economic inclusion in Bhutan. The interviews identified an ambivalent role of social norms in relation to disability. They are linked to two important building blocks of Buddhist ethics with important implications for social relationships and socio-economic inclusion: *Karuna* [compassion] and *Karma*. The first concept usually has a positive connotation. It has to do with helping, caring and being empathetic to others. There is, however, a negative side of compassion which is associated with a “live and let be” attitude towards others. When it comes to disability, for example, it may lead to inaction.

The second concept, *Karma*, has mostly been associated with a negative connotation by the respondents. In fact, the term *Karma* [literally “action”], denotes the principle of ethical causation: actions and consequences extend to multiple life cycles. Hence, present actions shape not only the present but also the future. So, Buddhists believe that *Karma* influences rebirth from one life to the next, suggesting that disability is often associated with actions committed during a previous life (Schuelka 2015). The concepts of *Karuna* and *Karma* are not separated. We can be compassionate with reference to helping “liberating” and supporting others from the suffering of the cycle of birth and death.

From a policy perspective, it is important to allow the positive aspects associated with social norms to emerge. This, of course, is a challenging task. Shore and Wright (1997) argue that “not only do policies codify social norms and values, and articulate fundamental organizing principles of society; they also contain implicit (and sometimes explicit) models of society” (7). The philosophy behind Gross National Happiness places Bhutan policy-makers a step ahead in designing policies that can incorporate social norms in a way that the positive values underpinning such unique culture can be nurtured. As one of our informants noted, an example can be compassion. It can be instrumental to action, alleviating and actively caring for persons with disabilities.

Yet, it is important that values contained in policies trickle-down to strategies and programs tailored to the different layers of society: from the central government and the urban – and literate – population to the rural and most isolated communities. We believe that conducting targeted awareness campaigns at the local level by involving *lamas* and *gups* [religious and non-religious leaders] in the communities, would improve inclusion, not just in economic terms.

Under this heading, it is also appropriate to note that a great deal of informal economic activity in rural Bhutan occurs without the formality of waged labour (e.g. Mannocchi 2017). In this respect, we advocate for a wider lens in considering what it means to economically “participate” in Bhutanese society, as long as informal arrangements are constructive and emancipatory for the most vulnerable.

Conclusions

Boettke, Coyne, and Leeson (2008) consider that formal rules must map onto an underlining set of institutions to achieve economic development. Informal institutions like social norms play a role in determining the “stickiness” of proposed reforms as they are grounded in practices, customs, and local culture.

The institutionalist approach favoured a crosscutting perspective to identify challenges and opportunities for economic inclusion of persons with disabilities at the macro- and meso-levels of analysis and provided “entry points” for change based on local social institutions and on what can practically be achieved. The themes identified through the analysis provide a pathway for actions based on insights from respondents (e.g. on the value of social norms, the valuable work of the CSOs and the ambivalent role of the private sector) combined with our analysis of the context, including policy and legislation. In this regard, the RGoB has already implemented a series of reforms.

However, while our recommendations can counter different bottlenecks specific to Bhutan, our approach demonstrates that the “equality of opportunity” element can be tackled systematically to support country-specific reforms, paving the way to less fragmented interventions.

Notes

1. “Skilling” is a recurrent word in Government documents in relation to programs designed to provide new skills and enhancing existing ones.
2. These strategies are particularly pressing in Bhutan, where the latest Census highlighted a positive correlation between level of educational attainment and unemployment (NSB 2018a), implying that the long-standing narrative on educational attainment and social mobility may be weakening in the Bhutanese context.
3. 4% of STWT graduates and 3.3% of STWT trainees had some form of disability.

Disclosure statement

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