Decentralisation and People's Participation

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Decentralisation to local government bodies, by definition, means that these bodies take on greater authority and responsibilities that are relevant to them and that were previously with the central government; in effect, becoming centres of authority themselves. Within the framework of the Local Government (LG) Act of Bhutan 2009, local governments in the country are responsible for providing public services, promoting socio economic development, framing and enforcing rules consistent with national laws, and promoting culture and protecting cultural sites among others.

In this distribution of competencies from the central government to local governments, the notion and expectation is that decision-making processes are brought closer to the people. In other words, people should have greater opportunity to take part in decisions affecting their village or municipality. Looking at whether these theoretical constructs apply to people's participation in decision-making processes in villages and counties within Bhutan shows trends of achievements as well as incomplete processes.

A local leader once explained the role of local governments: 'If a person stands outside and shouts, the blue sky may or may not hear him. Local governments help to bring the blue sky closer to the people'. This corresponds with the 'bridge between the people and the Centre' imagery that local government leaders often evoke when speaking of their roles. What is striking in these imageries is that local governments do not seem to perceive of themselves as decision makers but as links to those who do.

The LG Act states that the *Dzongkhag Tshogdus* and the *Gewog Tshogdes* are the highest decision-making bodies in the *dzongkhags* and *gewogs*, respectively. This is confirmed by the role of these bodies in deciding five-year socioeconomic development plans and, derived from those, the yearly *gewog* and *dzongkhag* development priorities. Notwithstanding the fact that these priorities have to fit within specified parameters (contribute to the country's five-year plan objectives, and within the budget ceiling as determined from the center), having the authority to make these decisions is indeed a big step that decentralisation has provided.

However, with respect to important aspects such as financing, staffing, and policy-making, there are noteworthy limitations to the scope for decision-making by local governments, and in effect, by citizens. For example, local governments can raise revenues through taxes within nationally defined scope and scale, some fines and user fees etc; however, these revenues make up, on average, less than one percent of overall expenditures.

In addition, administrative and technical staffing in the *dzongkhags* and *gewogs* are determined by different ministries and agencies, and the division of responsibility between the elected and the appointed is not always clear. In terms of policy functions, local governments may make rules within the framework of national laws but have a limited role in defining policies.

Using these examples, it may be argued that the form of decentralisation in the country is largely de-concentration and delegation: de-concentration in that specified decision-making and financial and management authority are transferred to local authorities under the supervision of central ministries; and delegation in that delivery of specified public services is now also through community centres in *gewogs,* which are institutions not wholly under the government but ultimately accountable to it.

The above parameters within which local government bodies make decisions seem to correspond to the ways in which people participate in local governance. Citizens can be seen actively engaged in decisions on development plans and priorities for their *chiwogs* and *gewogs*, and confident in expressing their issues and dissatisfaction with delays and quality of services. Of course, the extent of participation is not the same for all, and there are enabling or obstructing dynamics that are not fully perceptible to an outsider to the discussions.

Corresponding to the decentralised mandate of local governments, citizen engagement is limited in financial and policy matters. The scope of participation on financial matters is generally limited to paying local taxes, and to *zomdues* where citizens are informed on the annual budget ceiling from the central government and consulted on their allocation.

On policies too, the trend is for citizens to be invited to awareness programs organised by local or central government agencies. Here, drafts may be shared for feedback before finalisation through local government officials, Members of Parliament, and also through websites and social media forums. As can be expected, there is a greater

say when discussing local rules within the purview of local governments, to decide on issues such as waste disposal and determining fines for absenteeism in meetings.

Decentralisation has resulted in institutionalised forms of citizen participation. Legislative prerequisites in the LG Act say that local government meetings are open to interested citizens, that local governments need to ensure public participation in the formulation of plans, and that members are required to apprise citizens on resolutions adopted, and on budget and expenses. Resolutions, plans, budget, and other relevant information are to be displayed on public notice boards outside LG offices.

Zomdues are the most popular form of participation, whether for planning purposes or to identify issues to be taken up in the local government meetings. The LG rules and regulations have sought to formalise these village meetings through provisions such as the requirement of maintaining minutes and their submission to the *Gewog Tshogde*, decision-making through consensus, ensuring quorum in meetings, etc. Formalising these meetings has provided a recognised and regular space within which people meet, discuss, and decide. It also provides a link with the *Gewog Tshogde*.

Outside this, community-based groups such as forest, vegetable, or livestock-related farmers' groups provide space for participation in livelihood and resource management decisions. A risk here is that a large number of such groups are development project initiated, rather than natural interactions among citizens over common issues and opportunities. Citizens also have direct access to elected leaders, and visits to a local leader's house to lodge a complaint or to seek information and clarifications is common practice.

The introduction of the system of Gewog Development Grant (GDG) is worth elaborating as a means of decentralising resources to local governments and citizen engagement in decision-making. Under this grant system, a sum of Ngultrum two million per year per *gewog* is allocated from the Centre. One might even call this an example of devolution, in the sense that there is significant local authority over allocation choices within a broad national framework. This may be why conversations with citizens generally show a high degree of affinity towards what they often refer to as 'funds for *chiwogs*,' a level closer to citizens than *gewogs*.

In comparison to other grants that come to *gewogs*, citizens also show a higher degree of awareness of what these grants were being used for and why. A local government leader in Paro described the grant as 'the people's grant where we do not interfere. If I did interfere today, I will have people shouting at me tomorrow.'

Some referred to the grant as 'MP funds' because of the active role that several Members of Parliament seem to have played in creating awareness on the availability and possibility such a grant provides, and probably also because of the similarity in intentions and nomenclature to the constituency development grant introduced by the former government. Although called as such, there seems to be no indication of Members of Parliament influencing these grants, which is a positive sign. Citizens have used the grant to fund a wide range of their priorities, from irrigation canals and extended classrooms to farm roads and renovation of temples and monasteries.

The implementation of the grant, however, is not without challenges. For example, there is a low degree of awareness and interest in the grant in some *gewogs*, or dissatisfaction with allocation choices perceived to have been made without proper consultation. There are also concerns that a disproportionately large share of the grant was spent on cultural activities and not enough on income-generating ones. Despite these issues, the seemingly small experience in citizens' participation and decision-making provided by the GDG is a concrete example of local democracy and governance.

There definitely have been achievements in decentralisation in Bhutan, and people's participation in these decentralised functions has gained momentum. There is a clear shift from the earlier usage of the word 'community participation' to mean only labour contribution. Relatively new institutional channels, such as planning processes or committees and groups formed around managing natural resources etc., have contributed towards strengthening participation beyond information and consultation to decision-making.

However, as elsewhere, these are long-term processes and there are visible challenges and incomplete developments. Specifically for citizen participation, moving beyond 'only' planning development activities to monitoring of these plans, providing feedback and asking questions on what was done or not done, are aspects that would make participation genuine. These are areas where relations between service providers and citizens seem to have changed the least in the country.

There are examples that embody the spirit of more holistic participation, such as a rural water supply committee in Samtse that goes beyond maintenance work to reporting on service quality and engaging in addressing water-related issues. There are also interested citizens who express concerns over usage of budget on activities that are not relevant to the communities, such as using GDG to build a large car parking lot. However, these are a patchwork of initiatives rather than established practices.

There are also challenges related to the quality of participation in *zomdues*, the main forum through which citizens engage. Firstly, there are as many as two *zomdues* per month in some *chiwogs* and *gewogs,* which may partly explain why several local governments complain of people not taking participation seriously by sending the very old or children. A local government official commented, 'When we call for *zomdues*, they send someone who cannot understand the deliberations or take decisions. Then they complain that their priority was a farm road and not an irrigation canal'. On the other hand, some citizens perceive a disregard for the issues they express and a lack of follow-up mechanisms to take care of their repeatedly raised priorities, as reasons for non-participation.

According to a citizen, 'We have gone sore in the throat raising our water issue with anyone who will listen. It is neither addressed nor do we know where these issues are taken up once we have listed them'. A tendency in these meetings is also for a few vocal voices to take over discussions and for others to defer to them for decisions, a cultural 'lock-in' perhaps. In a few cases, the competence of the chairperson to include the silent majority made a big difference. Another factor that hinders participation seems to be awareness about the agenda items such as plans and budget, and other topics that could define the quality of deliberations.

In *chiwogs* and *gewogs*, information is generally communicated through meetings called by the *gewog* local government office or through *Tshogpas* and, more recently, through the public notice boards outside the *Gup's* office. A challenge in the former mode of communication is the differing abilities of local government officials to present information and respond to queries, while the use of public notice is limited to the literate population who visit the *Gup's* office.

It must however be noted that the boards in some *gewogs* show an impressive level of up-to-date information on progress, expenses, and even resolutions from meetings; and they are seen to have the effect of getting local governments accustomed to the idea of collecting and displaying information, and for people to seek them on these boards.

More recently, a trend is for those who use the language and tools of professional planners to gain greater status, not least because of the legitimacy accorded to them by development projects. There are arguments for both local styles of participation and decision-making, as well as newer approaches and formats.

The core point, however, is to ensure that local concerns and interests, especially of

those most at stake, are not undervalued and left out. Other forms of participation could also be strengthened, such as engagement through community-based organisations and regular citizen feedback surveys. The knowledge and skills of civil society organisations in community mobilisation is another avenue.

Whatever the form, it will be important for citizens to be able to see the results of their participation without which their confidence in the processes and decentralisation itself could be undermined.