

Editorial

Urbanisation in Bhutan

At the turn of the century, 2002, the Bhutanese government had a dream – to build Thimphu as “the city of our dreams”. The vision for our capital did, indeed, sound like a dream. It was to be a reflection of our hopes and aspirations, a reflection of Bhutan and the Bhutanese people. The basis was a professional structural plan that talked about intelligent urban development balancing nature, tradition, heritage, and spirituality. The open space concept would convey the scents and colours of nature, the rustling of the river, chirping of the birds; in fact, the valley would be a clean river garden along the burbling Wangchhu river.

The plan offered 10 strategies to implement the plan, nine to make it work and a 10th strategy called “Let It Be” which warned that if the government did nothing, “one fine day we will wake up and find Thimphu destroyed”. (Thimphu structure plan 2002-2027). All signs today point out that we decided to “Let It Be”. After two decades of neglect, characterised by uncontrolled transport growth, degradation the surrounding forests, pollution of the Wangchhu river, a housing boom that completely destroyed the zoning policy, the *thromde* (municipality) seemingly dominated by a few land owners, parks, footpaths, and bicycle paths being just plans on paper, and a population growth far exceeding official estimates, the Thimphu dream is now more of a Thimphu nightmare.

One of the main reasons for Bhutan being recognised as a development success was the ability to turn a late start into an advantage, with the opportunity of seeing and learning from numerous disastrous examples around the world. Our own region is a prime example of what not to do in nearly every aspect of development and growth. But there are convincing evidence and signs that we have not learnt much and are following the same path that many have trodden.

Theme

This issue of The Druk Journal looks at urbanisation, a prominent element of what has come to be called the development process. It is predicted that 80% of the world’s population will live in cities by 2080 as countries “develop”, referring to the rural urban migration, which is already a rapid

trend in many, if not all, countries. Urbanisation began as an intuitive inclination of the human tendency to look for security and social life by building communities. Over the years, cities have grown with different characteristics, a few well planned, most at random.

Bhutan, which began opening up in the 1960s, had every opportunity to build the most aesthetic cities and towns on earth, given our tradition of aesthetic architecture and organic use of natural materials. But the attempts at urban development has been less than successful.

Western Bhutan, which has grown faster than other regions, has built a number of eyesore landmarks. The towns of Khuruthang in Punakha, Bajo in Wangduephodrang, and the Chang Jiji suburb in Thimphu are pathetic attempts at establishing urban centres. Even more than the physical mess, we have completely overlooked the social elements of urbanisation and urban living. When 900 families from different parts of the country were placed together in a confined complex like Chang Jiji, it became a source of problems.

In 2001, the government recruited foreign experts to draft a comprehensive and long-term structural plan for Thimphu city. Twenty years later, during an urban conference organised by the Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS), the Bhutanese participants were highly embarrassed when experts asked us: “How did you manage to completely mess up a very good structural plan for Thimphu?”

The proposed parks, heritage sites, bicycle trails and footpaths, sports facilities were replaced by concrete structures, none of them very pretty. Most recently planned zoning of commercial, residential, protected areas was replaced by an explosion of budget hotels, destroying the tourism vision of Bhutan as a high-end destination.

The interests of Thimphu residents, a liveable city, had no chance against the narrower interests of landlords who preferred maximising land for rental space. Far from the features of the finer needs of a sophisticated city, like disabled-friendly facilities, basic services are in short supply. For example, even as the government advised everyone to wash their hands with the onslaught of the Corona virus, parts of Thimphu were short of water.

In the age of technology, the trend around the world is “smart cities”. We see smart Singapore, smart Incheon, smart Dubai, all leveraging emerging

technologies such as Blockchain and Artificial Intelligence as well as Data Analytics, to make everyday city experiences much simpler, seamless and happier for all residents and visitors. Public transport systems are built on GIS and other technologies.

Bhutan is in another age altogether. But we have planned *thromdes* in every *dzongkhag*. Local governments are expected to manage urban expansion against the forces of congestion, pollution, crude housing and inadequate services. Each of these factors can reduce the liveability and potential for economic competitiveness in Bhutan's growing cities. And as the traditional social systems break down, we lose the sense of community altogether.

Decisions

Bhutan has two choices. The first option is to give in to the sense that the cause is, indeed, lost. The visible trends in our cities and towns indicate that we have been overpowered by the lack of planning, implementation, incompetence, and corruption, the last being the most lethal. It is more pragmatic to look after personal interests as the rich and influential are doing.

Or, make an attempt to inject the concept of good urban development by stopping some of the most blatant mistakes being made right now, even if we cannot reverse some major blunders. Can we allow ourselves to watch a possible dream turn into a nightmare even as we know what's going wrong?

There may be a small light at the end of the tunnel. The government has declared the commitment to prioritise planned urban development – the plans that were made and were then completely neglected. Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering said that this government was determined to prevent further disaster in the urban growth trends in Bhutan. Such a gallant commitment to good governance not only deserves but needs the support of all sectors because it is not going to be easy. There are many residents in Bhutan's urban centres who have influenced the wrong decisions and are benefitting from them. The management of our *thromdes* have neither the vision nor the will to implement even good plans that have been drawn up.

In other words, we are talking about the need for a drastic shake up – even a u-turn – in urban planning and development. If we are unable to correct mistakes at this stage, it would be a tragic legacy that we leave for posterity.