



Using social behaviour change to promote healthy diets among children and adolescents

Healthy diets

The Bhutan Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan (2020–2025) seeks to improve the nutritional status of schoolchildren and adolescents, including those in monastic institutions, through improved nutrition knowledge, attitudes, skills, and practices. Based on behavioural research into food and snack consumption, a comprehensive social behaviour change (SBC) strategy and action plan was developed by WFP with government partners, including the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD), Ministry of Health (MoH) and Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MoAL). The SBC strategy contains both in and out-of-school activities, campaigns, and related materials.

Challenges

Bhutan is currently experiencing a transition in nutrition and food consumption patterns, especially among schoolchildren and adolescents. One in three adolescent girls are anaemic and one in ten schoolchildren are overweight, a problem that is rapidly increasing. Micronutrient deficiencies and overnutrition result from the same problem - poor quality diets, dominated by nutrient-poor rice and potatoes, and limited consumption of fresh fruits, vegetables and nutrient-dense foods like meat, pulses, and dairy. The WFP-led Fill the Nutrient Gap Analysis 2022, indicated that 27 percent of Bhutanese households cannot afford a diet that meets their nutrient needs.

In 2022, WFP partnered with the MoESD and MoH to undertake a qualitative study of dietary behaviour in schoolchildren, adolescents, and

their influencers. While knowledge and awareness of healthy and unhealthy foods were relatively high, other determinants of poor-quality diets were identified, such as:

- Poor accessibility and affordability of healthy foods, with abundant accessibility to inexpensive, convenient, and ultra-processed snacks.
- Deeply rooted socio-cultural norms and emotions on vegetarianism, eating nutrient-poor foods such as rice and potatoes, and using salty flavour enhancers such as *ezay* (chilli paste) and pickles.
- Lack of cooking skills to prepare healthy meals or knowledge of substituting healthy ingredients for unhealthy ones.



- Poor dietary habits, such as skipping breakfast or snacking on unhealthy foods after school and then skipping dinner.
- Eating junk food as a part of meals, discarding healthier options such as vegetables, pulses and animal products.
- Increased solitary and mindless eating of junk food by children, in front of screens, and less mindful eating of well-balanced meals as a family.
- Consumption of junk food as part of the development of social bonds with friends.
- Children using their preferences for snacks and junk food as part of asserting their independence and identity creation.

Solutions

WFP partners with, and provides technical assistance to MoESD's Health and Wellbeing Division (HWD) with a package of SBC activities and materials to influence food choices, such as social media advocacy campaigns, cooking competitions among schools and interactive games

WFP has also supported the development of a national SBC strategy and action plan to address specific drivers and barriers to healthy eating with targeted policy and programmatic tools and campaigns.

SBC initiatives

In 2023, SBC activities were implemented in 15 schools in Thimphu and Chhukha districts, including two schools for children with disabilities. The SBC activities include interactive games and props for different class ranges, school staff training, and implementation guidance.



The inclusive cooking class students at Changangkha Middle Secondary School.

A healthy diets social media campaign called *Eat Kheta, Be Seta* (Eat Smart, Be Smart) was launched by WFP and MoESD on their *School Health and Nutrition* Facebook page. The social media campaign includes cooking competitions among schoolchildren, videos by home chefs, an interactive quiz competition on nutrition, and nutrition facts.

WFP supported the Tarayana Foundation, a civil society organization, to implement community outreach SBC activities in 16 villages in the four rural districts of Zhemgang, Tsirang, Trongsa and Lhuentse. The community outreach activities included community mobilization, cooking demonstrations and competitions, capacity strengthening of farmers in post-harvest management, and building a resource pool of local champions who would continue to cascade key messages on healthy dietary habits in the communities.

Pinda's Magic Bowl, a five-episode nutrition education television programme produced in English and Dzongkha language, was aired on the national television channel, BBS 3, in 2022. The show targeted schoolchildren from five to 18 years. Edutainment is an effective medium to deliver nutrition education that helps children and their families make informed food choices and practice healthy eating habits. The TV show has been rebroadcast and uploaded onto YouTube channels.



Schoolchildren participating in a cooking competition organized as part of the healthy diets advocacy campaign.

