Update on the context and situation of children

Bhutan’s economic growth rose from 3 percent (2018) to 5.5 percent (2019) and was projected to reach 6.9 percent in 2020. Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDP) grew by 3.9 percent (2019), an increase from 3.2 percent in 2018 (National Accounts Statistics, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, brought the economy to a virtual standstill. GDP growth rate dipped to -2.1 percent (State of the Nation Report, 2020). To continue providing free universal basic services, 25 percent of the Government’s 2020 budget was invested in health and education (Ministry of Finance National Budget Report, 2020-21). This commitment is critical given that children and adolescents comprise 34 percent of Bhutan’s 735,553 estimated population (48 percent female; 64 percent rural) (RGOB, Population and Housing Census, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly threatened children’s well-being in Bhutan. The delivery of antenatal and post-natal care services was disrupted. For example, immunization coverage dropped from 97 percent (2019) to 86.7 percent (2020). Even before the pandemic interrupted services, infant deaths contributed to 83 percent of under five deaths (State of the World’s Children, 2019), 1 in 5 children were stunted, and 2 in 5 anaemic, with one third of adolescent girls anaemic (RGOB National Nutrition Survey, 2015). Updated health statistics for 2020 are not yet available.

Prior to COVID-19, enrolment of children in Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) increased from 9 percent (2014) to 23.7 percent (2020), and every child had access to primary schooling (90.6 percent Net Enrolment Rate and basic completion rate of 93.5 percent) with no significant gender disparities (Ministry of Education (MoE) Annual Education Statistics, 2020). All schools were closed in March 2020 due to COVID-19, affected the learning continuity of almost 180,000 school children of whom 74,726 also missed out on regular school meals. When classes 9-12 started to resume from July onwards, some 317 students (gender disaggregation unavailable) did not return to school due to various reasons including early marriage and the need to secure employment. A total of 149 students (68 female) from 34 public and private schools dropped out of schools in Thimphu district alone (Ministry of Education, Education in Emergency (EIE), Implementation Report 2020). High repetition rates (14 percent at Grade VII; 11.9 percent at Grade VIII; and 12.3 percent at Grade IX) remain a concern (MoE Annual Education Statistics, 2020), as do low scores in learning outcomes (BCSEA, Findings from Bhutan’s Experience in PISA-D, 2019).

The legal framework and institutions for child protection were strengthened in 2020 by Government: developing the first-ever National Child Policy; revising the National Youth Policy; endorsing national Standard Operating Procedures on Gender-Based Violence (GBV); and adopting Early Identification and Safe Referrals procedures for child victims. These procedures were widely utilized in response to COVID-19 triggered increases in cases of violence against children. According to records maintained by the NGO Respect, Educate, Nurture, and Empower Women (RENEW), cases of GBV increased by 36.6 percent this year (700 cases as of November 2020 versus 500 cases in 2019). National helplines also saw an increase in children and young people seeking mental health support services since the start of the pandemic.

Children with disabilities remain particularly disadvantaged, given insufficient mechanisms to respond to their needs compounded by stigma. Children in the monasteries are also disadvantaged, given insufficient mechanisms to ensure their rights are met in health, safe water and sanitation, education and protection (there are 248 monastic institutions with 13,458 religious persons of whom more than half are children; RGOB and UNICEF, WASH Baseline Survey in Monastic Schools and Nunneries in Bhutan, 2019).
Key challenges and risks to children:
Disparities between population subgroups by wealth quintile, location, gender, and age, continue to challenge achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Earlier delays in major hydropower projects, upon which Bhutan’s economy relies, were further exacerbated by COVID-19 containment measures including border closures and travel restrictions. The tourism sector, with an estimated 16 percent of the working population, was also severely hit (National Statistics Bureau (NSB) and UNDP, Rapid Socio-Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 on Bhutan’s Tourism Sector, 2020).

Even before COVID-19, multidimensional poverty was the highest among children aged 0-9 at 7.1 percent (RGOB Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2017). Bhutan’s 2019 youth unemployment rate stood at 11.9 percent (female 13.8 percent) which is likely to have increased due to COVID-19’s impacts (NSB Determinants of Youth Unemployment in Bhutan, 2020). School closure, economic stress and lockdowns have increased the risk of household tensions, putting many children at further risk of harm from violence, abuse and psychosocial distress.

To cope with the impact of the pandemic and enforced restrictions, the Druk Gyalpo’s Relief Kidu (a social welfare programme) was launched by the King of Bhutan to provide income support to individuals whose livelihoods were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In total, Nu.1.2 billion (USD 16.4 million) was granted to over 33,000 beneficiaries including over 14,000 children from April-September 2020 (https://royalkidu.bt/category/news-press-release/index.html). Scaling up shock-responsive social protection will be crucial to prevent thousands of children in Bhutan falling into poverty.

Located in the fragile eastern Himalayan ecosystem, Bhutan’s sustainable development is highly dependent on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, hydropower, and forestry. The agricultural sector, which employs about 69 percent of the total population and 63 percent of the nation’s earning women (ILO 2020 estimate), is particularly vulnerable. Driven partly by global greenhouse gas emissions, impacts include crop loss and resultant food insecurity due to unusual outbreaks of diseases and pests, erratic rainfalls, storms, droughts, flash floods, and landslides. The most significant impact for Bhutan is the formation of supra-glacial lakes due to the accelerated retreat of glaciers with increasing temperatures. Glacial Lakes Outburst Floods pose new threats to lives, livelihoods and development.

Other challenges include a lack of high-quality data and planning capacity, particularly at decentralized levels, and the risk that communities do not adopt positive behaviours towards children and adolescents for which communication for development (C4D) interventions are required.

Major contributions and drivers of results
GOAL AREA (GA) 1: EVERY CHILD SURVIVES AND THRIVES
UNICEF provided extensive system-strengthening assistance to MoH’s COVID-19 response. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) on continuity of essential health and nutrition services were developed and disseminated. By November, 9,258 babies were delivered at health facilities and 106 home deliveries took place, 7,513 mothers and 6,841 newborns received pre-natal care second visits and 10,396 pregnant women received antenatal care (ANC) first visits. Provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) for health workers aided infection prevention. Close coordination with MoH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, national airlines and UNICEF Supply Division, ensured all routine vaccines were procured and delivered on time with a minimum stock of six months despite multiple logistical disruptions. As a result, 86 percent of under one-year old children were vaccinated with DTP3 vaccine.
UNICEF helped MoH to reach 97 percent 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 on MNP and IYCF through virtual sessions, and 2.5 million MNP sachets were procured and delivered to facilities despite COVID-19 transport restrictions.

Finally, UNICEF supported MoH’s COVID-19 response through the design and monitoring of a risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) plan. To date, over 70 percent of the population (500,000 people) have been reached with lifesaving messages on COVID-19 prevention. Over 25,000 influential persons and volunteers were mobilized including 12 focal persons from different faith-based organizations and 3,811 Scout Volunteers (2,213 F) who disseminated lifesaving messages during the pandemic.

**GA2: EVERY CHILD LEARNS**
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. When schools were closed in March 2020, almost 180,000 school-aged children (32,135 in hard-to-reach areas; approximately 50 percent female) continued learning through online and remote learning programmes (TV and Google Classrooms) led by the MoE with UNICEF’s technical assistance. For children without access to online or broadcast learning, Self-Instructional Materials (SIM) were developed and distributed. SIM were adjusted for children with special needs reaching 740 (302 F). 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. UNICEF is currently supporting the development of Bhutan’s first Multi-Sectoral ECCD Strategic Action Plan to promote a Nurturing Care Framework through early stimulation and responsive caregiving for children from 0 to 8 years.

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.

Lastly, 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.

**GA3: EVERY CHILD IS PROTECTED FROM VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION**
A National Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence COVID-19 Response Plan – to ensure continuity of child protection services and strengthen response capacities of service providers and frontliners – was developed and implemented by the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) and CSOs, with support from the UN, especially UNICEF.

UNICEF led the rollout of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Six hundred (242 F) members of district women and children
committees and frontline workers in all 20 districts and 4 municipalities were trained in early identification and safe referrals (EISR) of child protection cases and GBV. UNICEF supported the Council for Religious Affairs and Bhutan Nuns Foundation to adapt the EISR package for their situation. UNICEF also supported NCWC to develop a national system for GBV case management in line with international standards to be rolled out in 2021.

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 worked with Youth Development Fund, MoE, MoH, and UNDP to launch an online campaign to address mental health, resulting in a doubling of cases received by MoE’s and NCWC’s helplines – from 204 cases received March-August 2020 to 528 cases in the month of the campaign alone (mid-October to mid-November).

**GA4: EVERY CHILD LIVES IN A SAFE AND CLEAN ENVIRONMENT**

In the context of COVID-19, UNICEF assisted 47,848 children in schools and monastic institutions to access quality WASH services and 95,145 people and 8,685 healthcare workers and patients to avail critical WASH services for infection prevention (gender disaggregation unavailable). UNICEF aided the construction of 17 mass handwashing stations with safe drinking water in seven common public places benefitting 21,650 people. UNICEF ensured WASH interventions were included in the Safe Schools Guidelines for school reopening. In anticipation of schools re-opening in 2021, UNICEF supported the construction of WASH facilities in 25 ECCD centres in 15 districts targeting 522 children (278 F).

UNICEF continued to contribute to Open Defecation Free (ODF) coverage with an additional 13,020 people in 10 blocks benefitting from 100 percent improved sanitation. Against the 2020 target of 48 percent of the population, ODF status is now 50 percent. To sustain positive behaviors, 83 school teachers have acquired skills to promote better health and hygiene, 55 school support staff were capacitated in WASH facility maintenance benefitting 35,157 children (17,379 F), and 57 Health Coordinators from 49 monastic institutions acquired skills to coordinate WASH services benefitting 4,376 children (390 nuns).

On the launch day of the “Red Bracelet” campaign, 4,500 girls in 45 schools and 28 nunneries received 40,000 sanitary pads which helped to create a more enabling environment to address the stigma around menstrual hygiene.

Supported by UNICEF, the National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy 2020 was endorsed by Government to advance implementation of environment-friendly and climate-resilient WASH interventions. WASH FIT (Facility Improved Tool) was introduced by UNICEF in all 95 health centers in seven districts against the 2020 target of four districts. The baseline survey for WASH in Health Care Facilities (WinHCF) report 2020 was finalized.

**GA5: EVERY CHILD HAS AN EQUITABLE CHANCE IN LIFE**

Upstream work on Public Financing for Children (PF4C) was reinforced by UNICEF through partnership with Sherubtse College to develop and deliver the first ever Social Policy Certificate Course for Local Government to 26 participants (7 F) from five eastern districts. UNICEF also supported a 3-district assessment of child-friendly local governance (CFLG) to better understand challenges and opportunities for future UNICEF support to CFLG.

A social protection policy brief was developed together with the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth to advocate for upscaling child-sensitive cash transfers in Bhutan. The brief was shared with the Gross National Happiness Commission and His Majesty’s Secretariat Office, both responsible for overseeing Bhutan’s social protection programmes. UNICEF offered technical support to the Government to explore different 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 partnered with NSB and the Department of Local Government to design a subnational database integrating many Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey items. UNICEF also partnered with MoE 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.

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. During the review of the Youth Policy, UNICEF and its partners provided a platform for 1,200 youth (116 F) from different backgrounds to have their inputs included.

UNICEF helped MoE, Loden Foundation, Fablab and YDF to engage around 1,264 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 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.

**CROSS-CUTTING**

**Gender.**
Recommendations from the 2018 Gender Programme Review continue to be mainstreamed into annual workplans while disaggregated data are used wherever possible for programming purposes. UNICEF worked with the other UN agencies to prepare for CEDAW reporting. As noted above, UNICEF assisted the development and use of an SOP on GBV in line with IASC GBV guidelines. The SOP has ensured that the multisectoral response to addressing GBV follows a common framework for providing survivors of violence greater access to legal, psychological, social and economic support.

**Humanitarian assistance.**
Under the leadership of the RGoB, UNICEF developed a COVID-19 response strategy guided by the Core Commitments for Children. The strategy aimed to reduce human-to-human transmission and mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on all children, adolescents, youth and their families, especially those hardest to reach.

UNICEF ensured timely procurement of routine vaccines together with medical, health, nutrition and WASH supplies to support MoH’s COVID-19 response. By facilitating a pre-financing scheme for MoH, UNICEF’s procurement of influenza vaccine enabled Bhutan to conduct nationwide vaccination covering all high-risk groups and 80 percent of the general population. Technical support was also provided to strengthen the cold chain supply systems in readiness for the introduction of COVID-19 vaccine in 2021.

With ROSA’s support, UNICEF Bhutan mobilized USD 2,958,692 against its Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC) appeal total of USD 2,616,000. Major support for Bhutan’s HAC came from the Japan Government, Asian Development Bank, Global Partnership for Education (GPE), GAVI, UN MPTF (COVID-19), Global Thematic Funds (General and WASH), the Lego Foundation, and various UNICEF National Committees.
CHANGE STRATEGIES
Eight change strategies underpin UNICEF Bhutan’s programme, examples of which are provided above but some additional highlights are provided below.

Programming excellence for at-scale results for children. UNICEF Bhutan provided further support to improve subnational data sources to better identify vulnerable children and continued to build capacity of district administrations and communities to improve planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring to achieve results for children and adolescents.

Gender-responsive programming. Described under Cross-Cutting above.

Winning support for the cause of children from decision makers and the wider public. The Government in partnership with UNICEF Bhutan and 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. 2020 was also the 30-year anniversary of Bhutan ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child. To mark the occasion, a decree was issued on November 20 by His Holiness the Chief Abbot (Je Khenpo) calling on all duty bearers to ensure the wellbeing of Bhutan’s children and to accelerate CRC implementation. These commitments alongside the Government’s alignment to UN’s global “Protect Our Children” increased media coverage and public awareness on issues impacting children and young people. UNICEF harnessed social media platforms to promote COVID-19 prevention through intensive online campaigns, engaging children and young people. UNICEF’s followers on Facebook more than tripled, from 12,363 (January 2020) to 41,616 followers (December 2020), with 970 messages recording 162,962,004 impressions. Instagram also recorded a fourfold increase in UNICEF followers from 2,537 (January) to 11,399 (December). UNICEF disseminated 46 stories in 2020 including news articles and reports, highlighting issues affecting Bhutan’s children and young people as a result of COVID-19.

Developing and leveraging resources and partnerships for children. UNICEF has played an instrumental role in leveraging millions of dollars for Bhutan from the Global Fund, GAVI, Vaccines for the World’s Children, and GPE.

Harnessing the power of business and markets for children. Close coordination with the national airline ensured that all routine vaccines were procured and delivered on time despite multiple disruptions to transport routes. Against 2020’s target of 6,000 children in 20 schools, 7,900 children (1,289 F) in 26 schools benefitted from access to clean toilets through use of SATO technology supplied through UNICEF Bhutan’s partnership with Lixil. Mawongpa Water Solutions joined with MoH, SNV and UNICEF to install handwashing stations in public places. UNICEF helped the Loden Foundation to provide employment opportunities to at least 50 unemployed youth. Future scaling up of business engagement will include a Business for Results deep dive to build capacity within UNICEF and to analyze opportunities in the business sector in areas such as family-friendly policy promotion.

Harnessing the power of evidence as a driver of change for children. Various studies and assessments conducted in 2020 for policy advocacy and investment purposes are listed under Goal 5 above. The evaluability assessment of the Country Programme, postponed due to the pandemic, will be covered in 2021 as part of the Country Programme mid-term review.

ENABLERS
UNICEF Bhutan’s results and change strategies are supported by 4 organizational performance enablers. While several references have been made to these enablers above, further highlights are provided below.

Governance (Modern, transparent and accountable governance for the organization). The Office surpassed global financial and programmatic assurance targets. Programmatic and operational risks
were monitored regularly using the new e-GRC platform. The One UN Business Operating Strategy was endorsed by the UN Country Team with reporting to begin in 2021.

Management (Results oriented, efficient, effective, and collaborative management). UNICEF Bhutan continued to invest in staff capacity for results-based management (RBM). The Office complied with 7 out of UNICEF’s Division of Financial and Administrative Management’s 8 simplification areas. For example, the Office now avails goods and services more efficiently with the globally introduced Corporate Credit Card.

People (Versatile staff, staff as agents of change). Six staff attended a RBM Training-of-Trainers in person (pre-pandemic). All other trainings were conducted virtually: Designing and Delivering Engaging Virtual Trainings (2 staff); English as second language (1 staff); P4FC (1); and Data Visualization (1). New procedures such as Regular Days Off, well-resourced teleworking arrangements, and frequent mental/physical health sessions aided staff welfare during the pandemic.

Knowledge and information systems (Efficient, safe and secure systems connecting results & people). UNICEF Bhutan was the first in ROSA to move to the Enterprise Content Management platform, boosting office efficiency. All existing data were migrated to Cloud SharePoint early 2020, helping the Office to function even during national pandemic lockdowns.
UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF plays an active role in Outcome groups, Inter-Agency Task Teams, and UN Business Operating Strategy under the new UN Strategic Development Partnership Framework (UNSDPF).

**GA1:** In 2020, UNICEF cooperated with WHO, UNFPA and UNDP to support the MoH’s COVID-19 response, ensuring continuity of health services, RCCE, and resource mobilization. UNICEF collaborated with WFP in supporting the MoH to develop the National Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan to advance implementation of nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions.

**GA2:** UNICEF, UNDP and WHO finalized the implementation of the UNPRPD Round 3 and are now looking towards for applying for Round 4 to advance the rights of persons with disabilities.

**GA3:** UNICEF worked with the UN Inter-Agency Task Team on Gender to roll out the training package on EISR and the SOP on GBV to service providers and frontliners in all 20 districts and 4 municipalities. 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 (7,584 F) as advocates to disseminate lifesaving messages across 20 districts during the pandemic.

**GA4:** UNICEF continued to partner with WHO and SNV on WASH programming and during COVID-19, with the installation of handwashing stations on public areas around the country.

**GA5:** UNICEF and UNDP with RCO coordination, and in partnership with RGoB 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.

**Cross-cutting:** In March 2020, UNICEF spearheaded the UNCT 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 by the Secretary General six weeks later. UNICEF subsequently helped UNDP to merge the 7-point package with the 5 Pillars of SERF and coordinated the reformulation of the UNSDPF in light of COVID-19 which was endorsed by the Government.

UNICEF and other UN agencies, including the RCO, partnered on various capacity building initiatives. Under the One UN initiative, 10 Peer Support Volunteers from all UN agencies were trained with the support from UNICEF’s Regional Staff Counsellor to provide support to all UN staff during the pandemic. As a part of COVID-19 response to all UN staff, UN HR Task Team in collaboration with Staff Associations organized numerous learning sessions on different topics such as safety and security, preventive measures for COVID-19, Yoga, Mindfulness, and Meditation.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

**GA1: EVERY CHILD SURVIVES AND THRIVES**
Lessons learned: The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore the importance of coordinated preparedness, especially stocking up on essential medicines and supplies including vaccines. Pandemic-induced travel and flight restrictions as well as border closures required intense coordination across government as well as with UNICEF HQ. The need for continued risk communication and community engagement to sustain positive behavioural practices was also a key lesson in responding to the pandemic.

Innovation: UNICEF supported MoH to conduct virtual capacity building of health workers on MNP supplementation and IYCF counselling through Zoom, helping to achieve the target of MNP supplementation scale-up to at least 18 of the targeted 20 districts.

GA2: EVERY CHILD LEARNS

Lesson learned: The importance of emergency preparedness planning in the context of education to ensure learning continuity, encompassing the needs of the most vulnerable, especially those with disabilities and hard-to-reach children. A tracer study conducted by the MoE with UNICEF support through the google platform involving more than 13,200 respondents representing students, teachers, and parents/guardians, revealed video lessons mainly targeted the higher classes. Other issues which emerged were the quality of learning, the amount of support received by children from parents and caregivers in terms of time and other necessary resources such as gadgets and space, and in terms of access for children with disabilities. Further, the video lessons had limited emphasis on conceptual understanding vital in enhancing students’ competencies to cope with learning in higher grades when the situation returns to normal.

Innovation: To support the continuity of learning for children who had no access to either online or TV-based lessons during the pandemic, Self-Instructional Materials (SIM) were developed and disseminated.

GA3: EVERY CHILD IS PROTECTED FROM VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION

Innovation: Case management protocols for child protection and GBV were adapted to the COVID-19 situation to ensure that the social service workforce had adequate resources (PPE, updated referral pathways, appropriate devices, etc.) while ensuring the continuous provision of services. Provision of mental health and psychosocial services also had to be adapted through various online platforms such as telephone, zoom, skype, and WhatsApp.

GA4: EVERY CHILD LIVES IN A SAFE AND CLEAN ENVIRONMENT

Lesson learned: While UNICEF continues to work on WASH in Schools through an increased focus on upstream interventions over the last 2-3 years and the Government has taken over most of the construction and maintenance of water supply schemes and toilets, there has been decreasing financial support over time impacting sustainability. Advocacy efforts at the highest level need to be reinforced through the finalization of a WASH investment case along with continued support for upgradation of unhygienic toilets using innovative as well as environment-friendly and cost-effective interventions (for example, SATO pan).

Innovation: Innovation in the context of COVID-19 has been to accelerate WASH activities such as installation of handwashing stations in public places as well as in schools, monastic institutions and health care facilities as a means towards infection control. To adapt with impacts of climate change, for the first-time a heat pump hot water system which enables a 70 percent energy has been piloted at one monastic school to provide to warm water for personal hygiene.

GA5: EVERY CHILD HAS AN EQUITABLE CHANCE IN LIFE
Lesson learned: Social policy is relatively a new area in Bhutan and can only work with a complete ‘buy-in’ from the Government. In the face of an increasingly limited fiscal space for social sectors, UNICEF needs to further invest in improving the understanding of key government agencies, especially Ministry of Finance, GNHC, Parliament and local government authorities, to invest in child outcomes. Different entry points for influencing upstream policy making and programming are being developed by UNICEF Bhutan in the form of partnerships on child-friendly local governance, social sector investment cases, vulnerability analysis, social protection policy briefs, integrated cross-sectoral programming using civic participation of young people, and capacity building of the local leaders on community consultation and engagement for developing local government plans.

Lesson learned: During the review of the Youth Policy, UNICEF through its partners, provided a platform to over 1,200 youth (116 F) from different backgrounds to raise their voice in reforming the Policy and to have their inputs included. This was in response to a lesson learned during development of the 2011 National Youth Policy in Bhutan which fell short in consulting young people.

Innovation: UNICEF’s expertise working with youth volunteers, diverse national partners and NGOs resulted in the engagement of 3,811 scout volunteers (2,213 F) to lead advocacy campaigns on the promotion of COVID-19 preventive behaviors and health safety protocols. Additionally, 117 adolescents (57 F) across 11 districts were trained as an enquirer to strengthen support mechanisms for their peers in the communities.

Innovation: To overcome the constraints imposed by COVID-19, UNICEF and the Evaluation Association of Bhutan turned the scheduled face-to-face evaluation training into an online format.

CROSS CUTTING
Lesson learned: The COVID-19 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. Pre-planned activities were reprogrammed in coordination with Government and partners to fit with the needs as well as the limitations imposed by COVID-19 without compromising UNICEF’s mandate.

All the lessons learned and innovations described above will be used to improve interventions in 2021 as well as to inform the Mid-Term Review of the current Country Programme in various areas including: continued maternal/child health and nutrition system strengthening; COVID-19 vaccination and RCCE; safe return to ECCD and schools with quality interventions on many education fronts including the potential for nationwide digitalization; evaluation of UNICEF’s support for inclusive education; further child protection workforce and system strengthening; expanded adolescent skill-building and civic engagement; new private sector engagements; initiation of child-friendly local governance and innovative public financing for children; an intensified focus on shock-responsive social safety nets; and continued advancement of our internal business processes.