

Bhutan

UNICEF HIV and AIDS Programming Country Profile 2006

UNITE FOR CHILDREN
UNITE AGAINST AIDS

HIV and AIDS in Bhutan

Bhutan is considered a very low prevalence country by UNAIDS. After the first case was identified in 1993, only 83 cases were identified as of April 2006. However, 22 HIV infected cases (27%) were identified in 2004 alone and 6 already in 2006, indicating an increase in infections in recent years. With a total of 18 deaths among the identified HIV cases, there are currently 65 people identified in Bhutan to be living with HIV/AIDS¹. Of the identified cases, 10 have been mothers from which 8 children were infected through mother to child transmission¹. Bhutan identified its first HIV/AIDS orphans in 2005, 3 children from one family, all of whom are HIV negative.

Though the total number is still small, both the Ministry of Health and development agencies are concerned with the current HIV/AIDS situation and it is seen as a potential major public health concern. Given that nearly 80% of Bhutanese who have died of HIV/AIDS remained undetected for more than 6 years, there is concern that they could have unknowingly infected others¹.

Underlying factors for a potential spread of HIV in Bhutan include: (i) high rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs); (ii) high proportion of young people (40% of the population below 15 years of age); (iii) migration and mobility within the country (iv) porous borders with neighbouring countries, India and China, that have a higher prevalence; (v) spread of commercial sex to new areas; (vi) liberal attitude to sex; (vii) low condom use and (viii) an increasing trend of substance use among youth.

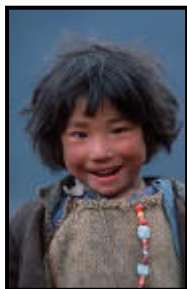
With a population of 672,425² the senior health officials in Bhutan are concerned about the potential impact of HIV/AIDS on the small population as well as the health care expenditure (all health care services including drugs are free of charge to Bhutanese people).



Vulnerabilities and risks facing children and young people

- ✘ Increased migration and mobility
- ✘ Low condom use
- ✘ Liberal attitude towards sex
- ✘ High rates of STIs
- ✘ Spread of commercial sex to new parts of the country
- ✘ Increasing substance use
- ✘ Low levels of literacy and education

© UNICEF/Bhutan – Child from Eastern Bhutan.



HIV and AIDS Estimates

(Source: UNAIDS, Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic 2006)

Number of people living with HIV	< 500
Adults aged 15 to 49 HIV prevalence rate	< 0.1
Adults aged 15 and over living with HIV	< 500
Women aged 15 and over living with HIV	< 100
Deaths due to AIDS	< 100

Strategy and Objectives

His Majesty the King provides guidance to the Cabinet and National HIV/AIDS Committee (NHAC) on the importance of preventing HIV/AIDS among the population. NHAC is chaired by the Minister of Health with membership of all the secretaries from other Ministries. Through a multi-sectoral group, all districts will have a working committee to deal with STI and HIV/AIDS.

UNICEF Bhutan provides some support to the government for attainment of goals set out in their 5 year work plan with a strong focus on the needs of children and women. The Royal Government established its current 5 year work plan in collaboration with the World Bank which has pledged 5.7 million USD with which a comprehensive programme including (i) prevention; (ii) institutional strengthening (laboratory services, blood safety, etc.); (iii) care counselling and treatment; and (iv) data and surveillance. UNICEF's strategy is to support the government efforts, with a focus on primary prevention among young people as well as PMTCT, Paediatric Treatment and Protection, Care and Support for affected children.



© UNICEF/Bhutan - HIV/AIDS poster with declaration by His Majesty the King of Bhutan

unicef

¹ Bhutan's National Newspaper, Kuensel, Article Name: Six More Detected with HIV. Date: April 15, 2006, Volume XX1 No.28.

² Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2005. Office of the Census Commissioner, Royal Government of Bhutan

UNICEF's HIV and AIDS Programme Areas

Prevention: Reduce adolescent risks and vulnerability to HIV by increasing access to and use of gender-sensitive prevention information, skills and services.

42% of Bhutan's population are young people. High rates of casual sex are detected in the country and a high incidence of STIs among young people is found. Condom use is very low. One of UNICEF Bhutan's first efforts for prevention was production of a poster of His Majesty the King with the Royal Proclamation on HIV/AIDS which has been distributed widely.

With increased mobility, spread of commercial sex to new areas and substance use across the country, there is need for prevention efforts to step up.

Current programmes

⌘ *Young People on Wheels - promoting awareness on HIV/AIDS:*

Children and young people comprise more than 50% of the detected HIV/AIDS cases in Bhutan. In order to empower this target age group with necessary knowledge and behavioral skills in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS, UNICEF and the Youth Development Fund, a local NGO, initiated this project in July 2005. With support of the Ministry of Health and artists from the Bhutanese Film and Music Industry, 30 out-of school youth were recruited and trained as trainers on HIV/AIDS sensitization, acting, dancing and singing. The result was a motivated group of young people with a mission of creating awareness on HIV/AIDS among their peers. Through skits, songs and dances, the 'Youth on Wheels...' took message on HIV/AIDS to 8 districts in 2005, reaching more than 8,000 people including school children, youth and local communities. The live tour concluded for the year with the final show in Thimphu in October 2005 coinciding with the launch of the Global Campaign on Children and AIDS. The 'Young People on Wheels ...' is currently on tour in Southern Bhutan under the banner - Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS. They plan to complete all 20 districts of the country in the next 3 months with the target of delivering the HIV/AIDS message to as many as 50,000 children and youth in the country.

⌘ *Religion and Health:*

Given that religious leaders are highly regarded in Bhutan, the Religion and Health project has started increasing the capacity of monks and nuns to be messengers on HIV/AIDS prevention. To date, nearly 100 monks and nuns have been trained on Buddhist responses to HIV/AIDS to communicate key messages to the general public. In addition to the respect and regard in which monks are held, most Bhutanese households have monks within their home to perform religious rites at least once a year, ensuring contact between the trained monks and families. This approach will not only help improve knowledge and change attitudes and behaviours related to HIV/AIDS and associated risks, but will also be important in reducing stigma. There is also interest on using monks to provide counselling and support services for people living with HIV/AIDS.

⌘ *Increasing Knowledge among Non-Formal Education (NFE) Learners:*

With low literacy continuing to be a major issue in Bhutan, there is an extensive NFE literacy programme with approximately 16,000 learners each year, most of whom are young women. In 2006, reading materials on HIV/AIDS prevention for use in the literacy programme are being produced. The stories will also encourage the NFE learners to act as agents of change in their communities and pass on key messages.

Future Programming Priorities

- ⌘** Development of a locally relevant training programme for religious leaders on HIV/AIDS prevention and care, including counselling and support for those affected with subsequent capacity building of monks and nuns.
- ⌘** Youth on Wheels: With success to date and need for continued child and youth participation, the project will continue to spread HIV prevention and care messages through edutainment programme and peer to peer education in the years to come.



© UNICEF/Bhutan – Monk providing HIV/AIDS education

Targets

- ⌘** To reduce the risk and vulnerability of HIV infection among youth
- ⌘** To empower young people to become advocates on HIV/AIDS among their peers and communities in their efforts to access specific information on HIV/AIDS



© Jonathan Swift – Mother and child

Targets

- ⌘ All identified HIV positive pregnant women have access to comprehensive PMTCT Plus services and follow up.

PMTCT Plus: Reduce HIV infection among pregnant women and prevent transmission of HIV to their infants.

The first mother-to-child transmission was reported in Bhutan in 2001. Currently, mother-to-child transmission constitutes about 7%. With UNICEF support, the PMTCT program is being introduced within the general framework of the HIV/AIDS program in 2005.

Future Programming Priorities

- ⌘ Training of health staff on PMTCT and counselling
- ⌘ Develop communication plan and materials regarding the importance of ANC and PMTCT
- ⌘ To monitor management of the PMTCT program and make programmatic changes as required.

Paediatric treatment: Universal access of HIV infected children to treatment, care and support.

Bhutan drafted Paediatric HIV infection management guidelines in October 2005. UNICEF will work with the Ministry of Health in 2006 to finalise the guidelines and build the capacity of Paediatricians and healthcare workers on them.

Future Programming Priorities

- ⌘ To monitor management of Paediatric HIV infection and make programmatic changes as required.



© Jonathan Swift – Mother and child

Targets

- ⌘ All HIV-exposed babies receive cotrimoxazole prophylaxis
- ⌘ All identified HIV-positive children have access to drugs, medicines and treatment for opportunistic infections.
- ⌘ All identified HIV-positive children who require it, have access to appropriate ARVs.

Partnerships

UNICEF Bhutan is working closely together with...

- ⌘ **Religious leaders:** UNICEF has supported religious leaders in training on Buddhist responses to HIV/AIDS and will undertake future work with them in similar areas.
- ⌘ **The Youth Development Fund:** UNICEF has worked with this local NGO on development and implementation of the Young People on Wheels Project
- ⌘ **Youth in Bhutan:** UNICEF has worked with a group of 30 out of school youth on the Young People on Wheels Project. UNICEF will continue to work with new groups of youth on similar activities in the coming years.
- ⌘ **Local Artists** from the Bhutanese music and film industry support training for the young people on wheels project.

UNICEF Bhutan
 P.O.Box 239
 Thimphu
 Bhutan
 Tel: +975 2 324325
 Fax: +975 2 323238

UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia
 HIV/AIDS Section
 Lekhnath Marg, Lainchaur
 P.O. Box 5815
 Kathmandu
 Nepal
 Tel: +977 1 4417 082
 Fax: +977 1 4419 479



© UNICEF/Bhutan – school children

Relevant Documents:

- ⌘ Buddhist perspective to HIV/AIDS prevention (in local language, Dzongkha)
- ⌘ Paediatric HIV infection management guidelines (draft form)