

The Healthy City

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Urbanisation and Challenges

In Bhutan, the process of urbanisation is accelerating, with the inevitable impact on the people's health. The National Statistics Bureau estimates that the urban population increased from 196,000 (30.9% of the population) in 2005 to 275,000 (37.8%) in 2017 and is predicted to reach 351,000 (44.0%) in 2027. The rural population ratio is decreasing proportionately. Motor vehicle numbers are rapidly increasing in Bhutan, from 49,300 in 2009, to 106,681 in 2019.

There has been consistent improvement in people's health in general. There is progress in maternal and child health and infectious diseases control, whereas morbidity cases rate of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD) increased from 43% in 2010 to 51% in 2019, according to the Ministry of Health. The population pyramid of Bhutan shows that the population is aging, and the birth rate has dropped.

Challenges in Thimphu

In Thimphu and its outskirts, road improvement and expansion are implemented by the government, but there remain many challenges in terms of improving accessibility, for example, barrier-free facilities for wheelchairs, sidewalks, and bicycle lanes along roads, etc. The barrier-free or accessibility concept comes from the Report of the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Barrier-Free Design in 1974, which pointed out that facilities of the city were designed for a fictitious "Mr Average", and not for real people of diversity. In Japan, Sendai City in Tohoku region started city planning based on the barrier-free concept in the early 1970s, and later the concept expanded throughout Japan. The Barrier-Free Law was enforced in 2018 in Japan.

In Europe, the cycle route network, "Eurovelo", will connect every country, with 16 routes of 90,000 km cycling roads. In Paris, during the COVID-19 pandemic, exclusive paths for bicycles in the city centre were expanded,

based on research on the movement of residents. The initiative was led by the mayor of Paris, who is trying to significantly reduce car traffic, and increase bicycles as the primary mode of transportation.

In Thimphu, managing waste is a big challenge, and active entrepreneurs in waste management are contributing to society. The Thimphu City population in 2005 was 94,102; in 2017, it was 138,736, and is predicted to be 188,762 in 2030. Waste in Thimphu increased from 60.7 tonnes in 2017 to 63.8 tonnes in 2019, according to the Statistical Yearbook of Bhutan. Garbage collection has not been able to keep up with the expansion of the city, because of a shortage of garbage collection trucks, segregation stations, etc, also, the Memelakha landfill has reached its capacity.

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), supported Thimphu city by introducing the “Fukuoka Method”, a semi-aerobic landfill disposal technology for solid waste, which lets air pass easily to the bottom of the landfill layer, and secures ease of respiration through pipes for quick drainage of contaminated water. This method was developed in the north of Kyushu Island -- the western main island of Japan -- in the course of solving the problem of increasing garbage during rapid economic growth, similar to what Thimphu is confronting. JICA is also supporting composting technology, maintenance of compactor cars, environmental education, etc.

After COVID-19

After COVID-19, many changes were observed. One impressive new activity is the Urban Agriculture Garden in Babena, north of Thimphu, undertaken by people who lost their jobs in the tourism industry. They are working hard to cultivate the land and plant vegetable seedlings with joy. This Urban Agriculture Garden activity is certainly useful, both for creating jobs and for improving health for workers in the fields; sweating together with colleagues while the tourism industry is suspended.

Private firms and shops in the town provide public water taps for washing hands. Many Desuups (the guardians of peace volunteers) patrol late at night to ensure public safety. Apparently, there are more middle-aged people running or walking for health in the morning and evening. On the other hand, elderly people cannot visit some of the religious sites for spiritual practice.

Generally, these changes in Bhutan after COVID-19 are improving and promoting people's awareness for mental, social and physical health.

What is “Health Promotion” and the “Healthy City” Movement?

The definition of “health” is “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO Charter, 1946), and “ensuring healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages” (the Sustainable Development Goal 3). The global COVID-19 pandemic is a big challenge for Bhutan, but we can improve the people's health through collective efforts, and by introducing useful ideas in the context of urbanisation. Here, let me introduce the ideas of “Health Promotion” and the “Healthy City” movement.

What is Health Promotion? In the 1950s, Health Promotion meant preventing infectious diseases through health education. It was extended to improving individual lifestyle and also a health-conscious environment, defined as “a process of enabling people to increase control in improving their health” (Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, WHO, 1986). According to WHO, health promotion “enables people to increase control over their own health. It covers a wide range of social and environmental interventions, designed to benefit and protect individual people's health and quality of life by addressing and preventing the root causes of ill health, not just focusing on treatment and cure”.

For successful health promotion, WHO focused on three key elements. The first one is “Good Governance”: Policymakers and administrative officers understand the importance of health and prioritise policies that prevent people from becoming ill and protect them from injuries, for example, by imposing taxes on unhealthy products. It is also achieved through legislation that supports healthy urbanisation, by creating walkable cities, reducing air and water pollution, enforcing the wearing of seat belts and helmets, etc.

The second element is “Health Literacy”: People need to acquire the knowledge, skills and information to make healthy choices.

The third element is “Healthy City”, one that is continually creating and improving its physical and social environment, and expanding community resources, which enable people to mutually support each other in performing

all the functions of life and developing them to their maximum potential (WHO's definition). Healthy Cities lead by example, in order to achieve change for the better, and thus have no standard requirements.

The Healthy City movement started in Europe, supported and promoted by WHO, and has been extended to the rest of the world. According to WHO, cities have “a key role to play in promoting good health. Strong leadership and commitment at the municipal level is essential for healthy urban planning, and to build up preventive measures in communities and primary health care facilities.”

Lessons from JICA's Projects on “Health Promotion”

JICA works for international co-operation in developing countries all over the world as the Official Development Assistance (ODA) implementing agency of the Government of Japan. JICA has implemented several technical co-operation projects on Health Promotion in Brazil, Bolivia, etc.

The lessons learnt are: Health promotion should be led by people's initiatives but support from the local administration, and collaboration with health and private organisations are key to sustaining and expanding the initiated health promotion activities.

The necessary elements and tools useful for continuing health promotion activities are health promoters (supporters), easy to understand evaluation schemes for everybody, networking among local administration organisations to share good practices and strengthening collaboration.

Potosi City is located in south Bolivia, South America, at an altitude of around 4,000 metres above sea level, among the highest altitude cities in the world. The famous “Salar de Uyuni (Uyuni salt flat)” is located in this district. JICA implemented a community-based health promotion project for strengthening Mother and Child Health services there. The project promoted community-engaged planning and implementation of health and sanitation improvement activities, including waterworks facility improvement, hand washing promotion, nutrition classes, and improving healthcare services delivery at health facilities, and strengthening the local administration's capacity to respond to and support the people's needs and requirements. Such health promotion activities improved the health of residents and increased social capital.

Healthy City Examples in Japan

I will introduce two examples of the Healthy City in Japan, including efforts of health promotion activities. The first case is Zama City in Kanagawa Prefecture, one hour by train from Tokyo. The City government adopted the “Zama Healthy Cultural City Declaration” in 2007, with the goal of a healthy and happy life for its residents, as the city’s policy. The Zama City government works together with residents, solving environmental problems, as well as improving infrastructure, providing people with health knowledge seminars, etc.

One recent activity, started in June 2020, implemented in Zama City is the creation of a “slope map” of the city. This shows several strolling courses that connect cultural sites, with instructions for people to walk up slopes and climb hills to strengthen heart and lung function, as well as to avoid the three Cs (Crowded places, Close-contact settings, and Confined and enclosed spaces) and encouraging exercise during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Kamikatsu Town’s Case in Shikoku Island

The second example is Kamikatsu Town in Tokushima Prefecture, located on Shikoku Island -- one of Japan’s main islands in the western part of the country, where the population is very elderly. The Kamikatsu Town is famous in Japan for “*happa* (leaves) business”, where elderly people pick leaves of trees from the nearby mountains to sell to restaurants in big cities like Tokyo, to be used for decorating Japanese dishes such as sashimi and sushi. Just collecting beautiful green or coloured leaves, such as maple and Japanese pepper, provides good income for the elderly, and keeps them healthy by walking in the mountains.

Kamikatsu town started, a few years ago, a kind of Healthy City activity in collaboration with a private company, Sunstar Inc, a famous manufacturer of oral care products. The company’s factory is located in Tokushima Prefecture. The Kamikatsu town government, the private company, and the people collaborated with each other and started a unique health tourism package. Kamikatsu town’s proximity to large cities such as Osaka and Kobe make it attractive for those urban residents to visit the town for healthy and green tourism.

In the Kamikatsu health tour package, tourists can enjoy vegetarian food and brown rice grown locally, nature walks, nutritional health guidance through food and dieting habits questionnaires, oral care instruction provided by Sunstar company, and visiting the temple of Jigen-Ji (Jigen temple) ranked 20th among 88 sacred sites of the famous “Shikoku Henro” pilgrimage tour on Shikoku Island.

The Druk Neykor

I am closely following the newly initiated Druk Neykor programme by the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB) (<https://www.bhutan.travel/drukneykor>). The Druk Neykor, or Bhutan Pilgrimage, is a nationwide pilgrimage tourism package which has been developed based on the system of “Shikoku Henro” from Japan. It reminds me of the Kamikatsu Town where one “Shikoku Henro” temple is located.

The Druk Neykor helps both devout domestic and inbound tourists to visit many recommended temples, monasteries, sacred sites and monuments in Bhutan. This package was developed by TCB in collaboration with Department of Culture, Zhung Dratshang (Central Monk Body), and the National Land Commission Secretariat. Tourists/pilgrims visit 108 sites listed all over Bhutan with pilgrimage record books. Visitors will get official stamps as proof of their visit at each site. For example, 16 temples and monasteries are listed in Thimphu.

I anticipate that this new programme will promote people’s health and contribute to improving approach roads, promoting traditional crafts and special products as souvenirs. It will also benefit the economy. According to an estimate in 2016, the economic benefits of the “Shikoku Henro” pilgrimage would be worth about 165 billion Yen, including transportation cost of tours for both Japanese and foreign tourists, lodging and food, proceeds related to goods such as bamboo hats, white clothing, canes, stamp books, and the ripple effect of increased consumption by tourism employees.

Conclusion

A healthy life was considered solely dependent on personal consciousness and effort in the past. In fact, problems such as air pollution, traffic congestion, unsanitary living conditions and environment, lack of zoning

of residential and business areas, quality of roads, etc, are there, but difficult to be controlled by the people alone.

So, what do we mean by “Creating a Healthy City”, and how is it done? It calls for collaboration among people, public administration, and private sector to pursue health and happiness -- people’s physical, mental, and social well-being. “Creating a Healthy City” will provide opportunities for people to tackle the problems of urbanisation themselves and, in the long run, lessen the social burden of aging and increase of NCDs in the future.

The concept of the Healthy City is that stakeholders, including local government, companies, associations, health-related organisations, etc. will support the people’s efforts and make it easier to develop healthy lives by working together to decrease environmental barriers and overcome obstacles -- difficult for people to solve without the help of experts.

For example, in the Zama City’s case, the local government listens to citizens’ suggestions based on the “Zama Healthy Cultural City Declaration” and reflects health promotion in various city plans. It also enlists the co-operation of private companies, Civil Society Organisations, and other members of society in the implementation of the plans.

These efforts will help to create a Healthy City where residents can live safely and peacefully in good health. At the same time, the city can prepare for the aging society in a sustainable way.