



Lama Sonam Jamtsho manufactures incense to support a monastery



The Loden Report

The Bi-annual Newsletter of Loden Foundation



“As I see it, to begin any new enterprise, first and foremost, one requires capital. There is a great opportunity here for the financial institutions and banks to make a positive impact by improving access to credit for our youth and rural people”

- His Majesty the King of Bhutan, During National Day Celebration 2016

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ABOUT US

Established in 2000, Loden is dedicated to fostering an educational, literary and intellectual culture in Bhutan. It aims to help the Bhutanese youth obtain education and learning at pre-school, school and post school stages and to promote a literary ethos in the Bhutanese society at large. Loden also aspires to preserve and promote Bhutanese culture and tradition in Bhutan and beyond.

Loden's core areas of operation include:

- i) Social Entrepreneurship
- ii) Early Child Care Development
- iii) Scholarship for Education
- iv) Promotion and Preservation of Bhutanese Culture and Tradition

BOARD OF TRUSTEES



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Pushpa Chhetri
(Entrepreneur)

Kuzuzangpo La!



Time flies. The Monkey year, the year of birth of Loden Chogsi alias Padmasambhava, after whom Loden is named, has just ended. Bhutan

saw celebrations throughout the Monkey year to remember Padmasambhava, its patron saint. It also witnessed festivities to mark the 400th year of the arrival of its founder, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal to Bhutan and the birth of the heir to the throne, Gyalsey Jigme Namgyal Wangchuck. Amid these joyous events, Loden also found time to rejoice and celebrate but without losing the focus and tempo of our mission.

We are glad to report to our partners, supporters and well wishers that we have made much progress in 2016. Our current preschool centres continue to provide a safe and enjoyable growing and learning space for nearly a 100 children between 3 and 6 years of age. A quarter of them have graduated to join schools while Loden has opened two more centres in Dawakha and Goshing with support from UNICEF and the Ministry of Education. The school students, whom Loden supported, have reached the auspicious number 108 and there are now over 30 who have received Loden's scholarship for higher education mostly in academic disciplines needed in Bhutan.

Our flagship Loden Entrepreneurship Programme has now conducted formal training for over 3000 young people, motivating and preparing them for a career in social enterprise. Loden has funded 24 new social ventures in 2016, and

has awarded capital funds for a total of 123 social enterprises. We are pleased to report the punctual repayment of over 85% of the loans thanks to our monitoring and mentoring support. In order to bring entrepreneurship training to students, we have extended our student business programme to 16 educational institutions and groups.

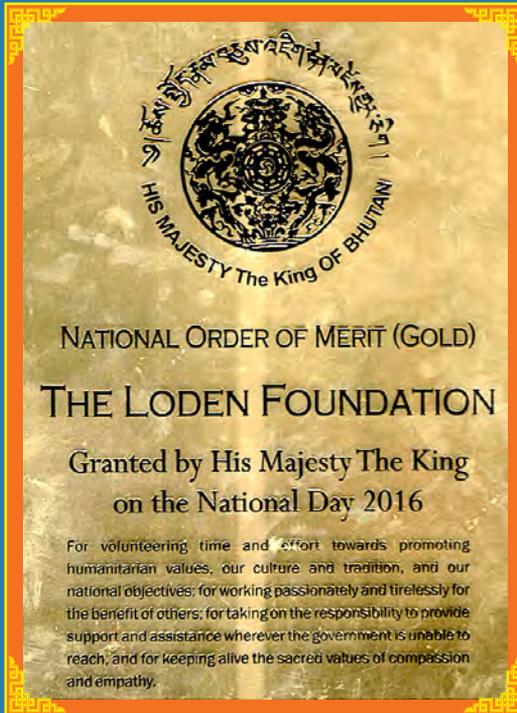
On the National Day 2016, the Loden team was overwhelmed by National Order of Merit (Gold) award from His Majesty the 5th Druk Gyalpo for our service to the nation. In addition, some of projects and beneficiaries have also received international and national recognitions. We hope these testimonies will encourage our partners, supporters and well wishers to continue our collaborations so as to make a difference in the lives of many people.

The Fire Bird Year, 2017, heralds a new chapter for Loden as it enters the 18th year. Loden has come of age, and is ready to take wings and fly to new heights. Besides expanding our current programmes, we plan to enhance our human resources and renew our cultural projects. It is our heartfelt wish and prayer that you will join us in welcoming the year and, as always, in our efforts to make all those we meet in life responsible producers, mindful consumers, and intelligent citizens of the world.

With Tashi Delek and Losar Greetings,

Karma Phuntsho
President & Founder

Loden receives recognition from His Majesty the King



Loden Foundation was awarded the National Order of Merit (Gold) by His Majesty the King of Bhutan on the most joyous occasion of the 109th National Day on 17 December 2016. The National Order of Merit was granted for “volunteering time and effort towards promoting humanitarian values, our culture and tradition, and our national objectives, for taking on the responsibility to provide support and assistance wherever the government is unable to reach and for keeping alive the sacred values of compassion and empathy”.

On receiving the prestigious award, Loden’s Executive Director Dorji Tashi said, “The award is a great honour for the foundation and an invaluable incentive for Loden to continue

to work with renewed dedication to serving the Bhutanese society by empowering youth through education and social entrepreneurship, and to promote Bhutan’s culture and tradition to the wider sections of society.” He said that he looks up to His Majesty the King as an exceptional social worker and draws inspiration from His Majesty who travels the length and breadth of the country, hiking for weeks across the mountains and deep forests to ensure that every single family lives a happy and prosperous life.

Loden reaffirms its commitment to continue to serve the King, country and people of Bhutan with unremitting loyalty and dedication.



The hon'ble Prime Minister Lyonchhen Tshering Tobgay presenting the award to Mr. Kumar

Bhutan Student Entrepreneurship Award

At the closing ceremony of the Global Entrepreneurship Week 2016, Mr Dhan Kumar, a student from Gaeddu College of Business Studies, the founder of Eco Waste Solution, was recognised as *Bhutan's Best Student Entrepreneur 2016*. He was presented with a plaque and a cash prize of Nu. 50,000.

Dhan's company which operates in Wangdue Phodrang is the first waste management initiative in the locality. Eco Waste Solution abides by the 'Four Rs' principle, that is, *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Recover* for a zero waste result.

Dhan Kumar has proven himself to be a source of inspiration for many young men and women aspiring to be entrepreneurs, the young people who dream to make remarkable contributions to society even as their ideas pay them well.

He will represent Bhutan in the International Global Student Entrepreneur Awards in 2017 which takes place in Frankfurt, Germany, which is attended by student entrepreneurs from all over the world.

The Bhutan Student Entrepreneurship Award was launched by Loden Foundation jointly with the Global Student Entrepreneur Award (GSEA) in 2015 to recognise the efforts of student entrepreneurs in operating a business. It was aimed at creating more awareness of entrepreneurship as an alternate form of employment among young men and women.

Five students from different university colleges and technical training institutes took part in the award competition.

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A dose of innovation in a bottle

What sets an entrepreneur apart from the rest is neither a complex series of personality traits, nor a high level of creativity or intelligence. It can be as simple as seeing opportunity in the day-to-day activities and grabbing it on time.

‘SOELCHU’, a project started by Mr Kencho Thinley in Gedu, is about perhaps the most common thing in life that we often take it for granted – water. SOELCHU produces natural mineral water.

The distinctive feature of SOELCHU is that the water is packaged in big reusable five-litre bottles which help cut the use of common plastic bottles. It is also a cheaper

alternative to regular bottled water.

SOELCHU has been actively operating in Gedu and Phuntsholing and recently entered the much bigger market of Thimphu where it is now available in a growing number of grocery shops.

Although Bhutan has enough fresh water for everyone, being endowed with abundant natural resources, bottled water is increasingly sought after, especially during the rainy season when the water that flows from the tap often turns muddy. Kencho has spotted an opportunity. He added a bit of innovation to it and it has now turned into a thriving business



Global Entrepreneurship Week

A week of impactful events and increasing popularity



Aimed at raising awareness of entrepreneurship, Loden organised the Global Entrepreneurship Week for the fifth time in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources and Thimphu TechPark from 14-20 November 2016.

His Excellency Lyonpo Lekey Dorji, the Minister of Economic Affairs, graced the opening ceremony in the morning and took part in a panel discussion in the evening on the topic 'The state of the Bhutanese economy and its direction'.

As part of the week, a series of training sessions were held on the fundamentals of entrepreneurship, followed by high-level discussions and debates on some pressing topics in which policy-makers, politicians, bureaucrats, business tycoons, CEOs of financial institutions, and entrepreneurs took part. The event has served as an excellent platform for various stakeholders to interact directly with the entrepreneurs.

The presence of His Excellency the Prime Minister of Bhutan, who graced the concluding ceremony as the Chief Guest, reaffirmed the support of the government for the development of a vibrant entrepreneurship ecosystem. His Excellency the Prime Minister offered Tashi Khadar to 15 entrepreneurs selected for the start-up loan and presented the Bhutan Student Entrepreneur Award. His Excellency Lyonpo Yeshey Dorji, who accompanied the Prime Minister, presented the Best Loden Entrepreneur of the year award.



Year Three of Loden-DHI Fund

The Loden-DHI fund is an ideal collaborative effort between a Civil Society Organisation and a state-owned company both of which believe in harnessing the power of aspiring entrepreneurs.

After the launch of the programme in 2015, Loden has spent Nu 1.4 million provided by DHI to support 18 new ventures in addition to Loden's regular scheme.

The projects range from a martial arts institute to an online travel agency, frozen dessert to a wooden toy making firm in Thimphu, dairy farms to woodworking enterprises, and agribusinesses to automobile workshops in rural parts of Bhutan. All these projects receive a

rigorous mentoring and monitoring services from Loden as part of our post-loan services to ensure high levels of success.

Loden has received the third and final tranche of the Loden-DHI fund of Nu. six million through which Loden intends to support about a dozen projects through the Spring 2017 selection process.

With the continued assistance from DHI, Loden hopes to contribute to the national goal of reducing youth unemployment and rural to urban migration thereby contributing to a balanced socio-economic development of the country.



Dasho Sangay Khandu, the Chairman of Druk Holding & Investment Ltd. (DHI) handing over a cheque of Nu. 6 million to Dorji Tashi, the Executive Director of the Loden.



An unprepared dairy farmer, now a successful CEO

Every successful entrepreneur would face some kind of failure in his or her lifetime, at least once. The key is to take failure as a learning experience and use it as a stepping stone to success.

This is what a Loden entrepreneur has lived through with grit until success shone on his way.

Tharchen is a trailblazer in his own right. He began his entrepreneurial journey as a dairy farmer in 2010 in Dagapela after his graduation from Sherubtse College. His university degree and zeal, however, did not see much luck. And his business failed. But it did not break him. It did not stop him from pursuing his goal of becoming a successful entrepreneur.

So, rising from the ashes of his failed business, he went on to start a training institute called 'iBEST' in Bhutan's capital city, Thimphu, in 2014. He is now the founder and Chief Executive Officer of the company which has grown quickly and is now 10 employees big.

Looking back, Tharchen realises that he was, after all, an unprepared dairy farmer. He confronted numerous impediments which seem to have caused the failure of his dairy firm. Tharchin says, "One of the major reasons is that I did not take into account external factors such as adequate water supply, pastureland and fodder that had a real impact on my business." Of course, he admits that inadequate experience and limited subject knowledge worked against him.

Tharchen says that, after two years of uncertainty and confusion with the dairy farm business, he decided to start the iBEST business, a very different business. Renewed confidence and the knowledge he had gained from his previous experience stood him in good stead.

iBest offers several consulting and training services with an objective to cater to the developmental needs of fostering a skilled workforce in the country. As part of its continuing development, iBest plans to venture into providing animation and multimedia services in the near future.



Loden Early Learning Centre

Loden has been successfully operating three community-based Early Child Care Development (ECCD) centres since 2008 in three remote communities of Samtse, Mongar, and Bumthang.

In 2017, Loden will open two more ECCD centres in Goshing, Zhemgang, and Dawakha in Paro. The construction work, currently underway, is expected to be complete by the end of March 2017.

In 2016, a total of 84 students – 56 boys and 28 girls – aged 2 to 5 enrolled in the three centres.

Our ECCD graduates have been holding top positions in the regular schools. Parents are highly supportive of our ECCD programmes and are now willing to make a small contribution to the cost of running them.

“Knowledge has no owner; everyone is entitled to it”.

A business plan born of a distressful personal experience



For a rapidly urbanising community that holds strong religious beliefs and practises elaborate funeral rites, conducting a funeral can not only be taxing on the grieving family but also often burdensome.

If necessity is the mother of invention, a bitter experience can be the mother of social enterprise. Mr Ugyen Wangda's bitter experience following the unexpected death of his cousin and the resulting hardship his family had to undergo arranging the funeral rites led to an excellent model of social enterprise.

The death of his cousin caught Ugyen Wangda and his family totally unprepared. Arranging a car to carry the body to the cremation ground, setting up tents, and putting together decorations, among others, turned into an ugly nightmare. He simply couldn't imagine any family facing the same hardship

that his family faced. This led him to contemplate a solution to help address a similar situation.

He converted this idea born of his bitter experience into a business plan to compete for an interest-free startup loan from Loden. He competed against 110 other applicants in the latter half of 2016 and was selected for the financial assistance he needed to start his funeral services business.

Thus was 'Funeral Service Thimphu' born. It provides a full range of much-needed funeral services such as adornment of crematorium pyre, customised dhar (white cloth) and grocery items for offerings, firewood provision, a vehicle for transportation, catering services, renting of kitchen utensils, gas cylinders, and the supply of tents required to conduct necessary funeral rites.





BISHNU PRASAD SHARMA
Company: Dumba
Business Category: Education
Location: Thimphu
Service Provided: Distinctive production through 3D printers



CHIMI LHAMO
Company: Mountain Mist
Business Category: Well being
Location: Thimphu
Service Provided: Production of Laundry Soaps



PEMA LHADEN
Company: Shaoule Food Product
Business Category: Agriculture
Location: Thimphu
Service Provided: Tofu production



NAMKHAR DEGYAL GYELTSHEN
Company: Transcend Artisan
Business Category: Crafts
Location: Thimphu
Service Provided: Production of signboards and interior design



NIDUP GYELTSHEN
Company: Gyeltshen Bakery
Business Category: Food
Location: Trongsa
Service Provided: Bakery



CHANGLO
Company: Asparagus Seedling Production
Business Category: Agriculture
Location: Dogar, Paro
Service Provided: Asparagus production



DAWA ZANGMO
Company: Yedthrok Salon
Business Category: Well being
Location: Samdrup Jongkhar
Service Provided: Skin and Hair Care



PEMA CHODEN
Company: Yeewong Magazine
Business Category: Media
Location: Thimphu
Service Provided: Magazine Publication



UGYEN WANGDA
Company: Funeral Service
Business Category: Professional Services
Location: Thimphu
Service Provided: Funeral services and catering



DORJI WANGCHUK
Company: Druk Green Orchid Restaurant
Business Category: Others
Location: Dungkar, Lhuentse
Service Provided: Food and accommodation



KINLEY DHENDUP & DUGAY
Company: Thuensum Green Farm
Business Category: Agriculture
Location: Punakha
Service Provided: Production of green chili and Shitake mushroom



PEMA CHOKI
Company: Dairy Farm
Business Category: Agriculture
Location: Dawakha, Paro
Service Provided: Production of dairy products



KINLEY ZANGMO
Company: Cwang Mushroom
Business Category: Agriculture
Location: Gidagom, Thimphu
Service Provided: Production of Oyster and Shitake Mushroom



WANGCHUK KUENGA
Company: Bhutan Herbal Tea Farm
Business Category: Agriculture
Location: Bumthang
Service Provided: Herbal tea production



KARMA YOESEL TSHERING
Company: Karma Green House Farm
Business Category: Agriculture
Location: Thimphu
Service Provided: Production of strawberries and fruits



What do we learn from Bhutanese entrepreneurs?



Over the last 8 years, we have had the unique privilege of reading over 2,000 business proposals from young Bhutanese entrepreneurs. What did we learn?

Although we read that Bhutan “is a small, landlocked country between India and China” over 2,000 times, we also learned about the variety of innovative and intriguing business ideas which are in the minds of young Bhutanese. Who would have imagined that, in the course of the two Loden selections in 2016, we would pick as new Loden entrepreneurs: Dumba, a start-up to create animation figures and signboards whose main items of equipment are a 3D printer, a laser cutting and engraving machine; Bhutan Ecolab, an installer of industrial pollution control systems; Shaoule Food, a processor of soybean in Tofu and Miso; and an Institute of Martial Arts! New ideas, new concepts...

How do innovative ideas emerge? From Amsterdam to Mumbai, potential entrepreneurs share their experience and ideas and aspire to do it in an informal setting such as a Hub where they can discuss ideas, have a coffee, explore the internet; Loden is exploring the possibility of setting up a Hub of this kind in Thimphu. And to start and grow, entrepreneurs need a complete ecosystem. It could start in the Bhutanese colleges through the Loden SEED programme. It also requires early risk taking, funding and mentoring. The Loden loan scheme makes finance and support available to emerging entrepreneurs.

Many projects will remain small but a few have the potential to grow further. In many countries, this next step after initial funding is met by venture capital funds but such funds do not exist yet in Bhutan. Therefore, there are still needs in the ecosystem and Loden envisages launching the “Loden Plus” initiative to fill this gap by making additional funding available to a limited number of growth opportunities.

But we also learn that the cultural and ethical dimensions of entrepreneurship should neither be forgotten nor held in contempt. The International news may give rise to the feeling that narrow economic self-interest, jingoism and barriers to international cooperation are on the rise. However, in the West, alternative models involving sustainability, cooperation and care are taken seriously.

There is a revival of interest in traditional and environmentally-friendly practices such as organic farming. Loden has recently funded a growing number of those projects, which have the added benefit of keeping the land in productive use and increasing rural incomes. Similarly, high-quality human relations are seen as more valuable than simply optimising self-interest. With a greater access to creative thinking and innovation from around the world, young Bhutanese have an opportunity to dream bigger and aim higher than their parents did.

All of these factors make the development of entrepreneurship in Bhutan so exciting with the creation of the new while building on the best of the old.

Gérard and Anne Tardy
Stalwarts of Loden Foundation

A Journey of an Intern with Loden

Lethro Gyamtsho shares his experience as an intern with Loden Foundation for the past three months.

“My journey with Loden has been truly a learning experience. The most important knowledge I have gained from my internship is that getting employed with a government agency is not the only option I will have after my graduation. If you have a good idea, you can establish your own business, especially with financial support from financial institutions and NGOs such as Loden.

“I have witnessed people flooding into our office to seek help for their children’s education and for their businesses, and I feel privileged to have contributed in my own small way in helping lessen their burden by offering my time and helping them fill out the application forms.

“In the three months I have worked with Loden, I never felt like an outsider but welcomed as a



member of the team who is working hard and contributing to the goals and objectives of the foundation. Above all, the experience has helped me grow as a person and has provided me with hands-on experience that will benefit me greatly in years to come.”

Lethro Gyamtsho
Intern



Extend a helping hand, pick up a child

If you wish to make a difference in the life of a child, provide him or her with an opportunity to attend a school by sponsoring his or her education, Loden offers a gateway by administering your charity.

Loden helps identify the most deserving candidates who come from an economically challenged background or who have lost a parent and then link them to sponsors. We generally help find donors willing to help children who are in need of support. Loden administers donations and communicates with the beneficiaries to keep them updated if they so wish.

Loden provides an annual support of Nu. 6,000 (\$100) for primary school students and Nu. 8,000 (\$150) for high school students for basic necessities such as school uniform, shoes, and stationery items.

If you are interested in helping sponsor a child, please write to us at info@loden.org.

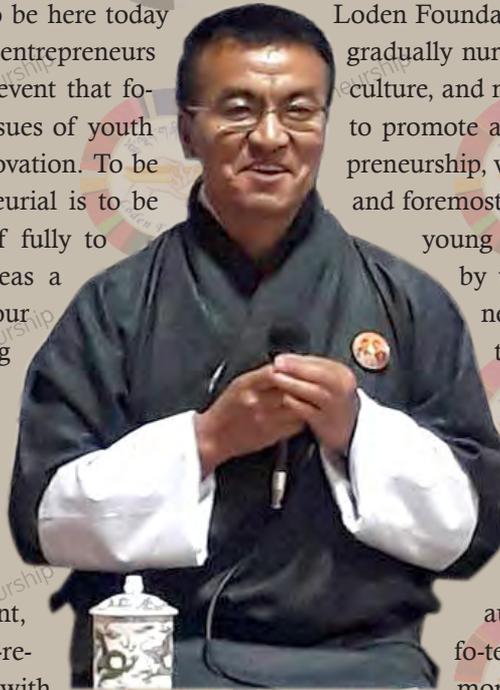
**Keynote address by His Excellency Lyonpo Lekey Dorji, Minster for Economic Affairs,
at the opening ceremony of Global Entrepreneurship Week
observed from 14-20 November, 2016.**

(Due to space considerations, the speech has been edited down from its original version, but its key messages have been retained.)

I am extremely pleased to be here today to see so many young entrepreneurs gathered together for an event that focuses on the important issues of youth entrepreneurship and innovation. To be innovative and entrepreneurial is to be willing to devote yourself fully to making your business ideas a reality. More than ever, our country needs its young citizens to stand up, and showcase their inherent creativity.

Entrepreneurship is the key to ensuring long-term sustainable development, achieving economic self-reliance and to dealing with our youth unemployment. We need to move from being a nation of trading imported goods, to a nation of businesses that create value through in-country development of products and services.

The political stability, comparatively low level of corruption, good governance and competitive electricity tariffs with preferential access to the Indian markets offer comparative advantages to our businesses. Nevertheless, we are not free from problems and challenges, and overcoming these will be crucial to achieving the next phase of our growth. With ongoing studies and reform initiatives, we expect to overcome them in partnership with our young entrepreneurs.



Loden Foundation has been successful in gradually nurturing an entrepreneurship culture, and more needs to be done now to promote a national culture of entrepreneurship, whereby it becomes the first and foremost “aspirational goal” of our young people. I am impressed by the Loden-supported businesses which have been established in many areas, including business support services, mushroom cultivation, water treatment services, handloom weaving, wellness enterprises, dairy farming, automobile workshops, info-tech initiatives and many more. These are the types of innovation and creativity that our society requires. On behalf of the Royal Government, I offer congratulations to all our entrepreneurs.

While we applaud and praise successful entrepreneurship, we must also remember that entrepreneurship is not easy. It is tough and requires burning a lot of “midnight oil”. For every successful business, there are numerous failed businesses but you must keep trying and our culture must change to accept failure as a path of learning to ultimately becoming successful.

While promoting competitive firms, I also wish to highlight the requirement for businesses to

‘exhibit a strong sense of social responsibility’ and while building your businesses, to become more involved in the communities in which you operate and contribute meaningfully to the people of those communities.

Promoting innovation lies at the heart of our Brand Bhutan initiative and innovation is the basis for our country to progress as we graduate from our current Least Developed Country status and thereafter need to avoid the “middle income trap”. Entrepreneurship through innovation needs to be fostered at work, school and in society at large, and I am pleased to note that Loden Foundation has done its part. The Royal Government on its part intends to promote entrepreneurship through Brand Bhutan besides other policy interventions.

As the Minister for Economic Affairs, I am very confident that the youth of our nation have the capacity to develop innovative solutions not only for business purposes but also for the greater good of our society.

As I conclude, let me remind our entrepreneurs that innovation does not mean competing with

Silicon Valley but bringing about domestic production of goods and services as simple as dairy farming, production of cereals, provision of home repair services, small scale manufacturing, improvement of construction services, provision of ICT services, to mention but a few.

To all the young people gathered here today, I reiterate that the most important characteristics of a successful entrepreneur must be confidence in your work, and that you should never, never retreat or ‘give up’ at the first sign of difficulty. Always remember - When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

I therefore wish to urge the young people throughout the nation to become true entrepreneurs and to bring forward new ideas and innovative solutions to meet our country’s development goals and overcome the challenges.

On behalf of the Royal Government, I wish you all the best in your endeavours to become successful innovators and entrepreneurs.

Thank you & Tashi Delek



The hon'ble Minister Lyonpo Yeshey Dorji presenting the award to Ms. Chhetri

A woman entrepreneur in the communications industry recognised

To recognise, motivate and encourage entrepreneurs, Ms Puspha Chhetri, who runs the Bhutan Media and Communications Institute (BMCI) was awarded the Best Loden Entrepreneur Award for 2016. His Excellency Lyonpo Yeshey Dorji, the Minister for Agriculture and Forests presented the award that included a cash prize of Nu. 108,000 on the last day of the Global Entrepreneurship Week.

Ms Chhetri is looked up to as one of the most enterprising and exceptional woman entrepreneurs supported by Loden. She resigned from the cushy position as the General Manager

of Kuensel Corporation, Bhutan's leading newspaper, to start BMCI, a social enterprise that supports the growth of the Bhutanese media and communications industry. BMCI provides training and programmes tailored to suit the needs of the community facilitated by both local and international trainers.

In the coming years, BMCI plans to focus on capacity building of media focal persons, local leaders and communities so that they become more aware of the role of the media and the importance it has as a communication tool in the 21st century.

Toys that seek to teach and inspire



As more young people are motivated to take up entrepreneurship as a career option, it becomes increasingly important to encourage more women to become entrepreneurs. The female entrepreneurs who have been funded by Loden since 2008 constitute some 30% of the 121 projects it supported. Loden actively seeks to empower women entrepreneurs who are also mothers and homemakers so that they become the inspiration for other women who wish to follow a similar path.

Ugyen Wangmo is one of the female entrepreneurs supported by Loden. Starting her educational toy manufacturing firm in Thimphu, she finds a balance between her work and motherhood.

Called 'Tsem', meaning 'toy', her firm is first of its kind in Bhutan that makes wooden educational toys.

The idea for her business was sparked by the lack of educational toys in the market for her child. As a concerned mother who wanted her son to be more interactively engaged instead of spending time watching television or playing mobile phones,

Ugyen felt the need to take on the task herself.

That was when she threw herself headlong into research on wooden toys. Then she got in touch with sawmills and furniture houses to collect unwanted pieces of wood, collaborated with craftsmen and carpenters, and purchased the machinery she needed from China.

Setting up her own business and managing her home at the same time has been a challenge for Ugyen. She has thus learnt why most women choose not to be entrepreneurs. But, she has also learnt that if one was willing to put in enough effort, managed time judiciously, and sought help from one's family, it is, after all, not difficult for a woman to become an entrepreneur. She believes that every woman with a business idea is indeed an entrepreneur in the making and must be given an opportunity.

With 'Tsem', Ugyen hopes to contribute to inculcating cultural values in children at a young age because most of the toys manufactured by her firm will be inspired by local designs and ideas, and will feature the national language, Dzongkha.



The Rising Eco-tourism in Panbang

Greetings from Panbang! After a three-hour drive on a road which took us through dense forest ringing with melodious bird calls, and also over more open country where we enjoyed some lovely views of the Mande river flowing calmly towards the southern foothills, my colleague Lham Dorji and I reached Panbang, our final destination. Panbang lies in the heart of an area of subtropical, rich biodiversity adjacent to the Royal Manas National Park, itself home to a wide range of animals, birds and plants.

Reaching our destination, we were warmly received by the adventurous River Guides of Panbang (RGP) who were eager to demonstrate their amazing river rafting skills and introduce us to the pristine natural environment of the area.

We followed our guides to the Dangme river, and waited by the river side, admiring the view and watching fishes jump and frolic in the current

while our guides prepared the inflatable raft. We donned our life jackets, put on our crash helmets, picked up our paddles and seated ourselves around the sides of the raft, feet firmly placed in the middle. Then, having listened attentively to our guides' instructions, we set off on our two-hour river rafting odyssey with a thrill of pleasurable excitement.

While on the river, enjoying the fresh air and the bird songs echoing across the water, we conducted an on-raft business meeting during which we discussed a range of issues concerning further development of the RGP project. The team members were eager to share with us their most memorable experience to date, namely the rafting visit of the Prime Minister, Opposition Leader, and Speaker of the National Assembly together with several other distinguished guests, all of whom themselves went on the river and expressed support and admiration for the RGA

river rafting service. While in the middle of the meeting, our attention was caught by the sight of a lovely black panther on the river bank, attempting to camouflage herself under a fallen tree to avoid our attention. This meeting, the first I have ever had on a river, was certainly the most memorable of our visit!

The group offered us hospitality at their splendid three-star (at least!) Jungle Camp (supported by Bhutan Foundation) located beside the Marangdut tributary of the Drangme river. Guests are accommodated in eight cosy twin-bedded, tented cabins with thatched roofs and verandas in the traditional Kheng style. Toilet and shower facilities are in a separate block nearby. Electricity is supplied from the national grid and running water is provided via a water tank. During our stay we were served delicious meals garnished with locally sourced delicacies such as wild banana flowers, bamboo shoots and edible orchids and ferns.

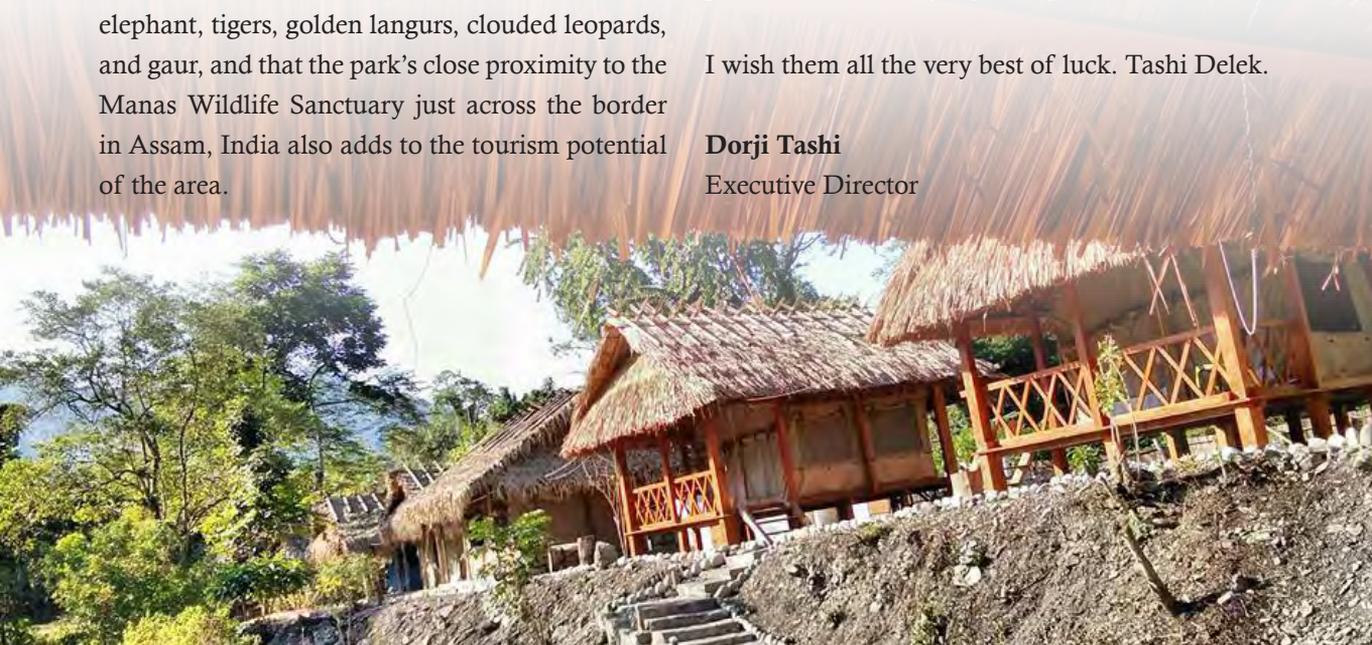
There is no doubt that this project holds great promise for adventure tourism, since part of the Royal Manas National Park falls within the dungkhag. I was told that notable wildlife to be found in the Manas Park include the Asian elephant, tigers, golden langurs, clouded leopards, and gaur, and that the park's close proximity to the Manas Wildlife Sanctuary just across the border in Assam, India also adds to the tourism potential of the area.

In 2014 Loden provided an interest free start-up loan of Nu. 0.8 million to this group, which they used to buy a raft and water sports safety equipment, and to send five members of the team on a two-week training course in Nepal. The group was also gifted a special raft by His Majesty the King in recognition of their service in helping to recover the body of one of the men who drowned in the river in May 2014, when the wooden boat which the passengers were boarding was swept away and then capsized. Bhutan Tourism Council also helped, inviting five members of RGP to Punakha for a week's training with a private travel company that runs a similar river rafting service there. The group is optimistic that this project will not only promote tourism in Panbang but also contribute to the socio-economic development of the dungkhag, and I have no doubts about that.

But in order for the river guides to bring their dream to reality, we must give them our personal support by staying at their Jungle Camp and taking trips on the river with them. On the basis of our own experience, I wholeheartedly recommend the experience to one and all! For further details of this new venture, see website <http://www.paddlebhutan.com/jungle-lodge/>.

I wish them all the very best of luck. Tashi Delek.

Dorji Tashi
Executive Director



“We may be a very small country with a small population, but our people have always been strong, intelligent and capable. But since that alone does not suffice in this day and age, we have also worked in cohesion and with a sense of solidarity to achieve our success”.

His Majesty the King of Bhutan

During 109 National Day Celebration in Trongsa, 2017

Management Team



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(Executive Director)



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