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Report of the field visit to Bhutan by members of the Bureau of the Executive Board, 17–22 April 2018

I. Introduction

1. The following members of the Executive Board of UNICEF participated in the visit: H.E. Mr. Tore Hattrem, Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations; H.E. Mr. Durga Prasad Bhattarai, Permanent Representative of Nepal to the United Nations; H.E. Mr. Gebeyehu Ganga Gayito, Deputy Permanent Representative of Ethiopia to the United Nations; Mr. William Eduardo Herrera Molina, Minister Counsellor, Permanent Mission of El Salvador to the United Nations; Ms. Ljilja Grgić-Stojanović, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the United Nations; and Mr. Nicolas Pron, Secretary of the Executive Board, UNICEF.
2. The field visit allowed the delegation to gain a direct understanding of the work of UNICEF at the country level. More specifically, the visit aimed to demonstrate concrete examples of UNICEF cooperation with the Government and with other partners, including the United Nations country team. Furthermore, the visit provided an opportunity for the members of the delegation to better understand the issues and challenges facing children and women in Bhutan.
3. The delegation would like to express its gratitude to the Government of Bhutan for the opportunities for substantive dialogue with senior members of the Government.
4. The delegation would like to thank the UNICEF country team in Bhutan, as well as the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, for the very carefully prepared and well-organized visit, and for the ready availability of staff throughout the visit. The delegation was particularly impressed by the commitment and dedication of government officials at every level and by the UNICEF staff.
5. The programme of the visit to Bhutan 17–22 April 2018, included meetings in Thimphu, Gaselo Village, Shari Pangkha and Bajo Town in the Wangdue Phodrang District, Punakha Dzong in the Punakha District, and Drugyel in the Paro District with the UNICEF country office, senior-level government counterparts, members of the United Nations country team, as well as key partners, including from civil society.
6. Throughout the visit, the delegation had the opportunity to visit UNICEF projects in the field. The delegation met with local government representatives; civil society

* E/ICEF/2018/19.

organizations; users of health facilities; health workers; school administrators; teachers; students; members of community groups; religious leaders; young monks; and UNICEF staff.

7. The present report summarizes the briefings received by the delegation members and concludes with the delegation's own observations.

II. Key issues facing children and women in Bhutan

8. The delegation was informed that the main challenges for children and women are the exposure to violence in many forms (physical, verbal and psychological). More than 60 per cent of children (aged 13–17 years) reported having experienced some form of violence.¹

9. With regard to infant mortality and chronic malnutrition, newborn deaths contribute to almost 70 per cent of infant deaths. An estimated 21 per cent of children under five are stunted, 44 per cent are anaemic and only 58 per cent of the population has access to improved sanitation. An estimated 21 per cent of children aged 2–9 years have at least one form of disability, and the needs of these children are not sufficiently addressed.²

10. Risky sexual behaviour, child marriage and early motherhood, physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, crime and violence are the main challenges for adolescents and youth. Moreover, rising levels of unemployment and a wide range of health issues, including sexually transmitted infections (including HIV and reproductive health issues), remain a critical concern in the country.³

11. During its visit to the Wangdue Phodrang District, the delegation gained a first-hand impression of the situation of youth, and had the opportunity to interact with the youth coordinators who provide recreational, educational and therapeutic services to vulnerable young people. The coordinators explained that the main challenges for youth are unemployment, suicide, substance abuse, unhealthy relationships and gang violence.

12. The role of UNICEF has been to provide a programme on capacity development, supporting youth parliamentary dialogue and, among other activities, promoting child protection and participation and mapping the youth and the risks they face in vulnerable situations.

Maternal and child health

13. The delegation was informed that women, in particular, are adapting slowly to accessing health-care services. It was therefore heartening to witness the efforts of the health assistants who serve and sensitize the people in their communities to the dangers of unattended childbirth. As a result of their efforts, more pregnant women are now aware and understand the importance of going to basic health units for antenatal and postnatal visits.

14. The rate of newborn deaths is still high, accounting for 70 per cent of all infant and 56 per cent of under-five deaths in Bhutan. An estimated 21 out of every 1,000 newborn babies die within the first month of birth. Seventy-five per cent of these neonatal deaths are due to prematurity and associated complications at birth, which are largely preventable with good antenatal, natal and postnatal care. Adequate care around labour, delivery and immediately after birth can prevent 40 per cent of newborn deaths.⁴

15. With UNICEF-supported community mobilization activities, rural women are also now able to relate their regular check-ups to their health in general, and pregnancy and safe childbirth in particular. This is a positive behavioural change that has resulted in an increasing demand for health services, even in the most far-flung regions.

16. UNICEF, in collaboration with Health Promotion Division, Ministry of Health, has organized workshops to sensitize local leaders and community workers on the importance of

¹ UNICEF Bhutan, *Annual Report, 2017*: p. 17, "A fair chance for every child in Bhutan", 2018, p. 17.

² UNICEF Bhutan, "Aspiring Happiness for every child in Bhutan...since 1974", Fact Sheet, February 2018, p. 2.

³ UNICEF Bhutan Fact Sheet, *A Second Window of Opportunity: Adolescent Development and Participation*, 2018, p. 2.

⁴ UNICEF Bhutan Fact Sheet, *Health...For Every Child*, 2018, p. 1.

health promotion in achieving community development goals. The workshops have sensitized local leaders, health assistants and multi-sector task force and community-based support system members on the need to invest in maternal and child health, nutrition, hygiene and sanitation, and child protection in achieving community and national development targets.

17. As a result, participants recognized the need to address “softer” social issues in achieving their community development goals; and committed to integrating social issues concerning children’s well-being in their local development plans for the 12th Five Year Plan (July 2018–June 2023).

18. In the region of Paro, the delegation saw evidence of the positive impact of the role of UNICEF in supporting the provision of public-health services to more than 4,000 people. Members of the delegation heard from health assistants who explained prevention programmes, along with vaccination and injection devices for immunization, capacity-building and training activities to help to reduce common childhood diseases and vaccine-preventable diseases, as well as antenatal care and growth monitoring.

19. In 2017, the United Nations country team initiated the development of the United Nations Sustainable Development Partnership Framework 2019–2023. Under the overall guidance of the Resident Coordinator’s Office, the United Nations funds and programmes jointly contributed to this strategic planning. UNICEF took a lead role in building capacity for results-based management, as well as guiding the common country assessment. UNICEF and the World Health Organization also continued to work on strategic health interventions and helped the Ministry of Health to leverage resources through the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.⁵

20. Support will continue for the Global Polio Endgame Strategy for bivalent oral poliovirus vaccines, inactivated polio vaccine, and measles, mumps and rubella to maintain the elimination status for polio and measles and for the introduction of newer vaccines. Effective vaccine management and cold chain maintenance also remain priorities for quality assurance. In 2017, World Breastfeeding Week, World Prematurity Day and World AIDS Day were observed by UNICEF, to raise awareness through capacity-building, health education sessions, social media and advocacy.

Child malnutrition

21. An estimated 1 in 5 children under five in Bhutan are stunted. Of the children who suffer from stunting, one fourth are severely stunted. Stunting persists in one-fifth of preschool Bhutanese children, suggesting that nutritional deficits other than insufficient calories, possibly reflecting poor dietary quality, exposure to infections, and pre/perinatal factors such as anaemia or malnourishment among mothers, may limit linear growth for more than 20 per cent of all children. Indicators of socioeconomic status are positively associated with all forms of undernutrition. Children from poor families have a higher risk of malnutrition (stunting, wasting and underweight).⁶

22. UNICEF and partners continued working towards improving mother and child nutrition, and reducing stunting and anaemia in children under five and adolescents. Therefore, much of the work of UNICEF through the health and nutrition programme has focused on ensuring that increasing numbers of newborns receive optimal care for their survival and growth.

23. The Government’s National Accelerated Nutrition Plan 2016–2018⁷ addresses undernutrition among adolescent girls, pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants and young children, preschoolers and schoolchildren. The Plan is part of a large, multisectoral food and nutrition strategic action plan.

⁵ Ibid., p. 26.

⁶ UNICEF Bhutan, *Annual Report 2017*, p.6, 2018.

⁷ Ibid.

24. Anaemia is still a major problem nationally among all vulnerable groups. Thus, the causes of anaemia and the responsiveness to iron-folic acid supplementation among the Government and partner agencies to expand their supplementation programmes and improve dietary diversity at the family level needs to be further investigated.

25. Growth monitoring (weight and height/length) was further strengthened by training 25 mother and child health staff in all 20 districts of Bhutan. Health workers are also provided with the knowledge and skills to provide quality services in infant and young child feeding, lactation management, nutrition counselling and growth monitoring.

Water, sanitation and hygiene

26. The approach supported by UNICEF has led to improvements in the water supply and child-friendly, gender-sensitive sanitation for 2,660 boys and 2,700 girls from 10 schools, adding to a cumulative figure of 12,600 children in 22 schools since the beginning of the current programme cycle (2014).⁸

27. In 2017, through the Rural Sanitation and Hygiene Programme, a subsidy-free and demand-driven community-led approach to total sanitation, 579 communities, including all rural households and institutions in three districts, were mobilized to adopt improved sanitation.

28. At the Gaselo Central School in the Wangdue Phodrang District, members of the delegation witnessed the construction of toilets, bathhouses, hand-washing facilities and water supply schemes, and learned how they have contributed to an improved learning environment for monks from monastic schools.

29. The delegation was informed that, at present, 5,700 students, child monks and nuns have access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities. In 2017, an additional 5,500 schoolchildren and 200 child monks and nuns benefited from improved water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, capacity-building and advocacy, to increase coverage and enhance behaviour change.⁹

Education

30. Bhutan has made significant progress in expanding access to education, especially in primary education, since the beginning of the first five-year planned development in the early 1960s. With a basic net enrolment rate at 96 per cent and a gender parity index (basic education) of 1.06, the current concern was more about efficiency, effectiveness and quality of education.¹⁰

31. UNICEF supported the development of a report outlining an investment case for early childhood care and development (ECCD). The ECCD investment case report is intended to support Bhutan to meet its national goal to reach at least 50 per cent of children aged 3–5 years by 2024 as well as its commitment to achieving the ECCD target of the Sustainable Development Goals, to reach all children by 2030.¹¹

32. In 2017, the focus was on strengthening the capacity of the Ministry of Education and partners to provide inclusive education to the most marginalized children, through development and endorsement of standards for inclusive education; modification of the curriculum to suit the needs of children with disabilities; improvement of assessment systems; and exchange of knowledge among practitioners of inclusive education.

33. With UNICEF support, the pre-school education gross enrolment rate (22 per cent) and transition rates from primary to secondary education (97 per cent) have surpassed the targets set for 2018 (20 per cent and 95 per cent, respectively).¹²

⁸ UNICEF Bhutan, Annual Report 2017, p. 2, 2018.

⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 2.

34. The delegation visited the Shari Pangkha Monastic School where delegation members interacted with children. They heard from the head teacher that most of the students came from different parts of the country and had different backgrounds, according to their cities of origin. With support from UNICEF, improvements had been made since 2009 in the WASH programme and child protection training. The head of the delegation and President of the Executive Board, Ambassador Hattrem, made a symbolic donation of sports supplies to the school. This was followed by a friendly soccer match between the members of the delegation, UNICEF staff and the monks.

35. With regard to education, several challenges remain. Enrolment in preschool remains low, at 22 per cent.

36. In 2009, UNICEF, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, started a community-based ECCD programme mainly focused around providing equitable access to all children, especially those in rural, remote and disadvantaged communities. In collaboration with the Ministry of Education and local civil society organizations, UNICEF supported the establishment and rehabilitation of 30 community-based ECCD centres in mainly rural and remote locations, bringing the total number of centres supported to 90 across all 20 districts since 2015.¹³

37. To progressively transform mainstream schools into inclusive schools, UNICEF supported the identification of two more schools that could benefit from a special education needs programme from 2018. About 400 teachers supporting children with disabilities in 15 schools already providing special education needs programmes were oriented on using standards for inclusive education. A bridging course to teach sign language to newly enrolled children was introduced at the Wangsel Institute, a school for the deaf in the Paro District. A modification of the regular curriculum for the deaf education programme, to provide a more age- and ability-appropriate curriculum, is also under way.¹⁴

38. Training of instructors from 7 nunneries and 14 monastic schools to teach basic English literacy and numeracy has benefited young monks and nuns (who are the most vulnerable children). The findings of an ongoing needs assessment for monastic schools and nunneries will be used to develop a physical education and sports programme for monastic institutions aimed at preventing non-communicable diseases.

39. Monastic institutions lack a comprehensive approach to education, with gaps in terms of English literacy, numeracy and physical education.

Child protection

40. Advocacy with the Government resulted in important gains for strengthening the policy and legislative environment for child protection. With support from UNICEF, the Government drafted a communication for development (C4D) strategy focusing on prevention of violence against children. In line with UNICEF programme priorities, key C4D activities undertaken in 2017 were the development of a child protection C4D strategy that looked at promoting the well-being of children to address the whole spectrum of child rights.

41. The year 2017 saw the implementation of many recommendations from the 2016 Violence Against Children research, with the Government initiating a review of the National Plan of Action on Child Protection (2013–2018) and the development of the Child Protection Programme Strategy and Action Plan of the Dratshang Lhentshog (2017–2022).¹⁵

42. The findings of the national research demonstrated that children across the country have a comprehensive understanding of violence, which includes physical, sexual and emotional harm. More than 60 per cent of children (aged 13–17 years) and more than half of young adults (aged 18–24 years) reported having experienced some form of violence. More than 64

¹³ Ibid., pp. 12 and 14.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

per cent of children reported having experienced physical violence at least once in their lifetime.¹⁶

43. UNICEF Bhutan is increasingly focused on cross-sectoral programming, for example, ECCD with a focus on early learning and disability; and child protection, with a focus on children who live without parental care (including in boarding schools and monastic institutions).¹⁷

III. Observations

44. The Bureau welcomed the opportunity to witness the activities of UNICEF in Bhutan and very much appreciated the dedication, hard work and efficiency of the UNICEF staff and their partners.

45. The Bureau noted with satisfaction the excellent cooperation and partnership between UNICEF and the government institutions in the development of norms and standards and the formulation of key policies affecting children.

46. The Bureau was impressed with the sharp focus of UNICEF on its comparative advantages, and its provision of strategic policy advice in national programmes. Being a relevant partner was possible not least because UNICEF has attracted top-level international staff as well as dedicated and skilled local staff.

47. The Bureau appreciated the concentration by UNICEF on the most vulnerable population groups and the most disadvantaged geographical areas. Furthermore, the efforts made by UNICEF to support partners to strengthen the disaggregation of data to reveal social disparities as a basis for advocacy and programme planning were found to be very important.

48. The Bureau welcomed, as an important strategy for achieving results for children, efforts made by UNICEF to influence policies, legislation and public spending in order to benefit the most disadvantaged.

49. The Bureau noted the importance of maintaining a minimum level of core programme resources to sustain UNICEF capacity to provide high-level technical advice and to influence policies.

50. The Bureau is of the view that the UNICEF programme in Bhutan has been very effective and has had a meaningful impact on the well-being of the country's children. The Bureau witnessed the strong country ownership of the programme and deep commitment of the Government of Bhutan. The Bureau welcomed the strong emphasis by UNICEF on national ownership of the country programme, which was evident throughout the visit.

51. UNICEF engagement with partners, civil society, communities and faith-based organizations, as well as the private sector, were prime examples of the added value and the multiplier effect UNICEF can produce by acting as a catalyst and bringing different partners together.

52. The members of the delegation noted the good cooperation within the United Nations country teams. The delegation was informed by UNICEF staff that there is close cooperation among the funds and programmes on policies at the central level. The delegation congratulates UNICEF for the partnerships established at all levels with the ministries, and with the local authorities at provincial and community levels to achieve results for children through evidence-based advocacy and action.

53. The members of the delegation appreciated the critical role UNICEF plays in support of the Government in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in supporting the protection and fulfilment of the rights of children and women in Bhutan.

54. The delegation observed that the Royal Government of Bhutan is open to ideas and willing to commit resources to programmes and projects that can have a positive impact and

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 27.

enrich children's lives. Therefore, UNICEF, given its credibility, has ample scope to continue its innovative work and act as a catalyst to initiate pertinent projects and programmes.

55. Throughout the visit, government officials were very welcoming towards the delegation and shared with them details relating to the efforts and interventions that the respective government offices were making in order to deliver results for children. It was observed that the various levels of Government were united around the cause of children and worked towards improving their lives.

56. In the context of the country's anticipated transition to middle-income status, the Bureau sees the importance of the emphasis by UNICEF on supporting disaggregated data to inform and shape policy and budgeting decisions. The contribution of the statistical profiles (fact sheets) by UNICEF Bhutan was a critical value added.

57. The Bureau would like to encourage more inclusive support for young monks.

58. The Bureau encourages UNICEF, in collaboration with the national authorities, to continue developing clear objectives based on the relevant Sustainable Development Goals to further increase the efficiency of the UNICEF programme in Bhutan.

Annex

Summary of the programme of the field visit to Bhutan, 17–22 April 2018

Tuesday, 17 April 2018

- Meeting with the UNICEF Bhutan team
- Meeting with the United Nations country team
- Welcome reception hosted by UNICEF Bhutan on the theme “We the Future movement”

Wednesday, 18 April 2018

- Call on H.E. Mr. Lyonpo Damcho Dorji, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Bhutan
- Call on H.E. Mr. Lyonchoen Tshering Tobgay, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Bhutan
- Meeting with Mr. Thinley Namgyel, Secretary, Gross National Happiness Commission. The Commission is the central planning agency for the Royal Government of Bhutan.
- Meeting with the National Commission for Women and Children: Chairperson and members: Commission Chairperson: Minister of Works and Human Settlement, Ms. Lyonpo Dorji Choden; Director of the National Commission for Women and Children, Ms. Kunzang Lhamu; and officials of the education and health ministries and monastic institutions.
- Lunch hosted by the Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Thursday, 19 April 2018

Gaselo Village, Wangdue Phodrang District:

- Visit the Gaselo Basic Health Unit
- Visit the Gaselo Central School
- Visit and lunch at the Shari Pangkha Monastic School

Wangdue/Bajo Town:

- Meeting at the Bajo Youth Centre

Friday, 20 April 2018

- Debriefing with government partners
- Debriefing with the UNICEF Bhutan team

Saturday, 21 April 2018

Paro District:

- Visit Paro District Hospital
- Visit Wangsel Institute, Drugyel, Paro District (the only institute in the country for deaf children) and Drugyel Lower Secondary School (which has a special education needs/inclusive education programme).
- Dinner hosted by the Director, Department of Multilateral Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.