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National report submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 5/1 and 16/21*

Bhutan

* The present document is being issued without formal editing.



I. Introduction

1. The Kingdom of Bhutan submits the Fourth Cycle Universal Periodic Review (UPR) National Report pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 5/1, 16/21 and 17/119. The report highlights the progress made by Bhutan in addressing its accepted recommendations from the third UPR cycle, as well as other human rights obligations during the period 2019-2024. Bhutan accepted 157 of the 220 recommendations during the third cycle.
2. Since presentation of the Third UPR Report in 2019, Bhutan navigated the COVID-19 pandemic with minimal loss of lives but suffered severe economic setbacks; undertook a major public sector reform to enhance accountability and improve service delivery; graduated from the UN's category of Least Developed Countries (LDC), and concluded its Third Parliament.
3. In January 2024, the country successfully concluded the fourth general elections with the People's Democratic Party forming the government on 28 January 2024. The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) remains steadfast in its commitment to human rights as reflected by the priorities of the country's 13th Five Year Plan (13FYP).
4. Bhutan's 13FYP spanning from 2024-2029 aims to increase the country's GDP per capita from USD 3,400 to above USD 12,000 by 2034 and quadruple the income of the bottom 40% of the population by 2030. The 13FYP is guided by four strategic objective areas of economic development, social development, security and governance. Social Development, social protection and social security are priority focus areas under the social development cluster of the Plan.
5. Given its transformative nature firmly rooted in Gross National Happiness (GNH), the 13FYP supports the vision of the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC), a unique initiative of His Majesty King Jigme for the future of Bhutan that was announced during the 116th National Day of Bhutan in 2023.

II. Methodology

6. The report has been prepared in consultation with various stakeholders including government agencies, parliamentarians, CSOs¹ and development partners, and in adherence to the OHCHR's Guidance Note for the 4th Cycle UPR National Reports. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade of the Kingdom of Bhutan coordinated the preparation of this report. The report was drafted by a multi-stakeholder group consisting of representatives of relevant agencies of the Executive, Legislative, the Judiciary and the Constitutional bodies.

III. Implementation of recommendations from the previous cycles and new developments

A. Fundamental rights (Recommendation 157.46)

7. The normative and institutional framework for the protection of human rights in Bhutan is firmly grounded in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan which guarantees the fundamental rights for all persons and provides effective remedies when these rights are violated. Detailed information on this has been included in Bhutan's third UPR report submitted in 2019 and in the updated Common Core Document 2023.
8. Article 7 of the Constitution of Bhutan provides that all persons have the constitutional right not to be discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, politics or other status. It is Bhutan's state policy to create a society free of oppression, discrimination and violence, based on the rule of law, protection of human rights and dignity, and to ensure the fundamental rights and freedoms of the people. Non-discrimination is embedded as a key principle under Bhutanese legal and policy framework. Accordingly, legal frameworks are in place to ensure non-discrimination.

B. Acceptance of international norms (Recommendation 157.1)

9. Bhutan acceded to the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children on 20 February 2023.

10. Bhutan ratified the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities in March 2024. While fully subscribing to the principles of the core human rights instruments, Bhutan remains committed to a gradual approach towards ratification of additional instruments in keeping with our national level of preparedness.

C. Legislative and institutional framework (Recommendations 157.10, 157.13, 157.123, 157.136-137, 157.140)

11. Following the process of harmonisation of laws in 2018, the Penal Code of Bhutan (PCB) was amended in 2021. Major amendments include the definition of child molestation (specifying acts that constitute molestation and increase in sentencing for rape) and amendment to decriminalise homosexuality (Sections 213 and 214) and Section 154 related to Trafficking in Person (TIP) which was amended to harmonise the definition of trafficking in persons with the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons.

12. Other relevant laws that were amended by the Parliament after 2019 are:

- (a) Anti-Corruption (Amendment) Act of Bhutan 2022
- (b) Civil Society Organisations (Amendment) Act 2022
- (c) Royal Bhutan Police (Amendment) Act 2022
- (d) Customs Duty Act of Bhutan (Amendment) 2021.

13. The following relevant new legislations were passed after 2019:

- (a) Civil Service Reform Act of Bhutan 2022
- (b) Gyalsung Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2022
- (c) Civil Liability Act of Bhutan 2023
- (d) Biological Corridor Nine Act of Bhutan 2023
- (e) National Digital Identity Act of Bhutan 2023.

14. The Bhutanese civil service underwent a massive reorganisation and restructuring to align with a renewed vision for the 21st century. Ministries were strengthened as the foundational structure of governance for a more effective role in policy setting and enforcement. Ministries and Agencies with allied mandates and common objectives were strategically repositioned for greater synergy and collaboration.

15. The National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC), the national machinery for the protection and promotion of rights of women and children, underwent changes to its structure with the Secretariat placed within the Ministry of Education & Skills Development (MoESD). An independent Commission was reconstituted, maintaining its policy, regulatory, and reporting mandates. All women and child protection services within the NCWC have now been transferred to The PEMA.

16. Under the leadership and guidance of Her Majesty The Queen, a new institution- The PEMA was established in 2022 as the nodal agency for mental health as well as women and child protection services. The PEMA was instituted to accord the required priority to mental health initiatives in Bhutan through proactive and responsive mental health service delivery network, an enabling mental health system, multisectoral collaboration and coordination, and advocacy.

D. Environment, climate change and disaster management (Recommendations 157.28-157.31, 158.52)

17. Bhutan's commitment to the environment is enshrined in its Constitution and supplemented by many specific legislations². In October 2023, the Parliament of Bhutan enacted the Biological Corridor Nine Act of Bhutan 2023, which will increase the country's protected area coverage to 52% from 51.44%.

18. The following policy guidelines were adopted further enhancing Bhutan's commitment towards environment protection:

- (a) Climate Change Policy of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2020,
- (b) Regulation on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer and Hydrofluorocarbons 2021, and
- (c) Carbon Market Rules of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2023.

19. In keeping with our carbon neutral commitment and efforts towards climate resilient development, the following have been developed and are being implemented:

- (a) Low Emission Development Strategy for Food Security, Human Settlement, Surface Transport and Energy 2021.
- (b) Bhutan's First National Adaptation Plan (NAP) was launched in September 2023. The NAP is undertaken in the priority sectors of agriculture, forest and biodiversity, health, and water and is informed by the Gender Sensitive Vulnerability Assessment.
- (c) Bhutan's Long-Term Low Greenhouse Gas Emission and Climate Resilient Development Strategy in 2023.
- (d) National Environment Strategy 2020 outlines gender-responsive development as a key approach and recognizes differential impacts of environmental degradation on men and women, and emphasises the key role of women in natural resources management.

20. A study on Gender and Climate Change in Bhutan with a focus on Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) Priority Areas was conducted by NCWC and the National Environment Commission in 2020, following which in 2022 the NCWC issued the gender mainstreaming toolkit for selected NDC Sectors in Bhutan.

21. The First National Disaster Management and Contingency Plan (2023-2028) (NDMCP) is being drafted. The NDMCP recognizes the differentiated impacts of a disaster event on the most vulnerable sections of society including women, children and other disadvantaged groups. The plan will be reviewed and updated annually to reflect the changing needs and collaborative nature of Bhutan's climate and disaster management arrangements.

22. Disaster Response and Coordination has been institutionalised at the national and district levels. Early warning systems to detect the signs of an impending flood and alert communities downstream have been installed. Warning systems, siren towers, automatic water level stations and automatic weather stations have been installed in the three river basins.³

23. A Tabletop Simulation Exercise and Disaster Risk Management Advocacy was completed earlier this year in one district. District officials as well as local government (LG) functionaries, first responders, members from Bhutan Red Cross Society (BRCS), Bhutan Telecom and the Food Corporation also took part in the exercise. A full scale emergency exercise was carried out at the *Paro* International Airport in June 2024 to enhance preparedness for real time emergencies and disasters in the aviation sector.

24. Training on Urban Resilience and Disability Inclusion in Disaster Risk Reduction was carried out in August 2023 for officials from all four Municipalities and representatives from the Disabled People's Organisation of Bhutan (DPO).

E. Administration of justice (Recommendations 157.2, 157.97–157.98)

25. Since 2021, 25 child and women friendly courtrooms have been equipped with facilities to enable in-camera hearings and video testimonies to minimise stress and anxiety associated with in-person court appearances. In addition, a total of 169 officials⁴ from the Judiciary, Office of the Attorney General (OAG), NCWC, Royal Bhutan Army and Royal Bhutan Police (RBP) were trained on child justice by the Judiciary in 6 batches between February to August 2021.

26. E-litigation platform launched in April 2021, enables survivors of domestic violence or abuse and children to participate remotely, thereby facilitating identity protection that might be compromised in a traditional courtroom setting. Court users and litigants, community centres and LG leaders have been trained to facilitate use of the platform.

27. The Bhutan National Legal Institute (BNLI) established the National Legal Aid Centre on 19 October 2022, with the aim of providing access to justice for indigent persons. As of June 2024, it has provided services to 94 recipients⁵ encompassing both civil and criminal cases.

28. The Guideline on Pro Bono Legal Aid Services 2023 was adopted and 75 private lawyers were trained on the guideline. There are currently 21 legal aid service providers.

29. In 2023, a specialised waiting room for detainees awaiting trial appearances for those with cases in both the High Court and the Supreme Court was constructed. This facility includes separate designated areas for men, women, and children in conflict with the law (CICL).

30. Since 2019, the Judiciary has constructed 2 additional district and 3 sub-districts courts. *Paro* district court is the first of its kind to have inclusive and disabled friendly court rooms.

31. Alternative dispute resolution services are provided free of cost by trained elected local leaders who are oriented on women and children related legislations and procedures. Court Annexed Mediation Units (CAMU) were established in courts across the country in 2019, providing enhanced access to prompt and speedy justice. The BNLI trained LG leaders and paralegals on mediation and mediation services are being provided free of cost. Since 2019, a total of 19,884 disputes have been resolved by the LG functionaries and 4,394 disputes have been resolved through CAMUs since 2021.

32. The Human Dignity Clinic of JSW School of Law was instituted to protect and promote the human dignity of individuals particularly women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities (PwD). The Clinic has developed:

- (a) An Advocacy Toolkit on legal proceedings: Access to Justice for PwD.
- (b) Diversion Programme Handbook for CICL.
- (c) Legal Aid Guideline for Vulnerable Women in Bhutan and its Advocacy Material.

33. A fully equipped forensic and DNA analysis laboratory was established in November 2023.

F. Public and political participation

34. The fourth parliamentary elections for the National Council (NC) and the National Assembly (NA) concluded in April 2023 and in January 2024 respectively. The number of political parties that contested in the NA elections increased from four to five during the fourth parliamentary elections.

35. The NC elections saw a 54.64% voter turnout with a female voter turnout of 50.79% and a male voter turnout of 49.21%. The voter turnout for the NA general elections was 65.59% with a female voter turnout of 50.85% and a male voter turnout of 49.15%.

36. To ensure equal and easy voting access, mobile voting booths for PwD and senior citizens and postal ballots for all eligible postal voters were provided. A special early voting (SEV) option for PwDs, patients with long-term illnesses, and senior citizens for three days prior to the poll day was also initiated by the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB). The voter turnout for SEV during NA elections was 96.04%.

37. ECB has prioritised civic and voter education to improve voter turnout, for which education modules based on key population groups have been developed. Pilot tests of modules commenced in June 2024 and will be scaled up nationally.

G. Cooperation with civil society (Recommendation 157.18)

38. The RGoB remains committed to providing increasing space for CSOs in Bhutan and values their contributions in complementing the efforts of the government to provide services, especially to the most vulnerable section of our society. Currently there are 53 registered CSOs out of which 41 are public benefit organisations and 12 are mutual benefit organisations.

39. The RGoB looks forward to continuing partnering with CSOs to support the implementation of the 13FYP. To this end, the SOP for Government-CSO collaboration is being developed.

40. Launched in May 2023, a first of its kind Parliament and CSOs Strategy Document,⁶ agreed upon and endorsed by the legislature and the civil society, provides a formal framework for collaboration between the Parliament of Bhutan and CSOs.

41. Guidelines for Endowment Fund, Social Enterprise and Fundraising to ensure the long-term financial sustainability and enable diversification of income sources of CSOs have been adopted.

42. The first CSO's Quarterly Meet, organised by the CSO Authority in April 2024 was attended by 45 CSO representatives. The forum was instituted to network and foster collaboration amongst CSOs. Critical issues emanating from the meet are deliberated during the Authority Meetings and Annual Authority-CSOs meet.

H. Good governance and anti-corruption

43. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) adopted a long-term Strategic Anti-Corruption Roadmap 2021-2030 in December 2021 which aims to reduce administrative complaints to less than 5%, increase proactive intelligence-based investigations ratio to 90%, reduce wastage of public funds to fraud and corruption and complaints qualified for investigation against law enforcement and regulatory agencies to zero percent, and enhance disciplinary referrals compliance to 100% by the end of the 13FYP.

44. Bhutan has completed both review cycles of the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC). The Country Review Report of the Second Cycle Review which assessed compliance to Chapter II and Chapter V of UNCAC is currently being finalised by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. Recognising the important role of civil society in combating corruption, Bhutan Transparency Initiative, a national CSO, is a member of the national UNCAC implementation review team.

45. Initiatives undertaken to further bolster regulatory framework on good governance and anti-corruption are:

(a) The Model Public Service Code of Conduct, launched on 30 December 2022, sets out integrity standards for public servants and provides compliance procedures. It addresses the educational, preventive, and enforcement aspects of anti-corruption and informs the public about expected conduct of public servants.

(b) The Integrity Vetting Rules, revised and adopted on 31 December 2023, promotes integrity and ethical leadership in public and private sectors. It facilitates informed decision-making in selection, recruitment, promotion, nomination, and appointment of a

person in public or private office including elections and public contracts. The revised Rule incorporates restorative justice elements.

(c) The Asset Declaration Rules 2017 revised and adopted in 2022 provides greater clarity in the administration of declarations including penalty provisions, roles and responsibilities of Asset Declaration Administrators and Heads of Agencies.

(d) The revised Debarment Rule adopted on 9 December 2023 ensures clean and transparent public procurement, fosters integrity and guards against fraud, corruption and unethical conduct in public finance projects.

46. Towards promoting integrity measures across the board, targeted preventive initiatives were implemented for different sectors, which include Organisational Integrity Plan for public sectors, CSO Accountability Standard for CSOs, Business Integrity Initiative of Bhutan for the corporate and business entities.

47. To foster a culture of integrity and bring positive behavioural change in the long run, the ACC through its Youth Integrity Program rolled out specific programmes for preschool children, school-going children, students of tertiary institutes, out of school youth and youth who are not in employment, education and training (Annex 1).

48. The Cabinet held 50 formal 'Meet-the-Press' events between 2019-2023, excluding sector-specific news conferences, briefings, press releases, and cabinet interviews to ensure consistent and timely access to information. The new government has continued the monthly 'Meet-the-Press' sessions, to better inform the public on the government's initiatives and respond to questions from the media.

49. Bhutan's first-ever 'Thimphu Press Club' was established on 3 October 2023. Spearheaded by the Bhutan Media Foundation, the club aims to be a dynamic platform where professionals from diverse backgrounds can come together, engage in dialogue, and exchange information.

I. COVID-19 response

50. Under the leadership of His Majesty King Jigme, Bhutan's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was effective and characterised by a whole of government and society approach. Early border closures, mandatory 21-day quarantine, extensive testing, and efficient contact tracing were instituted. A rigorous "Test, Trace, and Treat" (3Ts) strategy was adopted, utilising multilateral and bilateral resources to secure vaccines, necessary diagnostic and therapeutic supplies like testing kits and PPEs, and funding unmet needs from government resources. Stringent testing protocols were instituted. Public awareness campaigns and the use of technology were instrumental in educating citizens about health measures.

51. To achieve herd immunity, Bhutan adopted a mass vaccination campaign that began in March 2021. By April 2022, 93.5% of the entire Bhutanese population ages 12 and up had received two doses of vaccine. Despite our scattered population and rugged terrain, more than 91% of the entire population received two standard doses of vaccine and a booster shot, 100 percent of children aged 5-11 years and 99% of 12-17 years old children were vaccinated. Vaccines were also dispatched to other countries to vaccinate Bhutanese living abroad.

52. On the command of His Majesty King Jigme, the National Resilience Fund was set up in April 2020, to support people impacted by the pandemic. The Fund through the *Druk Gyalpo's Relief Kidu*⁷ disbursed Nu.4,163.33 million to 54,783 individuals between April 2020 to February 2022, including monthly child support to around 7,000 children. Ration support was also provided to 1,033 households between January 16 and 20 March 2022. A special *kidu* of Nu. 84.04 million was also granted to 2,555 households in Phuentsholing (red-zone) during the lockdown and Nu. 17.03 million to 675 Bhutanese working abroad in September 2020. Close to 140,000 loan accounts also benefited from the interest payment support *kidu*.

53. MoESD developed Self-Instructional Materials which enabled continued teaching and learning during the COVID-pandemic.

54. A crisis helpline with a first response team and emergency shelters in 20 districts were set up on the command of Her Majesty The Queen during the second and third national lockdowns. These shelters catered to immediate safety of gender-based violence (GBV) survivors and were linked with services such as counselling and legal services. Additional helpline services were instituted for mental health services. Online counselling and case management services were also provided by the PEMA, NCWC, MoESD and CSOs.

55. The ‘Gender Based Violence and Child Protection Emergency Preparedness and Response during COVID-19 Pandemic’ contingency plan was developed and implemented in April 2020. Under the plan, establishment of a remote case management system, support for front-line workers particularly for females and strengthening of institutional capacities to provide services were undertaken. The NCWC Mobile App to strengthen remote case management was developed with features to report cases as well as to apply for child adoption and alternative care services. The app also disseminates information related to women and children.

56. Implementation of Bhutan’s national pandemic response was largely possible due to the rapid mobilisation and deployment of *De-suup*⁸ volunteers who monitored our international borders, built temporary shelters for people displaced during the pandemic, served in quarantine centres, supplied food items during lockdowns, patrolled streets and roads, screened travellers and ensured interrupted public services. In March 2020, Bhutan had 4457 trained *De-suups* who had undergone the *De-suung* Integrated Training Programme.⁹ By April 2022, there were 26,257 trained *De-suups* deployed in various capacities across the country.

57. BRCS and national CSOs like Bhutan Toilet Organisation provided key services such as funeral services and deployment of basic sanitation needs for frontliners and essential service providers during the pandemic.

J. Education (Recommendations 157.86, 157.89)

58. Article 9 (16) of the Constitution guarantees every child the right to free basic education.

59. The number of schools and other educational institutions¹⁰ increased to 1,121 in 2023 from 1,007 in 2019.

60. Coinciding with the 112th National Day in 2019, His Majesty King Jigme announced the *Gyalsung* Programme, a year-long training programme aimed to empower youth with foundational skills, foster resilience, and promote national service. The inaugural cohort begins in September 2024.

1. Access to education and attendance (Recommendations 157.72-73, 157.76-78, 157.80-81, 157.91-95, 157.110, 157.146)

61. Extended Classroom Facility (ECR) was introduced to enhance educational accessibility, particularly in remote, rural, and widely dispersed villages where students travel considerable distances to reach school. As of 2023, there are 1,019 students¹¹ enrolled in 48 ECRs across the country.

62. Currently, there are 561 early childhood care and development (ECCD) centres across the country with 13,328 students¹², managed by 963 facilitators of which 95.64% are female. Bhutan aims to achieve 100% ECCD enrollment¹³ by 2029.

63. ECCD services for rural areas have been enhanced through mobile ECCD Centres. MoESD is also piloting Home Based Interventions for ECCD aged children in far flung areas that have too few children to qualify for a centre based ECCD programme.

64. In 2021, Caring for the Caregiver training was piloted in three districts.¹⁴

65. In 2021, the My *Sherig*-Digital Learning Platform, a device-independent software application for administration, documentation, tracking, reporting, automation and delivery of customised educational courses, training programmes and learning materials was

launched, complementing conventional teaching approaches. Over 4,000 materials on the Learning Management System are accessible on the curriculum website of MoESD.

66. The primary net enrolment rate (NER) 2018-2023 for both boys and girls has remained relatively consistent over the years. In 2023, the NER for primary education stood at 94.27 percent with no significant gender disparities.¹⁵

67. The merit-based King's Scholarship Programme was instituted in June 2022. 78% of the selected scholars in 2022 and 86% in 2023 were girls. Similarly, on average more girls have been recipients of the annual ex-country undergraduate scholarships administered by the RGoB.

2. Quality of Education (Recommendations 157.31-32, 157.52, 157.84)

68. The first National Educational Assessment (NEA) for grade III was conducted in 2021. A second cycle of the NEA for grades III and VI is planned for 2024, which will include students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). This will establish a benchmark for the performance standards of students, including those with SEN within our education system.

69. The School Performance Management System was revised to accord greater focus on health and wellbeing of students. Non-academic parameters contribute 60% of the total weightage. RGoB continues to prioritise school-based counselling programmes to support the mental health of students.¹⁶

70. 33 professional development programmes and training for the teachers and principals were completed between 2019 and 2023 (Annex 2).

71. RGoB undertook several measures to improve the quality of education through the development of curriculum material (Annex 3). Similarly targeted activities to improve the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in schools¹⁷ were carried out. The National Standards for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) for Schools & Monastic Institutions was launched in 2024.

72. Through the school feeding programme, students are provided nutritious meals to encourage regular attendance and enhance learning outcomes. 88,784 students¹⁸ benefited from this programme in 2023.

73. The National Strategic Framework on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) was adopted in 2021 and integrated in national school curriculum across all grades in seven subjects.¹⁹ CSE training for teachers was initiated in 2023, reaching nearly one-third of the schools nationwide. A *Dzongkha* version was made available and is being taught in monasteries and nunneries.

74. Modules on gender, sexual and reproductive health are integrated into the scout's handbook. As of 2023, a total of 119,976 students were actively engaged as scouts.

75. To de-stigmatise and address the challenges of menstruation, the Red Dot Bhutan Campaign was launched in 2022 and carried out across schools and nunneries. The Customs Duty (Amendment) Act of 2021 waived off customs duty and sales tax on all sanitary products.

3. Inclusive education (Recommendations 157.141-142, 157.90)

76. As of 2024, there are 44 inclusive schools providing SEN programmes to 1,069 students with special needs of which 37% are girls. The launch of the first model-inclusive ECCD Centre is tailored to accommodate girl children with disabilities and those from urban poor backgrounds and serves as a platform for early intervention services.

77. As part of education reform, a new policy for the assessment and certification of SEN students will be implemented from July 2024. This initiative, undertaken as part of the education reform, represents a significant advancement in our educational system.

4. Non-formal education (NFE) and TVET (Recommendations 157.82, 157.88, 157.101, 157.104)

78. The NFE programme has become widely recognized as a success in imparting fundamental literacy, numeracy, and practical abilities to the adult populace. As of June 2024, there are 326 NFE Centres and 29 Community Learning Centres with 337 facilitators, of whom 76.3% are females.²⁰ 7,703 learners were actively enrolled in the Basic Literacy and Post Literacy Course.

79. Measures to expand the UPSHIFT²¹ programme include incorporation into academic subjects such as Business and Entrepreneurship, STEM, and Innovation. UPSHIFT has been integrated into school scouting programmes and the scout proficiency badge system to enhance skill development among scouts. In 2023, the initiative was expanded to include an additional 64 schools and 7 colleges, covering 22% of schools, benefiting 16,000 young people,²² including those in 10 youth centres.

80. Access to TVET is provided through the 10 public TVET institutes as well as a range of alternative modes of skills development programmes.²³

81. The National TVET Gender Strategy 2024-2028²⁴ has been developed which is expected to increase female enrolment to 45% by 2028.²⁵

82. Periodic capacity development training is conducted for the management, teachers and instructors in TVET institute and pilot schools,²⁶ including training in gender responsive TVET programmes.

83. Training of Trainer-PwD for TVET trainers was initiated in 2024 in collaboration with DPO to build capacity in training for PwD. Critical Skills Training for PwD which provides customised tailor-made TVET courses for PwD will be continued in the 13FYP.

84. The *De-suung* Skilling Programme (DSP) was initiated by His Majesty King Jigme in 2021. DSP provides high quality and impactful short-term trainings aligned to leading regional and international standards. Participants are mostly unemployed *De-suung* volunteers in their early 20s. Since inception, more than 7000 individuals have enrolled in close to 150 programmes.

5. ICT and STEM in education (Recommendation 157.83)

85. In addition to enhancing ICT infrastructure and connectivity in education, the following have been undertaken:

(a) All 526 schools in Bhutan are now equipped with computer labs connected to the internet.

(b) The ICT Curriculum Framework was adopted in 2021.

(c) Implementation of 'Coding' from primary classes is underway, and a new ICT curriculum has been introduced as a compulsory subject across all grades.

(d) Digital citizenship education is integrated into the ICT education master plan (2019-2023). Global Citizenship Education is incorporated into the curriculum.

(e) Nine Bhutanese scholars participated in a capacity building program with NASA in 2020 as part of a multi-year Interagency Agreement to strengthen the foundation of science, technology, engineering and mathematics in Bhutan.

(f) Organised events to support girls and young women for success in a digital world and to narrow the gender gap in STEM education²⁷.

(g) Organised STEM and coding competitions nationally and facilitated participation in international competitions.

(h) In December 2021, 693 teachers and 12099 students in grades 10 and 12 were given a live virtual tour of the Compact Muon Solenoid of the Large Hadron Collider at CERN.

K. Health (Recommendations 157.51, 157.53, 157.66-157.70, 157.75)

86. As guaranteed by the Constitution, healthcare services are provided free of charge to all citizens. Bhutan's healthcare system continues to ensure comprehensive coverage and equitable access to health services across all levels of care, encompassing primary, secondary, and tertiary healthcare services, as well as traditional medicine practices which are integrated into the national healthcare framework.

87. Healthcare infrastructure has been expanded and facilities have been upgraded to ensure easy access, as a result of which 97.2%²⁸ of the population now lives within two hours of a health facility as compared to 87.9% in 2012. The 150-bedded *Gyalsuen Jetsun Pema Mother and Child Hospital* was constructed to cater to various medical needs, including paediatrics, gynaecology and obstetrics and is equipped with neonatal intensive care, and paediatric intensive care units. The 40-bedded *Deothang Hospital* completed in 2023, caters to the needs of south-eastern Bhutan. A 65-bedded Mother and Child Hospital is under construction in *Mongar* to cater to needs of the eastern region. Three satellite clinics²⁹ were also constructed to decongest the National Referral Hospital. The construction of a 80-bedded Royal Center for Infectious Diseases – with a surge capacity for 20 additional beds has reached the final stages of planning with construction due to commence in August 2024.

88. Essential medicines are made freely and easily available in all health facilities. The availability of essential medicines in all health facilities increased to 97% in 2023. The availability of standard medical consumables rose from 90% in 2016 to 97% in 2023, ensuring that patients have access to necessary supplies at any given time. The functionality of medical equipment in all health facilities also improved at 96.79% as of June 2024.

89. Diagnostic services have been expanded across health facilities, enhancing the overall quality of healthcare. 98% of all health facilities³⁰ across the country now provide diagnostic services such as biochemistry, haematology, X-ray, and ultrasound surpassing the initial target of 80% for the 12FYP.

90. A new mother and child hand book was introduced in 2023, which offered comprehensive regular check-ups and screenings for many diseases including NCDs, congenital disabilities, maternal mental health and GBV.

91. Institutional deliveries now stand at 98%. Postnatal care further supports maternal recovery by providing comprehensive assessments, breastfeeding assistance, newborn care, and screenings for postpartum issues.

92. The National Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan (2021–2025) addresses undernutrition, particularly stunting and micronutrient deficiencies among vulnerable populations. The innovative School Meal Planner PLUS tool was rolled out in nine districts covering 29% of all feeding schools. By December 2022, 17,460 children aged 6–23 months across 20 districts received Multiple Micronutrient Powder supplementation to prevent stunting and anaemia, and to improve nutrition. This has been scaled up in all health facilities. Of the targeted 18,000 children, 17,460 aged 6–23 months were reached.

93. To address the high prevalence of anaemia, a point of use fortification of complementary foods of children with multiple micronutrients was rolled out nationwide from 2019. The prevalence of anaemia in children still remains high at 44.7% in 2023. Review of the strategy and programme strengthening has been planned as a way forward.

94. Comprehensive programmes to prevent new infections and ensure access to treatment and care for those living with HIV/AIDS are being implemented. Robust awareness campaigns to promote safe practices and to reduce stigma are carried out regularly and accessible testing and counselling services are provided which ensures early diagnosis and linkage to care. Access to antiretroviral therapy (ART) is a cornerstone of Bhutan's approach, aimed at improving health outcomes and reducing HIV transmission rates. Subsequently Bhutan has worked on the global triple 90 targets.³¹

95. The Cancer Flagship Programme, a national initiative addressing stomach, cervical, and breast cancers, concluded in June 2023, achieving significant screening coverage of 87.2% for gastric cancer, 80.72% for cervical cancer, and 54.3% for breast cancer.

96. The Electronic Patient Information System (ePIS) has been rolled out in 24 hospitals including all the referral hospitals, and is expected to reach scale by October 2024. ePIS encompasses all aspects of patient data management, including demographics, diagnoses, treatments, medications, allergies, laboratory results, and imaging studies is a major project under the eHealth strategy.

97. Shortage of health professionals is emerging as a national concern and the RGoB is undertaking continued efforts in this area such as hiring of expatriates to meet critical gaps. The Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical Sciences of Bhutan has also introduced the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery programme. The inaugural cohort consisted of 25 students, with the academic sessions having commenced from January 2024.

Mental Health

98. The development of the National Mental Health Strategy was initiated in 2023 and is expected to be completed by the end of 2024.

99. The RGoB initiated construction of a 60-bedded mental health treatment centre in 2022 which is expected to be functional by the end of 2025. The treatment centre will have dedicated outpatient service, family and child wards, substance use treatment and severe case management units.

100. To increase accessibility to mental health services, The PEMA undertook the following:

(a) Instituted helpline services for mental health in October 2022.³² Help can also be sought through The PEMA website, emails and social media handles.

(b) Established a dedicated Child and Family Ward at the psychiatric department in 2023. The first child and adolescent Psychiatrist was placed in the ward in August 2023 and will supervise child mental health services in the district hospitals where services are integrated.

(c) Instituted Maternal Mental Health Screening and Management at the National referral Hospital in 2022, which will be scaled up in regional hospitals and other district hospitals.

(d) Initiated basic mental health care training for health workers from primary health care centres. 40 health workers were sent for training at NIMHANS³³ in 2023. All health workers from primary healthcare centres will be trained by 2025.

(e) Established a dedicated service center for protection services, helpline services, case management, adoption and alternative care and response to self-harm and suicide attempts. Postvention services are also provided through this service centre³⁴.

(f) Developed a web-based screening system in 2023 to enhance early identification efforts for early intervention. The system was piloted in 85 Higher Secondary Schools in 2023 and has been implemented in schools from May 2024 in a phased manner. The screening programmes will be taken to other institutions, workplaces and communities.

101. The National Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2018-2023 was designed to continue national efforts to prevent suicide. Children and youth are provided foundational skills to equip them to handle life challenges. Counsellors and wellbeing focal teachers are trained to identify children in distress and make appropriate referrals. A mental health screening system for all school children was initiated in May 2024 and those identified as at risk were intervened within the schools. The screening system will cover all students. In order to address suicide contagion, postvention services are put in place for families and friends affected by suicide.

102. A high-level National Drug Task Force chaired by the Prime Minister was instituted in 2022 to address drug related issues in the country. The Task Force will lead the national programme through policy intervention, resource mobilisation for preventive efforts and enhance treatment and reintegration services.

103. Hospital-based Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Treatment and Care Services was launched on October 10, 2022 by The PEMA. Services have been instituted in seven strategic

hospitals across the country.³⁵ The programme will be scaled up in a phased manner to all district hospitals. To reduce recidivism among drug offenders and facilitate reintegration upon release, prison-based SUD treatment and care programme was launched on 11 November 2023.

104. The PEMA is establishing a 200-bedded National Drug Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre in 2024 with a separate unit for specialised residential treatment and care for females with substance use issues.

105. A specialised school for students with SUD is expected to be in operation early next year. The objective is to help the affected become stable, substance-free individuals, to achieve academic success and assist in reintegrating back to the mainstream education system after completion of treatment.

L. Employment and social protection (Recommendations 157.144, 157.147-149)

106. The COVID-19 pandemic rendered more than 16,000 people unemployed of which more than 6,000 were youth. High youth unemployment levels have persisted post pandemic, increasing by 7.7% since 2021 reaching 28.6% in 2022 and dropping to 15.9% in 2023.

107. Various programmes to boost employment were initiated during the 12th FYP period such as:

(a) Entrepreneurship development programme under which more than 3,500 individuals were trained in entrepreneurship, business incubation centres established in 5 colleges, 2 start up centres in 2 districts and 2 Fablabs established in 2 educational institutions. Under this programme, a total of 555 jobs were created with 197 new startups established in the country. The program covered a mixed group including 15 PWDs and a total of 25 trainers trained on New Business Creation in 2022.

(b) Employment Responsibility System through which 103,032 individuals were employed between 2018-2024.

(c) The Build Bhutan Project that ran from 2020 to June 2022 employed a total of 1,752 people rendered unemployed by the pandemic with employment continuing under specialised firms.

(d) Under the incentive-based Youth Engagement and Livelihood Programme, 4,961 people were employed.

(e) Since 2021 the *GOWA* forum, an information dissemination platform that also provides on-the-spot recruitment by employers has covered 3081 participants and helped employ 469 participants across 6 districts.

108. Three major social protection policies were endorsed by the Cabinet to protect and empower vulnerable population:

(a) National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2019.

(b) Accelerating Mother and Child Health Policy 2020.

(c) National Policy for Senior Citizen 2023.

109. 68,221³⁶ members are enrolled under the provident fund scheme of the National Pension and Provident Fund, which covers civil service, state owned enterprises, armed forces and some private sector companies. Around 38,600 members from the private sector are enrolled in provident fund schemes offered by two insurance companies.³⁷ As a large majority of the population are currently not covered by any such scheme, the establishment of a social protection system that systematically addresses pressing social protection needs and welfare issues has been prioritised in the 13FYP.

M. Standard of living and poverty alleviation (Recommendations 157.21, 157.23, 157.25-27, 157.48-49, 157.55-62)

110. Measures taken in the 12th FYP resulted in the reduction of multidimensional poverty from 5.8% in 2017 to 2.1% in 2022.³⁸ In the same period, income inequality reduced with the gini coefficient score improving from 0.38 to 0.28. An estimated 12.4% of the population were found to be poor in 2022 based on the updated national poverty line.³⁹ The subsistence poor has also reduced from 1.5% in 2017 to 0.4% in 2022.⁴⁰

111. Some initiatives undertaken to improve the overall standard of living and increase income of rural households included:

(a) The subsidy providing 100 units of electricity to all rural communities was further expanded by an additional 100 units of free electricity for high land communities in 2019.

(b) Farm mechanisation and adoption of clean farm machinery such as piloting of irrigation controller water delivery systems using android devices. As of 2021, a total of 1,560 mini power tillers, 5,014 milling machines, 1,943 manual threshers, 177 maize shellers were distributed across the country.⁴¹

(c) Milk processing units were established in most districts and blocks and various income generating activities introduced in highland areas including setting up of a yak and sheep wool processing centre.

(d) To protect crops from wild animals, as of 2021, a total of 796 km of new electric fencing and 363 km of existing electric fencing were renovated, covering a farm area of 9971.3 acres and 5716 beneficiaries. In 2023, 87.05 km of chain link fencing with an expenditure of Nu.154.41 million benefitting 1159 households and covering a farm land area of 3211 acres and bringing in 2283 acres of cultivated areas was supported.

(e) The National Workforce Wage rate was increased from Nu.215 to Nu.400 for the unskilled category and from Nu.324 to Nu.600 for skilled (I) category in October, 2023.

112. Poverty is still a key criteria in the Resource Allocation Formula to determine resource allocation among LGs. The weight for poverty was increased from 15% to 25% for blocks in the 13FYP. Similarly, poverty has been included as a key criteria for municipalities with 10% weight.

113. The National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy 2020 aims to ensure universal access to safe water, improved sanitation, and hygiene. This policy clearly delegates among relevant agencies the responsibility of strengthening capacities, sustainable sanitation, hygiene and clean water systems to achieve universal coverage for all.

114. Under the *Desuung* National Service Water Project initiated in 2020, a total of 40 water scheme projects⁴² were completed which benefited over 5000 households, 1 BHU and 5 schools.

115. Households with access to 24 hours clean drinking increased from 63% in 2017 to 83% in 2022. Likewise, acreage of wet land brought under assured irrigation increased from 39,578 acres in 2018 to 47,493 acres.⁴³

N. Women (Recommendations 157.106-107, 157.109, 157.111-115, 157.120, 157.22, 157.64, 157.96, 157.99, 157.105)

116. The RGoB took various initiatives during the reporting period towards promoting and protecting the rights of women and children. Gender equality was identified as a cross-cutting theme in the 12FYP and mainstreamed through National Key Result Area 10 “Gender Equality promoted and women and girls empowered”.

117. The National Gender Equality Policy was adopted in 2020 following which the National Plan of Action for Gender Equality to aid in effective policy implementation was developed.

118. To address stereotypes and prejudices around gender division of roles and encourage men and boys to share unpaid care and domestic responsibilities, the NCWC launched a media campaign #BetterTogether in 2020.

1. Women's participation in politics and leadership (Recommendations 157.125, 157.127)

119. Women currently constitute 6.94% of the Parliament, which includes three elected members including one Minister and two eminent persons nominated by His Majesty King Jigme. Bhutan acknowledges the need to increase women's political representation. Towards this end, numerous initiatives to encourage women to participate in the political process such as capacity development training for serving and aspiring candidates, and increasing accessibility of Functional Literacy Test for aspiring candidates are being undertaken. Civic and voter education to educate and create awareness among women on the importance of participation in the electoral process are consistently carried out.

120. Women's participation in the national elections has remained relatively consistent over the years with the female voter turnout at close to 50%. Female voter turnout was higher than male in the most recent NC and NA general elections.

121. Women's representation in LG has been increasing over the three successive rounds of LG elections. The number of women elected has increased from 7.54% in 2011 to 11.67% in 2016 and 12.54% in 2021.

122. Bhutanese women play an active role in several UN Peacekeeping Missions around the world and their representation is well above the UN target of 17%.

123. Women's representation in the civil service has increased from 36% in 2016 to 40% in 2023. Women hold 23% of the executive and specialist posts⁴⁴ in the civil service surpassing the 15% target of the Gender Equality Strategy (2018-2023). Similarly, recruitment in the Professional and Management Category has achieved a balanced gender ratio of 50:50. Women hold 13.9% of the Constitutional posts. In the Judiciary, 50% of the workforce is women with 27% as district level judges and 59% as bench clerks. Women's representation in the RBP has increased from 10.8% in 2018 to 17.2% in 2024.

124. The Corporate Governance Guidelines for State Enterprise 2019 includes gender as a selection criteria for the Board of Directors for state-owned enterprises. Similarly, the Corporate Governance Code for the Druk Holding and Investment (DHI) considers gender as one of the determinants for selection of its Board Directors. Women constitute about 25% of the total Board of Directors for the DHI companies.

125. As of 2022, Bhutan has successfully achieved gender parity in primary, secondary as well as tertiary education, although gaps remain in technical and vocational education.

2. Gender-based violence (Recommendations 157.116-119, 157.121-122, 157.122-124)

126. To enhance prevention and response to GBV, various SOPs and guidelines were developed such as the:

(a) SOP for GBV prevention and response in 2020. Training sessions on the SOP were provided to more than 200 case managers by 2020. As part of the SOP, a service mapping exercise was carried out to create a comprehensive referral pathway for GBV survivors.

(b) A guideline for GBV case management was developed and a total of 101 women and 61 men, including protection officers, counsellors from government organisations, and volunteers from CSOs received training on the guideline and case management. These trained individuals now serve as case managers. In 2024, 32 police officers were trained on GBV, including sexual violence.

(c) A guideline for responding to GBV in emergencies was developed in November 2020, taking into consideration the lessons learned from the first national lockdown in August 2020.

127. Women and Child Protection Desks/Units have been established in all major police stations, with personnel trained in women and child-friendly services. The desks/units managed a total of 2,118 cases from 2021 to 2023, offering gender and child responsive services. All District police stations will have women and child protection desks/units within 2024.

128. The RBP has integrated women and child-friendly procedures into their training curriculum and conducted targeted capacity building for police personnel. Since 2021, a total of 1,639 police personnel has benefitted from the targeted capacity building including 35 instructors, 57 cadet officers, and 1,052 recruits. Over 200 police officers received training in 2020 and 2021 on GBV, early identification, and safe referral, including specialised training for GBV service providers.

129. The PEMA Home which will provide emergency accommodation services for those in need of interim protection will be functional by the end of 2024.

O. Children (Recommendations 157.32-33, 157.35, 157.121, 57.130)

130. The National Action Plan for Child Well-being and Protection 2019-2023 provided a framework for the ongoing process of building an effective child protection system and also integrated a child rights-based approach.

131. The following SOPs and frameworks for the promotion and protection of the rights of the child were developed or revised since the last review:

(a) SOP for Dealing with CICL 2018 was reviewed in 2022 to ensure that the integral roles and responsibilities, as well as the accountability of all stakeholders involved in handling cases of CICL, are clearly defined and upheld.

(b) SOP on Child Protection Case Management was developed in 2021 to provide a uniform approach to addressing cases of children who are harmed or at risk of harm and in need of protection, ensuring quality, consistency, coordination in services and adherence to the national and internationally agreed upon standards on case management.

(c) An Internal Child Safeguarding and Protection Framework to prevent and respond to the abuse and exploitation of children by organisations working with/for children.

132. The Judiciary conducted training for all sub-district court judges and bench clerks in court procedures for child justice. It also conducted training for all judges in 2021 to deepen understanding of child psychology.

133. The OAG developed and distributed the Training Manual on Child Justice 2022 to benefit agencies that conduct training on child justice. 63⁴⁵ officials were trained on the Manual in 2023 and 88 cases have been diverted from 2019-2023 in accordance with the Diversion Guidelines.

134. In 2022, three child friendly interview rooms were established in the central, north and south police stations of *Thimphu*.

135. Women and Children Welfare Committees were established across all 20 districts and four municipalities in 2019. Dedicated Child Focal Points have been appointed in all ministries, CSOs, districts and municipalities to support the committees.

1. Child marriage (Recommendations 157.108, 157.130-33, 157.136-139)

136. Marriages below 18 years are prohibited in Bhutan. The Royal Courts of Justice strictly ensures that applicants for marriage certificates are of/above 18 years of age and any marriage below the prescribed age is not recognized to be lawful. The PCB grades any sexual intercourse with a child below 18 years as rape and a felony of second degree.

137. To align the Marriage Act with other acts like the PCB 2004, Contract Act of Bhutan 2013 and the Child Care and Protection Action of Bhutan 2011 (CCPA), the Marriage (Amendment) Bill of Bhutan 2024 proposing formalising the marriageable age at 18 has been unanimously adopted by the NA in June 2024.

138. NCWC and its partners continue to focus on educating the general public and young people on harmful impacts of child and forced marriages, including penal provisions prohibiting such practices. A communication for development (C4D) strategy for child protection and wellbeing was developed in 2019 to help raise awareness on harmful social and cultural practices that increase children's vulnerabilities to violence, exploitation and neglect. The strategy seeks to address these norms and address knowledge gaps on positive parenting.

2. Corporal punishment (Recommendations 157.32-33)

139. In keeping with our commitment to safeguard the well-being and rights of our citizens, particularly our children, Bhutan stands firmly against corporal punishment. The CCPA and the PCB serve as robust legal frameworks to protect children from harm.

140. In 2022, the NCWC launched a comprehensive three-year project to Empower Communities to Address Violence Against Children. The project aims to promote multi-sectoral collaboration between key government agencies, CSOs and the general public in positive parenting at home, school and communities, transforming harmful and discriminatory gender and power dynamics and improving relationships and communication within the families. As part of this initiative, the "*Dekyid Thuendrel* - Positive Parenting toolkit" was piloted in 34 schools and 14 communities across three districts. Currently, the programme is being rolled out in 6 schools and 3 communities under *Thimphu* district. School based child protection committees and community based child protection committees have been established in all these schools and communities.

141. The NCWC in partnership with 22 agencies launched the Ending Violence Against Children campaign in July 2022 in three districts. It was complemented by a nation-wide online campaign through print, broadcast and social media. More than 320,000 people were sensitised on preventing violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect through the "Our Child; Our Wealth" campaign. NCWC is evaluating the effectiveness of the campaign, which will conclude in 2024.

142. The school discipline guidelines, revised in 2023 establishes a framework that promotes a positive and respectful learning environment by ensuring discipline practices that respect children's dignity, uphold their rights, and empathise with the psychological phases that children undergo during their growth and development, and respond appropriately.

143. His Holiness The Chief Abbot issued a decree in 2009, denouncing corporal punishment in all monastic institutions. The Child Care and Protection Office established by the Commission for Monastic Affairs in 2009 remains an advocate for alternative means of discipline in monasteries and nunneries. In 2019, His Holiness the Chief Abbot issued a decree emphasising on the well-being and protection of children from violence and other forms of exploitation.

P. Persons with disabilities (Recommendations 157.142-43)

144. The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) was adopted in 2019 which provides a strategic and coherent policy framework to improve the lives of PwD through their full and meaningful engagement in socio-economic development as equal members of the society.

145. Following the development of the policy, an action plan for the implementation of the NPPD, was adopted which tasked implementing agencies with mainstreaming the action plan into their respective plans and programmes. Activities implemented include launch of 27 new city buses fitted with disability friendly features such as ramps and audio notification in 2021 and a 20% discount on fare for PwD availing the smart card. A situational analysis and needs assessment on three policy intervention areas was completed which yielded a set of recommendations on building disability-inclusive employment, social protection and TVET system. Based on these assessment reports, a sensitisation seminar was conducted for a total of 25 participants representing relevant agencies from RGoB, CSOs and the private sector in July 2022. Equipment such as Braille Embossers and Braille paper were procured for the

Muenselling Institute. *Wangsel* Institute for the Deaf also received equipment, teaching and learning materials for four vocational trades.

146. Further, to demonstrate RGoB's commitment to the full and equal enjoyment of all rights by all persons with disabilities, Bhutan ratified the CRPD on 13 March 2024.

147. To ensure a holistic disability inclusion approach in government programming, the action plan for the NPPPD, as well as implementation of the CRPD obligations will be undertaken. Towards this end, social protection for PwDs has been identified as a key priority area in the 13FYP which includes developing 10 cluster hospitals with disability-friendly features by 2029 and expanding the number of inclusive schools for PwD from over 40 to 120 across the country.

Q. LGBTQI (Recommendations 157.24, 158.38-44, 157.51)

148. Bhutan made a landmark change in recognising and protecting the rights of LGBT+ individuals by passing the PCB (Amendment) Act 2021, which decriminalised same-sex relations. This amendment marks crucial progress towards protecting and safeguarding LGBT+ rights by ensuring equality within the legal framework.

R. Human trafficking (Recommendations 157.14-15, 157.17, 157.34-35, 157.37-45)

149. The SOP on Multi-sectoral Response to address trafficking in persons (TIP) in Bhutan was adopted in 2019. Law enforcement officials, CSOs, LG and volunteers were trained on its implementation.

150. The BNLI and the Department of Law and Order launched the Training Manual on TIP for the Judiciary in Bhutan in 2021 and 21 judges were subsequently trained.

151. The National Prevention and Response Strategy was launched in 2022 to enhance the mechanism to deal with TIP including strengthening bilateral, regional and multilateral coordination for effective prevention, protection and repatriation of TIP survivors as well as creating meaningful engagement for youths to prevent trafficking. The strategy is accompanied by a three year action plan.

152. Law enforcement agencies were trained in investigating trafficking of children, prosecution and sanctioning. Between 2020 to 2023, 75 officials from the Judiciary including judges, 171 police personnel, 28 master trainers were trained. More than 90% of the Labour and Immigration Inspectors have been trained in proactive identification of victims and reporting of TIP cases. 120 frontline workers were trained in 2020 to increase their capacity in identification and referral of TIP survivors.

153. TIP awareness programmes have been conducted in schools and communities covering over 20,000 people including children.

154. During the reporting period, the RGoB facilitated the return of 166 Bhutanese citizens who were trafficked for forced or unauthorised labour abroad. NCWC in collaboration with key stakeholders facilitated counselling, psycho-social support, shelter, legal aid, medical care, safe family reunions and basic necessities. Livelihood training was also provided.

S. International cooperation and assistance (Recommendations 157.6-8)

155. Bhutan presented its second Voluntary National Review of the implementation of the SDGs at the High-Level Political Forum in July 2021. The review enabled Bhutan to share its experiences and challenges in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, particularly in view of the pandemic.

156. The Mutual Legal Assistance Bill is being drafted. International cooperation in the areas of legal assistance in criminal matters is expected to further enhance judicial assistance in criminal investigations and proceedings on adoption of the legislation.

T. Cooperation with human rights mechanisms (Recommendation 157.3)

157. Bhutan's 10th Periodic Report under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was considered by the CEDAW Committee in October, 2023 at its 86th session.

158. Bhutan presented its 6th to 7th Combined Periodic Report on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) at the 96th session of the CRC Committee in May, 2024.

159. In 2021 and 2022, Bhutan worked closely with the OHCHR under the UPR Trust Fund towards development of a national mechanism for reporting, follow-up and implementation for which activities are ongoing.

IV. Achievements

160. Under His Majesty's leadership, Bhutan was able to weather the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, through a response that was swift, meticulously planned and executed with a whole-of-government and citizen approach. There was minimal loss of lives with over 90% vaccination coverage supported by the existing national immunisation system and infrastructure. As a result of these efforts, Bhutan had the lowest case fatality rate for COVID-19 at 0.05%, significantly lower than the WHO's global case fatality rate of 4.34%. This was achieved without significant disruption to routine services including routine immunizations for children and Mother and Child Health services for pregnant mothers.

161. Significant progress has been made in education and health outcomes as a result of the sustained investments made over the decades. Bhutan has achieved the lowest under-five child mortality rates in the region (19.5 per 1,000 live births), reduced maternal mortality rates to 53 per 100,000 live births from 89, universal access to primary health care services and highest coverage of antenatal care and immunisation coverage. Bhutan was also declared Open Defecation Free in 2022.

162. NER in ECCD has increased from 28% in 2021 to 38% (2023). Gender parity in education at all levels has been achieved as of 2022.

163. Bhutan's gender gap index ranking improved from 126th in 2022 to 103th in 2023 and has achieved reductions in intimate partner violence, early unions and acceptance of violence.⁴⁶

164. Bhutan is ranked 26th in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index with a score of 68 out of 100 in 2023, which is above the global and regional averages of 43 and 45 respectively. Bhutan is currently ranked as the 6th least corrupt country in the Asia Pacific region.

V. Best practices

165. Bhutan's development philosophy of GNH continues to ensure holistic development that promotes the rights and welfare of every citizen.

166. Following lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health is receiving the priority it deserves with the establishment of a dedicated nodal agency, increased budget allocation and focussed interventions at the prevention and treatment levels. In the 13FYP, there has been a nearly fourfold increase in the resources allocated for mental health with provisions for additional support for infrastructure and capacity development.

167. The Judiciary of Bhutan is one of the first in the region to develop and introduce the e-litigation system in response to challenges posed by COVID-19. The e-litigation services are still being continued to ensure enhanced access to justice.

168. In 2023, the Bhutan National Digital Identity (NDI) was launched. Bhutan NDI is a blockchain-based national cryptographic identity system based on the Self-Sovereign Identity system. Individuals have sole ownership of whom they want to share and what to

share using a digital wallet, where digital credentials are stored. With an increasing number of citizen services on the platform, it will simplify service provision.

169. Bhutan has a fully integrated Civil Registration and Vital Statistics ID system characterised by convenient accessibility of registration for obtaining civil registration and ID services. An innovative approach within the system is the ability to avail birth and death registration services from any registration centre. Based on the system, Bhutan has published a comprehensive Annual Vital Statistics Reports since 2020.

170. Bhutan's ePIS leverages ICT to improve health outcomes by revolutionising patient information management. It is a key initiative towards a more efficient and accountable health care system.

VI. Challenges and constraints

171. Despite graduating from the LDC category in December 2023, Bhutan remains highly vulnerable to economic shocks and the risks posed by climate change. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, causing a historic growth contraction in 2020. Economic growth has been largely driven by public sector investments in hydropower which has limited job creation resulting in high youth unemployment.

172. Critical challenges include limited air, surface, and internet connectivity, and the vulnerability of key road networks, power grids and communication systems due to increasing climate change and related disasters, accompanied by a rise in cybersecurity threats.

173. Ensuring the quality, inclusiveness, and sustainability of free health and education services, as well as effective social protection systems for vulnerable groups are emerging as issues of high priority.

174. Bhutan is undergoing demographic shifts, with declining fertility rates, projected rise in the old-age dependency ratio and emigration of citizens at prime productive age all of which holds significant implications for Bhutan's human capital and productive capacity.

VII. National priorities, commitments and initiatives

175. Bhutan's development journey has seen uneven progress, with economic development lagging behind advancements in social, cultural, environmental and governance dimensions. The 13FYP represents a strategic shift towards "re-balancing GNH" – with a deliberate focus on transforming the economy as a means to fulfil Bhutan's needs in the 21st century. Thus, the long-term goal is for Bhutan to be a *High Income GNH Economy by 2034* by ensuring an overall increase in prosperity for all Bhutanese. Many of the pressing social issues and challenges confronting the country today are invariably linked to an inability to generate enough decent jobs and economic opportunities. The pursuit of high growth is thus intended to improve inclusiveness, through creation of decent employment and strengthened social protection that encompasses gender and disability dimensions, so that no one is left behind.

176. Bhutan's ambitious GMC Project, will create the world's first mindfulness city that will serve as an economic hub in the fastest growing region. The city will be one-of-a-kind, anchored on the vision and values of GNH, encompassing conscious and sustainable businesses, inspired by Buddhist spiritual heritage, and distinguished by the uniqueness of the Bhutanese identity. The GMC will become a gateway connecting Bhutan to the world. Building the world's first mindfulness city will entail substantial expansion of Bhutan's energy sector, creating efficient and reliable connectivity including digital infrastructure and building the necessary skills to ensure that Bhutanese are well placed to benefit from the opportunities created by this massive undertaking.

VIII. Capacity building and technical assistance requests

177. The RGoB will require substantial financial and technical assistance to implement the 13FYP. The fiscal projections shows a resource gap of Nu.55,938 million⁴⁷ which needs to be mobilised. Building national capacity as well as sourcing key professionals and expertise from external markets to meet critical human resource gaps will be required.

178. Given the increase in the RGoB's international treaty reporting obligations, there is a need for targeted capacity building to fulfil such obligations. Considerable resources are consumed by the existing reporting obligations at the cost of other pressing needs. The current assistance received is far from adequate.

IX. Conclusion

179. Guided by the philosophy of GNH, Bhutan remains steadfast in its commitment to uphold all human rights for its people. Despite the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the RGoB has taken deliberate steps to strengthen human rights and ensure the well being of all its citizens. Bhutan has always placed its people at the centre of its development efforts and will continue to do so. The 13th FYP reflects the aspirations and commitment of the government to address the most pressing development challenges confronting Bhutan today.

180. Bhutan appreciates the support and cooperation of the international community thus far and hopes that this will continue as the country is poised to implement its most ambitious development plan till date. The RGoB remains open to productive and meaningful cooperation and engagement with the international community.

Notes

- ¹ Representatives of 22 CSOs who participated in a capacity building programme designed for Bhutanese CSOs for the UPR Review specifically to provide practical guidance to contribute to Bhutan's National Report were consulted.
- ² The National Environment Protection Act 2007, Environmental Assessment Act 2000, Waste Prevention and Management Act of Bhutan 2009, Waste Prevention and Management Regulation 2012, Regulation on Control of Ozone Depleting Substances 2008, Regulation for Environmental Clearance of Projects 2016.
- ³ *Punatsangchu* basin, *Mangde Chu* and *Chamkhar Chu* sub-basin.
- ⁴ 81 female and 88 male.
- ⁵ 43 males and 51 females.
- ⁶ <https://www.idea.int/news/parliament-bhutan-and-civil-society-organizations-launch-collaboration-strategy-strengthen>.
- ⁷ "Kidu" which is generally referred to the wellbeing of the people is traditionally a Royal Prerogative and enshrined in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan as a fundamental responsibility of His Majesty The King.
- ⁸ Guardians of Peace.
- ⁹ Initiated in 2011 by His Majesty King Jigme, as a value-based personal development programme to encourage citizens to contribute to nation building has trained more than 42,000 volunteers till date.
- ¹⁰ ECCD, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) & Tertiary Education Institutes.
- ¹¹ 516 female, 503 male.
- ¹² 6727 boys, 6601 girls.
- ¹³ NER in ECCD has increased from 28% in 2021 to 38% in 2023.
- ¹⁴ Trashigang, Tsirang, and Punakha Districts.
- ¹⁵ 96.29 for female and 92.31 for male.
- ¹⁶ The following initiatives have been undertaken to promote mental well being of students:
 - i. 177 counsellors trained between 2020-2021 to provide Psychosocial Support and Mental Health Support.
 - ii. Two online campaigns to promote mental health awareness among children and youth entitled "Project Gawa21" and #OnMyMind22 was launched in 2020 and 2021 respectively. Following the campaigns, 552 children and 278 female youth sought counselling services through the helplines of MoESD and NCWC.

- iii. Adopted the *Zoala* App to provide mental health and well-being support online. The App was piloted in four central schools comprising 320 students and 44 counsellors in 2024.
- 17 36 kitchens and stores refurbished, 127 Sky-Hydrant water filter installed in schools, 194 schools were covered in providing CSE Integrated Curriculum Orientation, 83 schools' health coordinators and officials trained on *Sorig Zhiney* and *Luejong*, there are 248 Trained Health Coordinators (156 male & 92 female); Toilet Ratio in schools: 1:26 for male and 1:18 for female; Student Water Tap Ratio is maintained (ECRs-1:24, PS- 1: 52, Lower Secondary Schools- 1: 93, Middle Secondary Schools- 1:90, Higher Secondary Schools- 1:81).
- 18 46,179 girls, 42,605 boys.
- 19 English, *Dzongkha*, Science, Biology, Social studies, Value, Health & Physical Education.
- 20 BLC: 162 (50 M, 112F), PLC: 163 (24M, 139 F) & CLC: 29 (3M, 26F).
- 21 Social innovator accelerator for young people aged 10-24 years that rapidly unlocks their generational potential to create real and tangible change in their lives and their communities.
- 22 8188 female.
- 23 Village Skills Development Program (VSDP), Special Skills Development Program (SSDP), Critical Skills Training (CST), and Skills Development Program (SDP).
- 24 The strategy aims to Increase female participation in formal TVET institutions and employment; Promote a positive perception and attitude towards women in training and employment, particularly in "non-traditional sectors"; and Enhance gender-responsive infrastructure, facilities, and environments to provide appropriate support at all stages of vocational education and training.
- 25 TVET Enrolment in 2023 – 32.5% Female, 0.5% PWD.
- 26 Complementing the capacity development initiatives, NCWC partnered with MOESD to provide training to Dzongkhag Education Officers, principals and school counsellors from over 90 schools in Bhutan in 2024.
- 27 Organised a winter camp providing robotics, coding, and scientific skills to 48 girls with special attention was given to differently-abled children; conducted digital literacy training of trainers for 50 girls between ages 17-25 years followed by programme roll-out in remote communities and organised national hackathon for 28 adolescent girls in September 2024.
- 28 National Health Survey 2023.
- 29 *Babena, Semtokha, and Debsi*.
- 30 10-bedded hospitals and above.
- 31 Bhutan targets that 90% of people living with HIV will know their status, 95% of people living with HIV will receive the ART and 90% on ART will achieve viral suppression.
- 32 Of the calls received between October 2022 to May 2024, 20.8% of the calls are related to mental health issues, 12% are related to gender based violence, 11.6% are related to relationship issues, 11.4% are for adoption services, 8.9% are violence against children and the rest related to self harm, substance use and behavioural issues.
- 33 National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, India.
- 34 As of June 2024, 616 (233 Males, 383 females) case management services were provided.
- 35 National Referral Hospital, Mongar Regional Hospital, Gelephu Regional Hospital, Phuentsholing/ Wangduephodrang/ Samdrup Jongkhar/ Samtse Hospital.
- 36 As of 30 June 2022.
- 37 The Royal Insurance Corporation of Bhutan has 32,700 members and Bhutan Insurance Ltd has 5,900 members from the private sector in their respective Provident Fund schemes as of May 2024.
- 38 *Bhutan: Multidimensional Poverty Index*. National Statistical Bureau, RGoB, and Oxford Poverty Human Development Initiative, University of Oxford, 2017 & 2022.
- 39 In 2017, the national poverty line was at Nu.2195 and it was revised to Nu.6204.
- 40 *Poverty Analysis Report* 2012, 2017& 2022. National Statistical Bureau, RGoB.
- 41 Moda system, MoAL.
- 42 27 drinking water, 9 irrigation and 4 integrated projects.
- 43 The 12th FYP Terminal Evaluation Report, 2023.
- 44 Important portfolios such as that of the Cabinet, Foreign, Finance and Commerce Secretary and heads of two constitutional offices.
- 45 31 males and 32 females.
- 46 National Health Survey 2023.
- 47 Approximately USD 666 million.