**WFP’s support to Nutrition in Bhutan (2019-2023)**

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Informing national policies and strategies on nutrition

**Nutrition Situation**

Bhutan is facing the triple burden of malnutrition with co-existence of undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and overnutrition. Over the years, the health and nutritional status of children has improved with wasting and underweight prevalence reduced to 4 and 9 percent respectively. Stunting, however, is persistent at 21 percent while overweight/obesity is emerging and increasing in Bhutan’s population with 11.4 percent of Bhutanese obese and 33.5 percent overweight.

Micronutrient deficiencies remain a major public health issue. Anemia, a proxy indicator for micronutrient deficiencies, is at 44 percent for 6-59 months old children. Over 35 percent of non-pregnant women and 31 percent of adolescent girls are anaemic - an important indicator of future health as 6 percent of girls are married by the age of 15, and 26 percent by the age of 18. More than 1 in 5 preschool aged children and 17 percent of pregnant women are deficient in Vitamin A. Amongst school aged children (5-19 years), several outbreaks of Vitamin B deficiencies including peripheral neuropathy and glossitis have been reported over the years.

Non-communicable diseases (NCD) continue to be the main health burden in the country, responsible for 69 percent of Bhutan’s disease burden and 71 percent of deaths in 2019 caused by hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, cancer and diabetes. In terms of diets, the risk factor survey of 2019 records salt consumption at 8.3 grams, significantly higher than the recommended daily intake of 5 grams. School children are big consumers of junk food – 40 percent of students drink carbonated soft drinks and 32.2 percent eat fast food 4 days in a week.
COVID-19 Response
COVID-19 constitutes a significant risk to the nutrition status of children and communities. Direct and indirect impact of the pandemic such as reduced household income, higher food price volatility, reduced availability of fresh foods have affected the quality of Bhutanese diets. WFP is working closely with government partners to maintain and improve nutrition, hygiene and food safety during the pandemic including assistance to the safe reopening of schools.

Building Human Capital through better Child Nutrition
WFP is partnering with the Ministry of Health and UNICEF to revise the National Health Policy (2020-30) and develop the National Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan (2020-25). These policies aim to increase national goals and multi-sectoral collaboration with other sectors required for effective national health and nutrition programmes and services.

WFP is assisting the Ministry of Education (MoE) to improve the nutritional and health status of children by transforming the National School Feeding and Nutrition Programme. Nutritious meals help children achieve their full physical and cognitive potential to lead more productive lives. As a mountainous country, transportation of food commodities to all schools across the country has significant financial implications for the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB). Given the Government’s plan to reach all rural schools with school meals in the country within the 12th Five Year Plan (2019-2023), WFP is working with government partners to analyze and optimize the supply chain costs for the National School Feeding and Nutrition Programme.

Timely, multi-sectoral and quality data is critical for evidence-based decision making to improve programme effectiveness. WFP, along with the MoE has developed and rolled out a real-time, integrated nutrition, health and education monitoring and reporting system. A major success of this intervention has been the increased dietary diversity in school meals and reduced food waste at schools from 2% in 2017 to 0.5% 2019.

Healthy Diets
Sustainable transformation of health and nutrition requires interventions on both demand and supply side. WFP is assisting the RGoB in developing a national SBC strategy to improve dietary and health practices of school children (ages 5-18) by creating demand for healthier diets.

This is further reinforced through nutrition and health education using an improved school curriculum, currently being developed with the Royal Education Council and UNICEF as well as through developing a digital and interactive game-based learning platform.

Adopting a whole-of-society approach, WFP has partnered with Tarayana Foundation to work across 4 districts to help rural and vulnerable population groups eat and stay healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The focus of this nutrition and health outreach is on children and adolescents aged between 5-19 years.

Food Fortification
RGoB has prioritized food fortification as a public health strategy to address micronutrient deficiencies amongst school children using the National School Feeding and Nutrition Programme as a platform. With growing evidence on the effectiveness of the programme, the Government plans to scale up the use of fortified rice to cover other vulnerable population groups including monastic institutions with gradual introduction through the open market.

Through its engagement with the food fortification taskforce, WFP provides technical assistance and capacity strengthening towards developing the regulatory framework and compliance mechanisms to ensure food safety and quality.

To ensure a successful food fortification programme and meet the future demand of fortified rice, WFP is:

- Supporting enhancement of national production capacity through the establishment of a fortified rice blending facility.
- Working with relevant agencies to strengthen the quality assurance system, food testing capabilities, and develop tools and create a trained cadre of professionals.
- Strengthening the capacity of relevant agencies across all aspects of the fortified rice value chain.
- Facilitating continuous advocacy and policy dialogue through exposure visits and knowledge sharing events.
- Investing in a micronutrient survey to create the evidence base needed to inform policy and regulatory measures including the national standards for fortified rice.

With these foundations laid, WFP together with the RGoB, would sustainably expand the consumption of fortified foods in Bhutan.