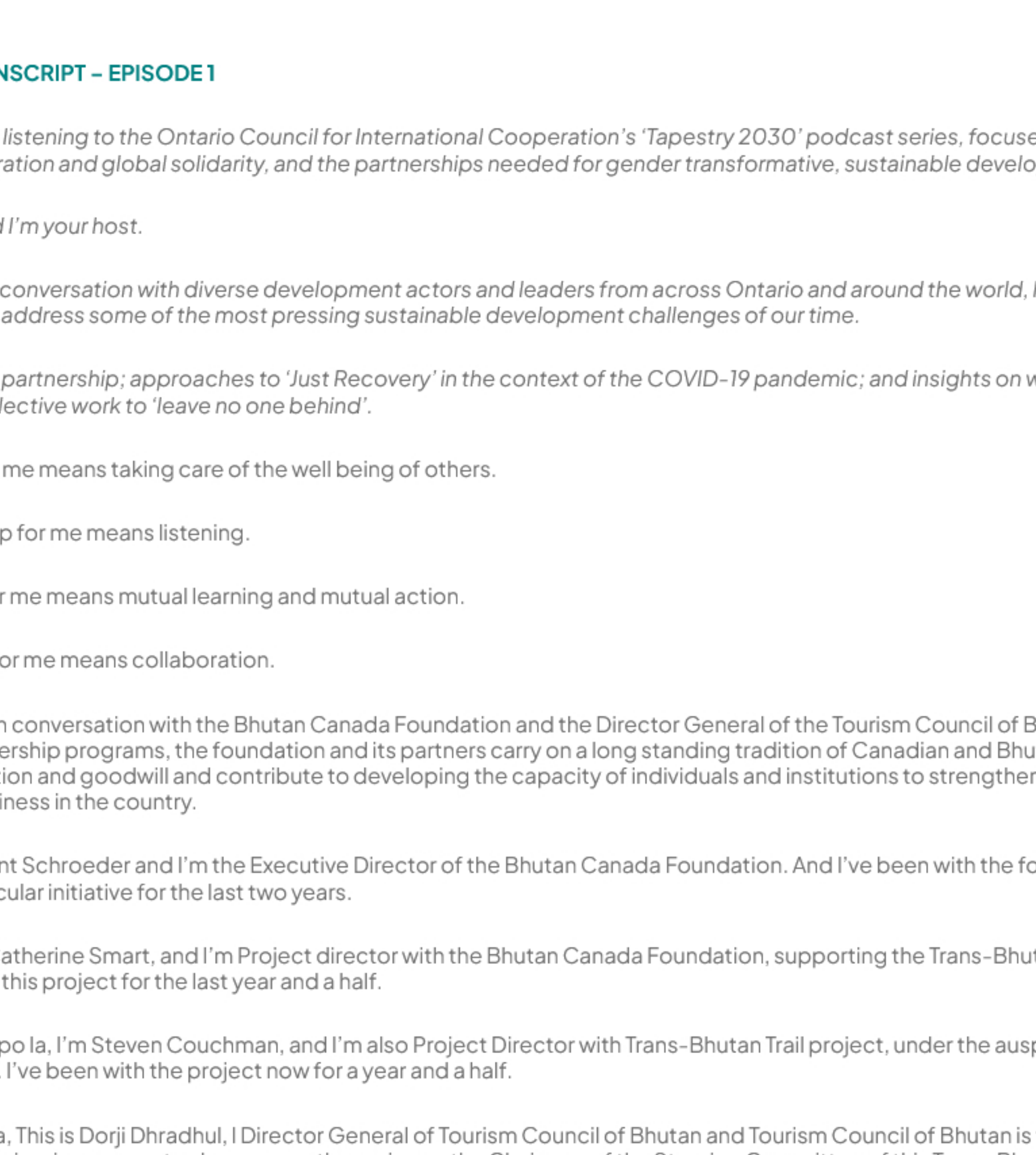


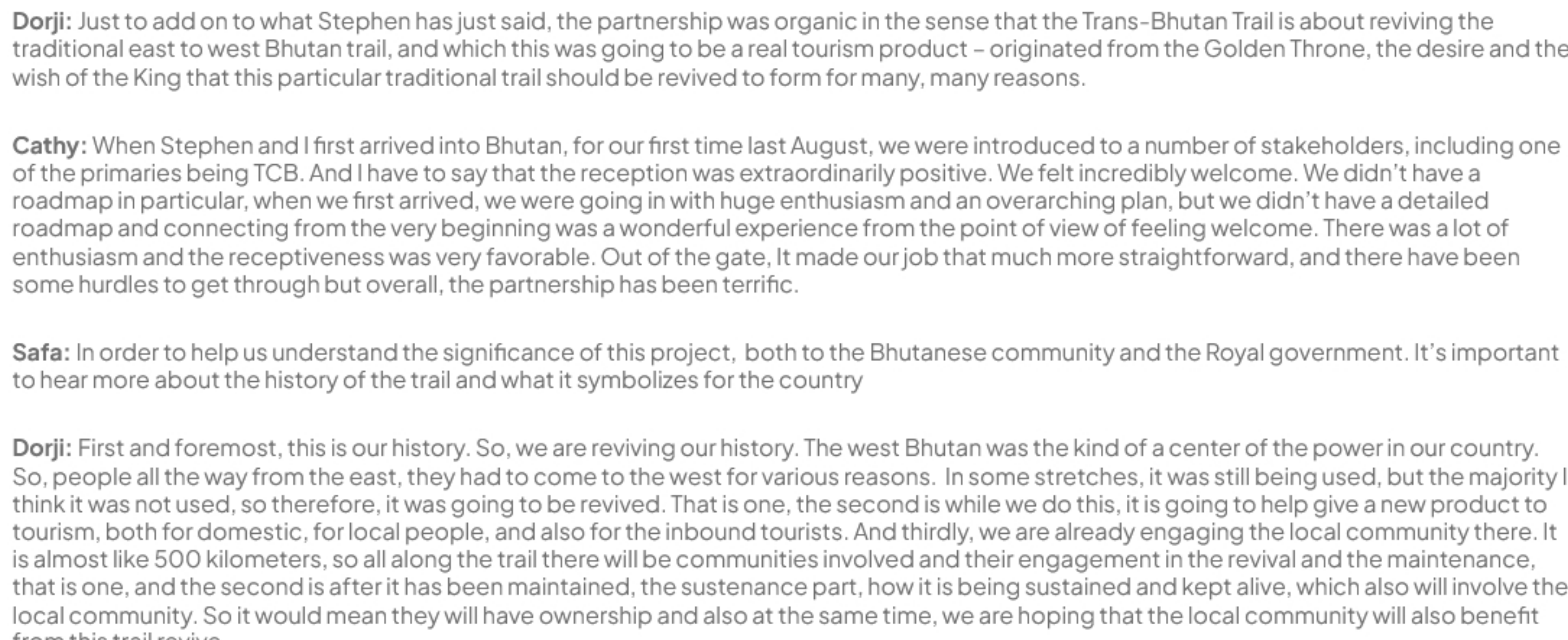
TAPESTY 2030 EPISODE 1: BUILDING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN BHUTAN

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Episode 1: Building Sustainable Tourism in Bhutan



TAPESTY 2030 TRANSCRIPT – EPISODE 1

Safa (intro): You are listening to the Ontario Council for International Cooperation's 'Tapestry 2030' podcast series, focused on the future of international cooperation and global solidarity, and the partnerships needed for gender transformative, sustainable development.

My name is Safa, and I'm your host.

In this series I'll be in conversation with diverse development actors and leaders from across Ontario and around the world, learning how they are working together to address some of the most pressing sustainable development challenges of our time.

You'll hear stories of partnership; approaches to 'Just Recovery' in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; and insights on ways you can make a difference in our collective work to 'leave no one behind'.

Dorji: Partnership to me means taking care of the well being of others.

Stephen: Partnership for me means listening.

Kent: Partnership for me means mutual learning and mutual action.

Cathy: Partnership for me means collaboration.

Safa: Today we are in conversation with the Bhutan Canada Foundation and the Director General of the Tourism Council of Bhutan. Through advocacy and partnership programs, the foundation and its partners carry on a long standing tradition of Canadian and Bhutanese knowledge exchange, cooperation and goodwill and contribute to developing the capacity of individuals and institutions to strengthen the conditions for well being and happiness in the country.

Kent: My name is Kent Schroeder and I'm the Executive Director of the Bhutan Canada Foundation. And I've been with the foundation and worked on this particular initiative for the last two years.

Cathy: My name is Catherine Smart, and I'm Project director with the Bhutan Canada Foundation, supporting the Trans-Bhutan Trail project. And I've been involved in this project for the last year and a half.

Stephen: Kuzu zangpo la, I'm Steven Couchman, and I'm also Project Director with Trans-Bhutan Trail project, under the auspices of the Bhutan Canada Foundation. I've been with the project now for a year and a half.

Dorji: Kuzu zangpo la, this is Dorji Dhradhul, I Director General of Tourism Council of Bhutan and Tourism Council of Bhutan is the organization that is responsible for tourism in our country. I am presently serving as the Chairman of the Steering Committee of this Trans-Bhutan trail project.

Kent: The Bhutan Canada Foundation, also known as BCF was founded about 11 years ago. And our mission is to support the people of Bhutan in developing the capacity of both individuals and institutions to strengthen the conditions for well being in the country. So we are focused on promoting well being and we do that through a partnership approach and through a capacity development approach. And historically, we have focused on education, both access to education and quality of education. We've done some work around health as well. And now more recently, we have this Trans-Bhutan Trail initiative, also known as the TBT, and that really bridges multiple aspects of well being – from health to local economic development, education, environmental sustainability, and culture.

Stephen: So the partnership between Bhutan Canada Foundation and Tourism Council of Bhutan started in August of last year. The project was identified as something that Bhutan Canada Foundation wanted to be involved with. And we visited Bhutan at that time, the conversations went well, who are the critical partners in this? And Tourism Council was obviously the key partner to work with. We had some meetings, we got along well, it started simply with providing an office for the operations and then it grew from there. We have staff from TCB as well, who are part of the team, and we are also relying on much of the infrastructure of TCB for work on the trail.

Dorji: Just to add on to what Stephen has just said, the partnership was organic in the sense that the Trans-Bhutan Trail is about reviving the traditional east to west Bhutan trail, and which this was going to be a real tourism product – originated from the Golden Throne, the desire and the wish of the King that this particular traditional trail should be revived to form for many, many reasons.

Cathy: When Stephen and I first arrived into Bhutan, for our first time last August, we were introduced to a number of stakeholders, including one of the primaries being TCB, And I have to say that the reception was extraordinarily positive. We felt incredibly welcome. We didn't have a roadmap in particular, when we first arrived, we were going in with huge enthusiasm and an overarching plan, but we didn't have a detailed roadmap and connecting from the very beginning was a wonderful experience from the point of view of feeling welcome. There was a lot of enthusiasm and the receptiveness was very favorable. Out of the gate, I made our job that much more straightforward, and there have been some hurdles to get through but overall, the partnership has been terrific.

Safa: In order to help us understand the significance of this project, both to the Bhutanese community and the Royal government. It's important to hear more about the history of the trail and what it symbolizes for the country

Dorji: First and foremost, this is our history. So, we are reviving our history. The west Bhutan was the kind of a center of the power in our country. So, people all the way from the east, they had to come to the west for various reasons. In some stretches, it was still being used, but the majority I think it was not used, so therefore, it was going to be revived. That is one, the second is while we do this, it is going to help give a new product to tourism, both for domestic, for local people, and also for the inbound tourists. And thirdly, we are already engaging the local community there. It is almost like 500 kilometers, so all along the trail there will be communities involved and their engagement in the revival and the maintenance, that is one, and the second is after it has been maintained, the sustenance part, how it is being sustained and kept alive, which also will involve the local community. So it would mean they will have ownership and also at the same time, we are hoping that the local community will also benefit from this trail revive.

Stephen: So the trail goes east to west across the country, and what it does is connects nine dzongkhags, and each dzongkhags has a dzong, and just from a descriptive perspective, a dzong is a fortress – white, it stands out in the landscape, it's an extraordinary structure. For people not familiar with them, they look a little like they're these giant Lego structures hanging off the sides of mountains and things like that. So they're quite extraordinary. And the trail was designed to connect the dzongs, one to the other across various mountain ranges in the country. And the work that we did was within each dzongkhags there are gewogs and a gewog is kind of a county, and so we had 28 gewogs, and we went directly to the leadership, the Gup of each gewog that's on the trail and worked with them directly. So they were most familiar with who was in greatest need in their communities, and we set up agreements with each gewog independently – depending on how long the trail was in that section, how much work needed to be undertaken, whether the trail was in active use, because some sections were in active use, some are completely filled in with jungle and so forth. So we set up arrangements with each of them. And they were responsible. So really handing the responsibility over to local government as much as we could, because they knew best who was in greatest need in each one of their gewogs.

Dorji: So once this COVID-19 begins to stress, our Majesty commanded that especially Tourism Council of Bhutan should work on how to engage meaningfully those people who are laid off. So whether it is in tourism sector or any other sector, because without having tourists, it was obvious that especially the tour guides and all they're going to go jobless. So it was a big, serious concern to His Majesty. And in fact, I also had an ordinance, and based on that royal ordinance and the royal command, we were really trying to come up – identifying activities, I mean, how to engage. First is to identify a meaningful activity, and then secondly, to engage those laid off. Of course, it was not just this TBT, we have some other activities also, at the same time happening as a part of this economic stimulus for tourism. We are getting this opportunity to rebuild, to revamp, reshape, revitalize our tourism products or services, including the Trans Bhutan Trail. When tourism reopens, I mean, this is going to be one new product that we can offer to the tourists. But on the other side of course, it is a concern because tourism is economically very important – in fact in terms of foreign exchange income, it is highest overall revenue, it is ranked at second, only second to hydro power. And in terms of employment, it engages almost like 50,000 by one single sector. I mean, this is the highest as an employer. Socioeconomically it has a huge impact with no tourists here.

Stephen: When the time comes to write the book on COVID-19, I hope they cover Bhutan because it was a textbook case on how to manage a pandemic. Epidemics are within living history in Bhutan, so people were familiar with what a pandemic meant. And I think with the leadership of His Majesty – it's important to highlight that this is a vision of His Majesty, the context being that Bhutan is a constitutional monarchy. The response was quite quick, even before the country closed down, they were being very careful at the airports, and as soon as the first cases occurred, they responded quite quickly. And at the moment, as far as I'm aware, there is no community transmission in Bhutan. So they've done an extraordinary job addressing this critical issue. So as far as the project itself was concerned, we were around that time just about to leave on our first national survey, we had two teams leaving from opposite ends of the country. And they were going around in the middle of the country, so the halfway point of the trail. And we were very touch-and-go whether we were actually going to leave at all. And I think if the schedule had been three days later, we would have been without a program. But thankfully, we had approval to continue on and we certainly had the benefit of having an extraordinary Steering Committee. We had, obviously the Tourism Council of Bhutan, we had the De-Suung, and the De-Suung are referred to as the Guardians of Peace. And it's a voluntary organization in the country, they stand out in a crowd because they always were orange, and they've really been a critical support system across the nation and as far as COVID-19 is concerned, but also with regard to the trail. So they have a volunteer organization across the country, they were participants, forestry as well and local government too. So it was quite a gathering. And you know, one of the things I certainly learned, we learned when we were in Bhutan was just how quickly people come together around common issues. When there is a need, people gather together and they make things happen very quickly.

Kent: The Director General really hit the nail on the head when he talked about engaging meaningfully, because this is an international partnership, Canada and Bhutan involving government actors, NGO actors through BCF, and also civil society organizations like the De-Suung, Guardians of Peace, and all these actors brought together complementary skills that enabled them to act quickly and act nimbly in response to something that required a quick and nimble response. And the trail initiative itself then was the vehicle that allowed this partnership of complementary skills to act nimbly, and act quickly to engage people who had been unemployed by the pandemic, and get them on the ground and get them working. And I think one of the nice things about this is, given that we were able to employ hundreds of people from these local communities, people who were unemployed because of the pandemic, that allowed us to engage more deeply and to build deeper relationships with those communities along the trail by having folks from those communities work on the trail, using the stimulus money.

Stephen: In the case of the financial model, the kind of the division of labor, we had the stimulus support from the Royal Bhutan government through TCB, that focused mostly on the nuts and bolts, the physical rebuilding of the trail, the bridges, the clearing, the drainage, all of that work that needed to be done. And BCF's contribution to this point has been largely around the operational side of things. So we have six staff with the TBT, five of whom are sponsored by the Bhutan Canada Foundation, plus the Bhutan Canada Foundation staff in country. And so we were doing mostly the operations and logistics side of the work, and continued to do the other thing that occurred partway through that survey – Director General, I still remember that phone call I received from you, I was in my tent, we were about four days from finishing our part of the survey, and you called and said, you know, listen, it looks like we're locking down the country. And we're going to have so many tourism workers, who are unemployed, and is there a way that we can engage them? And I was looking forward to coming back to Thimphu and having, you know, a week to take care of my blisters and so forth. But we met, we went right from doing that survey into planning and implementing trail restoration with about 700 people, mostly people who had lost employment from tourism. It's been devastating for Bhutan, and so many other countries as well. So what little we could do in engaging those folks and getting them working, we undertook immediately. So in a funny way that actually got the trail moving faster than we expected it would and opened up. So there are over 700 people engaged in trail activities across the length of the Trans-Bhutan Trail. They vary in their background. So the trail runs through large urban centers and also small villages and rural settings. So you know, everyone is unique in that. It took a little while, but it was very important for people to understand that the funds they were receiving were not international aid funds, but in fact, money contributed by the Royal government and they take extraordinary pride in their work because, as the Director General has mentioned, this is not just a trail, but it is a symbol of national unity. I don't think Bhutan would be Bhutan without the history of this trail. So in that sense revitalizing it and connecting with the stories and heritage of the country is very important. And that's practically manifests itself is that, you know, we would identify that there would be a footbridge required over a certain section. And we would go later to inspect that footbridge. And they would, the local folks would have built a footbridge out of walnuts, with a roof painted ornately, beautifully as is the tradition – because they want to know that when people come through their gewog, that they take pride in their work there.

Cathy: We have a researcher that we've hired to support part of the process in terms of storytelling. One of the pieces that listeners can look forward to in the months to come is conversations with elders along the trail, and people who have been alive long enough, well long enough, to remember what the trail was like before the national highway was built. So the stories go deep, and they're rich, and they're very heartfelt. The history of the trail is quite extraordinary. There's a beautiful little Museum in Thimphu, which is the capital of Bhutan, that speaks to the genesis of the trail. And it was essentially, it was the telephone of the country, so that messages could be delivered from region to region, town to town, gewog to gewog, and then it was used to deliver mail and goods and services ultimately, so it just evolved over time as the needs. But you know, many communities didn't communicate for the longest time, because Bhutan is a very mountainous country. And there's no particular straight line to drive from one region to the next, there's switchbacks all up and down from region to region. And so one can imagine getting from one side of the country to the other – it's not for the faint of heart, it can be quite strenuous. So the trail was a really important connector, and still is very much to this day, but for different reasons.

Safa: Now, in the context of a challenging time, like the coronavirus pandemic, it becomes even more important to use a gender lens when thinking about the activities and programs that you are implementing to build back better. Here's Kent with more reflections on that.

Kent: The need for a gender lens is magnified in times of crisis, like the pandemic, when you have to act nimbly and act quickly. And I think one of the challenges is being intentional about that. And I think, you know, as Canadian NGOs, of course, we're all well versed in gender, we byie into gender, in Canada we have a Feminist International Assistance Policy, but sometimes that commitment, we sort of assume it's part of our work. And we sometimes are not as intentional as we might be. And I think, again, that's magnified in a time of crisis. And I think there was a Bhutanese study that came out that did address some issues of gender and the pandemic, and it did talk about some of the gaps such as, you know, providing childcare to enable women to take part in initiatives like ours with the Trans-Bhutan Trail. So I think it really speaks to the need to be really, really intentional about using a gender lens when you're in a situation of crisis, when it's really needed. But it might be potentially overlooked, given the need to act quickly.

Dorji: The gender lens was even by default incorporated, because at the national level, this is a quite a serious subject. For instance, even in the present work that we're doing, just to give an example, we also started some activities called reskilling – so we are training presently about hundred tour guides, undergoing training from a cultural tour guide to a trekking tour guide. So when we select or accept the candidates for that we are saying it has to be 50/50 – 50 male 50 women. But unfortunately, in the present one, we are not getting enough female candidates. So basically, what I'm trying to say is the gender mainstreaming is happening even in our own government activities also.

Stephen: For example, that original survey team was made up fairly equally of men and women, in the cases of the local communities, it is mixed. So you know, certainly we have trail participants out there of maybe 20 or 30 people, and in pretty much all cases, it's the community that comes out, so it is all ages, young and old, who are participating in the work and both genders. So that's that's certainly gratifying and I think speaks to the values both of TCB and of Bhutan Canada Foundation.

Safa: One of the innovative solutions that Butan is well known for is their Gross National Happiness alternative development model – which is comprised of various policy tools, including a Gross National Happiness Index that measures the collective happiness and well-being of the population. Here is Kent explaining more about that.

Kent: Gross national happiness, or GNH, is really an alternative development paradigm or an alternative development model. It's a holistic and integrated model of development that really is an alternative to sort of that standard economic growth model that has dominated development since World War Two. And I think what's interesting about GNH, it was conceived by the fourth king of Bhutan, Druk Gyalpo, when he was still a young man. Really well ahead of his time. And it's an approach that identifies multiple social, economic, cultural, ecological and governance domains of development. The process of development is about addressing all of those domains and ideally addressing them in an integrated manner. And in doing so GNH sort of creates the enabling conditions for people to be happy, where happiness is not understood in that sort of Western sense of immediate gratification, but it's understood more in a, I think it's fair to say, in a Buddhist sense of underlying contentment.

Stephen: Traditional aid has been very paternalistic in approach – to the detriment of all in so many cases. And I think one of the things that certainly is a lesson that I've learned from this process is that the learning is two way, you know, we came to Bhutan as sort of catalysts. We certainly didn't know how to build trails any better than the Bhutanese did, but we were kind of a different chemical that kind of got thrown into the mix that then got things going. And we were able in that process to offer up some ideas and some ways of approaching the project that I think assisted. At the same time, we in Canada have an enormous amount to learn from Bhutan. And we bring those learnings back. And that's why that this, I mentioned already the COVID response, I mean, Bhutan is a textbook example of how to respond to a pandemic as a community, that we can all learn from. I think people are exploring a little bit more about what measures really matter and is gross domestic product really the thing that we want to focus on? Or should we spend a little bit more time thinking and exploring gross national happiness as a model for how we develop as a nation in Canada.

Cathy: Yeah, I think the other thing that is a key takeaway from certainly my perspective is that when Steve and I were invited to lead the charge on this particular initiative, we didn't go in telling anybody what to do. This has been a very collaborative experience from the very beginning and continues to be and as far as we're concerned, as long as we're involved with the initiative, the collaboration will continue. And I think that's been one of the golden nuggets and one of the key takeaways is – when you think about us turning our lives upside down and moving over to a country that we'd never lived in before and parachuting into this amazing world and the Bhutanese receiving us with open arms, if we had managed the situation differently in terms of telling versus inviting conversation and being very open minded, there's no way that this project would be where it is today. So I think that is definitely, maybe I'm speaking the obvious here, but I think it certainly is something that we all need to be very mindful of moving forward, especially given the circumstances that we're all experiencing right now with the pandemic.

Kent: I think one of the key parts of our story is engaging meaningfully in meaningful partnership. You know, what Canadians might be able to learn from this very small initiative, as we emerge from the pandemic and its economic consequences, there's going to be a need to address macro economic issues. And that's understandable. But I think historically, we've seen that focus on macro economic issues after a crisis tends to obscure or given preference over local needs, you know, the local needs of workers and local economies and local communities. As we in Canada, as we rebuild our economy, Canadians should focus on local economies, and look to forming meaningful and nimble partnerships that can help rebuild those communities. So maybe that's getting involved with the local community association and looking for how you can build a partnership with your local government. Those are the kinds of things that are going to help us build back stronger and build back at the local level. And I think that's a meaningful call to action that comes out of our experience with the Trans Bhutan Trail.

Dorji: It was very heartening to hear from Kent that the overarching principle or objective of Canada Bhutan Foundation in this engagement is well being and through capacity building and health as well – which actually fits in so well with the new tourism that we are planning now. Because of the pandemic, health and wellbeing, personal well being are coming at the forefront, so now Bhutan is repackaging our tourism, we are actually trying to now rebrand ourselves as an exclusive destination for well being and wellness tourism. So I feel this partnership between tourism and Bhutan Canadian Foundation could continue, even beyond this Trans-Bhutan Trail and into this new tourism that they are thinking of. This project has reconfirmed that all crises will have an opportunity. So I feel that because of this pandemic, the partnership really took off much faster than it was anticipated, I would say. Even the engagement from the Royal government as a part of this economic stimulus plan for tourism, roughly we must have spent about, in this project, 300,000 USD, engaging around up to 600 people, which is in our context quite a big money. And the learning through the leadership and the partnership that is happening – in our context, it comes from the Golden Throne, from His Majesty, and also from Bhutan Canada Foundation, I think from them, also the leadership is there, and somehow the harmony of this leadership, and the people working in that team from TBT, from Canada Bhutan Foundation, and from TCN, and other members of the Steering Committee, and also going right down to the local government. For me, while I have worked for almost four years in the district level with the people, but a project of this type is actually for me, for the first time, wherein a donor or an international NGO is partnering with the government and actually involving directly the local government and implementing. So this is for me, quite a new kind of experience, while getting engaged myself so directly. And so far it has been very successful. And now our vision and challenge is how to continue this and I'm sure we should be able to do this and continue to build on this partnership and engagement of the local community and other partners. And more importantly, to maintain this trail for all the partners.

Stephen: Bhutan is the only carbon negative country in the world, they sequester more carbon than they produce. If we're going to manage the earth out of the current crisis that we're in, we need to all take lessons from countries like Bhutan, and learn how to protect our forest, how to rely on renewable energy sources and things like that. And they, you know, Bhutan punches way over its weight. So those are learnings in the much broader context and certainly from my perspective, it was very humbling to be so welcomed, and so well received in the work. Trails are not about paths, they're about communities. And really just in order to feel such a part of that, I think, on a very simple level, go for a walk, walking is a great meditation. So getting out into the woods, breathing some fresh air, going for a walk, or in our case these days a snowshoe or a cross country ski. It's really good for your mental health and physical health. And I am so looking forward to being back in Bhutan and walking with our many friends there. And also sharing this extraordinary opportunity with others, once the Paro Airport opens again, and we're able to visit each other around the planet.

Cathy: I have to say, I really miss Bhutan. It's a very, very special part of the world. And so I'm sitting right now in my office looking out at the player flags in our backyard, and once a person goes to Bhutan, you are never the same again. It's a very, very special part of the world. And so whether a person chooses to go and trek the full trail or part of the trail, go to Bhutan.

Dorji: Thank you, Cathy, so much for your kind words. And I'd like to join Cathy in welcoming all the listeners to Bhutan, to a place what Cathy has just shared. And I also feel that Bhutan is special for some unknown or unique reason. Our tourism tagline is "happiness is a experience", so that place is Bhutan, so if you want to experience some special happiness, you're welcome to Bhutan. Happiness is a place – so thank you.

Safa (outro): The revitalization project continues and in so doing functions to bridge the past, present and future, connect communities and serve as a symbol of unity. To connect with the Bhutan Canada Foundation and to visit the website, <https://bhutanacanada.org/>, follow them on social media and feel free to send them a message of support. Thank you to all our wonderful guests for sharing their story with us today. Make sure to tune in to the next episode of the Tapestry 2030 podcast as we continue to share other stories from our OCIC membership community.

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