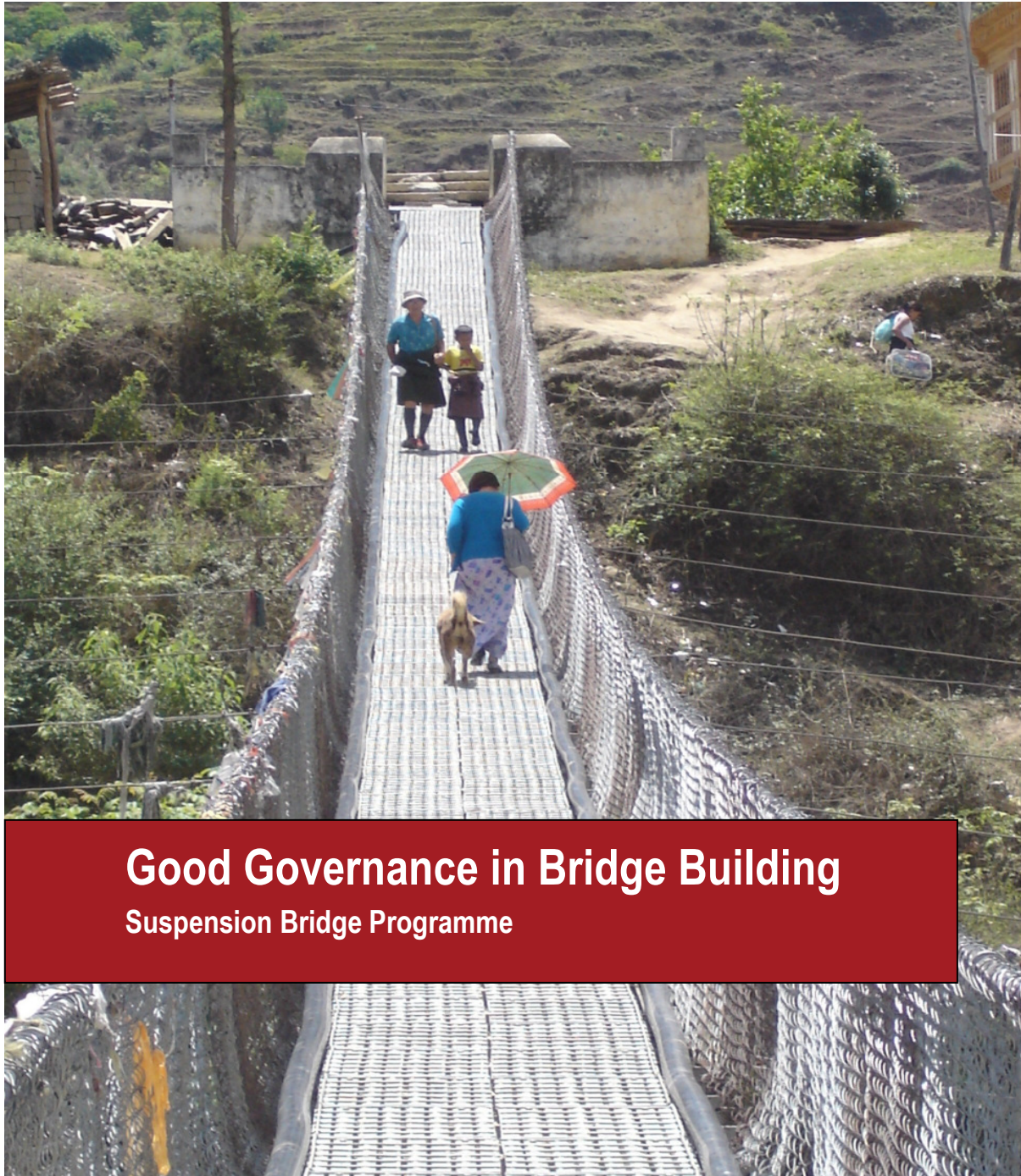




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BHUTAN



Good Governance in Bridge Building
Suspension Bridge Programme

Sharing Experiences from Bhutan – No.1

Katrin Rosenberg – August 2009

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This report on good governance and decentralization in the Suspension Bridge Programme is prepared based on the experiences of different stakeholders such as the local communities, the Suspension Bridge Section under MoWHS, the selected Dzongkhag Engineering Sections, and Helvetas Bhutan. It gives a comprehensive overview, how a cross-cutting theme such as good governance can be successfully incorporated in a sector project. The Suspension Bridge Programme has become a fully decentralized infrastructure development activity, not only concentrating on the product, but also on the process.

I would like to express my gratitude to the visited local communities, the Suspension Bridge Section as well as the various Dzongkhag Engineering Sections for sparing their time to participate in the interviews. It was an interesting mutual learning experience. Special thanks goes to the Suspension Bridge Section, especially Mr. Tshewang Dorji and Mr. Kunzang Namgyel, for perfectly organizing and accompanying me on the fieldtrip to collect the data. I am grateful to my colleagues in Helvetas Bhutan, who provided support, guidance and enriched the report with many valuable inputs – Dr. Walter Roder, Resident Coordinator, and Ms. Tashi Pem, Deputy Resident Coordinator. Last but not least, I would like to thank Mr. David Ermen for editing and proofreading this report.

About the Author

Katrin Rosenberg has successfully completed her Master of Arts in International Affairs and Governance at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland. Since September 2008, she is working towards a Master of Advanced Studies (MAS) in Development and Cooperation at NADEL, ETH Zurich, Switzerland. She does her project assignment, which is part of the MAS, with Helvetas Bhutan working in the area of good governance (February – November 2009).

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Abbreviations

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DES	Dzongkhag Engineering Section
DT	Dzongkhag Tshogdu
DUDES	Department of Urban Development and Engineering Services
FYP	Five-Year Plan
GNH	Gross National Happiness
GNHC	Gross National Happiness Commission
GT	Geog Tshogde
JICA	Japanese International Cooperation Agency
JE	Junior Engineers
LSTB	Long Span Trail Bridges
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MoWHS	Ministry of Works and Human Settlement
PlaMS	Planning and Monitoring System
ProDoc	Project Document
RAA	Royal Audit Authority
RDTC	Rural Development Training Centre
RGoB	Royal Government of Bhutan
RISD	Rural Infrastructure Services Division
SBP	Suspension Bridge Programme
SBS	Suspension Bridge Section
SSTB	Short Span Trail Bridges
UN	United Nations
UNCDF	United Nations Capital Development Fund

Glossary

Chathrim	Rules and Regulations
Dzongdag	Head of District
Dzongkhag	District
Geog	Block
Gup	Head of Block
Maangmi	Deputy Gup
Tshogpa	Village Representative
Zam	Bridge
Zhabto Lemi	Free labour contribution

Introduction

In recent years, good governance and decentralization became more and more relevant for donors. International Organisations such as the UN and the World Bank, bilateral donors (for example SDC) and NGOs like Helvetas, stressed their importance. Kofi Annan already stated in the late Nineties that governance is one of the most important factors in eradicating poverty. In line with this, promotion of good governance is one of the six strategic targets of the current and future Swiss development cooperation activities.¹ Initially, the focus was on local governance and on governments being accountable and transparent, as well as including the population in decision-making processes. As governance developed into a cross-cutting theme, it also has gained momentum in sector projects. Today, sectoral support is frequently considered as insufficient if it focuses barely on technical issues. Thus, a more holistic approach is required, one which considers not only the technical aspects but also the soft factors such as decision-making processes.

The Suspension Bridge Programme (SBP) as a sectoral project, is considered a very good entry point for community mobilization and promotion of governance because it combines a product (bridge, improved mobility) with a process (user orientation, community involvement). Better transport opportunities lead to empowerment of villagers such as schooling, employment, medical care, better income generation opportunities, etc. However, transport alone does not reduce poverty, but it is a crucial means to it. Because of the topography of Bhutan and the many remote villages, costs to build public infrastructure are comparatively high, especially if equal and equitable access for all has to be ensured. For this reason, several donors committed themselves to support the establishment of infrastructure. Furthermore, it can be linked nicely with the concepts of good governance and decentralization. This ensures that the product is anchored in the community and creates ownership. Helvetas and SDC have always emphasized a decentralized approach in their projects, because both these organizations believe that governance is crucial to help improving the framework conditions necessary for sustainable development and poverty reduction. Additionally, Switzerland has ample experiences and lessons to share since it has a rich and successful history of decentralization and of applying good governance values. The SBP as one of the oldest SDC/ Helvetas supported projects in Bhutan is considered to have contributed to good governance, especially in terms of participation. This study was therefore carried out to document the level of good governance principles used and to show how aspects of decentralization were included in the project.

The report first defines the central terms used and then briefly outlines the methodology. The second chapter gives an overview of the suspension bridge programme as well as of the specific Bhutanese good governance context. After that, the SBP is analyzed according to the six governance principles followed by a documentation of decentralization within the project. To conclude, recommendations are given with regards to aspects which need to be emphasized in an eventual additional phase of the project and how good practices developed could guide other projects.



Map of Bhutan (source: www.geology.com)

¹ SDC, 2008

Explanation of Terms

Good Governance

There are many definitions for the concept of governance. While development organisations and agencies generally agree on broad concepts, the detail interpretation may differ from organisation to organisation. The general definition established by UNDP gives an overview of the term:

“Governance is the system of values, policies and institutions by which a society manages its economic, political and social affairs through interaction within and among the state, civil society and private sector. It is the way a society organises itself to make and implement decisions – achieving mutual understanding, agreement and action. It comprises the mechanisms and processes for citizens and groups to articulate their interest, mediate their differences, and exercise their rights and obligations. It is the rules, institutions and practices that set limits and provide incentives for individuals, organisations and firms. Governance, including its social, political and economic dimensions, operates at every level of human enterprise, be it the household, village municipality, nation, region or globe.”²

In summary, the term governance includes the process of decision-making and the way in which decisions are implemented; or in other words: the way in which power is exercised and applied. Thus, governance focuses on actors (formal or informal) involved in these processes and the structures set up by them. Obviously, governments belong to these actors, but they are by far not the only ones; a lot of other institutions, organisations, and even individuals have influence on decision-making. Thus political parties, civil society organisations (CSOs), monarchs, religious leaders, etc. are addressed with the principles of good governance. Before elaborating on these principles, it has to be highlighted that governance applies at all levels. The global, national, regional, and local decision-makers can all be subsumed under the term.

Different organizations and countries derive principles from this definition. So does SDC, Helvetas and Bhutan. As the Bhutanese principles have to be seen in the context of Gross National Happiness (GNH) (compare chapter on the Bhutanese context of good governance), this report is based on the six principles, Helvetas is focusing on:

- *Participation*
This principle contains not only the representation of the people but also their active, free, effective and voluntary participation in decision-making processes, especially if directly affected.
- *Transparency*
Decisions ought to be taken in a transparent way, meaning informing people without being asked, i.e. through free and independent media, or at least providing all the necessary information when requested. The implementation or the follow-up must also be clearly communicated to the people.
- *Equity and Inclusiveness*
Equity and inclusiveness deal with the inclusion of all groups of a society, especially the most vulnerable. In addition, questions of equitable or equal sharing of benefits and burdens are raised, keeping in mind that eventually the process as well as the outcome has to be considered fair by the people.
- *Efficiency and Effectiveness*
Good governance means that processes and institutions produce results that meet the needs of the society while making the best use of the resources at their disposal. It refers to the extent to which expected results of a particular project have been achieved and also includes various aspects of sustainability.

² UNDP Strategy Note on Governance for Human Development, 2004

- *Accountability*
Who is accountable to whom varies depending on who is affected by a decision and by which institution it is taken. In general, accountability has to be ensured in two directions: to the next higher institution (according to a national audit system) and to the basis, mostly the people.
- *Rule of Law*
This principle focuses on fair legal frameworks that are enforced impartially. It also contains full protection of human rights, especially those of minorities. An independent judiciary is crucial.

Obviously, these principles do not stand alone, but are interlinked with each other and cannot be enforced independently. Accordingly, it is hard to hold decision-makers or office-bearers accountable if transparency is missing. Those principles go hand in hand, strengthening one of them, automatically leads to an improvement of the other one.

Decentralization

Some definitions of good governance include decentralization as one of the principles, but decentralization can also be seen as a prerequisite for governance. For the purpose of this report, decentralization is inherently included in all six principles. However, it shall also be looked at separately to emphasize the important role it plays in applying good governance principles.

Decentralization generally describes the transfer of competencies and responsibilities from the national level to lower levels of administration. Thorough decentralization consists of political, administrative and fiscal processes, and includes devolution of functions, human resources, and funds. The three aspects go hand in hand, but can be implemented according to different timetables. Fiscal decentralization often is the last power a central government agrees to devolve. Ideally, the central government never withdraws completely, but ensures a favourable framework or provides support. According to the principle of subsidiarity, only those responsibilities should be transferred, which regional or local bodies fulfil efficiently. There are always tasks which can be implemented more effectively by the central government. Local communities and CSOs should be involved in the decentralization process.

The aim of decentralization is basically to bring the government closer to the people. They should not have to go to the capital to get services but the services, relevant for the local contexts, will be brought to the people. This enhances accountability and transparency and puts a system of checks and balances (vertical separation of powers) in place, complementing the horizontal separation of powers (executive, legislative and judiciary). However, decentralization can also create or strengthen a local elite, capturing resources for their own interest. A special concern in an emerging democracy like Bhutan is the “decentralization of corruption”, with local governments far away from the central supervision. Thus, the challenge is to successfully implement decentralization, but preventing the possible negative effects.

Methodology

This report is based on information gained through a combination of desktop studies and interviews with different stakeholders. Project documents, backstopping missions, evaluation reports, etc. from the different phases provided rich sources of information. To triangulate and also to get first hand experiences, several interviews were carried out. The programme was analysed using the common principles of good governance. Therefore, appropriate indicators were developed before the interviews to frame the questionnaires. The Suspension Bridge Section (SBS) as the secondary stakeholder,³ including the current and the former Project Manager, were interviewed according to a semi-structured questionnaire, leaving space to delve deeper into interesting topics arising during the discussions. In a second step, the primary stakeholders, meaning the beneficiaries, were interviewed. Eight bridge sites from different project phases and their beneficiaries were visited in Wangdue Phodrang, Trongsa, Bumthang, Lhuentse, Mongar, and Tashi Yangzte Dzongkhags (compare appendix II for further information). The respondents were asked questions from a semi-structured questionnaire, which was adjusted according to the development of the discussions. The beneficiaries were interviewed in groups of three to twenty people depending on the time of day (sometimes the interview took place during daytime, sometimes in the evening). All groups included either a Tshogpa, Maangmi, or Gup. The use of group interviews including all present beneficiaries was considered appropriate, as the topic is not very sensitive and people are comfortable to share their opinions and experiences.

Apart from the direct beneficiaries, the Dzongkhag Engineering Section (DES), i.e. Dzongkhag Engineers as well as different Junior Engineers (JE) directly responsible for the respective bridge sites, were asked a set of questions to document where the opportunities and challenges can be found on the implementation side. By interviewing different stakeholders, it was ensured that governance aspects were covered at all different levels.



Discussions with the villagers close to Laptsha Zam construction site, Wangdue Phodrang

³ Secondary stakeholders are intermediaries such as implementing agencies, donor organisations, etc.

The Suspension Bridge Programme in Bhutan

This chapter provides a brief overview of the current situation in Bhutan, related to the topic of governance in the SBP. First of all, country specifics are outlined to better understand the overall situation regarding transport issues within Bhutan. After that, the history of the SBP is summarized and important details are highlighted. An explanation of the governance context in Bhutan concludes the chapter and points out the important steps in the Bhutanese decentralization process.

Country Specific Background

Bhutan is a land-locked country bordered by the Indian States of Arunachal Pradesh (in the east), West Bengal and Assam (in the south), Sikkim (in the west) and in the north by the Tibetan autonomous region of China. The total area of the country is 38,394 km². The terrain is mostly mountainous and the elevation varies from 100 meters above sea level in the south to more than 7,500 meters in the north corresponding with a wide range of climatic conditions. In the last years, Bhutan's economy has grown relatively stable, with annual growth rates of 7.2% in 2003 to 8.5% in 2006,⁴ underpinned by a high growth in investments. The latter can be mainly explained by the highly capital-intensive hydropower developments.



Suspension bridges provide easier access to markets

The total population of Bhutan amounts to 634.982 inhabitants⁵ with almost 70% living in rural areas. Twenty three percent of the Bhutanese live below the total poverty line⁶ with most of the poverty found in rural areas. One reason for this is the difficult access to numerous remote villages. In the Seventies, RGoB realized that improved access and mobility is key to poverty reduction. Social and economic development can only take place if people have access to schools, health facilities, markets, etc. Transport is thus an intermediary service, not able to reduce poverty alone, but a crucial

complementary for other programmes. The landscape is characterized by mountains and valleys with a high density of rivers and streams which imposes huge challenges on transportation and communication infrastructure to reach the scattered settlements. The main road network measures about 5.400km, consisting of the main west-east and north-south routes and connecting most of the major towns. An extensive network of farm roads and mule tracks complement the paved national highways. During the 10th Five Year Plan (FYP), another 1.000km of paved roads are to be constructed.

⁴ National Statistics Bureau, 2007a

⁵ National Statistics Bureau, 2005

⁶ Total poverty line is the minimum acceptable standard (Nu 1096.94 per capita and per month); it adds up the food poverty line (cost of goods attaining the pre-determined minimum food energy requirement of 2,124Kcal /capita/ day) and some non-food requirements (National Statistics Bureau, 2007b)

Administratively, Bhutan is divided into 20 Dzongkhags (districts) which are sub-divided into 205 Geogs (blocks) consisting of various villages and hamlets. Each Dzongkhag is headed by a Dzongdag (head of district) who is appointed by the central government and is responsible for civil administration and development activities. A popularly elected Gup is the head of a Geog. The local planning and implementing bodies, with also popularly elected members, are called the Dzongkhag Tshogdue (DT, district assembly) and the Geog Tshogde (GT, block assembly), which both have a broad range of political and administrative functions.

Programme Overview

In a mountainous country as Bhutan, bridges have always played an essential role for communication and trading. Thus, Bhutanese have been building bridges for centuries although most often in a makeshift way (i.e. log bridges), with limited durability and security. However, a few examples of historic iron chain bridges or cantilever bridges can be found throughout the country.

In 1971, the RGoB started a countrywide pedestrian bridge programme which was supported by the United Nations Capital Development Fund⁷ (UNCDF) from 1979 on until the Swiss involvement through the SDC/ Helvetas Suspension Bridge Programme (SBP) came into place in 1985. The Programme is divided into six project phases, each of them corresponding to the respective FYP.

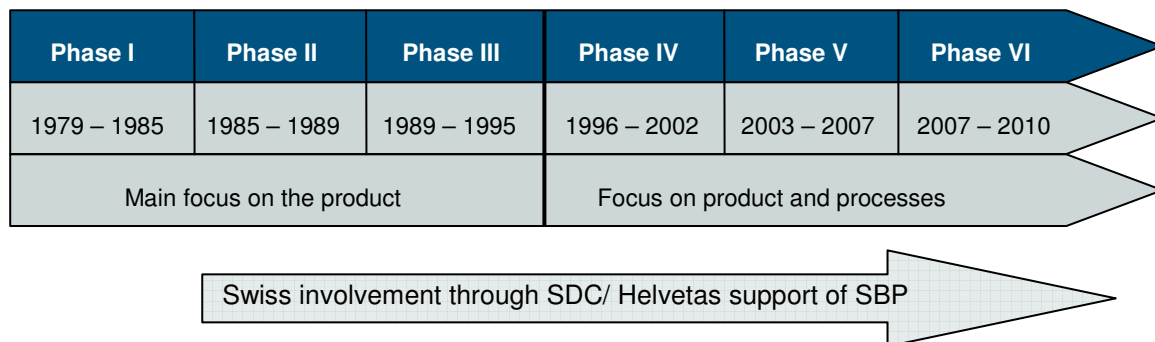


FIGURE 1: PHASES OF THE SUSPENSION BRIDGE PROGRAMME

The SBS as the implementing governmental agency was formed in 1979. After several institutional changes, the section experienced the latest transfer within the Ministry of Human Works and Settlement (MoWHS) in 2004 when it was shifted to the Rural Infrastructure Services Division (RISD) under the Department of Urban Development and Engineering Services (DUDES). At a first glance, this might seem contradictory – shifting a programme with the overall goal to connect rural areas to DUDES – but on closer examination one sees the rationale: under DUDES the SBS is authorized to issue directives to the DES, which are responsible for the construction of the bridges. A DES is headed by the Dzongkhag Engineer and his Deputy, several Junior Engineers (JE) and Assistant Engineers (AE) – the number differs according to the needs of the Dzongkhags.

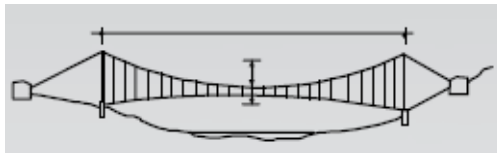
The Swiss involvement in the Bhutanese bridge building began in Phase II with the financial contributions of SDC (budgets ranging from 214 to 2.4 million CHF). Helvetas introduced the standard bridge design developed and applied successfully in Nepal and adapted it to the local circumstances. These Long Span Trail Bridges (LSTB) follow high standards of safety, durability and use, and are therefore quite costly and thus only justified for crossings of main trails or locations with strategic importance. The LSTB are either built as suspended⁸ or suspension⁹

⁷ With contributions from SDC

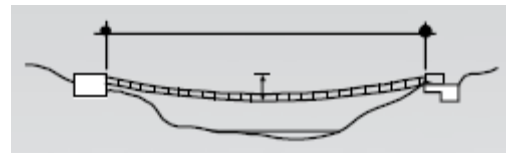
⁸ Can be constructed if there is enough freeboard, meaning more than 5 metres from flood level. The walkway of the bridge hangs on suspenders attached to the handrail cables. This type of bridge is simpler to construct.

⁹ Has to be constructed if there is not enough freeboard (less than 5 metres from flood level). The walkway hangs on vertical cables (suspenders) from the main cables stretched between towers built on the riverbanks.

bridges. Later, Helvetas Nepal developed a technology for Short Span Trail Bridges (SSTB), still meeting high quality standards, but easier and less costly to construct. SSTB were introduced in Bhutan in 2006.¹⁰



Suspension Bridge



Suspended Bridge

Since the beginning of trail bridge construction, 452 bridges have been constructed but only 349 are still existent (compare appendix I for a detailed map of Bhutan with Dzongkhag wise trail bridge distribution).¹¹ It is estimated that these bridges benefit over 70.000 households. The gap between existent and constructed is caused by bridges which have been washed away, or were replaced by motorable bridges, or by new suspension bridges. Furthermore, over 100 existing bridges have been rehabilitated. SDC and UNCDF together with the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) have jointly financed 250 bridges and over 50 rehabilitations.¹² Over the years, a lot of experience has been gained, resulting in gradual improvement and standardisation of all the procedures.

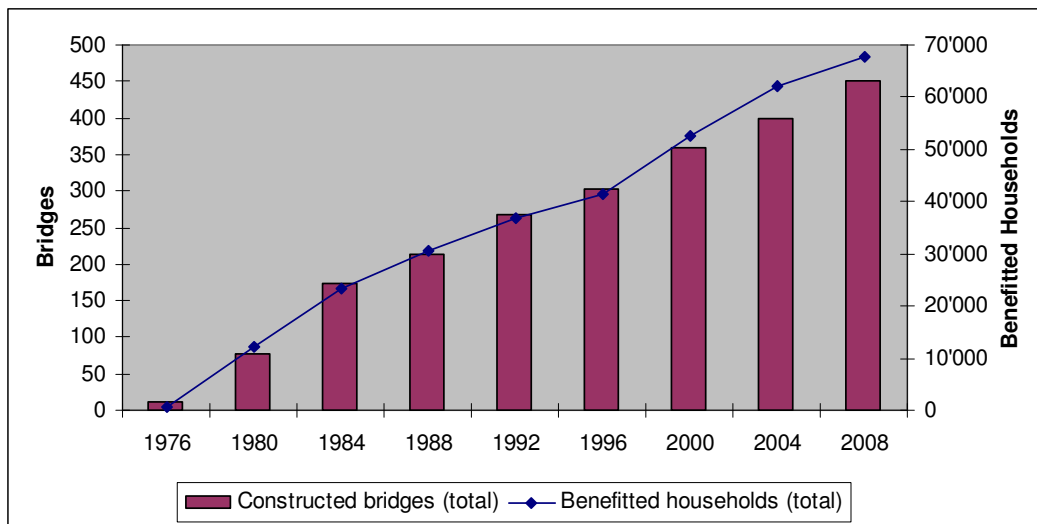


FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF BRIDGES CONSTRUCTED AND BENEFITTED HOUSEHOLDS¹³

In the earlier project phases (roughly from phase I to III, compare figure 1), the main focus was on the technical aspects of the bridge building. The product, i.e. the bridges and the technical improvements, stood in the foreground. From Phase IV on, the participation process of beneficiaries gradually moved into the centre of attention. Furthermore, local institutions were incorporated in the decision-making process, as soon as they were established. Obviously the technical components of the SBP have still played an important role and were improved continuously. However, SBP can be seen as a forerunner for decentralization, as it had already incorporated different elements of such a kind in the early project phases. With the decentralized decision-making processes, prioritisation of trail bridges has become more transparent and demand-oriented, as it starts at the village level and goes step by step up to the national level.

¹⁰ Helvetas, 2007

¹¹ Including destruction due to the May 2009 floods. 16 bridges have been damaged or washed away, SBS has so far made a list of 6 major bridges to be replaced and submitted it to GNHC and Disaster Management (Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs). India has agreed to support the worst hit Dzongkhags.

¹² ProDoc Phase VI

¹³ Source: Central Bridge Register, 2009. Some households are benefitted from different bridges and thus counted double or even triple.

Good Governance in the Bhutanese Context

In 1999, RGoB produced a vision statement¹⁴ for “peace, prosperity and happiness” to be reached in combining traditional values with modernisation. The overarching goal is to ensure future independence, security, and sovereignty of the kingdom applying the central development concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH). GNH consists of four pillars: sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, conservation of environment, preservation and promotion of culture, and promotion of good governance. Hence, governance is seen as an important part of development. The main dimensions include trust in local and national government institutions, trust in media, freedom of speech as well as freedom from discrimination. However, the six principles (or at least the most famous ones such as transparency) are also commonly used in different strategy papers for development.

Bhutan’s political system used to be rather centralised and the development planning process was carried out mainly in a top-down way. The central government defined the national policies which were made operational by the Planning Commission (today Gross National Happiness Commission, GNHC) and then implemented by the Ministries on the local levels. Dzongkhags received technical support from the central agencies in developing their plans which were then streamlined at national level. Nevertheless, there have been elements of decentralization since the 1950s (i.e. in the suspension bridge sector). The most significant steps towards decentralization can be summarized as follows¹⁵:

- Establishment of DYT (1981) and GYT (1991), both having some basic planning tasks.
- Introduction of the Tshogpas (village or hamlet leaders), to involve the communities directly in the planning (1990)
- Transfer of sectoral activities during the 7th FYP (1992-1997) to the Dzongkhags, but not accompanied with enough capacities at the local level.
- Enactment of D(Y)T and G(Y)T Chathrim in 2002 reinforce the importance of the GT and DT in the development process and are gradually implemented with the following major changes:
 - GTs and DTs have become relevant political actors with their responsibilities and duties and the popular election of their leaders extends their legitimacy.
 - Administrative bodies (National Assembly, GTs and DTs) are directly accountable to the Bhutanese citizens.
 - Although the separation of powers between the levels is not yet completely figured out, local leaders have a rather broad range of authority which especially proactive Gups can make use of.

The following modifications are important with regard to the SBP:

- In the 9th FYP (2002-2007) the GTs receive the right to retain rural taxes and user charges for maintenance purposes.
- The Geog FYPs are worked out on the local level.
- The prioritization of activities for the Geogs is subject to modification and approval in the DT. This means that the proposals of the Geogs are debated according to the budget provided for the sector plans of the district. The modified budget is then sent to the Ministry of Finance and – as it makes part of the national budget – is approved by the National Assembly.

The legal provisions were not very clear on the distinction between competencies, responsibilities and accountability of district and central government. Thus, a manual to the D(Y)T Chathrim had to be adapted, which settled controversial issues.

FIGURE 3: STEPS OF DECENTRALIZATION IN BHUTAN

¹⁴ Planning Commission, 1999

¹⁵ Chetri, 2004

The decentralization process has culminated in the introduction of parliamentary democracy in 2008 and is generally considered a success. Linder and Cavin¹⁶ attest the Bhutanese objectives of decentralization as having a “highly positive impact” on good governance although the role of the civil society has only been marginal, if not non-existent so far. One negative aspect however is that with the possibility of participation in the local FYP, the communities come up with long “shopping lists” for infrastructure projects which makes prioritizing rather difficult and overloads them with work (i.e. free labour contribution). As will be discussed later, this can also be observed in the SBP. The decisive point is whether or not the people are aware of their contribution (some Gups do inform and some not so much). At least in some cases this has to be doubted.¹⁷

Another issue coming up in governance discussion is the concept of Zhabto Lemi, which is deeply rooted in the Bhutanese culture. It will briefly be explained here, but further elaborated in the following chapter. Zhabto Lemi means free voluntary labour contribution of households to projects (either development projects, but also caretaking for temples, etc.) which directly benefit them,¹⁸ and can be considered as a substitute for taxes. Nevertheless, in 2006 the National Assembly discussed in its 85th Session the abolishment of Zhabto Lemi, because it was considered as inequitable.¹⁹ However, one year later the Ministry of Home advised the Assembly not to abolish it, but to clearly state in what projects and to what extent free labour has to be contributed.²⁰ It was realised that the country could not afford to abolish this tradition. However, the first Parliament abolished Zhabto Lemi in the third session (July 24, 2009), which imposes new challenges for rural infrastructure projects, including the SBP.

¹⁶ Linder & Cavin, 2003

¹⁷ In analogy to Linder & Cavin, 2003

¹⁸ In contrast to Goonda Woola, which asked a certain amount of labour contribution every month for projects or undertakings in the Dzongkhags, no matter if the respective households get benefitted directly. Goonda Woola was abolished by the Fourth King during the 7th FYP (1992-1997).

¹⁹ National Assembly of Bhutan, 2006

²⁰ National Assembly of Bhutan, 2007

Bridge Building in Alignment with Good Governance

Governance does not only apply to the upper decision-making bodies but to all authorities which are exercising power. Therefore, this study examines the good governance principles on three levels, namely macro, meso, and micro. The macro level consists of national and local governance, the meso level includes institutional governance, and the micro level assesses governance within the communities.

This chapter will be structured according to the good governance principles, which are discussed for the different levels while comparing their evolution in the different phases. However, it is not possible to completely separate these principles. There will be points which overlap and thus will be mentioned in more than one chapter. Decentralization is not treated as a separate principle but more as a cross-cutting issue which can be found within all principles. Therefore, implications for decentralization will be outlined wherever appropriate.

The programme was not consciously making reference to governance and its consequences until Phase V, where the term is mentioned in the project document (ProDoc) for the first time. Nevertheless, even in the earlier phases some aspects have been included in the programme. In line with this, it can be observed that the objectives of the SBP change over time: in Phase II the aim is to connect people and to provide better access, in Phase V the goals have broadened to community involvement as well as bottom-up decision-making. A specific characteristic of SBP is that it combines a product (bridge, improved mobility) with a process (user orientation, community involvement) and is thus a good example to show the links between governance and the establishment of infrastructure.

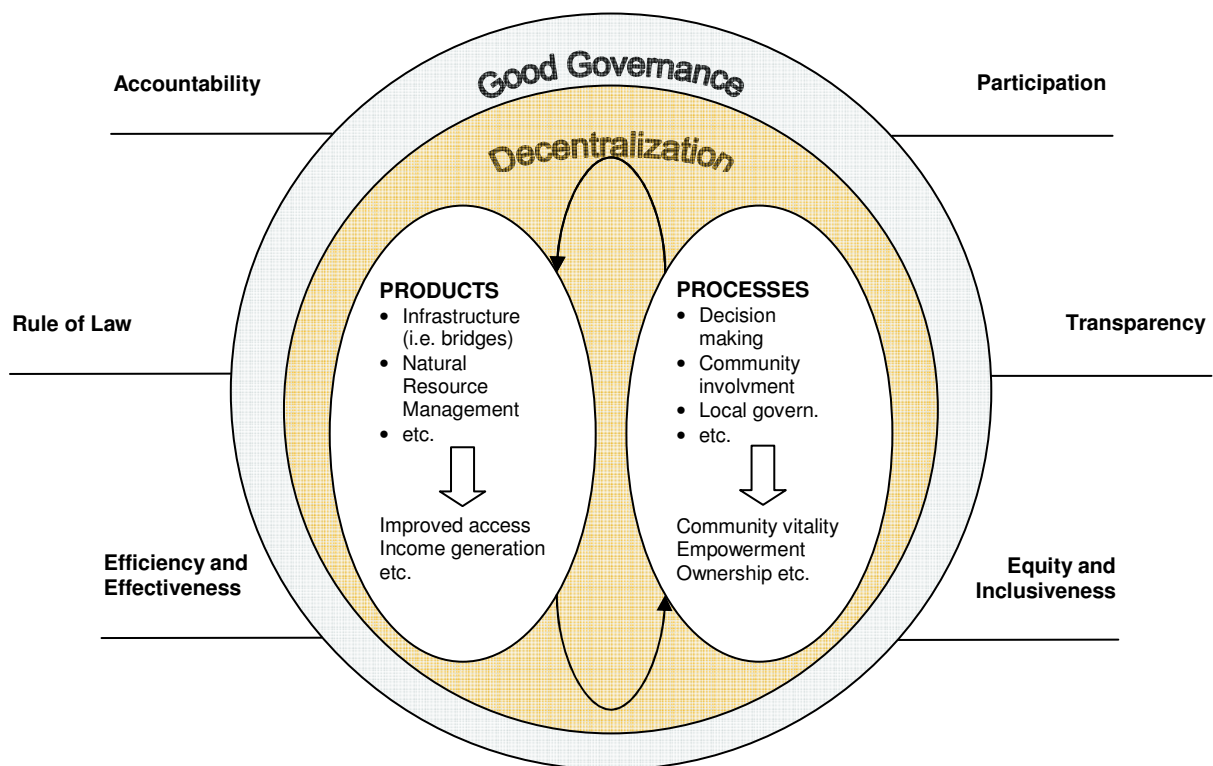


FIGURE 4: GOVERNANCE AND DECENTRALIZATION IN SECTORAL PROJECTS

Participation

Participation is a very broad term and can mean different things, ranging from manipulation (in which lip-service is paid to local involvement), to autonomy or self-mobilisation, in which local people really control decision-making. For this study, participation shall subsume on one hand the participation in the decision-making processes such as whether a bridge shall be requested or not, site selection and procedures to define the free labour contribution (Zhabto Lemi), and on the other hand – although it is not in the strict sense of participation – Zhabto Lemi itself, trying to create ownership for the users towards the bridge – especially with regard to later maintenance issues.

Zhabto Lemi

Already from the first phase of the project, participation was an important component of the programme, especially in terms of Zhabto Lemi (for bridge construction as well as for maintenance). Most of the users were willing to contribute labour because the establishment of a bridge mostly brought huge positive changes to their lives. The then FYPs were less ambitious and overloaded so that the villagers were not engaged in several projects. This changed with the implementation of the D(Y)T and G(Y)T Chathrims, which enabled the GTs to frame their own FYPs. As a lot of projects are working with Zhabto Lemi, there is a concern that the local partners have to contribute too many days, especially during plantation and harvesting time. Nevertheless, bridge building seems to be a project where they are willing to contribute labour without major complaints. Increasing mobility is apparently worth investing some time in – as all the interviewed groups pointed out. Or as a bridge user of Langthel Zam in Trongsa Dzongkhag puts it: *“Zhabto Lemi is a burden for us, but we take it positively and are willing to contribute, because the bridge gives us enormous benefits.”* However, SBS or the responsible JEs sometimes do face problems when asking for labour contribution. Everybody is aware that the villagers have a lot of work on the farms and with daily wage jobs. Hence, SBP is trying to reduce Zhabto Lemi as much as possible – in line with the government’s policy and has therefore cut down free head load transportation: from Phase V on only one day has to be contributed freely, before it was two days.

Zhabto Lemi as well as the participatory bridge request should contribute to an increased ownership, which is important when it comes to maintenance of the completed bridges. Before introducing steel decks, the wooden planks had to be replaced every few years. As the bridge



Wooden Planks



Steel Deck

crossing got immediately dangerous without regular plank replacement, people were willing to make time available for this maintenance. By now, most bridges are rehabilitated and wooden planks were replaced with steel decks. But since then, maintenance has become a major concern.

The bridge users do not seem to realise the importance of minor maintenance²¹ which thus is neglected in many bridge sites. This can be observed even more in cases where bridges are located at Geog or Dzongkhag borders – nobody really feels responsible for long-term maintenance. But efforts are now undertaken to stronger enforce maintenance. It can be concluded that although villagers have to contribute a substantial amount of free labour, it does not contribute much to develop ownership and responsibility for the bridge.

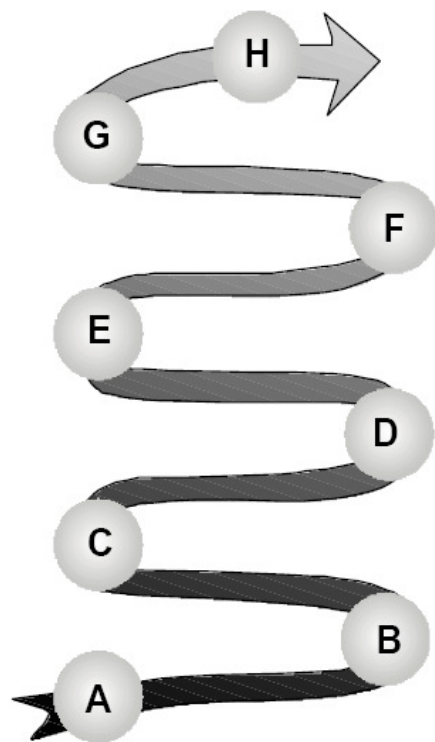
Decision-making processes

As outlined above, decision-making processes include not only the bridge request but also the organisation of Zhabto Lemi. In the early project phases, only a few points about procedures and decision-making processes are found in the ProDocs. This indicates that the technical aspects as well as the product outputs were given far more importance than the processes. Nevertheless, beneficiaries from bridges built in the earlier phases remember taking part in requesting the bridge: the Tshogpa (village representative) brought it forward to the Gup who had to forward it to the Dzongkhag Planning Officer. There was no prioritization within the Dzongkhags, the final decision was taken by the Planning Commission. This procedure was applied from Phase I to III. While studying the ProDocs, one sees that processes, especially in terms of participation, become more and more important over time, partially due to the progressing decentralization efforts. From Phase IV onwards the participatory approach is clearly stated: planning starts at the village or Geog level with the bridge request. 90% of the interviewed directly involved beneficiaries reported a truly participatory procedure in the village meetings where everybody could speak out and give his/her opinion. These open and inclusive discussions might be due to the socially not very sensitive topic of bridge building. Obviously most of the villagers are in favour of getting better access to roads and other infrastructure. As more Geogs may request a bridge than resources are available, it has to be debated in the DT which projects get prioritised (also from Phase IV onwards). Before the D(Y)T Chathrim was passed, the Dzongdag in his function as a chairperson had an influential voice. But since 2002 the chairperson is one of the DT members and the final decision is taken by the assembly with a 2/3 majority depending on the arguments the concerned Gups and Maangmis can bring up to convince the DT. The chairpersons are considered as fair and they tend to convince the assembly to give priority to the poor and needy places. Through these participatory and democratic procedures, the potential of mismanagement is reduced because it is assumed that only bridges are requested and prioritized which are in the interest of the majority.



Community meeting to discuss the bridge construction process

²¹ The ProDoc defines minor maintenance as cleaning of and around bridge elements, retightening bridge parts, minor repair of gabion boxes and slope protection measures, repairing the walkway and reporting of bridge condition.



- A. Request for a bridge originates from the community and is relayed to the Geog through the Tshogpa
- B. The requests are prioritized in the GT, based on set criteria. This list is sent to the Dzongkhags.
- C. All prioritised requests are presented at the DT. After debates, a final list is prepared and sent to the line agency at the centre.
- D. Depending on the policy and the budget, the centre allots a specific number of projects for each Dzongkhag. The Dzongkhag distributes the projects to the respective Geogs according to the prioritized list.
- E. The Geog informs the respective Tshogpas to prepare the communities and sends request to DES (before Phase VI SBS) for survey and design.
- F. SBS conducts survey and makes design for LSTB. DES is responsible for SSTB (from Phase VI on) and estimates the tender documents for fabrication.
- G. Geog together with DES, Tshogpa and community prepare detailed work plan. The bridge is built with all the involved stakeholders.
- H. After completion, the bridge is final checked by SBS. An agreement paper hands over the bridge to the Geog for upkeep and maintenance. Royal Audit Authority visits the bridge and verify the books of account.

FIGURE 5: STEPWISE PROCEDURE OF BRIDGE REQUEST²²

The site selection is also decided on the lowest level – as most suspension bridges had log bridge predecessors, normally the same site is chosen by the villagers. A change only takes place if it is technically not feasible to construct a bridge at the favoured site. This feasibility study was carried out by SBS engineers until Phase V, from then onwards – as capacity was built on a lower level – it has been gradually shifted to DES for SSTB. This shows that as soon as the capacity is available, the project tries to shift responsibilities to a lower level.

As there are not enough resources to build a bridge without Zhabto Lemi, it is compulsory for the bridge users to contribute free labour. The SBS or the DES do not define how Zhabto Lemi is organised. It is in the hand of the villages or Geogs to find an agreement among the users – which generally works well. This process enables the community to gain experience in decentralised decision-making and community participation. As there are different projects using Zhabto Lemi, people have established procedures how to allocate it. Every Geog has its own form of organising it. Sometimes the whole Geog contributes labour even if not all villages benefit, in other cases direct beneficiaries contribute more than less benefitted people. Communities also reported small conflicts in terms of who would be exempted (compare chapter on equity and inclusiveness), which were resolved. However, decisions on who is exempted are mostly taken by either the Tshogpa or the Gup (60% of the interviewees), although it was sometimes also discussed in the GT (40% of the interview partners). Over time, this leads to the establishment of adequate conflict management mechanisms within the communities. One also notices that there is a certain community vitality. Working on the bridge site as a team contributes to social cohesion within a village, the Geog, or adjacent Geogs.²³ This is certainly not only limited to SBP, but also to other projects working with similar methods. It has to be acknowledged that SBP as a successful project has made an important contribution to organizational skills at village and Geog level and to social cohesion.

²² Based on Helvetas, 2007

²³ Even inter-community or inter-Geog marriages took place thanks to the common efforts at the bridge building site.

However, awareness and knowledge of the soft factors such as community development and social mobilisation could still be improved at the local and regional level (compare chapter on decentralization). With further capacity building especially within DES, starting with the maintenance scheme, additional value could be added. Nonetheless, it must be kept in mind that the DES is rather overloaded with different projects and it might be too ambitious to include further tasks.

The Gup from Yalang Geog under Trashhi Yangtze Dzongkhag, shared the story of how Dukti Zam was prioritized and built which shows how the decentralized decision-making functions:

In the Eighties, there were three requests from three different Geogs: Bumdelling, Teotsho, Yalang. The DYT decided in favour of Ngalakhang Zam under Teotsho Geog, because the number of the beneficiaries was higher and it was therefore of more urgent need. However, there was a deeper lying conflict: Teotsho Geog did not agree because they were afraid that people from the other riverbank will start crossing their paddy fields. After some years, Teotsho Geog could be convinced because they saw the necessity and in Phase V Dukti Zam could finally be built. At the end they even agreed voluntarily to contribute ten days of Zhabto Lemi.

- ❖ Bridge users are mostly willing to contribute free labour (Zhabto Lemi), although it sometimes imposes a rather large burden on them.
- ❖ Organisation of Zhabto Lemi gives the villagers the opportunity to solve issues within their communities and they are thus able to establish adequate conflict management mechanisms.
- ❖ There is a trend to devolve decision-making processes such as bridge requests and prioritisation, to lower levels as soon as the capacity is established.

Transparency

With the ongoing decentralization process, planning is carried out at local, regional and national level, where FYPs are debated and formulated in the respective assemblies (GT, DT, Parliament). Thus, the bridge prioritization process has become completely transparent. In Phase III, bridge selection criteria were introduced (minimum households benefitted, benefits from economic and social activities, replacing dangerous river crossings, substantial time saving), which were further elaborated in Phase IV, with some sort of a point system. People consider the criteria as fair and useful. These criteria were not applied only in very few cases, since a small number of households got a bridge prioritized that benefits only them. But then it was justified by the remoteness of an area and the required minimum number of benefitted household was offset by the other benefits. These selection criteria have become less and less important with increasing decentralization. Debates over prioritization in the GT and DT are the means to take decisions from Phase IV onwards. Only if serious conflicts over prioritization occur, the selection criteria are consulted.

The term also subsumes transparency of the different actions and expectations of higher level agencies, which means in this case transparency of SBS and DES towards the bridge users. SBS communicates the activities of the project phases to all DES, which are in charge of spreading the word in the Dzongkhags. It mostly does not reach the people directly, but those responsible for decision-making are aware of the goals and activities. As already outlined, the projects ask for free labour contribution, which can be a substantial burden for the beneficiaries. Therefore, it is crucial that they are informed beforehand so they can take it into consideration. Until Phase IV, people were informed orally about their contribution, and from then onwards an institutionalised system was applied: in a Survey Agreement, it is roughly stated how much Zhabto Lemi they have to

contribute. This agreement is signed by all stakeholders or their representatives. The same method is used for the conditions for the head load transportation. People are aware that they have to contribute freely two days of transportation until Phase V and from Phase VI on only one day. All the interviewed villagers stated that they were fully informed of the need of their contribution. However, the awareness of free labour contribution for maintenance, after the bridge is built, is not very high. Geog engineers declare that they do inform the people but perhaps the information is not conveyed clearly enough. It cannot be determined exactly where the cause for the poor maintenance lies, but it is important that this aspect is not neglected. However, even if the importance of maintenance was emphasized at the beginning of a project, it may still not be done properly as this problem is a typical behaviour of free-riding which occurs with public goods.²⁴

The communication among former office-bearers and their successors is an aspect which could be improved. Several cases have been reported where successors were not aware of the actual state of the bridge construction or they did not know if the caretaker training had already been done or not. Also for the selection of staff for scholarships or short-term courses, a clear list of selection criteria exists. The main problem raised is staff shortage when too many people are leaving simultaneously for their studies.

The budget planning process has always been done in a transparent way, including all relevant stakeholders. There were generally several steps involved in planning the different phases of the SBP:

- 1) Identification of challenges and areas for intervention (usually done by an evaluation mission of a previous phase)
- 2) Joint discussions with partners to identify objectives, outputs and activities to be funded based on the challenges identified
- 3) Concept write-up including estimation of costs
- 4) Feedback from partners including Helvetas and SDC (final budget decision by SDC)
- 5) Project formulation and finalization.

Direct contacts between the donor and communities during this planning period were limited because the government partner agency would already have the overall FYP framework within which all projects and programmes, whether externally funded or not, would have to be integrated. These five year plans, especially starting from the 9th FYP onwards, are in turn a result of the priorities communicated at the village level and passed through the village meetings, GT and DT.

- ❖ The bridge prioritization process has become completely transparent with the introduction of selection criteria in Phase III. Although these criteria are applied less stringently with advancing decentralization, they are complemented with other more participative but still transparent procedures.
- ❖ In a Survey Agreement signed before the construction begins, people confirm in writing that they are aware of Zhabto Lemi and how much they will contribute.
- ❖ Transparency and information flows among local office-bearers and their successors are often not done systematically.

²⁴ Public goods from an economic point of view are goods which are non-rival and non-excludable. Therefore everybody uses the good but nobody feels responsible for it.

Equity and Inclusiveness

When talking about equity the question occurs what is actually meant by equity. Is it an equitable share that, for example, every household is contributing exactly the same amount of free labour, or is it equitable that poor households contribute less because they need more time to work on the fields, or is it equitable that people consider something as fair, for example, that some households' contributions are reduced because of comprehensible reasons.²⁵ This report tends towards the third understanding: beneficiaries should consider the arrangement they made as fair. Nevertheless, the first point should not be completely left out, but still be actively reflected, building a framework for the perceived fairness.

SBP is a nationwide programme, covering all Dzongkhags with an equitable share of suspension bridges per phase, depending of the territorial size. However, if a Dzongkhag is not in need of the bridges it is entitled to (for example Thimphu or Paro), the resources are transferred to other districts with high priority bridge sites.

As already outlined, bridges are public goods which do not exclude anybody from using them. According to their needs, rural households get either better market opportunities or easier access to job opportunities and social infrastructures. As women are generally mobile, they are also strongly benefitted as well as students, having to walk shorter distances to school. And it should not be forgotten that bridges also contributed a lot to either access to election facilities or made it easier for the Election Commission to reach the villagers.



Maintenance under surveillance of a caretaker

The most striking topic in terms of equity is probably the fairness and equal distribution of Zhabto Lemi. In backstopping missions it is often stated that Zhabto Lemi imposes a higher burden on poor villagers than on rich households, because the former depend on daily wage jobs and while contributing free labour are not able to pursue these jobs. When comparing Zhabto Lemi with taxes urban Bhutanese pay,²⁶ the rural people are taxed much higher. Theoretically, these arguments are true, but when asking the bridge users' opinion, they judge Zhabto Lemi mostly as fair (90% of the interviewees). As several projects are working with Zhabto Lemi, the contribution and the benefits at the end seem to hold balance. The communities also have systems in place which exempt certain people, for example if they do not have enough manpower due to death or illness. Some communities reported that poorer households had to contribute less than richer ones. These exemptions are mostly considered as fair. Another solution is that households without enough manpower can contribute money, which then is used to procure things needed by the communities. Providing financial contribution is a solution also used by "ex-villagers" living in urban areas and thus not being able to work directly on the construction site. As reported by one community, temple caretakers, traditional doctors, astrologers, etc. were exempted.

²⁵ For example elderly or sick people, or if a household member has to be accompanied to the hospital, etc.

²⁶ Taxable income is from Nu. 100.000, with the possibility to make many deductions. Thus the majority in Thimphu does not have to pay taxes.

As especially the latter are earning money, many people cannot understand why they do not have to contribute labour. But as these persons are treated with high respect, the villagers do not dare to raise their voice. Zhabto Lemi is not only required for construction, but also for maintenance. As the caretaker system is not thoroughly implemented in all Dzongkhags and Geogs yet, no conclusions can be drawn if the appointed caretaker (who does not get paid normally²⁷) is exempted from other work. As of now – if maintenance is done at all – it is mostly carried out on a rotational basis among the direct beneficiaries. The Parliament has decided on July 24, 2009 to abolish Zhabto Lemi with the justification to create more equity and give more responsibilities to local governments. If unskilled labour gets paid, new issues such as who gets employed will arise.

Both women and men contribute labour to the construction. The work is split according to what can be done best by each and who is available, considering their daily farm work. In some cases child labourers have been reported, although mostly during school holidays. However, the JE present at the construction site will normally not tolerate children contributing labour. If it is unavoidable, they are instructed to carry out easy tasks at the bridge site.

The Mongar DES brought up the issue with bridges close to Dzongkhag borders. One bridge is built under the Mongar budget and with free labour contribution of the respective Geog within Mongar, but eventually, it will be mostly used by people from Pemagatshel. The villagers themselves did not raise the issue – they might not even be aware of it. And also some voices in the DES were saying that at the end all are Bhutanese and borders should not be drawn stronger as necessary. However, the concern is certainly justified. To prevent future conflicts, cross Dzongkhag collaboration could be intensified, just as it is done when a bridge benefits more than one Geog.

With regards to interview partners, it is striking that all secondary stakeholders were male; the JEs as well as the engineers interviewed at SBS. Although the number of female civil engineers in Bhutan is increasing – a fact that can also be observed at the Royal Bhutan Polytechnic in Deothang, the SBP does not have female engineers neither at the headquarters nor in the Dzongkhags. This point should be given special attention in the future for example when introducing the new module on suspension bridges in the Polytechnic (in line with the ProDoc of Phase VI).

- ❖ SBP is a nationwide programme covering all Dzongkhags with an equal share of suspension bridges.
- ❖ Bridges – as a public good – do not exclude anyone from using them.
- ❖ Comparing Zhabto Lemi with the tax burden of urban people, the former imposes a higher burden on the rural population. The bridge users consider Zhabto Lemi, which is allocated according to certain rules which exempt people with special need, mostly as fair.
- ❖ Dzongkhag cooperation could be amplified, anticipating challenges arising if a suspension bridge is planned close to Dzongkhag borders.

²⁷ However, considering that GT decisions are mostly taken for the benefit of all, it can be assumed that there will be a refund in one way or the other. Maintenance does not take more than one day per month. The total wage paid to the caretaker would be 1.200 Nu. per year (according to the national minimum wage of 100 Nu. per day), which would not impose a huge burden to the Geog budget.

Efficiency and Effectiveness

The question if resources are used in an efficient and effective way could include a complete review of the project. As this has been done regularly by backstopping and reviewing missions, some aspects will be cited here but for further information the reader may compare those documents. In SBP, a learning process has taken place within the last thirty years in terms of technical as well as managerial capacity building. For example the site selection has become much more efficient: narrower sites are chosen, technologies have improved, etc., which all led to cost reductions. Although there are still some specific skills missing at DES level, the programme is executed successfully.

Staff shortages as well as limited capacities have been concerns raised throughout the different evaluations, especially at the beginning of the project. In Phase IV, this is outlined as a reason for restricted motivation of personnel and low efficiency of the project. Thus, human resource development got a higher priority. From Phase VI on, SBS can be considered as fully staffed and thus can work efficiently and effectively. Staff shortages and lacking capacities are linked and build a trade-off: JEs leave temporarily for their Masters' studies abroad, which eventually leads to higher capacity, but causes a shortage in the short term. This problem is still often faced at the local level. The lesson has been learnt that decentralization has to go along with capacity building at local level – ideally as long as the project is still centrally outlined, otherwise projects cannot be managed properly on lower levels. The same applies generally for the entire decentralization process.

The lacking capacity is often given as a reason for not achieving the goals set in the ProDoc. It is a fact that in most phases the anticipated number of bridges did not get constructed within the phase itself. Phase III got extended from 1993 to 1995 to complete all the 50 bridges. In Phase IV, the goal was specifically to plan realistically and take into account the available capacity of all involved parties, meaning local communities, Dzongkhags, SBS, and donors. Thus, the target of 12 bridges constructed per year could be fulfilled. However, in Phase V the target was not achieved, mainly due to the elections held in 2008, absorbing a lot of resources in Dzongkhags and Geogs. Other parts of the explanation for all the delays are on one hand unreliable Zhabto Lemi as the villagers sometimes do not turn up for construction. On the other hand it is the unrealistic planning at Geog level. As people decide in the GT on their FYP, they tend to overload the plans and thus they often resemble “shopping lists” rather than well thought-out development plans. This leads to the conclusion that local leaders and governments were overwhelmed by their new tasks and not well enough prepared. Hence, capacity building at this level is crucial, not only for the SBP, but for all other projects, too.

An issue in terms of strategic and comprehensive planning is the consultation and consideration of master plans for roads before planning and constructing a suspension bridge. This is especially important, because motorable roads construction is planned under MoWHS, and farm roads and power tiller tracks under the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA). To avoid duplication, careful coordination is required. However, this is not yet done systematically. A reason might be that bridges are requested by the villagers who are mostly not aware of the plans; the latter is also the case for the DT, where the final decision for the respective Dzongkhag is made. Therefore, some cases are known where only recently built bridges are replaced. In Khoma for example, a suspended bridge over the Kurichu has been replaced by a power tiller bridge (part of a JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) project) two years ago and now the Geog is applying for a motorable bridge. Coordination and communication between different stakeholders, such as governmental agencies, local



Power tiller bridge in Khoma

decision making bodies, etc., has to be improved to make sure funds are used as effectively and efficiently as possible. It might also be necessary to cross check the decentralized decision by a central agency (through SBS), who has more information on master plans and can thus avoid building a bridge which soon becomes redundant. The other possibility would be to make sure that DTs take master plans into account before prioritizing bridges. The 10th FYP highlights the need to improve coordination between the various government levels, indicating that the problem has been recognized and is being addressed.

While construction is carried out in a rather effective and efficient way, maintenance causes problems. Maintaining bridges has been an issue from the early project phases on, considering that wooden decks had to be replaced regularly. However, with the introduction of steel decks in Phase IV, major maintenance became more and more redundant and routine maintenance gained importance. The decentralized approach, leaving the organisation with the Geogs, failed to institutionalize good maintenance schemes, although all ProDocs since 1990 as well as FYP highlighted it to be crucial to the long-term sustainability. Practically however, SBS did not give enough importance to this issue and failed to introduce an effective scheme to ensure proper maintenance. SBS only concentrated on sensitizing DES and let them solve the problem with the people, but apparently, this did not work. Only after the backstopping missions strongly emphasised the need for improvement in this area, SBS took action and introduced a more centralised system. From Phase VI on, beneficiaries are advised to nominate a caretaker and SBS provides manuals as well as a toolbox. This approach is now being adopted in most Geogs and caretaker trainings are being held. As this is a recent development, its success cannot be measured at this stage.²⁸



A badly maintained bridge



Maintenance tools

- ❖ Because staff shortages and lacking capacity are linked and force a trade-off, meaning they cannot be tackled at the same time, finding the optimal solution has been a major challenge throughout the project.
- ❖ Overloaded Geog FYPs and lacking capacities are frequently listed as reasons for not achieving the goals set in the ProDocs.
- ❖ When planning new bridges, consultation of and coordination between road master plans of MoWHS and MoA are imperative.
- ❖ Importance of maintenance has been neglected on all levels for too long. The introduction of the caretaker scheme has yet to be proven successful.

²⁸ However, when passing Maksabi Zam under Mongar Dzongkhag, beneficiaries were maintaining the bridge under the supervision of the already trained caretaker.

Accountability

Accountability does not stand alone, but goes along with the corresponding responsibilities and with the good governance principles of transparency and rule of law. In the early project phases, SBS was responsible for most of the steps in the process of bridge construction. As transparent information sharing was not a key project component and the beneficiaries were not aware of these issues, direct accountability to the grass root level was not ensured. Nonetheless, RGoB already had its audit systems in place, reviewing all activities and thus ensuring that funds are not misused. Today, the Royal Audit Authority (RAA) physically visits every newly constructed bridge. Hence, there is no case known within SBP where funds or materials have been misused. If irregularities occur, it is mostly a delay in construction due to a default in submitting required documents or due to a delay in receiving the materials. The main challenge for the villagers is to find the responsible person and to make him or her accountable: *“If something is not working as it should, everybody blames somebody else”*, says a user of Phadingka Zam under Wangdue Phodrang Dzongkhag. If the omission is a local leader’s fault, this is taken into account by the voters at the next election. With the ongoing democratization and decentralization process, the villagers seem to understand the new opportunities and sometimes report or complain directly to their representatives, the Members of Parliament. This direct way is not appreciated by the Dzongkhag engineers, as mentioned in Lhuentse, who would rather prefer if people approach them directly instead of skipping this step. Also the better means of communication and accessibility of the rural areas led to higher accountability.

RAA has recently started to conduct performance audit reports reviewing the FYP. When a pilot study in Chukha Dzongkhag was carried out, two cases related to the bridge building were mentioned: 1) The Badina Zam which cannot be used during summer because the river rises and covers the mule track leading to the bridge; and 2) the delay in construction of the Getena bridge (Chabjika Zam) due to lacking assistance from DES as well as a delay in the delivery of construction materials.²⁹ Apparently, people were not very reliable in contributing the free head load transportation. The media³⁰ has reported this and has thus taken up an important role in making mismanagement cases public. It can now be hoped that the concerned DES as well as SBS investigate this issue and draw the necessary conclusions to ensure an improvement for future bridges.

- ❖ RAA physically visits every newly constructed bridge to ensure that no misuse of funds occurs.
- ❖ If minor mismanagement cases occur, the biggest challenge for beneficiaries is to find the responsible person. Accountability to the lowest level could thus be improved.

Rule of Law

Although important, the sixth principle of good governance can be dealt with briefly since there is no vast legal framework to be considered. As already outlined, there are some procedures in place which have to be followed in requesting a bridge or in determining free labour contribution, which are practically all adhered to. The criteria for selecting the bridge site, however, are not always followed strictly since the prioritization is part of the democratic and decentralised process and thus is debated in the GT and then DT (according to the G(Y)T and D(Y)T Chathrims). In Bhutan, it is however more essential, to build up capacities in local governance than to stick to selection criteria.

²⁹ RAA, 2009

³⁰ Kuensel, May 12, 2009

The government's plans for development and thus infrastructure are stipulated in the FYPs, on the central as well as on the local levels. However, these plans do not have a legal character and thus there are no measures in place for citizens to claim legal redress. This is a major problem, because goals set in ProDocs and FYPs are hardly ever met. But with the introduction of parliamentary democracy, the ruling party will be held accountable in the elections.

Furthermore, rule of law includes human rights aspects. Also in this context no major concerns appear. The only point that needs to be raised is child labour. Most of the local arrangements say that school children are not allowed to contribute Zhabto Lemi, which was also confirmed by all the visited communities. But it has to be kept in mind that school is not compulsory and despite the rather high enrolment rate of 91%, there are some children who do not attend classes on a regular basis and some reports mention children working on the bridge site, not only during holidays. Most probably it is only a minor issue and the Zhabto Lemi in bridge construction is certainly not the reason why children do not attend school.

❖ The Rule of Law is basically followed, including human rights.

Applied Decentralization in SBP

Different aspects of decentralization have already been mentioned within the particular principles of good governance. The two concepts are interlinked, but nevertheless some specifically decentralization-related points shall be outlined in this chapter. Generally, SBP does fully comply with the RGoB decentralization policy. Within the SBP, decentralization consists on one hand of the decision-making process and on the other of the technical assistance. Although many aspects of decentralization have been implemented successfully, there are still some major challenges remaining.

Decentralized Decision-making

SBP was not only in line with the government's policies on decentralized decision making, but even a forerunner. Major components have been carried out at local level before such processes were legally required. Thereby, capacities of local leaders such as Gups could be built and used as a basis for further projects. This early decentralization was in general part of the overall decentralization policy in the country, but its application received special impetus in the suspension bridge sector. This pioneering role of the suspension bridge sector in decentralization was perhaps influenced by the Swiss involvement and the demand-oriented project implementation. The decentralized approach has obviously not only been applied for bridges funded through Helvetas/ SDC, but for all suspension bridges. Even motorable bridges are now requested in similar ways.

Prioritizing, planning, and decision-making functions were shifted more and more to the Geogs, while the Dzongkhag sectors supported them with technical guidance. Decisions are taken at the grassroot level, where needs are often perceived in a much clearer way than on national level. Through the establishment of democratic procedures, local people get empowered and are forced to take over responsibility for their own development. The prioritization in DT and GT ensures that



Phadingka Zam connects beneficiaries with the national highway

bridges are requested which find a majority in the respective assembly and thus should be the fairest decision. However, the “normal” problems with democracy are still apparent, for example that majority rules minority, even if the majority constitutes only 51% of the population. Traditionally, Bhutanese are used to organise different village activities (such as Lhakhang caretaking, etc.) among themselves and also contribute free labour. The introduction of the decentralized approach and Zhabto Lemi to implement projects, continued the traditions and further institutionalised and developed their processes. Thereby people gain

experience in leadership and get empowered to take over posts in higher administrative bodies at the Dzongkhag as well as at the national level. For the last decades, it was appropriate to use Zhabto Lemi within the different projects. But with ongoing democratization and establishment of a market economy, free labour contribution might become more and more out-dated. This fact has been taken into account by the First Parliament, who abolished Zhabto Lemi in the third session and thereby paved the way for local governments to find other suitable solutions.

Coordination in decentralized planning is a major challenge. As the central level has less importance as a coordinating body, the local actors have to take over this task. However, coordinated and rational planning, which has often failed at the national level, becomes even more difficult and challenging on the local level. Geog and Dzongkhag staff are often not aware of national master plans and are sometimes lacking capacity as well as a long-term perspective in development planning. This can be observed for example in Khoma under Lhuentse Dzongkhag (compare chapter on efficiency and effectiveness). Uncoordinated planning is not only a problem at the local level, it can also be observed that communication and consultation between different ministries and departments engaged in infrastructure development could be improved significantly. For optimal planning, the MoWHS and MoA coordinate their master plans to avoid duplication and road planning which might lead to different bridge (suspension, power tiller, motorable) requests. Another constraint in terms of planning is the overloaded Geog FYP not really orienting itself on the actual capacities of the villagers (as most projects include Zhabto Lemi in one or the other form). Thus people as well as Geog staff are burdened with too many activities and consequently cannot achieve the goals set in their FYP as well as in the ProDocs of SBS.

Decentralization of Technical Project Implementation

Lacking capacity of Geog staff is not only a challenge when it comes to planning, but also when implementing the projects, be it on a technical, social or administrative level. In Phase III, SBS was responsible for planning, surveying, design, cost estimates, local procurement, coordination of work, etc. The then so-called Zonal Engineers were responsible for site inspection, supervision of works and final checks. The Dzongkhag administration had to organise the execution of the bridge building according to the design. From end of Phase IV and the entire Phase V, bridge design and survey for SSTB were gradually decentralized to the Dzongkhags. From Phase VI onwards, the responsibilities of the DES consist of the following:

- Assist DT in prioritization
- Assist Geog administration in planning and preparing proposals
- Mobilization of communities
- Assist in nomination, training, and supervision of caretakers
- Survey and design of SSTB
- Implementation and supervision of trail bridge projects
- Budgeting

The SBS' role now lies mainly on facilitation, i.e. acting as a resource centre and service provider. One of the main reasons why the technical side of the project was not decentralised further before Phase V is the lacking capacity at the local level, especially when it comes to the DES (compare chapter on efficiency and effectiveness). Still now it is questioned if the DES does have the capacity to fulfil all the tasks it is given satisfactorily, considering that the DES is not only responsible for suspension bridges but for different infrastructural projects. The Junior Engineers thus have quite broad areas of responsibility which are organised according to two models:

- JE responsible for one Geog and within this Geog for all infrastructure projects (for example in Bumthang).
- JE responsible for one activity such as bridge engineering and then supervising all the Geogs (for example in Trongsa).

By now the first model is applied in most of the Dzongkhags, because the DES considered it to be more appropriate to have an engineer responsible for one Geog. As SBS provides special training in bridge building, this has to be provided to more engineers. Both of the models imply quite a challenge for the often young and inexperienced engineers. Or as an author puts it in Kuensel³¹ *"[...] technical incapacity threatens to be major problem in implementing development plans at the village level. [...] District engineers have gone on record to say that it is nearly impossible to*

³¹ Kuensel, July 20, 2009

properly supervise every development work being done in the district.” To provide them further education, they are sent abroad for studies which leads to a shortage in the DES.³² Although the conditions have improved over the past years, it will still take some time to build up all the required capacity. A major challenge is to further train the people without hindering the implementation of the project. When JEs are sent for long-term education, the affected DES’ should still have enough engineers to carry out their work. If one Dzongkhag has to spare more JEs than others, short-term replacement of engineers could be a possibility to mitigate staff shortages. As outlined earlier, apart from the technical training, it is also crucial to raise awareness in the DES and the SBS on social issues such as basic community development, social mobilisation techniques or management skills. While SBS has a high level of technical bridge building knowledge, there is still need to build further capacity on these soft factors. In the Dzongkhags, awareness raising could be carried out as cross-cutting trainings, including other Geog extension staff. Another possibility are in-country trainings in the Rural Development Training Centre (RDTC) in Zhemgang, where social issues are more and more part of the curriculum. Also at the J.N. Polytechnic in Deothang could be further sensitized for this. Other problems at the beginning of the project were not only staff with lacking education, but also equipment and machinery that was not available at the regional level. These conditions are improved by now and equipment and machinery is not seen as a problem anymore.

Fiscal Decentralization

Finally, a closer look has to be given to the funding of the suspension bridge programme. In Bhutan, donor funds cannot be allocated directly to NGOs or local governments, but have to go through GHNC and the Ministry of Finance (MoF), which distributes them further. Until now, Geogs and Dzongkhags had to include all their activities in their FYP and received the funds only for the outlined and approved activities. With the adoption and implementation of the *Guidelines for Annual Grants for Local Governments*, even the financial power is devolved to a certain extent. Both Geogs and Dzongkhags are supposed to receive a certain number of grants if they fulfil the minimum conditions (such as annual plans according to PlaMS³³, monthly accounts and minutes of the GT and DT meetings, debating annual plans). The annual grants are divided into current and capital grants, the former covering all the administrative costs. The latter are further divided into tied and untied grants to finance the development activities. The guideline provides a list of activities which are eligible for the untied grants including bridge construction and maintenance for the Geogs. Although the Guideline for Annual Grants shall be implemented in the current financial year (beginning in July 2009), DES are fairly unaware of the new possibilities of how funds can be made available for bridge construction or, even more importantly, for maintenance. The maintenance problem for the suspension bridges could perhaps be solved by providing a small income for the caretaker. However, a sustainable maintenance scheme should be ensured.

Equitable resource allocation for annual grants is ensured by using the following formula:

- *Size of the population*
Population will be based on residency (and not on registration) in Dzongkhag and Geogs. 70% of the total budget is based on population size.
- *Poverty incidence*
To comply with the poverty reduction objective of the 10th FYP, Dzongkhags and Geogs with higher poverty incidence will receive a higher amount. 25% of the total budget is based on poverty incidence.
- *Size of the territory*
Geographic size determines 5% of the budget.

³² This year 12 JE are leaving the DES for studies abroad.

³³ Planning and Monitoring System

This comes basically to a per capita allocation, including the poverty incidence to ensure a more equitable allocation. The main challenge will be to find a way to compare relative poverty levels and to communicate transparently how it is calculated. Furthermore, some parliamentarians are concerned that poverty incidence is not given more weight. This is also one of the reasons why the Local Government Act was not adopted in the Third Session of the First Parliament. The whole process should ideally be considered as comprehensible and fair by the Dzongkhags and Geogs.

The abolishment of Zhabto Lemi on July 24, 2009 was, among others, justified by some of the parliamentarians as giving local governments more responsibilities: “*With the Local Government Act, local governments will be responsible for all the developmental planning and implementation works, including mobilisation of resources. It’s more appropriate not to impose anything by the government but leave it to the local governments on how to plan and execute [...]*” (Lyonpo Dorji Wangdi, Minister of Labour and Human Resources).³⁴ But already one day after the abolition Gups raised their voice saying that “*unless there are other measures in place the people would still have to serve their own communities*” (Phuntsho Wangdi, Gup of Orong Geog in Samdrup Jongkhar),³⁵ with other measures perhaps meaning higher taxes for the rural population. Indeed the abolishment of Zhabto Lemi imposes an additional burden to the local governments and thus the budgets have to be calculated on a new basis.

SBS has already discussed the possible abolishment with the MoF at the beginning of 2009 during budget talks for suspension bridges. At that time, the Ministry advised SBS to wait for the Parliament’s decision. SBS has now included a 100 Nu. per day rate in the cost estimates for the following year and will request the funds from MoF, which will either release them directly to the Dzongkhags or to SBS. However, from the author’s point of view, it might be difficult to carry out developmental projects without Zhabto Lemi in the near future. As rural people do not pay any taxes, it makes sense to ask them to contribute some labour as a tax substitute. The contribution ought to be much less than the status quo and should not burden the villagers excessively.



Yebesa Zam over Mochhu in Punakha Dzongkhag

³⁴ Kuensel, July 25, 2009

³⁵ Kuensel, July 25, 2009

Lessons learnt

This report concludes with lessons learnt in terms of governance and highlights issues and challenges in the SBP, which should be addressed by the different stakeholders, especially in regards to a possible extension of the project. Furthermore some good practices are highlighted that can be adopted in other Bhutanese projects or in suspension bridge projects in other countries.

Challenges and Recommendations

The main challenges already mentioned throughout the report shall briefly be summarized for quick reference and, where possible, recommendations on how to improve the situation are provided.

- One of the main challenges is sustainable bridge maintenance. Although it has been highlighted for years, the situation has not improved much. Bridge users do not realise the need for maintaining the bridge. Ownership of the bridge seems to be lacking. The new caretaker system has been introduced only recently, more time is needed to evaluate the impact. However, it is crucial that the DES as well as SBS commit themselves to carefully evaluate the potential of the new system.
- The bridges are built with Zhabto Lemi. As the Parliament abolished Zhabto Lemi, the construction of bridges becomes more expensive and additional fund may have to be allocated. The national minimum wage is Nu. 100 per day (if the government employs workers), which should thus be the rate for the villagers. A sudden change to fully paid labour would impose a huge burden on the Geog budgets. Therefore, it is assumed that for the time being, a salary is calculated for each project, though not according to the actual number of workdays. Another scenario is that each household still has to contribute a minimum of Zhabto Lemi, but much less than currently, and the overtime gets paid. In the near future it is realistic that the project keeps on working with beneficiaries contributing labour in one way or the other, also depending to what extent the people are able to claim their new rights. But it is also important that people contribute something – either taxes or labour.
- Zhabto Lemi is aimed at the creation of ownership of the bridge. However, this last point is questionable when thinking of the maintenance issue. Other means have to be found to ensure ownership and proper bridge maintenance.
- Lacking capacities and staff shortages at Dzongkhag level still impose a major challenge to timely delivery of quality work. This issue is being addressed by supporting university studies for JEs as well as short-term in-country trainings. It is important to not only focus on technical aspects, but also include soft factors such as community development and social mobilisation mechanisms. Establishing knowledge and capacity on the regional and local level in all Dzongkhags and Geogs requires time.
- If a bridge is built at Geog borders, communities in adjacent Geogs work together and share the contributions. Introducing a similar cooperation between Dzongkhags may be necessary. Generally it can be stated that there is insufficient coordination among programmes which work at community level. Hence there is no uniform approach of how to mobilise communities and increase their involvement and ownership. This could be addressed by sharing lessons learnt and enhancing communication in general.
- The preference of most rural people is to connect their village to the national highways through motorable roads and bridges. To avoid as many duplications as possible, careful infrastructure planning is required at all levels and by all involved bodies, from GT and DT to MoWHS, MoA and GNHC.

Good Practices and Insights

As the project can be considered rather successful, many insights and good practices can be derived from the Swiss involvement in the trail bridge building sector. The following are worth highlighting:

❖ Institutional aspects

- Sectoral projects are very good entry points for governance as they normally work directly with communities and thus have a great influence on the people's attitudes.
- The combination of a product with a process is an ideal basis for sustainable development and inclusion of cross cutting themes such as good governance.
- If the funding agency is engaged in the project from the very beginning, sharing of technical as well as institutional knowledge leads to an optimal output.

❖ Political aspects

- The early decentralization of the programme has led to important capacity building at the local level – be it in the decision-making process or from a technical point of view – empowering and preparing people for decentralization and democratization.
- Overcoming topographical obstacles has paved the way for political decentralization and for elections, making it much easier for the Election Commission to reach the villagers.
- An audit through an independent agency as the RAA is necessary to satisfy transparency and accountability.

❖ Community development

- Local people have the potential to develop leadership in development work. Organising Zhabto Lemi within the community leads to empowerment of the people through the management of such processes and establishment of adequate conflict management mechanisms.
- Ownership is built through a bridge request coming from the community itself and, to a certain extent, through contribution of labour.
- Transparency especially in terms of required contributions from the villagers is crucial for trust building.
- Sensitizing the communities for bridge maintenance raises the awareness of long-term and sustainable thinking.

❖ Impact of the bridges

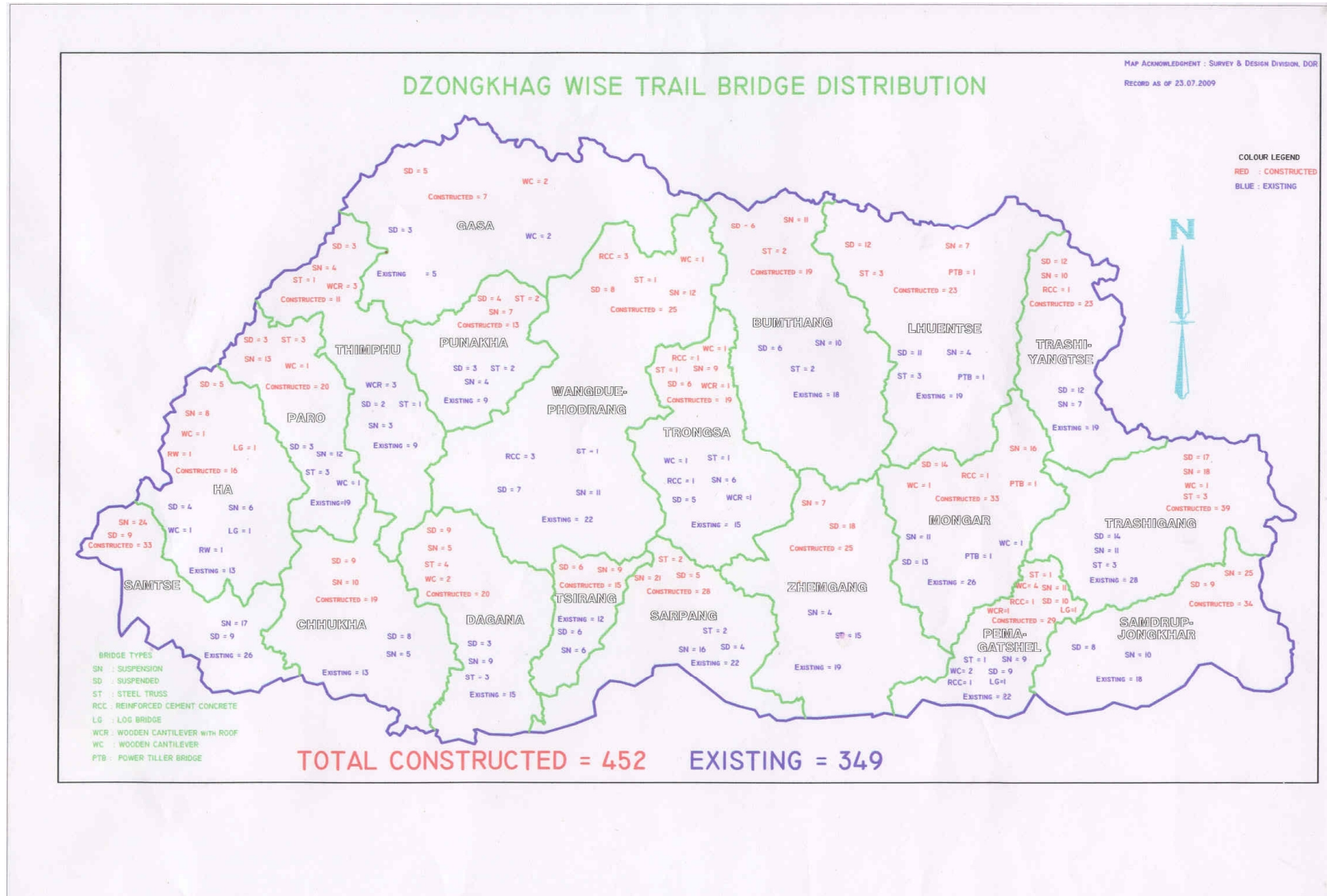
- The primary impacts of trail bridge building are safety, convenience, and time saving. Accessibility gives the people more freedom in planning their travels and work activities and often shortcuts long detours to the next safe river crossing.
- With better accessibility, buying of agricultural inputs as well as selling the products becomes easier and opportunities for income generation increase. Furthermore, other projects and infrastructure get better access to the communities which also have an economic impact. Not to be neglected are also the impacts on health and education because villagers reach schools and Basic Health Units much faster.

Although the immediate goal of SBP is providing infrastructure, the impacts go far beyond better access for the communities. Most of the impacts cannot even be measured in monetary terms. Thus, sector projects can never be looked at in isolation. SBP is a very good example of applying a holistic approach, including aspects of good governance and decentralization.

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Appendix I Dzongkhag wise Trail Bridge Distribution



Appendix II List of Visited Bridges

The following bridges and their beneficiaries from adjacent Geogs were visited during the fieldtrip from May 11 until May 20, 2009. The research team consisted of the Project Manager of SBP, Tshewang Dorji and SBS Chief Engineer Kunzang Namgyel who both also acted as interpreters, and the author.

Bridge Name	Phase	Date	Number of beneficiaries
Wangdicholling Zam, Bumthang	Phase III	May 13, 2009	3 people and current Tshogpa and JE
Khoma Zam Lhuentse	Phase III	May 18, 2009	15 people and Geog Administrative Officer and current Gup
Domkhar Zam, Bumthang	Phase IV	May 12, 2009	10 people and JE
Langthel Zam, Trongsa	Phase V	May 12, 2009	12 people and current Mangmii
Trome Zam, Bumthang	Phase V	May 12, 2009	8 people and JE
Dukti Zam, Tashi Yangtze	Phase V	May 14, 2009	20 people and current Gup
Phadingka Zam, Wangdue Phodrang	Phase V	May 19, 2009	3 people and JE
Laptsha Zam, Wangdue Phodrang	Phase VI	May 11, 2009	30 people and JE

Furthermore an interview was carried out with the Mongar DES, including the District Engineer and four Junior Engineers on May 18, 2009.



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