



Freshwater Action Network
South Asia

**EVALUATING PROGRESS ON
BHUTAN'S
COMMITMENTS AT
VII SACOSAN
DECLARATION**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: _____	2
2.ACRONYMS _____	3
3.EXECUTIVE SUMMARY _____	4
4.Alignment with SACOSAN VII Declaration _____	4
5.Institutional framework and stakeholder engagement__	5
6.Planning, monitoring, and review mechanisms _____	5
7.Progress in sanitation and hygiene initiatives _____	5
8.INTRODUCTION _____	6
9.OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY _____	7
10.METHODOLOGY _____	7
11.LIMITATIONS AND ETHICS _____	7
12.EVALUATION _____	7
13.Resolution 1: _____	8
14.Resolution 3: _____	10
15.Resolution 4: _____	12
16.Resolution 5: _____	13
17.Resolution 6: _____	15
18.Resolution 7. _____	16
19.Resolution 8: _____	17
20.Resolution 9. _____	19
21.Resolution 10: _____	21
22.RECOMMENDATIONS _____	22
23.CONCLUSION _____	24
24.BIBLIOGRAPHY _____	25
25.ANNEXURE _____	26

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ACRONYMS

1. **BFL** - Beyond the Finish Line
2. **BSB** - Bhutan Standard Bureau
3. **BLSS** - Bhutan Living Standards Survey
4. **B-WASH** - Bhutan Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
5. **DIY** - Do It Yourself
6. **DPOs** - Disabled People's Organizations
7. **HCFs** - Healthcare Facilities
8. **MH** - Menstrual Health
9. **MoH** - Ministry of Health
10. **MoIT** - Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport
11. **MoWHS** - Ministry of Works and Human Settlement
12. **NHPSP** - National Health Promotion and Sanitation Plan
13. **NECS** - National Environment Commission Secretariat
14. **NKRAs** - National Key Result Areas
15. **NSWASH** - National Strategy for Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
16. **NSHP** - National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy
17. **ODF** - Open Defecation Free
18. **PHED** - Public Health Engineering Division
19. **RSAHP** - Rural Sanitation and Hygiene Program
20. **SATO** - Safe Toilet Technology
21. **SACOSAN** - South Asian Conference on Sanitation
22. **SNV** - Netherlands Development Organization (Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers)
23. **UNICEF** - United Nations Children's Fund
24. **WaSIS** - Water and Sanitation System
25. **WHO** - World Health Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bhutan has made a commendable progress in aligning its policies, strategies, and programs with the SACOSAN-VII declaration aimed at advancing sanitation and hygiene in the region. The country demonstrates a robust institutional framework led by various ministries and agencies, along with active involvement from civil society, private sector entities, and development partners. Efforts have been, particularly focused on rural sanitation and hygiene, supported by demand-driven community-led initiatives and strategic partnerships with international organizations. However, while significant strides have been made, challenges persist, especially in achieving universal access to improved sanitation and hygiene facilities, particularly in remote areas. This report provides an evaluation of Bhutan's performance in implementing the Seventh South Asian Conference on Sanitation (SACOSAN VII) declaration based on the country's Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector status, planning and monitoring mechanisms, and progress in sanitation and hygiene initiatives.

Specifically, the evaluation surveys Bhutan's progress and challenges in implementing WASH initiatives in alignment with the commitments made at the SACOSAN VII. By analyzing existing data, reports, and government documents, the evaluation provides a review of Bhutan's efforts in the WASH sector to address the SACOSAN VII declaration. The evaluation considers factors such as establishment of baselines, data collection, addressing inequalities, human resource capacity, sectoral reforms, financial planning, advocacy, institutional priorities, knowledge management, and climate change adaptation. Though Bhutan has made commendable strides in improving WASH infrastructure and access, challenges persist. This requires continued collaborative efforts and strategic interventions.

ALIGNMENT WITH SACOSAN VII DECLARATION

Bhutan has demonstrated a strong commitment to the objectives outlined in the SACOSAN VII declaration. The country has aligned its national policies, strategies, and programs with Sustainable Development goals (SDGs) targets related to sanitation and hygiene (SDG-6.1 & 6.2). The establishment of the National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy (NSHP) in 2020 testifies Bhutan's dedication to promoting inclusive and safe sanitation practices. Moreover, the coordination mechanism through the Bhutan-WASH Cluster exemplifies the country's efforts to facilitate collaboration among stakeholders and streamline data collection processes to track progress effectively.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The institutional framework in Bhutan, led by ministries such as the Ministry of Health (MoH), the erstwhile Ministry of Works and Human Settlement (MoWHS), now Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport (MoIT) and the National Environment Commission Secretariat (NECS), demonstrates a multi-sectoral approach to addressing sanitation and hygiene challenges. In addition, the active involvement of civil society organizations, private sector entities, and development partners has enriched the implementation process. Collaborations with organizations like SNV Netherlands Development Organization, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and World Health Organization (WHO) highlight Bhutan's commitment to leveraging external expertise and resources to bolster its WASH initiatives.

PLANNING, MONITORING, AND REVIEW MECHANISMS

Bhutan's adherence to a five-year socio-economic development planning cycle, coupled with the integration of SDG indicators into national planning frameworks, signifies a proactive approach towards monitoring progress on sanitation and hygiene goals. The utilization of the National Monitoring and Evaluation Systems Framework (NMESF) ensures routine monitoring and evaluation of development plans, fostering accountability and transparency. The emphasis on social accountability and citizen participation further strengthens Bhutan's monitoring mechanisms, promoting community engagement and ownership of WASH initiatives.

Progress in sanitation and hygiene initiatives

PROGRESS IN SANITATION AND HYGIENE INITIATIVES

Significant strides in rural sanitation and hygiene has been made, exemplified by the Rural Sanitation and Hygiene program (RSAHP), which the MoH leads. The program's community-led approach facilitated the scaling of improved sanitation coverage across various regions, with notable achievements in Open Defecation Free (ODF) status verification and certification. Efforts to enhance hygiene practices, particularly through initiatives addressing menstrual health and handwashing, underscore holistic approach toward promoting health and well-being in rural communities.

INTRODUCTION

This report evaluates Bhutan's progress in implementing the SACOSAN VII Declaration. It focuses on the key areas outlined in the 10-points Declaration. The purpose of the review is to update the stakeholders, partners and the public to inform on the decisions made and work done to further the WASH sector in the country. Though the sector is as vast as it is important to the efforts of ensuring basic facilities of human dignity and well-being, but this evaluation concentrates, as mandated, on Bhutan's progress and achievements toward achieving the global SDGs), particularly SDG 6 (which talks about the importance of achieving clean water and sanitation for all). This is against the backdrop of Bhutan's commitments made at the Seventh SACOSAN held on 11-13 April 2018 in Islamabad, Pakistan.

The review not only attempts to assess how much of Bhutan's commitments have been achieved, but also to show the path for the country as to how to channel the national and institutional efforts to strengthen the WASH sector, so that people are empowered to pursue their health, social, and economic development agenda. The report is also expected to provide a clear picture of Bhutan's efforts and conviction to improve health and sanitation of its people. It could serve as a basis for stakeholders and institutional partners to deepen their collaboration in the future.

Upon evaluating Bhutan's legislative, policy and activity initiatives against all the 10 declaration resolutions, the report presents key findings and recommendations. As far as possible, the assessment was guided by the importance of ensuring objectivity, honesty and neutrality. Wherever necessary, critical evaluations are made in the hope of achieving what needs to be achieved to strengthen the WASH sector.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this evaluation exercise is to track Bhutan's progress in the WASH sector post Seventh South Asian Conference on Sanitation (SACOSAN VII). The study attempts to assess where Bhutan is on the commitments it made at the conference as one of the signatories to the Seventh SACOSAN Declaration. The study also evaluates the landscape of the WASH sector in the country. While doing so, associated challenges and opportunities are identified with recommendations to move forward.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an interpretivist approach as its primary research method, emphasizing induction and inference in reviewing relevant documents. It conducted a thorough examination of the existing literature within the WASH sector, with a focus on materials preceding and following the Seventh SACOSAN to maintain contextual accuracy and reflect on-the-ground realities. In addition to secondary sources, the evaluation incorporated the latest insights from two key officials from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport (MoIT) and SNV Netherlands, Bhutan. This was facilitated through a structured questionnaire aligned with the 10-point declaration of SACOSAN VII.

LIMITATIONS AND ETHICS

There is no generally agreed benchmark against which to assess the progress of the WASH sector in Bhutan. This evaluation does not affirm success or failure of Bhutan's work in the sector. As mandated, it only traces the visible progress of major policy and program made post SACOSAN in 2018. It does not, whatsoever, necessarily claim to be a policy prescription. To the best of the knowledge of the consultant and the contracting agency, professional research and review ethics were exercised. Objectivity, professionalism and honesty in review judgments were the ethical variables that guided the study.

EVALUATION

In the following sections, the progress and implementation status of all the 10 resolutions of the Seventh SACOSAN VII Declaration are evaluated. Given the broad scope of the subjects that overlap into several domains of policy and practice in the field, the focus is given more on the concrete policy and specific activity implementation outcomes than a generic evaluation such exercise often fall victim to.

Resolution 1:

ESTABLISHING BASELINES AND WASH TARGETS FOR SDG-6.1 AND 6.2 INCLUDING THE ELIMINATION OF OPEN DEFECCATION AND PROGRESS TOWARDS UNIVERSAL BASIC AND SAFELY MANAGED SANITATION AND HYGIENE.

Bhutan has made commendable strides in establishing baselines and WASH targets aligned with SDG 6.1 and 6.2. For example, the Roadmap for Sanitation and Hygiene to achieve SDGs of 6.1 and 6.2 has been developed. The endorsement of the NSHP of 2020 is a significant step towards this goal. However, more efforts are needed to ensure alignment of national and sub-national policies with SDG targets comprehensively.

In addition, Bhutan has undertaken efforts to establish baselines and targets for SDG-6.1 and 6.2, focusing on the elimination of open defecation and ensuring universal access to safely managed sanitation services and hygiene. According to the Bhutan Living Standards Survey (BLSS) 2017, improved sanitation coverage stands at 85.3 percent, with less than 1 percent open defecation. Further, baseline surveys for safely managed sanitation services in both urban and rural areas have been conducted. The studies have revealed that 53.6 percent of the urban population has access to such services.

Moreover, Bhutan's progress towards ODF status nationwide is a remarkable achievement. According to the Beyond the Finish Line (BFL) project brief, by November 2022, Bhutan declared all 205 sub-districts and 20 districts open-defecation-free, impacting close to 215,000 people. The findings speak to the national efforts in the area. For example, the initiation of the study by the Public Health Engineering Division (PHED) under MoIT demonstrates Bhutan's commitment to understanding and improving WASH in Health Care Facilities. The Guidelines for Faecal Sludge Management for Rural Sanitation and Hygiene 2019 is in place and the protocols of formative research on child faeces management and interventions have been developed. Further, Bhutan's commitment to achieving 100 percent improved sanitation by 2022 demonstrates conviction and progress towards the goal of universal access to sanitation services as outlined in SDG 6.1. The pledge was made in 2020 during the observation of World Toilet Day—has been achieved well by the deadline.

Likewise, Bhutan has successfully achieved 100 percent ODF status and improved sanitation, demonstrating progress towards the elimination of open defecation as outlined in SDG-6.1 and 6.2. The government's commitment to providing improved sanitation facilities aligns with the goal of universal basic and safely managed sanitation services and hygiene. UNICEF Bhutan has declared "Bhutan achieves 100 per cent Open Defecation Free with access to improved sanitation". The country's census provides essential data for assessing WASH conditions in healthcare facilities, aligning with SACOSAN's call for baseline establishment. The report indicates 95 percent of HCFs have basic water services, suggesting progress towards universal coverage. However, challenges such as water shortages during dry seasons and E.coli contamination highlight the need for sustained efforts.

Bhutan has made notable progress in establishing baselines for SDG 6.2, as indicated by efforts to assess the baseline data for safely managed sanitation services in both urban and rural areas. However, further efforts are needed to ensure alignment with SDG targets and to address the remaining challenge of open defecation. Overall, under this resolution, Bhutan has demonstrated a significant progress in establishing baselines and targets for SDG 6.1 and 6.2. The country's efforts to achieve universal basic sanitation services and hygiene are evident through important policy initiative, such as the NSHP of 2020, which outlines clear objectives and strategies to improve sanitation infrastructure and services.

Resolution 2:

STREAMLINE AND ALIGN THE DATA COLLECTION TOOLS, PROCESS AND APPROACHES OF KEY NATIONAL AND SUBNATIONAL SURVEYS SO THAT THEY TRACK PROGRESS ON WASH-RELATED SGDS.

Efforts to streamline and align data collection tools and processes for tracking WASH-related SDGs have been observed. Bhutan has integrated SDG indicators into its National Key Result Areas (NKRAs) and monitoring frameworks. (NKRAs are primary development guiding indicators that guide both policymakers and implementers to set and pursue national goals.) In the National Health Survey of 2023, the MoH undertook included the SDG indicators on WASH. And the Annual Health Survey the ministry carries out is one source of data on WASH in the country. This has enhanced the accuracy and efficiency of data collection. Continuous refinement of these processes will be essential to ensure a robust monitoring and evaluation.

While the outcomes might not be as expected and desired, concerted efforts, however, have been made to improve and streamline data collection to measure progress of activities under this declaration. For example, the MoH in partnership with UNICEF and SNV has been involved in conducting surveys and assessments to gather comprehensive data on WASH indicators. However, challenges remain in ensuring consistency and comprehensiveness in data collection methodologies. This has often led to incoherent planning and poor outcomes. As pointed out while evaluating the Resolution 1, the endorsement of the NHSP of 2020 and the subsequent development of the National Strategy for Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (NSWASH) indicate efforts towards aligning data collection with WASH-related SDGs. In the near future and long run, these policy and strategy frameworks are expected to guide and achieve the outcomes required by this resolution. Particularly on the data collection mechanisms to help track the progress on the WASH-related SDGs, the study PHED conducted provides valuable insights into the status of WASH in HCFs across Bhutan. By using structured questionnaires and conducting surveys in all district hospitals, Bhutan has made strides in collecting relevant data for future interventions, planning and decision making. At the national level, the Water and Sanitation System (WaSIS) to keep track of the progress in the sector has been developed.

Some specific and important initiatives the country undertook related to this Resolution is harmonising the monitoring information systems and indicators in line with international definitions. This is a notable effort indicating progress toward aligning data collection processes with WASH-related SDGs. This progress gains better credence and utility when backed by the country's emphasis on developing integrated national sanitation and hygiene information systems. It is a testament to the commitment to effective monitoring and evaluation of WASH initiatives. Though Bhutan has made commendable efforts under this Resolution, much is left to be desired, especially in terms of sectoral coordination in collecting and making use of data to track progress on WASH-related SDGs.

Resolution 3:

TO ENSURE NO ONE IS LEFT BEHIND BY GENERATING EVIDENCE TO UNDERSTAND INEQUALITIES IN ACCESS TO WASH, ESPECIALLY AROUND GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS, VULNERABLE GROUPS AND INCOME LEVELS; IMPROVED TARGETING OF THOSE LEAST SERVED; STRENGTHENING PARTICIPATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN COLLABORATION WITH SECTOR PARTNERS.

Bhutan has shown commitment to understanding and addressing inequalities in WASH access, particularly among vulnerable groups and in remote areas. The implementation of community-led approaches and targeted interventions has contributed to narrowing the gap in the areas the resolution covers. However, further strengthening of participation and accountability mechanisms is crucial for sustaining the progress in the areas. To ensure this, Bhutan has long acknowledged the importance of addressing inequalities in WASH access. That is why increased efforts have been made to target remote and disadvantaged communities and groups. For example, people with intellectual disability, hearing impairment, and caregivers are targeted making video spots and poster to educate them on WASH. However, disparities persist based on income, gender, disability, and geographic factors. These causal factors will continue to pose challenges to making access to quality WASH services encompassing given the infrastructural and implementation gaps.

Despite the challenges, Bhutan's focus on inclusive practices and evidence generation to understand inequalities aligns with SACOSAN VII commitments. The BFL project prioritized marginalized groups such as people with disabilities, women, and those living in poverty. Particularly, the country's focus on targeting vulnerable groups, including girls with disabilities, indicates efforts to ensure inclusivity in menstrual health (MH) and WASH initiatives, aligning with SACOSAN VII commitments to leave no one behind. The evidence to it is the emphasis the country puts on "Leave No One Behind and Post ODF strategy" which set the goal to achieve 100 percent improved sanitation by 2022. This reflected Bhutan's commitment to addressing emerging issues in ODF communities and ensuring sustained sanitation and hygiene practices for all. This neatly aligned with the Resolution's goal of leaving no one behind.

Similarly, Bhutan's focus on achieving ODF status across districts and gewogs indicates efforts to address inequalities in access to sanitation facilities. The National Toilet Guidelines of 2021 is in place; the Guidelines for making toilets and handwashing access easier for All in Rural Bhutan has been developed; and Do It Yourself (DIY) on accessible toilets educational materials have been distributed.

Achieving the 100 percent ODF is the outcome of this concerted efforts. While doing this, the involvement of community organizations and partnerships with civil society groups demonstrate a commitment to reaching vulnerable groups and geographically disadvantaged areas. For example, to meet Bhutan's deadline for the declaration of ODF in December 2022, local governments and Bhutan Toilet Organization worked together. The latter supplied and helped local government leaders expedite the construction of more than 1000 toilets using SATO pan technology. However, the potential in the collaboration between agencies concerned, especially government, international and non-governmental organizations, remain to be explored to the optimum.

In what could be an indication of opportunities for a sustained and progressive improvement in the WASH sector, there is the legal and policy framework that will support it. Reiterating, the enactment of the NSHP of 2020 speaks of Bhutan's recognition of importance to address inequalities in access to WASH facilities and services. The Policy emphasizes the need to achieve universal coverage and access to sustainable services for all, with specific provisions for vulnerable groups and remote geographical areas. The policy's focus on inclusive planning and coordination reflects Bhutan's commitment to 'leave no one behind in its WASH efforts'.

On an important social indicator of inequality, especially among vulnerable groups, the National Health Promotion Strategy plan 2015-2023 (NHPS) stresses on the efforts to strengthen participation and accountability and the need for inclusive policies and interventions to address disparities in access to healthcare services and nutrition. The importance of targeting vulnerable groups, such as adolescents, pregnant women, and children under five in health promotion efforts has gained traction in policy and strategy framing.

Upon acknowledging disparities in access to WASH facilities and services, particularly related to income, gender, disability, and geography, efforts have been made to debase this social and health inequity. But continuous attention and targeted interventions are required to ensure inclusivity. An example of a successful targeted intervention is the Red Dot campaign focusing on MHM for girls and women with disabilities. It has been a success, especially in schools and institutions. A knowledge booklet on menstrual hygiene is in place. Further, BTO has initiated an MHM-friendly toilet assessment to ensure toilets are safe for menstruating women. This reflects a commitment to understanding and addressing inequalities in WASH access, in line with SACOSAN's declaration. On the whole, Bhutan recognizes the importance of equity in WASH access, as highlighted in its commitment to addressing gender and inclusion disparities. Efforts to identify vulnerable groups and prioritize their needs align with SACOSAN's emphasis on reaching all segments of society. However, one important thing that emerges out of the assessment to ensure a sustained progress under this domain is the need to strike a desirable coordination between policy pronouncement and activity formulation and implementation.

Resolution 4:

CONSTRUCT STRUCTURED HUMAN RESOURCE CAPACITY ASSESSMENT FOLLOWED BY A ROADMAP FOR HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT FOR PUBLIC SECTOR, CIVIL SOCIETY, SERVICE PROVIDERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGED IN WASH.

Bhutan's agreement to construct a structured assessment of human resource capacity followed by a roadmap for development reflects its proactive approach to addressing workforce needs in the WASH sector. Collaboration between public sector entities, civil society, and service providers underscores the holistic nature of capacity-building efforts. The need for a structured human resource capacity assessment mentioned in the BFL project brief signifies the commitment to enhancing capacity building. Particularly, the involvement of stakeholders like Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) suggests a comprehensive approach.

The country's NHPSP 2015-2023 proposes a roadmap for human resource development in public health sectors, including training programs and capacity-building initiatives. This aligns with the goal of strengthening the workforce involved in implementing health promotion activities, including those related to water, sanitation, and road safety. This policy intervention and action testifies Bhutan's recognition of the importance of human resource and capacity development in the WASH sector—although challenges remain in the availability of skilled personnel.

Efforts to collaborate with technical training institutions and development partners are steps towards addressing this challenge. Beyond this, the NSHP of 2020 emphasizes the importance of capacity development at all levels with specific strategies to enhance skills and expertise among relevant agencies, local governments, and community-based organizations. However, further efforts are needed to ensure effective implementation of capacity development initiatives. On this commitment, the human resource capacity in the WASH sector remains a challenge in Bhutan. Despite government initiatives to allocate resources and prioritize capacity building, there is a mismatch between skills and market demand. Effective and well-planned collaboration with technical training institutions and development partners is essential to address this gap.

Resolution 5:

INTRODUCE ESSENTIAL SECTORAL REFORMS BASED ON COMPREHENSIVE LEGISLATIVE REVIEWS WITH SPECIFIC FOCUS ON REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS AND INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS INCLUDING ENHANCED INTER-MINISTERIAL COORDINATION FOR QUALITY SANITATION AND HYGIENE SERVICES.

Bhutan has long recognized the need for sectoral reforms to strengthen WASH governance and institutional frameworks. Following the recognition of the importance of an effective institutionalization of WASH governance, the country has initiated essential sectoral reforms, including legislative reviews and institutional enhancements to strengthen regulatory frameworks for sanitation and hygiene. Inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms have been bolstered, indicating concerted efforts to improve service quality and effectiveness. The continued focus on implementation and enforcement will be pivotal for a sustained impact.

Setting the legislative and policy environment for the WASH governance, the NHPSP 2015-2023 advocates for policy reforms and legislative reviews to improve regulatory frameworks and institutional arrangements in areas of water, sanitation, and road safety. It emphasizes the importance of inter-ministerial coordination for effective implementation of health promotion programs. Here, the focus on legislative reviews and institutional frameworks aligns with the SACOSAN's call for sectoral reforms. And Bhutan's commitment to enhancing regulatory frameworks indicates a proactive approach to improving WASH governance and service quality.

What looks promising is that Bhutan has anchored its need for sectoral reforms to improve sanitation and hygiene services to a national policy. The NSHP of 2020 reflects a commitment to institutionalize mechanisms for effective coordination and service delivery, with clear delineation of roles and responsibilities among relevant ministries, agencies, and local governments. One example of a sectoral reform that had a flight from a mere policy discourse is the delineation of mandates between relevant agencies and the establishment of a dedicated water agency. Progress in this area could enhance coordination and improve service provision in the WASH sector. However, ongoing efforts need to be more vigorous and sustainable to strengthen the inter-ministerial coordination and ensure alignment with the regulatory frameworks. For now, Bhutan's emphasis on institutional arrangements and enhanced inter-ministerial coordination shows its seriousness towards essential sectoral reforms that this Resolution requires.

On the operationalization and outcome front, the initiatives, such as the Red Bracelet Campaign and the Red Dot Campaign, are noticeable efforts to address menstrual health and WASH issues. Similarly, the country's work on waste segregation, disposal, and infection control demonstrates efforts towards sectoral reforms in healthcare waste management. The provision of separate waste containers and adherence to disposal protocols indicate progress in this area. Another sectoral reform activity is the Rural Sanitation and Hygiene Program (RSAHP) aimed to achieve total sanitation in rural communities through a community-led approach. The program represents efforts towards institutionalizing sustainable WASH systems.

The evaluation of initiatives and outcomes under this domain informs that reasonable progress has been made. It also indicates that sustained efforts need to be maintained to achieve desirable outcomes in the future. One particular issue that draws the attention is the need to ensure effective and horizontal policy coordination, program planning and implementation. The current initiatives and efforts bear the risk of getting derailed because of potential fissures in inter-institutional collaboration and policy-program disconnect.

Resolution 6:

DEVELOP EFFECTIVE FINANCIAL PLANNING AND REPORTING ON SANITATION AND HYGIENE RELATED INVESTMENTS TO ACHIEVE SDG RELATED TARGETS BY STRENGTHENING THE TRACKING AND MONITORING PROCESSES.

At least on the policy front, Bhutan has made some progress under this commitment. Apart from efforts to develop effective financial planning and reporting mechanisms for WASH-related investments, the country's emphasis on exploring innovative financing options and encouraging private sector participation demonstrates a commitment to mobilizing resources for sanitation and hygiene services. The NSHP of 2020 underscores the importance of sustainable financing mechanisms and calls for proper cost recovery mechanisms to meet operational expenditures. It testifies Bhutan's efforts to achieve SDG-related targets. Also, the NHPSP 2015-2023 stresses on the importance of financial planning and reporting for sanitation and hygiene investments. The plan emphasizes the need for innovative financing mechanisms to support health promotion efforts, including those related to water, sanitation, and road safety. It suggests strengthening tracking and monitoring processes to ensure accountability in financial planning and reporting.

As mentioned above, the efforts to develop effective financial planning and reporting mechanisms for sanitation and hygiene investments demonstrates Bhutan's commitment to achieving SDG-related targets. However, there is a need for an effective tracking and monitoring processes to ensure optimal utilization of resources and alignment with strategic objectives. While the financial planning and reporting mechanisms for sanitation and hygiene-related investments are being strengthened in Bhutan, challenges persist in resource allocation, sustainability, and the absence of standardized tariff regulations. A costed WASH plan is needed to achieve national and SDG targets effectively. And also there is a need to have specific and proper data on financial allocations. As one of the measures to address these pressing challenges, the subsidy-free and demand-driven approach of the RSAHP suggests a sustainable model that could contribute to effective financial planning for sanitation programs.

The progress under this Resolution appears minimal. But Bhutan's inclusion of financial planning in its WASH agenda resonates SACOSAN's emphasis on resource mobilization. As things stand, ensuring effective utilization of funds and transparent reporting mechanisms remain crucial for achieving SDG-related targets. The gist of the evaluation under this Resolution is that Bhutan continues to face challenges in WASH sector financing, including low priority for the sector and poor coordination during budget preparation. Efforts to explore proper cost recovery mechanisms and develop a costed WASH plan are steps towards addressing these challenges.

Resolution 1.

DEVELOP NATIONAL AND SUB NATIONAL ADVOCACY PLANS, STRATEGIES AND CAMPAIGNS THAT PROMOTE USE AND SUSTAINABILITY OF SANITATION SERVICES AS SOCIAL NORMS WITH ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF ALL.

Bhutan has recognized the importance of advocacy and social mobilization to promote the use and sustainability of sanitation services. The NSHP of 2020 outlines specific strategies for behavior change communication and community engagement. This policy statement reflects the country's commitment to fostering social norms on sanitation and hygiene practices. On the strategic approach, the NHPSP 2015-2023 highlights the significance of advocacy plans and campaigns to promote the use and sustainability of sanitation services, including healthy city initiatives. It emphasizes the need for an active engagement of all stakeholders to drive social norms around sanitation and hygiene. To achieve the desired outcomes, agencies concerned will have to double down the efforts to ensure full engagement of all stakeholders in advocacy and awareness campaigns. Stakeholder engagement and collaboration are key aspects of these initiatives, aimed at influencing social norms and behaviors. This inclusive approach is crucial to ensure the sustainability of WASH interventions. The emphasis on advocacy plans to promote sanitation as a social norm resonates with SACOSAN's goal of fostering behavioral change, which in turn aligns with SACOSAN VII declaration. The engagement of civil society organizations and community participation underscores the importance placed on promoting social norms.

Some specific activities undertaken to address this Resolution include menstrual health advocacy through campaigns and collaborations with various stakeholders. This demonstrates efforts to promote social norms in line with SACOSAN VII objectives; the country's commitment and achievement of making it ODF with access to improved sanitation by 2022 reflects a strong advocacy for improved sanitation facilities and hygiene practices at the national level; and the Red Dot campaign is in line with the need for advocacy plans outlined in SACOSAN VII. Further, district-wise rural and sanitation hygiene multi-stakeholder review meetings have been held and strategies developed. The annual observation of World Toilet Day, Global Handwashing Day and Menstrual Health and Hygiene Day add to the list of abovementioned advocacy and strategic planning efforts.

At the national policy and planning level, Bhutan has prioritized the WASH sector, as evidenced by government messages and inclusion of WASH components in the 12th Five Year Plan (2018-23). This is an evidence to the national commitment to promoting sanitation services as social norms and ensuring sustained progress in the sector. However, there is a mismatch between policy, planning and activity framing and implementation. Effective sub-national advocacy plans, strategies and campaigns need to be strengthened. The level of CSOs and community engagement in the venture should be improved, while the private engagement could be introduced and increased.

Resolution 8:

PRIORITIZE WASH IN INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS, ESPECIALLY ACCESSIBLE WASH IN SCHOOLS, HEALTH CARE FACILITIES AND PUBLIC PLACES INCLUDING SENSITIZATION AND PROVISION FOR MENSTRUAL HYGIENE MANAGEMENT.

Bhutan's efforts to prioritize WASH in institutional settings, particularly in schools, healthcare facilities, and public places reflects its commitment to ensuring universal access to sanitation and hygiene services. Sensitization and provision for menstrual hygiene management are notable initiatives contributing to improved health outcomes and gender equality. BFL project's interventions in the area is a significant initiative. The emphasis on menstrual hygiene management and accessible WASH facilities aligns with SACOSAN VII resolutions. Several projects aimed at improving the access to sanitation facilities, with a focus on menstrual hygiene management and sensitization efforts had been initiated. One particular activity was the focus to provide female-friendly toilets and menstrual education in schools. According to BTO, in schools fifteen girl students have access to a unit of toilet, while 40 boys have to use one unit of it. Backing this claim, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and its partners (UNICEF and Save the Children), since 2019, BTO upgraded over 3,000 units of outdated school toilets (which had exposed septic pits) using a Japanese SATO pan to make them clean, safe, and odor-free. Having covered the entire country in the last five years, BTO now anticipate a major shift towards setting new standards for school toilets.

At the broader national level, Bhutan's emphasis on improving water quantity, quality, sanitation access, and waste management in HCFs indicates a prioritization of WASH in institutional settings. MoIT has developed WASH in Health Care Facility Strategy of 2022 and carried out assessment on WASH using WASH FIT (Facility Improvement Tool). This will be supported by the National Standard for WASH in Health Care Facilities which the Bhutan Standard Bureau (BSB) is developing.

The NSHP of 2020 underscores the importance of providing adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities in institutional settings, with specific provisions for menstrual hygiene management. This is a clear recognition of the importance of promoting health and well-being in institutions. Stressing the importance of WASH facilities in institutional settings, the NHPS 2015-2023 calls for sensitization and provision for menstrual hygiene management to ensure health and well-being of all individuals. Prioritizing sanitation and hygiene in institutional settings and rural communities, much efforts were made to achieve ODF in gewogs and dzongkhags. And efforts to provide 24x7 safe drinking water through government flagship programs show the commitment to improving accessibility and sustainability of WASH services in institutions. However, as water is fundamental to WASH services, the provision of uninterrupted around-the-clock water supply is a challenge, especially during the dry seasons. This compromises the quality of sanitation and hygiene.

Overall, under this domain Bhutan's focus on WASH in healthcare facilities underscores the importance of addressing sanitation needs in institutional settings, aligning with SACOSAN's priorities. As in many of other domains, though there are good policy arrangements in place, not much concrete activities have been carried out. It calls for a stakeholder-wide approach of review and implementation. Since schools are micro entities, a proper coordination could bring about better results under this Resolution.

Resolution 9.

COLLABORATE TO STRENGTHEN KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND LEARNING ON SANITATION AND HYGIENE AT REGIONAL, NATIONAL AND SUB-NATIONAL LEVELS THROUGH TRAINING CENTERS AND NETWORKS.

In any important work, policy framework and commitment are the foundation. At least in policy, Bhutan is clear about the importance of strengthening the WASH sector to enhance sanitation and hygiene of the people. That is why in policy, Bhutan has demonstrated a commitment to strengthening knowledge management and learning on sanitation and hygiene through collaborative efforts at regional, national, and sub-national levels. The NSHP of 2020 emphasizes the importance of capacity building and collaboration with research institutions and universities to enhance skills and knowledge in the sanitation and hygiene sector. The efforts to establish training centers and networks reflect a recognition of the importance of continuous learning and knowledge sharing in WASH initiatives.

The same emphasis is stressed by the NHPSP 2015-2023 adding an important component of capacity building. Though it indicates efforts to strengthen knowledge management and learning at various levels, much has been limited to policy and planning not much of implementation. However, not to discount some collaborations with training centers and networks which have facilitated knowledge sharing and capacity development, fostering innovation and best practices in the WASH sector. For example, the Post ODF strategy and the involvement of partner agencies like SNV in developing and strengthening WASH systems indicate a focus on knowledge sharing and learning from past experiences to sustain sanitation achievements. However, regarding the strengthening of training centers and networks at the national and sub-national level, the evaluation informs that not much has been done save the establishment of B-WASH clusters. This can be leveraged better to meet the declaration's objectives.

At CSOs level, since 2019 BTO has hosted the Freshwater Action Network of South Asia (FANSA) Bhutan Chapter. It gives the regional body secretarial support to implement WASH-related activities and projects. And BTO is implementing the project 'Rising for Rights for Strengthening Civil Society Network in South Asia to achieve SDG 6', funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation through the FANSA regional network. This network and collaboration that BTO is managing can be used as a launchpad by Bhutan's relevant stakeholders and partners in the WASH sector to deepen and broaden the knowledge and scope in the area. The government could give appropriate support to government institutions and CSOs engaged in the field.

One good thing that unambiguously emerges out of the review is that Bhutan has acknowledged the importance of an effective knowledge management and utilization to improve WASH activities' impact and outcome. Particularly, its collaboration to strengthen knowledge management aligns with SACOSAN's emphasis on learning and capacity building. Establishing training centers and networks can facilitate knowledge sharing and best practice dissemination in the region. But as things stand, achievements is far short of the commitment.

Resolution 10:

SUPPORT CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION AND EXPLORE FINANCING TO PROMOTE CLIMATE RESILIENT SANITATION AND HYGIENE TECHNOLOGIES AND BEHAVIORS IN GENERAL AND AT-RISK COMMUNITIES IN PARTICULAR.

As a policy initiative, Bhutan has recognized the importance of climate change adaptation in promoting climate-resilient sanitation and hygiene technologies and behaviors. The NSHP of 2020 underscores the need to explore financing options to support climate-resilient WASH initiatives. This reflects the country's commitment to addressing climate change impacts on water and sanitation services. Further, the efforts to integrate disaster resilience and sustainability considerations into WASH planning and implementation demonstrate a proactive approach to climate change adaptation in this domain. Focusing on at-risk communities the NHPSP 2015-2023 suggests exploring financing options to support climate change adaptation efforts related to WASH and road safety.

Bhutan's vulnerability to climate change underscores the importance of promoting climate-resilient WASH technologies. There already is the National Guidelines for Sanitation Technology of 2023, which was developed to assist in selecting the best solutions for on and off-site sewage management technology and to provide quick guidance to sanitation planners. This can be leveraged to adopt and promote climate smart sanitation facilities. To ensure sanitation with a minimal use of water, ecological sanitation is being considered as one of the toilet options. Integrating adaptation measures into WASH planning can enhance the resilience of communities, aligning with SACOSAN's objectives. However, further exploration of financing mechanisms and collaborative initiatives will be essential for scaling up climate resilience efforts.

Though Bhutan's exploration of financing to promote climate-resilient sanitation and hygiene technologies aligns with SACOSAN VII recommendations, but there are no any concrete actions taken and desired outcomes visible at the national level. Policy pronouncement and intent of expression of commitment are forward-looking but are hugely short of implementation. The only action that is directly relevant to this Resolution is Bhutan Toilet Organization's collaboration with the Religion and Health Project (RHP) under Zhung Dratshang/Central Monastic Body. The project upgraded 'the pit latrines and aqua-privy toilets to safe pour-flush toilet using SATO pan' (it is considered climate smart technology) in the monasteries. This has improved the health, hygiene and sanitation of monks. Moving forward, SATO technology that BTO is promoting holds a future to ensure climate-smart toilets. The technology has been used to construct clean toilets at public events, camps and construction site. Similarly, the piloting of Johkasou tanks to build toilets has helped reduce wastewater dumping and leakage into water bodies. Initial reports suggest that this technology not only can help adapt to climate change but also mitigate its adverse impact on the WASH sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** Enhanced data collection and monitoring: Bhutan needs to step up efforts to improve and streamline data collection methodologies and ensure consistency and comprehensiveness in tracking WASH-related indicators. Regular monitoring and evaluation are essential to assess progress accurately and identify areas that need interventions.
- 2** Addressing inequalities: Prioritize and increase efforts to address inequalities in WASH access, particularly among vulnerable groups and in remote areas. Strengthening participation and accountability mechanisms and targeting marginalized communities will be crucial for achieving equitable outcomes.
- 3** Capacity building: Need to invest more in human resource and capacity building to bridge the skills gap in the WASH sector. Collaboration with education and training institutions and development partners should be intensified to ensure a skilled workforce capable of driving sustainable WASH initiatives.
- 4** Sectoral reforms: Continue efforts toward sectoral reforms, including legislative reviews and institutional enhancements, to strengthen regulatory frameworks for sanitation and hygiene. The clarity on what kind of legislation and legislative review should be undertaken need to be established through a rigorous exercise to ensure better implementation outcomes. Focus on implementation and enforcement to ensure effective service delivery and compliance with standards.
- 5** Financial planning and reporting: Develop a costed-WASH plan to guide resource allocation effectively and ensure alignment with national and SDG targets. Strengthen tracking and monitoring processes for sanitation and hygiene investments to optimize resource utilization. Since budgetary constraints prevent government from allocating adequate financial resources for the WASH sector, it could ease and aid raising funding for WASH activities by relevant Civil Society Organizations.
- 6** Advocacy and community engagement: Continue to develop and implement advocacy plans and campaigns to promote sanitation services as social norms. Foster stakeholder engagement and community participation to drive behavioral change and ensure the sustainability of WASH interventions. Increase the engagement of civil society organizations and media to carry out this function. Engaging journalism such as WASH reporting grant by Bhutan Media Foundation is a good example of bringing journalists onboard to promote and strengthen the WASH cause.

- 7 Prioritizing WASH in institutional settings: Maintain focus on prioritizing WASH in institutional settings, including schools, healthcare facilities, and public places. Ensure provision for menstrual hygiene management and accessibility to sanitation facilities to improve health outcomes and promote gender equality. Institutions concerned need to improve their level of cooperation in their collaborative initiatives.
- 8 Strengthening knowledge management: This domain is one of the weakest linkages in the WASH sector. Need to strengthen the knowledge management and learning on sanitation and hygiene by fostering collaboration with training centers and networks. Promote innovation and best practices to drive continuous improvement in the sector.
- 9 Supporting climate change adaptation: The real danger of climate change to the WASH sector remains underestimated in public's thinking and education. There needs to be more targeted efforts in advocating and educating the people about this adverse impact on their personal health and well-being. In general, scale up efforts to support climate change adaptation in promoting climate-resilient sanitation and hygiene technologies. Explore financing mechanisms and collaborative initiatives to mitigate risks and ensure sustainable WASH practices in the face of climate challenges.

CONCLUSION

Bhutan's commitment to advancing sanitation and hygiene, aligned with the SACOSAN VII declaration, has yielded a good progress marked by proactive policies, multi-sectoral collaboration, and community-driven initiatives. Despite notable achievements in rural sanitation and hygiene, challenges persist, demanding sustained efforts and strategic interventions. To respond to this, a good policy environment needs to be backed up by proper planning, programing and implementation through inter-institutional collaboration.

While Bhutan has attained ODF status across districts and gewogs, addressing inequalities in WASH access, especially among vulnerable groups and in remote areas, remains a priority and a challenge. Targeted interventions and enhanced monitoring mechanisms are crucial to ensure equitable access to sanitation and hygiene services for all segments of society. Efforts to streamline data collection tools and integrate SDG indicators into national frameworks signify progress in monitoring WASH-related progress. However, continuous refinement and improvement are needed to enhance the accuracy and comprehensiveness of WASH-related data. This will enable better tracking of progress and informed decision-making.

Human resource capacity gaps pose a challenge to sustaining WASH interventions. Bridging these gaps through collaborative efforts between public sector entities, civil society, and training institutions is essential for effective implementation of WASH initiatives at all levels. Sectoral reforms, including legislative reviews and institutional enhancements, are imperative to strengthen regulatory frameworks and improve WASH services quality. Continued advocacy efforts, community engagement, and prioritization of WASH in institutional settings are vital for promoting behavioral change and ensuring sustainable practices. While efforts have been made, achievements are not as desired.

Supporting climate change adaptation in promoting climate-resilient sanitation and hygiene technologies is crucial amid raging environmental challenges. Exploring financing mechanisms and collaborative initiatives to scale up climate resilience efforts will mitigate risks and ensure the sustainability of WASH practices. Proper and effective planning and coordination in this area is still lacking.

Though Bhutan has made notable strides in advancing sanitation and hygiene, yet achieving universal access demands sustained commitment, innovation, and collaboration. Addressing existing challenges and implementing recommended actions will accelerate progress towards SDG targets. It will enhance health and well-being of Bhutan's population through improved access to sanitation and hygiene services. To achieve this, the current forward-looking and promising WASH policy paradigm needs to be leveraged. Otherwise, the risk of it remaining just as a policy pronouncement is high and real.

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ANNEXURE

SEVENTH SOUTH ASIAN CONFERENCE ON SANITATION 11th -13th April 2018 Islamabad.

SACOSAN-VII Declaration

We, the Heads of Delegations from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka participating in the 7th South Asian Conference on Sanitation, (SACOSAN.VI) In Islamabad, Pakistan in April 2018.

1. Realizing that safely managed drinking water and sanitation services are basic rights of every person and poor access to safely managed sanitation services and hygiene is a leading cause of preventable disease and stunting.
2. Appreciating SACOSAN member states for integrating sustainable development goals (SOGs) into national development agendas.
3. Recognizing that significant progress has been made towards reducing open defecation in the region, and growing attention is being given towards building sustainable and safely managed sanitation systems and hygiene behaviours.
4. Understanding that South Asia is home to many of the world's most rapidly urbanizing areas presenting challenges in service provision but also real economies of scale in serving densely inhabited areas.
5. Reaffirming all SACOSAN commitments made between 2003 and 2016, and reiterating our call for joint actions and learning through SACOSAN being anon. partisan forum, so that all South Asians may enjoy safe and adequate sanitation and hygiene

SACOSAN VII unanimously resolves and commits to:

1. Establish baselines and WASH Targets for SDG-6.1 & 6.2 including the elimination of open defecation and progress towards universal basic and safely managed sanitation services and hygiene. All countries in the region should review and align their national and sub national policies/strategies with safely managed sanitation services and hygiene as outlined in SDGs.
2. Streamline and align the data collection tools, processes and approaches of key national and sub national surveys so that they track progress on WASH related SDGs.
3. To ensure no one is left behind by: generating evidence to understand inequalities in access to wash especially around geographical areas, vulnerable groups and income levels, improved targeting of those least served, strengthening participation and accountability in collaboration with sector partners.
4. Conduct structured human resource capacity assessment followed by a roadmap for human resource development for public sector, civil society, service providers and other stakeholders engaged in WASH.
5. Introduce essential sectoral reforms based on comprehensive legislative reviews with a specific focus on regulatory frameworks and institutional arrangements including enhanced inter-ministerial coordination for quality sanitation and hygiene services.
6. Develop effective financial planning and reporting on sanitation and hygiene related investments to achieve SD related targets by strengthening the tracking and monitoring processes.
7. Develop national and sub national advocacy plans, strategies and campaigns that promote use and sustainability of sanitation services as social norms with the active engagement of all.
8. Prioritize WASH in institutional settings especially accessible WASH in schools, health care facilities and public places including sensitisation and provision for menstrual Hygiene management.
9. Collaborate to strengthen knowledge management and learning on sanitation and hygiene at regional, national and sub-national levels through training centres and networks.
10. Support climate change adaptation and explore financing to promote climate resilient sanitation and hygiene technologies in and behaviours in general and in at risk communities in particular.

End of the Report
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