

The Experience of a Gewog Administration Officer (GAO)

Damcho

The Change

The situation of a gewog administration (Local government) changed dramatically after His Majesty the King reminded the gups in October, 2016, that local government (LG) is not the lowest level of government, as it is sometimes misconceived, but it is the closest level of government to the people. His Majesty awarded kabney (scarf) to all the gups and patang (ceremonial sword) to dzongkhag thrizins (district chairperson), giving LG another image lift.

In the past, Bhutanese people were not familiar with rules, regulations and Acts. Today, they know about the regulatory environment through media and social media. At the same time, dealing with the public is also more challenging. This has both advantages and disadvantages, because that awareness can be used for the benefit of the community or to create disharmony. People normally do not attend meetings about the construction of farm roads, but they will always raise problems at the time of construction, or after the work is completed.

Community participation has also improved, with more awareness and engagement in zomdu meetings, and monitoring developmental activities like farm roads and irrigation projects. Now people are more concerned about developmental activities taking place within their community, and getting involved in solving the issues at chiwog and gewog levels, with the support of gewog administration. They know their responsibilities for the gewog budget, which in the past was left solely to those working in the gewog administration.

In the past, people would propose building farm roads, but would not be involved until the gewog administration handed the roads to the community. Now they take part in meetings from the start of the work to the handing/taking over. Most people are now aware of the approved budget and activities for a particular financial year. The gewog administration posts

every activity and budget on a gewog Facebook page and on social media like Wechat and gewog notice board.

During my initial appointment in 2007, most villages and chiwogs were not connected by roads, water, irrigation and electricity facilities. Now, nearly all villages have access to all these facilities, making the life of rural people more comfortable, and improving their living standard. This has been made possible by the process of decentralisation and the transfer of power to the LG, which can plan activities based on the priorities of people.

Progress in Livestock and Agriculture

With a flexible budget, gewogs can plan and prioritise without fully depending on draft plans, with public consultation at the gewog level. This is unlike the past, where we had to work according to draft plans, and changes had to be routed through Dzongkhag and ministries.

Workload drastically increased after decentralisation, along with authority and risks, but we are also learning more. Service delivery is much faster these days because we can make decisions in the gewog, unlike in the past, where everything had to be routed through the dzongkhag administrations and ministries.

Waste management and toilet facilities have also improved tremendously with more awareness of contagious diseases.

Service delivery has improved with information shared through social apps like WeChat, Whatsapp, and Facebook groups. Earlier, chiwog tshogpa (unit of county committee) and chipons had to visit every household personally, making it more time-consuming, less informative and with poorer coverage. Social media have been useful in reaching even people in outlying areas.

Qualifications and Capacity

Many people were in doubt at the time of decentralisation, thinking that illiterate gups and local leaders would face major problems with the lack of capacity and manpower in the gewogs. But financial rules, regulations and

Acts, orientations and support from civil servants at the gewog level have helped avoid and deal with many problems.

There is capacity building, transparency, ownership, and sense of responsibility in the gewogs, but more capacity building is required for those working in gewogs. Only then will the gewog administration be in a position to think outside the box and change their working style.

Qualification requirements are a must for local leaders. With modernisation, most of the work is done online with digital systems like APA (Annual Performance Agreement), EGP (Electronic Government Procurement), EDATS (Electronic Daily Allowance and Travel System), Zoom meetings and others.

People also understand the importance of local leaders, and they now prefer someone who can contribute to the gewog because everything has to be routed through the gewog. It is likely that, in the coming years, more qualified people will contest in elections.

Local governments not only discuss plan activities but also focus on rules, regulations, and dzongkhag and gewog by-laws. Now evidence and research-based decisions are made, not like in the past, when the decisions of *goshey nenshey* (the one who can understand more and speak confidently, especially former LG members, chimi, and civil servants staying in the village) were what mattered.

Youth and Women

In the recent past and gewogs were inhabited by the less educated and youth, and most houses were empty, making it difficult for the gewog administration to implement developmental activities. Now, some educated people, especially youth who left school, remain in the gewogs, helping their parents; even retired civil servants are returning to villages and taking up farming.

There were fewer women taking part in chiwog and gewog zomdus (village and county meetings) in 2007. With awareness and sensitisation, more women are participating today and even contesting for local leadership posts. The public are also gradually acknowledging the importance of having women leaders, be it in local government or national Parliament.

Earlier, there was not much competition in LG elections but, with more importance given to LG and with an increase in the salary, authority, and even a vehicle quota, elections to LG posts have become more competitive.

Elections in the initial stages led to community division and problems, even among family members, who were divided by parties like People's Democratic Party (PDP), Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) and Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT). Now, with more elections taking place and with more awareness, there are fewer problems related to elections.

Earlier, there were issues/problems between gups and Gewog Administration Officers (GAOs) in gewogs. The LG Act and other rules and regulations have helped resolve many problems. With more responsibilities after decentralisation, and the importance given to GAOs, working relations between GAOs and gups have improved, and this has helped in planning activities and service delivery.

Gewogs did not have proper offices. Some were temporary sheds, with the weather making it inconvenient for staff, and destroying documents. Now every gewog has an office with amenities. This is a major improvement from earlier times when the gup's office had to borrow furniture and different items needed for ceremonies.

It was also difficult to find housing, and many civil servants faced problems. Officials had to live in the gewog office. Now, with development, houses are available in gewogs.

I feel proud and privileged to have had an opportunity to start my carrier at the grassroot level, discovering the ground reality and problems of the communities by visiting every nook and corner of five gewogs under three dzongkhags (Chhukha, Tsirang and presently at Thimphu). When I look back, I feel satisfied with what I have done and how I have helped the farmers in my small ways.