

Case Study: **Bhutan**

■ Learning from our experiences

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## How Schools in Bhutan Improved Access to Sustainable and Functional Handwashing Facilities



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### ■ Background

Children and adolescents comprise 43 per cent of Bhutan's estimated population of 735,553 people. Prior to COVID-19, the majority of children were in schools. In the country, one in every five schools lacks handwashing facilities and functional toilets. Nearly one third of schools have no separate toilets for girls. These problems risk the well-being of children and bear gender-specific repercussions.

In March 2020, the detection of Bhutan's first COVID-19 case led to the closure of schools across the country. One of the conditions set by the Government to reopen schools was to install handwashing facilities in schools to improve access to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and ensure the safety of children. Following directives from the Ministry of Education, schools across the country started constructing handwashing stations. This was one of the country's biggest responses to the COVID-19

pandemic. In the process, the project helped address water shortage problems in schools which led to an overall improvement of WASH programmes in schools.

### ■ Strategy and implementation

The Ministry of Education reallocated the school feeding budget (which was halted due to school closures) to build additional handwashing facilities in schools. They also provided District Education Offices with the standard design of the stations.

UNICEF partnered with the School Health and Nutrition Division of the Ministry of Education to provide financial and technical support in the implementation of the initiative. While some schools used contractors, most schools took up the tasks themselves to save costs and ensure quality of the infrastructure. Teachers and staff across the country came together to build additional handwashing stations, which were customized to meet the needs of the children and prepared the schools to welcome the students back.

These efforts were documented and amplified through UNICEF and the Ministry of Education's digital platforms. The stories informed the public of how schools were preparing to reopen and the measures that were being taken to ensure the safety of children. 7,800 posters on handwashing and 50,000 soap bars were distributed to 600 schools.

### ■ Progress and results

Records with the Ministry of Education show that the number of handwashing points in schools across the country increased by 77 per cent. From 9,654 handwashing points before the on-set of the pandemic in early 2020, the number today has increased to 17,071 tap points. This means that at the national level, access has improved from one point for every 17 students, to one point for every 9 students. At the district level, excluding the four municipalities, the tap to student ratio has more than doubled from one tap for every 19 students to one tap for every 9 students. In the municipalities, the ratio doubled from one tap point for every 26 students to one tap point for every 13 students. These figures include all tap points, including those in toilets as well as barrel handwashing stations with multiple tap points. All points as informed by the district education officials are functional and have access to regular water supply.

This achievement is a result of the Government and its partners' efforts to improve access to handwashing facilities in schools and ensuring the safety of children. The COVID-19 pandemic, which reiterates the importance of handwashing, was one of the main factors that initiated the efforts. Advocacy efforts and improved handwashing practices also resulted in a decline of water and sanitation-related diseases, as recorded by health centers.

### ■ Lessons learned and way forward

- Triggered by the pandemic, scaling up of handwashing facilities was critical in terms of improving access to functional and sustainable handwashing facilities. The advocacy efforts on handwashing simultaneously supported the initiative to build additional handwashing stations, while creating awareness on how handwashing with soap saves lives.

- The construction of additional handwashing stations in schools saw the biggest improvement in terms of access to handwashing points with regular water supply.
- These stations replaced the earlier practice of using tippy taps and had an impact on WASH programming.
- Teachers and staff in schools learned vocational skills that they can impart to children.
- The partnership between UNICEF, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health was strengthened.
- Community support and engagement is critical to ensuring that infrastructure of schools (including WASH facilities) is sustainable.
- Based on the progress made in improving access to handwashing facilities, efforts must continue to support schools that were unable to complete the projects.
- Budget must be secured for construction of new facilities and for maintenance and operations.
- The availability of a regular water source for the schools needs to be secured. Schools often share their water source with the communities. This factor must be taken into consideration to ensure the sustainability of handwashing stations and other WASH facilities.
- It is important to allocate a contingency budget to prepare and respond to emergencies.
- The need to have precise data on WinS requires a review of the Education Management Information System (EMIS) questionnaire used to collect information from schools, and presents the opportunity to design better real-time monitoring systems.
- School inspections can lead to data collection on the state of WinS development in every school. With information on WinS regularly being collected and updated, decision makers would be able to track the implementation of WinS infrastructure development. This would lead to support and local solutions being attributed to schools facing challenges in a timely manner.

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Related links:

1. [Schools record a 77 Per cent increase in handwashing facilities during COVID-19 pandemic](#)
2. [UNICEF Bhutan Photo Essay: As Schools Prepare to Reopen...](#)
3. [UNICEF Bhutan Article: “We are ready to open the school anytime”](#)
4. [UNICEF Bhutan Article: For the Safety of its Students: Schools in Gelephu Thromde step up COVID-19 prevention measures](#)
5. [UNICEF Bhutan Article: “Our Students Will Return to School One Day”](#)
6. [UNICEF Bhutan Article: Securing Children’s Learning](#)
7. [Hand Hygiene Bhutan Facebook Page](#)

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