

Kingdom of Bhutan Country Overview



Background

Bhutan is a landlocked country bordered by China in the north and India in the east, west and south in the eastern Himalayan region. The climate varies between sub-tropical to tropical in the southern foothills, cool winters to hot summers in the central valleys and severe winters to cool summers in the high Himalayas. The country has over 71% of its land under forest cover which includes 42.7% protected areas, thereby maintaining its rich biodiversity and water resource availability of 100,000 cubic meters per capita per annum. Bhutan's key demographic figure; population of 735,553 (PHCB 2017), an area of 38,394 square km, Bhutan being a young democratic constitutional monarchy established in 2008, and it is the only **carbon negative country in the world**.

In 1971, Bhutan began to develop its foreign relations by joining the United Nations and in 1974 with the coming in of UNICEF the WASH program formally started. Bhutan is also an active member of SAARC and is currently a member of 45 international organizations. In 2017, three-member delegation from Bhutan led by the Minister for the Ministry of Works and Human Settlement (MoWHS), attended the SWA Sector Ministers and Finance Ministers meeting as an observer in Washington DC, USA. Their participation was supported by UNICEF (HQ and CO). A formal application was sent to SWA by MoWHS in consultation with Ministry of Foreign Affairs in May 2017 for accession to the membership and was granted in October 2017. Bhutan is now the 7th country to join SWA from amongst the eight SAARC countries.

Status of WASH sector in Bhutan

Bhutan has made good strides in achieving improved sanitation at 85.3% as per the Bhutan Living Standard Survey (BLSS 2017). However, current SDGs basic service levels is 69% and Bhutan still faces less than 1% open defecation according to JMP 2019. A rapid survey done in 2017, on the assessment of baseline data for safely managed sanitation services in urban areas which showed that 53.6% of the population has access to safely managed sanitation services. Similarly, a baseline survey has been carried out for rural areas on safely managed sanitation services for which the data entry and analysis is being carried out.

Improved water sources in Bhutan stands at 99.5% with 45.5% of households having piped water in the dwellings and 50.4% with piped water in compound according to BLSS 2017. Bhutan has 36.2% of its population having access to safely managed drinking water with 100% pipe connection nationally according to JMP 2019.

Disparities in access to WASH facilities and services are prevalent in Bhutan. These inequalities are related to income, gender, disability and geographic factors, and are often interrelated. Rural households are remote and scattered, often located on mountainous terrain with limited access and challenging supply chains.

Table 1: Status of WASH sector in Bhutan, JMP 2019 Report

Bhutan	Drinking Water			Sanitation			Hygiene		
	National	Rural	Urban	National	Rural	Urban	National	Rural	Urban
	2017	2017	2017	2017	2017	2017	2014	2014	2014
Safely managed	36	28	49	-	-	-	-	-	-
Basic service	61	69	49	69	67	73	80	75	87
Limited service	3	3	1	9	5	15	18	22	12
Unimproved	0	0	1	22	28	13	-	-	-
No service	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	1

Country Priorities

It is evident from the message granted by His Majesty the King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck “Where we live must be clean, safe, organised, and beautiful, for national integrity, national pride, and for our bright future. This too is nation building” that the WASH sector is top priority.

Also, in the 12th FYP there is emphasis on the WASH components;

- Sustainable water-ensure water for all (DRINKING and IRRIGATION) by 2021.
- Manage wastes more efficiently.

Bhutan follows a five-year socio-economic development planning cycle starting with the 1stFive Year Plan (FYP) in 1961. The FYPs articulate the socio-economic development priorities and programmes to be implemented over a five-year period.

The planning process for the 12thFYP covering the period 1stJuly 2018 to 30thJune 2023 began in January 2016 with series of extensive consultations with all relevant stakeholders, including individuals, government agencies, local governments, private sectors, Civil Society Organizations, political parties etc.

Assessment/mapping of the 12th FYP National Key Result Areas (NKRAs) and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)was carried out with the SDGs by Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC). Previously, there were 16NKRAs which were closely related with 16 of the 17 SDGs and close to 100 Targets and indicators of SDGs are integrated into the NKRAs and KPIs. With the coming in of new government the water sector is given more importance with the creation of a dedicated NKRA 17-themed “Sustainable Water Ensured”.

The two lead ministries (Ministry of Health and Ministry of Works and Human Settlement) in consultation with other relevant sectors have harmonized the SDG 6.1 and 6.2 indicators with the National Key Result Areas (NKRA 8 and 15) of the 12thFive Year Plan (2018-2023). Bhutan’s planning process is based on inclusive bottom-up planning where local governments prioritise developmental activities according to the local needs aligned with NKRAs.

1. Macroeconomic Stability Ensured	4. Culture and Tradition Preserved and Promoted	7. Quality of Education and skills Improved	10. Gender Equality Promoted, Women and Girls Empowered	13. Democracy and Decentralization Strengthened	16. Justice services and Institutions Strengthened
2. Economic Diversity and Productivity Enhanced	5. Health Ecosystem Services Maintained	8. Water, Food and Nutrition Security Enhanced	11. Productive and Gainful Employment Created	14. Health and Caring Society Enhanced	17. Sustainable Water Ensured
3. Poverty Eradicated and Inequality Reduced	6. Carbon Neutral and Disaster Resilient Development Enhanced	9. Infrastructure, Communication and Public Service Delivery Improved	12. Corruption Reduced	15. Livability, Safety and Sustainability of Human Settlements	



In addition to the 12 FYP activities, the present government has prioritized water security and therefore, a flagship program with the objective to provide 24x7 safe drinking water is underway to address issue of low accessibility despite the high-water availability. This is mainly due to issues in source management, inadequate infrastructure development and issues in governance and sector-based management systems.

Response to COVID-19

The first phase of the Flagship Program covers ten Dzongkhags(districts) and four Thromdes(municipalities). The total cost of the interventions for the watershed management, infrastructure development and water quality improvement has been estimated as Ngultrum.2,751.6 million (USD 39 Million), benefitting 74,241 households, living in the selected regions in the 1st phase. With the hopes of ensuring access to 24x7 safe drinking water, the Flagship Program implementation began alongside the 12th Five Year plan activities.

Coincidentally, the **Covid-19 pandemic** situation has pressured the Government to emphasize more on provision of safe water, sanitation and hygienic conditions as never before to prevent and protect human health during infections disease outbreak. Thus, most of the water flagship activities has been prioritized and front loaded by the Ministry of Works and Human Settlement to provide 24x7 safe drinking water to the communities at the earliest possible. Additionally, the flagship program also provides an employment opportunity for the local communities during its implementation phase.

Similarly, the Ministry of Health in partnership with SNV and UNICEF constructed 25 mass handwashing stations with safe drinking water at common places in 10 Districts of Bhutan. This resulted in generation of improved hand hygiene behavior amongst the community during COVID-19 pandemic.

Institutional Arrangements

The Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) leads the development of five year plans (FYPs) which includes setting national targets and budget allocation for Sanitation and Hygiene Programs. The National Environment Commission is responsible for establishing and ensuring compliance with standards, codes of practice and regulations on effluent discharge, septic tanks and water quality.

The WASH sector in Bhutan comprises of the following;

- The Ministry of Works and Human Settlement (MoWHS) is responsible for urban WASH at the national level. Within the MoWHS, the Water and Sanitation Division of the Department of Engineering Services (DES) is responsible for developing policies, strategies and guidelines.
- The Ministry of Health (MoH) is responsible for rural WASH at the national level. Public Health Engineering Division (PHED) under MoH is responsible for developing policies, strategies and guidelines.
- The School Health and Nutrition Division of Ministry of Education is the lead coordinating agency for WASH in Schools in the country.
- The Religion and Health Project of the Council for Religious Affairs is the lead coordinating agency for WASH in monastic institutions including nunneries.
- The Local Government is responsible for preparing annual targets, work plans and budgets for WASH within their respective jurisdiction.

A coordination mechanism (B-WASH Cluster) at the central level is in place to provide platform for inclusive and participatory collaboration and coordination amongst the sectors/agencies (Tourism Council of Bhutan, the CSOs- Ability Bhutan Society, Royal Society for Protection of Nature, Bhutan Nuns Foundation, Tarayana Foundation, Bhutan Toilet Organization, UNICEF, Swiss Red Cross, SNV, media and private sectors) to address the WASH issues. It also facilitates harmonization of policies, standards, guidelines, data management, advocacy and awareness towards achieving the national, regional and international (SDG) commitments. It also takes the initiative of building capacity and pre-positioning of essential materials for humanitarian preparedness and response for WASH in emergency.

Challenges

Amongst many challenges faced in the WASH sector, following are some of the key challenges that needs to be addressed;

WASH Sector Financing: Planning & budgeting for WASH are prepared by respective sectors based on the approved five-year plan. There has been steady increase in the resource allocation for WASH sector in the last 3 years notably in the urban sectors through development partners and international financial institutions like UNICEF, SNV, World Bank and ADB. Some of the key challenges faced in the budgetary allocations are low priority for WASH sector, poor coordination during budget preparation between the centre and the local governments and absence of dedicated operation and maintenance budget for WASH facilities including monitoring and follow-up activities. A greater proportion of budget for sanitation and hygiene related activities in rural Bhutan are still supported by the development partners (UNICEF, SNV, WHO and Swiss Red Cross). Apart from the challenges in resourcing the WASH sector, there is also the issue of sustainability of the services due to the lack of effective resource recovery mechanism like standardized tariff regulation at national level. There is a need to come up with a costed WASH plan to achieve national and SDG targets.

Capacities Development: Human resource capacity at all levels is a challenge in order to effectively plan, implement and monitor WASH initiatives. With the government now allocating 50% of the national

budget to the local government in the 12th Five Year Plan, human resource capacity including availability of skilled personnel is a key constraint for the sector. Thus, local governments need to set aside dedicated budget for building capacities in WASH. Currently, there is no collaboration with technical training institutions leading to a mismatch of skills and market demand in development of certain critical WASH services. However, there is an opportunity to collaborate with the research institutions and universities. In addition to the government's effort, development partner's role will continue to remain crucial in capacity building & innovative approaches to help country achieve 2030 agenda.

Coordination Mechanism: Currently there are number of agencies involved in water and sanitation sector. Often these agencies work in isolation with limited coordination. Having this important mandate divided across many agencies and most prominently between the MoWHS and MoH, along the lines of urban and rural areas. MoWHS oversees the urban water and sanitation while the Ministry of Health is responsible for the rural water, sanitation and hygiene. With two agencies involved, it weakens holistic approach to planning and management of service provision in the WASH sector. The endorsed National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy, 2020 gives clear delineation of mandates for concerned agencies such as MoWHS and MoH. Thus, implementation of this policy ensures to eliminate the coordination issues amongst various WASH sectors in Bhutan. The current government also believes in the establishment of a dedicated water agency to ensure water for all by 2021 for which the discussion is ongoing.

Climate Change: Despite the Bhutan's carbon negative status, the country is experiencing impacts of global warming especially on glaciers and glacial lakes, which constitute a major source of water in Bhutan. The Bhutan Himalayas is known to have some 677 glaciers and 2,647 glacial lakes, these glaciers are reported to be retreating by about 20-30 meters each year (Bhutan Environment Outlook, NEC, 2008) and inconsistent rainfall reported in recent years may adversely impact the WASH services.

Commitments:

Table 1: BHUTAN COMMITMENTS FOR 2019 WITH PROGRESS UPDATES.

Commitment	Status
CSO (Bhutan Toilet Organization)	
Lobby with Government to pass the National Sanitation Policy and become and implementing partners of the policy	Achieved (National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy 2020 endorsed by Government where CSOs are included as implementing partners.
Forge partnership with Ministry of Health (MoH) to reach out to the most vulnerable population that we left out and give them access to adequate toilet facility.	Ongoing, Led by MoH engaging UNICEF, SNV and CSOs, strategies for last mile and post ODF is being developed.
Government (Ministry of Health)	
Upgrade all old school toilets to improved PF toilet using SATO technology (Toward zero pit latrine in School) and push for new school toilets to use equally resilient technology in partnership with Ministry of (MoE) and UNICEF Bhutan.	Ongoing, (completed in 8 districts) the project is being implemented in partnership with MoE and UNICEF. The project is further extended to Monastic schools and nunneries in partnership with Religion and Health Project (RHP) and UNICEF.
Establish baseline for SDG 6.2	Ongoing, Led MoH in partnership with UNICEF, SNV and WHO baseline establishment survey for WASH in Healthcare facilities and Rural sanitation programme is completed. The report for the baseline is being compiled currently.
100% basic sanitation coverage in > 50% of the Gewogs (Blocks) of the country	Ongoing, annually the certification of gewogs/districts with 100% sanitation coverage and ODF is done during the World Toilet Day observation (19 November). Currently 50% of gewogs are certified as 100% basic sanitation and ODF.
Government (Ministry of Works and Human Settlement)	
Develop an inclusive national road map for “National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy”.	Ongoing, after the endorsement of “National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy”, the development of roadmap is the first priority of the Government. The consultant could not be recruited due to pandemic situation. However, drafting of TOR for recruitment of consultant is ongoing.
Explore proper cost recovery mechanism to meet our operational expenditure for urban WASH infrastructure.	This activity will be taken care during the development of roadmap for “National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy”.

Table 2: BHUTAN COMMITMENTS FOR 2020.

Organization	Commitments
CSO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ In partnership with UNICEF, SNV and MoH, reach out to the most vulnerable population that were left out and give them access to adequate toilet facility. (Bhutan Toilet Organization) ❖ In Partnership with Youth Center Division, MoE and UNICEF improve WASH services in Youth Centers across the country. (Bhutan Toilet Organization)
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Develop and finalize the strategy for rural sanitation last mile and post ODF (Ministry of Health) ❖ Improved access to safe drinking water supply for school children through provision of facilities and capacity building. (Ministry of Education) ❖ Improved access to safe drinking water supply for child monks and nuns through provision of facilities and capacity building. (Religion and Health Project, Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs) ❖ Develop an inclusive national road map for sanitation and hygiene. (Ministry of Works and Human Settlement)
Development Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Support development of National Sanitation and Hygiene Road Map. (UNICEF) ❖ Support development of sanitation last mile and post ODF strategy. (UNICEF)