

Number Matters: More than a Technical Exercise

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A topic that comes up intermittently, but without any clear conclusion, is the best number of gewogs (county) and corresponding number of Gewog Tshogdes (county councils), the highest decision-making body in a gewog. The number of gewogs was increased, through bifurcation, from 199 in 2002 to 205 in 2005; since then, there have been proposals and discussions to reduce this number. More recently, prior to the third local government elections in 2021, the topic emerged once again.

Mergers as a Strategy

In recent years, successive governments have studied the need to rationalise the number of gewogs. Merging some gewogs was one of the main strategies in this rationalisation plan. A prime reason cited by proponents of reducing, and even halving, numbers through mergers of gewogs is to reduce administration and salary costs. Each Gewog Tshogde is comprised of a gup (elected chairperson of a county councils), mangmi (elected vice chairperson of a county council), and between five and eight tshogpas (elected representative from a chiwog or sub-county). It is supported by a gewog administration composed of civil servants.

The need for such a local government machinery, especially for small gewogs, is being questioned. It was estimated that there would be a cost saving of Nu. 200 million annually by reducing the number of gewogs by 57. These figures may look different today because of the increase in the recurrent costs of running a gewog.

Another reason is improved connectivity. With the expansion of the road network across the country and better telecommunications services, travel time to local government offices have been significantly shortened. It is, therefore, not efficient to maintain numerous local government offices when fewer of them now have a wider reach.

In addition, if the plans to provide fully integrated online public services are indeed fulfilled, we might be looking at a local government public service model that requires much less physical interaction to access services.

Population size is a direct criterion for merger of gewogs with small populations, or mergers of a sparsely populated gewog with a larger one in its proximity. Within the larger rationalisation plan, a more populated gewog would broaden the revenue base for a local government. This could have positive implications on fiscal decentralisation and on the balance between centrally determined and allocated resources and locally collected and retained resources.

The situation today is that the total amount of tax that a local government retains is negligible. There are instances of local government officials paying the land, cattle, or house taxes themselves because the cost of collecting is higher than the taxes collected.

Fewer local governments would also enable larger allocations of financial and human resources to provide better incentives and working conditions. This is expected to attract and retain experienced personnel and to address the often-repeated challenge that local government functionaries do not have adequate capacities.

However, local government performance is multifaceted. Among others, it is linked to having adequate numbers of competent technical staff. For example, local government functionaries often cite the need for accountants and engineers in the gewogs to enable infrastructure plans to be designed, approved, and implemented on time.

Another factor that affects local government capacities is the “one size fits all” staffing principle via a centralised recruitment and promotion system. Capacities are also sometimes interpreted based on the ability to fill up planning and budgeting formats correctly.

Beyond frontline service delivery which are or should become more ICT enabled, and correctly filling, planning and budgeting formats, competencies linked to leadership, working across sector silos and boundaries (public, voluntary, private), and anticipating and managing change for strategic results that benefit citizens, are needed.

Beyond Costs

The valid arguments on the number of local governments lean heavily towards reduction in public expenditure and increasing efficiency. In addition, the arguments tend to be largely linked to just one role of local government, that of public service delivery. Social, cultural, and historical facets to gewog boundaries have not received attention, or have been dismissed, as proclaimed by a media editorial that “sentiments and petty issues such as cultural differences and belief systems must not stand in the way because restructuring the governance structure is in the best interests of the nation.” (Kuensel editorial, ‘Why rationalisation of gewogs must happen,’ February 26, 2021).

Two decades ago, there were discussions on the merger of Chang gewog with Mewang gewog or Thimphu thromde (municipality). The pro-merger argument was that with the extension of the municipality boundary, the Chang population would decrease and be too small to warrant existence as a separate gewog. Strong sentiments against the merger arose, linked to the sacred duty this particular gewog has, along with seven others, in continuing the ancient Pazap (warriors in the Zhabdrung’s army) tradition.

This tradition is a re-enactment of a battle scene from the 17th century at the annual Thimphu Lhamoi Drubchen and Punakha Goenpoi Drubchen, both highly revered religious festivals of historical significance. It was argued that a merger meant that Chang gewog would cease to exist, which in effect meant a discontinuation of this tradition of the eight gewogs providing the men who would represent the Pazaps during the festivals. It was resolved by the 80th National Assembly to retain Chang as a separate gewog.

Perceptions about a gewog boundary can be closely tied to a community’s complex and multifaceted sense of identity. For example, the name of a merged gewog seems to be of particular interest. Some social media comments are clear in recommending that a new name must be provided if their gewogs were integrated with another.

With some mirth, it was mentioned at a recent meeting that there would be an uproar and invocations of history, culture and tradition if Ura was to be merged and had to suffer the ignominy of being subsumed under Chumey gewog.

The assumption is that smaller gewogs would be merged or integrated with larger neighbours. Equality of opportunity could become an issue. For example, merging a large gewog with a specific population or people of similar circumstances with a smaller one that does not share common attributes, may lead to stifling democratic participation.

Unwillingness to vote for local government or party candidates from the smaller community would be a democratic deficit, for instance. It is possible that under-representation in leadership positions will take away attention from nuanced issues that small communities face when merged with larger communities.

Those sceptical of mergers contend that efficiency gains for the government may not necessarily mean efficiency gains for ordinary people dependent on local government offices to access public services. Travel time could become greater for some communities already burdened by deprivations based on distance.

Another important question is while road and telecommunications services have improved, has the productivity of local government grown to be able to do more (e.g. changing complexity of local governance issues) or serve more (e.g. change in population size, geographic size)?

With greater mobility, the population base in a gewog is changing not only in numbers but in diversity. For example, gewogs increasingly have both rural and urban characteristics, and those on the periphery of large towns also have rapidly growing numbers of people not registered in the gewog but who require the same services. People's expectations of speed and quality of services are becoming more demanding as well.

Some comments even go as far as to say that mergers contradict the principles of decentralisation and citizen empowerment. Article 22 of the Constitution says 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." These roles need competencies beyond the more traditional role of service delivery.

What Could be Key Determinants?

While the concept of mergers has dominated discussions, this is part of a rationalisation plan. Rationalisation, by definition, must be a larger process that seeks to identify and mitigate or overcome structural and systemic weaknesses affecting local government within Bhutan's overall macro governance structure.

Redrawing gewog boundaries on the basis of population, financial viability, service delivery, geographic sizes, economic potentials, and for more efficient redistribution of resources, are all valid. However, it must be recognised as more than a technical exercise. While there is no generally accepted formula, some determinants derived from current discussions in Bhutan can be observed.

One determinant should be the essential functions of local government: What is the primary purpose of local government in Bhutan?

Is it for efficient delivery of local services? Is it to promote democratic governance, representation, and citizen engagement? Where civil society structures are not strong, the role of local government in promoting local democracy and facilitating the genuine engagement of women and youth in the democratic process becomes crucial.

Linked to this is the question of whether what is considered an appropriate number of local governments for efficient service delivery would look different from the appropriate number needed to promote local democracy. Or, is the primary role of local government the advancement of economic development and employment creation?

In 2012, the National Council believed that about 11 new gewogs were needed to accelerate socio-economic development and alleviate poverty in some dzongkhags. Maintaining smaller gewogs was seen as part of a wider strategy to tackle poverty. In the Local Government Act of Bhutan 2009, the number of tshogpas have been determined to be five (minimum) and eight (maximum). A rationale must, therefore, already exist to determine a ratio between the number of electors to the number of electorates.

There are also outlier gewogs which present special purposes for local government. For example, is the purpose of local government to provide public services and support for important population groups, however small, along international borders? Such outlier considerations must go beyond cost efficiency questions.

Reducing administration costs and increasing efficiency is an important determinant. Improved connectivity and greater use of technology are enabling factors. In addition, mergers could broaden the revenue base, with positive implications for fiscal decentralisation.

Mergers would also help to increase competencies by allowing allocation of adequate human and financial resources per gewog. When assessing competencies, however, the broader framework within which local governments function is important. Competencies of local government is much more than a question of whether a gup should have a bachelor's degree. For example, the elected depend on a centrally organised human resource structure to provide it with the professional and technical staff needed to realise its objectives.

There are also practical considerations. Communities, irrespective of their geographic or population size, burdened by remoteness or poverty, often have greater needs and place greater demands on local government and must feature as a determinant in decisions on gewogs merging.

Unmeasurable factors such as historical, cultural and social distinctiveness or similarities must not be ignored. Perhaps not as the main pivot around which local governments are organised, but at the very least, it should be recognised during consultation processes. Care must be taken to not decrease or worsen representation opportunities for small communities, whether in village meetings or as leaders in local government. In this sense, chiwog boundaries will also matter, as each chiwog elects a representative to the gewog tshogde.