

PROJECT BRIEF

BEYOND THE FINISH LINE-BHUTAN (2018-2022)



SNV | Supporting Bhutan to become 100% open-defecation free

Impacting the lives of close to 215,000 people in Bhutan, the Beyond the Finish Line (BFL) project (2018-2022) progressed equitable, universal access to safely managed sanitation and hygiene across eight districts, leaving no-one behind. SNV was a key contributor to the national scale-up of sanitation improvements and systems strengthening. Our work, together with partners, accelerated the pace for Bhutan to become an open-defecation-free (ODF) country in November 2022, building on 15 years of collaborative work with government and partners.

SNV has been supporting the Ministry of Health (MOH) of the Royal Government of Bhutan to develop its approach to sanitation and hygiene since 2008. At that time, access to basic sanitation stood at just 54%, and 30% of children under five years old experienced stunting – some of the highest rates in South Asia. Together, we developed a rural sanitation and hygiene approach, which was endorsed and became the country's Rural Sanitation and Hygiene Programme (RSAHP) in 2012.¹ By 2018, and in partnership with UNICEF, the RSAHP had successfully reached 10 of the 20 districts in Bhutan. Access to basic sanitation stood at 64%, and whilst the hygienic quality of the toilets was improving, inequities in access were of increasing concern.

Poor handwashing rates, unsafe disposal of child faeces, and a lack of adequate opportunities for women and girls to practise good menstrual hygiene were identified priorities. There was also a need to broaden the focus beyond households to include informal settlements, healthcare facilities, and monastic institutions. In addition, as more people gained access to improved sanitation, the challenge of safe management practices emerged.

In 2018, together with UTS-ISF and CBM Australia, as part of the Beyond the Finish Line project supported by the Australian Government, SNV sought to help redress these challenges, placing gender, disability, and social inclusion at the centre of its approach.

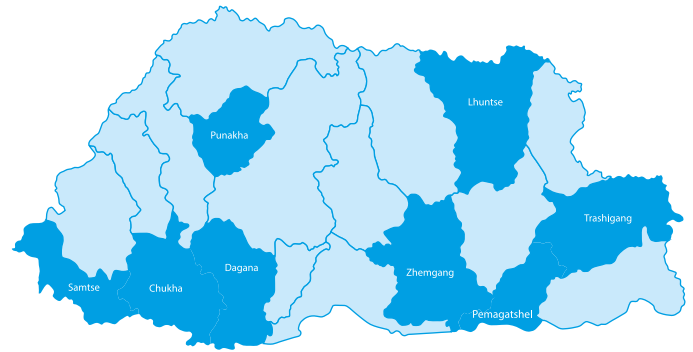
¹ SNV, 'Sustainable Sanitation and Hygiene for All in Bhutan', *Systems Change Case Study*, The Hague, SNV, 2020, <https://snv.org/assets/explore/download/202010-sanitationhygiene-systems-change-case-study-bhutan.pdf> (accessed 24 April 2023).

Applying a rights-based approach, our primary focus was on building government duty bearers' capacity in planning, investing, and delivering inclusive safe sanitation and hygiene services. We applied a phased approach to address post-ODF and safely managed service levels, beyond the finish line. Our aim was to support a better and more diverse Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) sector through the B-WASH Cluster: a collective of partners with a joint vision of building a nation with access to safe, sustainable, and equitable WASH for all. To redistribute power and make the dynamic more collaborative, we engaged with Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) and strengthened the leadership, agency, and voice of women, people with disabilities, and households living in poverty in WASH programming.

By 2021, the Bhutanese Minister for Health officially announced the government's ambition to achieving 100% nationwide ODF status by 2022.

This was supported by a robust programme in place, solid sector leadership from the MOH's Public Health Engineering Division (PHED), and an enabling policy environment to deliver rural sanitation and hygiene at scale.

Map 1: Focus areas in Bhutan

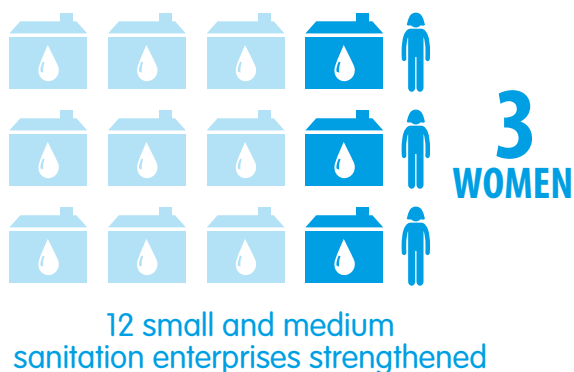
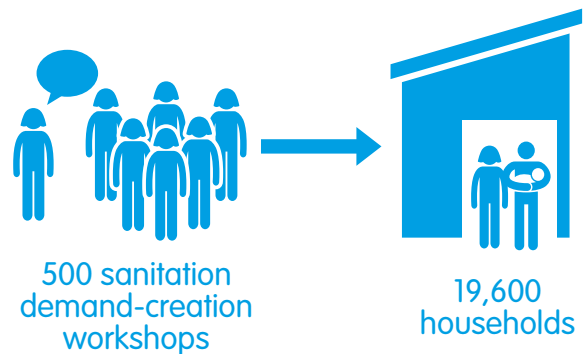
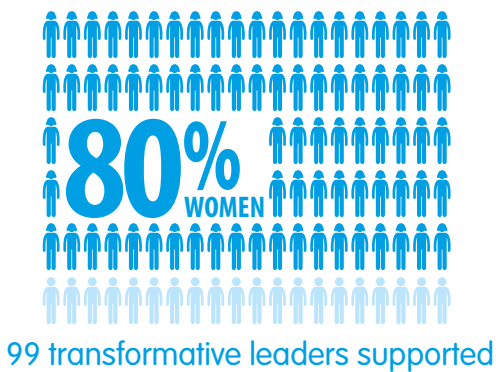


On 19 November 2022, during World Toilet Day, the Government of Bhutan declared all 205 sub-districts and 20 districts open-defecation free. SNV had helped lift the sanitation and hygiene conditions of 122 of these sub-districts and contributed to making improved sanitation a reality for every household across eight districts (see Map 1).

Transforming systems in Bhutan

The achievement of nationwide ODF status in 2022 with 100% improved sanitation was a milestone for the country. SNV was instrumental in helping government develop the RSAHP and provided technical and strategic guidance, while government has provided strong leadership.

Transforming systems in numbers (2018-2022)



How did we achieve this?

Policies

Bhutan has made significant progress in developing and strengthening systems for rural sanitation and hygiene. A decade in the making, the country’s National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy was endorsed in 2020 – an important framework for action. We supported it through national and regional stakeholder consultations, formative research and demonstrated practice. SNV also supported the development of the country’s National Strategy for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Healthcare Facilities: A Framework for Action (2021-2030) and was part of the national working group for the National Sanitation and Hygiene Roadmap in 2022. Not only does the roadmap provide strategic guidance to WASH sector implementation in rural and urban areas, it also offers direction on strengthening the focus on post-ODF and climate resilience. As a member of the national task force, we worked to incorporate Menstrual Health and Hygiene (MHH) in the National Health and Physical Education Curriculum within schools, and we advocated for the representation of DPOs and disability champions.

Practices

Key to success was building the capacity of national organisations to scale up the sanitation and hygiene ambition across 20 district agencies to steer, implement, and monitor sanitation and hygiene services with greater attention to inclusive processes. Investments in WASH, post-ODF, safe emptying, and inclusive processes must benefit all and give priority to last-mile groups. Our emphasis was on creating the

foundation upon which rights-based WASH programming could flourish. This meant giving prominence to social accountability, area-wide and climate change resilience planning and investment, institutionalisation of support systems for disadvantaged groups, leadership roles for women and people with disabilities, and a phased approach to post-ODF processes.

Power dynamics

DPOs are now formally recognised as sector stakeholders with the right to participate in sector planning and decision-making. Women’s meaningful engagement and participation has steadily been increasing thanks to initiatives such as trainings for health workers, transformative leadership initiatives (coaching, mentoring, and networking), and collaboration with women’s civil society organisations (CSOs). Today, women are more willing to participate and speak in local meetings.

Resource flows

After gaining the skills to mobilise resources for sanitation and hygiene – both financial and human – local government authorities took a more proactive stance in fulfilling their responsibilities as duty bearers. They started allocating funds for sanitation through sub-district annual budgets, with some mobilising funds from private sponsors and donors. For example, several districts saw increased funding for advocacy initiatives and last-mile groups received additional support through government interventions, e.g., mobilising skilled workers (masons), providing modes of transport to carry equipment and supplies, and negotiating down construction and

Figure 1: Results of four-year programming in sanitation access (2018-22)*

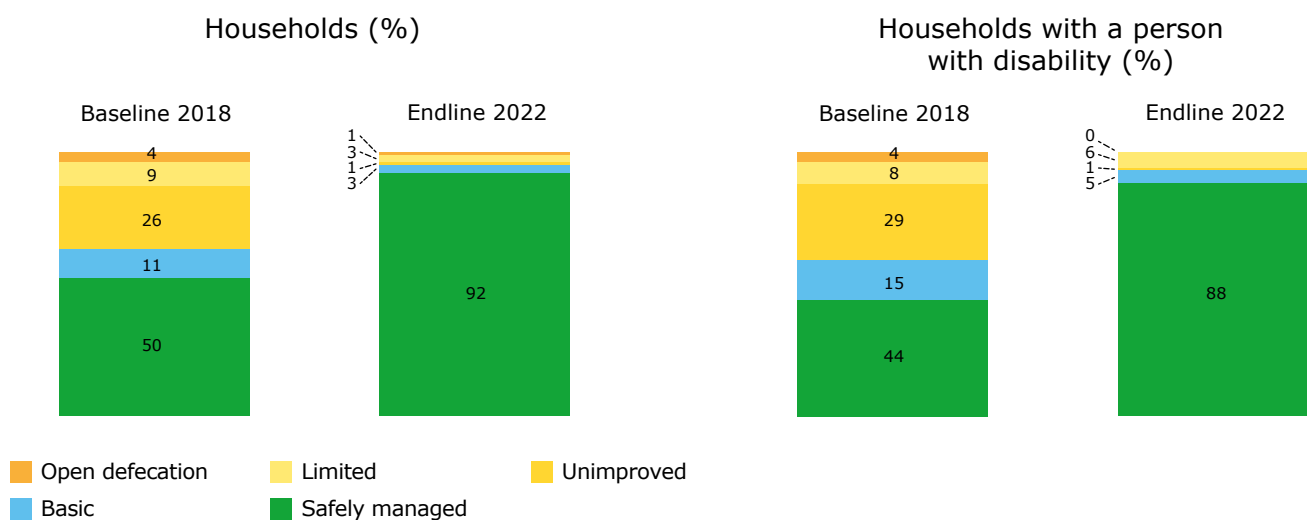
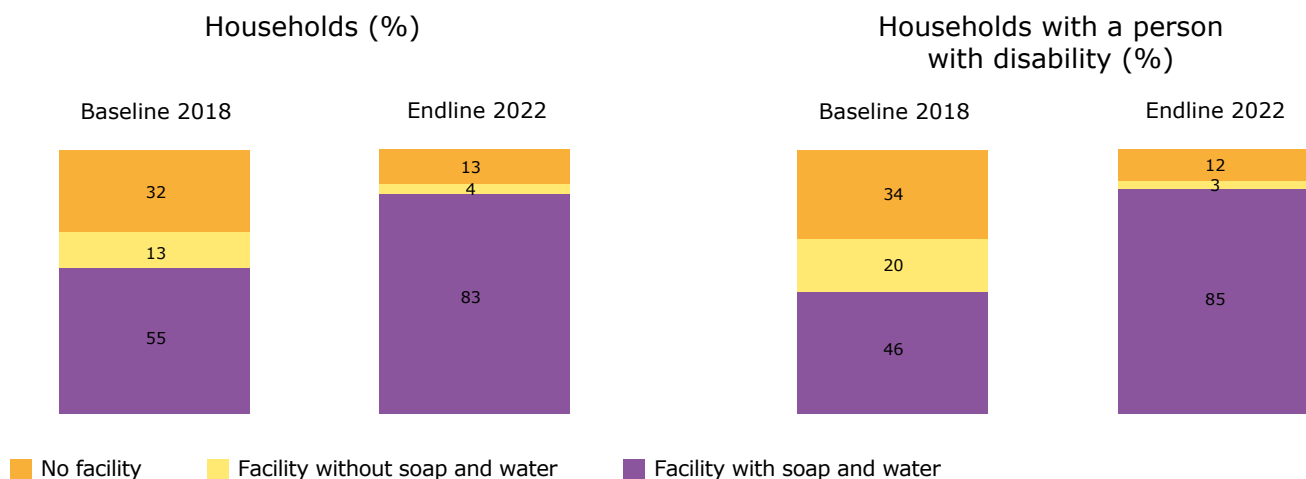


Figure 2: Results of four-year programming in handwashing with soap access and practice (2018-22)*



*N.B. Data from SNV’s Beyond the Finish Line project performance monitoring indicator survey, as per the JMP.

service prices for households. Local governments are fully aware that the onus for sanitation improvements is on them, in line with Bhutan’s decentralised governance arrangement and a national sanitation and hygiene strategy that rests on a non-subsidy approach.

Social norms, values, behaviours, and attitudes

Health Assistants are now more involved in evidence-based, inclusive, and accessible hygiene social behavioural change communications (SBCC) initiatives. Focused on the key behaviours of handwashing with soap (HWWS), menstrual health and hygiene management, safe disposal of children’s faeces, and safe emptying practices, SBCC helps shift social norms and attitudes. While the presence of a handwashing facility alone does not guarantee its use, our SBCC campaign used emotional drivers of nurture to support safe hygiene practices embedded in the national approach. Further, through Bhutan WASH Cluster meetings, stakeholders began adopting last-mile strategies and mainstreaming disability considerations in WASH programming. Combined, these methods contributed towards the ODF achievement, with improved sanitation.

With great power comes great responsibility – leading for transformative change



This is the story of Mrs Ugyen Pem, the Chief District Education Officer of Dagana District who participated in our Transformative Leadership workshop.

From the workshop, Mrs Ugyen gained a sense that she has the duty to drive Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) change through her role.

‘I did understand gender in a general sense, but I am not sure if I stressed the need before . [...] I also had an understanding of inclusion, and I knew I should do something about it.’

Mrs Ugyen is now driving change for stronger GESI through her work. She has ensured that toilets in schools and government buildings are inclusive. She is actively advocating for GESI to be incorporated in toilet designs, and she makes the budget provisions necessary for it.

She has brought the conversation on GESI to her office and community meetings, influencing wherever she sees the opportunity. She urges us all:

‘Take the opportunity wherever possible to go the extra mile and not just wait for directions.’

² For more information about WASH-Fit, see: <https://www.unicef.org/documents/who-unicef-water-and-sanitation-health-facility-improvement-tool-wash-fit>

Relationships and connections

The quality of connections and communication among all actors within the system – held together by a strong governance structure – is a testament to Bhutan’s sanitation and hygiene success. Bhutan has a strong close-knit culture, which gives it an advantage in harnessing multi-sector and stakeholder approaches. Formal and informal methods of team building developed trust and open communications. Using the WHO/Unicef WASH-FIT assessments,² we involved local government, healthcare facility (HCF) authorities, and local partners to help roll out better quality HCF services, including through the increased allocation of soaps and bins for menstrual health and hygiene and improvements in medical waste management protocols. The assessments also led to structural HCF improvements, including the addition of ramps for wheelchair users. This healthcare facility achievement and many more demonstrate the importance of political will, leadership, long-term partnerships, and collaboration to achieve systems change – for all.

Our recommendations

Over the last 15 years, the priority given to approaches for sanitation and hygiene has evolved and steadily improved. Lessons learned over the years have shaped and modified policies, strategies, operational approaches, and tools

Yet in this Himalayan context, climate change is already impacting the functionality of rural WASH services, undermining important gains and widening inequalities even further.

With support to address these risks systematically, local governments can take adaptive actions to manage the impacts of water-related risks of floods, dry spells, and landslides on sanitation and hygiene. They can also embed resilience efforts within existing programmes, policies, and budgets.

Responding to emerging water governance and security challenges, it will be important to bridge the gap between rural WASH services, water security, and the national climate change agenda.

Transforming Bhutan’s WASH sector to become disability inclusive



Disability inclusion in WASH is both a process and an outcome: introducing appropriate technologies and making sure that our WASH systems are co-designed with disability experts and people with disabilities.

Our journey with DPOs began in 2015, and this collaboration has grown - together with CBM Australia - to transform Bhutan’s WASH sector through the increased presence, voice, and meaningful participation of DPOs and people with disabilities.

According to Mr Rinchen Wangdi, Former Chief of the Public Health Engineering Division in Bhutan’s Ministry of Health, their presence has helped the sector develop more accessible and inclusive systems and has strengthened the capacity of local government to dialogue with people with disabilities in a more sensitive manner.

Today, DPOs such as Ability Bhutan Society (ABS) are present in WASH programming at all levels. ABS has successfully designed and won a social inclusive development proposal for implementation across five districts and at a national level and is now a key player in the national WASH arena.



First female local leader (Gup) in Dagana inspects disability-inclusive toilet. Photo credit: SNV/Tshechu Dorji Wong.

In order to sustain and build on Bhutan's success, combined with a stronger emphasis on climate-resilient programming, our recommendations are as follows:

Focus on operationalising the roadmap

This includes: follow-ups to implement post-ODF strategies in target districts, with particular attention on last-mile households (especially people with disabilities) gaining access to improved sanitation; safely managed sanitation including faecal sludge management; and climate-resilient WASH for households, schools, and healthcare facilities. A key emphasis will be on implementing evidence-based, systematic, and robust M&E systems within the mandates of the appropriate agencies, for timely follow-ups.

Take a cohesive approach

With a national-level restructuring process currently underway, it will be important to ensure that sector planning, co-ordination, and monitoring within local and national governments do not become fragmented. Responsibilities for hygiene and sanitation must be defined clearly to ensure that both continue to be prioritised as mandates evolve.

Champion civil society organisations

CSOs must be supported to further develop and strengthen their role, including in helping to address challenges relating to gender and disability, both at national and local levels.



SNV, 'Supporting Bhutan to become 100% open-defecation free', *Project Brief, Beyond the Finish Line-Bhutan (2018-2022)*, The Hague, SNV, 2023.

Beyond the Finish Line - Bhutan

Beyond the Finish Line (BFL) - Sustainable Sanitation and Hygiene for All in Bhutan is a four-year project that progressed equitable and universal access to safely managed sanitation and hygiene for close to 215,000 people across eight districts in Bhutan. Supported by the Australian Government's Water for Women Fund, the project was implemented by SNV in partnership with the Government of Bhutan, UTS-ISF, and CBM Australia.

SNV

SNV is a mission-driven global development partner working across Africa and Asia. Our mission is to strengthen capacities and catalyse partnerships that transform the agri-food, energy, and water systems, which enable sustainable and more equitable lives for all.

Cover photo

SNV team celebrating an open-defecation-free Bhutan with the country's Health Minister, Dechen Wangmo, other dignitaries and guests during World Toilet Day 2022. Photo credit: SNV/Oopz Production.

For more information

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