

Local Government – Critical to Democratic Governance

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Introduction

In his 1972 coronation speech, His Majesty the fourth Druk Gyalpo (King of Bhutan) stressed the importance of citizen involvement in nation-building. The nature of government requires reciprocity from citizens; it is in fact a prerequisite, especially in Bhutan's contemporary governance structure. Without this collaboration, there is a tendency to expect the top-level administrative organisations alone to shoulder the responsibility for national economic development.

Governance should be inclusive not exclusive, yet local government (LG) in Bhutan seems somewhat elusive with regards to direct contribution at the national level. An image of a regionally operative body minding local interests is what best defines it. Streamlining of its activities targeted at the national level seems desirable. This is feasible with an added authority and enhanced responsibility. Being “nearest and closest to the people”¹ the LG has potential to act as a catalyst towards imbibing this mindset and attitude change.

According to Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering, fears that civil servants and local governments would be politicised by the central government had led to a “big disconnect” between these institutions. He said that a careful reading of the LG Act suggests that there is no communication between gewogs (county), and between gewogs and the dzongdas (district administrator).² Connecting these linkages in a cohesive manner is vital. The LG first needs to be accorded a platform. Here, the tourism sector³,

¹ His Majesty the King's speech in October 2016 speaking to gups retrieved from Call for Articles | The Druk Journal

² The big disconnect between central and local governments | Kuensel Online

³ Considered as one of the five jewels of Bhutanese economy followed with Hydropower, Agriculture, Small and medium enterprises, and Mining.

particularly domestic tourism⁴, focusing on Bhutanese travellers, would be helpful.

It took a pandemic to remind us of the importance, absence, and the unaccounted nature of the recently emerging notion of domestic tourism.

The launch of the 2019 DOTS (domestic and outbound tourist survey) by the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB) substantiates this. This article attempts to bridge the divide between the notion of domestic and international tourism, wherein the LG, in its existing platform, is strengthened and its role made more vivid with the linkage of tourism.

Firstly, the relevance of LG for domestic tourism partnership is conceptualised. Secondly, assessing grey areas to enhance the partnership is identified. Thirdly, a local to glocal approach, with example narratives to elucidate this role, is presented.

The key focus is for an outcome for fostering key responsibilities in the respective LG portfolios with the potential for the tourism industry, thereby playing a critical role towards contributing to national development.

Relevance of the LG – Domestic Tourism Partnership

Democracy is gauged by a consensus of the majority. If numbers are anything to go by, the majority of administrative portfolios under the ambit of LG are the highest, compared to other governance bodies.

In the Constitution, the highest number of sections is under Article 2 (The Institution of Monarchy) with 26. The LG has close to 22, and is fewer by just two sections compared to Article 10 (Parliament) and Article 9 (Principles of State Policy) with 24. It is certain that thorough deliberation for the LG was undertaken.

So, why is this image still at the fringes of national development? Three arguments are presented here:

⁴ Domestic tourism comprises activities of a resident visitor within the country of reference (either as part of domestic tourism trip or an outbound tourism trip).

The Driving Force

How can this role become critical to mainstream governance and why should the LG be involved? The TCB, as the sole authority in devising the tourism policy, recently announced the hiring of a national consulting firm for development of a national ecotourism masterplan.

While a plan is feasible, applying local expertise and knowledge provides a different vantage point. Under the recent Tourism Levy Bill 2022 enacted, international tourists have to pay a SDF (Sustainable Development Fund) of US\$200 a day. Urban and rural Bhutan, in particular, will need to live up to the pursuit of the “high value low impact tourism” policy.

With the merging of LG with the domestic tourism sector the Constitution provides further basis.

Strength in Numbers

Article 34 of the National Referendum, Section 2, sub-section (b) conveys a powerful narrative, where a referendum may be called upon. “An appeal is made by not less than 50 percent of the total number of members of all dzongkhag tshogdus (district council).” This presents a need for a stronger foundation for the LG to be closely involved in national development.

Rejections of government proposals like the solar power project in Bumthang and mining quarries, are some prominent narratives that will tell of the power of LG in democratic governance. Pro-active participation in developmental discourse must be instituted.

Image Realignment

Article 22, Local Governments, Section 18 (e) stipulates that the LG be “Supported by the government to promote holistic and integrated area-based developmental planning.” This concept evokes opportunity for the LG in fostering a role critical to democratic governance.

The premise is that development of local areas will contribute to the national level developmental vision. These aspects of local interests thinking can

be glocal⁵ in nature and in principle, merged with the vision and goals of tourism in Bhutan. The next section provides some scenarios for such partnerships.

Assessing Grey Area-Local to Glocal

Identifying a modus-operandi to validate the argument for a LG–domestic tourism partnership is not difficult. Assessing the grey areas to this end is crucial and helpful in consolidating a critical role. While there may be numerous avenues for deliberation, due to extensive study required and space limitations, the content targeted here is a general overview with prominent scenarios.

Firstly, the connection is clearly laid out by Article 22 Section 3, which reiterates that “local governments shall ensure that local interests are taken into account in the national sphere of governance, by providing a forum for public consideration on issues affecting the local territory.”

Why not streamline this path more effectively by building on the established platform of the tourism sector? A renewed approach for an economy that is induced by the forces of globalisation, glocal is more a necessity than limiting development activities with a local-only approach. The following examples help elucidate this role.

The Royal Bhutan Flower Exhibition takes place annually in different parts of the country. Local administrations are sought to oversee the continuity of the project once the event is over. Has it been successful? Not quite, in most cases. Flowerpots have gone missing a few days after the exhibition show in the capital city itself. In Samdrup Jongkhar, having witnessed it first-hand a few days after the exhibition, I found the charm of the show soon dissipated with the end of the event. It is the same case with cleaning campaigns.

Under its developmental sphere, as assessed above, local administrations could also perform this role with financial autonomy, which lessens bureaucratic red tape. There is a need for finances and manpower, wherein

⁵ Reflecting or characterised by both local and global considerations.

the systems respond and not react to events. The continuity of such projects will only add value to tourism prospects. There should be incentives besides civic awareness programmes and fines.

The Trans Bhutan Trail (TBT) initiative of His Majesty the King is named in TIME's "50 extraordinary travel destinations around the world for 2022". The restoration engaged thousands of Bhutanese workers and villagers in a unique private or public partnership between the government and the people. The government, Tourism Council of Bhutan and Bhutan-Canada Foundation combined forces to oversee the restoration of 18 major bridges, 10,000 staircases, and hundreds of kilometres of pathways. Intrepid travellers can hike, bike, and camp through the lush meadows and dense forests of nine dzongkhags, 28 gewogs (local governments), two municipalities, parts of Phrumsengla National Park, and more than 400 historic sites.

It has "its own sustainability fund to ensure that the trail will be properly maintained for generations to come". The "National Water Flagship Programme" to improve the livelihood of the people, and the recent Desuung Takshel (Tourism) Programme are examples of a tourism transformation initiative. Tourism prospects across the country, however, will improve with better communication within dzongkhags and with information-sharing among authorities.

As literate and capable local leaders fill the portfolios of local governance, there is a need for extended creative platforms to showcase their potential, skills and ideas. Hiring local people for tourism projects and maintaining them will hold the LG accountable. This should come with decentralisation of powers.

Recommendations

1. Governance Structure and Finance Support

The organogram of the Royal Government of Bhutan, from the purview of autonomous bodies, has no direct linkage with local government. Everything needs to be routed through ministries. Finance is the lifeblood of any organisation; the slow trickle down to the lower level of governance in mediocre amounts does not facilitate ground-level outcomes.

An apolitical view for an apolitical body best describes this case. “Inserting a new sub-section, the National Council adopted the Tourism Levy Bill 2022 with calls for the competent authority to strengthen and implement strategies to ensure that the benefits of high value low volume tourism are shared across all regions of the country.” The reset button needs to be pressed now and stakeholders renewed.

2. Institutional Level Incentive with Respective Unique Selling Points

Druk gi Nagyoe (strongman of Bhutan) was a popular TV programme that showcased primarily the physical strength of contestants from different dzongkhags of Bhutan, with an ultimate winner after a National Day competition. There is pride over which dzongkhag comes first, second, and third. Similarly, annual awards for the LG may be instituted for initiatives directed at developing tourism concepts.

River rafting in Punakha, the black-necked crane festival in Phobjikha, and events like the Haa Mela, are some concepts promoting the domestic travel sector. However, diversification of these ideas is important. This can be the unique selling points of each region. For example, in Chhukha dzongkhag Jigmechu on the Thimphu Phunthsoling highway, is said to be “your holiday destination”. Similarly, natural and created resources can be the foundation upon which tourism projects are promoted, while certain events merge all scenarios, like the Royal Bhutan Flower Exhibition.

In Bhutan, while the “one-nation one-people” philosophy and secular values is our existential basis, ethnic considerations in daily life exist. Identifying with a region is part of the Bhutanese personality. What of LG and tourism? Similar to the One Gewog One Product (OGOP) idea, each dzongkhag must strive to create its own unique selling point in marketing domestic tourism.

3. Addressing Unbalanced Regional Tourism

How can the LG deliver on this policy? An incentivised role for the LG is needed for this post-pandemic period. Its apolitical nature further provides flexibility in dodging the red tape of changing governments and, subsequently, addressing the issue of unbalanced tourism plaguing Bhutan.

The criticism of tourism being only focused in the Western region of the country must end at some point. Bhutanese, not foreigners, should be the first to be enticed to travel the length and breadth of their own country.

The outflow of youth and adults to Australia and other countries, the problem of *gungtongs* (empty houses in villages) and the rural-urban migration are trends that can be mitigated by employment opportunities and vacancies created under LG tourism projects. This can help enhance the vibrancy of regions and spark interest in travel.

Local authorities must create projects with tourism prospects, supporting such initiatives among households, communities and townships, with all measures possible, and with overall guidance and standards from the government or TCB. Youth seeking employment need to step up to the various dimensions of such tourism avenues. Lastly, similar to the hotel ratings, projects catering to the domestic and international tourist market should be targeted.

4. National Coordination for Tourism Friendly Infrastructure

A US\$200 per day fee for international tourists is a competitive factor in the global tourism sector. However, the uniqueness of Bhutan validates this hike. But, differentiating between tourism projects for local and international makes the industry confusing and could create policy loopholes, like missing restrooms on the highways on a long journey. Investments in developing tourism-friendly infrastructures for domestic tourism should, therefore, identify with both segments of the sector.

Failure in short and medium term policies will doubtless preoccupy deliberation at the top-level of governance. What of the long term? If the same stakeholders are voicing their opinions on redefining policies, it may be best reviewed under different settings with varying stakeholders. A path towards LG, especially with the non-government community, with delegated responsibility, shows some potential. For example, the Bhutan Toilet Organisation, on the basis of equating distances of travel on the highways and interiors of Bhutan, can partner with respective local authorities in building, operating and maintaining restrooms, with a fee structure.

Conclusion

Arriving at a consensus for this partnership is not as important as recognising the need for it. It would be ideal for LG to bolster its role and contribute to nation-building. For a small country like Bhutan, duplication of efforts by various institutions is not viable, given the limited resources and its size. The present economic progress also relies on human capital. The De-Suung initiative continues to validate this. This needs to be nurtured and fostered at the governance level too. When each citizen feels connected to national development, perhaps the LG will be successful.

Macro Perspective

Recognising the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals supplement governmental efforts, and that the grassroots is where democratic governance should thrive, "Bhutan has requested the United Nations to consider its graduation from Least Developed Countries (LDC) in 2023 instead of 2021, stating that it is in the country's interest to graduate after the conclusion of the 12th Plan".⁶

A discussion on macro and micro development seems imminent. Yet, how can such deliberations begin, when the grassroots is distant from economic benefits? Democracy succeeds with people's participation from all strata of society and, therefore, such a role is of paramount importance.

Approach at the Governance Level

Singapore's success story, according to Dr Kishore Mahbubani, in a recent Royal Institute of Governance and Strategic Studies (RIGSS) talk mentions MPH (Meritocracy, Pragmatism and Honesty) as its success story for its development. This aspect is desirable across civil service portfolios, and even more so, under the LG governance structure. Pursued with a gradual but consistent progressive partnership, this banner should unfurl with a long-term vision. Its evolution is similar to the drafting and framing of the country's Constitution.

⁶ Bhutan proposes to graduate from LDC in 2023 | Kuensel Online

The time is now. Nation-building is not just a politician's job. Citizens do not require a political cape to do so. Although structures of governance may be characterised with individuality, the holistic vision for the nation need not be compromised. Ultimately, will international tourists find value in paying the SDF? This is precisely where the LG becomes critical. The progress made on domestic tourism will ultimately spill over into the sector as a whole. It now makes sense to invest more in the grassroots, as emphasised in the beginning.