

Bhutan

Update on the context and situation of children

Status of political and socio-economic landscape

Bhutan made impressive socio-economic advancements over the past six decades, significantly improving average living conditions. The country reached Low-Middle-Income status in 2007 and graduated from the Least Developed Country (LDC) group in 2023, representing a significant milestone in its development journey.

Despite this positive momentum, Bhutan is highly susceptible to external and sectoral shocks, principally due to its rugged terrain, remoteness, and fragile mountain ecosystems. On 20th July 2023, flash floods and landslides triggered by heavy rains washed away a section of a hydroelectric plant in Eastern Bhutan which resulted in 7 deaths and 16 others missing[1].

There is high dependence on India for trade and transit, and strong reliance on a handful of key sectors for value-added creation. Bhutan is still recovering from the adverse impacts of COVID-19 on its economy, with an estimated GDP growth rate of 4 per cent in the fiscal year 22/23 from -10% in 2020 and inflationary pressures over the last three years[2]. The public debt of the Government of Nu. 276,976 million, accounting for 136.8 per cent of GDP[3], remains elevated. Adjustments to national and international debt policy and treatment frameworks are required to ensure that children are sufficiently protected from fiscal and macroeconomic volatility.

The economic and civil service transformation initiated in 2022 with a focus on improving efficiencies within the Government structure and opportunities for economic growth continued. With government reforms being implemented, UNICEF Bhutan continues to strengthen partnerships with redefined entities to ensure coordination and facilitation with key government counterparts and support the government to sustain critical gains made in social sector.

2023 was the last year of the 12th Five Year Plan and the last year of UNICEF's Country Programme. The government continued investing a high proportion of its national budget in the social sector (28.8 per cent)[4], benefitting children and adolescents (34 per cent of Bhutan's estimated population of 735,553[5]). With the ongoing formulation of a ten-year long development plan, the draft 13th Five Year Plan was formulated in 2023 and has prioritized economic growth with continued focus on human capital development, governance, and security. This will be launched by the newly elected Government in March 2024.

Status of children

While income and multidimensional poverty are overwhelmingly concentrated in rural areas, emerging pockets of poverty in urban areas are a concern. In 2022, moderate multidimensional poverty rate was estimated at 17.8% of the population (8.2% urban, 23.9% rural – and 61.4% of Bhutanese poor live in rural areas)[6]. **Children are disproportionately poor**, and moderate multidimensional poverty is highest for children with 20.7% of all children living in poverty. Children aged 10–17 years are the poorest age group – nearly 25% are poor. The most significant contributors to national poverty are deprivations in access to health (18.0%), followed by water and school attendance (both at 15.7%) and female years of schooling (15.3%). Despite notable progress in social services in the last two decades, the quality and inclusiveness remain a concern. The triple burden of malnutrition and high neonatal mortality remains a challenge. Only one-third of children aged 3–5 years attend **structured ECCD**, and the quality of teaching is a challenge to learning outcomes. **Child protection violations** are also highly prevalent. **Inadequate human resource capacity** in the social sectors hinders the transformation of existing national policies into fully functioning plans and the delivery of quality services.

Bhutan has a Gender Gap Index of 0.6382, ranking it 103 out of 146 countries in 2023[7], lagging behind mainly in the dimensions of political empowerment. Despite formal guarantees of equality by Government, structural and cultural norms continue to obstruct full realization of gender equality and women's empowerment. Meanwhile, efforts to leave no one behind are hindered by an inability to adequately identify vulnerable groups, given a dearth of up-to-date data, especially related to key social indicators.

Young people lack *market and future- ready skills*. The upward trend for youth unemployment (especially among young female workers) and migration are critical concerns, alongside informal employment. Post COVID-19 pandemic unemployment rates were the highest recorded from 2.7 per cent in 2019 to 5 per cent in 2020, and youth unemployment rate (15-24 years) from 11.9 per cent in 2019 to 22.6 per cent in 2020[8] . In 2023, overall youth unemployment rate was 15.9 per cent (Female: 18.3 vs Male 13.4 percent), and is still a predominantly urban phenomenon (23.9 per cent), as compared to rural areas (9.4 per cent)[9].

Limited technical capacity regarding social protection within key government agencies remains a challenge. Accordingly, with social protection becoming a priority among key government agencies, Bhutan CO (BhCO) must continue investing in strengthening their capacity and advocate for investment in social protection for women and children to fulfill the sustainable development goal of leaving no one behind.

Lack of recent, comprehensive, and disaggregated data on children remains a significant gap. The 2022 Common Country Analysis and 2022 UNICEF-commissioned Situation Analysis – along with recent evidence from Bhutan Living Standard Survey (2022) and Bhutan Multidimensional Poverty Index 2022 - provide detailed information and analysis about children and women. However, challenges persist with poor quality and non-availability of disaggregated data of child well-being and protection, in addition to capacities for analysis and use.

UNICEF continued to support the government in strengthening evidence generation for women and children and in monitoring progress towards the achieving the SDGs by 2030. This includes providing technical assistance to the government for undertaking the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) in 2024, which will generate disaggregated data and allow identification of deprivations. The MICS will be used to review progress towards the child-related SDGs and support the government's resource allocation and resource mobilisation as it transitions from LDC status. Furthermore, working with the Ministry of Education and Skills Development, the BhCO started a costing exercise to achieve SDG4.

[1] <https://kuenselonline.com/seventeen-still-missing-in-ungar-flash-flood/>

[2] <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=BT>

[3] State of the Nation 2023

[4] National Budget Report 2023/24

[5] PHCB 2017

[6] BLSS 2022;MPI 2022

[7] chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf

[8] LFS Report 2020

Major contributions and drivers of results

UNICEF worked with the Royal Government of Bhutan and other partners to design, implement and monitor an integrated work plan aligned with results of the Country Programme (2019-2023) and with the outcome areas of the UN Sustainable Development Partnership Framework (2019-2023).

Key results achieved across different programmes: -

- The Royal Government of Bhutan ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in October 2023- a significant milestone for disability and inclusiveness.
- The government rolled out an anti-bullying campaign in schools across Bhutan - a result of advocacy efforts, which were built on 2022's achievements in the multi-sectoral EVAC and anti-bullying campaign.
- High-Level side event "Mental Health for All: Leaving No One Behind" was co-hosted by Bhutan at 78th United Nations General Assembly,
- Provided technical and financial assistance towards drafting of the government's 13th Five Year Plan, where Social Protection is prioritized for the first time in a government plan.
- Supported drafting of National Education Policy led by Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD).
- Supported National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) and two CSOs to submit State Responses and Alternate Reports to Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Under respective Goal Areas, BhCO continued to strengthen programme implementation and relevance, achieving key highlights mentioned below: -

GA1: EVERY CHILD SURVIVES AND THRIVES

UNICEF continued supporting health system strengthening for effective coverage of health and nutrition services to children, adolescents, and women. High coverage of health and nutrition services was achieved. Ninety-eight per cent of children received their 3rd dose of DTP vaccine before their first birthday, 97 per cent of children aged 6-23 months received multiple micronutrient supplements for quality survival and prevention of stunting and 62.4 per cent of mothers and 73 per cent of newborns received postnatal care within two days of birth.

UNICEF continued supporting early detection, management, and referral of children with delays of developmental milestones. One hundred and fifty-two health workers from 13 districts were trained on applying the Bhutan Child Development Screening Tool (BCDST) for early detection and referral for health care management. Twenty-eight physiotherapists and physiotherapy technicians from 19 (out of 20 districts) were trained on the implementation of Rapid Neurodevelopmental Assessment (RNDA) tools enabling them to better address the specific needs of children with disabilities.

UNICEF supported the launch of comprehensive maternal and nutrition health (cMCH), including conditional cash transfer and the 1,000 golden days initiative of Accelerated Maternal and Child Health (AMCH) policy to improve effective coverage of essential health and nutrition services for children and women. Multiple Micronutrient Supplements (MMS) for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers was introduced with the cMCH package, which will contribute towards reducing maternal anaemia, and prevent prematurity, low birth weight and intergenerational stunting.

UNICEF supported mental health and environmental health. In 2020, Bhutan recorded more than 4,200 cases related to mental and behavior disorders. Within 2016-2020, 491 suicides were recorded,

with the highest number among young people¹⁰. To address rising numbers of mental health, psychosocial and suicide cases, UNICEF supported government in developing a multisectoral social and behavior change action plan to raise awareness and literacy about MHPSS and accessing preventative services thus helping connect other critical ministries, e.g., the MoESD around multisector interventions. MHPSS was also observed as a theme for World Children’s Day and during One UN Communication SDG campaign “Football for Goals” in collaboration with Bhutan Football Federation, reaching over 5,000 school children, including those with disabilities, and their parents.

UNICEF in partnership with WHO supported a High-Level side event, “Mental Health for All: Leaving No One Behind”, co-hosted by Bhutan in September at the 78th United Nations General Assembly. This reaffirmed the highest level of political commitment and action to ensure universal access to mental health care and support through multi-sector interventions.

UNICEF supported environmental health primarily on lead toxicity. The 2019 Lead Study reveals that 40 per cent of children had high levels of lead in their blood. Awareness programmes were organized during international lead prevention week on risks of lead toxicity.

A comprehensive mapping of community health programmes was conducted, generating evidence for investing in strengthening of community health system for effective and equitable health services. The landscape analysis on adolescent nutrition generated evidence to strategize systematic interventions for strengthening of primary health care services for child survival, and to reduce adolescent overweight and obesity.

GA2: EVERY CHILD LEARNS

UNICEF focused on supporting strengthening data collection systems and development of a National Education Policy; capacity building and diversification of services for young children, children with disabilities and children in monastic institutions; and partnership strengthening with government, CSOs, development partners and parents.

UNICEF continued playing a convening and partnership coordination role through its support to the Education Sector Coordination Meeting and Local Education Group and as the Coordinating Agency for GPE. s Coordinating Agency and through its participation in the development of the Partnership Compact, UNICEF contributed to leveraging GPE funds for the development of ECCD. UNICEF, in partnership with Save the Children and the World Bank contributed to the implementation of the Partnership Compact through the respective GPE funds: System Capacity Grant, System Transformation Grant and Multiplier Fund.

Partnership with the Monastic Education Council was forged to support education in monastic institutions and to develop a new Dratshang Management Information System, to collect data on child education, Water Sanitation and Hygiene and child protection in monastic institutions. English language as a subject was introduced in monastic institutions through digital learning apps.

To address the gap in 21st-century skills, UNICEF and the MoESD scaled up UPSHIFT to ensure its sustainability and integration. This involved integrating UPSHIFT into the school curriculum (eg. Business & Entrepreneurship, STEM, and Innovation). Additionally, UPSHIFT is being incorporated into the school scouting program and into the Scout proficiency badge system to enhance skills development for Scouts. UPSHIFT expanded to include an additional 64 schools and 7 colleges, covering 22 per cent of schools, including 10 youth centres, and 7 colleges, benefiting 16,000 young people (8188F).

In the area of inclusion, 39 schools were provided with access for 1,040 children with disabilities, and three model inclusive ECCD centres were established in the central, eastern and western regions reaching over 90 children, including 15 with disabilities. In 10 districts, governors, planning officers

and sector heads were oriented on the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities. Frameworks for inclusive education in higher education and pre-vocation curriculum for students with disabilities were developed. An ICT curriculum for children with vision impairment was developed to support effective learning through technology. In collaboration with UN Agencies and the Disabled Persons Organization of Bhutan, UNICEF advocated and contributed to the ratification of the UN Convention of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

BhCO helped the government align the Multi-Sectoral ECCD Strategic Action Plan to the Government's draft 13th Five- Year Plan and develop a quality monitoring tool for the ECCD programme into a web-based platform. Access to home-based ECCD interventions increased for 410 children, reaching parents in 600 communities.

GA3: EVERY CHILD IS PROTECTED FROM VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION

UNICEF continued strengthening the capacity of the social service workforce (SSW) in the prevention and response to gender-based violence (GBV) and child protection. 929 (433 F) members of the SSW, including justice for children workforce, were trained on GBV and CP case management, psychosocial support, early identification and safe referral, and child justice. Access to MHPSS services was enhanced, benefiting 44,757 (22,616 F) children and adolescents.

Women and child protection desks under the Royal Bhutan Police (RBP) were expanded to Trashigang and Dagana and at newly established North and South Thimphu Police stations. Women and girls' safe spaces (WGSS) were established in two districts and existing WGSS were strengthened in five districts, resulting in 17,938 women and girls benefiting from case management services, psychosocial support, referrals, and livelihood skills.

UNICEF supported the NCWC and two CSOs to submit State Responses and Alternate Reports to the CRC.

Training packages and guidelines on child-friendly legal aid were developed with the Jigme Singye Wangchuk School of Law and the Legal Aid Centre to provide accessible and responsive legal system for children. As a result, 47 (24 F) lawyers from the Centre and Bar Council and 29 (18 F) prosecutors from the Office of the Attorney General and RBP are equipped to effectively prosecute child-related cases. Five hundred and forty children (113 F) in contact with the law benefitted from child-friendly interventions, of which 149 children (12 F) received rehabilitation support.

To enhance rehabilitation and reintegration of Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) UNICEF supported Nazhoen Lamtoen to rehabilitate 12 male children at Youth Development and Rehabilitation Centre (YDRC) and reintegrate eight children who have completed their rehabilitation. For diversifying diversion services for CICL, a mapping of community services was conducted. MOUs with 15 community organizations were signed.

To strengthen protection of vulnerable children, including children with disabilities, UNICEF worked with the Commission for Religious Affairs to adopt a national child safeguarding policy for the Central Monastic Body. Support was provided to Ability Bhutan Society to provide positive parenting skills to parents, caregivers, physiotherapy unit staff, ECCD facilitators, SEN coordinators, and primary school teachers of children with disabilities. As of 2023, 49,072 parents and caregivers were reached.

UNICEF also supported a skilling and engagement programme, which benefitted 17,110 (8,405 F) young people through personal empowerment, gaining 21st-century skills and employability skills on entrepreneurship, coding and programming and multimedia skills.

GA4: EVERY CHILD LIVES IN A SAFE AND CLEAN ENVIRONMENT

UNICEF continued to support sustaining 100 percent ODF status (achieved in 2022). BhCO continued to provide support towards ensuring sustained hygiene practices and strengthened inclusive climate

resilience WASH services. The inauguration of an inclusive toilet in Khuruthang Middle Secondary School demonstrated benefits of inclusive WASH services in education institutions. The National Standards for WASH was drafted, underscoring the need for standardized services in healthcare facilities, schools, and monastic institutions.

Installation of environment-friendly heat pumps for hot water systems in monastic schools (inc. 1 nunnery) in high altitude areas demonstrated success of climate resilient WASH services for children and women in remote areas. Through capacity building of WASH caretakers and health coordinators, installation of safe water systems and heat pumps, and upgradation of toilets using SATO technology, 6,806 children (2,301 girls) in schools and monastic institutions were reached.

In Lhuntshe district, 280 people are reached daily through the provision of inclusive handwashing stations and safe drinking water to 14 Primary Health Centers (PHC). Since 2022, UNICEF supported 186 PHCs with safe water systems.

Since its inception, UNICEF supported observation of ‘Red Dot Campaign and high-level advocacy on Menstrual Health and Hygiene’. Global Menstrual Hygiene Day (2023) highlighted efforts to address menstrual hygiene challenges for girls and women with disabilities. 1,216 children, including 45 children with disabilities (15 girls), now access inclusive toilets in three schools with Special Education Needs programme.

GA5: EVERY CHILD HAS AN EQUITABLE CHANCE IN LIFE

BhCO invested in capacity building of newly elected Parliamentarians on investing in children through a training course on social policy. This provided necessary skills and knowledge on a wide range of analytical, management and problem-solving skills to support policy formulation, enactment, and effective implementation. The training also incorporated critical recommendations into the Council's five-year Strategic Development Plan.

UNICEF's continued advocacy efforts on social protection resulted in prioritization of social protection and having a shock-responsive social protection system in place by 2029. UNICEF's technical assistance to Cabinet Affairs enhanced their understanding of various models of social protection systems and the importance of investing in inclusive child-sensitive social protection.

UNICEF supported establishing a social security system for the monks and nuns. Launched in September 2023, it contributes towards reducing the vulnerabilities of monks and nuns, including children in monastic institutions, to economic hardship and social exclusion. Today, 157 monks (of 7,000 registered) will receive monthly benefits.

UNICEF contributed to the government's emergency health financing strategy. The five-pronged strategy will ensure availability and continuity of adequate funds for health emergency preparedness and response.

In partnership with the Ministry of Finance and the MoESD, the first ever education budget brief was finalized, and the findings will enhance social sector expenditure for children's rights and development.

A resource guide on child-friendly local governance was developed to support advocating and sensitizing local government officials on child-sensitive investment through their local budgets.

CROSS-CUTTING

Gender

The 2023 Gender Programmatic Review (GPR) identified gender responsive priorities for the next Country Programme and highlighted the need for strengthening existing programmatic approaches to gender, with a focus on adolescent girls. The BhCO made efforts to integrate gender across its programmes and in partnership with others.

BhCO partnered with UNDP, UNFPA and WHO to roll out the RESPECT framework to prevent

violence against women in all the 20 districts and four municipalities. UNICEF supported establishment and strengthening of Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) in Samtse, Sarpang, Chhukha, and Punakha districts.

UNICEF and Women in Tech Maldives organized a national hackathon in Bhutan (30 girls from 7 districts) with a focus on empowering adolescent girls in STEM education.

BhCO partnered with Bhutan Cricket Council Board to host a workshop to develop leadership through sports designed for 200 adolescent girls. UNICEF supported Youth Development Fund for a four-week program on "Digital Entrepreneurs" to empower young female entrepreneurs, providing 20 unemployed girls (15-24 years) with essential skills in digital marketing and entrepreneurship.

PSEA

UNICEF, as an active member of the UN PSEA working group, conducted orientation for UNICEF staff, UN agencies and partners, resulting in enhancing awareness on PSEA and conducting UN PSEA Common Assessment.

Humanitarian Assistance

BhCO initiated discussions with Department of Local Governance and Disaster Management (DLGDM), the nodal government agency and *Desuung Office*, community of volunteers, to prepare for and respond to natural disasters from a child-centred and sensitive approach. Emergency preparedness efforts intensified after internal capacity development and simulation. Inter-agency emergency preparedness was also strengthened.

CHANGE STRATEGIES

Winning support for the cause of children from decision makers and the wider public:

UNICEF supported capacity building of newly elected Parliamentarians on the importance of social policy and investing in children. Financial and technical support for drafting of 13th Five-Year Plan was also provided, contributing to social protection being prioritized in the national plan for the first time.

BhCO doubled its followers' impressions (especially those between 13-44 years) through Facebook, Instagram and X (previously Twitter), where the messages recorded 62,100,178 (62 million) impressions, with a 33.5 per cent increase in its followers. UNICEF Bhutan had 59 mentions in national media and Country Office issued 11 joint press releases in 2023.

UNICEF Bhutan hosted two visits from donors, Japan Committee Vaccine for the World's Children (JCV) and Czech National Committee. These advocacy efforts complemented with strategic media coverage on issues affecting children contributed to the wellbeing of children remaining a priority for Government and increased awareness and visibility of UNICEF's work in Bhutan.

Amongst others, the CO harnessed the high-level visit by Regional Director for South Asia and the World Children's Day event to advocate inclusion, mental health and child rights issues. These advocacy efforts which were built on 2022's accomplishments, resulted in the Government rolling out an anti-bullying campaign in schools across the country in 2023.

Developing and leveraging resources and partnerships for children:

BhCO partnered with the EU to improve learning outcomes and foster digital transformation of the education system in Bhutan signing an agreement for 1 million Euros to support inclusive access to digitalization in education and skills. This will pave the way for greater employability, economic growth, and poverty reduction. Contribution from the National Committees increased by 14 per cent

Harnessing the power of business and markets for children: Supported 16,000 young people (8188 F) across 129 schools, 10 youth centers, and seven colleges in implementing 146 innovative social projects. BhCO continues to partner with private and corporate sector entities (iBEST and DHI) to

explore digital solutions and options for children, adolescents, and youth.

Harnessing the power of evidence as a driver of change for children: A SITAN and GPR, amongst others, were conducted to support development of UNICEF Country Programme 2024-28. UNICEF contributed technically and financially to the National Health Survey (2023) supporting the MoH to generate data on Health, Nutrition and WASH. Learnings and good practices of the UPSHIFT interventions were documented. Following sustained advocacy for social sector data, the government approved MICS and requested financial resources.

ENABLERS

BhCO's results and change strategies are supported by four organizational performance enablers. In the area of **governance**, effective and efficient delivery of programme results was further strengthened by rationalizing processes through developing and simplifying standard operating procedures, such as contracts, payments and HACT compliance. The Annual **Management** Plan priorities were developed focusing on results-oriented, efficient and collaboration between operations and programmes. Fourteen indicators were fully achieved while four were partially achieved at year end.

As a follow up to Global Staff survey (GSS) 2022, an action plan was developed and implemented in consultation with the Staff Association.

The programme staff developed Explanatory Notes, including identifying key programme specific and cross-sectoral outputs and indicators for the next five years. The Country Programme Management Plan for the new Country Programme Cycle was also drafted in consultation with staff.

In the area of **people and culture**, staff members received professional development through online and external opportunities. . In-House Training with ROSA support was conducted for eWP, Emergency Preparedness and Managing Performance (inc. Career clinic). All staff retreat with a focus on Clifton strength and open culture was conducted. Internal capacity on HACT, e-Tools and ePDs was strengthened through a 3-month international stretch.

Knowledge and information systems:

UNICEF continues to work with relevant partners to strengthen Bhutan's data ecosystem. UNICEF worked with Evaluation Association of Bhutan and the Office of Cabinet Affairs and Strategic Coordination to train local level community planners on basic M&E concepts. UPSHIFT documentation for 64 schools and 10 youth centres generated evidence on meaningful skilling.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

UNICEF Bhutan continued efforts to strengthen strategic engagements with key government agencies, CSOs, private sector and donors. UNICEF in collaboration with the RGoB, CSOs, academia, and development partners including UN agencies implemented programme interventions pertaining to health and nutrition, education (ECCD, inclusive education), child protection, ADAP and social policy. Additional strategic partnerships were forged with the Office of Cabinet Affairs and Strategic Coordination (OCASC), GovTech (the Government's Technology Agency) and with the EU for resource mobilization.

Health and nutrition sector programmes were implemented in partnership with MoH, MoESD, Faculty for Nursing and Public Health (FNPH), Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences (KGUMSB), Pema Secretariat and National Medical Services (NMS). UNICEF collaborated with UN agencies (WHO, UNFPA, WFP, UNODC, UNDP) to advocate for health and nutrition agenda. This facilitated development of integrated sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health (SRMNCAH) strategy and gender responsive programme interventions (eg. HPV vaccination and

screening for cervical cancer as continuum of care).

UNICEF continued playing a convening and partnership coordination role through its support to Education Sector Coordination Meeting and Local Education Group, and as Coordinating Agency for GPE. In its role as Coordinating Agency and through its participation in development of the Partnership Compact, UNICEF contributed to leveraging GPE funds for development of ECCD. UNICEF, Save the Children and the World Bank contribute to implementation of Partnership Compact through respective GPE funds: System Capacity Grant, System Transformation Grant and Multiplier Fund.

Together with UN Agencies and Disabled Persons Organization of Bhutan, UNICEF advocated and contributed to the ratification of the CRPD.

Partnership with Monastic Education Council was forged to support education in monastic institutions and to develop a Management Information System, that provides data on child education, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene and child protection in monastic institutions.

UNICEF and the MoESD organized high-level advocacy event on UPSHIFT bringing key stakeholders including government officials, representatives from civil society, school principals, focal teachers, and young people to celebrate success of UPSHIFT and engage in discussions regarding its sustainability and broader adoption within the national program. Additionally, UPSHIFT is being incorporated into the school scouting program and integrated into Scout proficiency badge system to enhance skills development for Scouts.

Leveraging technical expertise of other UN agencies, UNICEF worked with UN inter-agency task team on gender to roll out the RESPECT framework to prevent violence against women. Further, partnership with UNDP (financial and technical support) resulted in capacity building of newly elected National Council members on treaty body reporting and follow-up, and joint advocacy for ratification of CRPD. UNICEF together with WHO supported Government and CSO partners in implementing MHPSS joint programme. UNICEF also partnered with ITU to support GovTech Agency in generating evidence for strengthening the child protection system to respond to online violence and exploitation.

For the WASH sector, UNICEF strengthened its collaboration with MoESD, MoH, Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport (MoIT), Religion and Health Project (RHP) of Central Monastic Body, Local Government and rural communities, and Bhutan Toilet Organization (BTO). UNICEF, in partnership with SNV, continued to advocate with MoH to sustain 100 per cent national ODF status and progress towards safely managed sanitation in the next country programme cycle. UNICEF continued partnership with Mawongpa Water Solutions and Druk Water Solutions, the key private sector partners for WASH, SNV and BTO to promote sustained awareness efforts for quality and climate resilient WASH system.

For the first time in its partnership with Government, UNICEF and UNDP provided financial and technical assistance to Office of Cabinet Affairs and Strategic Coordination for drafting of national development plan- the draft 13th Five Year Plan which will be endorsed by the new Government in 2024. UNICEF will continue to build on its burgeoning partnership with Office of Cabinet Affairs and Strategic Coordination and provide support for the development of a social protection framework.

Under the Akelius project UNICEF leveraged partnership with Bhutan's only private telecom provider-Tashi Cell – who provided free internet for 300 tablets in 7 monastic institutions, for 6 months, helping these institutions cut operational cost and enabling the young monks and nuns access learning.

Cross-Cutting Areas:

To advance the youth agenda, UNICEF played a pivotal role in advocating for establishment of 30-member Adolescent and Youth Advisory Board to the UNCT. This collaborative approach facilitated

the integration of diverse expertise and resources (UNDP, WHO, UNFPA, and FAO). In collaboration with Women in Tech Maldives, UNICEF developed a hackathon program. Additionally, UNICEF facilitated a discussion to establish a new partnership with MoESD and GovTech with the aim of expanding the digital skilling program for youth on a larger scale. UNICEF also partnered with DHI to engage students during the Fab Lab International Conference.

Building on the 2022 multi-sectoral Ending Violence Against Children (EVAC) campaign, UNICEF continued to engage and strengthen the alliances of more than 17 agencies in advocating children's welfare through collaboration. CSO partners—RENEW, Tarayana, and Nazhoen Lamtoen—integrated EVAC, engaging 7,000+ individuals in 50+ communities. Similarly, the Bhutan Scouts Association integrated EVAC and mental health promotion, benefiting 2,000+ school children. Bhutan Football Federation (BFF) integrated EVAC and mental health promotion within their CSR program, reaching 5,000 children (including those with disabilities) via football clubs and events. Collaborating with UNICEF, they spotlighted World Children's Day, sensitizing youths on violence and Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS). BBSC, the national TV and radio station produced and aired a compelling short film on peer violence and mental health, sparking discussions in schools. UNICEF collaborated with the "Black Box Theater Group" empowered 25 youths in staging a theater performance illustrating the impact of violence and poor mental health on children. Additionally, UNICEF's support for training five faith leaders to foster advocacy for children's wellbeing through Faith Based Organizations. Gains made in establishing this consortium of community influencers will be leveraged to engage and mobilizing communities in addressing issues concerning children in the national development plans and UNICEF new country programme.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

With LDC graduation and advent into the next development phase, UNICEF continues to ensure that critical gains made in the social sector are sustained, and that critical issues pertaining to children and women continue to be prioritized by Government and civil society. Additionally, use of SBC and engagement of children and youth were critical to enhancing programme effectiveness. The CO was presented with several opportunities for innovative solutions and to improve programming.

It was observed that ongoing engagements deepen partnerships, and that collaboration for multisectoral MHPSS interventions will contribute towards improving the mental health wellbeing of children and adolescents. **As addressing MHPSS is a cross-sectoral challenge, UNICEF has the capacity to troubleshoot and take the lead role to spearhead and nudge the IPs into ensuring that appropriate hands-on technical support is being provided for effective programme delivery and to continue to work in close collaboration which is a daily ongoing process.**

Integration of Multiple Micronutrient Supplements (MMS) for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers with comprehensive MCH flagship programme and conditional cash transfer reduces the service delivery cost, while contributing to equitable coverage of health and nutrition services. **Cross-sectoral collaboration for behavior change in coordination with social policy, nutrition, and health is critical for innovative solutions.**

Though the provisions of Breast Milk Substitute (BMS) Marketing Code is included in National Food and Nutrition Security Policy and Food & Drug Bill of Bhutan, there is no dedicated BMS code for legislative monitoring that requires to undergo legislative impact assessment before submission to Parliament. **Continued high level advocacy among parliamentarians and the policy makers is critical for all areas where there may be policy implications.**

Working with the organizations of persons with disabilities and advocating with leaders at district level created an upward push for the ratification of the CRPD. **For demand creation on critical policies, UNICEF needs to continue to advocate upward with local government stakeholders and**

communities.

Draft 13th Five Year Plan presented opportunities for re-alignment and synchronization of country programme actions with the national priorities. Draft National Education Policy uses evidence from the 13th FYP but is not supported by an education sector analysis. The SDG 4 costing exercise supported by UNICEF Bhutan Country Office and ROSA will provide further evidence. Therefore, any important policy formulation requires need assessments and research to make it evidence based. **UNICEF will continue to advocate with Government on prioritizing evidence generation before embarking on critical policy formulation.**

Building on innovation and digitalization required in monastic institutions for filling data gaps, the development of Dratshang Management Information System (DMIS) will provide relevant data on education, health, and child protection in monastic institutions to support policy development. **It was noted that while introducing innovative practices and systems to traditional institutions, they need to be customized and tailored, and implemented incrementally for a smooth transition.**

The involvement of children and other rights holders by UNICEF, Government IPs and CSOs in decision-making provides strong support towards ensuring that policies, and programmes are more effective in addressing barriers to inclusion and more relevant in supporting their full and equal participation. **This highlighted the need for engagement of children as agents of change.** The preparatory work on ratification of CRPD has highlighted **the importance of working with relevant committees in the National Assembly and National Council**, given their oversight role in implementation of Conventions.

With RENEW's deep community ties, and strong network including staff and volunteers who are willing to dedicate time and resources to developing and supporting the WGSS, UNICEF's partnership with RENEW was fundamental in reaching 17,938 women and girls. Therefore, **developing and leveraging partnerships with CSOs with large networks and proven community trust is critical for successful implementation.**

Various training packages developed on justice for children, MPHSS, child protection, and GBV have ensured that there is consistency in the delivery of training across different organizations and helped maintain uniformity in the skills taught, reducing variability in the learning experience. Accordingly, to institutionalize the capacity building of the social service workforce, it is important to have **standardized training materials developed in line with international standards.**

Programmes also had lessons learned from various programmatic experiences: -

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- Experience documented through ECCD programme suggests that the expansion of parenting education requires a multi-pronged approach based on facility-based and home-based interventions.
- The Eduten mathematics learning application and model online language teaching pilots in monastic institutions showed the criticality to expand internet connectivity to schools and monastic institutions. National standards are required to improve quality of WASH services and to address climate action for which action was taken to draft National Standards for WASH in healthcare facilities, schools, and monastic institutions. Once endorsed, these standards will facilitate effective implementation of inclusive, climate-resilient, and environmentally friendly WASH interventions across diverse settings.

Cross-Cutting Areas

UNICEF acknowledged the significance of customizing interventions to cater to varied requirements, interests, and aspirations of young individuals. In this regard, including adolescent girls in a digital

skilling program inspired them to embrace technology and venture beyond their comfort zone in exploring innovative interventions. Innovative approaches were used through implementation of UPSHIFT, including designing training that equip young people, including out of school youth, with employability skills, and tailoring the program to meet specific needs and contexts of different schools.

Collaboration with government agencies, NGOs, sports bodies, media and private sector organizations was critical for leveraging resources and networks to maximize impact and sustainability. Collaborating and leveraging resources from other partners should be continued.

While the Country Programme was developed from a gender lens, concerted efforts need to be made to implement activities to be gender responsive.