

Urban Conundrum -- Bhutanese Style

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Introduction

The mainstream and social media are filled with public outcries over the state of urban development, the loudest criticism being directed at Bhutan's largest cities, Thimphu and Phuntsholing, where more than half of the urban population live. Apparently, urbanisation has gone all wrong -- streets that defy logic, unsightly buildings, scarce public spaces, erratic municipal services, inadequate infrastructure and impatient residents.

This is ironic, as the potential and perils of rapid urbanisation were recognised over a generation ago, and efforts and resources were invested to capitalise on the former and arrest the latter. The aim of this article, therefore, is to reflect on and consider if the urban phenomenon is anathema to Bhutan's development approach and what should we do differently, going forward. The intent is not to dwell on past practices but to seek to learn from our experiences and to pave the way forward.

Urban Planning in Bhutan

Globally, cities are promoted as engines of economic growth and indeed, the pulse of national economies is driven by the productivity of their primary cities. They are established either in places of thriving or anticipated economic activity. However, development of towns in Bhutan initially resulted from the establishment of administrative centres, as seen from the location of older towns around *dzongkhag* and *dungkhag* head offices.

Planning urban development: Town planning in Bhutan began concurrently with the advent of modern development in 1961. After a convoluted evolution over five decades or so, it grew into the Department of Human Settlement (DHS) and the Department of Engineering Services of the Ministry of Works and Human Settlement (MoWHS). In the early days, the human settlement sector in Bhutan was accorded the national prominence it deserved, and comprehensive development plans were prepared for several towns across the country in the 1980s and 1990s.

However, over the decades, it became the function of a small technical unit. This has had an adverse implication on both its operational capability and public perception of its role, scope and impact.

Urban planning is now being increasingly recognised as an area of national concern, but the implementation is largely misguided. It is often misunderstood as being solely tasked with the preparation of spatial blueprints, the bulk of which constitutes plot subdivision. Once the plans are approved for implementation, they are taken over by engineering departments. Consequently, urban planners often work in silos, devoid of the support of other related and allied professionals.

There is also a disconnect between the agencies responsible for urban planning and development in terms of technical backstopping, capacity development and professional parenting. The Department formulates plans at the central level but there is no corresponding implementing unit in the field. All projects are treated as engineering activities for the purpose of their implementation. Although urban planning and civil engineering are complementary, they cannot substitute for each other.

Planning approaches: Urban planning has evolved over the years, in approach and content. In 2002, the Ministry undertook the comprehensive exercise of preparing the Thimphu Structure Plan, which was based on Bhutan's overall development approach, and has influenced most planning projects since. The other change has been in the land assembly mechanism. Conventionally, land for urban development was mobilised through compulsory acquisition of private land, especially where state land was not available. However, all land requirements for the new Thimphu Structure Plan, especially the extended urban areas, were assembled through land pooling schemes.

Land pooling has now become the preferred method, promoted by policy and enabled by legislation. It is considered a win-win situation for both government and landowners. It has eliminated the upfront government fund required for land acquisition, while allowing the original landowners to remain in the same locality and share in the benefits of urban development. However, it also has disadvantages. Land for the infrastructure corridor and common areas is mobilised through the contribution of landowners, who then may be tempted to maximise their returns to make up for the contributed land.

Planning process: Town planning may have started as a central government affair, but it, too, evolved in tandem with the government's policy initiatives on decentralisation and citizen participation in developmental decision-making. Consequently, establishments of new towns were proposed through the respective communities and local government machinery. Plans submitted for approval required the endorsement of local communities before they could be approved for implementation.

However, in the absence of a specific planning legislation, urban planning and public consultation processes could not be entirely inclusive. It is based on the prevailing practice, wherein only registered residents are invited to meetings and many individuals who do not own properties in a town are left out of the planning process. This has many potential disadvantages. Firstly, landowners make up only a small proportion of the town residents. Secondly, many landowners are absentee landlords and are not able to attend consultation meetings. This results in under-representation and a lack of input from the larger public, leading to issues of ownership of the plan and the development interventions it proposes.

The Crossroads

Traditionally, Bhutan has been an agrarian society that lived off the farm sustainably and in harmony with its environment. Its geography, natural environment, culture and spirituality shaped a unique way of life. However, the country is now transforming -- physically, economically and demographically. Urbanisation is probably the biggest effect and agent of this change and the transition from rural to urban is unprecedented and rapid. In 1999, Bhutan's urban population was estimated at just 15 percent. Today two-fifths of the population live in urban areas, and in less than a generation from now, every other Bhutanese will be an urban resident. Although the economic dividends of this transformation are uncertain, its adverse impact on the socio-cultural make-up is undeniable.

Between 2005 and 2017, the number of households in Bhutan jumped from 126,115 to 163,001, while the average household size was reduced from 4.6 to 3.9, indicating a nuclearisation of Bhutanese families, which is contradictory to the traditional Bhutanese culture of extended families. However, a direct impact of this increase is the rising demand for housing and infrastructure services. Homeownership is also low in urban areas,

with only 19 percent of urban households living in owner-occupied units, compared to 63.6 percent in rented housing. But nothing compares to the public dissatisfaction with urban infrastructure services. This, in a way, is puzzling, considering that urban development plans are generally praised for the coverage and depth of their contents, both by experts and the general public.

Perhaps this dichotomy results from the discord between urban planning and implementation on one hand, and expectation from and commitment to the plan, on the other. This gap can only be bridged by a combination of technical, administrative and social interventions.

Setting the legal framework: Urban planning and development are generally possible only when facilitated by an enabling Act. Legal backing is necessary because urban planning limits some of the rights and privileges to which citizens are entitled. But planning authority is exercised for the common good and it relies on the concept of police power – “the inherent power of a government to exercise reasonable control over persons and property within its jurisdiction in the interest of the general security, health, safety, morals, and welfare, except where legally prohibited” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). In this light, it is a remarkable achievement that Bhutan has been managing its urban development even in the absence of supporting legislation. On the flipside, it could also have contributed to the current state of urban centres and their affairs.

Therefore, it is critical to establish an enabling Act to set the framework for spatial planning and development. It must essentially make references to relevant existing legislations, with a focus on conflicting and duplicating provisions, and clarify the powers and functions for various agencies responsible for urban planning, its procedures and instruments.

Restructuring central departments: At the broader government level, departments under the Ministry of Information and Communications (MoIC) and MoWHS could be restructured to rectify the inefficiencies resulting from their historical associations. The Road Safety and Transport Authority has practical and operational association with the Department of Roads and belongs more with the MoWHS than MoIC. Its association with the latter is archaic in that today, communication is understood more in the sense of information technology than of transportation.

The other reform is to consider placing the DHS with the National Land Commission Secretariat. This arrangement would build on the provision of the Land Act, which mandates the Secretariat to carry out national land use planning and to ensure judicious use of scarce land resources. In this scenario, a new Department of Housing could be established in the MoWHS to cater to emerging housing issues, especially in urban areas.

Decentralised urban planning: The Local Government (LG) Act empowers the *dzongkhags* and *thromdes* to carry out physical planning and development of urban areas within their jurisdictions. The MoWHS and the DHS are expected to provide the overall development policies and monitor the performance of local governments. Each *thromde* and *dzongkhag* has its own technical teams, and urban planners and architects are also posted in some larger *dzongkhags*. While this arrangement suits the engineering sectors well, there are challenges for urban planning, as it requires the expertise and input of many related professions. In most cases, the *dzongkhags* end up relying on the Department. This creates a conflict of interest for the Department, as it then becomes both the regulating and the implementing agency. Projects are also delayed as the Department has to attend to competing requests from various *dzongkhags*.

Therefore, it will be prudent to consolidate the existing manpower that is thinly spread, into regional urban planning and development offices. These offices will cater to a number of *dzongkhags* that are grouped based on their proximity, scope for regionally integrated development and need-based resource sharing. This arrangement will also enable local governments to share expertise in urban and regional planning, housing, demography and geography, architecture and civil engineering, transportation planning, investment planning and urban economics, social and community planning, and surveying. These would be otherwise under-utilised if they were deployed in any one *dzongkhag*.

Thromde's functions, powers and reporting requirements: In 2009, when the LG Act 2007 was amended, the *Thromde Act 2007* was subsumed by it. Most provisions of the latter Act were incorporated, but there continue to be challenges resulting from the complexities of municipal affairs and ambiguity in functions, co-ordination and reporting arrangements. Although there is a general understanding that the *thromdes* will report to the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs for their overall governance

and management, and to the MoWHS for technical matters, practical difficulties remain. It is important to separate the *thromde* administration, urban management and the technical functions. Enactment of a Planning Act will help to bring clarity to these issues as well.

Resource mobilisation and equity: Land pooling has become the favoured land assembly mechanism, but its continued usage in its current form will have issues of equity. Planning benefits are shared unequally between the landowners and other urban residents, and among different regions where land values differ substantially, as the contribution ratios are based on land areas and not values. Furthermore, as land contribution is not compensated, there are attempts to, firstly, bring down the contribution ratio, compromising the quality and adequacy of public amenities and, secondly, maximise the built-up area, often resulting in unauthorised constructions. Therefore, it is recommended that contributing landowners be compensated at fair market value to start with.

Planning instruments: Currently, development control regulations form the sole tool to enforce plan implementation. It must be complemented by other planning instruments, such as fiscal incentives, taxation and strategic policy interventions, for economics is as much a part of urban management as the built environment. The current practice of disconnecting essential services, as a measure to discipline landowners who deviate from approved drawings, must be discontinued immediately and replaced with appropriate fines and penalties. It not only deprives access to basic services, with potential risks to public health, safety and convenience, but it penalises only the innocent tenants, while the defaulting owners often reside elsewhere.

Policy and sectoral co-ordination: A city is as much a public domain and shared space as it is a hub for individual endeavours. City building involves the stakes of individuals and groups, and the mandates of various agencies, ranging from environment, culture and heritage to public health and safety, trade and commerce, housing, recreation and leisure and waste management, etc. Undertaking these activities in isolation often results in conflict and duplication, rather than complementing and supplementing one another. Therefore, it is critical to ensure that there is a setting and acceptance of common priorities, harmonisation of programmes, and co-ordinated implementation of projects to ensure optimal use of resources.

Community involvement and contribution: As in most other aspects of governance, municipal affairs are considered a function of the government or that of the *thromdes*. The role of the private sector has been limited to their participation in a few consultative meetings, to which only registered landowners are invited. Such a narrow approach excludes many urban residents from urban planning and development processes. This anomaly must be rectified to promote community ownership of the local plans.

The importance of public participation in urban planning is well-documented, but what is important is community engagement, not just participation. In this context, the Japanese approach of *machi-zukuri*, where local residents work with their government for the development of their own community, would complement our own concept of *khimtshang-dangrey* (neighbourliness). Furthermore, ownership of projects and their chances of success are proven to be more in localities where there is a higher level of social capital, which grows only when the members are given opportunities for interaction.

One way to encourage interaction is to implement the concept of “neighbourhood nodes” that urban development plans already provide for. This spatial arrangement ensures that a household can access most of the services it requires within its own locality, while also facilitating chance encounters amongst community members. Then all entities offering public services, whether public, corporate or private, must be mandated to locate their services within the designated nodes. This would also help during emergency situations like the lockdown imposed by the Coronavirus, both for efficiency of service delivery and community organisation.

Another arrangement would be to follow the concept of school districts aligned with the *Thromde Demkhong* boundaries. Children in a locality must then be required to enroll in schools nearest to their places of residence. This would have the benefits of increased interaction among children and their parents, thereby building the social capital of a neighbourhood, reducing travel time and traffic congestion on account of dropping and picking up children from schools, and producing a consistent quality and standard of education across schools. This will also help to avoid social segregation based on income and economic status.

Thirdly, one of the main principles of governance is decentralisation and devolution of power to local governments, to enable direct participation of the people in developmental activities. However, the last *thromde* elections in 2016 demonstrated massive under-representation. Of the 160,676 people residing in the four *thromdes* of Thimphu, Phuntsholing, Gelephu and Samdrup Jongkhar, only 7.4 percent (11,845) were eligible to vote, of which only 2.3 percent (3,769) actually voted. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that efforts to enhance voter registration and voter turnout are sustained. This will not only help to ensure proper representation but also hold elected leaders accountable.

Conclusion

A city has diverse stakeholders and actors but it belongs to every resident -- past, present and future. In a city, conflict of interests and clash of priorities are natural, but it is through dialogue and consensus that it moves forward. A city thrives when there is a shared sense of community, and every resident is committed to it. So far, we have invested in technical solutions and hard engineering, which of course must be sustained. But this is only half the effort. We must now place community at the centre of our planning efforts. In spatial terms, this means emphasis on shared spaces -- places that promote community vitality. This may seem like sub-optimal use of resources because the returns cannot be expressed in material terms, but it is a small price we can pay for our well-being, for contentment is the key to our happiness.

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