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Background information: Swiss-Bhutanese relations

Political and diplomatic relations

Early stages of cooperation: an engagement based on friendship

Switzerland and Bhutan share friendly political relations. These ties date back to the **personal friendship** between the Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1929-1972) and Swiss entrepreneur Fritz von Schulthess, which later metamorphosed into cooperation in the area of **development**. Mr. von Schulthess took up the first projects in Bhutan through his **foundation “Pro Bhutan”**. These included the foundation of a Dairy and Forest agency, which was mandated with the responsibility for forestry agriculture and livestock development in the district of Bumthang and later at the national level.

The engagement of Helvetas and Swiss Development Cooperation SDC (1975-2016)

Under the fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck (1972-2006), development cooperation between Switzerland and Bhutan intensified further, which resulted in **Helvetas** (1975) and later the **Swiss Development Cooperation SDC** (1982) starting to engage in Bhutan's development. Mainly financed by SDC, Helvetas initially focused on the **dairy, agricultural and forestry sectors, the construction of suspension bridges and education**. One of the signature projects was working with village communities to form forest management units, thereby strengthening forest management and democratic processes at the same time. In the educational sector, SDC and Helvetas supported 3 of the 11 constituent colleges across Bhutan, namely the Paro College of Education, the Samtse College of Education (which worked in close partnership with the Zurich University of Teacher Education) and the College of Natural Resources. Projects also included the provision of infrastructure and the capacity-building of human resources through teacher trainings.

Upon request of the Bhutanese government, Switzerland changed its focus to supporting the **democratic transition** from 2006-2016. In this context, SDC invested more than CHF 20 Mio in the governance sector. Projects included providing Bhutan's Anti-Corruption Commission with capacity-building support, strengthening the independence of the Bhutanese justice system through a collaborative project with the Federal Administrative Court of St. Gallen and the Austrian Development Agency, providing decentralised authorities with management skills training, making government services more accessible, strengthening women's rights and supporting the development of the media.

SDC's phasing out

Following recommendations by the Committee for Development Policy and ECOSOC that Bhutan should graduate from the category of *Least Developed Country* in 2023 and due to the fact that the country had successfully consolidated into a well-functioning democracy, it was agreed between Switzerland and Bhutan to **close the Swiss Development Cooperation office in Thimphu** in 2016 and to phase out after more than 35 years of cooperation in the field of development. Today, the partnership between Bhutan and Switzerland is no longer focused on development, but is a **full-fledged**

partnership between equals, focusing on a large spectrum of topics with political, economic, scientific and cultural priorities.

Establishment of formal diplomatic relations

Bhutan opened a permanent mission in Geneva in 1971 and the two countries officially established **diplomatic relations in 1985**. Switzerland does not have a permanent diplomatic mission in Bhutan. It is represented by its Embassy in New Delhi. On August 1st, 2018, **Lyonpo Kinzang Dorji**, former Prime Minister as well as president of the Bhutan-Switzerland Society, was accredited as **Honorary Consul** of Switzerland to Bhutan.

The first official bilateral contact between the two countries took place in 2000, when Bhutanese Foreign Minister Jigme Thinley met his Swiss counterpart Joseph Deiss in Bern. Two years later, Federal Councillor Joseph Deiss travelled to Bhutan. Since then, several bilateral exchanges have taken place at different levels. On March 8, 2018, the Prime Minister of Bhutan, Tshering Tobgay, met Swiss President Alain Berset in Bern.

A lasting Swiss footprint in Bumthang

During the initial years of cooperation between Switzerland and Bhutan, about 15 families of Swiss origin resided in the dzongkhag (district) of **Bumthang** in central Bhutan, which was the focal point of development assistance. Bumthang is today a well-developed valley and is even sometimes called the “Swiss district”. The success of Swiss development efforts are clearly visible and have left a positive mark in Bhutanese public opinion.

Bilateral Agreements

In October 2013, Switzerland and Bhutan signed a **bilateral agreement on visa exemption for diplomats and officials**. In 2017, during the third round of political consultations held in Bern, a **Memorandum of Understanding on the establishment of regular political consultations was signed between the two countries**.

Economic relations

Trade between Bhutan and Switzerland has been **at a modest level** so far. In 2017, bilateral trade amounted to a little more than CHF 1 Mio (ca. INR/N 72 Mio.). Major items exported by Switzerland to Bhutan include **machine tool equipment, pharmaceuticals and precision instruments**, whereas Switzerland mainly imports **base metals** and articles thereof from Bhutan. Both countries are aiming at **strengthening their economic ties** in the coming years.

Private and public cooperation

In addition to the official Swiss engagement at the State level, there is increasing cooperation between private and public entities of the two countries. This includes, for example, the following areas:

The **Society Switzerland-Bhutan** in Switzerland and its sister organization, the **Bhutan-Switzerland Society** in Thimphu, work closely together in order to strengthen ties through social, charitable, ecological, cultural and other philanthropic projects.

Helvetas continues to be active in Bhutan, mainly in the fields of **vocational education and training** as well as **sustainable economy**. Further, Helvetas tries to strengthen **civil society** in its new role as an active part of the democratic system. Therefore, a competitive grant mechanism for CSOs has been set up in collaboration with the EU¹.

Helvetas also facilitates **Bhutanese activities in Switzerland**. On the occasion of the International Year of Mountains 2002, Helvetas established a contact between the association “Lebens- und Erlebnisraum Pfyng-Finges” in the Canton of Valais and Bhutan in order to construct a **suspension bridge**, the so-called “Bhutanbrücke”. The bridge was designed and planned in Bhutan and the construction work was accompanied by a Bhutanese engineer.

¹ <http://csogrant.bt/>

Furthermore, private individuals are engaged in the exchange of know-how in the **educational sector**. There are, for example, projects offering Bhutanese youth the possibility to complete an apprenticeship in Switzerland in the hotel industry or in the construction sector.

In the area of research, the **Swiss-Liechtenstein Foundation of Archaeological Research Abroad** (SLSA), supported by Swiss universities and Helvetas, started the first ever archaeological excavations on Bhutanese soil in 2008. From 2011-2013, the SLSA supported the institutionalization of archaeology through workshops with officials in Bhutan. Furthermore, the linguist **Dr. George van Driem**, a professor at the University of Zurich, has supported the Bhutanese government to codify the grammar of Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan. In August 2018, in the framework of the literary festival "Mountain Echoes", he held several talks in Thimphu.

Switzerland also supports Bhutan in the **humanitarian** sector. Upon request by the King, the **Swiss Red Cross** has collaborated with the Ministry of Health and the Department for Disaster Management in supporting the education of Red Cross volunteers and village health workers. The Swiss Red Cross also played a major role in the establishment of a Red Cross Society in Bhutan in May 2017.

Collaboration with Bhutan also takes place at the cantonal level: A priority project of the Canton of Zurich consists of a contribution to improve **fire protection and traffic safety** in Bhutan.

Finally, efforts are undertaken to bring Bhutanese **culture** to Switzerland. The **Musée d'Ethnographie Neuchâtel** owns the largest permanent collection of Bhutanese art and artefacts outside of Bhutan and the **Rietberg Museum** in Zurich organized an exhibition on Bhutanese ancient and current culture in 2010. Swiss film festivals regularly show **films** of Bhutanese filmmakers. The film *Honeygiver Among the Dogs* by Dechen Roder was shown at the Fribourg Film Festival 2017, where it received the Special Jury Award, as well as at the Locarno Film Festival 2018.