

GMC: A Challenging Vision

ABSTRACT

The proposed Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) represents a transformative urban development initiative in Bhutan, aimed at establishing a pivotal business connection between South East Asia and South Asia. Announced by King Jigme Khesar on December 17, 2023, the GMC aspires to create a holistic living environment attuned to Bhutan's philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), emphasising mindfulness, sustainability, and community well-being. This article explores the vision, strategic location, design principles, stakeholder collaborations, socio-environmental considerations, and potential challenges associated with the GMC.

Keywords: Gelephu, futuristic city, mindfulness, metropolis

Introduction

In December 2023, King Jigme Khesar announced the ambitious GMC project. The announcement marks a significant moment in Bhutan's urban development initiative, considering the country lacks the geography and population required for a mega city. As the country seeks to balance economic growth with the well-being of its citizens, the GMC is proposed as both a commercial hub and a model for sustainable urban living. This project aims to serve as a catalyst for attracting Bhutanese youths and professionals who have migrated abroad in search of better opportunities, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and community. The GMC project aims to integrate contemporary urban planning with Bhutan's unique cultural values, creating a city that reflects both modern aspirations and traditional ethos.

Gelephu is one of the most industrial and commercial towns of southern Bhutan. The current city was established in the late 1960s when the settlement was shifted from the banks of Mau river into its present location - about 30 kilometres east of Sarpang, the district headquarters. Though Sarpang is the administrative centre for the district by the same name, Gelephu has prospered and developed as a market town serving the hinterland due to various factors such as its proximity to Indian consumers, flat land for commercial expansion, tropical climate and growing population in the region. The geographical setting of the town with relatively flat terrain, close proximity and easy connectivity with India, and its location as a nodal connection for east, west and the central parts of Bhutan, makes Gelephu a preferred location for development. These advantages have positioned the Gelephu region as highly attractive for strategic development proposals initiated by the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB), including an industrial estate, a rail head, and an international airport.

At his announcement, the King highlighted that the land connection through Gelephu to link the two regions (South Asia and South East Asia) is a vibrant opportunity.

“South Asia is experiencing an unprecedented economic transformation. This is a period of growth and a period of immense opportunities for our region, which is home to around two billion people. The land connection from Gelephu or Samdrup Jongkhar through Assam and Northeast Indian states, to Myanmar, Thailand, to Cambodia and Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore, is a vibrant economic corridor linking South Asia to South East Asia. We are in a unique position to reap great benefits if we seize the opportunity, make good plans, and work together diligently” (Wangchuk, 2023).

The King also envisions to bring back Bhutanese youth and professionals who have migrated overseas searching for better economic opportunities. There are at least 30,000 Bhutanese in Australia (Asian News Network, 2024), and one estimates put the close to 100,000⁵ Bhutanese now live outside Bhutan. This population does not count towards Bhutanese refugees who have been resettled in several developed countries. Other notable countries with Bhutanese population include Canada, United States of America, Kuwait and Japan.

The vision of the GMC incorporates a holistic living environment that emphasises the principles of mindfulness, sustainability, and community well-being. The concept is rooted in Bhutan's GNH philosophy, which prioritises the well-being of citizens over economic growth. This project is envisioned as a sanctuary where residents can lead balanced lives, surrounded by nature and integrated with their community.

The project seeks to be a model for future urban developments in the region.

The GMC has three primary objectives:

Globally – To provide a sanctuary for professionals and businesses who want to transform the world into a more equitable, sustainable, and humane place.

Regionally – To create a tight-knit community that will drive the long-term economic and social development of South Asia.

⁵ As of end 2023, Bhutan records 64,000 of its citizens living overseas, in over 13 countries. The number has increased substantially since then.

Locally – To provide Bhutanese in Bhutan and overseas with meaningful employment and education opportunities, transforming the country and driving economic growth in a sustainable manner. The GMC initiative aligns with Bhutan's goal of becoming a developed nation by 2034 (Dorji, 2024). [Bhutan graduated](#) from least developed country to developing nation in 2023.

Location And Size

The GMC is strategically located in the south-central region of Bhutan, along the India-Bhutan border, enhancing its role as a transit hub for trade and tourism. The projected city is expected to cover approximately 2,500 square kilometres⁶, extending beyond the borders of the Sarpang district, which itself encompasses less than 2,000 square kilometres. This expansive area has the potential to serve as a central point for inland traders from Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, while also facilitating connections with India, Tibet, and Central Asian nations.

The geographical positioning of the GMC not only offers logistical advantages but also embodies Bhutan's aspirations for regional integration and economic collaboration. The city's strategic location will foster cross-border exchanges, attracting businesses and tourists alike. The GMC says, the final size of the core city will be determined through comprehensive environmental assessments, community consultations, and infrastructural capabilities, ensuring that the development aligns with the aspirations of the local population, while also adhering to Bhutan's commitment to environmental stewardship, such as being world's first carbon-negative country, constitutional requirements for 60 per cent of the nation's total land under forest cover.

⁶ During king's announcements, the city was proposed within 1000sqkm but the online portal for GMC has now expanded this size to 2500sqkm.

Design Principles

The proponents of the project claim the design of the GMC is influenced by GNH principles, prioritising individual and collective well-being over economic metrics. The urban layout will incorporate green spaces, walking paths, and recreational areas, encouraging outdoor activities and social interactions. This focus on designing for well-being is crucial in creating a community that promotes healthy lifestyles and fosters social ties among residents.

Green and Sustainable Infrastructure

One of the hallmarks of the GMC would be its commitment to sustainability. The urban design would embrace renewable energy sources, sustainable building materials, and water conservation practices. The integration of green roofs, solar energy, and efficient waste management systems would be fundamental to reducing the city's carbon footprint. Additionally, the project would prioritise the preservation of existing natural landscapes, integrating them into the urban environment to create a harmonious coexistence between nature and urban life.

Community-Centric Spaces

By fostering a mix of residential, commercial, and cultural spaces, the GMC aims to cultivate a vibrant and interconnected community. The layout would encourage mixed-use developments that promote local businesses, cultural activities, and social interactions. Community centres, art spaces, and marketplaces would serve as focal points for residents, enhancing social cohesion and cultural identity. The design would prioritise accessibility, ensuring that all segments of the population, including the elderly and differently-abled, can navigate the city with ease.

Development Partners

The RGOB has invited and engaged several international and regional partners for successful realisation of the GMC dream. These partners were handpicked and not selected through competitive tender process, which is contrary to the country's existing procurement rules and regulation. Current partners engaged, as per the GMC website, are:

Bjarke Ingels Group

Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) is a prominent architectural firm based in New York City, (Hadley, 2022) founded by architect Bjarke Ingels in 2005 (in Copenhagen, Denmark). Known for its innovative designs and sustainable approaches, BIG has made a significant impact on modern architecture, advocating for solutions that are both environmentally sustainable and socially responsible. The firm's philosophy revolves around the idea of "Yes is More", which emphasises a positive and proactive approach to problem-solving in urban design and architecture.

BIG's work spans a diverse array of projects, including residential buildings, cultural institutions, and urban planning initiatives, all characterised by a commitment to enhancing the quality of life for residents through thoughtful design and community engagement. The firm is particularly recognised for its ability to integrate natural landscapes into urban environments, creating spaces that foster interaction and promote well-being.

Magnolia Quality Development Corporation

Established in 1994, Magnolia Quality Development Corporation (MQDC) is a real estate company based in Thailand. With an emphasis on sustainability and innovation, MQDC has experiences of building high-rise luxury living spaces that enhance the quality

urban life. The company has a diverse portfolio, including residential, commercial, and mixed-use developments, all designed with a focus on environmental stewardship and community well-being.

The company has faced criticism and controversy over several projects, particularly regarding environmental impact and community relations. One of the most notable controversial projects is 'The Forestias,' a large-scale mixed-use development in Bangna, Bangkok. While marketed as a sustainable community, the project faced backlash from environmentalists and local residents who raised concerns about deforestation and the disruption of local ecosystems. Critics argued that the development compromised green spaces and wildlife habitats, leading to significant ecological changes in the area (Bangkok Post, 2024).

ARUP Infrastructure Engineering

ARUP Group, founded in 1946 by English engineer Sir Ove Arup, is a global engineering and design consultancy firm. Headquartered in London, ARUP aims to influence the built environment through its interdisciplinary expertise, integrating engineering, design, and sustainability principles. The firm's expertise spans transportation systems, water management, energy infrastructure, and urban development, all aimed at enhancing the functionality and liveability of cities.

One of the ARUP's celebrated projects is the Sydney Opera House in Australia, where it played a crucial role in overcoming the engineering challenges posed by Jørn Utzon's visionary design. The firm's work on the Lotte World Tower in South Korea and the High Line in New York City exemplifies its commitment to pushing the boundaries of architecture and urban design.

However, ARUP is not without controversy. The firm was involved in the construction of the London Aquatics Centre for the 2012 Olympics, which faced criticism for its cost overruns and design issues (Wainwright, 2008). ARUP's role in various infrastructure projects has raised concerns about environmental impacts and community displacement, particularly in large-scale developments.

CISTRI Strategic Economics

CISTRI is a Singapore-based consultancy firm (subsidiary of Australian company Urbis Ltd) specialising in economic strategy, urban development, and infrastructure planning. The firm has expertise in transport management, water management, and urban regeneration.

NACO Airspace Specialist

Established by Dutch aviation administrator Dr Albert Plesman in 1949, Netherlands Air Consultants (NACO) is airport engineering consultancy, headquartered in Hague. One of its iconic projects is Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. It has so far been involved in the consultancy and engineering of more than 600 airports around the world.

ERM Ecology Consultant

London based Environmental Resource Management (ERM) provides environmental, health, safety, risk, and social consulting and sustainability related services. Established in 1987, the company has worked mostly in the mining and energy sectors for environmental impact assessment. Outside of the UK, most of its projects have resulted in controversies. In 2022 the company and its partners were sued in a US court for knowingly exposing local residents to a toxic chemical that has contaminated the air, water, and soil. (Bloomberg Law, 2023).

CDR Hydrology Consultant

Established in 2012, CDR International is Netherlands-based coastal, river and port engineering and consultancy firm. CDR, which stands for Coasts, Deltas and Rivers, is an expert in project development, management, design and engineering services, particularly in the marine and maritime industries. The firm is known for flood risk assessment, water supply management, and ecosystem restoration.

Teneo

Based in New York City, Teneo is a public relation advisory company established in 2011. The company rose to prominence following the inclusion of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton as members of their advisory board. The inclusion ran into controversy and Clinton departed the following year. Company hiring of senior politicians continued, inviting both controversy and influence in expanding its business empire.

Feasibility Studies of The GMC

There had been several attempts in the last few decades to convert Gelephu into a commercial hub. The GMC is not the first test for the city. In 1986, the National Urban Development Corporation (NUDC) prepared an Urban Development Plan for Gelephu, with support from the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements. This plan aimed to address the needs of a growing population. However, political instability in the early 1990s and subsequent demographic shifts led to the abandonment of these plans and the transformation of Gelephu into a ghost town.

In the late 1990s, migration patterns shifted, revitalising the area as people moved from the northern regions of Bhutan to the south. This demographic change, coupled with a renewed focus on economic

development, prompted Bhutan to propose the establishment of a Special Economic Zone post-2000 (Department of Human Settlement, n. d). The proposal from the first elected government of the country was not materialised. The government has so far not published any reports outlining reasons of the failure. However, since the document projected plans until 2034, the transformation of Gelephu into GMC may form part of the proposal.

A joint study carried out by the Department of Urban Development and Gelephu Municipality in 2003 estimated the location population to be 12,398 with an average household size of 3.6 persons. The male to female ratio was 1.07 and about 50 per cent of the population were aged between 18 and 45. At that time, around 26 per cent of the Gelephu population were homeowners while 58 per cent were tenants and 8 per cent stayed in public housing. The literacy rate was 55 per cent, with 40 per cent reaching higher secondary level. The average household income was about Nu. 9,081 per month⁷, while the average income per person was about Nu. 2,522 per month. At least 20 per cent of the residents were government employees, 12 per cent were engaged in private business and 28 per cent were primary school students. The town also housed considerable numbers of police and army personnel.

This joint 20023 study highlighted the need for sustainable urban planning that could accommodate the aspirations of a young and dynamic population. The proposers claimed the area had all necessary primary infrastructure like telecommunications, roads, buyers' market, electricity and the good will of the government and public.

⁷ Average exchange in 2003 BTN 1 = AUD 54

Public Consultation And Community Engagement

Despite the excitement generated by the King's announcement of the GMC in late 2023, there has been a concerning lack of community consultation. Local residents express uncertainty regarding the future of their land, the impact on agrarian lifestyles, and potential changes to their socio-cultural fabric. Many inhabitants fear that the rapid urbanisation associated with the GMC might displace them or alter their traditional ways of life.

Engaging the community in meaningful dialogue is essential to address these concerns and ensure that the GMC reflects the aspirations of its future inhabitants. Effective public consultation strategies should include village meetings, surveys, and workshops that allow residents to voice their opinions and participate in the planning process. By prioritising community-driven development, the GMC can foster trust and ensure that the needs and aspirations of the residents are met.

Potential Strategies For Community Engagement

Focus Groups: Establish focus groups representing various demographics within the community, including youth, elders, farmers, and local business owners, to gather diverse perspectives on the development.

Workshops And Public Forums: Organise workshops and public forums where residents can learn about the project, express their concerns, and contribute ideas for the city's design and function.

Feedback Mechanisms: Implement transparent feedback mechanisms, such as online platforms or suggestion boxes, to allow residents to share their thoughts and concerns continuously throughout the development process.

Partnership With Local Leaders: Collaborate with local leaders and organisations to facilitate communication between the government and the community, ensuring that community voices are heard and considered.

Environmental Impact Assessment

A crucial aspect of modern urban development is conducting a comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). It remains unclear whether the government has completed or initiated this process for the GMC. Given Bhutan's commitment to environmental conservation, adherence to EIA protocols will be essential in balancing urbanisation with ecological sustainability.

The EIA process should evaluate potential impacts on local ecosystems, air and water quality, and the socio-economic fabric of the community. It should also incorporate mitigation strategies to address any adverse effects identified during the assessment. This approach will not only ensure compliance with internationally acceptable environmental practices but also reinforce Bhutan's identity as a nation that prioritises environmental stewardship.

EIA requires a comprehensive baseline studies to establish the current state of the environment, including biodiversity assessments, water quality analyses, and air quality measurements. It should evaluate potential impacts of the proposed urban development on the environment, including land use changes, habitat destruction, and resource consumption. If there are any negative impacts identified, propose mitigation measures to minimise negative impacts, such as preserving green spaces, implementing sustainable construction practices, and enhancing public transportation to reduce reliance on cars. The project should establish a monitoring framework to track the environmental

impacts of the GMC over time, ensuring that any unforeseen consequences can be addressed promptly.

Conclusion

The GMC represents a bold vision for urban development in Bhutan, intertwining economic aspirations with the principles of mindfulness and sustainability. The project aims to create a model for future urban developments by demonstrating how cities can be designed to enhance both individual and collective well-being. By prioritising community engagement, environmental stewardship, and sustainable practices, the GMC has the opportunity to redefine urban living in the region and serve as an example for other nations facing similar challenges.

Integrating GNH principles into its urban framework means the GMC can create a thriving economic hub and foster a sense of connection between individuals, their communities, and the natural environment. As this ambitious project unfolds, it will be essential to navigate the complexities of urban development with a mindful approach, ensuring that the vision for the GMC becomes a reality that benefits all stakeholders involved.

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