

Young People Lead Research to Inform the National Youth Policy in Bhutan

The Kingdom of Bhutan has a young population with nearly a third aged 10-24 years old. As part of its Gross National Happiness Index,¹ the government strives for adolescent and youth wellbeing through good living standards, mental and physical health, quality education, and more. Young people in Bhutan are considered as a national human resource. Accordingly, increasing focus has been given to them to build their skills and provide adequate platforms for their participation, including in decision-making processes.

In developing the 2011 National Youth Policy in Bhutan, consultation with young people was limited. This was recognized and addressed in 2020 as young people were provided with adequate space to raise their voice in reforming the Youth Policy. On this occasion, adolescents, and youth from across Bhutan served as leaders and participants; raising their concerns on issues that affect them and their communities and sharing ideas for positive change. Their inputs were included in the development of the National Youth Policy, which promotes meaningful participation and engagement of adolescents and youth—in their communities and on matters that affect them.



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Youth Voice in Youth Matters

To amplify the voices of adolescent and youth, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD)—supported by UNICEF—partnered to launch the *Youth Voice in Youth Matters* programme.² The initiative consulted young people for the revision of the Bhutan National Youth Policy. In doing so, BCMD designed a collaborative research project that put youth in a leading role as peer researchers through a three-pronged approach:

¹ <https://ophi.org.uk/policy/national-policy/gross-national-happiness-index>

² <https://youtu.be/3vuFmnrQ-MY>

- **Building youth skills:** Youth researchers assessed the adolescent and youth situation in Bhutan by learning about the National Youth Policy, and through skills building in research, analysis, and communication;
- **Valuing youth voice:** Youth researchers gathered input from their peers through focus groups and surveys to offer recommendations to relevant stakeholders for the revision of the Youth Policy. UNICEF and its partners ensured safe spaces where youth could feel at ease and express their opinions without fear.
- **Strengthening civic engagement:** Youth researchers implemented youth-led advocacy social media campaigns. In the process, they learned how to craft messages, pitch their ideas to decision-makers, and evaluate a campaign.

Building the Capacity to Research

Promoting citizen engagement in Bhutan requires an inclusive approach, where young people in differing life situations can critically analyse their situation and offer solutions. To start *Youth Voice*

Youth-Led Research

In 2020, the young volunteer researchers conducted **18 focus group** discussions across **10 districts** to engage **114 adolescents and youth** from diverse backgrounds. In addition, **1,099 young people** provided inputs on the policy through an online survey.

Both studies were balanced in participation of boys and girls.

in *Youth Matters*, UNICEF supported BCMD and the Department of Youth and Sports (DYS), MoE to train 24 young people as facilitators who would collect data to inform the revision of the National Youth Policy. The research training was incorporated into a nine-day winter camp where the youth learned how to work with their peers to reflect on their situation as young people, identify priority issues and underlying causes and suggest solutions for the future. They also learned about policy development, reviewed the 2011 National Youth Policy in depth, and gained public speaking skills by presenting their views to stakeholders, friends, and family.



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Capturing Adolescent and Youth Concerns and Ideas

As a model for inclusive research, the 114 participants were from diverse backgrounds, including young monks and nuns; young people with disabilities; LGBTQI youth; secondary school and college students; adolescents and youth working in entertainment centers; and young people not in education, employment, or training

The administration of the survey and in-person focus group sessions with were held in early 2020. A national consultant worked with the young researchers to translate the data they gathered into concrete recommendations for the new National Youth Policy. The priorities for action identified by the young people included:

- **Education:** quality of curricula and facilities; preparing youth to work; meeting the needs of those with disabilities;
- **Health and Wellbeing:** quality of mental health and sexual reproductive services and spiritual guidance; access to recreational facilities;
- **Governance:** opportunities for young people to engage civically; need for more diverse media representation; greater participation in school governance;
- **Socio-cultural Environment:** ways to preserve and promote culture and tradition; guidance from parents and adults; safety of girls and LGBTI populations;
- **Economy:** opportunities for jobs, training, internships, entrepreneurship opportunities, jobs and financial support for all, including young people with disabilities; and



Focus Group. ©2020 UNICEF Bhutan

- **The Environment:** environmental protection and conservation; sanitation and cleanliness, enforcing the plastic bag ban.

Shifting the Narrative that Young Voice Matters

Throughout the *Youth Voices in Youth Matters* programme, partners found that proving the value of adolescent- and youth-led research was very challenging. Critical for meaningful adolescent and youth engagement was that those crafting the revised National Youth Policy would listen and respond to the views of young people.

While the project had high-level support from the government, gaining trust from all the stakeholders involved required on-going discussions and negotiation. For example, policy planners had initial concerns around the quality of the data being gathered by the young people, the time it would take, and how the information would be presented. These concerns were alleviated as the policymakers received and reviewed the data—finding it to be high quality, timely, and presented in ways usable for decision-making.

Developing Awareness and Advocacy Campaigns

As the National Youth Policy was being updated at the government level, the 24 researchers participated in further training. The sessions built their capacity to develop concrete action plans and social media campaigns for awareness-raising and advocacy on the six themes highlighted through the research.³

UNICEF Bhutan's goal is to work with partners to reach 3,000 youth volunteers (1,500 girls/1,500 boys) to engage and lead advocacy campaigns and policy dialogues to educate children, adolescents, and youth on the new National Youth Policy.

Moving Forward

After the National Youth Policy launches in 2021, UNICEF Bhutan will be supporting national partners and Civil Society Organizations to develop programmes and plans that operationalize the National Youth Policy. This will include efforts to strengthen the legal and policy environment for adolescents and youth; support of and advocacy to increase adolescent and youth friendly services; actions to improve in-school and out-of-school adolescent and youth participation in networking and civic engagement activities; capacity building of service providers across sectors, including in education (psychosocial support through counselling), and partnership support.

Two key lessons emerged from this initiative: the first is that meaningful adolescent and youth participation requires multi-generational capacity building. In addition to building the skills of young people, we need to work with decision-makers to build their awareness of the value of open dialogue with youth; and their skills in listening and responding to the concerns of young people.

³<http://bcmd.bt/yibhutan/blog/resilience-amidst-a-pandemic-summer-camp-kicks-off>

Partnerships to Promote Awareness on the Youth Policy

UNICEF Bhutan is partnering with the **Bhutan Scout Association** and **Youth Development Fund** (an NGO) to promote the concept of Child-Friendly Local Governance in 2021. More than 69,000 Scout Association members across the nation will be involved in developing awareness and advocacy campaigns based on the National Youth Policy.

If Bhutanese policies are to succeed in supporting young people's participation and civic engagement, social attitudes amongst those in power will need to shift.

Youth Voices in Youth Matters showed that when you trust adolescents and youth, partner with them, and give them full support, they can offer valuable insights and solutions for policy and practice improvement. As the programme illustrates, young people can be partners in ensuring social wellbeing and achieving the indicators set for Gross National Happiness in Bhutan.

Additional Resources and Links

- Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy: [Youth Initiative for Debate, Deliberation and Dialogue](#)
- [Youth Matter in Youth Matters](#) video

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