



Fund for Innovation
and Transformation

Fonds pour l'innovation
et la transformation



BHUTAN CANADA
FOUNDATION



འབྲུག་བཅོམ་འགྲུབ་དང་དམངས་གཙོའི་ལྗེ་བཀ
BHUTAN CENTRE
for MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY



Democracy Beyond Elections: Participatory Policy Through Design Thinking

A FIT Case Study in Bhutan

Lessons Learned from Bhutan Canada Foundation with partner
Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy



In partnership with
Canada

inter-council
network Provincial & Regional Councils
for International Cooperation

Overview

Bhutan Canada Foundation with partner Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy tested the innovative design thinking (DT) infused model of policy deliberation that engages unheard citizens like vulnerable women, youth and persons with disabilities (PWD) in shaping policies related to social protection.

The innovative approach engaged government officials, vulnerable women, PWD's and vulnerable youth in collaborating in a set of interrelated activities that were infused with the DT principles of empathy, co-learning, co-design and voicing.

These activities led to the co-development of a set of policy recommendations for which vulnerable participants advocated to government officials based on their lived experiences.

Key Results

- 100% of participating government officials planned to adopt a participatory and inclusive policy deliberation process compared to 89% at the baseline. The increase was greater among women officials than men.
- 84.6% of participants from vulnerable groups planned to continue actively engaging and influencing policy decisions compared to 61% at the baseline.
- 96% of vulnerable women planned to continue advocating on gender-related issues compared to 61% at the baseline.



A Participatory and Intersectional Gender Approach



The innovation drew on a series of participatory activities infused with design thinking principles that built upon one another. It included two design thinking workshops where vulnerable participants engaged with government officials in co-learning and co-designing social protection related policy recommendations based on the lived experiences of vulnerable people.

As well, the innovation focused on grounding women's voices, and vulnerable women in particular, in the policy deliberation process. This included not only adult women who were vulnerable, but young women, women with disabilities and their caregivers, as well as transgender women. Their lived experiences provided the foundation within the innovation to discuss and design policy recommendations to improve social protection related policies.

Specifically, this involved topics focused on how gender shapes the types of risks people face and how these risks can be interrelated for women. These co-learning opportunities provided powerful stories of gender inequality that served as the foundation for the co-creation of policy advocacy recommendations. The policy deliberation process was therefore directly based on the needs of the most vulnerable women in a manner that has not occurred in the past in Bhutan.

Lessons learned through the test illustrated that empathy is a powerful driver of policy deliberation, the multiple design thinking stages of the model are effective in promoting participatory policy dialogue and follow-up, diversity is required in participating government officials, and the expectations of vulnerable participants need to be managed.

This learning document will dive into some of the lessons learned and actions taken during testing.

Lessons Learned and Actions Taken



Participant Feedback- A Key Driver of Identifying Lessons Learned

Feedback from participants was incorporated directly into testing activities, including a daily debriefing and post-activity focus group discussion during innovation workshops, as well as through the midterm and final evaluations. The two evaluations used a mixed-methods approach where the qualitative data that emerged from key informant interviews, dyad interviews and focus group discussions enabled a deeper exploration of the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the quantitative results. .

How Participant Feedback Led to the Integration of an Intersectionality Approach

Participants of the first DT workshop recommended that the initiative include a deeper and more diverse understanding of vulnerability.

The innovation was originally designed with three categories of vulnerable groups as participants including vulnerable women, youth and people with disabilities.

In response to participants recommendation that this was too limiting, the second DT workshop re-conceptualized vulnerability to include multiple sub-categories of vulnerability within the original categories. This included the category of PWD being subdivided into those with visual, hearing and intellectual disabilities. Sub-categories of vulnerable women included women in difficult economic or social circumstances, women as caregivers to disabled family members, and transgender women. The original vulnerable youth category included was subdivided to include the sub-categories of unemployed youth, LGBTQA+ youth and youth who are recovering addicts.

This was a critical change that allowed the initiative to better reflect the complex nature of vulnerability and incorporate this complexity into policy deliberations and advocacy recommendations. It will be critical in future applications of the innovation to pay attention to this need to diversify our understanding of vulnerability among women and others to more meaningfully reflect their lived experiences.

Empathy as a Powerful Driver of Meaningful Policy Deliberation

Empathy is a core component of the design thinking policy deliberation approach. By listening to and engaging with the lived experiences of vulnerable populations, the innovation intended to foster empathy within government officials that becomes the basis of discussions for policy recommendations. The innovation test illustrated that the role of empathy was more powerful than expected.

All participating government officials spoke of gaining empathy that they previously lacked given the gap in their knowledge of the lived experiences of vulnerable people. Many spoke of being overcome with emotion when hearing these experiences directly from the people who live them and the importance of using this in the policy process. Several spoke of their past participatory approach to policy involving consulting with civil society organizations. Their experience with the innovation test has taught them that they must go deeper and hear from vulnerable people first had.

Significantly, participants from vulnerable populations spoke of how they, too, gained empathy for other people's vulnerabilities. Many spoke of how in the past they had only focused on their own experience, but the design thinking experience opened their eyes to the different challenges other people face.

Moreover, multiple vulnerable focus group participants spoke of how this new empathy has led them to believe it is critical for people with different kinds of vulnerabilities to continue to collaborate as all their voices together will amplify each of their experiences and empower them.

The emergence of empathy and the desire to confidently collaborate across vulnerable groups was a powerful outcome that was not necessarily expected at the beginning of the initiative.

The Multiple Stages of the Design Thinking Policy Model are Valuable for Promoting Application and Follow-Up

Multiple participants spoke of previous modes of participation that usually involved a single event with a largely one-way transmission of knowledge from government to citizens.

Participants further stated that this often led to them simply forgetting the results of the consultation after its completion. The policy deliberation model used in the Bhutan Canada innovation test used a set of design thinking stages.

The stages focused on three events involving co-learning, co-creation and voicing.

Multiple participants stated that this staged approach was important for driving meaningful co-creation of policy recommendation. By building their deliberation experiences together over time, participants felt more meaningfully involved and committed to policy change.

Diversity of Participants from Government is Needed

While the innovative approach had a clear impact on participating government officials' knowledge and confidence in engaging in a participatory and inclusive process of policy deliberation, a key lesson that emerged was the need to broaden the diversity of government officials in the future.

This needs to occur in two ways.

1

Front-line service providers need to be involved in the design thinking policy process as it is at the front-line where vulnerable people experience the greatest discrimination in the process of policy implementation.

2

The highest-ranking officials such as Ministry Secretaries and Ministers should also be involved.

Managing Expectations of Vulnerable Groups

The design thinking policy process excited and empowered participants from vulnerable populations. Many who were interviewed stated that it was the first time any government official had listened to them.

At the same time, this also raised expectations that something would finally be done by the government to improve their specific issues. This became evident in the first design thinking workshop. In response, subsequent innovation activities involved clarifying the potential outcomes of the process. Continuing to do so will be critical in future applications of the innovation.



Simplifying Language Around the Policy Process and Design Thinking

Policy concepts are a part of the daily work of government officials yet are quite foreign to vulnerable participants. Using them in the workshops in a manner that is relevant to both groups represented a challenge.

While this was recognized and a balance sought in the first workshop, input from participants illustrated that policy and design thinking concepts in the first workshop needed to be further simplified and explained so all participants could engage in policy deliberations effectively.

This simplification was undertaken for the remainder of the innovation. It will be critical for it to be maintained in future applications of the innovation.



Shifting Understanding of Participatory Methodologies

During the beginning of testing, it was identified that government officials understood “participatory” policy processes as meeting with civil society organizations (CSOs). Many were already doing this prior to the project, reflecting the 89% figure at the baseline.

However, after participating in the initiative, their understanding of the nature of a participatory approach shifted.

Participating government officials now believe it to be critical to engage directly with vulnerable people in addition to CSOs to directly hear about their lived experiences. They now plan to continue to do so in the future.

This important fundamental shift in how government officials understand and want to practice participation and inclusion going forward was a key success of the innovation test.



Fund for Innovation
and Transformation

Fonds pour l'innovation
et la transformation



Fund for Innovation
and Transformation

www.fit-fit.ca

