

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

VISION

To build an *inclusive* nation with informed *law abiding* youths physically and mentally healthy, capable of contributing positively towards Bhutan's development in accordance to Gross National Happiness.

Background

The free health services of Bhutan has always been a statement of pride for the country. While the Bhutanese health system has succeeded in establishing nationwide immunization programmes and in eradicating diseases such as smallpox, mental health is still an issue of concern among the Bhutanese youth. It has been observed that there is an increasing rate of people suffering from mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety. In surprising contradiction to the global statistics which states that 1 in every 6 people aged from 10 to 19 suffers from depression, Bhutan's official report only 561 cases of depression from the age of 5 to 49 in 2018 which indicates that most of the cases of depression is most likely going unreported. There has been an increase in attempted suicide rate from 104 in 2014 to 126 in 2018 and mental health disorders has been identified as one of the most pulsating causes of substance abuse among youth.

Youths in Bhutan are seen resorting to alcohol and substance abuse mainly due to mental health issues, peer pressure, dysfunctional families, poverty and lack of guidance from parents and guardians. Easy access to drugs, lack of youth friendly health services and cultural acceptance of alcohol in Bhutan is a catalyst accelerating the increase in alcohol and substance abuse among youths. While youth friendly health services (YFHS) have been established in the country, the availability of these services in rural areas and the timing of the services are still matters of concern. The timing of YFHS coincides with the working hours making it difficult for school going and employed youths to avail the services. Alcohol and substance abuse is a leading cause of national mortality, violent activities and one of the causes of rise in unplanned pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) among youth.

Another contributing cause of the rise in STDs and unplanned pregnancies among youth is also the lack of comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in the school curriculum. Youths in Bhutan are unaware of Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), consequently engaging

in unsafe sex and intravenous drug abuse. As a result of unplanned pregnancies, there has been increases in abortion rates over the past years. Despite being legal only conditionally, there has been 1438 cases of abortions recorded in 2018 alone.

It has been observed in most monasteries, nunneries and hostel messes that the standards of hygiene isn't maintained in the kitchens. There is hardly any use of hair nets and gloves while preparing food for mass gatherings, coupled with a lack of proper facilities for storage. This is a cause of concern as poor hygiene in such densely populated mass leads to public diseases which includes food poisoning and diarrhea. To curb the issues mentioned above, our suggestion would be to educate the youth in schools and through TV and social media.

Critical issues

In the National Youth Policy 2011, the critical issues mentioned were mental health(although not emphasized enough), physical, mental, sexual and domestic violence, inadequate sexual and reproductive health knowledge, substance abuse and non-communicable diseases.

While critical issue 2 mentions the increasing alcohol consumption among youth, we felt that 'injuries including drink driving' limits the issue only to the youths who drink and drive, which is why we would like to suggest a change in statement to 'deaths/injuries due to alcohol'.

Critical issue 8 addresses the lack of awareness and information on young people with disabilities. However, we suggest it to be made more inclusive by including more target groups like the LGBTQI community and youth living with STDs.

An additional issue that we have come up with is the timing of YFHS. The timing of most YFHS clashes with the 9-5 working/school hours which makes it difficult for the youths who are in schools/colleges/jobs to avail the services. Therefore, we suggest that on weekdays the YFHS should open from 4pm to 9pm (i.e. after office/class hours) and during weekends, from 10am to 9pm.

According to the statistical year book of the national statistics bureau, there has been 1438 abortion cases among women of 12 to 49 years of age despite abortion being only conditionally legal. This indicates the severity of issue surrounding abortion and as such should be mentioned under the critical issues. We also felt the need for poor hygiene in monasteries, nunneries and boarding facilities to be highlighted in the critical issues.

Policy Statements

We felt that policy 8 which focuses on patient-centered approach in the health system rather than disease-centered approach, should be left as it is in the revised youth policy 2020. This would

help drive efforts and focus to provide services to youth who are engaged in substance abuse and who are suffering from mental illness. We also support statement 9 which highlights the ease for all young people to access youth friendly health information and services.

While statement 7 and 9 are both important policies, we would like to recommend that the two statements be merged to avoid redundancy. Policy 7 talks about informing and educating youth on issues regarding health and well-being and policy 9 which talks about providing access to health and information services could be merged to read “to inform, educate and provide access for youth to health information and youth friendly health services”.

Another suggestion we had was to compose policy statements for alcohol and drug abuse, non-communicable diseases and availability and timing of youth friendly health services. Although youth living with STD and LGBTIQ weren't seen as priority youth groups in 2011, with people speaking out more now, we find the need to make statement 10 inclusive of the new target groups. Policy 10 states, “to further understand the situation of disabled young people throughout the country”; for this, we would recommend not only focusing on ‘understanding’, but adopting more proactive approach such as initiating programs and establishing platforms for the betterment of the situations concerning the target groups.

Solutions

In addition to the critical issues mentioned above, these are some of the other possible solutions:

- Strict checking of customer's ID in bars and restaurants before selling alcohol.
- Strict monitoring of bars and restaurants by the Royal Bhutan Police.
- Free distribution of sanitary pads and incinerators in all hostels and nunneries. Sex is a choice, menstruation is not. Condoms are free while sanitary pads are not.
- Making it compulsory for all the cooks involved in mass food preparation to use hair nets and gloves.
- Revise the timing of YFHS from 4pm to 9pm during weekdays and from 10am to 9pm during weekends so that youths can actually avail the services.
- Making professional counselors and therapists available in all the institutions involving youth and in all health centers.
- Including Comprehensive Sexuality Education in the school curriculum from a primary level and also in nunneries.
- Encouraging participation of vulnerable youth groups and providing them with platforms for their talent.

RECREATION AND SPORTS

Background

The background of the NYP 2011 covers most relevant information regarding recreation and sports along with the challenge of limited financial support inhibiting the growth of recreation for youths in Bhutan. However, the only and the most important point that we feel should be emphasized on in the document is the impact of social media in the recreational lives of youth. It has to be noted that the sedentary lifestyle of youth today is mainly due to the easy access to social media. Additionally, in regard to recreation and sports when we say 'youth' we have the misconception that this word only refers to school going students. However, we would like to suggest that even other youths like monks, nuns, LGBTs, unemployed youth and youth living with disabilities have equal access to recreational facilities.

Critical issues

Limited facilities to engage in sports/recreational/cultural activities is a critical issue mainly due to budget constraint, which we are in agreement with. Another critical issue mentioned is the limited Health and Physical Education (HPE) classes provided in school. We would like to restate here that PE classes in school aren't supported with the necessary professional sports instructors who carry out the classes effectively. This leads to children considering PE as free periods and also PE classes being substituted by other classes like mathematics and science.

Issue 3 states 'limited activities for youth to do during winter break in urban areas'. We suggest that it should not be limited to the youth living in urban areas but made inclusive of youths in rural areas as well. Such effort and initiatives to equitably distribute recreational facilities and opportunities would help curb increases in the rate of rural-urban migration.

Policy statements

Although policy statement 24 highlights the encouragement of young people to participate in sports, cultural and recreational activities. However we believe that simply encouraging youth will not be enough. More importantly youth have to be provided with the platform and facilities to engage themselves in recreational activities. We also find the need to address the recreational needs of priority target groups including monks, nuns, LGBTs and youth living with STD.

Recommendations

Listed below are some of the recommendations to improve recreation for youth:

- Providing facilities and diversified options to the target youth groups.
- CSOs like Loden foundation that encourages youth entrepreneurship should encourage young entrepreneurs to start business that leverage recreation.
- Quality of HPE classes should be improved in all schools. Professional sports instructors must be assigned to the PE classes.
- Health and Physical Education sessions should be introduced even in monasteries and nunneries.
- Courts and grounds of schools/colleges could be leased to private entrepreneurs during breaks. This would solve the limitations of facilities and generate funds for the schools/colleges.
- Student discounts must be available. Initially we thought we could make it more inclusive of unemployed youth but realized the challenges in identifying the employment status of youths (and hence their ability to pay) with the burden it would put on the state resources.
- Lastly, to use social media effectively, we suggest introducing a national forum that can act as an information hub to disseminate recreational activities and opportunities in all 20 Dzongkhags.

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