Annual Report 2020

Accelerating Results for Every Child in Bhutan

unicef
for every child

75

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A student of Laptsakha Primary School in Punakha walks home with her cushion and desk after attending a lesson at a farmhouse in Laptsakha village.

"Each of our children must embody the fine blend and balance of our native grit and intellect with acquired knowledge and skills to survive and prosper as individuals and as members of our national community."

His Majesty The King
Royal Edict on Education Reform
Thimphu
February 2021

THE CHILD MANDALA

THE CHILD MANDALA – A VISION FOR THE WELLBEING OF CHILDREN IN BHUTAN

Mandala is a symbolic representation of the universe, an idea that life is never ending, in which everything is connected and interdependent. Drawing inspiration from this concept, the Child Mandala represents our collective journey in ensuring the wellbeing of children in Bhutan. It is grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

In this Mandala:

- Children are at the center of focus.
- The flower petals represent children's physical, mental, social and spiritual wellbeing.
- The triangles in four directions represent the guiding principles of Child Rights, which are:
  Best Interest of the Child, that is when adults make decisions, they need to consider the impacts on children and ensure their wellbeing.
  Non-Discrimination means all children are treated equally.
  Survival and Development, that is all children survive and thrive.
  Respect Views of the Child means adults listen to children for their views.
- The squares represent the support required in ensuring the rights of children. This support ensures that children are happy, safe from harm, healthy, learning, playing and heard.
- The last three circles represent those responsible for providing the care and support, namely:
  - Families as duty-bearers to ensure the love and care children need.
  - Community members or, where applicable the extended family, to provide appropriate direction and guidance to children.
  - The State to ensure that all appropriate legal, administrative measures and services are available to help children grow to their full potential.

In summary, the Child Mandala represents a guide to ensure the wellbeing and happiness of children. And it requires everyone to work together through partnership and collaboration.

Bhutan signed the CRC on 4th of June 1990 and ratified it on 1st of August 1990.

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ACRONYMS

C4D	Communication for Development
CCT	Conditional Cash Transfer
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ECCD	Early Childhood Care and Development
EndVAC	End Violence Against Children
EPI	Expanded Programme on Immunization
MCH	Mother and Child Health
NYP	National Youth Policy
PCV	Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine
RGoB	Royal Government of Bhutan
SATO	Safe Toilet
SGD	Sustainable Development Goals
UNSDPF	United Nations Sustainable Development Partnership Framework
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

*All data sourced and reported in this report is official government data.

UNICEF Bhutan would like to thank our partners who supported us in 2020:

Asian Development Bank
Andorran Committee for UNICEF
Czech Committee for UNICEF
Danish Committee for UNICEF
Federal Republic of Germany
GAVI, The Vaccine Alliance
German Committee for UNICEF
Global Partnership for Education
Government of Denmark
Government of Japan
Government of South Korea
Government of Switzerland
Hongkong Committee for UNICEF
Japan Committee for UNICEF
Japan Committee for UNICEF (COOP Sapporo)
Japan Committee for UNICEF (Vaccines for the World's Children)
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Korean Committee for UNICEF
Lego Foundation
New Zealand Committee for UNICEF
Swedish Committee for UNICEF
Swiss Committee for UNICEF
UNICEF Gulf Office, Dubai
United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

FOREWORD

2020 was a year unlike any in recent memory. As the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed panic, tragedy and chaos, it upended the lives of children and young people across the world.

While they may be less susceptible to the virus itself, children and young people were affected by the impacts of the economic and social consequences of the lockdowns and other measures taken to counter the pandemic. Decades of progress on children's health, education and other priorities were at risk of being wiped out.

The pandemic significantly threatened children's well-being in Bhutan. The delivery of antenatal and post-natal care services was disrupted, and immunization coverage dropped from 97 per cent in 2019 to 86.7 per cent in 2020.

When the pandemic shuttered schools in March, learning was disrupted for almost 180,000 children of whom 74,726 also missed out on regular school meals. When classes 9 - 12 resumed in July, 790[1] students did not return to school.

Yet, the crisis also presented opportunities to address some of the longstanding challenges facing children.

Handwashing received a major boost as schools and learning institutions across the country stepped up measures to ensure access to inclusive handwashing facilities. Students and teachers embraced technology, tapping on a breakthrough opportunity to provide inclusive digital teaching and learning solutions.

The Government aligned to UN's global "Protect Our Children" statement and reiterated its commitment to the full implementation of the Convention of the Rights of Child. To mark Bhutan's 30 years of signing the Convention, the Chief Abbot, His Holiness the Je Khenpo issued a decree calling on all duty bearers to ensure the wellbeing of Bhutan's children and to accelerate the implementation of the CRC.

In 2020, UNICEF Bhutan and partners supported the Government's COVID-19 preparedness

and response efforts through the provision of personal protective equipment for health workers, procurement of all routine vaccines, and soaps for schools and ECCDs.

We assisted the Government to develop an Education in Emergencies COVID-19 Response Plan which incorporated safe school reopening protocols, curriculum adjustment and delivery, and psycho-social support. UNICEF supported the review of the National Youth Policy and development of Bhutan's first ever National Child Policy to promote more investment in quality social services and empowerment of children, adolescents and youth.

Throughout the year, our close collaboration with partners, including UN sister agencies, has helped us focus our attention on the country's most vulnerable children and women and ensure that no one is left behind in the COVID-19 response.

Much, however, remains to be done. We will continue to work on the ground with innovative interventions to address issues the pandemic has triggered for children and young people. Among others, discussions have begun to connect children and young people to the benefits of technology through digital skills and connectivity.

The trust of our many strategic partners and donors makes everything we do possible. We are grateful for their support and I want to emphasize again my commitment, and the commitment of UNICEF, to use all of these opportunities to continue to make

[2] https://kuenselonline.com/rural-students-fall-through-the-digital-divide/

the most efficient use of the resources entrusted to us to accelerate results for children.

The Annual Report 2020: Accelerating results for every child in Bhutan describes UNICEF's continued commitment and the progress we made together with the Royal Government of Bhutan and partners to achieve results for children. It features stories from the field where our work has made a difference to the lives of the most vulnerable children.

As we embark on yet another journey together with our partners and the people of Bhutan, it is my pleasure to share with you the story of our work for children in 2020.

Thank you and Tashi Delek

Dr Will Parks
Representative
UNICEF Bhutan Country Office

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF Bhutan entered its second year of our new Country Programme in 2020. The situation challenged the implementation of our regular programmes as the Country Office readjusted to support the RGoB's preparedness and response efforts.

In 2020, UNICEF together with its partners and donors continued to accelerate its efforts to sustain the progress made thus far and support the Government's preparedness and response to COVID-19 to ensure that no child gets left behind in the country's response efforts.

The following are some of the significant achievements and challenges.

Achievements

Health: UNICEF's support to strengthen the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 response and continuity of essential health and nutrition services helped save the lives of children including newborns. By November, 9,258 babies were delivered at health facilities and 10,396 pregnant women received antenatal care first visits. Provision of personal protective equipment for health workers aided infection prevention.

Despite the pandemic causing multiple logistical disruptions, UNICEF and partners managed to procure and deliver on time a six-month stock of all routine vaccines. As a result, 86 percent of children below one year were vaccinated with DTP3 vaccine.

UNICEF helped the Ministry of Health reach 97 per cent of children aged 6-23 months in all 20 districts with multiple micronutrient powder (MNP) supplementation and counselling on Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF). As part of the scaling up, 450 health workers were trained virtually on MNP and IYCF, and amid transport restrictions, 2.5 million sachets of MNP were procured and delivered to facilities. With UNICEF's support to the COVID-19 response, over 70 per cent of the population (500,000 people) were reached with lifesaving messages on COVID-19 prevention.

Education: UNICEF assisted the Government to develop an Education in Emergencies COVID-19 Response Plan, which incorporated safe school reopening protocols, curriculum adjustment and delivery, and psycho-social support.

To support learning continuity for children during school closure, UNICEF provided technical assistance to provide online and remote learning programmes and supported the printing of Self-Instructional Materials for more than 30,000 children who were unable to access lessons on television and online platforms.

UNICEF also ensured 9,188 (4,602 F) preschool children were reached through home-based early learning and parenting programmes, and distributed parenting booklets, soaps, and home-based early learning kits in all 20 districts.

The first ever Evaluation of Bhutan's ECCD Programme was completed, providing recommendations to improve access to and quality of early learning, and to increase investment as well as sustainable utilization of resources for ECCD.

To measure learning outcomes of children and gauge the quality of general education, the first Inclusive National Education Assessment Framework (NEAF) focused on 21st Century skills in Bhutan was launched with UNICEF's technical support. The Framework includes assessment of learning outcomes for children with disabilities.

Four more schools were assisted by UNICEF to provide the Special Education Needs (SEN) programme, achieving the target of 24 SEN schools for the current country cycle. UNICEF also assisted Disabled Persons Association of Bhutan to be certified as Bhutan's first Disabled People's Organization.

Child Protection: To ensure continuity of child protection services and strengthen response capacities of service providers and front liners, UNICEF helped the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) to develop a National Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence COVID-19 Response Plan in partnership with UN agencies.

UNICEF also assisted the rollout of Standard Operating Procedures for Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and trained 600 (242 F) members of district women and children committees and front liners across the country on early identification and safe referrals of child protection cases and GBV.

With UNICEF's assistance, 27,404 children (13,760 F) and 948 parents and caregivers (402 F) received remote counseling and psychosocial support while the capacity of 1,750 children (713 F) was enhanced to stay safe while accessing online education. UNICEF's partnership campaign with the Youth Development Fund, MoE, MoH, and UNDP to address mental health resulted in doubling the number of cases received through national helplines. From 204 cases between March and August 2020, the cases rose to 528 cases during the month-long campaign from mid-October to mid-November.

Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic compounded the existing challenges that UNICEF and partners are striving to overcome.

Health and Nutrition: One in five children are stunted and two in five, anaemic. One third of adolescent girls are anaemic, a risk factor for intergenerational nutrition deprivation. Infant deaths contribute to almost 44 per cent of under five deaths and only 72 per cent of the population have access to basic sanitation services. About 21 per cent of children aged 2-9 years have at least one form of disability but early detection and the needs of children with disabilities are not sufficiently addressed. The pandemic impacted the delivery of antenatal and post-natal care services, and immunization coverage dropped from 97 per cent in 2019 to 86.7 per cent in 2020.

Education: About 8,174 children between 6-19-year-olds are estimated to have never attended school. Quality of education needs special attention as well as learning outcomes of children with disabilities. Only 25 per cent had access to ECCD in 2019. Children with disabilities, in hard-to-reach communities, and migrant and nomadic children are yet to gain access. When the pandemic shuttered schools in March, learning was disrupted for almost 180,000 children of whom 74,726 also missed out on regular school meals. When classes 9-12 resumed in July, 790[2] students did not return to school.

Protection from violence and exploitation: Children in Bhutan are still affected by a range of violent acts, affecting both girls and boys. More than six out of 10 children experienced some form of physical violence at least once. During the pandemic, 684 children (258 F) and 327 adults (120 F) availed remote counselling and psychosocial support.

For many families, monastic schools are a source of support for their most basic needs. A baseline study found that there are 13,373 religious persons in 248 institutions today. The main protection issue for child monks and nuns are associated with living conditions and nutrition, which impact their overall development and well-being.

Challenges to effective implementation of protection and justice legislation remain. Inconsistencies in legislative provisions require immediate attention. The availability and capacities of personnel to implement child protection programmes remains limited. Coordination at national and sub-national levels needs strengthening and more needs to be done to create awareness on child protection issues.

Pre-Primary students of Laptsakha Primary School in Punakha attend classes at a farmhouse in the village after the pandemic led to the closure of schools.
Photo: UNICEF Bhutan/2020/SPelden

[2] https://kuenselonline.com/rural-students-fall-through-the-digital-divide/

PROGRESS IN NUMBERS

86% of children under one vaccinated with DTP3 vaccine
97% of children reached with multiple micronutrient powder (MNP)

500,000 people reached with lifesaving messages on COVID-19 prevention
Over 25,000 influential persons and volunteers mobilized to disseminate COVID-19 prevention messages
3,811 scout volunteers disseminated COVID-19 safety messages
12,692 youth volunteers engaged in offline and online civic engagement initiatives
1,200 youth consulted in revising the National Youth Policy

32,135 children supported with self-instructional materials (SIM)
9,188 preschoolers reached with home-based early learning programmes
27,404 children availed remote counseling and psychosocial support

47,848 school children accessed quality WASH services
17 mass handwashing stations with safe drinking water constructed in 7 public places
Constructed WASH facilities in 25 ECCD centres in 15 districts
40,000 sanitary napkins distributed to 4,500 girls

41,616 Facebook followers
162,962,004 social media impressions

USD 4.5M million mobilized

A UNICEF staff loads the refrigerated van with life saving vaccines at Paro international airport. Despite COVID-19 disrupting transportation, the vaccines arrived in the country on time.
Photo: UNICEFBhutan/2020/SPelden.

EVERY CHILD SURVIVES AND THRIVES

A child receives a dose of the polio drops at the Gyaltsuen Jetsun Pema Wangchuck Mother and Child Hospital in Thimphu. Photo: UNICEFBhutan/2020/SPelden

The timely arrival of life saving vaccines amid the challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic was critical in sustaining the high coverage of immunization in Bhutan.

With a six-month stock for children and women in the country, all essential healthcare services including immunization for newborn, children and women continued without disruption. UNICEF leveraged its expertise on procurement and convening to ensure critical healthcare supplies were available despite the pandemic. Strategic partnership with the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the national airlines, and UNICEF Supply Division in Copenhagen resulted in availability of adequate stock of life saving vaccines and continuity of immunization services.

UNICEF in partnership with WHO and UNFPA supported the development of Standard Operating Procedures on continuity of essential health service for children and women during the pandemic and nationwide lockdowns.

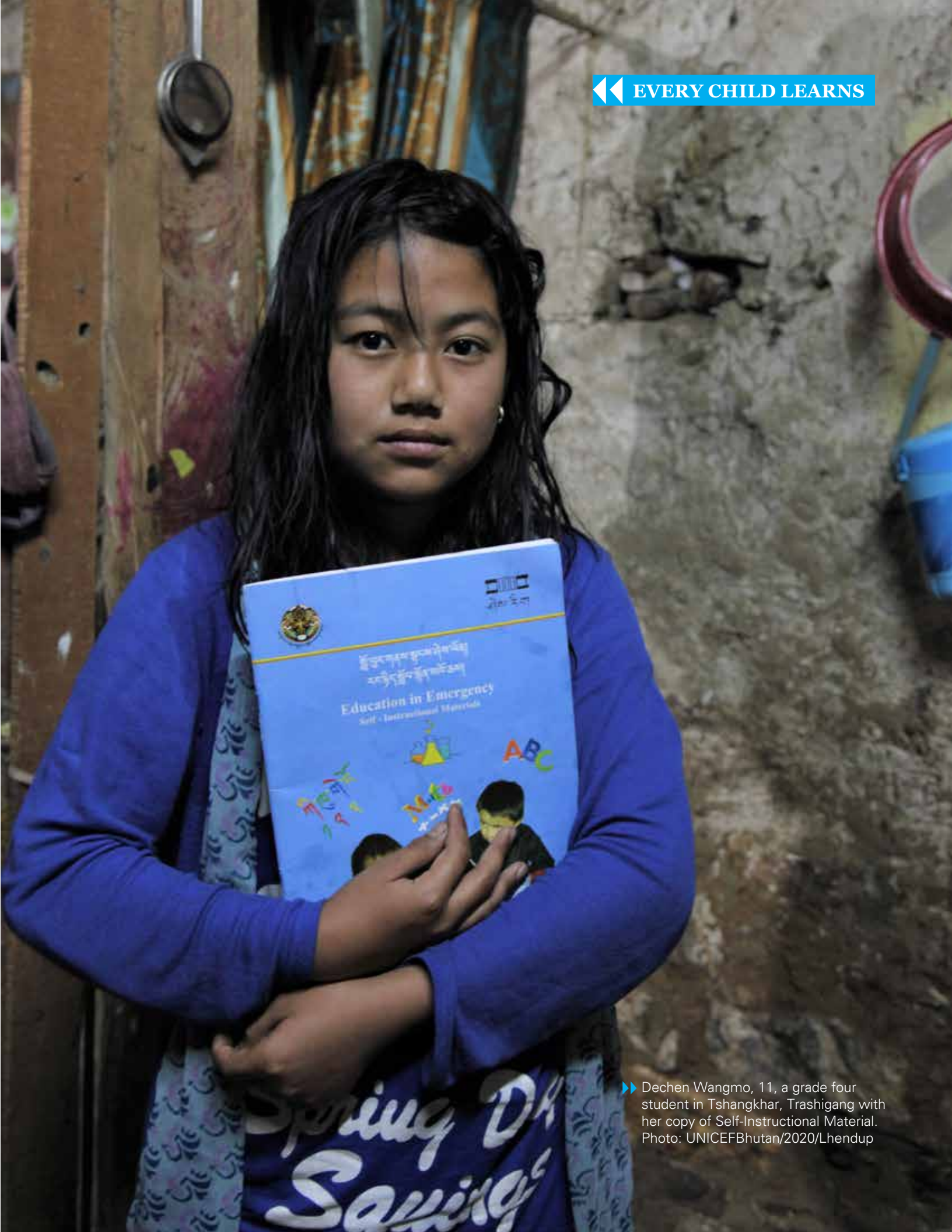
By June 2020, 5,294 children below one year received their third dose of DTP vaccine against the annual target of 11,400 children. As per the annual procurement plan, 133,000 doses of BCG, 100,000 doses of bOPV, 39,000 doses HepB, 68,000 doses of MMR, 34,000 doses of DTP, 86,000 doses of Td, 17,000 doses of Penta and 7,680 doses of HPV vaccines were procured and delivered to the Health Ministry. Procurement of 28,000 doses of Penta, 7,680 doses of HPV, 40,800 doses of PCV and 527,800 doses of northern hemisphere seasonal influenza vaccines were delivered by November 2020.

To strengthen cold chain systems for the immunization programme and COVID-19 vaccination, UNICEF supported the procurement of five deep freezers, 224 vaccine carriers and 400 numbers of

A *desuup*, a civil volunteer, helps unload medical supplies procured for COVID-19 response in Thimphu.
Photo: UNICEFBhutan/2020/YChoden

30 days temperature monitoring devices (30DTR). To support the Government's response to COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF handed over 20,000 coveralls, 5,000 medical masks, 82,000 face shields, 150 handheld thermometers, 50 Body bags, two RT-PCR machines, 1,000 kits reagents, 42 television sets to be used for dissemination of messages on COVID-19 at the health facilities and five digital projectors to be used for conducting virtual meetings and conferences about COVID-19 responses. An additional 875,000 surgical masks were also provided later to support the response efforts.

Following the launch of the multiple micronutrient powder (MNP) supplementation for children aged 6-23 months in 2019, the programme expanded to 18 districts in 2020. With UNICEF support, over 450 health workers from 277 health centres in 18 districts were trained virtually to scale up health and nutrition interventions during and post COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 50 senior health assistant students were skilled to provide vaccination services, as backup support, during the pandemic. Health workers were also trained to screen children with disabilities using the Bhutan Child Development Screen Tool.



Dechen Wangmo, 11, a grade four student in Tshangkhar, Trashigang with her copy of Self-Instructional Material. Photo: UNICEFBhutan/2020/Lhendup

EVERY CHILD LEARNS

Children in Tshangkhar village, Trashigang watch their lessons on the national television, BBS. Photo: UNICEFBhutan/2020/Lhendup

One of the biggest impacts of COVID-19 pandemic was felt in the education sector. When the schools closed in March 2020, learning for more than 170,000 children was disrupted.

UNICEF supported the Government in developing the COVID-19 Education Response Plan, which outlined Education in Emergency in a phased manner, highlighting curriculum adjustment and delivery, safety protocols when children return to school and psycho-social support to children.

As part of the Education in Emergency response, and to ensure learning continuity, UNICEF supported the Education Ministry in the delivery of remote and online learning through television and Google Classrooms. For more than 32,000 school children who had no access to TV and digital learning platforms, UNICEF supported the printing and designing of Self-Instructional Materials (SIM). SIM was also adapted to reach 740 children with special needs (302 F). When the schools reopened for grades 10 and 12 in July, about 219 children were reported to have dropped out of school. By the end of the year, the number of children leaving schools had more than doubled to 790.

UNICEF also ensured 9,188 preschool children (4,602 F) were reached through home-based early learning and parenting programmes, and distributed parenting booklets, soaps, and home-based early learning kits in all 20 districts. An online campaign on early learning from home helped in documenting the efforts of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) facilitators to engage children during the closure of the centres and provided UNICEF and partners with the much-needed information to support early learning for children.

The first ever Evaluation of Bhutan's ECCD Programme was launched in 2020 providing recommendations to improve access to and quality of early learning, and to increase investment as well as sustainable utilization of resources for ECCD.

To measure learning outcomes of children and gauge the quality of general education, the first Inclusive National Education Assessment Framework (NEAF) focused on 21st Century skills in Bhutan was launched with UNICEF's technical support. The Framework includes assessment of learning outcomes for children with disabilities.

Four more schools were assisted by UNICEF to provide the Special Education Needs (SEN) programme, achieving the target of 24 SEN schools for the current country cycle. UNICEF also assisted the Disabled Persons Association of Bhutan to be certified as Bhutan's first Disabled People's Organization. UNICEF introduced physical education training to improve the wellbeing of monks and nuns and provided technical support to develop an English curriculum for monastic institutions.

From Left: Education Secretary Karma Tshering, Education Minister JB Rai and UNICEF Bhutan Representative Dr Will Parks launch the ECCD Evaluation Report. Photo: UNICEFBhutan/2020/SPelden

EVERY CHILD IS PROTECTED FROM VIOLENCE, ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION

A nun student shares her group's concerns on child protection issues during a consultation session at the Department of Youth and Sports in Thimphu. Photo: UNICEFBhutan/2020/GBhutii

EVERY CHILD IS PROTECTED FROM VIOLENCE, ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION

To ensure continuity of child protection services and strengthen response capacities of service providers and front liners, UNICEF and UN partners helped the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) to develop a National Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence COVID-19 Response for implementation by the NCWC and civil society organisations.

With UNICEF's assistance, 27,404 children (13,760 F) and 948 parents and caregivers (402 F) received remote counseling and psychosocial support while 1,750 children (713 F) saw their capacities enhanced to stay safe while accessing online education. UNICEF partnered with the Bhutan Youth Development Fund, the Ministries of Health and Education, and UNDP to launch an online campaign to address mental health. The campaign helped in doubling the number of cases received by national helplines – from 204 cases between March and August 2020 to 528 cases during the campaign month from mid-October to mid-November.
To address the psychosocial needs of children and caregivers affected by COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF supported the mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) Desk created under the Education Emergency Operations Centre.
This was supplemented by the development of a guidance note on provision of remote PSS to parents and caregivers as well as a training manual on psychosocial support for children for counsellors and front liners.

To date, 147 school guidance counsellors (76 F) from all 20 districts have been trained to use this manual. In 2020, records show that 684 children (258 F) and 327 adults (120 F) had availed remote counselling and psychosocial support. Since the reopening of schools for grades X and XII students from July 1, a total of 5,336 children (2,578 F) have been reached through counselling classes.

The training on providing psychosocial support to students have helped school guidance counsellors to provide remote counselling. Photo: UNICEFBhutan/2020/SPelden

Since the reopening of schools for grades X and XII in July, 5,336 children including 2,578 girls were reached through counselling classes in 2020. Photo: UNICEFBhutan/2020/GBhutii. Photo for illustration purpose only.

UNICEF supported the NCWC in rolling out the training package on Early Identification and Safe Referrals (EISR) of child protection cases for 600 (242 F) members of district women and children committees and front liners in all 20 districts and four municipalities. To identify and safely refer child protection cases to case management agencies in their districts, 193 members of the District Women and Children Committees (68 F) from 10 Districts and four municipalities were trained to deal with survivors of GBV in line with the national Standard Operating Procedures on GBV.

A mapping of GBV and child protection services in their respective dzongkhags/thromde was also carried out to help front liners and others in providing efficient services to survivors. The Council for Religious Affairs and Bhutan Nuns Foundation were also supported to adapt the EISR package for their situation.

A CSO, Nazhoen Lamtoen was supported to train 156 (60 F) health workers, community leaders, volunteers and other front liners and 27 social workers and volunteers (12 F) working with children with disabilities to identify signs of violence, abuse and exploitation and refer them to case management service providers.

EVERY CHILD LIVES IN A SAFE AND CLEAN ENVIRONMENT

Health Minister Dechen Wangmo shows a child the handwashing steps at the inauguration of the first public inclusive handwashing station in Thimphu.
Photo: UNICEFBhutan/2020/SPelden

EVERY CHILD LIVES IN A SAFE AND CLEAN ENVIRONMENT

UNICEF's WASH Officer explains to a school's contractor in Punakha on building an inclusive handwashing station that is accessible to the smallest children. Photo: UNICEF Bhutan/2020/SPelden

Promoting good hygiene by ensuring frequent and proper handwashing with soap was one of the first and immediate responses UNICEF supported the Government with in 2020. Children in 600 schools and 250 monastic institutions were reached with hand hygiene messages through the distribution of 7,800 posters and 50,000 soap bars.

To ensure access to handwashing facilities, UNICEF and partners constructed 17 mass inclusive handwashing stations with safe drinking water in seven public places. The Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) responses improved access to safe and clean environment for 47,848 children in schools and monastic institutions. With WASH support extending to health care facilities, the interventions helped 8,685 healthcare workers and patients avail critical WASH services. UNICEF and partners' support to improving access to handwashing facilities in schools resulted in schools recording a 77 per cent increase in the number of handwashing tap-points. UNICEF supported WASH interventions were included in the Safe Schools Guidelines for school reopening and in anticipation of schools re-opening in 2021. UNICEF also supported the construction of WASH facilities in 25 ECCD centres in 15 districts to benefit 522 children (278 F).

A student of Gelephu Lower Secondary School washes her hands with soap at the handwashing station installed outside her classroom. Photo: UNICEF Bhutan/2020/SPelden

An additional 13,020 people in 10 blocks benefitted from 100 per cent improved sanitation in 2020. UNICEF continues to contribute towards achieving Open Defecation Free (ODF) coverage, which today stands at 50 per cent. Supported by UNICEF, the National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy 2020 was endorsed by the Government to advance implementation of environment-friendly and climate-resilient WASH interventions.

UNICEF continues to engage its partners in menstrual health management and the "Red Bracelet" campaign rolled out in 2020 helped in 4,500 girls from 45 schools and 28 nunneries receiving 40,000 sanitary pads. While enhancing access, the menstrual hygiene products and the campaign helped create a more enabling environment to address the stigma around menstrual hygiene.

EVERY CHILD HAS AN EQUITABLE CHANCE

Participants of the Social Policy Certificate Course for Local Government at Sherubtse College in Trashigang. Photo: Sherubtse College, 2020

Upstream work on Public Financing for Children was reinforced by UNICEF through partnership with Sherubtse College to develop and deliver the first ever Social Policy Certificate Course for Local Government functionaries comprising 26 participants (7 F) from five eastern districts. UNICEF also supported a three-district assessment of child-friendly local governance (CFLG) to better understand the challenges and opportunities for future UNICEF support to CFLG.

To advocate for upscaling child-sensitive cash transfers in Bhutan, a social protection policy brief was developed together with the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth. UNICEF offered technical support to the Government to explore ways to optimize investment in shock-responsive social protection. These efforts will be expanded in 2021.

UNICEF supported the Government and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative to develop a Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) to help policy makers understand which regions and subgroups are most vulnerable during the pandemic, and to estimate the investments needed to support these groups. UNICEF also partnered with the Ministry of Education to conduct a thematic analysis of inclusive education based on the Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2017 to enable targeted planning and programming for children with disabilities.

To explore opportunities to effectively engage young people in local planning and budgeting process, UNICEF conducted a sensitization workshop for seven local leaders (1 F) along with 11 local youth (7 F) of Toedpisa Gewog (sub-district) in Punakha district on child-friendly local governance.

Following the workshop, youth were invited for the first time to attend the Gewog Tshogdu (local development and planning meeting) as observers.

UNICEF supported the review of the National Youth Policy and development of Bhutan's first ever National Child Policy to promote more investment in quality social services and empowerment of children, adolescents and youth.

Work to develop an investment case on WASH to further advance discussion with key government agencies on public finance for children was initiated. The investment case once published will be a critical advocacy paper for the Country Office and sector agencies to advocate with development partners to invest in the provision of inclusive and accessible WASH services through public finance allocation and leveraging private sector resources.

Youth participants present suggested work activities to get involved in local governance planning at the workshop. Photo: YDF

ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT AND PARTICIPATION

A leadership scout participates in an orientation workshop on COVID-19 safety measures to support the government's advocacy efforts in Mongar.
Photo: UNICEF Bhutan/2020/SPelden.

ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Students of the Wangsel Institute for the Deaf in Paro share their views on the national youth policy in February 2020. Photo: BCMD.

To promote the participation of adolescents and youth, UNICEF partnered with the Department of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Education to train 120 leadership scouts (53 F) from six districts to advocate on COVID-19 preventive behaviors, creating awareness on COVID-19 triggered social issues and linking families to support services, and in thanking front liners for their work and sacrifices. They were also engaged in advocating the importance of staying at home, maintaining physical distance, and disseminating accurate information through their network and online platforms during the pandemic.

UNICEF also engaged 59 youth volunteers (41 F) in leading social entrepreneurship projects in four communities addressing the elimination of violence against children during COVID-19, imparting employability skills and knowledge, and supporting homeschooling as a response to COVID-19. An additional 1,533 adolescents and youth (977 F) were also trained on using digital tools and online safety.

To support the review of the National Youth Policy, UNICEF and its partners engaged and consulted 1,200 youth (116 F) from different backgrounds to share their views and inputs on the policy. UNICEF also partnered with the Youth Development Fund, to organize a workshop for seven local leaders (1 F) and 11 youth (7 F) in Punakha district to encourage local government to allocate adequate resources for children, adolescents, and to create spaces and mechanisms to listen to their voices.

UNICEF helped the Ministry of Education, Loden Foundation, Fablab and YDF to engage around 1,264

Leadership scouts engage a resident of Mongar town on COVID-19 safety measures. Photo: UNICEF Bhutan/2020/SPelden.

adolescents and youth (748 F) in skills development programmes. A total of 12,692 youth volunteers (6,623 F) were also engaged in offline and online civic engagement initiatives.

With ROSA's support, a knowledge management study was developed to document impacts of UNICEF's intervention on the rights of adolescents at community level. The findings will support the design of strategic programming for adolescents in 2021. In partnership with Bhutan Toilet Organization, UNICEF assessed WASH facilities across all 13 youth centers.

BEHAVIOUR AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Scout leaders from Paro break into groups to discuss activities for community engagement on COVID-19 safety protocols. Photo: UNICEF Bhutan/2020/SPelden.

BEHAVIOUR AND SOCIAL CHANGE

UNICEF Bhutan Representative Dr Will Parks engages with scout leaders during an orientation session on advocating COVID-19 safety protocols. Photo: UNICEF Bhutan/2020/SPelden.

Recognizing the urgent information needs of Bhutan's population to prevent and contain COVID-19, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Health in developing and implementing a multi-sectoral, multi-channel national COVID-19 Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) action plan including training and mobilizing front line workers and volunteers. The collaboration contributed in raising public awareness and adherence to COVID-19 prevention advisories.

With UNICEF's support, an estimated 492,000 people (200,000 F) were reached by the Ministry of Health with lifesaving messages on COVID-19 prevention and access to services. This was achieved through the engagement and training of more than 25,000 front line workers and volunteers including health workers, local leaders, the desuups (civil volunteers), scouts, COVID-19 focal persons in schools and institutes, youth volunteers and religious persons in all 20 districts.

UNICEF, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education supported the training and mobilization of 500 COVID-19 focal persons in schools and institutes, towards ensuring that schools have handwashing stations, guidance on physical distancing, mass screening and regular sensitization sessions on COVID-19 and its social issues such as gender-based violence and mental health. These trained focal persons reached more than 54,000 children and young people in 152 schools and institutes across 20 districts.

An estimated 4,000 young people in 17 districts were directly reached with lifesaving messages

The portable megaphones were handy in disseminating information in the communities. Pictured: A health worker in Tseza gewog, Dagana district with the megaphone. Photo: UNICEF Bhutan/2021/SPelden

through the networks of scout leaders and youth volunteers with UNICEF support. Younger children in some remote communities benefitted from the support of scouts with their online class and Self-Instructional Materials supplied by the MoE. In some remote communities, families also benefitted from receiving essential supplies delivered by scout volunteers during the lockdown.

An estimated 300,000 people were informed through timely and reliable lifesaving information from the distribution of the COVID-19 IEC materials. This activity also contributed in sustaining public trust because of consistent messaging of information based on WHO and Health Ministry's recommendations.

UNICEF's support in supply of portable megaphones was timely and useful for front line workers and volunteers in managing crowds and sharing information during the lockdown period.

ADVOCATING FOR CHILDREN'S WELLBEING

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Chair of the National Commission for Women and Children, Dr Tandi Dorji at a dialogue with children and young people in Thimphu.
Photo: UNICEF Bhutan/2020/KDupchu.

ADVOCATING FOR CHILDREN'S WELLBEING

Message from His Holiness the Je Khenpo on World Children's Day

Bhutan has always ensured the wellbeing of its children and at a time like this, we need to ensure more than ever, that our children and their needs are not forgotten.

While much is being done, I call on the Royal Government, our religious leaders and the people of Bhutan to uphold the wellbeing of the children by placing their interest in the center of all decisions and act for the best interest of children at all times to come. Children's needs differ from adults' and so our decisions must also consider the impacts on children's wellbeing.

Our children are the future, and they look up to us for their learning, health, safety, wellbeing and happiness. I call on everyone across the country to treat them equally, to nurture them and give them the best start in life so that they grow on to become responsible citizens.

I urge all policymakers, parents, religious leaders and the individuals to value, take care and listen to the children. Their involvement in decisions that impact them is critical in ensuring their wellbeing. We must ensure that every child everywhere is safe, healthy, learning, heard and happy.

Bhutan's efforts towards children's wellbeing and happiness is commendable. I urge all to continue the efforts and work together to build a society fit for our children, one that cares for the happiness and best interests of our children at all times.

Trulku Jigme Choeda

(70th Je Khenpo)

In January 2020, the Government in partnership with UNICEF Bhutan and the Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) successfully hosted the second South Asia Religious Leaders' Platform for Children to discuss the role of religious leaders and groups in advancing children's rights. The 45 religious leaders of various faiths noted the important role they can play to support and promote the rights of children in each of their countries.

To observe the World Children's Day, UNICEF in partnership with the National Commission for Women and Children held a consultation with children and young people on issues affecting them. This was followed by a dialogue between them and the Minister for Foreign Affairs who is also the chairperson of the Commission. These commitments alongside the Government's alignment to UN's global "Protect Our Children" increased awareness on issues impacting children and young people.

To support children and young people cope with psychosocial issues triggered by the pandemic,

Religious leaders committed to work in support of child rights in all eight of the region's countries. Photo: UNICEF Bhutan/2020/DangphuDingphu

UNICEF partnered with the Youth Development Fund (YDF), the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and UNDP in an online campaign to address mental health. The President of YDF, Her Majesty the Queen Mother, Tseyring Pem Wangchuck launched the campaign with a call for action to address mental health issues among children and young people.

The month-long campaign resulted in doubling the number of cases received by the helplines of the Education Ministry and the NCWC. From 204 cases received March - August 2020, the helplines received 528 cases during the campaign which ran from October 9 - November 9.

Bhutan marked 30 years of ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2020. To mark the occasion, the Chief Abbot, His Holiness the Je Khenpo issued a decree on November 20 calling on all duty bearers to ensure the wellbeing of Bhutan's children and to accelerate the implementation of the Convention.

As the pandemic induced lockdowns and closure of schools among others, UNICEF harnessed social media platforms to promote COVID-19 prevention messages through intensive online campaigns, engaging children and young people. Over 200,000 people were reached with lifesaving messages and access to services from a series of UNICEF social media campaigns and messaging.

UNICEF Bhutan Youth Goodwill Ambassador, Sonam Wangchen's music video "Chikhar – together", the COVID-19 stories series, as well as mental health and other online campaigns reinforced national initiatives in building national solidarity, compassion, and resilience to fight the pandemic.

UNICEF's followers on Facebook more than tripled, from 12,363 in January 2020 to 41,616 followers by December 2020, recording 162 million impressions. UNICEF had 96 media mentions highlighting issues affecting children and young people as a result of COVID-19, and UNICEF and its partners' support to the Government's response efforts.

PARTNERSHIPS FOR PROGRESS

UNICEF Bhutan played an instrumental role in leveraging millions of dollars for Bhutan from the Government of Denmark, the Japan Government, Asian Development Bank, Global Partnership for Education (GPE), GAVI, UN MDTF (COVID-19), Global Thematic Funds (General and WASH), the Lego Foundation, and various UNICEF National Committees. With the regional office's support, UNICEF Bhutan mobilized USD 2.9M against its Humanitarian Action for Children appeal of USD 2.6M.

The Country Office continued engagement with donors and UNICEF National Committees through ongoing communication, high quality donor reports, as well as development of new proposals. The total resources mobilized for regular programmes and COVID-19 response in 2020 was about USD 4.5M million, more than double the amount mobilized in 2019.

DELIVERING AS ONE

To support the Government's COVID-19 response, the UN agencies in Bhutan handed over USD 1.14 million to the Prime Minister in March 2020. Photo Courtesy: PMO

As a strong actor in the UN Country Team, UNICEF continues to fully support the Delivering as One approach and embrace the acceleration in UN coherence and reform.

In 2020, UNICEF cooperated with WHO, UNFPA and UNDP to support the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 response, ensuring continuity of health services, risk communication and community engagement, and resource mobilization. UNICEF collaborated with WFP in supporting the Health Ministry develop the National Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan to advance implementation of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions.

UNICEF, UNDP and WHO finalized the implementation of the UNPRPD Round 3 to advance the rights of persons with disabilities.

UNICEF and UNDP partnered in an online campaign on mental health issues affecting children and young people during the pandemic which promoted young people's awareness of and access to counselling services. UNICEF and UNFPA in partnership with Bhutan Scout Association, engaged 17,000 adolescents and youth as advocates to disseminate lifesaving messages across 20 districts during the pandemic.

Partnership continued with WHO and SNV on WASH programming and during the pandemic with the installation of handwashing stations on public areas around the country.

With the coordination of the Resident Coordinators' Office, UNICEF and UNDP in partnership with the Government secured USD 872,000 from the SDG Joint Fund for funding the Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF). The INFF programme will be implemented jointly in 2021 and 2022, supporting financing solutions aligned with both responses to COVID-19 and longer-term investments

in a sustainable future. UNICEF and UNDP partnered with the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy to hold a series of panel discussions on shock-response social protection streamed online.

UNICEF spearheaded the UN Country Team in the formulation of a 7-point technical assistance package to help protect the most vulnerable from COVID-19's socio-economic impacts which effectively marshalled the immediately available resources of UNCT and Development Partners including International Finance Institutions. This 7-point package fully aligned with the UN Global Framework to respond to the immediate socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 (SERF) issued in May by the Secretary General. UNICEF partnered with UNDP to merge the 7-point package with the 5 Pillars of SERF and coordinated the reformulation of the UNSDPF in the COVID-19 pandemic situation, which was endorsed by the Government.

The UN country team and a representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launch the annual results report, 2019.

LOOKING AHEAD: REIMAGINING THE FUTURE FOR EVERY CHILD

Bhutan has made impressive progress in social areas over the last decades. Based on these achievements, the country is striving to complete the last mile and graduate into a lower middle-income country by the end of the current plan in 2023.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly threatened children's well-being and impacted the lives of the Bhutanese people. The pandemic brought to the fore the importance of consolidating actions which support results for children through strengthened coordination, accountability and a strong focus on the humanitarian-development nexus.

All lessons learnt in 2020 will help to improve our interventions in improving our interventions in 2021. To sustain the changes made to the lives of children and support the country in the COVID-19 response and recovery efforts, UNICEF will continue to support: maternal/child health and nutrition system strengthening; the COVID-19 vaccination; safe return to ECCD and schools and the nationwide digitalization of education; enhance and strengthen child protection workforce; expand adolescent skill-building and civic engagement; engage the private sector; initiate child-friendly local governance and innovative public financing for children, and an intensified focus on shock-responsive social safety net.

The UN in Bhutan celebrates 50 years of partnership and UNICEF, its 75th anniversary in 2021. As we move ahead into the post-COVID era, UNICEF commits to reimagine a better future for all children and young people.

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