

Empowering Local Government through Participatory Planning

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The Comprehensive National Development Plan for Bhutan 2030 (CNDP) was launched in 2019, with the aim of reducing disparity between urban and rural areas and promoting sustainable development.

A key recommendation recognised by the CNDP concerns the role of local government through participatory planning. It is highly dependent on the functions of local government in the formation of a capital region and regional centre. The concept of regional centres brings to the forefront the role of local governments and local leaders, critical for planning, implementation and governance of symbiotic projects and interventions, which are multi-layered and interdependent. The establishment of a regional centre with boundaries cutting across various local jurisdictions, means local leaders will now also be required to manage both rural and urban areas.

This article will highlight the importance of participatory planning, collaboration, and integration, right from plan formulation to implementation, to ensure the success of holistic service delivery through linked urban centres (LUC). Local governments will be required to actively engage in the planning process, to share aspirations and resolve local issues, and to propose priority projects, which will have a higher impact in the jurisdiction and the LUC.

Local leaders must have collaborative capacity to interact with neighbouring jurisdictions, to enhance integration and achieve resource optimisation in regional infrastructures. This article will highlight the unique planning process keeping the participatory approach at its core.

Southern Central Regional Plan (SCRCP)

Following a main recommendation of the CNDP, the Department of Human Settlement (DHS) in the Ministry of Works and Human Settlement is implementing a project to formulate a Regional Plan for the

Southern Central Region, and a structure plan for the Sarpang-Gelephu Linked Urban Centre, in collaboration with JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency).

LUC is a concept in which two towns create a centre for higher order/ advanced social services, markets, and economic activities in the region. The Holistic Service Delivery Model proposed in the CNDP considers a LUC as linking district and gewog centres within the region to provide services.

The participatory approach of the SCRP strives to involve people, agencies, and stakeholders in the process of planning, to foster engagement and ensure ownership by participants/ stakeholders. It is to ensure that all sections of societies are equally involved in the planning process, and engaged in a systematic and cumulative learning process.

This will allow participants, including locals, professionals and experts, to co-create knowledge and learn skills from each other. Further, it promotes shared decision-making, and supports the target groups in carrying out their own studies and assessment of problems and preparing actions to ultimately uphold and enhance decentralisation principles.

The DHS takes the lead for the SCRP, with technical support from the Japanese Project Team (JPT), to foster coordination among stakeholder agencies and provide uninterrupted logistic support.

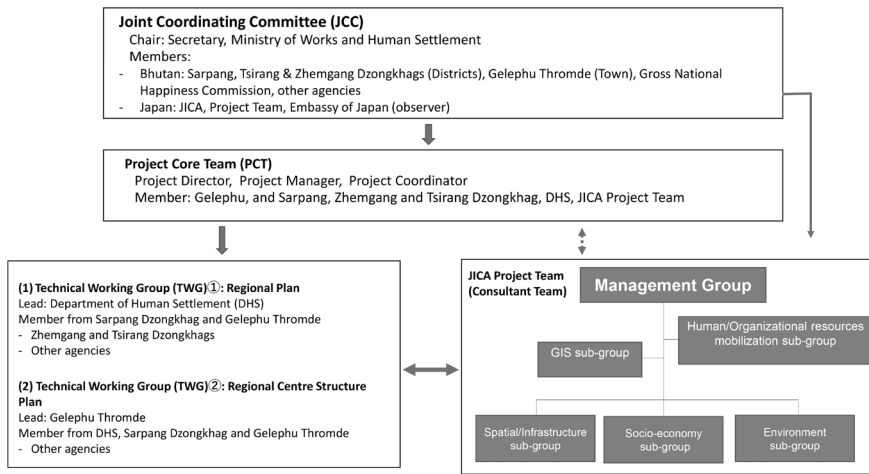
The participatory planning approach in formulating the SCRP is promoted through the creation of various platforms to enhance collaboration. The vital component of this platform is the engagement and participation of local government leaders, representatives of local community groups, farmers' group, CSOs, business groups, etc, who have a direct stake in the project.

Project Structure

Considering the complexity and tiers of planning processes, the project takes an entirely different approach from the conventional method, where these relevant agencies are only consulted by the planning agencies during the planning process, or at the endorsement level.

Currently, many existing plans are either unknown to agencies, or they take little ownership, even after the plans are shared for implementation, mainly because of minimal engagement during the initial stages. The project has a multi-pronged structure to overcome the barriers to information sharing, sensitisation, involvement of stakeholders at grassroots level and ownership.

Figure 1: Implementation Structure for SCRP.



A Joint Coordination Committee comprising key stakeholder agencies will ensure policy level engagement and collaboration and provide overall supervision and direction to the project.

The Project Core Team (PCT), with managerial and administrative functions, includes officials of the Department of Human Settlement, with other members from Gelephu thromde, Sarpang dzongkhag, and GNH Commission. The PCT ensures that the functioning of subgroups is aligned to core objectives of the project, and coordinates to expand participation of stakeholders through awareness and budgetary support for public engagement.

Technical working groups (TWGs) function independently and carry out rigorous interaction and coordination in gathering sectoral data, providing updates of local conditions and working closely with JICA expert groups.

The creation of sub-groups enables sectoral-specific discussions with JPT experts, and exhibits the system of enhanced job delegation, accountability and ownership. The TWGs members are also a vital component and linkage between the JPT experts and local residents so that the issues and aspirations of the people are well articulated in planning proposals.

Coordination and Consultation Meetings with Central Agencies/ Ministries

The JPT experts visiting Bhutan meet relevant central agencies and ministries in Thimphu to present their data analysis findings. This gives the agencies an opportunity to bring their own sectors on board to share the issues and validate the findings, and at the same time, to provide platforms for certain agencies without membership representation in the JCC, PCT and TWGs.

Such meetings are found to be vital to ensure broad participation of agencies and to incorporate and realign the plan to sectoral plans. It also expands the awareness level of the planning process and has garnered strong support from participants, including CSOs and the private sector.

Problem Awareness Workshop to Engage Local Governments

Cities face social, ecological and economic problems, such as poverty, tensions between different groups, pollution, resource use, congestion, and spatial competition.¹ These issues need to be addressed through community participation and engagement, as the top-down approach of planning may become blunt and insensitive to local problems and opportunities.

Furthermore, local governments should not be excluded from planning and development, since there is a complex interaction as a result of migration of people, flows of information, resources and wastes, eventually impacting social, environmental and economic situations.²

The unsustainability of urban areas is not because of their inherent characteristics, but is rather the result of poor governance and planning³, thereby making the role of local governments ever more challenging

¹ Legner, M., & Lilja, S. (2010). *Living Cities: An Anthology in Urban Environmental History*. FORMAS.

² UN-Habitat. (2008). *State of the World's Cities 2008/2009: Harmonious Cities*. Earthscan.

³ Rode, P., Burdett, R. (2011). *Cities: Investing in energy and resource efficiency*. UNEP.

and vital. Cities or urban areas need competent and accountable local governments, who bring together all stakeholder groups for sustainable urbanisation.⁴

Spatial plans and its regulations have direct implications for local governments, who are the primary agencies to approve new buildings, alterations and renovations of existing buildings, and changes in buildings and land uses.⁵ Therefore, consideration of local governments as the primary stakeholders in planning paves the way for an inclusive and comprehensive plan.

The cornerstone of the participatory planning approach is the engagement of local leaders, local government representatives, sector heads, NGOs and regional officials, who are at the grassroots level and interact with local residents daily.

Recognising that they know best about local situations, the JPT and their counterpart jointly conducted problem analysis workshops in three dzongkhags of the project area and Gelephu thromde, to identify the key issues people faced, in addition to secondary information gathered through data collection.

To create the best conditions for local participants to attend the workshops, it was also necessary to firstly share the background and intent of the project, through the use of dzongkhag and thromde administrations.

The JPT experts introduced the “problem tree analysis” method whereby participants were grouped into gewogs, and asked to note down all the problems faced in their area, followed by identifying core problems and causes. Participants were also asked to present their findings to other groups and learn from each other. With little or no help from the JPT, a participant could identify core problems and its causes, which would be the basis for proposing planning interventions to resolve the issues.

The draft problem analysis results were shared with participants for consensus building and to collect feedback on the technical arrangement made by the JPT experts.

⁴ UN-ISDR (2010), *My City is getting ready*

⁵ Malalgoda, C., Amaratunga, D., Haigh R. Creating a disaster resilient built environment in urban cities: The roles of local governments in Sri Lanka.

Creation of Regional Platform

To sustain the participatory planning approach in carrying out actual planning after the data analysis, the JPT planned to create a regional platform to continually engage people in the planning process. The PCT and the JPT are in the process of finalising the members, mode of the platform, and the roles of platform members.

It will provide an avenue to keep members involved in data collection, planning, and implementation. Tentatively, members include gups, CSO members, farmers' cooperatives, private sector, youth groups, elderly groups, and women's groups, to ensure diverse and inclusive representation in planning and decision-making.

Role of Local Governments in Promoting Participatory Planning

Section 13 of the LG Act of Bhutan 2009 mandates landowners and local authorities to be part of the consultation meeting for thromde boundary demarcation, empowering the people to take an active part in it. Once declared as a yenlag thromde (satellite town) the functioning mandate is provided to dzongkhag or gewog administration, as outlined in section 18 of the LG Act 2009.

The key activities that the local government is empowered to take up under section 48 of the LG Act 2009 to enhance participatory planning, is to promote holistic and integrated area-based development and to encourage the involvement of communities and community organisations in local governance. To fulfil these mandates, the LG must ensure cordial relationships among the gewogs and create a conducive platform for participation of stakeholders in planning and implementation of developmental activities.

In the case of the dzongkhag tshogdu (district council) the LG Act 2009 provides various powers and functions, such as general, regulatory, administrative and financial powers. The dzongkhag tshogdus are mandated to promote balanced socio-economic development in the gewogs and thromdes in the dzongkhag. This entails the active participation of the gewogs and thromdes in the common forum and in assessing the development status of the jurisdiction. This can be achieved by carrying out holistic planning, and involving stakeholders during the implementation.

The Gewog Tshogdes (county committees) are empowered to carry out numerous regulatory functions, such as regulating construction activities. Without the involvement of the people in formulating the regulations, it will be very difficult to enforce the provisions, firstly because the Plan would not be able to capture the local needs, and secondly, because the residents may not provide enough support without understanding the context and provision for the regulations. Further, since the gewogs are empowered to promote area-based development planning, spatial planning will become a relevant and appropriate tool and medium to carry out the mandates.

The LG Act provides many powers and functions to the thromde tshogdes (town committees). Some of the powers include ensuring planned development, approving land use and development plans, local area plans including land pooling, and other development techniques. These functions have a direct impact on communities, and merit strong collaboration, engagement and participation of all in both planning and implementation of development activities.

The thromde tshogdes (town committees) are also mandated to carry out many regulatory functions to ensure planned and holistic development. LG members play a vital role in ensuring public participation in formulating five-year and annual Plans, and the implementation of development activities in their respective constituencies.

Section 145 and 146 of the LG Act 2009 require all sessions to be open to the public, to ensure public participation in the development of various plans and programmes. However, these mandates are rarely fulfilled, mainly because the public are not aware of the legal empowerment and, at the same time, information is not disseminated properly to invite public participation.

Public participation is difficult due to various barriers, such as geographical, financial, and logistic issues. One strategy to ensure increased participation is through use of information technology and mass media to report and display discussions and decisions.

The participatory planning approach in the formulation of the SCRPs is one step forward to ensure that the mandates of the LG Act, which provides strong legal basis for public participation and engagement, are fulfilled.

Creation of local groups and conducting frequent meetings involving people of respective constituencies are important to ensure proper information is disseminated. It is also legally binding on the local government to be fully engaged and involved in the planning and implementation of national projects.

Way Forward to Sustain a Participatory Planning Approach

Local leaders, as representatives of the people, are central to the development process. The decentralisation and devolution of powers by the central government empowered local governments to plan and carry out developmental activities by themselves. The SCRP provides them with an appropriate platform for participation in the planning process. Recognising that the proposals in the Plans will have direct impact in their functioning, it is imperative that local leaders are fully engaged in the planning and implementation of developmental activities.

The conventional process of planning is not very effective, as people are firstly, unable to comprehend planning technicalities during the broad public consultation meetings and, secondly, due to lack of engagement, they are not able to assess the long-term benefit of the plans.

Another reason could be the long-term planning horizon and investment intensive proposals which may deter local leaders from showing interest and making efforts to participate and engage in the planning process.

To sustain the participatory planning approach and broaden stakeholder engagement, there is a need to institute and activate local planning teams comprising the local community, through a conducive legal environment. A Spatial Planning Act is vital to empower the community and planning authority, and to stipulate the roles and mandates of stakeholders in the planning process and implementation.

This arrangement would also resolve the issue of people's impatience or "meeting fatigue", as a legal framework would provide a systematic way of engagement and making decisions in the planning process, rather than unnecessary gatherings, consultation and meetings.

One issue that discourages public participation is the long planning period, prolonged moratoriums, and unrealistic phasing and investment plans. The legal provisions should be able to resolve such issues, so that people take part in the planning process and take ownership of the plan. One way of encouraging participation is to establish a system of reverting to original conditions and land uses if the planning, implementation and moratorium get extended beyond the legally stipulated period.

Decentralisation also has a drawback, especially in the context of developing countries and those which are in transition, with a lack of sufficient funds to finance local development priorities and a lack of frameworks or advocacy, for local accountability.⁶ This is evident in Bhutan, since local elected leaders do not have a clear understanding of the provisions of the Local Government Act of Bhutan.

Lack of statutory support for people who have contributed to the planning also hinders them from realising participatory planning. There is a need to provide enough administrative, technical, and financial support and authority to the local government to implement their development plans.

There is a need to develop a central planning database system for consistency and updated data. Participatory planning is an ongoing process and the final result may differ from the original goal. There is also a need for a dynamic and flexible planning process.

The outcome of the Plan will be long term and participants may not be able to see immediate results. Therefore, the government needs to allocate a budget for key interventions that will bring about quick benefits to the people.

The financing of the urban infrastructure should be explored and strategised through various financing models, such as donations, urban tax, and the sale of reserved plots created through land pooling. Section 52 of the Land Pooling and Readjustment Regulation 2018 proposes the creation of reserved plots through contribution by private landowners for sale to generate funds.

⁶ Boex, J., Malik A.A., Brookins, D., & Edwards, B. (2016). *Dynamic Cities? – The role of urban local governments in improving urban service delivery performance in Africa and Asia.*

Currently, members of Parliament are not able to participate in the local planning process and decision-making. It is important to involve them in the planning process so that legislative issues are taken care of.

Creation of local planning teams, which includes the involvement of residents, is important, so that the community has a voice in planning, as there are chances of dilution if planning is taken up only by elected leaders. The local planning team should have the required capacity to carry out quantitative and qualitative surveys, create awareness of the purpose and benefit for planning, and carry out M&E (monitoring and evaluation) of the SCRPs during and after implementation.

In the 12th FYP there is a significant increase in the capital allocation, from 30% to 50%, along with the enhanced decentralisation of authority and human resources allocation to implement the Plan. With the government currently formulating a national decentralisation policy, there is a huge opportunity to promote and sustain the participatory approach in planning. This could well be one of the key factors to further promote an effective decentralisation plan in pursuit of a vibrant democracy and Gross National Happiness.