

Implementer and Facilitator: A Blended Role of Local Government

Lekey Wangdi

Background and Context

The transition process of local Government (LG) in Bhutan has gradually gained momentum over the past decades. The establishment of LG in the dzongkhags (districts) and gewogs (counties) — Dzongkhag Yargay Tshogdu (district development committee) in 1981 and Gewog Yargay Tshogchung (county development committee) in 1991 — and the enactment of the Local Government Act in 2009, amended in 2014, and the drafting of a decentralisation policy, were some milestones in the local governance journey.

Today, there are 20 dzongkhags, 205 gewogs and four thromdes (municipalities) governed by 20 dzongkhag tshogdus (district councils), 205 Gewog Tshogdes (county committees) and four Thromde Tshogdes (town committees). They are functioning with a certain degree of autonomy in decision-making, resource allocation, and implementation of plans and programmes.

In the 12th Five-Year Plan of the country, with the objective of a “Just, Harmonious and Sustainable Society through enhanced Decentralisation,” the role of LG has been reinforced and appraised as being vital to achieve national objectives. For example, in this plan, 50 percent of resources from the overall five-year plan budget have been allocated to local governments to enhance fiscal decentralisation.

While it is acknowledged that the role of LG has drastically increased, there is lurking scepticism and debate about the lack of capacity in the local governments. The parliamentarians¹, local governments², decision makers³, media, and public have discussed issues such as lack of professional capability, inability to utilise allocated resources, the increasing trend of

¹ Local Governance Assessment Study 2015, National Council of Bhutan

² <https://kuenselonline.com/lg-leaders-ask-for-engineers-for-developmental-activities/>

³ Local Governments’ Capacity Needs Assessment, Department of Local Governance, MoHCA

corrupt practices⁴, and poor coordination between LGs⁵, central ministries, and agencies.

The approaches taken to address these issues are part of the challenge. While we continue to follow conventional ways of doing things, following existing norms and practices, the change in society demands more flexibility, teamwork, and an integrated approach to keep up with the pace of change and the interconnected nature of problems.

The approaches that LGs adopt to cope with their ever-increasing role are mostly static, while the change in society is more dynamic and complex. The perceived role of LG officials and elected leaders as the sole implementers in local governance and development processes seems to be a major impediment to the efficiency and governance of LGs.

Many times, we experience that national vision and well-intended policies do not necessarily translate into action on the ground.

The shortage of human resources and critical professionals like engineers, accountants, and skilled personnel at the local government level was discussed in different forums, like dzongkhag tshogdus⁶, gewog tshogdes⁷, gups' and dzongdas' conferences. These stories were covered by mainstream and social media.

However, these problems have not been solved and, as a result, performances of LGs are hampered. They include under-utilisation of annual funds allocated to LGs, delays in implementation of plans and programmes, and compromised quality of work. There is also a lack of accountability and inability to monitor and provide timely feedback.⁸

There is complacency and a tendency to continue with existing norms and practices whenever change is initiated. National vision is impeded by resistance to change and perceived risks. This is further aggravated by the lack of motivation and absence of an enabling environment that promotes innovation, new ideas, a sense of competitiveness, and belonging. There is a

⁴ ACC Annual Report, 2019

⁵ Assessment Study on dzongkhag tshogdu and Gewog Tshogde, Department of Local Governance, MoHCA

⁶ <http://www.bbs.bt/news/?p=148661>

⁷ <https://kuenselonline.com/progress-for-zhemgang-in-2021/>

⁸ Study and Assessment on compliance of LG Act, LGRR and other functions, 2021

fear of being reprimanded for deviating from the prescribed procedures and therefore, limited space and flexibility beyond existing norms and practices.

There are no opportunities to promote partnership models and approaches. Presently, apart from commonly used guidelines on procurement of works and goods and community contracting protocol, the other concepts and approaches — like Public Private Partnership Policy 2016, civil society and LG partnerships, academic institutions and many more areas of collaboration — remain largely unexplored and cloudy.

Article 22 of the Constitution of Bhutan states that “Power and authority shall be decentralised and devolved to elected local governments to facilitate the direct participation of the people in the development and management of their own social, economic, and environmental well-being.”

The Local Government Act 2009 empowers and mandates LGs supported by local government administrations — dzongkhag, gewog and thromde — to implement social and economic development policies, plans and programmes in those localities.

Similarly, the Local Government Development Planning Manual editions 2009, 2014, and 2021, and other fiscal policies and guidelines — like the Annual Grant Guidelines for Local Government issued by the Ministry of Finance — guide LGs in planning, and budgeting, and ensure citizen participation in enhancing economic, social, and environmental well-being and promoting decision-making at the local level.

Further, to enhance and achieve implementation efficiency and gains, the government has promoted a Triple C approach (coordination, consolidation, and collaboration) and applied it as the fundamental principle and device underpinning all goals, strategies, and programmes in the 12th Five-Year Plan.

However, such thoughtful vision and well-intended strategies have not materialised at the LG level because of lack of advocacy programmes, lack of directions, no compliance and follow-up mechanisms, and limited capacity of sectoral staff and elected local leaders like gup, mangmi, and tshogpas.

While there are broad strategies highlighted, there is a lack of clear standard operating procedures (SOPs) and partnership guidelines that could help LGs broaden their roles and focus on building strategic partnerships with actors outside of the LGs. Sectoral staff in dzongkhags, gewogs, and thromdes are considered implementers, regardless of their capacity to implement, and there is a very limited partnership approach in the local governance and development process.

What Can Be Done?

Given the current scenario and the persistent challenges faced by the local government, the viable and implementable alternative is to shift the role of the LG from its current perceived role of “implementer” to a more dynamic role as “implementer and facilitator”. This article recommends several measures to encourage a more active role by local governments.

The central ministries and authorities responsible for promoting LG governance and functions must focus on creating a conducive and enabling policy environment, developing clear guidelines, and enabling new roles of partnership in policy frameworks. The guidelines and frameworks must be followed to promote institutionalisation of changes and reforms. For instance, there is a need to review the government’s Procurement Rules and Regulations and to develop partnership guidelines to promote partnership-based approaches.

The range of implementation modalities must be expanded. One such example is the Community Contracting Protocol implemented in gewogs and dzongkhags which, when properly implemented, enables local communities to participate in local development without having to go through a tendering process, and award work up to the value of Nu. 1.5 million (M) to community members.

LGs can play a vital role in facilitating different stakeholders and promoting partnership models based on the principles of subsidiarity and comparative advantages. The principle of subsidiarity focuses on addressing problems at the lowest appropriate level and involves all those who are affected.

This vision has been clearly articulated in the 12th Five-Year Plan (2018–2023) document under the “Triple C” concept of Coordination,

Consolidation, and Collaboration. This is a window of opportunity for LGs to promote various partnership models in implementing plans and programmes.

LGs as facilitators can focus on bringing different key players together, promoting partnerships, and strengthening the partnership mechanism for achieving shared goals. The shared goals of LGs were clearly articulated as Local Government Key Result Areas (LGKRAs) to be achieved in the 12th Five-Year Plan.

There are 10 LGKRAs: Gainful employment created and local economy enhanced; food and nutrition security enhanced; community health enhanced and water security ensured; quality of education and skills improved; culture and tradition preserved and promoted; livability, safety and sustainability of human settlement improved; transparent effective and efficient public service delivery enhanced; democracy and decentralisation strengthened; carbon neutral, climate and disaster resilient development enhanced and gender equality promoted, women and girls empowered.

The LG alone will not be able to accomplish all these without the support of partners. The principles and values of collective efforts, complementary roles, creating an enabling environment, and mutually agreed outcomes could help achieve desired results.

There is an opportunity to foster collective efforts, find niche market positions, enhance funding windows, and address issues of implementation capacity at the LG level. Sectors such as agriculture and livestock within the dzongkhag and gewogs alone cannot fulfil the increasing demand for services and keep abreast of complexity and changes in society.

In the past, dzongkhags like Gasa have worked to establish connections between organic farmers and potential partners like Aman Kora, Uma Bhutan, Damchen Resorts, and Khuru Resorts, among others, in order to foster genuine market links and inspire farmers to choose organic farming.⁹ Haa dzongkhag and Chukha dzongkhag used similar strategies to bring together a variety of partners — including government organisations like the Gross National Happiness Commission and the Tourism Council of Bhutan; Civil Society Organisations like the Association of Bhutanese

⁹ <http://www.gasa.gov.bt/gallery/gasa-organics-partnering-hotels-resorts-punakha>

Tour Operators, the Guide Association of Bhutan, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature; development partners, and local residents — in order to develop and implement dzongkhag tourism development plans, product development plans, and marketing strategies.¹⁰

Recently, Trongsa dzongkhag and Taktse College of Language and Cultural Studies launched a partnership to encourage youth participation in local governance and development processes.¹¹ Initiations and best practices like those in the cases mentioned above are just a few examples which LGs could replicate and benefit from.

There is a need for a leadership drive among the executive heads as well as elected local leaders. Leaders must be advocates of the dynamics of change, foster teamwork, and importantly, be open to change. Dzongdas (district governor) and dzongkhag tshogdu (district council) chairpersons can play a vital role in taking such initiatives and reforms beyond current practices in the dzongkhag; so can the executive secretary and thrompon in the thromde and gewog administrative officer and gup at the gewog level.

Districts, municipalities, and gewogs must be promoted and marketed as destinations, and key players must be invited. Players like corporations, civil society organisations, private institutions, universities, and investors must reach out to the local governments and pitch their ideas and present their plans and objectives. The values of every player in the evolution of society must be acknowledged.

Inter-local governmental exchange programmes must be started and promoted in order to share expertise, strengthen networking, scale up efficient ways, and learn from one another. It is important to promote a healthy feeling of competitiveness that is progressive and supported; inter-local governmental exchange programmes and events could be organised at different levels among executives in LGs, the sectoral level and between elected local leaders.

The government should provide a platform for LGs to pitch their business ideas and provide grants based on merit, competitiveness, and creative solutions. Subsequently, a performance-based budget allocation and rewarding system must be instituted in addition to the annual grants.

¹⁰ <http://www.chhukha.gov.bt/announcements/destination-chhukha-tourism-action-plan-2021-2025>

¹¹ <https://www.clcs.edu.bt/?p=4710>

The LGs' transition from implementer to implementer-cum-facilitator, and adoption of new strategies will strengthen the position of the local government-elected members like gups, thrompons, and tshogpas, as well as local government administration staff headed by the dzongda.

The focus of LG will change from routine administrative and management activities to more strategic and visionary ones. They will be able to guide different players and provide strategic directions. This approach is consistent with principles and legal provisions of the LG Act, highlighting the role of district and gewog administrations to provide required technical support to LGs.

The way forward in building and promoting a partnership model and shifting the approach of the LG will not be without hurdles. There are limitations and foreseeably difficult obstacles to overcome, such as changing working processes, the requirement to harmonise legislative frameworks, a change in leadership, and the deconstruction of the attitude of territorial protection, but this does not make it impossible.

It is in the larger interest of local governments to pursue the role of being facilitators along with their current role as implementers.