

Sustainable Development Goals and National Development Agenda

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Bhutan joined the international community and over 150 world leaders during the 70th UN General Assembly (UNGA), 25th September 2015, in adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs. The 17 goals, 169 targets, and 231 indicators of the SDGs integrates the three dimensions of sustainability – the social, economic, and the environmental. In addition the development agenda places a strong emphasis on leaving no one behind and poverty eradication; forging a new global partnership based on the spirit of solidarity, cooperation, and mutual accountability; placing people at the centre of development and striving for a world that is just, equitable and inclusive; promote sustained and inclusive economic growth; and take action on climate change and environment among others.

Bhutan follows a five year planned socio-economic development which forms the primary national development agenda for the five year Plan period. These Plan periods also coincide with the tenure of the elected government. All international and regional development goals such as the SDGs, SAARC development goals, Vienna Programme of Action, and Istanbul Programme of Action are mainstreamed into the five year development Plans.

Bhutan's development has been guided and is based on the development policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and continues to do so even to this date. GNH is based on the premise that human needs are more than mere material needs. It has other non-material needs or dimensions like spiritual, cultural, and environmental needs to be able to pursue a more meaningful and productive life.

The GNH principles ensure balance between the human activities and the environment or, rather, the entire system within which we live including environment and the cultural and social dimensions of a society.

GNH is measured using what is called the GNH Index, derived from a set of nine Domains, 33 Indicators and 124 Variables. These nine Domains include five

conventional and four non-conventional domains which define the core or the essence of GNH from Bhutanese society's perspective.

The domains are as follows:

Conventional

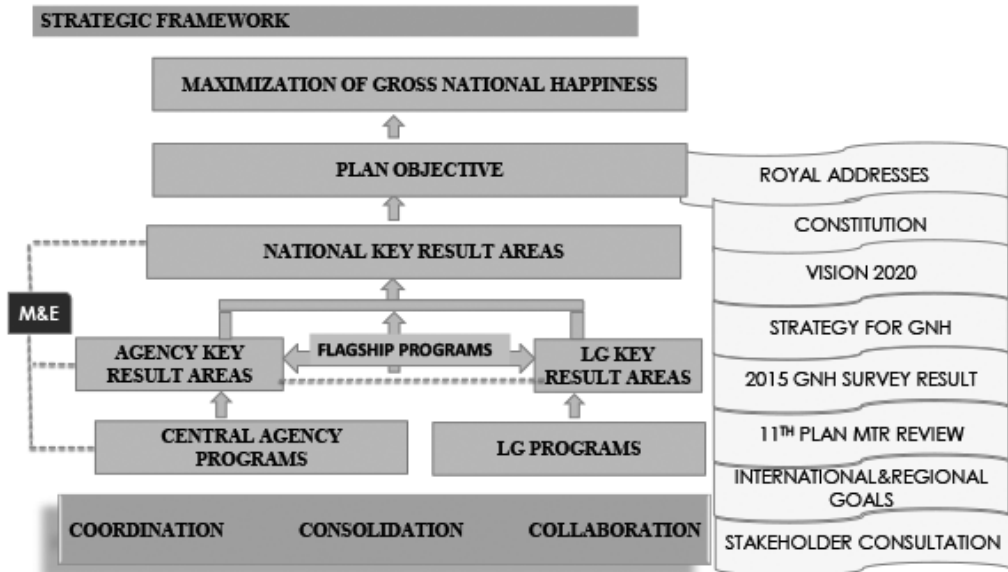
1. Health
2. Education
3. Good Governance
4. Ecological Diversity and Resilience
5. Living Standards

Non-conventional

6. Psychological Well-being
7. Time Use
8. Cultural Diversity and Resilience
9. Community Vitality

As can be seen from the above, our development practice embeds the core values of sustainable development, that is, balancing the economic, social and environmental pillars of Sustainable Development and has other additional dimensions such as Culture, Time Use and Psychological Well-being. It can, therefore, be said to be SDG Plus agenda.

The five year planning framework provides for integrating and mainstreaming the international development goals such as the SDGs both at the national as well as at the sub-national level. The planning framework is illustrated below:



Given the universality of the development paradigm, GNH, there is very close integration of the SDGs into the national development Plans in Bhutan. These integration are so seamless that there was not much additional effort to separately integrate the SDGs into our development Plans. This can be evidenced from the fact that 14 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are aligned and integrated with the 16 National Key Result Areas (NKRAs) identified for the 11th Five Year Plan (FYP) and the results of the Rapid Integration Assessment of the SDGs and our 11th Five Year Plan which revealed a high degree of integration. The assessment revealed that of the 169 targets, 143 targets were found to be relevant to Bhutan, excluding targets related to Goal 14 on Oceans and Goal 17 on means of implementation. Of the 142 relevant targets the assessment revealed 134 targets as already integrated into the National Plan.

As an early mover country, Bhutan has prioritised three goals in the medium term: Goal 1- Ending poverty in all its forms everywhere, underscoring the continued importance Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) places on poverty reduction, and the shift beyond income poverty towards addressing issues of social protection and vulnerable groups; Goal 13 - Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, upholding Bhutan's commitment to the global community to remain carbon neutral at all times; and Goal 15 - Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

Similarly, to further enhance the integration of the SDGs with our National Plan,

Bhutan has embarked on the formulation of the 12th Five Year Plan which will be implemented from July, 2018 to June, 2023. Recognising the importance of National Ownership, Partnership, and Participation in the successful implementation of any national agenda, including the SDGs, the guideline for the 12th FYP preparation process adopted an inclusive approach that reflects the aspirations of the Bhutanese people and is a Plan that all sectors of the society (including the private sector, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), youths and farmers among others) can connect with. Extensive consultations and sensitisation and awareness creation on the SDGs were conducted for government officials, parliamentarians, youth, and people's representatives at the Local Government, private sectors and Civil Society Organisations.

A preliminary assessment/mapping of the 12th FYP National Key Result Areas and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with the SDGs show very high relations. The 16 NKRA are closely related with 16 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and about 44 indicators of SDGs are integrated as KPIs for the National Key Result Areas.

Empowering SDGs at the Local Level

International Development Goals such as the SDGs are often at best understood and advocated at the National Level without localising them at the grassroots level. Since Bhutan's development Plan is largely a bottom-up approach, it is imperative that these international goals are localised.

The primary planning framework is provided through what is called as the five year plan guideline. As in the past, the current and the next Plan (12th FYP) guideline clearly stipulates that the Local Government, besides the central agencies, mainstream the SDGs into their plans and programmes. However, it is not sufficient to direct the agencies to see to the mainstreaming of the goals. Some of these would include empowerment of the SDGs at the local level. At the forefront, it is imperative to ensure that there is sufficient understanding and ownership of the SDG as a starting point. Therefore, sufficient advocacy at different sections of the society including key stakeholders like the youth, parliamentarians and political parties, CSOs, private sectors and local leaders needs to be carried out to ensure that all stakeholders understand and are at the same level of understanding. This would help coordinate and build synergy of efforts around the common goal and formulate action plans that are globally consistent but locally grown and relevant.

Once these Action Plans or local development plans are formulated consistent with the principles and aspirations outlined in the SDGs; it is important to ensure that there is sufficient resources - human and financial. Practices would differ, depending on the economical and political considerations, but for countries that are dependent on Official Development Assistance, it is imperative that national policies and priorities take precedence over the donor prescribed policies and priorities. For this, it is useful to have strong national institutional mechanisms/institutions that govern and regulate the flow of foreign funds and channel the domestic funds into priority areas. These institutions and national development framework which clearly stipulates and outlines the development priorities help in ensuring that resources are directed towards the nationally defined priorities. The Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) secretariat is largely mandated to carry out this function. However, given the fragmented role on mobilising resources between the GNHC and the Ministry of Finance, this often becomes a challenge. Similarly, short-term and political priorities risk taking precedence over long-term development priorities such as the SDGs in democratic political set up.

SDGs are a very ambitious aspiration and require that all citizens participate and play their roles. For this, it is critical that all stakeholders are included in the identification, formulation, and implementation of the priorities, supported by legal and policy framework that creates the necessary environment. As mentioned earlier, Bhutan has made an earnest efforts in garnering the entire section of the population towards defining the priorities for the 12th Fiver Year Plan and formulating the National Key Result Areas through an extensive and inclusive consultation process led by the GNHC. Such processes would help in localising the SDGs and therefore ensure greater ownership and chances for success.

Challenges

While there has been seamless integration of the SDGs into the national and sub-national development plans and programmes, Bhutan faces critical challenges in mobilising the resources required to finance the programmes to support development projects as it has to depend on the development partners for almost all its capital investments. Development assistance are not often in the areas that are of high national priority and is further constrained by uncertainties in the flow of these in principle commitment.

Additionally, the SDGs are very ambitious goals with even greater and far-fetching targets. Some of these goals and targets require consistent and substantial amount

of predictable resources and investments. Due to constraints of resources and the availability of technology, even advocating the need to pursue these goals becomes difficult.

Furthermore, for the SDGs, it is imperative that the entire group of stakeholders, including the private sector and CSOs, collaborate and ensure there is synergy of efforts. Often these are difficult for various considerations including organisational and individual agendas taking priority over the professed mandates.

A critical element of monitoring the SDGs is the availability of reliable data. As is the case with many developing countries, Bhutan also faces serious challenges on the availability as well as quality of data for monitoring and evaluation purposes. While the RGoB is constantly working to improve, a lot would need to be done in this area.

Way Forward and Conclusion

Despite the high level of integration of the SDGs with the national development plan and the challenges, Bhutan remains committed to working towards fulfilling our international commitments such as the SDGs and is consistently working with our development partners and local stakeholders.

As we progress in further defining and formulating the next five year plan, we would need to consistently remind ourselves and ensure that the SDGs are mainstreamed within the Plans. For this, it is important to create greater awareness amongst all the stakeholders, including parliamentarians and the local functionaries, and provide them with the necessary tools and build capacity to better appreciate the SDGs.

The Gross National Happiness Commission secretariat, as the central planning and coordinating agency, should ensure that limited available resources are channeled to areas that can capitalise and ensure greatest value. It is also imperative that the GNH interact and coordinate with the development partners to mobilise the resources, including technology transfers. The development partners should also be willing to provide resources in the areas where it is required and not just confine to providing policy and technical support. Unlike many other developing countries, Bhutan is quite clear on the policy front. What it requires is the investments in the areas that will help build the national productive capacity like social and economic infrastructures such as all-weather roads, bridges, urban infrastructures, and communication facilities.

While some work is already underway, it would be imperative that Bhutan build a

strong and robust data ecosystem which will be required to monitor the progress towards the SDGs and also provide valuable data and information for making informed and evidence based policy decisions.

For the success of SDGs at the national level, three elements are seen to be critical: political will, national institutions, and resources. In Bhutan's case, it is clear that we are very well positioned in having a strong political will and commitment and a fairly good in the institutional set up. What is clearly challenging is the resources, given that we are a least developed country that is very highly dependent on the development partners to finance our capital investments. It is, therefore, imperative that Bhutan and its development partners further strengthen the existing collaboration to mobilise the resources required for short and medium term investments and build the national economic base to generate domestic resources for future investments.