

The Role of Local Government in Sustainable Development

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Not If or When or Why, but How?

The roles of Local Government (LG) is intertwined with national development. In that sense, the question is no longer whether we believe that Local Government is ready or not to take on more responsibilities and authority – although there are voices that believe that they are not – but *how*. Local priorities communicated through Local Government and national objectives must, therefore, find resonance in each other. We might say that national objectives are formed by consolidating local priorities. However, there are also examples of endless community meetings that do not really result in any alterations. These are held in preset formats that are shared for awareness and orientation rather than out of any willingness to change.

The overall objective of the country's 12th Five Year Plan is to establish a “Just, Harmonious and Sustainable Society through enhanced decentralisation.” Sustainable Society has been defined as “a society able to sustain its social, economic, and environmental development needs.” This aligns with the spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which seeks to end poverty in its different forms in a way that is inclusive and protects our planet for now and for the future. The *how* of bringing this process to where it matters relates to the workings of Local Government; be it through planning for local economic development, managing our forests sustainably, taking up climate-smart agriculture, or finding ways to include the old, young, women, and the disabled in our shared prosperity.

LG in Bhutan were conceived to facilitate the direct participation of people in their own development. This is their democratic role. Local Government is also expected to plan and deliver services efficiently. This is their service delivery role. They are also charged with conserving culture and tradition and promoting community harmony. Therefore, looking at Local Government as performing only this or that role presents an incomplete picture. Whichever role they take on, LG is designed to bring development to the people. This does not only mean closer physical proximity of development services but also democratic decisions and active participation.

Local Government do not have legislative functions but can make rules within the framework of national legislations. The Local Government Act, 2009, specifically mentions regulating air, water, noise pollution and other environmental degradation as a function of LG. This example demonstrates the decentralisation of sustainability roles at different levels of government. The central level formulates environment sustainability related laws; LG formulate rules for their implementation, monitor their application, and impose sanctions if disregarded. The Water Regulations, for example, foresee making Local Government accountable for the protection of traditional practices that promote environmentally friendly behavior to safeguard certain water bodies that are believed to be abodes of local deities. In this role, keeping in mind the regard with which Local Government are generally held in communities, they can promote sustainable (or unsustainable) development and influence citizen behaviour.

Rowing and Steering

The above role of Local Government, therefore, brings to mind an interesting analogy of a boat that is sometimes used in discussions on new approaches to governance. Local Government is moving from not just rowing the boat also steering it; utilising other levels of government or actors for every day delivery while providing guidance and policies. Various levels of government can be moved beyond their everyday delivery roles of “rowing” to “steering” via initiatives which bring policies and guidelines to life. A surprised expatriate once asked me: “Why is the government making yogurt?” It was not comprehensible for a person coming from a highly devolved local governance system and strong private sector engagement to walk into a central government-run yogurt shop. My response was: “Why not?” It was equally not clear to me at that time that this could be done by an organisation or individual rather than the government.

Thus far, Bhutan has a short history of decentralisation of authority to Local Government. Today, Local Government is taking on more and more responsibility for rowing, but they are also taking on more steering functions within their jurisdiction. Local priorities emerge through Local Government. Decisions as to where to allocate increasingly greater amounts of financial resources are also delegated to them.

This increased responsibility has led to an often-repeated argument in the discussions on decentralisation in Bhutan: “Local Government is not ready with the capacity to take on so much.” Local Government do need support to take on the additional roles and responsibilities. Functional topics such as making plans and

budget, delivering public services, and reporting continue to need capacity support through a combination of training and placement of quality administrative staff to help with the “rowing.”

What is perhaps more important is the fulfillment of the strategic roles of LG, such as providing a vision for the *gewog* or *dzongkhag*, steering its overall development, making decisions based on their ability to understand, listen and articulate (*goshbey*, *nyenshey*, *labshey*) the priorities of people. And here lies a challenge. Too often, when “improving” LG, our focus is on how to fill the planning and reporting formats correctly, on how to request for budget and report on expenditures online, and on procurement procedures. These are all important but we may miss the democratic roles of Local Government by being too focused on their functional roles (in their latter role, they should ideally/technically already be supported by adequate “rowers”).

Regardless of what roles they may assume, LG are at that level of governance where they can infuse sustainable development objectives concretely into local perspectives and plans. They can steer and row such integration processes. The *Dzongkhag Tshogdu* is the highest decision making body in a *dzongkhag*. This means that this body approves the five-year and annual plans of a *dzongkhag* within the budget ceiling provided by the central government. Therefore, through the *Dzongkhag Tshogdu* sessions, local leaders deliberate on the development pathway of their *gewogs* and *dzongkhag*. They decide on the number and length of farm roads or irrigation channels; they identify and finalise river bank protection schemes or drinking water supply schemes; they prescribe the maintenance of a kitchen and toilet in a *lhakhang* (monastery) or the reconstruction of an earthquake affected *goenpa* (temple), and they discuss and come to a consensus on the metric tonnes of chillis and asparagus or potatoes to be produced in a year: all the details of life in their constituency.

When these details are visualised within a broader perspective of their *dzongkhag* and *gewog*, this is their steering function. These plans are implemented with the expert advice and technical support of the *dzongkhag* and *gewog* administration, and central government agencies. For example, the planning and reporting on a farm road is supported by the *gewog* administrative officer; its technical feasibility and quality is guided by engineers in the *dzongkhag* within set standards as established under national road guidelines; and the budgeting process is supported by the *gewog* accountant and *dzongkhag* finance officer. In fulfilling their monitoring and evaluation responsibilities as stated in the Local Government Act, the *gewog tshogde* or *dzongkhag tshodgu* are expected to monitor these services and ensure that the planned length of farm road is built within the stipulated time and at the quality

that is stipulated, thus steering the different rowers beyond their short-term goals for their *gewog* or *dzongkhag*. When this medium to long-term perspective aligns with or contributes to the national 12th Five Year Plan objective of Bhutan or to the SDGs, we will be able to localise larger goals and aspirations.

However, local leaders will first have to understand and believe in these national objectives and international goals. Often times, we tend to look at LG as “only” implementers of what plans we sign up for at international levels and formulate in Thimphu. Globally, the articulation of the SDGs was participatory and there were avenues for individuals and groups from around the world to take part. Subsequently, there was a strong integration of the SDGs into Bhutan’s “National Key Result Areas.” These National Key Result Areas defined the broad objectives for Bhutan in the next five years. Facilitated by local leaders, these objectives now need to find their place in local aspirations, Five Year Plans, and annual activities. They need to be discussed in village *zomdues* (public meetings) so that objectives like “carbon neutral, climate and disaster resilience development and enhancement” are more than just words.

LGs and the Dimensions of Sustainable Development

Discussions on sustainable development lead to discussions on different aspects of development, mainly social, economic and environmental (though some also add political and cultural). The general powers and roles of Local Government as per the Local Government Act of Bhutan align with these dimensions. Some examples of their expected roles and the corresponding sustainability dimension is presented in the next page.

There are of course other additional roles for Local Government, both written and unwritten. These can range from planning and prioritising annual development activities to developing and enforcing rules, and mediating controversies over water sharing during paddy cultivation to being there in times of celebration or bereavement in families in their community.

The different but interconnected dimensions of sustainable development means that different levels of the government, different sectors of our society (such as the private sector and civil society), as well as individual and collective efforts are needed. The value that Local Government bring is its closeness to where sustainability objectives can be translated into priorities and actions.

After all, we have been reminded by none other than His Majesty the King that

“Local Government is not the lowest level of governance, it is the closest to the people.”

