

Accountability Scenario in Bhutan: An Analysis of Accountability by Nature of Obligation

Namgay & Dechen Pelden⁺*

Abstract

Accountability is one of the concerns that need to be addressed for the development and prosperity of the country as highlighted by His Majesty in several Royal Addresses. The Annual Audit Reports, Anti-Corruption Commission Reports, and the media highlights of the last five years (2017-2021) strongly indicate the prevalence of accountability gap/issues in the public sector. Considering the topical and importance of accountability for national development, this paper explores the scenario of accountability through an analysis of the annual audit reports, the reports of ACC, and the media publications. While not everything is accountability, it is one of the key elements for good governance and public sector development. Considering the availability of various definitions of the concept, this paper attempts to study the concept based on the categorization of types of accountability as mapped by Bovens (2006) and Lührmann et al. (2020). Specifically, this paper provides an analysis of accountability by the nature of obligation; Horizontal, Vertical, and Diagonal Accountability using data from the publications of ACC, RAA, and a print media house. Accountability by nature of obligation was chosen from the four types of accountability propounded by Bovens (2006) as it helps to comprehensively explain accountability in a democratic setup. The content of reports of over five years by each agency was analysed to present a synopsis of the scenario of each sub-type of accountability.

Keywords: Accountability; Horizontal Accountability; Vertical Accountability; Diagonal Accountability; Public Sector; Governance

* Senior Lecturer, Department of Management Development, Royal Institute of Management, Bhutan. Corresponding author: namgay@rim.edu.bt

⁺ Senior Lecturer, Department of Finance & Budget, Royal Institute of Management, Bhutan.

Introduction

Accountability is one of the topical issues in the sphere of public sector governance in Bhutan as repeatedly emphasised in numerous public addresses of His Majesty the King, complemented by annual reports of the oversight bodies and frequent media highlights. Most agencies in the public sector continue to uphold 'accountability' as one of their core values and generally stand right next to their respective strategic vision and mission statements. For example, accountability is one of the core values of Bhutanese Civil Service and it is explained as 'A civil servant is responsible for his/her decisions and actions and must be accountable to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to his/her office as prescribed by law and the BCSR.' The same is reflected in the Civil Service Act 2010 of Bhutan. Further, some agencies such as the Royal Civil Service Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, Royal Audit Authority, Election Commission of Bhutan, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, and Royal Institute of Management have embraced Accountability as one of their core values.

Although accountability is defined in various ways in literature, Lindberg (2013) affirms that three dimensions (source of control, strength of control, and direction of relationship) help to organise and capture all types of accountability. While authors have categorised accountability into various types, the categorization promulgated by Bovens (2006) provides clarity and an exhaustive concept. Bovens (2006) mapped accountability by the Nature of the Forum (Political, Legal, Administrative, Professional, and Social Accountability), Nature of the Actor (Corporate, Hierarchical, Collective, and Individual Accountability), Nature of the Conduct (Financial, Procedural, and Product Accountability) and the Nature of the Obligation (Horizontal, Vertical and Diagonal Accountability). Although each type of accountability provides perspectives and insights into accountability from different angles, accountability by nature of obligation was chosen as it helps to explain accountability comprehensively in the context of democracy.

Beran (2006) explains that the voters by taking part in voting give the successful candidates the right to govern and put themselves under an

obligation to obey the successful candidates. Likewise, successful candidates are also obliged to fulfill their mandates. Further, accountability by nature of obligation also includes the role of media and CSOs which are essential in a democracy.

This study seeks to clarify the concept of accountability by the nature of the obligation (Horizontal, Vertical, and Diagonal) from the perspective of how it is implemented in Bhutan. It attempts to depict the scenario of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal accountability and proposes suggestions to strengthen accountability. The study intends to answer “How does accountability by nature of obligation manifest in Bhutan?”.

Specifically, it attempts to achieve the following objectives:

1. Clarify the concept of accountability by the nature of obligation;
2. Portray the scenario of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal accountability in Bhutan; and
3. Suggest strategies to strengthen accountability mechanisms for each type.

Literature Review

Cambridge dictionary defines Accountability as “the fact of being responsible for what you do and able to give a satisfactory reason for it or the degree to which this happened.” Accountability according to multi-donors’ perspectives, including the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is, “the government is able and willing to show the extent to which its actions and decisions are consistent with clearly-defined and agreed-upon objectives.” Accountability, according to Schedler et al. (1999, p. 17), is the relationship between two players, where ‘A is accountable to B when A is obliged to inform B about A’s actions and decisions, to justify them, and to suffer punishment in the case of eventual misconduct’. Lindberg (2013) stated that accountability impedes the government’s use of power. Accountability prevents unlawful behaviour and evaluates politicians’ performance (Goetz, 2008) while accountability helps citizens ensure that governments are responsive to their interests (World Bank Institute, 2005). Goodin et al. (2014) explained as an obligation to generally provide an account to a superior or to someone

with a legitimate stake. As such, accountability enables individuals, entities, and the government to take responsibility and be obligated to achieve intended goals and outcomes to make a difference in the lives of citizens.

To simplify and understand the concept of accountability at the general level, Lindberg (2013) reiterates defining attributes that should be included for any form of accountability:

1. An agent or institution who is to give an account (A for agent).
2. An area, responsibilities, or domain subject to accountability (D for domain)
3. An agent or institution to whom A is to give account (P for principal)
4. The right of P to require A to inform and explain/justify decisions concerning D; and
5. The right of P to Sanction A if A fails to inform and/or explain/justify decisions concerning D.

However, a set of criteria for measuring accountable behaviour must be in place to make an agent accountable (Knouse, 1979; Schedler, 1999). From the above formulations, accountability is understood as the relationships between two or more actors/stakeholders that include: Agent, Principal, and the Institutions - the Right of P to require A to account and the right to sanction through an institution set up on the Domain on the discretionary authority given to the agent. The element of discretionary authority for the whole or part of the domain is the key to making it accountable.

There are numerous studies on accountability concept, perspective, attitude of key stakeholders, types and sub-types of accountabilities. Lührmann et al. (2020) analysed citizens' attitudes towards governmental accountability in 24 European countries and determined the influence of contextual and individual factors on perceptions of accountability. de Boer (2021) attempted to update the understanding of accountability by embedding it in the broader conceptual structure of public accountability. Laebens & Lührmann (2021) studied how different accountability mechanisms including parliamentary and judicial oversight (horizontal accountability),

pressures from civil society and the media (diagonal accountability), or electoral competition between parties and within parties (vertical accountability) contribute to halting democratic erosion.

Fox (2015) identified limits to the conceptual framework applied on Social Accountability and accessed its impact through new conceptual lenses. Khoirina (2022) conducted a research study to determine and prove the effect of Accountability and Transparency as independent variables to Budget Management as the dependent variable. Mechkova et al. (2019) studied how and in what sequence the accountability sub-type-vertical, horizontal and diagonal accountability are developed considering both *de facto* and *de jure* dimensions. Likewise, Hilhorst et al. (2021) conducted study to take stock of accountability initiatives and practices, and distinguished upward, sideways, and downward accountability, and incorporated formal and informal forms of accountability.

However, Bovens & Schillemans (2014: 674) mentioned the need of research on meaningful accountability to facilitate movement from one size fits all accountability to context sensitive accountability based on situations. Heldt & Herzog (2022) researched on the limit of transparency-expert knowledge and meaningful accountability and discussed how expert knowledge might be communicated to outsiders to capacitate meaningful accountability. Aleksovska et al. (2022) conducted a study on how the accountability prioritisation was made by the public sector actors given a multitude of accountability forums.

While authors have categorized accountability into various types, a categorization by Bovens (2006) provides clarity and an exhaustive concept. According to him, accountability is categorized by Nature of the Forum (Political, Legal, Administrative, Professional, and Social Accountability), Nature of the Actor (Corporate, Hierarchical, Collective, and Individual Accountability), Nature of the Conduct (Financial, Procedural, and Product Accountability), and the Nature of the Obligation (Horizontal, Vertical and Diagonal Accountability).

Lindberg (2013) bifurcated accountability as Horizontal and Vertical accountability based on three dimensions: the source of accountability being internal or external (Gormley & Bella, 2004), the degree of control/influence, high or low (Powell, 2000), and the spatial direction

of accountability relationships-top to bottom or vis-à-vis (Schedler, 1999). In addition to Vertical and Horizontal accountability, Mark Bovens (2006) explained diagonal accountability as the third type of accountability based on the nature of obligations.

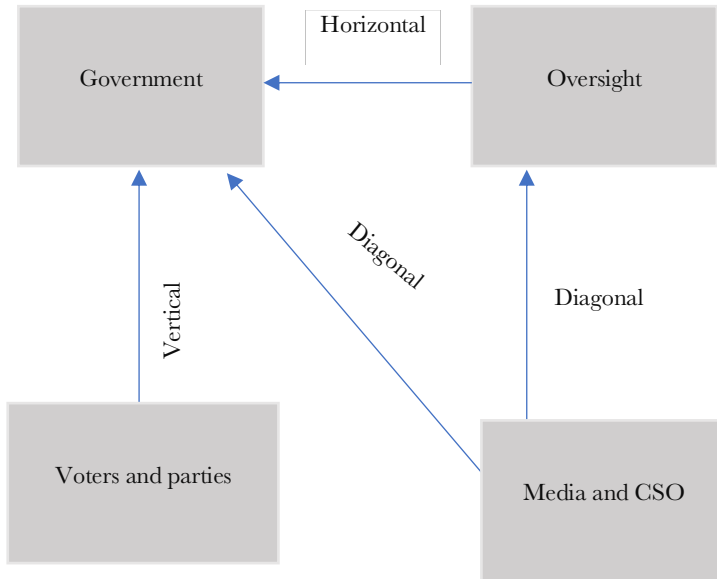
Horizontal accountability is the relationship between more or less equal institutions or engaging different branches of government (O'Donnell, 1998). Thereby, the state institutions hold the executive branch of the government accountable. It requires the existence of institutions including legislative and judicial branches, and other oversight agencies that can demand information and make agencies accountable for their improper behavior (O'Donnell, 1998; Rose-Ackerman, 1996). For example, state institutions like the Royal Audit Authority and the Supreme Audit Institution of Bhutan are entrusted with auditing and reporting on the use of public resources of various government stakeholders including corporations and financial institutions.

Vertical accountability is the relationship between un-equals (Lührmann et al. 2020). It considers the potential of the population to hold the government accountable through elections and political parties (Schedler et al. 1999). According to them, vertical accountability can be upward or downward based on the spatial direction of the accountability relationship. Citizens operate upward vertical accountability on their elected representatives, while in the bureaucracy it is vertical accountability.

The contribution of non-state players to accountability is referred to as diagonal accountability (Schillemans & Bovens, 2004). It reflects the extent to which Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and media players limit government directly or indirectly by providing information to the public at large and enforcing accountability. The CSOs, media, and citizens can leverage the platform to provide and amplify information about the government, thereby holding it accountable (Grimes, 2013; Malena & Forster, 2004). The relationship between the three subtypes of accountability by the nature of the obligation is clearly explained by Lührmann et al. (2020) as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Relationship Between Three Sub-Types of Accountability.



Source: Lührmann et al., 2020

This paper provides an account of each type of accountability in Bhutan based on the content analysis of the annual reports of the Royal Audit Authority (RAA) and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), and the publications in the independent media, which resonate with all above three subtypes of accountability.

Methodology

This study is based on the review of secondary data published by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), Royal Audit Authority (RAA), and the media reports covered by the Bhutanese newspaper on accountability. Content analysis of reports of agencies and media reports published online was carried out in order to describe the scenario of sub-types of accountability in Bhutan. Specifically, for Horizontal accountability, the content of the Annual Audit Report (2016-2020) and the Annual Report of ACC (2017-2021) was

analysed. For Diagonal Accountability, searches were conducted on the online repositories of papers using the keyword “Accountability”. The repository of *The Bhutanese* from 2017-2021 (similar to the period of agency reports) was retrieved and the content was analysed for what the accountability report is about and the agency involved. Finally, the content of reports related to social accountability published by the Bhutan Transparency Initiative and the Anti-corruption Commission was analysed for Vertical Accountability.

Krippendorp (2004) suggests that content analysis is most successful when we can break down the “linguistically constituted facts” into attributions, social relationships, public behaviours, and institutional realities. Following this suggestion, this study focused mainly on public behaviour and institutional realities.

Results & Discussions

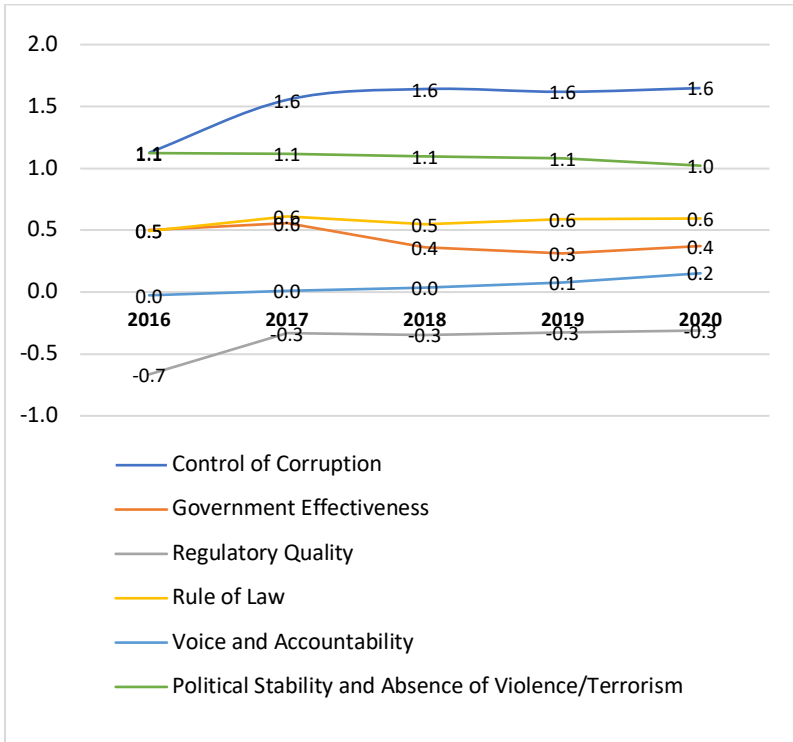
At the international level, the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators presents a comparative data on aggregate individual governance indicators for 215 economies over the period 1996–2020. The results combine the perceptions of a large number of business enterprises and citizen and expert survey respondents across the countries. A review of these indicators for Bhutan shows that Bhutan needs to do more in terms of accountability as indicated in Figure 2.

The lagging two indicators are Voice and Accountability, and Regulatory Quality although some improvements were seen in recent years for accountability.

The synopsis of sub-types of accountability based on the nature of the obligation (Horizontal, Vertical, and Diagonal) as observed in Bhutan based on the analysis of relevant documents such as the reports of ACC, RAA, and media are presented below.

Figure 2

Worldwide Governance Indicators for Bhutan 2016-2020



Source: World Bank, 2022.

Horizontal Accountability

This section highlights horizontal accountability which is referred to the relationship between more or less equal institutions or engaging different branches of government to hold the executive branch of the government accountable (O'Donnell, 1999). It requires the existence of institutions including legislative and judicial branches, and other oversight agencies that can demand information and make agencies accountable for their improper behaviour (O'Donnell, 1998; Rose-Ackerman, 1996). This section highlights the scenario of accountability as observed through the analysis of the reports of the

two-key oversight (constitutional body) agencies in Bhutan. It provides a synopsis of accountability issues as highlighted by the annual reports of the Royal Audit Authority (2016-2020) and the Anti-Corruption Commission (2017-2021).

Accountability by Oversight Agencies

The Royal Audit Authority

The Royal Audit Authority (RAA) is the Supreme Audit Institution (SAI) of Bhutan, established in 1963. Since then, the RAA has undergone a series of changes along with the overall country's development and reform. It is mandated by the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008, and the Audit Act of Bhutan, 2018 to audit and report on the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the use of public resources. As per Section 67 of the Audit Act, RAA is entrusted to promote accountability, transparency, and integrity in public operations through its reports and recommendations. The RAA conducts financial, performance, and compliance audits, and submits its annual reports to His Majesty, the Prime Minister, and Parliament as per Clause 25(5) of the Constitution and Section 111 of the Audit Act. The Public Accounts Committee, as mandated by the Constitution, reviews, and reports on the Annual Audit Report to Parliament for its consideration or on any other report presented by the Auditor General. The audit jurisdiction includes government offices including all offices in the legislature and the Judiciary, all public authorities and bodies including Civil Society Organizations, Religious Organizations, and Non-Governmental Organizations administering public funds, the police, and the armed forces as well as the revenues, public and other monies received and the advances and reserves of Bhutan.

The analysis of the Annual Audit Reports indicates that accountability has been and continues to be an issue in the public sector in Bhutan. Over five years from 2016-2020, the RAA reported irregularities amounting to Nu. 4986.71 million in various agencies as shown in Table 1. The majority of the observations were in the ministries with an increasing trend over the years.

Table 1

Observations by Type of Agency

Observations by Category of Agency (Unresolved Amount)					
Observations by Agency	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Ministries	310.35	115.21	198.33	643.90	635.62
Dzongkhags/Gewogs	61.23	50.52	163.11	268.00	93.78
Autonomous agencies (Budgeted agencies)	104.30	72.75	24.96	139.73	288.79
Corporations	76.86	148.10	195.35	38.84	235.42
Financial Institutions	22.66	NA	NA	294.49	654.91
Non-Governmental Organizations	13.39	20.53	22.64	30.16	62.80
Total	588.78	407.11	604.38	1415.12	1971.31

Source: RAA Annual Reports 2016-2022

The existence of issues of accountability is further exhibited by the category of the observations as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Observations by Category

Observations by Category of Observations					
Observation Categories	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Shortfalls, Lapses and Deficiencies	367.32	143.63	262.28	871.38	1574.24
Non-Compliance to Laws and Regulations	159.80	86.75	185.10	444.80	408.06
Mismanagement	52.26	168.50	127.38	67.06	42.76
Fraud, Corruption, and Embezzlement	9.41	8.23	29.61	31.91	26.17
Total	588.78	407.11	604.38	1415.15	2051.23

Source: RAA Annual Reports 2016-2022.

Shortfalls, lapses, and deficiencies continue to increase over the period among the various types of irregularities. While there was a slight dip in the total in 2017 from 2016, the total irregularities increased significantly over the years from 2017 to 2020.

Table 3

Summary of Irregularities (Initial Observation and Resolved Amount)

Observations Resolved					
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total amount of observations Draft AAR	3039.61	730.40	922.73	3531.70	4309.03
Total amount resolved during the year Draft AAR	2450.82	323.28	318.35	2116.55	2257.79
Balance reported in AAR	588.78	407.11	604.38	1415.15	2051.23
Percentage of unresolved observations	19.37	55.74	65.50	40.07	47.60

Source: RAA Annual Reports 2016-2022.

RAA's annual reports publish only the unresolved irregularities and principally the accountability issues would have been much higher as 24% to 80% of the observations are resolved either through a refund or acceptable justifications.

The analysis indicates that the RAA had been instrumental in strengthening accountability in the country particularly in being able to uncover the irregularities which otherwise would have been hidden and the perpetrators escaped without any accountability.

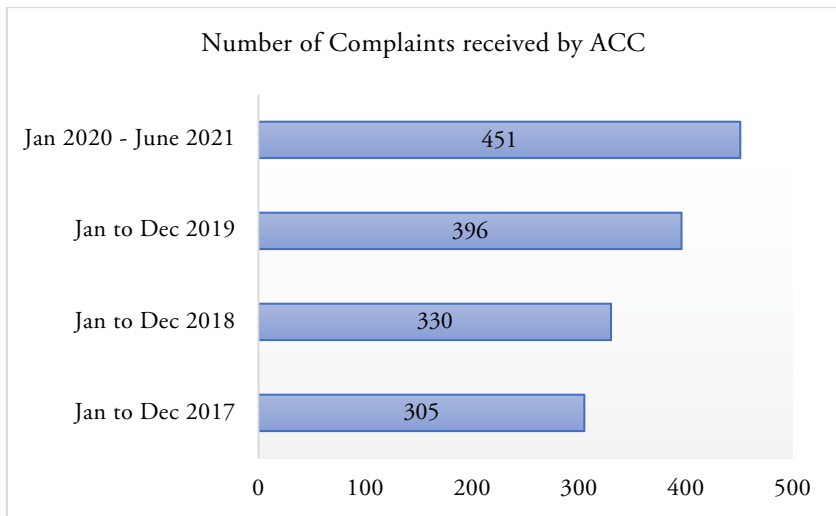
Anti-Corruption Commission

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) is a constitutional body, mandated to prevent and fight corruption in Bhutan. Established on 31 December 2005 by Royal Decree, its mission is to tackle corruption through leading by example, achieving excellence in partnership, and mainstreaming anti-corruption measures in public and/or private organisations. The anti-corruption commission has adopted a tri-

pronged strategy of Prevention, Education, and Investigation to combat corruption in the country. The ACC submits its annual reports to His Majesty, the Prime Minister, and Parliament, and the Good Governance Committee reviews and reports on the Annual Report to Parliament for its consideration. The ACC's jurisdiction includes both the public and private sectors including all offices in the Legislature and the Judiciary, all public authorities and bodies including Civil Society Organisations, Religious Organisations, and Non-Governmental Organisations and the armed forces, Corporate and private sector in the country.

Figure 3

Number of complaints received by ACC from 2017 to June 2021



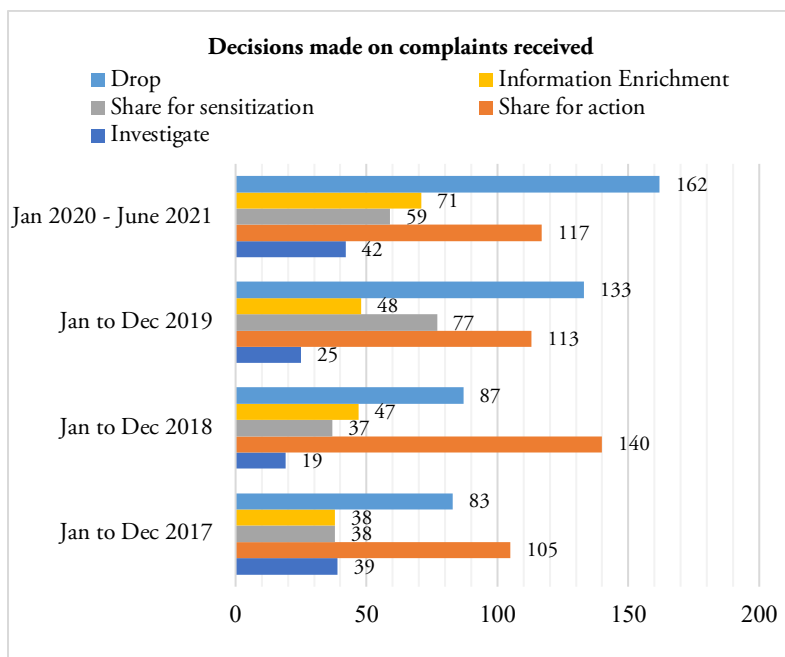
Source: ACC Annual Reports 2017 to 2021.

The ACC received a total of 1482 complaints from Jan 2017 to June 2021 over a period of four and half years as shown in Figure 3.

As the number of complaints alone does not reveal issues of accountability, further analysis of the complaints by the decisions made on the complaints helps to clarify the issues as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Decisions made on complaints

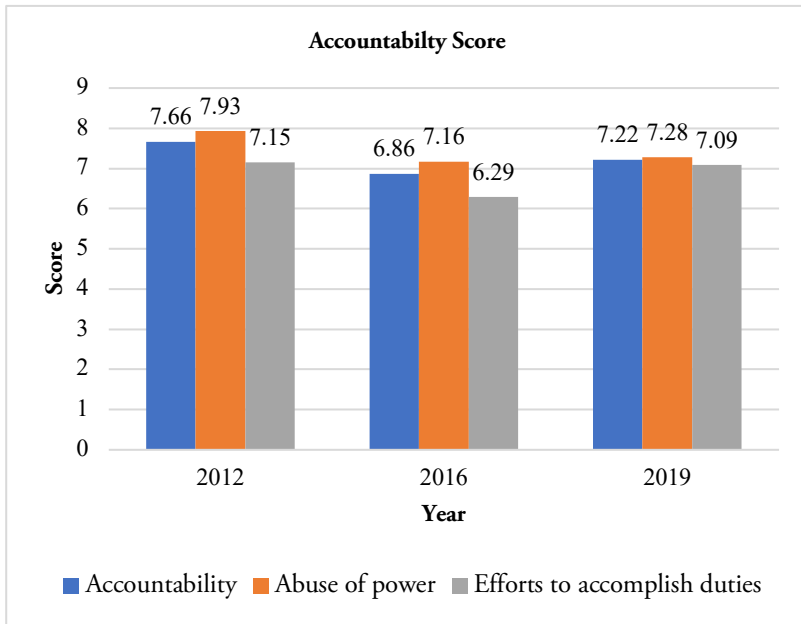


Source: ACC Annual Reports 2017 to 2021.

While the majority of the complaints received are dropped owing to baseless and unsubstantiated nature, the proportion of complaints that were shared for action dominates the decisions indicating issues of accountability in the agencies. The complaints about administrative lapses are shared with the agencies for follow-up actions by the agencies themselves so that agencies take the responsibility of ensuring effective management and administration. The agencies are required to submit a report including the administrative actions taken against the officials involved. The ACC investigates the complaints related to corruption offences as per the Anti-Corruption Act 2011 (ACAB 2011) and only 6-13 percent of the complaints have qualified for investigation over the years.

Figure 5

Comparison of NIA scores for Accountability



Source: NIA 2012, 2016, and 2019 (ACC).

The ACC in collaboration with the National Statistics Bureau (NSB) also conducts the National Integrity Assessment (NIA) once every three years to assess transparency, accountability, and corruption in public service delivery as perceived and experienced by the service users and providers. The first NIA was conducted in 2009 and the latest in 2019. The accountability component scored the lowest score (7.22/10) of all other components of external integrity (assessment by service users) which falls in the need improvement level. The assessment indicated that the public officials do not put in the required efforts to accomplish duties. Figure 5 shows a comparative score of the NIA in 2012, 2016, and 2019. The trend shows that accountability score has not improved over the years and is a concern in public service delivery in Bhutan.

Vertical Accountability

Vertical accountability is the relationship between un-equals (Lührmann, Marquardt, & Mechkova, 2020), and it considers the potential of a state's population to hold the government accountable through elections and political parties (Schedler, Diamond, and Plattner 1999). Based on the spatial direction of accountability relationship, vertical accountability on their elected representatives, while in bureaucratic layers it is usually downward vertical accountability.

Social Accountability complements the vertical accountability mechanisms of the government agencies through bottom-up oversight strategies by engagement of citizens. The government functions are so broad that it is impossible to oversee the entire operations by the oversight agencies. While elections provide opportunities for the citizens to hold the elected leaders accountable for their actions, it happens only periodically. Thus, Social Accountability provides a platform for effective participation or engagement by the citizen in the development process. Some of the areas where people partake are the planning and priority setting, budgeting, public expenditure tracking, monitoring of public service delivery, and investigative journalism among others to improve governance and enhance public service delivery. The World Bank defines Social Accountability as “an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organisations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting Accountability” (Malena, 2004).

In Bhutan, the social accountability programme was first introduced in 2013 by the Anti-corruption Commission (ACC) through advocacy and capacity-building workshops for key partner agencies such as the Department of Local Governance (DLG), the Royal Institute of Management (RIM), and Bhutan Transparency Initiative (BTI), a Civil Society Organization (CSO). Since then, various Social Accountability tools such as Participatory Planning and Budgeting, Social Audits, Citizen Score Card (CSC), and Citizen Report Card (CRC) in the Gewogs through the aegis of the Department of Local Governance, Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs.

To enhance the program's effectiveness tools such as proactive disclosure of information, Participatory Planning and Budgeting, Community Monitoring and Assessment (CMAC), Grievance Redressal Mechanism, and CSC were contextualized and implemented by DLG and BTI. So far Gewog officials and citizens in nine Dzongkhags (Thimphu, Paro, Punakha, Tsirang, Sarpang, Samtse, Samdrup Jongkhar, and Zhemgang and Bumthang) were trained on the implementation of the tools mentioned above. The BTI's training of citizens and officials in Local governments include practical exercises to conduct CSC in vulnerable and key services have made significant impact in holding the elected leaders accountable. A BBS report on July 9, 2022 highlighted the dissatisfaction of the Thromde Demkhongs over awarding multiple contracts to a single contractor by the Thromde (Pema Seldon Tshering, 2022). The information was uncovered by the Demkhongs during a social accountability training exercise conducted by BTI for the Demkhongs and Thromde officials.

While the programme was well received by the citizens in terms of its impact in engaging citizens particularly in monitoring development works, challenges such as willingness and competencies of local government officials; weak coordination between the local government and citizens; and lack of monitoring and follow up by the central agencies are identified as some of the key issues (ACC, 2022). Social accountability provides a perfect platform for vertical accountability wherein citizens hold the elected leaders accountable before the next election.

Diagonal Accountability

During the last five years (2017-2021), *The Bhutanese* published close to 197 articles (Table 1) on accountability-related highlights on ministries, corporations, financial institutions, gewog administration, judiciary, autonomous agencies, dzongkhag administration, and non-governmental organizations. Those highlights which are not about a specific agency or crosscutting in nature are placed under the 'others' category (Table 2). The nature of these accountability issues and highlights are on the status, output, outcome, impact of either completed or ongoing projects and programmes; individuals' opinions

on various subjects, and abstracts from various agencies' annual reports.

The accountability was mostly for and against the institution(s). These highlights were broadly bifurcated into non-compliance to laws, rules, and regulations, shortfall, lapse and deficiencies, initiatives/activities, and others. Those accountability highlights either contributed or intended or potential to directly or indirectly contribute towards further strengthening accountability associated structure, tools, and mechanism at the individual, institutional, and the cross sectoral and national levels are categorised under initiatives/activities. The accountability under non-compliance to laws, rules, and regulations includes those that highlight deviations from the existing norms. And those highlights associated with ineffective and lack of controls, systems, mechanisms, supervision, and monitoring are categorised as shortfall, lapses, and deficiencies, and the rest broad highlights are put under the others category. There are 91 highlights under initiatives/activities, 47 under shortfall, lapses, and deficiencies, 41 under others, and 18 highlights under non-compliance to rules and regulations. Of 197 highlights, 33 highlighted accountability from ministries, three against the judiciary, 16 related to gewogs administration accountability, 17 against Corporations accountability, 12 from constitutional bodies, 12 for autonomous agencies, one against dzongkhag administration, and 103 placed under others category.

Table 4

Frequency of Word 'Accountability' in Publications

Media	Year					Total
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	
The Bhutanese	41	34	47	24	51	197

Source: *The Bhutanese*

Non-compliance with laws, rules, and regulations

Highlights with a clear indication of deviations from the existing laws, rules, and regulations, and also good practices along with accountability against specific individuals, agencies, parties, and committees are categorised under non-compliance to laws, rules, and

regulations. Some of the highlights include the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) accountable to the Prime Minister and the larger government in relation to OAG's involvement in defamation cases against the individual; performance audit recommendations to improve the healthcare service delivery, enhance accountability and improve decision making were reported not found implemented by JDWNRH and Thimphu Thromde; and on the cancellation of the monthly Meet-the-Press with the government.

Shortfall, lapses, and deficiencies

Some of the highlights under this category include: government expenditure with no ceiling, rules, limit, and even accountability in relation to hospitality and entertainment expensed by around thirty ministerial ranking individuals; lack of proper performance supervision on the medical staff, thereby, lacks accountability; and call for clear criteria on the admissibility of funds from the General Reserve including the accountability process in the event of diversion of the fund to other than intended activities and programmes. The Bhutanese (December 12, 2021) questioned the performance of the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) for the delay of the third local government elections results and called for fixing accountability for ECB. It indicates the performance accountability against the institution.

Further, the Enactment of Civil Liability Act to protect citizens was brought to the public notice stressing the need 'to bring about accountability in the system and imbibe a sense of responsibility amongst relevant/responsible individuals, officials, agencies, business entities, as well as citizens.'. The publication also highlighted the topical topics including the spread of the COVID virus due to ineffective strategies of government; enactment of the Civil Liability Act to hold public agencies and others liable in case of similar incidents; diversion of general reserve funds to fund capital works activities.

Initiatives/activities

The analysis also uncovered the key initiatives/activities that were highlighted by the Bhutanese. The initiatives include the Annual

Performance Agreement (APA), MaX online system, and eKaaSel-Online Grievance Redressal System. The initiatives/activities also include: developing, revising, debating, or proposing bills, guidelines, rules, systems, and tools to enforce or enhance accountability at various levels and situations. The reports also highlighted the parliamentarian deliberation on the Civil Liability Bill to bring about accountability in the system and imbibe a sense of responsibility. For example, the Hydropower Committee for Hydropower development in Bhutan called for a clear delineation of roles, responsibilities and guidelines for every agency involved in project investigations to ensure the credibility and accountability of project investigation reports. The committee also called for the Bhutanese counterpart to take the lead role to build Bhutanese capacity and ensure ownership and accountability.

Likewise, it also reported that the Supreme Court has come up with a draft Judicial Accountability Guidelines 2017 to facilitate launching complaints against and investigating judges. The initiatives also included various recommendations and measures like the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between agencies to either institute or further strengthen accountability, coming up with policy documents such as the Decentralization policy on works to strengthen local governance and ensure citizen's participation. Similarly, the Ministry of Health seeking full autonomy of JDWNRH from RCSC, and a proposal on leveraging ICT for effective and efficient various service delivery were some of the media highlights for the last the period under review.

Others

Under the 'Others' category included those broad, generic, and cross-cutting opinions, views, recommendations, and promises/pledges of agencies and individuals, and also abstracts from published reports of oversight bodies, various committee reports, and other publications associated with accountability-related highlights.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

As expressed by His Majesty the King in numerous national events, accountability is one of the concerns that need to be addressed for the development and prosperity of the country. The Annual Audit Reports, Anti-Corruption Commission's reports, and the media highlights for the last five years (2017-2021) strongly indicate the prevalence of accountability gap/issues in the public sector. The audit observations on fraud and corruption; mismanagement; non-compliance to laws, rules, and regulations; and shortfall, lapses, and deficiencies reporting millions annually from almost the same agencies itself are apparent of the rooted accountability problem. It also reveals the existence of minimum or doable repercussions for breach of trust and responsibilities, as the same and similar instances are reported annually. Further, the review also reveals the reliability and value-addition of the recommendations provided by various oversight bodies to the various agencies. The media played a crucial role in informing the public on various counts of accountability, including initiatives and activities that were introduced to further strengthen the accountability mechanisms.

However, it is key to understand the root causes of this behaviour in terms of who commits fraud and why to proactively address those rooted risks. According to Rabi and Noorhayati (2015), they stressed focusing on fraud prevention rather than detecting it post its occurrence which is less expensive and more effective and likely assures recovery of loss. Thanasak (2013:1) explains that before making any efforts to reduce fraud and manage the risks proactively, it is key for the organisations to identify the factors leading to fraudulent behaviour by understanding who the fraudsters are, when, and why frauds are committed. As such, the study concluded for future studies to determine causal factors to prevent and detect lapses from happening in various public agencies.

Recommendations

Oversight agencies may prioritise strategic sectors to enhance horizontal accountability

The analysis indicates that the oversight agencies are doing a commendable job in strengthening horizontal accountability. However, the issues of accountability are also seen to be increasing owing to the economic developments and investments. Thus, oversight agencies may prioritise strategic sectors or high impact cases for a whole of system overhaul and impact.

Strengthen media and CSOs to enhance diagonal accountability

Efforts should be made to strengthen media and CSOs that work in the governance field. These actors are not only instrumental in ensuring a vibrant democracy, but they are also important accountability stakeholders with the potential to fill gaps where the government and oversight agencies are unable to work effectively. Support in terms of capacity development and grants in addition to creating enabling conditions are essential for Media and CSOs to function effectively.

Enhance platforms for citizens to engage in governance to improve vertical accountability

While elections provide opportunities for the citizens to hold the elected leaders accountable for their actions, it happens only periodically. It is essential to have platforms for citizens' effective participation in governance and providing feedback to improve services. Social Accountability programme serves as an effective platform for citizens to hold their elected leaders accountable, it is still in its infancy stage of implementation. Key stakeholders such as the oversight agencies and Department of Local Governance could consider strengthening its implementation through the CSOs.

Enhance ethical leadership culture

One of the key strategies to strengthen accountability in organisations is setting the tone and modelling by the head and leaders. Acknowledging the initiatives taken by the RCSC, ACC, and RAA to enhance ethical leadership culture. Coordinated and collaborative

efforts may be considered by the constitutional bodies in terms of timely sharing of information and taking appropriate actions.

Strengthen supervision, monitoring, reporting and follow up mechanisms and modalities

Focus on instituting and strengthening supervision, monitoring and reporting mechanisms across all public sector institutions to facilitate robust implementation of planned activities and quality outputs and outcomes.

Reference

- Abdullahi, R. and Mansor, N. (2018). Fraud prevention initiatives in the Nigerian public sector: understanding the relationship of fraud incidences and the elements of fraud triangle theory, *Journal of Financial Crime*, 25 (2): 527-544.
- Aleksovska, M., Schillemans, T., & Grimmelikhuijsen, S. (2022). Management of multiple accountabilities through setting priorities: Evidence from a cross-national conjoint experiment. *Public Administration Review*, 82(1), 132-146.
- Anti-Corruption Commission of Bhutan [ACC]. (2019). *National integrity and anti-corruption strategy (2019-2023)*. Thimphu: RGOB.
- _____. (2010). *National integrity assessment report 2009*. Thimphu: RGOB
- _____. (2013). *National integrity assessment report 2012*. Thimphu: RGOB.
- _____. (2020). *National integrity assessment report 2019*. Thimphu: RGOB.
- _____. (2021). *National integrity assessment report 2020*. Thimphu: RGOB.
- Beran, H. (2006). Political Obligation and Democracy. *Australian Journal of Philosophy* 54(3), doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048407612341271>
- Bovens, M. (2007). Analysing and assessing accountability: A conceptual framework 1. *European Law Journal*, 13(4), 447-468.
- Dykstra, Clarence A. (February 1938). The Quest for Responsibility. *American Political Science Review*. 33(1): 1-25. doi:10.2307/1949761.

- de Boer, T. (2021). Updating public accountability: a conceptual framework of voluntary accountability. *Public Management Review*, 1-24.
- Fox, J. A. (2015). Social accountability: what does the evidence really say? *World Development*, 72, 346-361.
- Gisselquist, R. M. (2012). *Good governance as a concept, and why this matters for development policy*. WIDER Working Paper No. 2012/30.
- Goetze, C., & Guzina, D. (2008). Peacebuilding, state building, nation building—turtles all the way down? *Civil Wars*, 10 (4): 329-347.
- Goodin, R., Bovens, M., & Schillemans, T. (2014). Public Accountability. In *Oxford handbook of public accountability*. Oxford University Press.
- Gross National Happiness Commission. (2016). *Guidelines for preparation of the 12th five-year plan (FYP) 2018-2023*. Thimphu: RGOB.
- _____. (2019). *Twelfth five-year plan 2018*. Thimphu: RGOB.
- _____. (2019). *Twelfth Five-year plan 2018-2023. volume I main document*. Thimphu: RGOB.
- Hilhorst, D., Melis, S., Mena, R., & van Voorst, R. (2021). Accountability in humanitarian action. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 40(4), 363-389.
- Heldt, E. C., & Herzog, L. (2022). The limits of transparency: Expert knowledge and meaningful accountability in central banking. *Government and Opposition*, 57(2), 217-232.
- Kassem, R., & Higson, A. (2012). The new fraud triangle model. *Journal of emerging trends in economics and management sciences*, 3(3), 191-195.
- Khoirina, S. (2022). The influence of accountability and transparency on budget management: study at public health center bandar lampung. *Peradaban Journal of Economic and Business*, 1(1), 52-61.
- Laebens, M. G., & Lührmann, A. (2021). What halts democratic erosion? The changing role of accountability. *Democratization*, 28(5), 908-928.
- Lindberg, S. I. (2009). *Accountability: the core concept and its subtypes*. Africa Power and Politics Programme Working Paper 1.
- Lindberg, S. I. (2013). Mapping accountability: core concept and subtypes. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 79(2), 202-226.
- Lührmann, A., Marquardt, K. L., & Mechkova, V. (2020). Constraining governments: new indices of vertical, horizontal, and

- diagonal accountability. *American Political Science Review*, 114(3), 811-820.
- Mansor, N. (2015). Concomitant debacle of fraud incidences in the Nigeria public sector: understanding the power of fraud triangle theory. *International Journal of academic research in business and social sciences*, 5(9), 2222-6990.
- Mechkova, V., Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). The accountability sequence: from de-jure to de-facto constraints on governments. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 54(1), 40-70.
- O'Donnell, G. A. (1998). Horizontal accountability in new democracies. *Journal of Democracy*, 9(3), 112-126.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2011). *Towards more effective and dynamic public management in Mexico*. OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing.
- Royal Audit Authority. (2017). *Annual audit report 2016*. Thimphu: RGOB.
- _____. (2018). *Annual audit report 2017*. Thimphu: RGOB.
- Royal Audit Authority. (2019). *Annual audit report 2018*. Thimphu: RGOB.
- _____. (2020). *Annual audit report 2019*. Thimphu: RGOB.
- Royal Audit Authority. (2021). *Annual audit report 2020*. Thimphu: RGOB.
- _____. (2021). *Auditor general's occasional paper on agencies rationalizing irregularities 2021. vol 1*. Thimphu. RGOB.
- Ruankaew, T. (2016). Beyond the fraud diamond. *International Journal of Business Management and Economic Research*, 7(1), 474-476.
- Schillemans, T. (2008). Accountability in the shadow of hierarchy: the horizontal accountability of agencies. *Public Organization Review*, 8(2), 175-194.
- World Bank (2022). Worldwide governance indicator 2021. *WGI 2021 Interactive*. <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>

Newspapers

- Abhinaya Chhetri (2019, November 23). Most Media Houses uncomfortable with cancellation of the monthly Meet-the-Press. *The Bhutanese*.

- Abhinaya Chhetri (2020, April 4). Work from Home adopted by RCSC, DHI and some private companies. *The Bhutanese*.
- Abhinaya Chhetri (2020, January 2). Mines and Mineral Bill of Bhutan 2020 adopted with big changes. *The Bhutanese*.
- Damchoe Pem (2017, June 17). PAC reviews five Performance Audit Reports. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2017, May 6). Bhutan ranks 27 of 176 countries in 2016 corruption survey. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2018, June 16). Dzongdas' Conference sees PM announcing greater decentralization of resources and authority to Local Govts in draft 12th plan. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2019, September 14). MoU signed between ACC and BTI to prevent corruption. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2021, December 11). NC's Civil Liability Bill to hold public agencies and others financially liable for deaths, injuries and damage to property. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2021, March 4). Thrompon hopefuls from Phuentsholing outline plans. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2021, October 4). 31 UN agencies found 2020 a challenging year. *The Bhutanese*.
- Jack Nicholson (2017, July 15) A civil discourse. *The Bhutanese*.
- Karma Chuki Namgyel (2019, July 6). SOEs not required to submit budget for NA Economic committee review. *The Bhutanese*.
- Karma Yuden (2021, August 14). Buyback not a good approach because it depletes government resources: FCBL. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2021, January 30). Transport Sector takes extra measures to guard against COVID-19. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2021, March 4). Three candidates for the Thimphu Thrompon post and their pledges. *The Bhutanese*.
- Kinley Younten (2017, December 30). eKaaSel – Online Grievance Redressal System. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2021, May 6). NC Legislative Committee proposes for enactment of Civil Liability Act to protect citizens. *The Bhutanese*.
- Pema Seldon (2017, May 20). Complaints against Local Government top ACC complains. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2018, July 07). MOE proposal says IWP should be done by MoE and ranking of teachers should be done by school authorities. *The Bhutanese*.

- _____ (2019, August 6). Minister's Entitlement Bill suggests check and balance. *The Bhutanese*.
- Pema Seldon Tshering (2022, Jul 9). Some demkhongs not happy with Thromde for awarding multiple contracts to single contractor. *The Bhutanese*.
- Sonam Yangdon (2017, February 18). Managing for Excellence. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2017, January 14). Question raised on the legality of Bhutan Children's Parliament (BCP). *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2017, September 12). MoLHR found to have implemented most of PAC's recommendations. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2018, December 01). mBoB's recent indemnity clause is in violation of Consumer Protection Act: OCP. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2018, June 28). Majority of performance audit recommendations not implemented by JDWNRH and Thimphu Thromde: PAC. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2018, October 27). A look at DNT's Economy pledges. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2019, June 4). MoH plans to delink JDWNRH from RCSC to obtain full autonomy. *The Bhutanese*.
- Tenzin Delma (2018, December 12). BOE fails to give written statement to parents and students of 'Learn and earn' program. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2018, December 15). 60 parents and students highlight flaws in BEO's Japan program. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2018, December 22). The parents and students of 'Learn and Earn' Program approach the opposition party. *The Bhutanese*.
- Tenzing Lamsang (2017, July 29). The systemic failures within BDBL that led to a Nu 576 mn fraud. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2017, March 18). Draft guideline sets up system to complain against and investigate Judges. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2017, May 13). Civil service promotions to depend on individual performance from this year on. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2017, November 3). ACC complaint filed against National Film Awards. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2018, December 22). The focus of the 111th national day royal address. *The Bhutanese*.

- _____ (2018, December 8). Committee of secretaries given a second lease. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2018, November 21). Hydro committee calls for better standards and more Bhutanese participation. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2019, August 10). The real 'herd mentality'. *The Bhutanese*.
- Tenzing Lamsang (2019, August 8). Agreement on 2,560 MW Sunkosh still eludes two countries. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2019, January 26). 30 ministerial rank individuals spent Nu 370 mn in 'hospitality and entertainment' in last 10 years. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2019, January 26). Austerity is coming. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2019, July 5). DNT checking DNT: Party moves to elect separate Party President and a new Executive Committee. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2019, July 9). RCSC's non-action on 4 separate administrative charges against Labour DG may set a precedent. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2019, June 22). Pay hike gives boost to health staff but deep surgery needed to improve quality. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2019, March 30). Mining Bill favors private participation with better regulation. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2019, March 30). Sunkosh stuck due to differences between Bhutan and India on implementation modality. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2020, April 18). Govt service delivery slows down post COVID-19. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2020, December 19). His Majesty envisions a developed Bhutan in our lifetime and presents a reality check for the civil service and the education system. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2020, December 19). PM says not against joining UNCRP and education access for disabled students a priority. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2020, March 28). (Step 1) Govt stops vegetable import on March 24, Minister announces it (Step 2) Faces panic buying, price rise and strong public backlash [Step 3] Issues circular on March 26 saying there never was a 'ban'. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2020, November 28). MoEA says harvesting more timber and processing it could lead to Nu 50 bn in annual revenue and Nu 194 bn in value addition. *The Bhutanese*.

- _____ (2021, December, 25). RAA points to inefficiency, inadequacies and fraud after evaluating 279 bn worth of Govt procurement in last 5 years. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2021, January 23). After accepting lapses govt does extensive reviews and course correction around Paro Airport. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2021, July 20). ACC wrote to PM on Penjore's complaint against OAG. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2021, June 15). In a first OAG takes 'legal action' against a person for defamation without any complaint of defamation. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2021, November 6). More than 100 plus Gups yet to get Audit Clearance for LG elections. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2021, October 7). Govt's non-interference with OAG in Penjore case is probably our biggest contribution to democracy: PM. *The Bhutanese*.
- Tshering Dema (2019, July 5). Students on govt scholarship for alternative medicine now not recognized by BMHC. *The Bhutanese*.
- Usha Drukpa (2019, November 02). Rude behavior and medical negligence are the most common complaints received by JDWNRH and BMHC. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2020, November 11). MoE with support from Save the Children to provide free smart phones or tablets to all students with special needs. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2021, April 24). Moral Responsibility important while applying for interest waiver under Druk Gyalpo's Relief Kidu: RMA official. *The Bhutanese*.
- _____ (2021, May 15). MoE to provide smart phones and tablets to 744 students with disabilities with support from Save the Children and Helvetas. *The Bhutanese*.