

## Towards an Effective, Efficient, and Engaged Thimphu *Thromde*

*Karma Wangchuk*

Thimphu is a city with great potential. As the nation's capital, it is the biggest urban centre in Bhutan, home to almost one fifth of our national population. Proper management of Thimphu's rapid growth will decide the type of city our children will inherit in the future. Thimphu has to respond to the needs of the old and the young to allow enterprise to thrive and grow, and be a city where infrastructure is efficient and reliable, policies are predictable, and decision-making is based on consensus and transparency. Yet the sad reality is Thimphu *thromde* (municipality) has not been able to harness the city's great potential. We have a *thromde* that does not know the way, go the way, or show the way. The *thromde* has not been able to get even the basics right. Take, for instance, the flooded streets every monsoon -- although the city is blessed with steep topography -- or the lack of adequate potable water despite a raging river running right through the city. Moreover, the hills surrounding the city are home to numerous perennial lakes. Our roads are dug, and re-dug every year, to lay one infrastructure or another, in an endless, wasteful, uncoordinated cycle. Along the backstreets, even rudimentary urban amenities like drains and sidewalks are absent. In short, Thimphu is rapidly turning into a typical Third World city right before our eyes.

Current laws do not help the *Thrompon* (Mayor) make any meaningful changes in the *thromde*. Transformative change will not be possible if two structural issues within the *thromde* are not resolved. Firstly, the elected *Thrompon* has no authority to hire or fire any *thromde* staff. In turn, the lethargy and inertia of the bureaucratic staff, whose jobs are protected by the RCSC, mean the elected leader's vision is not effectively translated into action on the ground, since the *Thrompon* is totally hamstrung by not being able to fire non-performing staff. Secondly, the *thromde* is entirely dependent on government handouts for any meaningful capital investments and maintenance. Under this process, a pothole that could be fixed within minutes, would have turned into a crater by the time the central government's funding is approved.

Our Constitution mandates that local government is staffed with civil servants directly governed by the RCSC. Relegating the status of the *thromde* to that of a gewog is a primary reason why the *thromde* can never be effective. The complexity of managing a city like Thimphu is in an entirely different league from that of managing a gewog in a remote corner of Bhutan. The population difference itself is several times in magnitude. However, existing laws treat Thimphu *thromde* the same as any local government, thereby allowing the central government to straight-jacket the *thromde* by controlling both its staffing and finances.

The strategy to get our city functioning effectively is to give the city autonomy in staff recruitment and financing. Thimphu has the highest real estate value in the country. The market value of prime real estate along its main streets is comparable to any big city in the world. However, Thimphu landowners pay next to nothing in property taxes. A typical commercial land owner pays Nu. 0.50 per sq ft in land tax, while a typical residential land owner pays Nu. 0.25 per sq ft.

A typical commercial land has at its lower end, a market value of Nu. 15,000 per sq ft, and a typical residential land has a minimum market value of Nu. 2,500 per sq ft. Therefore, a typical commercial landlord only pays 0.000033 percent of the property value in tax, while the residential landlord pays 0.0001 percent. In such a scenario, how can the municipal authority get the necessary funds to maintain the city? The landowners would be willing to pay higher property taxes, since these amounts would be deductible at the time of filing their income taxes. Moreover, by paying more taxes, residents could demand better services from the municipality.

If the municipal authorities had better access to predictable funds (eg. property taxes), they would be in a much better position to plan and coordinate municipal investments. The *thromde's* GIS system would have to be fully updated every year, so at the click of a button, the *thromde* should know in real time the number of apartments, shops and land areas occupied for commercial, residential, institutional and recreational use.

Once autonomy is achieved, the *thromde* should fire all current staff and re-hire them on contract. Workers should be made accountable to elected officials. Non-performing employees should be dismissed and the highly

productive well paid, removing the existing bureaucratic inertia and complacency. Elected officials would be thus enabled to fulfil the mandate of the electorate.

Currently, decision-making within the *thromde* is opaque. To enhance transparency in the process, *Thromde Tshogdu* meetings can be held once a week and telecast live on the local cable operators' channel so that residents can watch the proceedings at home, keeping a close eye on their elected officials' participation in the decision-making process.

Much of the physical work can be outsourced. The *thromde* should be concerned with just policy-making, designing the infrastructure to the required high standard, and monitoring the construction to ensure compliance with the approved design. Thousands of jobs could be created. For instance, the *thromde* design team could design an effective drainage network, to ensure that all water runs into a nearby drain. These smaller drains would then discharge water into a larger secondary drain, which will eventually run into an even bigger primary drain. Drain outlets should be adequately large and numerous, so that evacuation of water is almost immediate.

Several contractors could do the job in different parts of the city. Most of the work can be done at night, between 10 pm and 6 am, so that roads can be closed to traffic. The primary drains could connect to a shallow holding pond with a weir system to catch garbage, like plastic bottles, before draining into the river. A recycling group can salvage the waste and take stewardship of the holding ponds.

The GIS Unit could divide the drainage network into watershed areas, each managed by a private drain-cleaning group. Where needed, secondary drainage could be created between two adjacent private properties via easement right of way, thereby also creating more shortcut footpaths for pedestrians. Every household located on that particular watershed will pay a monthly drain-cleaning fee, depending on the number of units in their building, which then goes to a private drain-cleaning contractor.

The municipal inspector will simply ride an electric bike mounted with a GoPro camera to monitor that the cleaning groups are doing their job as per the contract. Not only will the inspector be able to monitor a large area

within a limited time, but this method would ensure that the drains never get clogged, as maintenance would be year-round, and not after the fact, as is the practice now.

This means that neighbourhood residents will no longer have to clean their own surroundings in order to celebrate one occasion or another, or whenever someone important is about to visit the city. The cleaning of the city should not be an eyewash, but an everyday event. The building owner will ensure that the respective tenants are billed their share of the cost of keeping the neighbourhood drains clean. Each building owner would be required to keep sufficient garbage bins, proportionate to the number of apartments in the building. Garbage should be collected from the curb side at night, and not during prime rush hour as is the practice now.

Pedestrian walkways will be integrated along with the primary drains, since these drains will run almost perpendicular to the contours, and therefore offer many shortcuts for pedestrians. These areas will be well-lit at night, with adequate safety features like handrails and CCTV coverage. These shortcuts will seamlessly connect to roadside walkways, which will be expanded to at least six feet wide, so that at least four people can easily pass one another.

Sidewalks will be poured concrete with broom finish to facilitate ease of construction. The height of all sidewalks will be a standard six inches so that car doors do not get jammed. Moreover, where the curbs meet a road crossing, the sidewalk will be ramped to allow wheel-chair access. Where streets are narrow, the drains will be constructed directly below the sidewalk. The openings into the drains will be kept wide and built along the curbs. All urban roads will have sidewalks.

Sidewalks that connect important landmarks will have special symbols posted along the way, so that the user will be guided at all times. So, we could have a sidewalk that goes from the city centre to Changangkha Lhakhang, or from Olakha to Simtokha Dzong, or even from Simtokha Dzong to Changangkha Lhakhang, along the riverside. Street name signs have to be bilingual, legible, visible and to international standard in terms of letter size and font.

It is evident from the number of people taking to the streets in the mornings and evenings to walk, jog, and undertake other exercise, that the more facilities we can provide in the form of safe, wide and scenic sidewalks, the more people will use them. A healthy population would help the national exchequer save money by not having to combat rising lifestyle diseases.

It is estimated that close to 40 percent of treated water is lost between the reservoir and the end user, a colossal loss and highly unacceptable. Apart from an ageing pipeline, another problem may be defective water meters. It should be mandatory to replace the water meter every five years, and penalties should be severe for illegal water connections (i.e not metered).

Moreover, the waterline network should be mapped using GIS so that the city office is not left at the mercy of the water linesman who currently knows where the water mains and connections are located. This is one reason the water linesman can never be transferred, as the city office as an institution does not know where the water mains are located.

Adequate sources should be tapped to supplement water so that city residents would be able to enjoy 24/7 water supply since we have more than enough water sources. The goal should be to ensure that we can drink the water right out of the tap, and that we have enough water pressure for a six-storeyed building to get water directly. By eliminating the need to build an additional slab under the roof to accommodate overhead plastic water tanks, and underground water reservoirs with pumps, we would save hundreds of millions of ngultrums.

Wherever possible, unused public urban spaces have to be captured for mini parks, such as small spaces left over near a road junction or crossing, or between two private plots. These mini parks could feature some benches, a rock garden, sculpture, and general landscaping to make the area attractive, so that they do not become dumping grounds for household garbage. Sponsors could be solicited to furnish park benches, with their names displayed on the benches.

Every new construction could be required to buy 10 ornamental saplings to green the city. Better still, parents could celebrate their children's birthdays by donating to buy ten ornamental saplings to be planted in the city, in

their children's names. The city could choose 20 ornamental trees, 10 shrubs, and 5 groundcovers that can be easily grown in their nurseries and planted throughout the city, which in no time would be transformed into a green oasis.

Among the city's most under-utilised assets are school playgrounds, which children would like to use even during weekends, holidays and after school hours. Currently, schools do not allow anyone to use their playgrounds after school hours. The school management is attempting to protect their property against vandalism and other anti-social activities. But if the city authority installs CCTV cameras to monitor the grounds, and LED lighting to facilitate night use, many youths would be kept engaged in playing sports and away from deviant activities.

Empty classrooms could also be used to conduct extra classes after hours, either free or for hire. This would keep our youths engaged, both physically and mentally. During times of disasters, these school playgrounds could be used as evacuation grounds for medical services, shelter, and food.

All city buses should be made to ply the roads from 6am to midnight on a regular schedule. The routes would consist of a trunk line going up and down the valley, and secondary routes going across the valley. Pre-paid Smart Cards should be introduced so that the fare is automatically deducted after tapping on the fare meter in the bus. Fares paid through Smart Card should enjoy a 50 percent discount in order to encourage more users. This would reduce fare evasion, currently a major issue with cash fares. There should be no free parking anywhere on the public streets of Thimphu. Revenue generated from parking fees would be used to subsidise public transport and the creation of facilities.

At critical junctions, automated traffic signals should be introduced. This was less urgent in the early days, when we had a national automobile population of just over 5000. However, the scenario is very different today, with the national automobile number crossing 100,000, an increase of more than 20-fold. Already, crazy ideas like installing overhead crossings on narrow streets are being implemented. A simple traffic light will solve a lot of issues and save the city money by not having to build unnecessary infrastructure or spend on enforcement. Currently, a traffic policeman is stationed at every pedestrian crossing in the city. They can easily be replaced by automation, freeing up police for on the beat crime deterrence.

The city sorely lacks affordable housing. Even the *thromde* house their daily workers in shanties, which is actually against the law. Some of these shanty settlements are more than a couple of decades old. While there are government-owned and rent regulated housing for government employees, housing for private employees are left at the mercy of the market. However, a win-win solution could be introduced. Presently, residential areas are permitted to have a plot coverage of not more than 40-45 percent, which means a significant area is left open. However, if we allow the owners a 60 percent coverage, in return for them providing a certain number of units in the affordable category, it would have the positive impact of increasing affordable housing stock in the city. Moreover, the affordable housing stock would be distributed throughout the city, thereby minimising the stigma associated with living in a poor neighbourhood.

Nobody wants someone else's garbage in one's backyard, but the current system of transporting most of the city's sewer to Babesa for treatment is unfair for the residents of that neighbourhood. Technologies exist where sewerage can be treated within the neighbourhood that generates the waste. Compact and mechanised sewerage treatment plants, like the ones we have for the ministerial enclave, can be provided throughout Thimphu. The neighbourhoods connected to that particular network would be responsible for the maintenance and functioning of that particular sewerage treatment plant, by levying fees. This would prevent the unpleasant spectacle of bubbling up of raw sewage on our main streets during monsoons. In theory, each local plan area could be connected to its own sewerage system.

As residents of this city with a huge potential, we should all be saluting the efforts made by street vendors trying to make an honest living. Instead of constantly harassing them, the *thromde* should help by facilitating their activities -- providing communal taps, toilets, waste receptacle bins, timely waste collection, licensing, etc. Perhaps a certain street can be closed off at night for the vendors' use. By morning, when the rest of the city wakes up, the streets could be already cleaned and ready for business. On weekends, a flea market could be set up by closing off one street, so that a vibrant market could be established for second-hand clothing and household goods.

Within the *thromde* office there should be established a commercial for-profit unit called the Thimphu Redevelopment Authority, which could provide all the necessary designs for new buildings for a reasonable fee. The

advantage for customers would be a shorter design and approval process. The approved design would come with quantity estimates, 3D renderings, and a physical model. In this way, the *thromde* would be able to control the aesthetics and look of new buildings. Earnings from these activities could be ploughed back to research new building materials and technologies and attract great design talents to the *thromde* office.

Thimphu still has the potential to be a great city. However, this potential is being eroded every day through mismanagement, apathy, and the sheer incompetence of the people tasked with our city's care. If common-sense planning prevailed, if the residents' hopes and aspirations were considered in charting the city's future, if decision-making was made more transparent and accountable, if waste and duplication were reduced, if more ways were explored to generate revenue by improving services, if accessibility, mobility, and safety were enhanced in public transport, if affordability was ensured in housing, if self-employment and enterprise were celebrated even at the level of a vendor, the current slide of our city towards a Third World metropolis could be reversed. The true potential of a great capital city could be realised.