

WHO contribution in Bhutan (2020–2024)

EVALUATION BRIEF



World Health Organization



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PURPOSE

The evaluation was commissioned by WHO to assess its contribution to Bhutan's health sector during 2020–2024 in line with the WHO Country Cooperation Strategy (CCS) 2020–2025 and related biennial work plans. It also serves to inform the design of the next CCS for 2026–2030. Its objectives were to review WHO's contributions to Bhutan's national health goals, examine alignment with national priorities, assess technical assistance and partnerships, and propose strategic shifts consistent with Bhutan's 13th Five-Year Plan (2024–2029).

METHODS

The evaluation employed a participatory and utilization-focused approach using a reconstructed theory of change (ToC). Data collection involved a desk review of more than 100 documents including the CCS, WHO workplans, national health policies and third-party reports. Quantitative analysis was undertaken on WHO financial data and national health outcome data. Fifty key informant interviews were conducted across WHO's three levels and with stakeholders in Bhutan, including ministries, academia, development banks, UN agencies and civil society organizations.

KEY FINDINGS

Relevance: WHO's support is strongly aligned with Bhutan's national health priorities and Five-Year Plans. It has played a central role in developing strategies for infectious disease control, noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), health financing and emergency preparedness. WHO has adapted well to changing contexts, strengthened health data collection and analysis, and supported more strategic planning in health financing. Communication efforts have also improved through new media strategies.

Coherence: The CCS 2020–2025 is closely aligned with WHO's 13th General Programme of Work (GPW13), WHO South-East Asia Regional Office (SEARO), regional flagship programmes and Bhutan's 12th Five Year Plan. WHO works in close partnership with the Ministry of Health (MoH), UN agencies and other stakeholders. The WHO Country Office (WCO) location inside the MoH has facilitated collaboration, and stakeholders see scope for WHO to strengthen its convening role across sectors.

Effectiveness: WHO has supported Bhutan's health goals in areas including the COVID-19 response, vaccination, disease eradication, strengthening of primary health care, mental health and academic

training. The MoH values WHO's impartial technical support from country, regional and global levels. Notable innovations include the Service with Care and Compassion initiative for NCDs and collaboration with the monastic sector on health promotion. Challenges remain in ensuring adequate monitoring and funding for some initiatives.

Efficiency: WHO has invested strategically in high-impact interventions such as hypertension and diabetes management, digital health systems and integrated data sharing. It mobilised significant resources, including US\$ 4.9 million from the Pandemic Fund to support a One Health approach. However, the large number of small Direct Financial Contribution grants in 2024 highlighted the need to streamline funding mechanisms and improve efficiency.

Sustainability: WHO has contributed to national capacity building in surveillance, epidemiology, international health regulations compliance and rural health worker retention. These nationally owned gains are valued, but they face risks from declining health budgets, the outward migration of skilled personnel and reduced WHO country resources.

Equity: WHO played a lead role in the 2023 National Health Survey, providing vital evidence on vulnerable populations. It has supported programmes addressing tuberculosis, NCDs and reproductive health, and has rolled out gender, equity and human rights toolkits alongside the Water and Sanitation for Health Facility Improvement Tool. Despite these contributions, gender equality has not been systematically addressed and vulnerability analysis remains limited.

CONCLUSIONS

Relevance. WHO's strategic priorities demonstrate strong alignment with Bhutan's national health plans and it has become a reliable long-term partner. WHO has effectively brought expertise and standards to Bhutan and adapted to evolving needs. With Bhutan's graduation to Low and Middle Income Country (LMIC) status WHO must strengthen its focus on NCDs health financing and human resources.

Coherence. WHO's work is consistent with global, regional and national frameworks and collaboration with UN partners has been effective. WHO can further strengthen its convening role and cross-sectoral partnerships, which are increasingly important as the country shifts focus from infectious diseases to NCDs.

Effectiveness. WHO has strengthened Bhutan's health system, particularly in disease elimination, NCD management and emergency preparedness. The Service with Care and Compassion initiative represents a successful adaptation of Package of Essential Noncommunicable (PEN) Disease Interventions. During COVID-19, WHO provided critical support valued at US\$ 7 million.

Efficiency. WHO has mobilised resources effectively, including US\$ 4.95 million for One Health and US\$ 2.5 million for TB and HIV programmes. However, direct financial contributions should be consolidated into fewer, larger allocations to reduce administrative burden and increase strategic impact.

Sustainability. WHO's financial contributions remain important as external aid decreases. There is a need to leverage financial support alongside technical expertise to maximize impact. Monitoring and evaluation systems must be strengthened to demonstrate effectiveness, value for money, and to inform strategic planning.

Equity. WHO has advanced gender equity and inclusion in some areas, but overall performance has been mixed. The CCS 2020–2025 lacked appropriate metrics. Future work should integrate stronger vulnerability analyses and systematically mainstream gender, equity and human rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure continuity between CCS 2020–2025 and CCS 2026–2030

- 1.1 Focus on NCD prevention and control, strengthening primary health care through the Service with Care and Compassion initiative, scaling up lifestyle and mental health campaigns, advancing the National Suicide Prevention Strategy, and activating the NCD Multi-Sector Action Plan II.
- 1.2 Continue technical support for malaria elimination, reduction of HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and elimination of cervical cancer.
- 1.3 Address the lack of guidelines, staffing and funding for neglected tropical diseases, and expand telemedicine services.
- 1.4 Close emergency response capacity gaps by building on the Joint External Evaluation and developing a new National Action Plan for Health Security.

2. Strengthen cooperation and partnerships

- 2.1 Use convening power to coordinate multi-sector responses to NCDs in alignment with the 13th Five-Year

Plan and in close partnership with government, UN agencies and the Resident Coordinator.

- 2.2 Continue supporting efforts by the MoH to address health workforce shortages through sustained technical advice.
- 2.3 Engage with multilateral development banks and UN agencies to increase external financing.
- 2.4 Reduce the number of direct financial contributions, target resources to priority interventions and release staff time for planning, monitoring and evaluation.
- 2.5 Strengthen partnerships with monastic institutions and traditional medicine practitioners to broaden health promotion.
- 2.7 SEARO and WHO headquarters should provide tools and assistance to enhance WCO Bhutan's convening role, create a regional coalition on human resources for health, and guide access to innovative financing.

3. Improve equitable access to health services

- 3.1 Strengthen analysis of gender inequalities, identify barriers to access for women and girls and make strategies explicit in programming and communications. Expand digital health solutions for remote populations and gather feedback on their needs.
- 3.2 Support data consolidation across health databases to reduce fragmentation and enable targeting of vulnerable groups.
- 3.3 Continue work on financial protection and affordability studies with the MoH, National Statistical Bureau and World Bank to improve access for low-income groups.
- 3.4 Engage local civil society organizations to improve local service delivery for people with disabilities and those living with HIV and cancer.

4. Improve budget management, monitoring and learning

- 4.1 Broaden consultations on programme budget planning and management beyond the MoH to increase transparency.
- 4.2 Integrate evaluation into major interventions, strengthen the evidence base on value for money and develop investment cases.
- 4.3 SEARO should establish quality standards for its advisory role, monitor uptake of recommendations and facilitate regional learning exchanges on cross-cutting themes.
- 4.5 WHO headquarters should devise tools for periodic performance assessment of country and regional offices, combining self and independent reviews to strengthen planning and accountability.