Address by the President of Bhutan-Switzerland Society,
Lyonpo Dr. Kinzang Dorji,
on the occasion of 6th Annual General Assembly of Bhutan-Switzerland Society,
on 1 August 2015

Mr. Mathias Meier,
Mr. Mario Fehr,
Mr. Werner Kuelling,
Lyonpos,
Dashos,
Ladies and gentlemen;

I have the great honour of extending, on behalf of the members of Bhutan-Switzerland Society, our sincere greetings and warmest felicitations to the people of Switzerland on the auspicious occasion of celebration of 724th National Day of Switzerland today. Happy birthday Switzerland! On this happy occasion, please accept our heartiest congratulations and best wishes.

We are greatly honored to have two very special guests from Switzerland amongst us today who need no introduction. I would only like to remind ourselves that Mr. Mario Fehr, Cantonal Minister from the Canton of Zurich and Mr. Werner Kuelling, former Secretary General of Helvetas and currently Vice President of our sister organization in Switzerland, Society Switzerland-Bhutan, are not only very old friends but they are also steady and true friends of Bhutan who have stood by our side through thick and thin, highs and lows and rain or shine. So, thank you for being such loyal and steadfast friends of Bhutan.

Bhutan-Switzerland Society will be fifteen years old this year, and when we look back on its long journey, I feel it has really come of age now, thanks to our sister organization in Switzerland which has played a pivotal role in the upbringing and growth of our Society. As members, we all should look back with a deep sense of satisfaction and feel proud of our achievements. And there are a number of good reasons why I am saying this.

Firstly, almost from day one of our foundation, we have been able to identify and implement a number of very relevant and useful activities cutting across various spectrum of fields spanning from farmer exchange programme to supply of school uniforms, exchange visits of musicians to establishment of school bakery, financial support to fire disaster reconstruction projects to kitchen garden irrigation project, fielding of teacher volunteers to support to Bhutanese visitors to Switzerland, financing Thanka painting and religious statues to hosting monks from Central Monastic Body in Switzerland, and the list goes on. These activities have enabled the two Societies to build a strong foundation for promotion of friendship, understanding and cooperation at the people to people level, which is the primary goal and purpose of establishing the two Societies.
Secondly, as far as I know, ours is the only friendship society or association which focuses on promotion and development of friendship and cooperation at the people-to-people level which is not only important and relevant today but assumes greater importance for the future in the context of gradual phasing out of bilateral development assistance from Switzerland. Accordingly, the recent high level bilateral consultation between the two governments has rightly underlined people-to-people cooperation as one of the key areas of nurturing and sustaining the existing warm and close ties of friendship, understanding and cooperation between Bhutan and Switzerland.

Thirdly, as far as I know, no other pro-Bhutan friendship association or society has such a strong counterpart in Bhutan, as we have, because of which our existence is well known and our presence in the country highly visible. Further, Bhutan-Switzerland Society and Society Switzerland-Bhutan do not only work in close consultation with each other but have also established a clear channel of communication and modality of functioning, and now, we are going a step further by working on having a Strategic Plan for 2016-18 in place for smooth, successful and meaningful cooperation in the future.

However, this is not the time to rest on past laurels but to move forward and try to take people-to-people cooperation to higher levels and at the same time make it sustainable in the longer-term future through institutionalization as against the ad hoc manner with which we have been functioning so far. The fact is that we do not even have an approved terms of reference and rules of procedure for its functioning not to talk of its working within the legal framework of the country. So, it will be most appropriate if we were to get ourselves registered under the CSO Act 2007 during its 15th birth anniversary as a non-political and mutual benefit organization with the CSO Authority, with whom I have personally had close consultations with in this regard. I am convinced that this is the right step forward for a brighter future of our Society and more so for a brighter future for our bilateral relations between Bhutan and Switzerland. You will agree with me that the existence of a registered office and a permanent staff of BSS would make a huge difference in the mobilization and renewal of membership as well as collection of membership fees and discharge of its functions which have been major challenges so far. Bhutan-Switzerland Society would also become a credible institution existing for the larger interest of Bhutan and its people instead of being just another friendship society on paper. So, the main agenda for today’s AGM is seeking your support for endorsement of the proposal for registration of BSS under the CSO Act and the broad framework for the BSS Strategic Plan for 2016-18. I would, therefore, like to beseech you to support these proposals keeping in mind the larger interest of our Society and for a brighter future for our age-old relations with the people of Switzerland.

Ladies and gentlemen;
I would now like to report on the progress of projects and activities carried out by our Society in the last one year since the last AGM. The Board and Support Group Meeting following the AGM, to which the President of SSB was invited as a special guest, identified a number of key and relevant areas upon which the Society could focus its limited resources, on which I would like to report as follows:

1. Skills development programme: Recognizing the poor quality of technicians available in the market in the key areas of plumbing, house wiring and electrification, carpentry and masonry, as personally experienced by many members both at home and at work, the meeting decided that our Society should take it up as an area of focus to bring about the necessary change so as to address the long felt need for improvement. However, since it was discovered later that Helvetas was already supporting the MoLHR to address the problem, it was felt wise to avoid any duplication of efforts but instead wait for any opportunity to find a role if there was one in the future.

2. Swiss volunteer programme: A proposal and criteria for availing Swiss volunteers has been prepared by Lyonpo C Dorji and Mr. Kinzang Namgyel as directed by the Board. In the mean time, 2 volunteer teachers are already placed with the Early Learning Center.

3. Improving nutrition among school children: Following the support extended to the establishment of a bakery at Bjoka Primary School with the primary intention of diversifying the food basket and consequent nutritional improvement for the school children, Dasho Nado Rinchen, Dr. MK Rai, Mr. Dungkar Dukpa and Mr. Karma Tenzin were assigned the task of preparing a proposal to assist the Ministry of Education in trying to fulfill the nutritional requirement of a growing child in the light of recent incidences of malnutrition in some schools and the complete phase out of WFP assistance by 2018. A preliminary proposal to this effect has been received, but with the recent launch of the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-24 by the Royal Government, the recent Board Meeting felt that it was perhaps not necessary to pursue this programme any more.

4. Farmers exchange programme: Based on the past experiences, it was felt that the selection criteria and selection process should be clearly defined to make the programme relevant and meaningful. As desired by the Board, Mr. Chhimi Dorji has already prepared the selection criteria, and he has also agreed to oversee the selection process in close consultation with concerned agencies. During the recent visit of the SSB President, it was agreed that the selection process should be put in motion so that this important programme can be implemented from 2016.

5. School exchange programme: A concept paper prepared by SSB was made available in which the exchange programme was expected to be implemented through the use of ICT tools, and the Board had decided that Early Learning Center would pilot this programme. The SSB President has also been in touch with Jigme Losel Primary School here in Thimphu to explore the possibilities for a tie-up under this programme.
6. Improvement of hiking trails: A proposal to improve hiking trails in Bumthang Dzongkhag has been received by SSB and is under their active consideration.

7. Exchange visit of Board Members: Based on the suggestion of the SSB President, the Board had decided to invite SSB Board Members once every 2-3 years to further strengthen the close working relationship between the 2 Societies. Accordingly, the SSB President visited Bhutan in May 2015 as an official guest of BSS to attend the official celebration of 30 years of formal diplomatic relations between Bhutan and Switzerland. Recently, the BSS Board has approved the proposed visit of Mr. Ernst Reinhardt and Ms. Regula Hanimann to Bhutan in October 2015. Besides, the BSS President has been invited by the SSB President to visit Switzerland in September 2015 for further consolidation of our close and cordial relations and also to give final shape to the Strategic Plan 2016-18.

8. Deepening understanding of Switzerland in Bhutan: While the other programmes are expected to contribute towards deepening understanding of Switzerland in Bhutan, specific activities such as screening of films on Switzerland, organizing talk shows, conducting Swiss cooking classes, encouraging writing of short stories on visits to Switzerland and other relevant events will form one of the core functions of BSS in the future to deepen understanding of Switzerland among the Bhutanese population.

9. Visitors’ lecture programme: We are grateful to our sister organization for not only been looking after almost every Bhutanese visitor to Switzerland but also for organizing a regular series of lectures on Bhutan by both Bhutanese and non-Bhutanese scholars and officials to heighten awareness among the Swiss people about Bhutan, its history, culture and politics. So, it will be quite appropriate to have a similar lecture programme in Bhutan, to educate our Bhutanese people and also to learn from many years of Swiss experience in crucial areas of interest to Bhutan such as democracy, local governance, education system, etc., by Swiss visitors to Bhutan. In return, BSS can organize talk shows for Swiss visitors and tourists to promote people to people cooperation, and also to try to mobilize membership for SSB.

10. Fund raising programme: With the registration of BSS with the CSO Authority, an office and one or two staff will be required to run the organization for which adequate funds will be required. At present, contributions from members form the only source of income for the Society but after registration BSS will be eligible to raise funds from various sources to sustain its programmes and activities. This will be an important programme in the future.

These will also form the framework for our Strategic Plan 2016-18.

The support to remote and disadvantaged schools continued to receive priority based on the fund committed by our sister organization in Switzerland. So, in the academic year 2014, the support to Tradijong CPS, Barpong CPS, Kaktong CPS and Yaragla CPS were continued at a total cost of Nu 1,034,900.00 while the first year
support to Tashibi CPS which was Nu 260,425.00 was exclusively funded by Ms. Regula Hanimann. In addition, Nu 360,000.00 was provided to Kaktong CPS for construction of a Multi-Purpose Hall, Nu 219,309.00 was spent on setting up of a bread bakery at Bjoka Primary School and Nu 936,739.00 was spent on a Kitchen Garden Irrigation Project in Yangbari exclusively funded by Annegret Reinhardt and PrimeSteps Foundation. Similarly, in the academic year 2015, SSB had agreed to continue support to Kaktong CPS, Yaragla CPS and Tashibi CPS (Ms. Hanimann) for which they had transferred a sum of Nu 757,320.00. But due to prudent procurement practice adopted by the BSS Secretariat, there was a huge savings of Nu 240,269.00 even after including 6 desktop computers for Yaragla and Tashibi. It has subsequently been agreed that this savings be used for supporting the requests received from Tradijong CPS, Barpong CPS and Nimtola PS, amounting to Nu 159,800.00. In addition, Ms Hanimann is expected to support Yangbari school’s request worth around Nu 150,000.00. I have been informed that she has already raised more than CHF 4,500.00 for support to a project being supported by BSS.

The generous support extended to these remote schools of Zhemgang and Monggar Dzongkhags since 2011 has made a huge impact to the lives of so many children because some of them would not have been able to continue their schooling without this crucial support. With the launch of the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-24 and introduction of central school system extending boarding facilities right down to the primary students, it gives us tremendous satisfaction to know that the support being provided by BSS and SSB to these schools was in the right direction and that such support will now be available from the Royal Government.

The establishment of a bakery at Bjoka PS school on a pilot scale was received very well and benefitted the children as well as the school. However, the equipment got damaged due to power fluctuation, just before the school was closed for the winter vacation. The equipment has since been repaired at a cost of Nu 29,400.00 generously supported by SSB. It has been decided that an evaluation of the bakery project will be undertaken this winter with the kind help of Mr. Dungkar Dukpa of WFP. Similarly, the support extended to the schools since 2011 will also be put under an evaluation with help from the Ministry of Education as already agreed with the Director General of Department of School Education.

Once again, I would like to take this opportunity to express our deepest appreciation and gratitude to the President and members of SSB for the generous financial as well as other support extended to Bhutan and the Bhutanese people whether through BSS or otherwise. Their President, Ms Marianne Frei, has done such a wonderful job of bringing about new ideas and initiatives, and more so, in establishing a very close working relationship between our two Societies. Her regular trips to Bhutan have definitely made a huge difference in nurturing our relations. The singular contributions made by Ms Regula Hanimann to Tashibi CPS and by Annegret Reinhardt and PrimeTime Foundation to Yangbari kitchen garden project deserve our special thanks. We are grateful to Lyonpo Pema Gyamtsho and SSB for mobilizing CHF 2,000 from the Swiss friends of late Karma Tobden to install
religious statues on the altar of Tang Primary School in fond memory of one of Bumthang’s pioneer entrepreneurs.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my former colleagues on the Board for a marvelous job and for their unstinted support. Above all, Dr. Saamdu Chetri deserves to be specially acknowledged for his singular contribution in drafting the essential documents, namely Articles of Association, Memorandum of Association and Rules and Regulations, for registration of BSS under the CSO Act as well as to enable BSS to function in a transparent and accountable manner.

Last but not the least, I would like to thank our host today, Mr. Mathias Meier, SDC Director, for his continued support to BSS, in allowing Kinzang and Ram to share their time with BSS, and for hosting our AGM today coinciding with the celebration of the Swiss National Day.

Once again, I would like to wish you all a happy Swiss National Day.

Thank you, and Tashi Delek!