



JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION OF BHUTAN

A Short Guideline for Rural Reporting

Why this guide?

This short, practical, and straight-to-the-point guide is for reporters and other professionals who are interested in rural issues, and want to bring these issues to the attention of a wider audience. The guide aims to help journalists pursue a deeper and more accurate coverage of issues that constantly beset rural Bhutan.

Rural issues are often pushed to the edges of the news agenda

Issues afflicting rural areas often do not make it to the mainstream news. In some cases rural issues are simply pushed aside. In Bhutan, where media houses are already plagued by poor financial health, editors are reluctant to spend the precious newsroom budget on rural coverage. Therefore, there is no real effort from news organizations to reach the many far-flung pockets of the country. Add to this the universal media stereotyping, that rural issues do not make exciting news, that rural news do not sell newspapers or get people to watch news broadcast.

Social stereotypes, as defined by negative words associated with rural areas: backwaters, boondocks, backward, hinterland.

Definition of rural areas

“There is no standard definition of ‘rural areas’, but they are often defined as localities with a population of less than 2,000 inhabitants, often sparsely populated. Other criteria may be used, such as the percentage of the economically active population employed in agriculture, the general availability of electricity and/or piped water in living quarters, and the ease of access to medical care, schools and recreation facilities.”

Source: *International Labour Organization: Report IV, 97th Session of the International Labour Conference, 2008, p. 20.*

Breaking stereotypes

Given such harsh financial realities, it takes courage and sacrifice from reporters and editors to embrace rural issues. Paying constant attention to what’s happening ‘out there’ could mean losing segments of urban readership. However, connecting central policymakers to rural realities can only be achieved through balanced and accurate rural reporting.

Look at rural areas as a vibrant part of the mainstream. Rural areas are often a source of innovation in agriculture, farming, and business.

“Stereotypes are created and perpetuated not only through the written word. In fact images are often more powerful than words. They send strong and lasting messages to audiences in a way that the written or spoken word does not, often reinforcing stereotypes.”

Source: *International Labour Organization*”

Why rural Bhutan matters?

Globally, about half of the world’s population live in rural areas. In Bhutan, 70% of the country’s population live in rural areas, and, according to the International Fund for Agricultural Development’s Rural Poverty Portal, 96% of Bhutan’s poor people live in rural areas. Many of these people often live in the most inaccessible parts of the country, eking out a living through subsistence farming, cut off from markets, and with reduced access to basic public services. Studies have shown that poverty in Bhutan continues to be predominantly a rural phenomenon where people have limited opportunities for off-farm employment and other income generating activities. Media can help mainstream these ‘island’ communities through regular and accurate reporting on issues afflicting them.

Some facts about rural Bhutan

Percentage of Bhutanese living in rural areas: 70%

Rural illiteracy rate: 37.4% (male), 59.4% (female)

Labour force participation rate: 63.1%

Rural unemployment rate: 1.8%

Households with 4 hours or more walking distance from the nearest roadhead: 20.9%

Source: *National Statistics Bureau*

Rural areas as source of human-interest stories

Most fascinating media reports or stories are often about people, and rural residents and what they do make for interesting subject matters. For example, the unassuming entrepreneur in Pemagatshel who provides employment to his neighbours in his livestock farm would make an inspiring success story for readers. Similarly, with water sources like springs drying up rapidly, women spending long hours in fetching drinking water is a subject policymakers need to hear and act upon. Issues afflicting women, youth, and children in rural areas deserve wider readership.

Poverty in Bhutan

Currently 12% of the population lives below the national poverty line. Thirty percent of the population is urban and 70% is rural. According to the Poverty Analysis Report 2012 (PAR 2012) poverty in rural areas is 16.7% in comparison to urban poverty at 1.8%. This can be attributed to low levels of agricultural productivity, access to markets and commerce, road infrastructure and the impact of rural-urban migration.

Source: *UNDP Bhutan*

Finding strong story ideas and angles

Writing a good story means finding a strong, newsy, and unique angle to the story so that you are able to sustain the interest of your readers, listeners, or viewers. What is happening now, for example, the erratic rainfall pattern and its impact on agricultural productivity, is newsier than the landslide that damaged paddy fields two years ago. Reporters can also consciously give rural angles to mainstream stories since most national issues permeate all segments of society and affect every individual in the country. For example, although climate change and global warming are considered mainstream issues, they are also intrinsically rural issues since natural disasters affect poor and vulnerable rural population more than their affluent urban cousins.

Some topical rural issues

- Human-wildlife conflict
- Decreasing agricultural activities as farmers hang up ploughs for more cash-based opportunities
- Agriculture's declining contribution to the GDP
- Rural-urban migration
- *Gungtong* or empty households
- Rural poverty
- Impact of climate change on agriculture
- Dying traditions like yak herding and other transhumance activities
- Drying water sources
- Affect of changing rainfall/ weather pattern on agriculture
- Vulnerable/ disadvantaged/ marginalized groups, like Lhops of Samtse or Monpas of Trongsa
- Empowerment of local population
- Local governments
- Cultural tourism
- Emerging agribusinesses and rural entrepreneurs

How to write a good pitch

1. Introduce your story idea and define your angle. In other words, say concisely what you want to write about.
2. Explain concisely why your idea is news worthy, unique, and important.
3. Explain briefly why your story has the potential to engage readers.
4. Explain how your story adds to the conversation already out there.
5. Give a deadline for your story.

Dos & don'ts while writing a pitch

- Select a specific topic, not a broad idea.

Example: Write about poultry farming, not livestock rearing.

- Target a particular audience.

Example: Women, youth, girls, private sector employees.

- Include a clear, concise 'top line' for your story. Top line means the most important aspect of your story.

Example: Farmers in Punakha lost more than 70% of their paddy to an unexpected rainfall.

- Give a brief summary of who you are.

Example: I am Sangay Dorji, a senior reporter with *Bhutan Express*. I mostly cover rural issues, with a particular focus on women and children.

Example of a good pitch

Of late conversations about locked empty homes in rural areas have reached the highest level of policymaking. There is a general agreement that rural-urban migration is chiefly behind this phenomenon. However, there hasn't been any serious attempt to look into the issue at a deeper level. As a part of my analysis, I'd like to delve into other possible reasons for the increasing number of empty homes, what long-term impact would this trend have for the country, especially Bhutan's rural social fabric, and propose solutions as policymakers deem right.

I will talk to the people who have left their rural home for urban areas. I will also talk to local leaders, policymakers, and lawmakers about how the trend could be reversed, or at least put to a halt. For example, would ensuring basic amenities like healthcare, water, road, schools, electricity, and making rural life more attractive through improved infrastructure and diversification of economic opportunities halt this disturbing trend? Should the government incentivize farming, or put in place policies and measures to bridge the widening gap between rural and urban pockets?

I will look into how Bhutan could draw lessons from similar trends abroad, and talk to scholars who have researched on the phenomenon elsewhere.

If my pitch is accepted, I can turn in a draft of the piece by 15 June 2017.

Thank you
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Consider these elements while writing a pitch

Why the *gungtong* story is important?

Reasons: no economic opportunities in rural areas; many farmers move away from farming activities to more cash-based opportunities like *kushi*.

Impact: challenges to local governments during household surveys or census; fields remain fallow; increased wildlife attack on farms; decline of community vitality; drainage of government resources on rural investment.

Solutions: Ensure basic amenities like healthcare, water, road, schools, electricity, etc.; make rural life more attractive through improved infrastructure and diversification of economic opportunities; incentivize farming; put social structures and safety nets in place; policies and measures to bridge the widening gap between rural and urban pockets.

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