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

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Nutrition Situation

Bhutan is at a crossroad of a triple burden of malnutrition, brought about by modern lifestyle and its related health issues. Hunger is no longer a public issue - wasting has been brought down to 4 percent and underweight to 9 percent. 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.

Anaemia, 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.

Non-communicable diseases (NCD) continue to be the main health expenditure in the country, responsible for 69 percent of Bhutan’s disease burden and 71 percent of deaths (2019) caused by hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, cancer and diabetes. In terms of diets, the risk factor survey of 2019 records 86 percent of Bhutanese do not consume adequate vegetables and fruits, and salt consumption remains at 8.3 grams, significantly higher than the recommended daily intake of 5 grams. The nutrition status of children is no different with 3.9 percent of children under 5 years and 11.4 percent of school aged children overweight. 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 level of children and communities as a result in reduced household income, higher food prices and a reduced consumption of fortified and fresh food. WFP has worked closely with government partners to improve nutrition, hygiene, diets and food safety during the pandemic. This includes launching a community outreach programme with Tarayana (CSO) on eating and staying healthy during the pandemic, and assistance to the safe reopening of schools.

Building Human Capital Through Better Child Nutrition

WFP partners with the Ministry of Health and UNICEF in the revision of the National Health Policy (2020-30) and in developing the National Nutrition Strategy (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.

The transition from the National School Feeding Programme to the National School Feeding and Nutrition Programme will ensure that children’s nutritional and health status are improved through provision of nutritious meals.

WFP supports the Ministry of Education in this transition by designing cost-optimized nutritious school menus based on local and seasonal food using an online menu optimizer platform. Through the consumption of nutritious school meals, school children are developing an appetite for healthy diets that continue later in life. Aiming at making a healthier and productive future population with reduced rates of NCDs and micronutrient deficiencies, WFP assists the ministries of education, health, agriculture and forest in developing a national social behaviour change communication campaign for improved dietary and health practices of school children (6-18 years). 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.

With the Ministry of Education, WFP has developed and rolled-out a real-time and integrated nutrition, health and education monitoring and evaluation system to all schools in Bhutan. The system provides timely data and evidence for improved policy decisions and programme effectiveness of school based programmes.

To produce healthy and safe meals, schools require appropriate infrastructure. To facilitate this, WFP together with the Ministry of Education is developing national standards for school kitchen, stores and kitchen equipment. The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) is expanding school meals to additional rural schools where new kitchens and stores are required. WFP assist the expansion and infrastructure upgrade through construction of 23 new kitchens and stores as well as refurbishment of additional 36 existing school kitchen and stores across the country.

Being a mountainous country, transportation of food commodities to all schools across the country has significant financial implications for the RGoB. The scale-up plan of the RGoB to reach 95 percent of all schools with school meals in the country by 2021 comes with additional costs. WFP is working with government partners to optimize and reduce costs for the National School Feeding and Nutrition Programme’s supply chain.

Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture

To meet the demand for nutritious school meals and to support local agricultural production, WFP collaborates with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests in enhancing the production and entrepreneurial capacity of local smallholder farmers groups. By 2023, WFP aims to connect 9,000 farmers across the country with schools within their vicinity. In addition to making fresh and nutritious local foods available for school meals, the support will also enhance the income of these farmers.

Investing in local farmers is supporting the RGoB’s initiative to increase food self-sufficiency through enhanced local agricultural production and local economy. By supporting the objectives of the Bhutan 2040 Agricultural Strategy, WFP strengthens capacities of government agencies, smallholder farmers groups and support climate resilient and nutrition-sensitive agriculture production in partnership with the World Bank, IFAD, FAO, UNDP and ITC.

Food Fortification

Fortified rice, which was included in school meals in 2017, helps in meeting multiple micronutrient requirements of school children. Fortified oil with Vitamin A and D also forms part of the school feeding food basket. With the introduction of fortification as a strategy to address micronutrient deficiencies among the Bhutanese, WFP supports the multi-sectoral Food Fortification Taskforce by developing Bhutan’s regulatory and compliance framework for the National Food Fortification Programme that starts from an adoption of Bhutanese standards for fortified rice.

For smooth enforcement of the regulations, capacities of relevant agencies are built and institutionalized. WFP also supports construction of a blending facility to produce sufficient fortified rice and laboratory capacities for quality testing and analysis. With these foundations laid, WFP together with the RGoB will expand the consumption of fortified foods in Bhutan.

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