

# Community Engagement Platforms to Encourage Participation in Governance and Community

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## **Decentralisation and Democracy**

Since the 1960s, Bhutan's governance has been increasingly decentralised to encourage as many ordinary citizens as possible to participate in decision-making processes, and to better reflect the will of the people. Elected local governments have been playing the important role of facilitating the direct participation of the people in the development and management of their own social, economic and environmental well-being, which is an important aspect of democracy.

Legislation, structures and human resources have been strengthened during decentralisation. In 2002, laws for Dzongkhag Yargay Tshogdu (District Development Council) and Gewog Yargay Tshogchung (County Development Committee) were established to encourage the participation of local people in governance.

Dzongkhag Yargay Tshogdus were in charge of developing district hospitals, district roads, providing network services, in city-village development plans, forestry and rural electrification. Gewog Yargay Tshogchungs were in charge of development, planning, monitoring of water supply, irrigation, farm road, bridges, gewog hospitals and community schools. Local people were appointed as staff for development work. The Local Government Act 2009 strengthened decentralisation.

However, as the functions of local government (LG) were strengthened, the Department of Local Government was concerned that the traditional mutual benefit and self-help habits of the people would weaken. For example, people would now wait for the local government to repair or maintain local roads and public toilets, work that they had done themselves in the past.

To solve this problem, and to strengthen people's ownership in community activity and participation in governance, the Department of Local Government is currently trying to implement Community Engagement Platforms (CEP) across Bhutan.

CEPs encourage people to be active in their community for self-help and mutual assistance, gathering together their previously unheard voices, becoming an important platform for them to enhance their engagement in the democratic process and in community development.

### **Local Government Budget Increased Through Decentralisation**

The budget allocation for local governance has been rising over the years. In recognition of the importance of LG's role in the socio-economic development of dzongkhags and gewogs, the government has substantially increased their share of resource allocation in the 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan, and approved the Annual Grants for Gewogs (AGG) starting from Financial Year (FY) 2019-20.

For FY 2022-2023, a total of Nu 22,769.208 million was allocated for local governments, 26% of the total capital budget. Considering the centrally executed activities in local government, the actual budget allocated to Local Governments is about 46% of total allocation.<sup>1</sup>

The annual grants to gewogs and enhancement of DDG to dzongkhags are expected to empower LGs to prioritise development activities with flexibility, besides promoting transparency, accountability and ownership.

Such government initiatives will go a long way to deepen realisation and fulfil the wishes and aspirations of the people. With the budget increase, more responsibility is placed on local government and local leaders. It is now more important than ever for them to be able to identify the areas of priority when they allocate the budget. The CEP was needed to be able to<sup>2</sup> discuss and identify such priorities.

<sup>1</sup> Budget-Report-for-FY-2022-23-in-English.pdf (mof.gov.bt)

<sup>2</sup> CEP Introduction Video: "Our Community, Our Responsibility": <https://fb.watch/fz4qV-VmPQI/?mibextid=epbgrl>

## Community Engagement Platform (CEP)<sup>3,4</sup>

The CEP is a small village/community-based group of around 10 people within a chiwog, who share the same attribute/personality, such as age, gender, etc. The CEP is a platform where people can gather for an internal meeting called nangzom, to conduct discussions on any topic, but mainly to deliberate and form community proposals and plans. Members also use the platform to coordinate activities/events, and organise welfare activities and emergency responses during difficult times.

The idea comes from a Japanese platform called “Jichi-kai”, defined as a voluntary body “whose membership is drawn from a small, geographically delimited, and exclusive residential area (a neighbourhood) and whose activities are multiple and centred on that area<sup>5</sup>”.

The CEP disseminated the idea of “livelihood improvement — Seikatsu Kaizen” which supported the development of rural areas in post-war Japan. Problems the CEP group faces are divided into three categories — “costly improvements, non-costly improvements, and money-generating improvements” — with an understanding of seasonality through seasonal calendars, and time management in daily life.

The concept of CEP has been introduced and developed in Bhutan with cooperation between the Department of Local Governance (DLG), Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs and Japanese experts dispatched through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Project named “Support to Community Engagement in Local Governance (SCLG)”. A pilot CEP was conducted in Punakha, Mongar and Dagana (2 chiwogs each).

## The Advantages of CEPs/pilot Nangzom

There have been several advantages:

— The voices of women and the young and old can be heard more often, and more opinions of people can be reflected.

<sup>3</sup> DLG (mohca.gov.bt)

<sup>4</sup> Concept on Community Engagement Platforms (CEP) and Nangzom: <https://fb.watch/fz4uONwW0-/?mibextid=epbgrl>

<sup>5</sup> (Tsujinaka, Y. et al. 2009) [Series Contemporary Civil Society 1: Self-Governing Bodies and Neighbourhood Associations in Contemporary Japan – Self-Governing, Networks and Governance According to the First Nationwide Investigation]. Tokyo: Bokutakusha.

- It is easy to coordinate and manage local government and easier to share information<sup>6</sup> from chiwog to people through CEP coordinators, or the other way round.
- It resolved meeting fatigue (many people were tired of long meetings with so many participants attending and not everybody had a chance to talk).
- It enhances people's participation in planning and decision-making and strengthens the development of the chiwog plan.

In Dagana, there has been significant movement among the CEP. People have been holding CEP meetings occasionally for issues such as cleaning the water reservoir (they have been giving some workers to clean water reservoirs from each CEP.)

In Mongar, the budget that was applied during the discussion of CEP before COVID-19 was selected for funding by local government as the LG was able to see that the proposal was prioritised in the community and only the most important and the ones they needed.

In comparison, chiwogs without CEPs had so many requests not prioritised. Some of them seemed to be more of personal rather than community needs.

In Punakha, some CEP members said that information-sharing has been much easier after the CEP was introduced. Its members maintained infrastructure such as roads, since ownership of such infrastructures was encouraged. Younger members even developed a critical sense of how the village population is getting smaller every year, prompting them to return to the village, becoming hard working CEP coordinators.

The CEP saw many good instances of self-help and mutual assistance, playing a role to identify what requests to bring to the local government.

## **COVID-19 Impact**

During the pandemic, lockdowns and restriction of gatherings prevented CEP groups from meeting. Although during the pandemic there might have been less budget allocated to the local community, CEP still came together for mutual assistance to do what they could themselves without

government budgetary support. Community members helped each other; some CEPs coordinated and delivered vegetables to De-Suups who were on COVID-19-related duties.

## **Conclusion**

The DLG, in cooperation with JICA, had started pilot CEPs in three dzongkhags — Mongar, Dagana, and Punakha. It is now trying to increase the number of CEPs to another four dzongkhags — Haa, Tsirang, Trongsa and Bumthang, always bearing in mind the aim of strengthening democracy through offering citizens as much opportunity as possible to actively engage in decision-making, governance and politics at grassroots level.

However, in Japan, as the country developed, the number of 'Jichi-kai' has been decreasing. Traditional ways of mutual understanding, assistance and self-help, have been disappearing, or lost in many areas. Fortunately the Bhutanese government has realised the importance of such traditions and is trying to strengthen this trend.

The Community Engagement Platform will revive such community spirit which was stronger in the past but still exists to some extent, even in cities like Thimphu, where neighbourhood mutual assistance bonds may have grown stronger during the pandemic. We hope these community bonds and relationships will continue to thrive in the future of Bhutan.