

**Welcome address of Mr. Ernst Reinhardt, President Society Switzerland –
Bhutan, on the occasion of launching the book “Far apart and close together.
Switzerland and Bhutan - Development Partners since 1950” and the concert
tour of “BigSenn”, 30th October 2008**

Your Majesty

Your Royal Highness

Respected Lyonpos, Dashos, MP's and other Dignitaries

Dear friends

In my life I have seen passing by 50% of 50 years of modern development in Bhutan. And I am 65 now. An unheard-of speed of development of a rural society. And this with little and rare social upheavals. This is the achievement of good and wise leadership by the successive kings of Bhutan. Both Bhutanese and the international community do recognise this. The Society Switzerland-Bhutan congratulates the Wangchuck Dynasty to its centenary.

“Change and Continuity in Bumthang

by Dolma Roder

(fragments from our book)

On a tour to Switzerland we met Swiss who had worked with Helvetas in Bhutan. They were almost always nostalgic about their time there. They spoke of Bumthang with a level of intense emotion and even intimacy that caught me off guard. I was an intrigued by-stander with no idea how to make sense of their memories.

Were these people remembered by Bumthangpas with the same affection and wistfulness? How did Bumthangpas view the 30 years of Swiss experts coming and going in their valley? How did they evaluate and understand the work that these experts had done in their home valley?

Not surprisingly, few of the Bumthangpas I interviewed were able to talk about the Swiss and what they had done during their time in Bumthang. The exceptions were people who had worked with the Swiss and shopkeepers in Jakar who often claimed that the Swiss and Helvetas had done nothing at all for them. This accusation is not completely without merit, as Swiss projects tended to target landowners and for various reasons most Jakar shopkeepers do not own any land.

Most other people I spoke to regularly confused the Swiss with tourists. When I pointed out the difference, they would usually argue that, since they could speak to neither group, it was impossible for them to make distinctions. Other people, while recognizing the concerns of Helvetas projects (potato variety introduction, renovating the hospital, introducing smokeless stoves and so on) routinely attributed any of the effects of these projects to the Bhutan government or even to the King.

Whatever the causes of changes in Bumthang, I was repeatedly told that Bumthang had become comparatively prosperous. Bumthangpas agreed almost unanimously that important changes have occurred in recent decades including “the way we eat and the way we dress.” The ability to afford rice for most meals was almost always cited, as was being able to buy nicer clothes and “real” shoes. Bumthangpas in general seemed unopposed to most of the changes that the valley had seen, in many cases they welcomed the opportunities it had brought them.”

This is not the result of short-sighted marketing, but of efforts for structural, lasting, sustainable changes. Efforts of good people, both Bhutanese and Swiss. Pragmatic approaches. Integration into the social tissue.

The book “Far apart and close together” provides some insights into the process of development, its drivers, the institutional framework, some problems and many impacts. Many authors, fore-most Bhutanese, have contributed to this book. On the verge of the last phase of Swiss development assistance it highlights some crucial challenges ahead. Let me outline some features.

The main thrust

The focus of the Swiss assistance towards Bhutan's development has been on poverty alleviation in the rural area. Making best use of natural renewable resources was the mission of Helvetas. Sponsoring research, training and formal education with an early view on good practices and governance, as well as basic infrastructures were key activities. Thus, Bhutanese have long since managed most of the project activities in the following lines:

Renewable Natural Resources Development
Forestry
Education and Culture
Public Health
Rural Infrastructure Small Enterprise Development
Groundwork for Good Governance.

Transitions in Cooperation

The personal friendship between a Swiss businessman and his wife, his daughter, the King and the Queen were the driving forces to start with. The transition to Helvetas and Swiss Development Cooperation via the Foundation Pro Bhutan proved essential to deliver the assistance professionally. Historic moments in Bhutan The Wangchuck dynasty, in an exemplary manner, has guided Bhutan into the modern world. And beyond that into democracy, following a popular vote with a stunning participation. Bhutan is well prepared, its development on sound footing.

The book and the concert

Without the generous assistance of Helvetas and our friend Werner Külling, the Swiss Development Cooperation, the family von Schulthess and the members of the Society Switzerland-Bhutan it would have remained a dream. Words of thanks also go to the initiator Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuck and my ever-supportive friend Dasho Tshering Wangda. And to all Bhutanese co-authors and photographers, first of all to Dr. Saamdu Chetri.

The Society Switzerland-Bhutan and its sister organisation, the Friendship Association Bhutan-Switzerland, proudly present the book to the Royal Family and the people of Bhutan on the occasion of the Centenary Celebrations. The musicians of BigSenn and their Bhutanese counter-parts will carry the good message throughout Bhutan, joyful sounds and proud fanfares to foster gross national happiness and underline our feelings of belonging to this beautiful country.

Tashi Delek