

# APFSD YOUTH FORUM 2023



## Asia-Pacific Regional Youth Call to Action 2023



### Bhutan

**Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at all levels in Asia and the Pacific with Young People at the Forefront**

#### SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

Gross National Happiness (GNH), in the words of His Majesty the King, is “development with values” since it represents a comprehensive and responsible approach to sustainable development. The GNH development paradigm consists of almost every objective aimed within the SDGs. The GNH carefully directs the country’s Five Year Plans, which firmly align with the SDGs and have chances for real-world application. Bhutan’s development is guided by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which serves as its guiding principle for the growth of the country. The recent transition of Bhutan from LDC to Developing Country is a positive indication of the progress in Bhutan. However, it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the developments especially in regard to young people in Bhutan. There are still various gaps to be filled in order to achieve the Agenda 2030 of SDGs in Bhutan.

With regards to SDG 4 (Quality Education), one of the key barriers is the lack of accessibility of digitalised education and technology to economically disadvantaged people. The sudden change of the education system to the online world was an easy transition for some, while it was equally challenging for many in the rural areas with no access to internet and lack of phones or laptops which made regular learning very tedious. People with Disabilities (PWDs) in Bhutan have the opportunity to pursue education till 12th grade, but after completion, there are very limited opportunities for further education. Lack of colleges or institutions for PWDs creates a very narrow space for career growth which further impacts mental peace for many. The out of school youths have no access to accurate information on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). There are very few youth organisations providing information on SRHR but even so, most of the focus is given towards the school and college going youths, leaving out the out-of-school youths which can lead

to uninformed decisions impacting their lifestyles. The lack of advocacy and knowledge about sex and gender and lack of integration of CSE in the school curriculum has increased discrimination against people of different gender identities, leading to an increasing number of dropouts from the LGBTIAQ+ community.

Bhutan has been known as a gender neutral country, however various imbalances still persist in the country. Men continue to dominate Bhutan's political processes, but mechanisms are in place to improve women's participation. In the 2018 national elections, women made up 51% of the electorate, yet their participation in the Parliament was extremely limited. Nevertheless, the 2018 elections recorded the highest number of women candidates being elected in comparison to the past two elections, doubling the women representation from 8.3% in 2013 to 15.3%, which is quite remarkable. In the third local government elections in 2021, participation by women increased significantly with 185 women elected to various local government elective offices, making it a cohort of the highest number of women leaders. When the term "gender equality" is used, it is mainly directed towards women, and the inclusivity of the LGBTIAQ+ community is often neglected. It is important to remember that patriarchy impacts men as well.

On SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), Bhutan has been progressing well. Clean water is abundantly available and WASH facilities are increasingly reaching the remote areas of Bhutan. The National Hygiene and Sanitation Policy was developed in 2020. The policy ensures that everyone has access to comprehensive coverage and sustainable services, that appropriate technology is adopted for sustainable sanitation systems, that a sustainable and effective financing mechanism is developed for safe sanitation and hygiene services, that all levels of capability, including behavior change communication, are strengthened, and that institutional mechanisms for effective and efficient coordination and service delivery are put in place. The Bhutan Living Standards Survey 2017 also indicates an impressive 99.5% of households having access to improved water sources and the situation of access to improved water sources increased tremendously to 99.5% in rural areas as against 99.6% in urban areas. Bhutan has achieved the status of 100% ODF (open defecation free) status in 2022 as well. Moreover, CSOs like the Bhutan Toilet Organization, have been adding a lot of value to the

sanitation facility of the entire country. However there are still certain gaps to be filled, such as the lack of quality toilet facilities in regard to travelers within the country. There is also a need to increase awareness on water storage for areas which do not get water 24hrs a day. The inconsistency of maintaining good practices can reduce the efficiency of implementation. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the efforts towards constant and correct handwashing techniques were implemented with such enthusiasm, but with decrease in risk, the effort has decreased as well.

SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) has aligned with Bhutan's energy decisions till date. The ongoing Bhutan Green Power Development Project of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) taps into Bhutan's enormous hydropower potential through a public-private partnership, the first of its kind in the country. Although, large hydropower has drawn controversy in the past, mainly because of issues associated with the land rights of local communities, the rights of indigenous peoples, and the environmental impact of damming major rivers. Bhutan has been granted international support from UNDP and ADB in means of electric vehicles and the users are increasing everyday as well.

In regard to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), Bhutan is very far from urban development. There are not many facilities of transportation and development. Keeping in mind the mandate of forest preservation, there must be progress towards sustainable development in ways of improving transport facilities. Moreover, offices, corporations, banks and markets could be much more PWD friendly as well.

As for SDG 17 (Partnership for Goals), Bhutan is very far from recognition. Most of the time, the relevant stakeholders and politicians are not aware that Bhutan is being represented in big platforms for change. The lack of acknowledgement can demotivate anyone who is interested in genuine change for the betterment of our country.

## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

### SDG4: Quality Education

- Digitalisation of education should be prioritised by ensuring that schools have access to technology such as phones, projectors, and computers, while implementing appropriate regulations. This can improve the quality of education by providing students with digital resources to enhance their learning experience and preparing them for the demands of the modern workforce. By leveraging technology, education can be made more accessible and inclusive, enabling students from all backgrounds to achieve their full potential.
- Primary schools should incorporate sustainable intelligence, including the concepts of SDGs and humanitarianism, into their curriculum. By educating young students on these important topics, they will be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to address environmental challenges and work towards a sustainable future while also understanding what they want to do. This will make learning conceptualised and not just concrete.
- Career counsellors can provide resources and advice to help students make informed decisions about their education and career paths, ultimately leading to better outcomes and a more productive workforce. By empowering young people with the tools they need to succeed, we can help them realise their full potential and contribute positively to society.
- Colleges must strive to be inclusive and PWD-friendly, offering accessibility measures that enable students with disabilities to pursue higher academic education, not just vocational training. By removing physical and social barriers, colleges can ensure that all students have equal access to education and can reach their full potential. This will promote a more diverse and inclusive society that values and supports everyone.

### SDG5: Gender Equality

- Policies should prioritise equity over equality. While equality aims to treat everyone the same, it may not address the challenges different groups face. By focusing on equity, policies can be tailored to address the specific needs of marginalised communities and ensure that all individuals have equal opportunity, regardless of their background and/or identity.
- Gender equality policies must be made more inclusive. Currently, the policies mainly focus on equality for women, while ignoring the needs and challenges faced by the LGBTIQ+ community. To promote a truly equal society, the policies should address the problems of all individuals, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.
- Implement gender responsive approaches to sustainable development which includes access to comprehensive sexuality education to ensure young people's health and wellbeing.

### SDG6: Clean Water and Sanitation

- Strengthen and develop partnerships that involve Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), parents, local leaders, and caregivers in healthcare. These partnerships can promote community engagement and participation in health programs, increase access to healthcare services, and improve health outcomes. By involving CSOs and other stakeholders, communities can take ownership of their health and well-being and ensure that healthcare policies and programmes are tailored to their needs.
- Create awareness and prioritise high-level policy decisions on menstrual health management. This includes strategising good management practices and providing adequate and better services/facilities to improve the situation in both academic and religious institutions. Menstrual health management is a critical aspect of women's health, and ensuring access to proper sanitation facilities and hygiene products is crucial to reducing health risks and promoting gender equality.

## SDG7: Affordable and Clean Energy

- Invest in the socio-economic impact of hydropower. While hydropower has been a key driver of Bhutan's economy, it is essential to consider the potential negative impacts of dam construction on downstream communities. The government should prioritise studying and analysing the socio-economic impact of dams on local communities to ensure that the benefits of hydropower are shared equitably and that the livelihood and well-being of the people living downstream are also maintained.

## SDG11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

- Government must allocate proper housing and locations for Indian labourers who come into the country to work. Despite being from a different country, these labourers contribute to the development of Bhutan and providing them with adequate living conditions is a humanitarian duty of the government. Proper housing and living conditions not only improve the well-being of the labourers but also promote social inclusion and reduce inequalities.
- Increase disability-friendly infrastructure in Bhutan. Persons with disabilities (PWDs) make up a significant portion of the country's population, and creating accessible infrastructure is a critical step towards promoting their inclusion and well-being.
- Reconstruct traditional houses to be disaster-prone. Traditional infrastructure is a significant aspect of Bhutan's cultural heritage, but it is essential to integrate disaster-prone features to ensure the safety of communities. With increasing climate change impacts, disasters such as floods, landslides, and earthquakes are becoming more frequent and severe. By integrating disaster-prone features into traditional infrastructure, Bhutan can promote sustainable development while safeguarding communities' safety and well-being.
- Develop strategic and proper mitigation plans by higher authorities in large communities during natural disasters. Climate change increases the frequency and severity of natural disasters, and large communities are particularly vulnerable to their impact. By developing strategic plans and mitigation measures, higher authorities can minimise the impact of natural disasters on communities and promote sustainable development.

## SDG13: Climate Action

- Gather accurate data on the impact of climate change on both the natural environment and human societies. This includes quantitative data on temperature changes and qualitative data on the socio-economic consequences of climate change. This will provide policymakers with the necessary information to make informed decisions and develop effective strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change.
- Raise awareness about climate change and its impact on the planet among the younger generation. It is recommended to incorporate climate change education into school curricula, starting from elementary levels, to help students understand the causes and effects of climate change and the necessary steps to mitigate it.
- Advocacy and awareness campaigns to educate the larger population about the impact of climate change on the country. Although Bhutan is known for its lush green environment, it is not immune to the effects of climate change, and the population must take ownership in developing climate-resilient communities.
- Establish effective collaboration among stakeholders in introducing climate change solutions. This collaboration should involve all levels of society, from policymakers and government agencies to civil society and private sector organisations. The collaboration should avoid duplication of efforts and ensure consistent interventions at all levels. This will help maximise interventions' impact and ensure resources are used efficiently.

## SDG17: Partnerships for the Goals

- Governments should recognise and acknowledge the efforts of youth volunteers and organisations working towards achieving the SDGs. This recognition can serve as a source of encouragement and motivation for youth-led initiatives, and it can help to foster a sense of ownership and responsibility towards achieving the SDGs. Governments can recognise such efforts through awards, grants, and other forms of support, which can help to scale up the impact of youth-led initiatives and promote meaningful engagement of young people in sustainable development.

- Policies and laws must be inclusive and focus on people from all walks of life, including those with different gender identities and disabilities. This means ensuring that policies and laws are designed to meet the needs of all individuals, regardless of their gender or ability.
- Establish a robust monitoring and evaluation system for policies and activities to achieve the individual SDGs. While Bhutan has made significant progress in developing policies and implementing activities towards the SDGs, the effectiveness of these efforts is often not measured or evaluated. Establishing a monitoring and evaluation system can help to track progress, identify areas for improvement, and ensure that resources are being used effectively.

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*The APFSD country and sub-regional briefs were developed through collective discussions and engagements between youth advocates at the APFSD Youth Forum in Bangkok on March 18-20, 2023. The Bhutan drafting team was led by Apsara Chhetri and Palden Wangchuk Dorji, with inputs provided by Dechen Wangchuk, Pema Choden, and Rinchen Niksum Dorji. Overall supervision was provided by the ARROW Call To Action team.*

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