

Face-to-face and remote psychosocial counselling in schools during COVID-19

THE CASE OF BHUTAN

COUNTRY/COUNTRIES:

Bhutan

PARTNERS:

Ministry of Education (MoE) and UNICEF

THEMATIC AREAS:

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)

COVERAGE OF SYSTEMS CHANGE:

Nationwide

KEY RESULTS:

Early monitoring of psychosocial distress among students prompted the MoE in collaboration with UNICEF to include MHPSS as a key component in schools and to train all school guidance counsellors in the country to provide both face-to-face and remote MHPSS to children and parents/caregivers. The following results are attributed to these interventions:

- 1) All 156 school guidance counsellors (76 female and 80 male) from all 20 districts in Bhutan were trained as of September 2020 on how to provide psychosocial support remotely to children, parents and caregivers; and
- 2) Information, education and communication materials (IEC) were developed, which enhanced the messaging and reach of MHPSS support.

COVID-19 CONTEXT

In March 2020, the Government of Bhutan closed schools as a measure to stop the spread of COVID-19. The

Ministry of Education (MoE) responded rapidly, and delivered lessons on television, radio and through online platforms. Complementary to the remote-learning platforms, the mass distribution of self-instructional materials have helped many children to continue learning.

While school closure is recognised as a successful preventive strategy for the spread of COVID-19, the MoE and UNICEF warned that it might also have high psychosocial and educational costs. Social isolation, for instance, may lead to reduced peer and support networks for children. In addition, parents could be unprepared for home schooling, and there is an increased risk for children to be exposed to violence and exploitation (UNICEF, 2020a).

As of April 2020, school closures in Bhutan affected 170,263 school-going children (UNICEF, 2020b). Given the possible impacts on children's psychosocial wellbeing, the MoE, with the support of UNICEF, strengthened the provision of Mental and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) interventions in schools. This case study explores the interventions with school counsellors to provide MHPSS in Bhutan.

DETAILS OF PROMISING PRACTICE/ CRITICAL POINT OF CHANGE

Immediately after the Bhutan Government detected the first case of COVID-19 in March 2020, the MoE activated the Education Emergency Operation Centre. Within this platform, the MoE created a sub-working group on MHPSS for children and young people. UNICEF has been actively working with this sub-working group to enhance support for children, parents and caregivers.

Before the pandemic, Bhutan had a counselling service provided by the MoE within schools. When the pandemic started, school counsellors set up a Facebook page to support children to manage their time during school closure. Many children shared their experiences of anxiety and other emotional issues, as a result of the pandemic. Noticing this increased negative impact on children's psychosocial wellbeing, the MoE with the support of UNICEF, included a provision of MHPSS via existing platforms such as Facebook.

By May 2020, 173 children (76 boys and 97 girls) and 75 adults (36 female and 39 male) had been provided with remote counselling and psychosocial support including innovative approaches such as art therapy. As of September 2020, all 156 school guidance counsellors (76 female and 80 male) from all 20 districts in Bhutan were trained on how to provide psychosocial support remotely to children, parents and caregivers (Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, 2020). When schools started gradually reopening in September 2020, face-to-face psychosocial support was also conducted.

LESSONS LEARNED FOR CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS

- **It is necessary to have continuous monitoring during COVID-19 to identify critical and ongoing challenges, in order to propose new solutions to address them.** The evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to changing situations across time that required ongoing adaptations. Early monitoring of the challenges raised by the pandemic was essential to developing interventions that met children's needs during the pandemic.
- The increased number of children who contacted school counsellors to share their emotional challenges during the pandemic, raised awareness about the need for such support. **Adaptations to the approach and methodology of the school counsellor programme were critical for ensuring wider coverage and access to remote mental health and psychosocial support, for students.** Based on the assessment of the initial interventions of school counsellors, the MoE recognised the need to add psychosocial support to existing counselling and educational interventions.
- **Online platforms and disseminating hard copy information, education and communication (IEC) materials played a key role in increasing the reach of MHPSS interventions.** Since schools were closed, the MoE, with the support of UNICEF, established various platforms to provide psychosocial support remotely, improving access particularly during lockdown. In addition, several IEC materials on MHPSS were developed and disseminated widely. The materials reached a great number of people with useful information that they can refer to during any future humanitarian crisis as well.
- **It is necessary to build capacities that can adapt as needed in crisis settings.** The changing nature of COVID-19 led the MoE to understand the need to provide support through online platforms during the lockdown, and to

understand the need to provide safe face-to-face support during the gradual reopening of schools.

- **Effective and comprehensive psychosocial support to children must include support and counselling to parents and caregivers.** Parents are usually unprepared for home schooling. In addition, the secondary effects of the pandemic, such as economic hardship and social isolation, could increase the levels of stress in families, thus increasing the likelihood of children experiencing or witnessing violence at home. For this reason, it is necessary to support parents to manage stress and to provide counselling on positive parenting including positive discipline strategies.
- **Training and developing education and communication materials with clear guidance contribute to the effectiveness of the intervention.** During the pandemic, UNICEF supported the training of school counsellors in all 20 districts in Bhutan. With UNICEF's support, various educational resources were also developed, including a guidance note on the provision of remote psychosocial support, and a training manual on psychosocial support. These materials contributed not only to delivering the training session but also to making resource materials available to the counsellors for their daily activities.

LESSONS LEARNED FOR PARTNERSHIPS: COOPERATION, COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

- **Having a MHPSS sub-working group, within the Education Emergency Operation Centre, contributed to mobilising resources that ensured the effective provision of psychosocial support in schools.** Specifically, the collaborative work with UNICEF contributed to leveraging resources to train counsellors and set up platforms to deliver MHPSS interventions.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND FUTURE ADAPTATION

- **Ensuring economic and human resources to maintain the adaptations** introduced during the pandemic will be crucial for the continuation of psychosocial support for children and young people in schools and for their parents on positive parenting.

KEY CONTACTS AND FURTHER RESOURCES:

For more information visit:
UNICEF Bhutan Country Office website at
<https://www.unicef.org/bhutan/>

REFERENCES:

Global Social Service Workforce Alliance (2020). Policy and Funding Support for the Essential Role of the Social Service Workforce in the COVID-19 Response. <http://socialserviceworkforce.org/resources/blog/policy-and-funding-support-essential-role-social-service-workforce-covid-19-response>

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