Virtual Zomdu Operational Guidelines

Parliament of Bhutan

2018

Table of contents

1. **Scope of the Guidelines**

These guidelines shall guide the operations of the Virtual Zomdu (video conferencing) between the members of Parliament and their constituents in Bhutan. The purpose of the guidelines is to assist parliamentarians and the people to engage in healthy dialogues/discussions virtually to promote inclusive governance culminating in a vibrant democracy. The guidelines will be used in line with the existing laws – Election Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2008, the Local Government Act of Bhutan 2009, the Local Government (Amendment) Act of Bhutan 2014. 2009, National Council Act of Bhutan 2008 and National Assembly Act of Bhutan 2008, National Council (Amendment) Act of Bhutan 2014 and National Assembly (Amendment) Act of Bhutan 2014, among others - concerning zomdu (public meeting) in the country. The application of the guidelines is limited to the operations of Virtual Zomdu sessions. The geographical coverage of the guidelines shall be the venue of Community Centers (CCs) - the venue for the people participating at the Virtual Zomdu to gather – and National Council and National Assembly of Bhutan. Currently, the CCs are operated and managed by **Bhutan Development Bank.** The Guidelines shall apply to the new operator as well (in case of change in the management of the operations of CCs in the future). It is prudent to have guidelines to ensure safe and efficacious use of the Virtual Zomdu facility. These guidelines are designed to serve as a consensus operational best practice reference in conducting Virtual Zomdu sessions.

2. Introduction

Bhutan embraced parliamentary democracy in 2008. The democratic institutions, culture and platforms for democratic discourse are being built, deepened and explored. The Virtual Zomdu platform for parliamentarians to interact with their constituents is an attempt to bring Parliament to the people. This is in the backdrop of most constituencies being situated at far-flung and scattered villages with mountainous terrains which limit frequent physical presence of MPs at their constituencies. The Virtual Zomdu platform will provide an impetus to the existing norm of MPs visiting their constituencies twice a year. It will not substitute the mandatory visits, but will fill in the gap when certain issues warrant interaction and dialogue between the people and their representatives (when they are away from their constituencies).

The Virtual Zomdu facility is also an effort toward riding on Bhutan's ICT dream – to become an ICT-enabled society. It ensures optimum use of the existing facilities at CCs in the country. Most CCs have fiber optic and Internet connectivity. Beginning with creating a platform for MPs and the people to interact and discuss issues of their concern, the facility can be used for other purposes in the future. For example, for health advocacy, spreading important agricultural and disaster management related messages. The Virtual Zomdu sessions will be open to all people of the constituencies regardless of literacy, gender, and social status.

Some immediate benefits of the Virtual Zomdu project include strengthening democratic culture through two-way interaction between MPs and the people, holding elected leaders accountable by the public, bringing Parliament to the grassroots in real-time, and minimizing cost by harnessing the advantages of digital technology. Others are informing people about the work of the Parliament, increasing the engagement of the people, especially at the local level, in democratic processes, and enabling parliamentarians to collect feedback on issues they deliberate in the Parliament.

Moreover, the Virtual Zomdu platform can engage broader audience than who could attend Virtual Zomdu sessions at the CCs. The sessions could be streamed on to the parliamentary website, social media, and on radio programs.

3. Administration
The Parliament of Bhutan (National Council and National Assembly), Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC), Department of Local Governance (DLG) under the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, Department of Information Technology and Telecom (DITT) under the Ministry of Information and Communications and **Bhutan Development Bank** are involved in using the Virtual Zomdu platform, managing its facilities and facilitating the sessions. The individual institution's responsibilities are outlined hereunder.

3.1. Gross National Happiness Commission
The Commission will guide the Virtual Zomdu project to ensure its alignment with the Royal Government of Bhutan's Development Plan.

3.2. Parliament

The Parliament of Bhutan led by the National Assembly Secretariat, through the taskforce, will be responsible for the overall Virtual Zomdu project implementation. The National Council and National Assembly of Bhutan shall have the User Right of the Virtual Zomdu platform and its facilities. They own the Virtual Zomdu equipment set up in their respective Secretariats. They will bear the cost associated with periodic maintenance of Virtual Zomdu equipment at the Secretariats. After the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Bhutan's support to the Virtual Zomdu facility is phased out after two years, the Parliament shall ensure the sustainability of the project starting from bearing the no**minal fees charged by the Bhutan Development Bank for** operating and facilitating the Virtual Zomdus through its CCs. Further, the Parliament shall be responsible for replacing/upgrading (when needed in the future) Virtual Zomdu equipment set up at its secretariats.

3.3. Department of Local Governance

The Department of Local Governance will support and guide in conducting Virtual Zomdu sessions. The Department will ensure effective flow of communication between the Parliament and Virtual Zomdu organizers at the local level. It is the responsibility of the Department to inform and advise the local government participating in Virtual Zomdu sessions about the relevant laws in place on holding zomdus. The Virtual Zomdu sessions will be conducted in accordance with the provisions of the Local Government Act on holding Zomdu and other relevant laws and policies.

3.4. Department of Information Technology and Telecom

The Department is responsible for technical backstopping to enable smooth conduct of Virtual Zomdu sessions by CC operators and the Parliament. The Department will ensure that Virtual Zomdu facilities are in good condition all the time.

The Department will attend to technical problems the CC operator and Dzongkhag ICT officials report about.

3.5. Bhutan Development Bank.

The Corporation, through the CC operators, will facilitate the Parliament and local government authority in conducting Virtual Zomdu sessions. Its operators will manage and take care of the Virtual Zomdu equipment. In this regard, the Corporation will work closely with   Dzongkhag Administration Office and DITT.

The CC operator at the particular CC shall book the venue for the planned Virtual Zomdu. He/she shall ensure all Virtual Zomdu equipment are functional during the session, including ensuring audible sound and clear visuals. In the event of encountering technical problems during the Virtual Zomdu sessions, the CC operators will inform the Dzongkhag ICT officials concerned. The CC operator will also collect feedback and fill out monitoring information sheet on each Virtual Zomdu session to enable effective monitoring and evaluation of the project.

3.6. UNDP Bhutan

UNDP Bhutan is a partner in the Virtual Zomdu project and has provided financial and technical support to the prototyping and piloting phase of the project during 2014 and 2015. The support included setting up required hardware at the Parliament and at the 45 pilot CCs, as outlined in the project document. UNDP Bhutan will work with the Parliament of Bhutan and GNHC to mobilize resources to upscale the project from 2016.

4. Ethical Considerations

The parliamentarians will use the Virtual Zomdu platform to interact with the people in their constituencies. The platform will not be used for personal interest such as political campaigning. The conduct of Virtual Zomdu sessions must adhere to the existing relevant laws in force. The larger objective of holding Virtual Zomdu sessions must be to engage the people in discussing parliamentary issues and others that concern them - which are within the mandates of parliamentarians. The parliamentarians will use the Virtual Zomdu platform to educate people on the works of the Parliament. They will limit their discussion to the agenda approved by the Speaker of the National Assembly or Chairman of the National Council. People in the constituencies can also request parliamentarians to use the Virtual Zomdu platform to discuss issues of their concern. The parliamentarian concerned shall get the approval from the Speaker/Chairman to do so.

The parliamentarian concerned will bear the full responsibility to ensure the Virtual Zomdu is conducted to benefit the people at the grassroots. Any conflict of interest shall be avoided. MPs shall provide sufficient time to allow their constituents to ask questions and shall answer them. The Virtual Zomdu organizers and participants shall consider it imperative to use the platform ethically and with respect.

5. Coordination of the Zomdu

After the Speaker/Chairman approves a parliamentarian's proposed agenda for discussion with his constituents through Virtual Zomdu platform, the information with the approval should be sent to the Dzongkhag Administration concerned copying it to the Department of Local Governance for information and support where necessary. The Dzongkhag Administration shall inform the Gewog Administration. The Gewog Administration will coordinate the zomdu.

The Gewog Administration concerned will have at least one week (from the date of approval of the agenda by the Speaker/Chairman) to coordinate the Virtual Zomdu session. The MP concerned shall also liaise with the Gewog Administration to arrange the session.

5.1. Request for Virtual Zomdu session from the people

The people in the constituencies shall also initiate to engage their representatives in the Parliament at a Virtual Zomdu session to discuss issues of their concern. A person (s) desiring to have a Virtual Zomdu session with their MP shall inform the Gup along with the proposed agenda. The Gup shall inform the MP concerned who in turn will seek approval from the Speaker/Chairman.

5.2. Notice

The Gewog Administration shall inform the people about the Virtual Zomdu with their elected leader at least two days in advance.

5.3. Agenda setting

MPs wishing to use the Virtual Zomdu platform shall set his/her agenda and seek the Speaker/Chairman's approval. Only the approved agendas shall be discussed at the zomdu.

5.4. Format of the session

It shall be left to the MP concerned and the people participating at the zomdu to decide the format of the session. The focus of the Virtual Zomdu shall be on the two-way interaction between the people and their representatives. It must encourage constructive discussions and debates. However, this is a suggested format.

1	Introduction
2	MP's remarks on the agreed agenda
3	Open the floor for questions
4	Participants ask questions to the MP
5	The MP answers questions
6	Discussion
7	Decision

5.5. Chair of the zomdu

The MP concerned shall chair the session and moderation at the gewog/cc will be carried out by the concerned gewog administration.

5.6. Duties of the CC operator

The CC operator at the particular CC shall book the venue for the planned Virtual Zomdu. He/she shall ensure all Virtual Zomdu equipment are functional during the session, including ensuring audible sound and clear visuals. In the event of encountering technical problems during the Virtual Zomdu sessions, the CC operators will inform the Dzongkhag ICT officials concerned. The CC operator will also collect feedback and fill out monitoring information sheet on each Virtual Zomdu session to enable effective monitoring and evaluation of the project.

Duties of Dzongkhag Adm office
If the Dzongkhag ICT officials are not able to solve the problems, they will forward the case to DITT for immediate intervention.

5.7. Minutes

A parliamentary secretariat (NC/NA) official shall be deployed to assist the MP during the Virtual Zomdu session. The official will keep the minutes of the meeting and document it for future reference. Further, all Virtual Zomdu sessions shall be videoed and maintained at the parliamentary secretariats for record. A copy of the minutes of the meeting shall be shared with the Gewog Administration concerned.

The minutes shall include the following among others:

a.   A fair and correct summary of the proceedings

b.   Decisions taken, if any

c.   Date and venue of the meeting

d.   List of attendees

e.   Name and signature of the chairperson

5.8. Technical support during the zomdu

The **CC** operator, guided by the Dzongkhag Administration officials and DITT, will provide technical support during the zomdu.

5.9. Zomdu duration

The duration of the Virtual Zomdu can be as per the agenda and should be scheduled during office hrs, monday to friday.

5.10. Timing

The Virtual Zomdu sessions shall be held between 9.00am and 5.00pm from Monday to Friday.

5.11. Language

In line with the Local Government Act of Bhutan 2009 concerning zomdus, the national language (Dzongkha) shall be used as the medium of the Virtual Zomdu.

6. Venue and facilities

All Virtual Zomdu sessions shall be held at **CCs** with the other point/hub at the Parliament of Bhutan (National Council and National Assembly). Currently, some CCs are located at Gup's office. Therefore, the reference to CCs also covers Gup's office at which CCs are housed.

6.1. Facilities

Currently, there are 185 CCs in operation. Of these, 133 have Internet with fiber optic last mile connectivity. A CC is a two-room structure each with 2-3 computers, black and white printer, a color printer, a digital camera, a photocopier, a scanner, a binding machine and lamination machine. Operators, with Class XII or X qualifications trained in basic computer operation systems and provision of offline and online services, manage the CCs.

6.2. Transmission speed and bandwidth

Bandwidth must be unrestricted at all CCs for videoconferencing from the Dzongkhag Administration.

- Current bandwidth restricted to 512 Kbps from the Dzongkhag Administration (via Bhutan Power Corporation) to CCs.
- Minimum bandwidth required: 1Mbps
- Recommended bandwidth: 2 Mbps (Full 1080p HD)

6.3. Network Overview

As per the diagram below, currently, an 8 Mbps internal G2C/G2G intranet connection exists in all 20 Dzongkhags. Over the current network and with the hardware in place at DITT, it is possible for either NA or NC to hold videoconferences with up to 9 CCs at the same time from anywhere across Bhutan. In addition, if NA happens to be holding 9 simultaneous videoconferences, the NC can at the same time also hold its own 9 simultaneous videoconferences with any of the CCs across Bhutan.

VC Setup at NA & NC Office and at all CCs
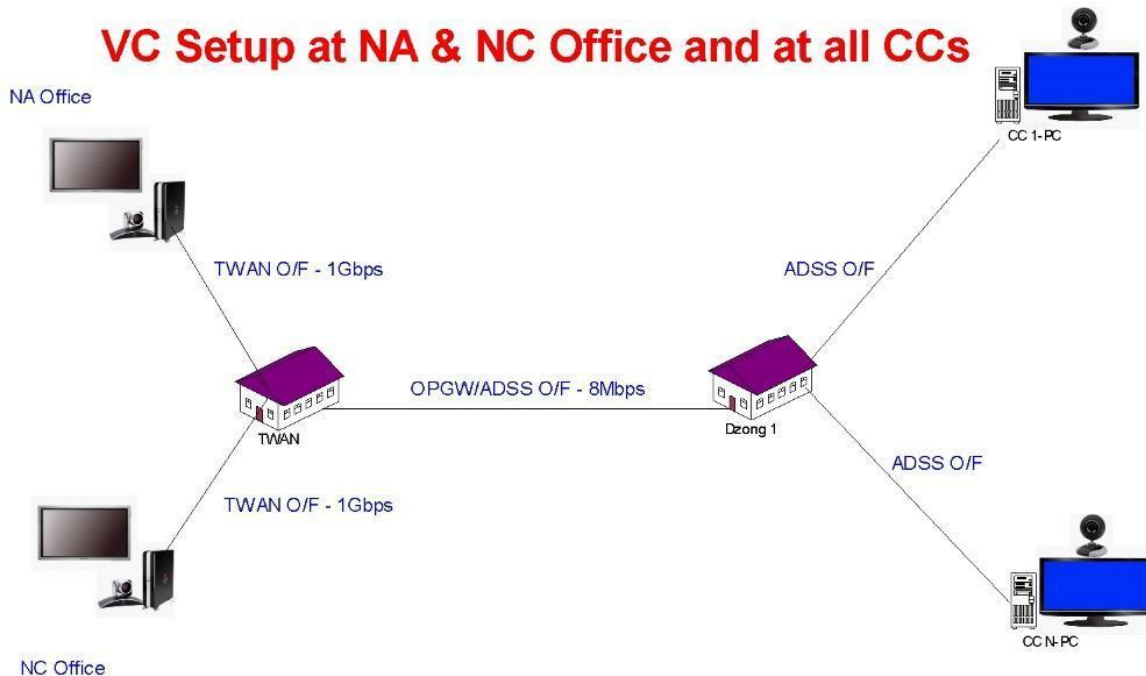
7. Ownership

The National Council and National Assembly will own the videoconferencing hubs and other related equipment installed at their offices. **DITT will own all the Virtual Zomdu equipment set up at CCs until now (date). The equipment will be inventoried and handed over to DITT by the Parliament.** A bilateral agreement shall be drawn between the Parliament and DITT regarding the handing over of the Virtual Zomdu equipment.

8. Maintenance

It shall be the responsibility of DITT to carry out regular maintenance on the Virtual Zomdu equipment at CCs and at the Parliament to ensure they are functional all the time. The CC operators will keep DITT informed regarding the needs and requirements to maintain the equipment.

As specified in the project document, UNDP Bhutan will provide seed funding for the maintenance of the Virtual Zomdu equipment at CCs and pay **nominal fee to Bhutan Development Bank for using CCs** and facilitating the conduct of Virtual Zomdu sessions (by CC operator) during 2015.

The UNDP and other stakeholders will mobilize further resources for the project and its up scaling. Once the project is institutionalized, the Parliament of Bhutan shall bear the

maintenance cost and fees payable to the CC. UNDP Bhutan (for the first two years of the project) and the Parliament thereafter shall pay to the Bhutan Development Bank the following annual fee.

- **Nu. 1000 per VZ (includes the first hour)**
- **Nu. 500 for each additional hour**

No network access fee will be charged for the Virtual Zomdu.

9. Scheduling Virtual Zomdu sessions

The availability of the Virtual Zomdu platform for MPs shall be on first come, first served basis. The confirmation of the availability of the facility is subject to the approval of the Speaker/Chairman. -

10. Use of Virtual Zomdu facilities for other purposes

Apart from MPs using the Virtual Zomdu facility to engage people in the constituencies on issues of their concern, it shall be the responsibility of the project's taskforce consisting of different stakeholders to plan and decide when the Virtual Zomdu facility should be used for other purposes. It could be, for example, used for undertaking health and electoral advocacy and spreading agricultural and disaster management messages.

11. Adherence to existing relevant laws and policies

All Virtual Zomdu sessions will be conducted in adherence to the existing relevant laws, policies, rules and regulations. It shall be the duty of the MP concerned and the gewog administration to ensure the Virtual Zomdu is conducted in accordance with the law.

12. Dispute resolution

Any dispute arising out of Virtual Zomdu sessions will be dealt in accordance with the laws of the Kingdom of Bhutan.

13. Composition of the taskforce

The Director of the National Assembly will be the chairman of the taskforce with at least one representative each from all the stakeholders.

14. Evaluation

The Virtual Zomdu project will be evaluated annually. During the evaluation, the taskforce will collect feedback from MPs to improve the project.

Reconstitute Task Force

Annex 1: Monitoring information sheet

Sl. No			Remarks
1.	Virtual Zomdu serial No.		
2	Community Center Name		
3	Timing		
4	Duration taken		
5	Date		
6	Month		
7	Year		
8	Name of MP		
9	National Assembly		
10	National Council		
11	Constituency		
12	Dzongkhag		
13	Agenda		
14	No. of Participants & Age bracket	M. F.	
15	Number of questions asked	………	
16	Who asked?	a.Man ……….. b.Woman …….	

Annex 2: Evaluation: Virtual Zomdu feedback form

Please take a few minutes to provide us your valuable feedback about the Virtual Zomdu session you attended. Your feedback and advice will be used to improve Virtual Zomdu sessions to serve you better.

Virtual Zomdu Serial No: ………………..

Name of MP: …………………………….

Constituency: ……………………………

DD/MM/YY:…………………………

1. Of the following reasons, please choose the best three that were most important to you in deciding to attend the Virtual Zomdu session.

- The Gewog Administration informed me to attend
- Agenda of the Zomdu
- Had a question to ask
- To listen to the MP
- The MP informed to attend
- Had free time
- Others (specify)_____

2. Please indicate whether you 'Agree'
   or 'Disagree' with the following statements: **Agree**   **Disagree**

	Agree	Disagree
The Zomdu was well organized	☐	☐
The MP was well prepared	☐	☐
The session was useful	☐	☐
The MP addressed the concerns raised	☐	☐
The time allotted was sufficient	☐	☐
The Zomdu format is effective	☐	☐
I enjoyed the Zomdu	☐	☐
The Zomdu provided me more information on the subject	☐	☐
I would recommend others to attend	☐	☐
The Zomdu improves communication between	☐	☐

`   MPs and the people

- I would attend the Zomdu in the future   ☐   ☐
- The Zomdu improved by understanding of the topic ☐   ☐

3.   Suggest one thing that should be done to improve the Zomdu.

-

4.   What are the topics you would want to discuss with your MP at future Virtual Zomdu sessions?

-

5.   Provide any other comments regarding the Virtual Zomdu.

-

Annex 3: General guidelines for successful Virtual Zomdu

1. **Identify tropical issues for agenda:** MPs and people could think of agendas that are tropical and relevant.
2. **Organize well:** Ensure that zomdu is conducted properly. All equipment should be functioning well. Lighting and sound should be fixed properly for visibility and audibility to ensure clear communication.
3. **Market Virtual Zomdu:** Led by the Parliament, the stakeholders market the Virtual Zomdu platform. Announcement through Bhutan Broadcasting Service's (BBS) Radio Program in vernacular languages/dialects could be effective. Other communication channels such as mainstream media outlets and social media could also be used.
4. **Keep the discussion simple:** Most attendees are people without formal educational attainment. Therefore, the discussions could be effective if kept free of legal and technical jargons.

5. **Sufficient time for Q&A:** The aim of the Virtual Zomdu platform is to maximize a two-way communication between MPs and their constituents. Allocating sufficient time for Q&A will make the zomdu interactive, lively and interesting.

6. **Encourage participants to ask tough questions:** Most participants are people at the grassroots. MPs could encourage them to ask tough questions without censuring themselves to make the best use of the platform.

7. **Getting back with answers next time:** In the events where MPs are not able to give answers instantly to the questions asked, they could leave a word that they will have the answers either at the next Virtual Zomdu or communicate through other channels. This will build confidence in the platform.

8. **Use it as an alternative meeting space:** Many constituencies are located in far-flung villages that are difficult for MPs to be there often. The Virtual Zomdu platform could be used to keep in touch with the constituents regularly and hear their concerns.

9. **Follow up:** Both MPs and organizers could keep in touch with the participants who attended the Virtual Zomdu in the past and follow up with them how to improve the space to benefit the people. The relationship between MPs and the people built through Virtual Zomdu sessions should be put to use to contribute toward building democratic culture.