

A situation analysis of
Children & Women in BHUTAN
2006

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2006

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Preface

This Situation Analysis was undertaken by the National Commission for Women and Children with support from UNICEF to provide a basis on which to construct Bhutan's periodic report to the CRC Committee due in 2006.

This report will also form the basis for UNICEF's next country program cycle: 2007-2011. It has two main sources. First, discussions with representatives of the Royal Government of Bhutan and those of UN and other international agencies – combined with some of their major reports and surveys. Second, an extensive process of consultation with ordinary families, and those who meet them in the course of their daily work – teachers, health workers, community leaders and government officials – in all regions of the country.

The body of the text reflects the priorities and views expressed during all these

consultations, underpinned by the formal documentation and other sources cited in the text. Further information that emerged during the country-wide consultations has also been incorporated in numerous boxes throughout the report. This report reflects the situation in Bhutan early in 2005. Inevitably it will be overtaken by events, but we hope it will at least offer a useful snapshot of a complex and fast changing country.

Our thanks to everyone who gave so generously of their time in helping to prepare this assessment – especially the women and children of Bhutan.

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Country Profile

Bhutan Basic Data Table

Country profile indicators

1. Total population (2005).....	672,425
2. Total population of children (0-18 years, 2005)	271,607
3. Total population of youth (15-24 years, 2005)	145,810
2. Total area (2005).....	38,394 sq. km
3. Annual population growth rate (natural increase).....	1.3 %
4. Estimated urban population (2005).....	30.9%
5. Total number of live births (last 1 year).....	12,538
6. Total number of Deaths (last 1 year).....	4,498
7. Crude birth rate (per 1,000 population).....	20
8. Crude death rate (per 1,000 population).....	7
9. Child Mortality rate (per 1000 live births).....	61.6
10. Infant Mortality rate (per 1000 live births).....	40.1
11. Total Fertility rate.....	2.6
12. Life expectancy at birth: male/female (2005).....	66 / 66 years
13. Age structure (estimated % of population, (2005))	
0-14 years.....	33.1%
15-64.....	62.3%
65+.....	4.7%
14. Overall sex ratio.....	111 males (per 100 females)
15. Population density.....	16 (persons per sq. km)
16. Child dependency ratio.....	53.1 %
17. Deliveries attended by health professionals (last 1 year).....	49.1%
18. Deliveries NOT attended by health professionals (last 1 year).....	50.9 %
19. Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR).....	255 per 100,000 live births
20. Immunization coverage: BCG/OPV/DPT3/measles (2005).....	93% 96%/ 95% / 88%
21. Adult literacy rate (Calculated from Bhutan Nat. Pop. Census 2005).....	52.8 % (M-65%; F-38.7%)
22. Primary Net Enrolment Ratio total/boys/girl.....	79%/ 80%/ 79%
23. Proportion of girls among primary students (2005).....	48.5 %
24. Completion rate for primary education (MoE2005) total.....	85.8%
25. GDP per capita (NSB2005).....	US \$834

Source: Fact Sheet, Population and Housing Census of Bhutan, 2005, Office of the Census Commissioner, RGOB; PPD, MoE 2006

Executive Summary

Bhutan has steadily been opening up to the outside world and investing in human development, while preserving its core traditions. This has resulted in some striking improvements in people's lives, though there are still many urgent tasks in health and education. The next stage in the country's development can involve greater participation – allowing women and children to develop and express their views and thus become more active and discerning citizens.

Bhutan's unique development path has been determined to a significant extent by its geographical location and by its rugged and precipitous terrain. This has obliged people to settle wherever they can find usable land and, as a result, they are very scattered: more than half the population must walk more than half a day to reach the nearest road. Nevertheless, a committed Government under the guidance of His Majesty the King has extended an impressive range of public services across this spectacular landscape.

Living longer, living better

Some of the most striking improvements have been in health. Between 1960 and 2005, life expectancy rose from 37 years to 66 years, while infant mortality fell from 203 deaths per thousand live births to 40.1. These gains are primarily the result of basic preventive and curative health services – which now cover around 90% of the population – complemented by better water supplies and sanitation.

Too many lives lost

Nevertheless, there are still significant health problems: many women and children are still dying unnecessarily. For infants, while pneumonia is the major killer, thousands are still dying from diarrhoea, and a high proportion of these deaths are in the first weeks of life. Bhutan also still has disturbingly high levels of protein-energy malnutrition: many children are stunted or underweight or lack vital micronutrients – becoming malnourished even in the womb, or being fed inadequately during the first years of life.

The risks of motherhood

Many women are also dying as a result of childbirth: for every hundred thousand live births there are 255 maternal deaths – all of which are preventable. The best solution would be for all mothers to give birth in a basic health units (BHUs) or in a hospital – linked to emergency obstetric care centres. At present, however, around 80% of deliveries happen at home. Moving to institutional delivery will mean spelling out to families the risks associated with childbirth, explaining the medical interventions that can save mothers, and encouraging them to come to the facility early. At the same time, the Government will also need to ensure that the BHUs and hospitals are indeed fully prepared to receive women – and can offer them a safe, warm and comfortable environment. Improving ante-natal care will also be important – to improve the health of the mothers and the unborn children and also to familiarize the mothers with the available services so that they are more likely to give birth at the BHU or a hospital.

Averting a HIV/AIDS epidemic

Another major health hazard is HIV/AIDS. HIV prevalence is still probably below 0.1%, so Bhutan still has the opportunity to avert a full-scale epidemic. But it will need to act decisively as the country has a number of major risk factors: high rates of casual sex; porous borders, increasing international travel, rising drug abuse and very low condom use. Since the main mode of transmission is heterosexual sex, virtually the whole sexually active population is at risk. However, the immediate priority should be to focus on truck stops and other places with high rates of casual sex.

An educated generation

Over four decades, Bhutan has been extending its system of basic schooling in a flexible and innovative fashion – through primary schools and community schools, often with boarding facilities, as well as through monasteries which still provide residential instruction and religious education for around 15% of children. There is, however, still a long way to go before every Bhutanese child receives a high quality education. Net primary school enrolment is 79.4% ; around one-third of children receive no schooling at all, and those who do attend school may start late and have to repeat classes. At present, more than half the population cannot read or write.

One of the main obstacles to schooling appears to be poverty. Many parents say they cannot afford to send their children to school, or need them to stay at home and work. In principle, education is free. But in fact it does cost money. One UNICEF survey concluded that over a six-month period parents were paying an average of Nu. 1,729 per pupil – for uniforms, school feeding, fees and other contributions. The need to obtain a ‘security clearance’ and the delay and difficulty in obtaining one is reported as a major problem, particularly for children in the south.

Bhutan has not made primary education compulsory, since schools have often been far from home. But with many more schools now available, the Government should be able to phase in compulsory education in areas where all children have a school within a reasonable distance – a walk of one and a half hours. Secondary education depends on the availability of places – which are only sufficient for around 30% of children graduating from Class X.

Sending girls to school

Bhutan is close to achieving the MDG objective of eliminating gender disparities in education. The primary net enrolment ratio is 80% for boys and 79% for girls . When it comes to secondary school, though there has been a significant drop in the gender gap, the national population and housing census of Bhutan 2005 has shown

that the proportion of females after Class X decreases significantly,.

Parents typically fail to enroll girls for secondary education because they want them to help at home. But they may also be concerned about their daughters’ security since the secondary school will usually be further away. Moreover, while parents are convinced of the value of education many still believe that boys should get preference because girls will be ultimately looked after by their husbands. Girls themselves may reinforce these traditional attitudes, somehow feeling inferior to boys and not believing in themselves sufficiently to study hard.

Friendlier education

Girls and boys are more likely to stay in school if the education system engages their interest and enthusiasm. Education in Bhutan is still largely a one-way process; teachers transmit information to their pupils and do not invite them to challenge them or to be creative or to solve problems. As well as needing the skills to create a stimulating learning environment, teachers also often have to teach multiple grades in the same room – for which they will need more specialised training. Monastery education too needs improvement: the curriculum is narrow, living conditions are generally poor, and discipline is strict. Many of the young monks do not wash or bathe regularly, and suffer from a range of diseases.

Getting an early start

If children are to grow up with an appetite for learning they need to be stimulated from an early age. Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) encompasses all aspects of a child’s life, including nutrition, health, psychosocial development and the multiple interactions that young children have with the wider community. ECCD programmes could, for example, encourage parents to feed children more appropriately, set aside time to play with them and generally help them develop their cognitive, language, social, emotional and motor skills. Where possible, this can be supplemented through nursery and pre-primary schools.

An alternative schooling channel

Those who miss primary education or who drop out early can attend non-formal education (NFE) classes. Bhutan at present NFE offers classes to around 16,000 learners of whom around two-thirds are female; they are also supposed to be 15 years or older though some have been as young as seven. Teaching methods in NFE classes also need to be improved. The quality is very uneven and instruction is even less interactive than that in the formal schools. It should, however, be possible to make non-formal education more interesting and productive. The NFE system should be able to provide more vocational training for some pupils while offering others the ability to transfer more easily to formal schools. NFE could also be used as a springboard from which to start credit or savings groups and generally enhance women's role in community affairs.

Learning for life

Education is of course a basic right in itself. But for the country as a whole it also provides the next generation of workers. At present with high levels of youth unemployment, there is a danger that today's school leavers will remain dissatisfied and resentful. Bhutan still needs to educate children who will be able to work as productive farmers and others who will take administrative or clerical jobs. But it also needs more people with enquiring minds and the skills that will enable them not just to occupy jobs but also create them.

New risks for children

Bhutanese children have traditionally been able to rely on the protection of their parents and their extended families. But modernization and urbanization have brought new responsibilities and risks. The extended family is becoming more extended spatially – and eroding some of the children's traditional layers of protection. Under the stresses of daily life; separation and divorce are becoming more common and creating difficulties for children.

Violence against children

Tensions within families, frequently fuelled by alcohol, can lead to domestic violence. In the past, such events remained largely hidden or were tolerated as part of normal life. Young women and children may also be subject to sexual abuse within the home. Some of this can take place under the guise of the traditional form of courtship known as 'night hunting', which involves a young man secretly entering the home of a young woman to have sex.

Many children are also subject to corporal punishment. This is now banned in schools but older teachers find it difficult to change their ways. Parents too are resistant: having traditionally chastised their children by slapping, cuffing or beating them they may request that teachers continue with this form of discipline. Children in monasteries are also subject to rigorous corporal punishment. Eliminating such treatment completely will mean convincing both parents and educators that there are better alternatives.

Drug abuse and crime

Bhutanese parents have become increasingly concerned about substance abuse by their children. Primarily this concerns drinking alcohol, sniffing glue or correction fluid, or smoking marijuana – along with some abuse of prescription drugs or injection of heroin. There are also concerns about a rise in youth crime. Although there is certainly crime in the rural areas the highest rates appear to be in the urban areas where there is greater social dislocation and more temptations.

Child work

The Government is addressing child labour through a new Labour and Employment Act, but it could also reduce it by enforcing compulsory primary education.

Although Bhutan is not a member of the ILO and has not ratified any of the major labour conventions, including ones related to child labour, the Government is addressing child labour through a new Labour and Employment

Act, but it could also reduce it by enforcing compulsory primary education. This new act should clarify that work done by a child under 18 who is not a member of the immediate family constitutes employment, whether the child is paid or not. Following up on such legislation, will require an effective system of labour inspection, which Bhutan is only starting to develop.

A priority for protection

In the years ahead, Bhutan will need to encourage the health and education systems to broaden the scope of their care for children, while also creating new social services, either through the state or NGOs, to which women and children can turn at times of distress. People will also need a better understanding of what constitutes 'abuse', 'domestic violence' and 'sexual exploitation'. This will require a process of sensitization and education involving educators and the media – and women and youth themselves.

Bhutan is in a strong position to offer protection. Families tend to be large and their ties are close. The state too takes its responsibilities seriously. In 1990 Bhutan was one of the first governments to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) without reservations. Bhutan's concern for children has also been reflected in its establishment of the National Commission for Women and Children with the mandate to promote and protect the rights of women and children.

Further progress could be seen if Bhutan were to ratify human rights conventions on civil and political rights; and on economic, social and cultural rights. One area of concern stemming from this is that registration of births is not universal and is carried out principally by Health Workers. This needs to be incorporated into a Civil Registration programme that is able to systematically register all births in Bhutan.

Wider horizons for Bhutan's children

Over the past two decades Bhutan has tried to

place the well-being of children and women at the centre of social development policy. The new task is to widen the scope of development policies and programmes in relation to children, and in particular in relation to adolescents between 12 and 18.

For basic health, education, early childhood development, water supply and environmental sanitation, fulfilling these rights will mean extending services and eventually covering all Bhutanese children and families. Bhutan is already committed to these goals, but some populations have so far been relatively neglected – such as young monks, disabled children, those living away from home, and those in ethnic minorities – whose inclusion and coverage requires special initiatives.

Bhutan also needs to respond to new sources of childhood vulnerability – including rural-urban migration, social and economic mobility, the dispersal and fragmentation of families, the pressure of qualified young people on scarce jobs, and the growth of consumer tastes and desires. Protection measures need to be underpinned by law, but laws and regulations on their own will rarely suffice. They will not bring about the behavioural and attitudinal changes needed to end such practices. What is required also is a sensitization of opinion.

At present, Bhutan has few forums for building such awareness – lacking well-established community associations or networks of NGOs. With the institution of the Constitution in 2008, Bhutan has an opportunity to further advance democratization, and at the same time it can promote networks of organizations for youth and for women. Such networks could provide forums for the discussion of sensitive issues and serve as starting points for systems of protection. In addition they would enable youth to develop their capacities for civic responsibility and leadership. In this sense, child participation and child protection are two sides of a coin.

The key is participation – allowing women and children to develop and express their views and thus become active citizens and discerning users of services. This will take time, but with the creation of the National Commission for Women and Children the opportunity is now at hand.



The Bhutanese are proud that they have greater gender equality than other societies in the region

Bhutan's unique development path

Determined to control its own destiny, Bhutan has been setting a distinctive course in the pursuit of Gross National Happiness. And it has done so with considerable skill – steadily opening up to the outside world over recent decades, while preserving its core traditions and essential character. Throughout this period, the people of Bhutan have benefited from the inspired leadership of their King, but as they embrace a new constitution and a broader democracy they will find themselves entering a more complex and demanding era.

Bhutan is one of the world's most striking countries. Geographically it is dramatic. Snow-capped peaks line the horizon, while the mountains and hills overshadow steep gorges through which rush myriad streams and rivers. Just as impressive are the human imprints on this dramatic landscape. Buddhist monks have sought isolation by siting temples and monasteries on steep mountainsides and in remote places. Across the precipitous slopes of the lower Himalayas, generations of farmers have carved terraces to create cascades of orchards, vegetable plots, wheat-fields and glistening rice paddies. In valleys and on hillsides, the main human settlements are dominated by majestic dzongs: traditional fortresses built on spurs of rock visible for miles in several directions. Even private houses still preserve most of their traditional structures and decorate their wooden frameworks with elaborate painted designs.

The Bhutanese people too, remain distinctive not just in their rich and diverse culture and institutions but also in the pace with which they are adapting to rapid social change, as they modernize their society and extend and deepen their relationship with the outside world. This has enabled them to make striking progress in human development – raising incomes and boosting standards of health and education. Nevertheless they have a long way to go. Modern development of any kind only began here in the 1960s and Bhutan remains a very poor country: about half of the adult population are illiterate and one-third of children

are malnourished. Many people still have very limited opportunities, particularly those living in scattered and isolated communities who have to make long treks even to reach a motorable road.

A resolutely independent nation

Bhutan's unique development path has been shaped to a significant extent by its geographical location. This small, mountainous country occupies a niche between the world's two most populous countries – China and India – and has always been determined to retain its independence. For three centuries, following the unification of the country in the 17th Century, it protected national sovereignty through warfare and by a deliberate policy of isolation – taking advantage of the country's inaccessibility and the difficult terrain to keep most potential invaders at bay. It also made good use of international diplomacy: in the early 20th Century Bhutan signed a treaty with the British who agreed to offer foreign policy advice while not interfering in the country's internal affairs. In 1949 Bhutan signed a similar treaty with independent India.

By the early 1960s, however, it had become evident that Bhutan would have to complement its close relations with India with a stronger presence on the international stage. Bhutan

joined the United Nations in 1971 and established relationship links with other international organizations, notably the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank. It has also cultivated close relations with a number of smaller European countries including Austria, Switzerland, Denmark and the Netherlands, from which it has received significant bilateral aid.

Modern development in Bhutan is thus a relatively recent affair. It is only since the 1960s that Bhutan has the trappings of a modern society, with motorable roads, a currency, some basic industry and modern education and health services. Even television only appeared in 1999.

Momentum for democracy

Bhutan has also been going through a steady process of democratization and decentralization. Bhutan's monarchy was established in 1907 when the civil and religious leaders declared their allegiance to the first king, Sir Ugyen Wangchuck and his heirs. Since then Bhutan has had four monarchs. It was the third King, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, who started to open up the political system when in 1953 he established a National Assembly – and later a Royal Advisory Council and a Council of Ministers. His son, the fourth and present monarch, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, gave the process even greater momentum when from 1981 he promoted decentralization. Then in 1998 the King transferred full executive power to a Cabinet of Ministers. Most recently, early in 2005 he took another decisive step when he presented a new Constitution that will lead to the establishment of a parliamentary democracy.

Ethnic groups

One of the aims of this new Constitution is to preserve national integrity while accommodating ethnic diversity. In 2005 there were 672,425 people in Bhutan, who may speak any one of 19 languages. Their ethnic composition can be profiled in a number of different ways, but probably the simplest is to divide the population into groups such as Ngalops, Sharchops, and Lhotsampas. But over the years, with increasing intermarriages coupled with cross mi-

gration and settlements, this distinction is becoming less pronounced.

Bhutan's cultural identity is deeply rooted in Buddhism. The country was united in the 17th century under the rule of a powerful Tibetan lama, who fled into exile as a result of a disputed succession to his father's seat of power. Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel consolidated his hold over Bhutan's different regions by constructing dzongs and repelling armed invasions from the north. Serving as both a religious and political leader, he not only helped shape the distinctive Bhutanese form of Buddhism but also established many cultural practices including the national dress and the tsechu festivals. Today's King carries out the temporal functions of government as head of state, while the Je Khenpo, the head of the state-backed Monk Body, is the spiritual leader. The leadership has thus been divided since the advent of monarchy in 1907. But the close relationship between Buddhism and the state lives on – physically embodied in the imposing dzongs that serve as district headquarters for both civic and religious administrations, containing within one set of fortified walls the governmental offices, the royal court of justice, temples and monastic bodies.

Bhutan has in earlier centuries defended its independence through warfare and diplomacy. More recently it has also aimed to protect national sovereignty by asserting its cultural identity and establishing Dzongkha, as the national language. In the 1980s the Government started to enforce a national code of etiquette, Driglam Namzha (traditional values). The Bhutanese have to wear the national dress – the gho for males and kira for females in the work place, at school, and at public and private events; they also have to wear special scarves, according to a prescribed code, in government offices or on formal state occasions.

Rugged landscape, scattered population

One of the greatest development challenges in Bhutan is its rugged and precipitous terrain: the country consists mostly of mountains, the land rising from 200 metres above sea level in the south to over 7,500 metres in the north-

ern peaks of the Himalayas. A high proportion is covered with trees and, following the Land Act of 1995, at least 60% is destined to remain forested. People have settled across this vertiginous landscape wherever they can find usable land and as a result they are very scattered: more than half the population must walk more than half a day to reach the nearest road. People can spend hours picking their way along steep, narrow trails – including farmers going to town, children making their way to the nearest primary school, or health workers setting out from a basic health unit to run one of the monthly outreach clinics in a village that may be visible on the other side of a gorge, but many hours away on foot

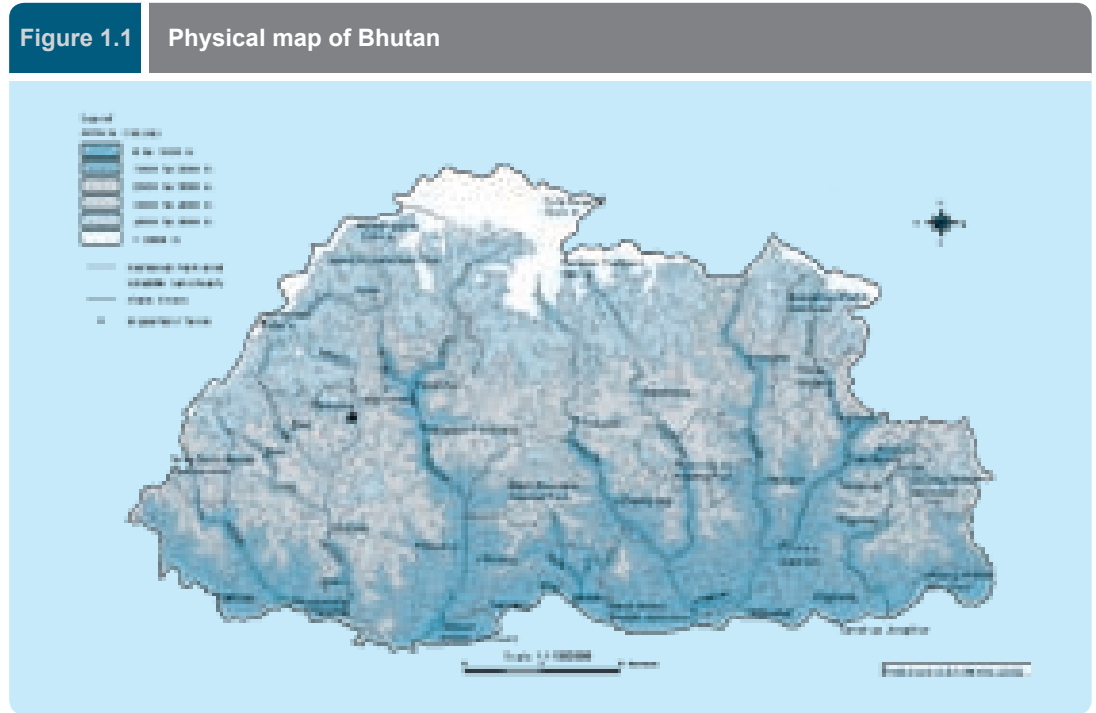
The terrain has helped fashion the lives and outlooks of Bhutan's various people, prompting a fierce degree of self-sufficiency among those inhabiting remote villages on steep mountainsides and in alpine valleys. It affects all aspects of development, notably the degree of access to services for women and children. Many community schools, for example, are several days' journey from the road head; a teacher who wants to attend a meeting at the district town may need two weeks for the round trip. Many children who live far from their primary school are obliged to board. Members of farming families, including children under 18, will commonly

walk two or three days to go to market or take part in local festivals. Distances and the climbing required also affect the provision of emergency health services and the chances of safe childbirth. In the rainy season, moving about the landscape is also complicated by frequent landslides; these can be hazardous, especially over longer journeys, such as those of boarder children walking home from school for holidays and relatives visiting other family members.

As the map in Figure 1.1 illustrates, most of the main river valleys run from north to south, rendering east-west travel very difficult; just one sinuous road leads from the west of the country to the east – a tortuous three-day journey, winding round thousands of hairpin bends.

This also results in a low population density. The National Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2005 gives a clear picture of the size and distribution of the population. It indicates a population density of 18 people per square kilometre – far fewer than the 350 in India, for example, or the 171 in Nepal.

From a demographic point of view, however, the size of the population is probably less significant than the growth rate. Following the introduction of basic health services, better water supplies and environmental sanitation, the

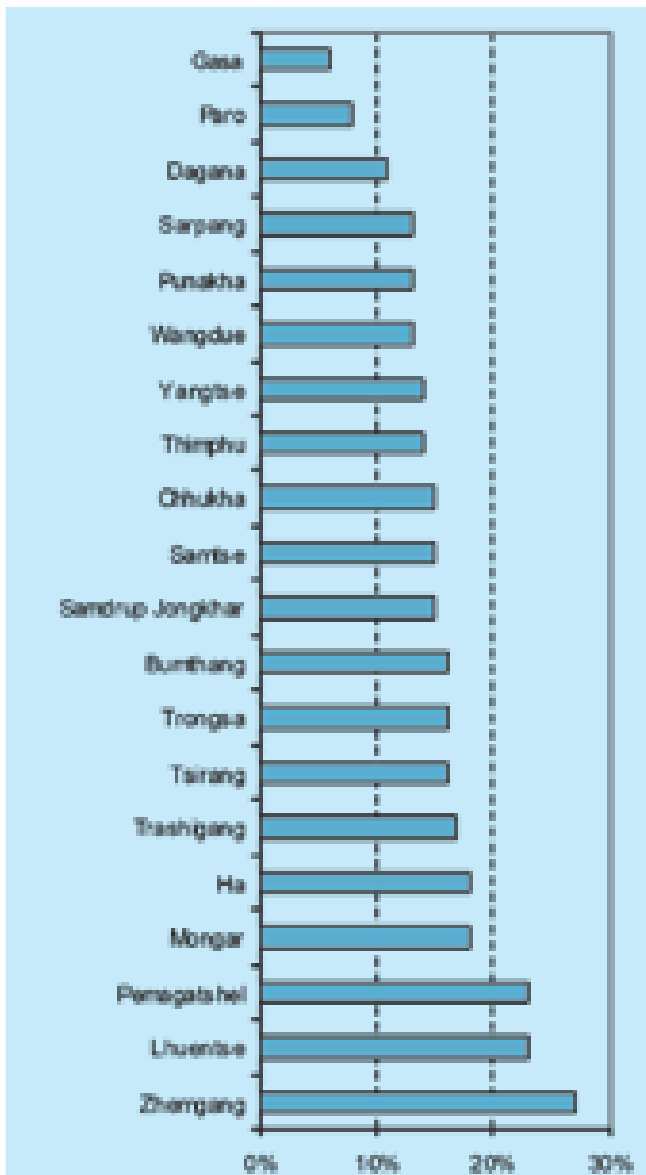


population started to expand rapidly during the 1970s and 1980s. It is still growing, but more slowly. According to a recent National Health Survey, between 1994 and 2000 the growth rate fell from 3.1% to 2.5%. In 2005, the growth rate further decreased to 1.3%. Over the same period, the total fertility rate dropped from 5.6 to 4.7 children per woman of reproductive age.

This deceleration is largely the result of better family planning services, with the active

support of Her Majesty Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck, the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador. Nevertheless, with fewer than one-third of couples using modern methods of contraception the growth rate is still relatively high and families can be large, especially in the east. As a result, for the foreseeable future the population is going to be very youthful – currently 42% are under fifteen years old – with significant implications for the future provision of health and education services.

Figure 1.2 Rural-urban emigrants as a proportion of dzongkhag population



Source: MOA, 2005

Moving from east to west

Another major demographic issue is migration. Traditionally, when searching for work many people have migrated seasonally, but nowadays many people are heading for the cities and settling there, seeking more opportunities for education and work, as well as readier access to public services. In 2005, almost half of rural households reported that family members had migrated – generally leaving areas in the south and east of the country, notably Zhemgang, Pemagatshel and Lhuentse where more than 20% of the population migrate seasonally or for long periods (Figure 1.2). More than one-quarter of permanent migrants head for Thimphu where the population is growing at around 7% per year.

As a result, between 1995 and 2000, the proportion of Bhutanese living in urban areas rose from 15% to 21%, and on present trends over the next 20 years urban dwellers will make up more than half the population.

The situation of women

Women have the same legal rights as men; they face no overt discrimination and have equal access to health, education and public services. Indeed in some cases, women are in a stronger position than men. In west and central Bhutan, for example, and in some parts of the east, the family system is matrilineal and land is inherited through the mother: as a result 60% of rural women hold land registration titles. And since in Bhutan it is often the most capable member of the family who takes charge, the mother or the eldest daughter may become the head of the household. The woman will also have to take

charge if her husband migrates to find work in urban areas, though she may not gain much as the head of the household if she cannot raise enough income from the farm to support the family. An absent husband who fails to provide economic support can be taken to court but implementation of this law is weak and women may fall on hard times.

Within the household, men and women are more equal in Buddhist Bhutan than in neighbouring countries. Unlike those in other parts of South Asia, Bhutanese men commonly share domestic tasks – as part of the isolated, rugged, and self-sufficient traditional life-style. Boys as well as girls learn to cook, clean, and wait on elders. Husbands may also occasionally cook, and assist at childbirth – attending their wives during labour and helping them deliver. Nonetheless, as in other countries, women in Bhutan do assume a large proportion of the family work burden, managing the household, looking after children and fetching firewood

Her husband has gone missing

‘My husband was a driver; he came from Trashigang a long way to the east and was working on the road. Seven years ago he had an argument with the contractor, and went off to work somewhere else, leaving us behind. So I became divorced – there has been no contact from him since. Since the new law [on women’s rights in marriage] was passed, I have applied to the court for money from my husband to support me and my children. I have been five times to the court in Mongar, I have even given them a photograph of my husband, but they say they cannot trace him.’

Sonam, 27, a road-side worker on the west-east highway

and water – as well as sharing much of the productive work, including most aspects of cultivation on the farms.

Despite their relatively high status, therefore, women are still some way from achieving full equality, and face many indirect forms of gender bias. This is reinforced by traditional beliefs that women’s comparative lack of physical strength and their sexual vulnerability makes them less capable than men – a view that can be strengthened by religious beliefs. Some Buddhists, for example, say that women are further away than men from achieving enlightenment in the cycle of rebirth.

The Bhutanese are proud that they have greater gender equality than other societies in the region; nevertheless they do largely assume

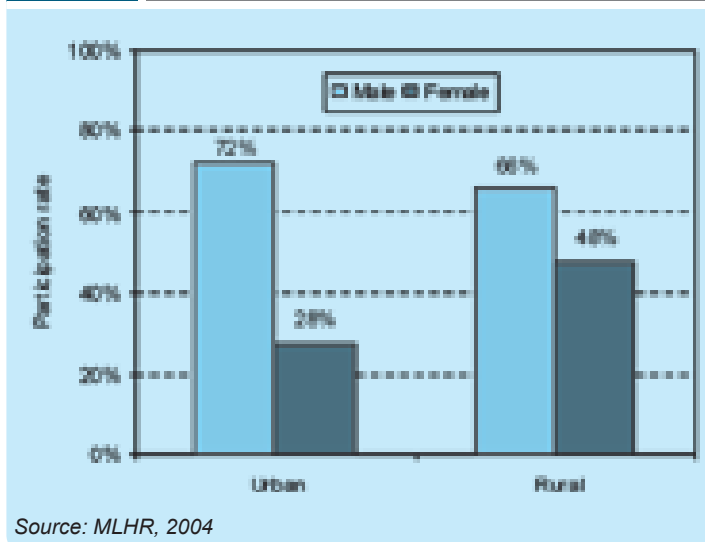
Making up for a lost education

‘When I was young, my family were farmers in Paro – they had a lot of land, 30 or 40 acres. I had an older brother, and we both worked on that land, and it was very hard work. Seeding, weeding, taking the animals to graze, planting chillies, working in the paddy. We got so wet, we had no shoes, there were no gum-boots then. And deep thorns used to go into my legs – I used to take them out with a safety-pin. My mother and sister-in-law also worked in the fields. At harvest, every family helped the others.

‘I never went to school – there was no school. By the time one opened, I was too old. But even when it did open, it was the boys who went to school. They said that schooling wasn’t necessary for girls. Most were kept back to work at home. So now I have come to NFE because I missed out in my childhood. I want to be able to read my prayers, and the stories from long ago.’

Pema, a 57 year-old housewife, Thimphu

Figure 1.3 Male and female labour force participation, 2004



that women are inferior to men, and that their work is less significant. This has had major ramifications for women's lives, for their education, for their participation in public decision making and for their expectations for the future. In the past these attitudes restricted girls' education. Today, even though many more are in school, girls typically express the view that they are less important than boys and men, and do not expect to reach a similar level of academic achievement, especially in the higher grades.

As a result of the slower rate at which girls entered school, in 2005 the literacy rate was 59.5% for men, but only 48.7% for women. In recent years girls' enrolment ratios have approached those of boys, particularly at the primary level, but as girls reach adolescence they are less likely than boys to enroll in secondary school or may finish their schooling earlier. Older girls and women who have missed out on basic education can, however, take advantage of non-formal education (NFE) classes, where they make up around 70% of enrolment.

Women's employment

Women's household responsibilities and their relative lack of education have hampered their opportunities for employment outside the home. Women's labour force participation is significantly lower than that of men, particular-

ly in the urban areas (Figure 1.3). Where women are employed, they tend to be working in low-skilled and low-paid jobs. In the urban areas many work in the informal sector, often from home as weavers, for example. Women are also under-represented in government jobs where they make up less than one-quarter of the civil service. There are also fewer women than men working as teachers: in 2003 around one-third of teachers were women, though a somewhat higher proportion of women are now being trained at the two National College of Education where by 2004 they represented 40% of enrolment.

The same factors have also reduced women's opportunities for participation in public decision making. There are very few elected women members (tshogpas) on the district development committees and only four female elected members of the National Assembly (chimis). There has been only one female gewog heads (gups) till date and no female district administrators (dzongda).

Much of this employment disadvantage has been attributed to the late start that Bhutan made in education in general and for women in particular. Certainly women have made

Taken from school to look after her sister

'I was withdrawn from school two years ago when I was in class III. My father insisted that I stay at home to look after my little sister while my brother and other sister remained in school. I am the one chosen to help out at home – I don't know why they chose me. My parents then sent me to NFE because they thought I might otherwise forget what I had learned at school. The NFE instructor went to see my father, to ask if I could go back to school because that is what I would like. But my father refused. We are farming people with quite a lot of land, and I too shall be a farmer. He says I can manage without school education.'

Tenzing, a 13-year old girl in Trashiyangtse, Eastern Bhutan

progress, and many young women and girls have now set their sights on careers in the professions. Even so, the advances have been slower than might have been hoped, and too many families – and young girls themselves – seem to have been conditioned to low expectations for women.

Economy and poverty

Around two-thirds of the workforce make their living from agriculture. Many are subsistence farmers, growing rice, maize, potatoes or wheat but others also grow cash crops including apples, oranges, potatoes, ginger, and cardamom . Even so, they do not produce sufficient food: Bhutan only grows around 60% of its staple food, rice, and has to import the rest .

Agriculture, with livestock and forestry, may be still the bedrock of employment but it is becoming less important in overall economic terms: between 1985 and 2003 its contribution to GDP fell from 53% to 32% and in 1994 to 27% . Moreover future prospects for agriculture are limited since virtually all the land suitable for intensive agriculture is already under cultivation.

Land reform in the 1960s resulted in a fairly equal distribution of land establishing a ceiling

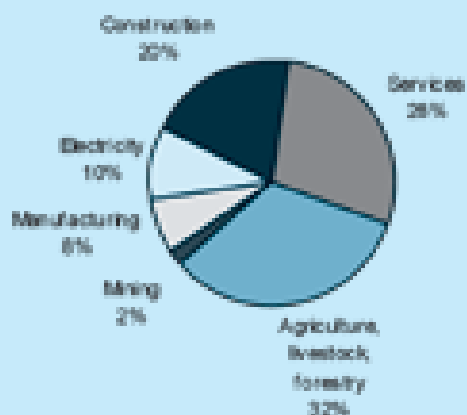
A father's hopes for his daughter

'My daughter in class IX is determined to become an engineer. Because the older one failed, I want her to succeed even more. Their generation has a better time than ours did. In our day, we faced a lot of problems. There were no roads and travel was very difficult. Children who went away to school were brought up by teachers. Today children have a more civilized environment. This generation is brighter than ours, because they have a better education, more interaction with others and with their friends, and more exposure to the world.'

Khamtu, father and businessman, Damphu, Tsirang district

of 25 acres. Since then however, the land has become steadily more fragmented. Generally farmers occupy small family plots – farm sizes average only 1.5 hectares per household . By 2003, 76% of rural households had less than five acres and 10% were landless . Future increases in productivity would probably require more mechanization, which in turn would require land to be consolidated in larger blocks, making more people landless.

Figure 1.4 Structure of GDP, 2003



Source: RMA, 2004

Girls, too, have entrepreneurial ambitions

'I want to be an educated farmer, and practice crop rotation and many things: hybrid seeds, manuring the fields, cross-breeding the animals, having an orchard. When I am rich, then I will not work any more. I will build a big house, undertake construction for other people and become a business woman. I will have a shop, sell produce and make the village develop.'

Singye, a 17-year-old secondary school student in Damphu, Tsirang district

Young school-leavers in limbo

'After our children finish Class X, if they don't qualify they are in a limbo. We can send them off to private school in Thimphu, but it costs so much and we have to take loans and get into debt. They have become too educated to work in manual labour. So they sit about at home. We need more openings.'

Parents in Buli village, Zhemgang district

Over recent decades, Bhutan has enjoyed healthy economic growth – more than 6% per year. The distribution of that growth, however, gives cause for concern since most of this is either in capital-intensive industries, notably electricity, or is concentrated in the urban areas. The more dynamic sectors, such as electricity production and construction, boost economic output, but they employ relatively few people. Tourism too has also shown strong growth, but here too the benefits are not widely spread: since there are very few independent travellers most of the benefit goes to tour operators and hotels, or to the Government. In 2003, over 130 tour operators brought 6,261 tourists gaining revenues of US\$8 million, and bringing the Government a royalty of US\$3 million .

Another concern is that most modern economic development has historically been in the public sector, leaving Bhutan's private sector relatively underdeveloped. Total taxation from the private sector in 2003/04, for example, represented only around 10% of government revenues . Moreover, the private sector itself tends to be dominated by a small number of large corporations. Slow growth in the private sector and the lack of an entrepreneurial culture are hampering the employment opportunities of young people who are having trouble finding work.

Income and poverty

Despite recent economic growth, Bhutan remains a poor country. The 2004 Poverty Analysis Report calculated an income poverty line for Bhutan of Nu. 740 per capita per month. On this basis, more than 32% of the population live in income poverty, of whom the overwhelming majority – 97% – are in the rural areas and more than half are in the eastern region (Table 1 1). Poverty is also more prevalent among larger households: of single-parent households only 4% are poor, while among households with eight members more than half are living in poverty.

However, people who for generations have led a hardy and self-sufficient life, farming on a subsistence basis with a small surplus for barter or sale, do not necessarily consider themselves poor. Herders for example handle little money, but they may have considerable numbers of yaks and a substantial trade in dairy products; neither they nor many small farmers would describe themselves as poor though they have little cash or access to services. They often have much better houses, for example, than many other South Asian communities. Even those living on the fringes of the cash economy may not be severely disadvantaged since they are entitled to free education and health care. Indeed the Bhutanese consider that very few people are 'really poor' – mainly applying the concept to those who have experienced some form of tragedy or acute distress such as family fragmentation or loss of provider.

Those in the urban areas nowadays, however, need much more cash to survive and have also been acquiring consumer tastes. As a result the view of 'wealth' is changing and there is a growing gap between subsistence or semi-subsistence and cash-dependent life-styles.

This also raises concerns about inequality. In Bhutan the richest 20% of the population receive 49% of national income while the poorest 20% receive only 7% (Figure 1.5). The distribution is similar within urban and rural areas – in both cases the richest fifth consume around eight times more than the poorest.

It should be emphasized, however, that these measures of poverty and inequality refer only to income. People can be poor in many

Table 1.1 Income poverty, 2003

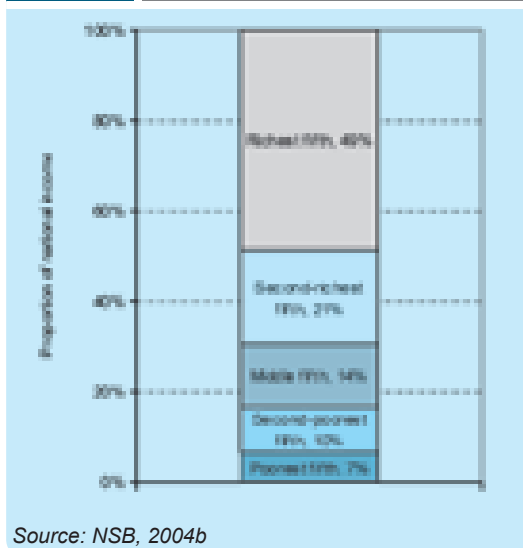
	Percentage of population who are poor	Percentage of the total population	Percentage of the poor population
Rural	38%	81%	97%
Urban	4%	19%	3%
Western region	19%	40%	24%
Central region	30%	26%	24%
Eastern region	49%	34%	52%
Total for Bhutan	32%	100%	100%

Source: NSB, 2004b

other ways, beyond having low incomes. Thus they can lack education, or be in poor health, or suffer from food insecurity. On this basis it could be argued that people in Bhutan are likely to be better off since they are entitled to free education and health care. However, it is not yet possible to assess the impact of this through a composite measure. UNDP has developed an

pal. The HDI has also been increasing: Bhutan's second national human development report in 2005 presents a time series, indicating a steady rate of progress between 1984 and 2002 (Figure 1.6). This will now need to be recalculated since one HDI component, the literacy rate, turns out to be lower than previously thought but the general trend should be similar.

Figure 1.5 Distribution of income by quintile, 2003



Source: NSB, 2004b

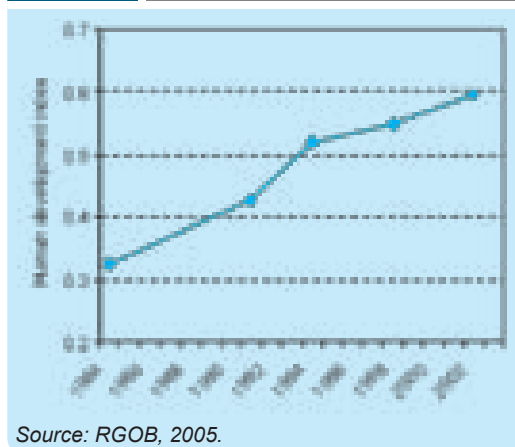
overall 'human poverty index' which measures non-income forms of deprivation, but this has yet to be computed for Bhutan as there are insufficient data.

There have, however, been calculations for the human development index (HDI), a composite of measures of income, life expectancy and educational attainment. Bhutan's HDI for 2002 of 0.536 puts it at the lower end of the group of 'medium human development' countries, some way behind India and China but ahead of Ne-

Government investment

When Bhutan started to open up to the outside world, it did so systematically by embarking upon a series of Five-Year Plans, the first two of which focused on economic development and were entirely financed by India, which also supplied much of the technical expertise. Later plans broadened the objectives, integrating economic development with investment in health and education. The King has also declared that the aim of Bhutan's development

Figure 1.6 Trend in human development index



Source: RGOB, 2005.

plans should not simply be to increase gross national product, but rather to maximize 'Gross National Happiness'.

Throughout this period Bhutan has maintained a high rate of investment, averaging over 40% of GDP during the 1990s. One of the crucial factors in the years ahead will be whether it can sustain this. Thus far it has used its own resources to meet recurrent expenses while financing 'development' expenditure largely from foreign assistance; this represented 40% of GDP during the 1980s though it declined to 28% during the 1990s as the whole economy grew. Between 1991 and 2000, overall per capita aid to Bhutan averaged around \$100 per year, far higher than that to Nepal at \$20, or to Bangladesh at \$12, though similar to the level in other small countries in other regions. These funds have come from a range of donors: in 2003 the regular government-donor 'round table' meeting was attended by 18 bilateral and 27 multilateral and other agencies. The flows of assistance can, however, vary significantly from one financial year to another depending on the timing of disbursements for particular projects (Table 1.2). And in recent years external funding has fallen some way short of meeting all the capital costs – only reaching around 70%.

In 2003/04, for example, the Government's total expenditure was Nu. 12,479 million. As indicated in Figure 1.7, government tax and other revenues totalled Nu. 6,162 million which was sufficient to cover current expenditure of Nu. 5,569 million. Grants, however, were only Nu. 4,456 million, rather than the Nu. 6,066 million envisaged in the Ninth Plan, and were sufficient to cover only 64% of the capital budget. The net result was a budget deficit of Nu. 1,861 million (15%).

This deficit has to be met largely from external or local borrowing. And this combined with donor preferences nowadays for loans rather than grants has meant Bhutan has been accumulating debt, which increased between 2000/01 and 2003/04 from \$236 million to \$529 million – and is now equivalent to 75% of GDP. Of this around half is in rupees to the Government of India, while most of the rest, in convertible currency, is owed to the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and the Government of

Austria. As a result of the level of debt resulting from expenditure on the country's latest large hydropower scheme, the 1020mw Tala project, the World Bank has now classified Bhutan as a heavily indebted poor country. This will have the advantage of entitling the country to more grant aid instead of loans.

Even so the debt service ratio is quite low, only around 4%, since most of the loans have been at concessional rates. And the debt is not seen as a matter of great concern primarily because almost two-thirds of it has been used to invest in hydropower which will bring high returns. Moreover many of the largest loans in the social sector, including a \$31 million education sector loan from the World Bank which is being disbursed over a period of six years starting in 2003, will also produce long-term economic benefits.

The longer term prospect is that Bhutan should derive the funds it needs for investment from sales of electricity to India. The revenue from three major plants, Chukha, Basochu, and Kurichhu already contributes half of the government budget, and when the Tala project comes on stream, the four plants could provide up to 90% of government revenue. There should also be further opportunities to export yet more power: Bhutan hydroelectric potential is thought to be around 30,000 megawatts of which only around 1.5% are currently being exploited.

The direction of public expenditure for 2004/05 is indicated in Figure 1.8, showing health and education combined should account for 27% of the total outlay; in each case around half will be current expenditure and the rest for capital investment. Commendably, Bhutan has for some time exceeded the '20:20' commitment of devoting at least 20% of public expenditure to the social sector.

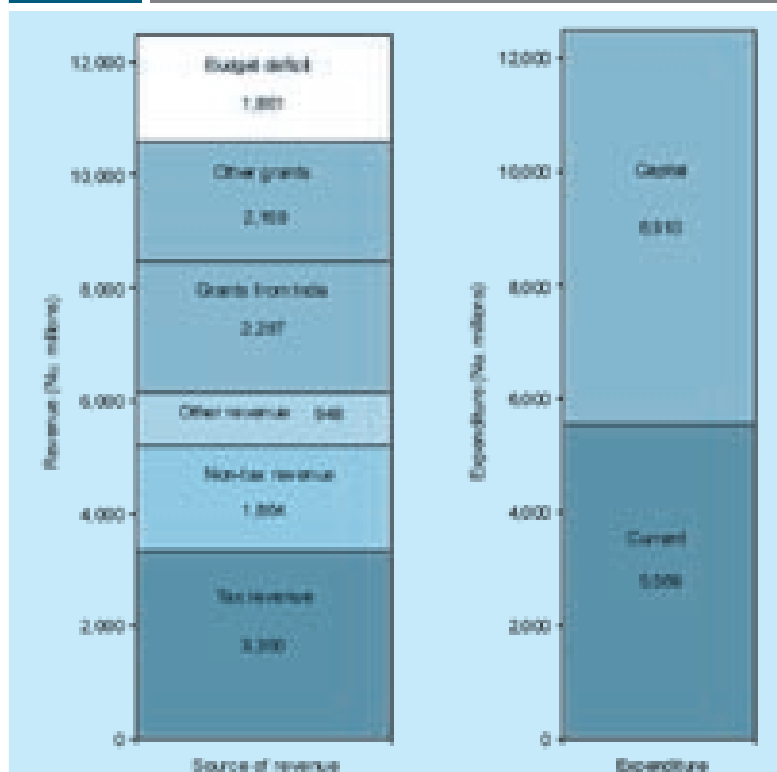
Table 1.2 Grant donors, 1999/00 to 2003/04, Nu. Million¹

	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04
Govt. of India	2,188	2,551	945	2,632	2,287
DANIDA	319	395	535	526	579
JICA	7	0	4	0	50
Govt. of Netherlands	74	148	275	201	322
UNDP	141	51	133	86	53
Govt. of Austria	143	174	44	69	33
HELVETAS	76	94	0	0	0
Swiss Dev. Cooperation	106	67	63	104	123
EEC	30	18	113	131	203
UNCDF	11	27	27	27	25
Others	180	185	559	708	782
Total	3,274	3,711	2,697	4,482	4,456
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
UNICEF ²	64.4	83.1	77.1	79.5	87.8

1. Source: RMA, 2004

2. UNICEF data refers to funds allotted to RGoB through cash assistance as well as in-kind supply procurements and travel during calendar years (from UNICEF PROMS Reports)

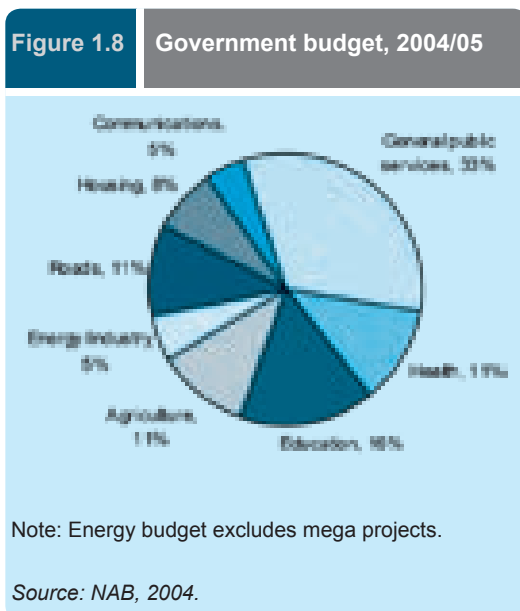
Figure 1.7 Government revenue and expenditure, 2003/04



Source: RMA, 2004.

Political and constitutional change

Bhutan is a hereditary monarchy, but the King has steadily been moving the country towards a parliamentary democracy. One of his most de-



cisive steps was in 1998 when, while remaining head of state, he relinquished his position as head of the government, handing responsibility to a Council of Ministers.

The prime minister emerges from the 150-member National Assembly, whose 105 elected members, the chimis, serve fixed three-year terms. The other members are appointed by the King or by the Monk Body. The National Assembly elects the Cabinet of Ministers. The role of Chair, and thus Prime Minister, rotates annually among the five who received the most votes.

Bhutan will take its next major step when it adopts a new Constitution. The draft has now been published and widely circulated. Among other things this will permit the creation of political parties and institutionalize a two-party system in national polls.

Meanwhile, the King and the Government have steadily been decentralizing many parts of its administration to the 20 dzongkhags (districts) and 201 geogs (blocks of villages). They started the process in 1982 by establishing the

dzongkhag yargye tshogdue (DYTs, or district development committees) and continued in 1992 by establishing the Gewog Yargye Tshogchung (GYTs, or block development committees).

The basic level of government administration is thus the GYT. This is chaired by the local leader, the gup, supported by the mangmi, an elected assistant. Previously, the gup had been elected by representatives of households, but in 2002 for the first time the election was based on a universal adult franchise – for many people this was their first experience of voting. The other voting members in the GYT are the tshogpas, each of whom represent a village or cluster of villages. The GYT also has non-voting members, including the chimi in whose constituency that geog falls and the gaydrung, or clerk. The gup, however, has a dual role, for in addition to representing his electorate he also acts as a paid administrator for the geog, answerable to the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs. This means that it will not always be clear whether the gup's function is bottom-up or top-down.

The next level up is the DYT which consists of all the gups, mangmis and chimis plus representatives of municipalities and towns – who between them elect the Chairpersons. Also on the DYT, though non-voting, are the chief executive of the dzongkhag (district), the dzongda (district governor), who is a civil servant answerable to the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs. Where appropriate the DYT also includes representatives of municipalities, towns or sub-districts.

Overlaid upon this horizontal structure, however, is a vertical structure emanating from the sectoral ministries in Thimphu. Thus the DYT also has as non-voting members, the dzongkhag education officer and the dzongkhag health officer. They too have dual lines of responsibility since they report not just to the dzongda but also to their own ministries. Again this creates an ambiguous situation since it is not clear to what extent priorities are being resolved at the dzongkhag or the central level.

The question of how far decentralization has gone, and how effective it has been, was highlighted during the preparation of the Ninth Five-Year Plan. For the first time, the principle

was to work at least partly from the bottom up, by having the GYT and the DYT present their own ideas, which were to be incorporated into the overall plan. It is not clear, however, exactly how much influence the GYT had since their proposals also moved up the chain being modified by both the DYT and the central ministries. It seems, however, that the process varied considerably from one part of the country to another.

Thus far Bhutan's decentralization consists essentially of de-concentration, in which centrally defined tasks are carried out by a local manager, rather than a significant devolution of power and responsibility. There is, for example, no fiscal decentralization, since the lower levels of government are dependant almost entirely on the centre for funds. The Dzongkhags raise no funds of their own, and while the geogs do have powers to collect funds locally from some rural taxes, on land, houses and cattle, the rates tend to be low and equivalent to only around 10% of their total spending – which in itself is very modest. The rest comes in the form of budget-balancing grants, which although they could in principle respond to articulated local needs often simply reflect past spending patterns.

This is evident from Table 1.3, which shows revenues and expenditures from the budget for

2002/03, the first year of the Ninth Plan, at different levels of government. This shows that the central government is still responsible for 83% of total spending, while passing responsibility to the dzongkhags for 16% and to the geogs for less than 1%. And when it comes to capital expenditure the centre spends 90% of the funds.

Another factor constraining decentralization is the limited capacity of the gups and other local administrators to manage projects and funds. This varies greatly from one area to another, but many gups will have had only primary education and while they may be respected in their communities they would not necessarily have the skills normally demanded of civil servants. The Government, with the assistance of donors, has made determined efforts to meet the capacity gaps by, for example, appointing accountants within each dzongkhag to service groups of geogs, but there is still a long way to go.

Civil society

Even if there is little socially-based discrimination, Bhutanese society, with its roots in theocracy, and subsequently monarchy, tends to be strongly hierarchical and deferential. People show respect for those in authority. In return

Table 1.3 Financial resources of each level of government, Nu. millions, 2002/03

	Centre	Dzongkhag	Geog	Total
Own revenues (taxes, fees, charges, royalties)	5,100	0	8	5,108
Funds from the centre for current expenditures	0	1,224	12	1,236
Funds from the centre for capital expenditures	0	571	66	637
International inflows	5,566	0	0	5,566
Total revenues	10,666	1,795	85	12,546
Current expenditures	3,361	1,224	11	4,597
Capital expenditures	5,681	571	66	6,318
Total expenditures net of lending and debt repayments	9,043	1,795	78	10,916

Note: This does not include Thimphu Municipal Corporation.

Source: Vaillancourt, 2004.

the authorities are expected to serve the Bhutanese people by providing services and facilities to meet their needs. As a result, Bhutan has developed many of the characteristics of a welfare state, offering free services such as education and health care.

Bhutan has few of the institutions which elsewhere might serve as an organized form of 'civil society' – serving as a buffer or intermediary between the people and the state. Instead the assumption is that the state will always act for the benefit of all the people. And following decentralization, the further assumption is that the state and the people will work in even greater harmony, with information and influence flowing freely from one to the other. Most mass produced information, however, only flows from the Government. The bi-weekly Kuensel newspaper is published by a public corporation since 1967. Recently, on April 30, 2006, Bhutan had its first private newspapers, Bhutan Times, followed by the second private paper, Bhutan Observer, on June 2. The government runs the national radio and TV stations (Bhutan Broadcasting Service) and starting from September 28, 2006 a private radio station, Kuzoo FM90, went on air. Another private radio station, Radio Valley, will start soon.

Nevertheless some form of organized civil society is beginning to emerge in a distinctively Bhutanese way. The starting point for this has been existing systems of community mobilization. Traditionally, because of their relative isolation, Bhutanese communities have had to be self-reliant and fall back on their own resources – contributing, for example, voluntary labour and materials to the upkeep of monasteries, temples and chortens (shrines). Even today, villages do also readily raise funds and work together to arrange festivals and religious events.

People have also worked together to share resources such as water, or footpaths, or grazing land. They may have done so under the leadership of a local elite, but most people would have been able to make their voices heard since their household would be asked to contribute voluntary labour. People also cooperate when building houses or helping each other with labour- or capital-intensive agricultural activities, such as terracing the land, ploughing, or transplanting rice. However this has not involved the

creation of specific community organizations since people in small and close-knit communities had a traditional expectation of informal mutual assistance.

This situation is now changing. A degree of mechanization has meant, for example, that people do not exchange agricultural labour as much as they used to. And as the Bhutanese become more mobile and migrate to the towns, community ties have eroded. In response, people are now looking for alternative forms of mutual support such as community trust funds.

Meanwhile the gups and the GYTs also require labour contributions for many development activities – to build community schools, for example, or health centres. Local people do not, however, necessarily see the GYTs as forums through which they can express concerns and priorities, but rather as extensions of government. This sense can be reinforced by the operating style of some government officials who deliver services in a supply-led mode and usually in a top-down fashion. This may be because they find it difficult to change their style of work or doubt that local communities yet have the capacity to handle more responsibility, though also because in practice local people have few channels through which to express their demands or service preferences, and little experience in doing so.

Community-based organizations typically come into being in response to grass-roots demands to fulfil unmet needs. In Bhutan, however, the Government has provided the people with so much that this process has never really got underway. Bhutanese communities traditionally had their own ways of co-operating and did not feel the need to systematize these.

Bhutan does not therefore have a mature network of community-based organizations. Nor has there been much impetus, until recently, for the creation of non-governmental or non-formal bodies. Some NGOs have recently been established, but these have largely been instigated by the state or members of the Royal Family. They include the National Women's Association of Bhutan, the Royal Society for Protection of Nature, the Bhutan Trust Fund for Cultural Preservation, the National Women's Association of Bhutan, the Health Trust Fund, the

Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry; and more recently the Tarayana Foundation, RE-NEW (Respect Educate Nurture and Empower Women) and the Youth Development Fund.

Following the passing of the Cooperative Act in 2001, the Government has also been encouraging the formation for agricultural cooperatives. Although these organizations do offer channels for voluntary activity they do not yet offer much of a voice for community concerns.

To allow a greater expression of views from society, and to build services that respond better to people's demands, it would seem desirable for young people and women to come together to develop their own organizations and agendas. In the first instance, this would need to be inspired and led from within the official mainstream and with the patronage of its key members; but in time, and with the right participatory structure, the associations themselves would develop their own momentum and leadership. This would help to compensate for the current erosion of community ties, and also support democratization and decentralization processes. This would be especially valuable in the expanding urban areas where there are fewer traditions of mutual cooperation and unfamiliar social stresses.



**...there is no reason why women's
health should be any worse than
men's...**

Surmounting extraordinary obstacles, Bhutan has extended basic health, water and sanitation services to most of its population. Yet, many women and children are still dying unnecessarily from preventable diseases, and more than one-third of children are malnourished. Although only few cases have been detected, the population as a whole remains vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. If Bhutanese children are to reach their full potential they and their parents will need to engage more closely with the public health system – achieving full access to preventive and curative services and acquiring basic principles of health and hygiene.

Bhutan has made dramatic improvements in health standards. Between 1960 and 1994, life expectancy rose from 37 years to 66 years, while infant mortality fell from 203 deaths per thousand live births to 61. Fewer mothers have also been dying as a result of childbirth: between 1994 and 2000 maternal mortality per hundred thousand live births is estimated to have fallen from 380 to 255.

As in other countries these gains have come primarily from basic preventive and curative health services, which between 1992 and 2002 increased their population coverage from 70% to 90%, complemented by better water supplies and sanitation. This achievement is more impressive given the logistical obstacles to extending health services to the more remote areas; indeed in developing basic and equitable systems in such difficult terrain, Bhutan has been a primary health care pioneer.

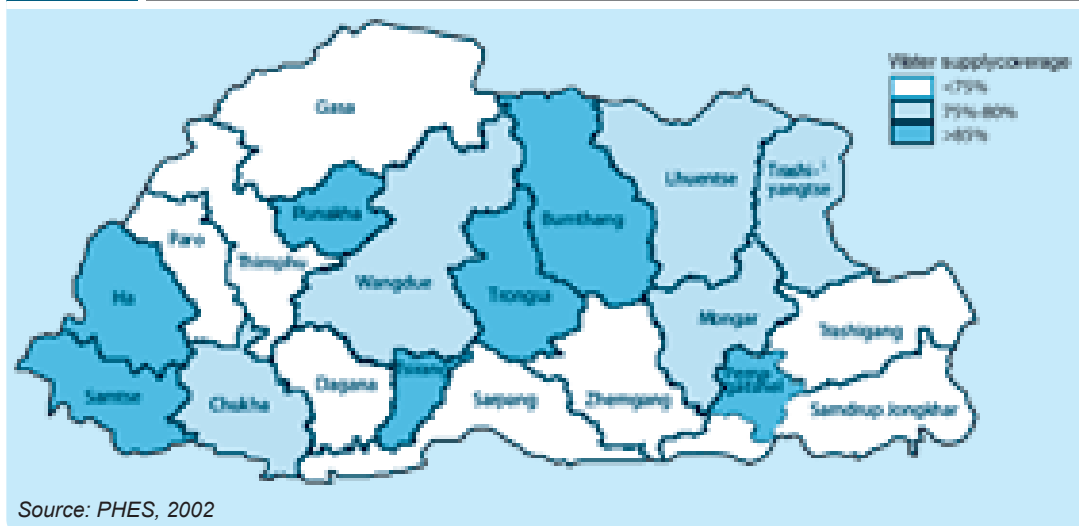
Further gains may be more difficult to achieve, partly because they could demand more expensive curative care, but also because they will need to be based on changes in behaviour, both on the part of communities and of health workers.

Clean water and safe sanitation

One of Bhutan's major achievements has been to extend water supply and sanitation coverage across the country. In the case of water supplies, ready access means that water is available to a household within 100 metres horizontally or 50 metres vertically. On this basis, coverage of households in the rural areas increased between 1990 and 2000, from 30% to 78%. Coverage does vary somewhat, however, between districts, from a low of 65% in Trashigang to a high of 98% in Bumthang (Figure 2.1). Coverage is low in some of the more highly populated areas such as Trashigang, Samdrup Jongkhar, and Sarpang and also districts such as Gasa, Zhemgang and Dagana whose populations tend to be highly dispersed. The low coverage in Paro and Thimphu is probably because recent migrants may not have official supplies.

In the rural areas, most systems are gravity-fed, taking water from springs or streams into underground pipe systems leading to tap stands located close to communities, schools or basic health units. Most other systems consist of protected springs. In the urban areas, water is piped to some households and available to others through tap stands. Urban supplies also reach a higher proportion of households, though there are significant differences in estimates: the 2000 National Health Survey indicated that water had reached 98% of the urban

Figure 2.1 Water supply coverage by district



population but the Public Health and Engineering Department of the Ministry of Health, estimated that, probably as a result of rapid in-migration, coverage is actually only 81%.

Clearly there are still many communities who have yet to be served. The Ninth Plan aimed at 100% coverage. This will be quite a challenge – apart from repairing the old systems it would mean constructing 130 new schemes per year. This would involve communities finding around 25% of the cost in terms of materials and labour, the government 15%, and the rest would have to come from external funding. Up to 2000, such funding came from UNICEF and from 2000 to 2005, largely from DANIDA.

There are also problems of maintenance since it is thought that around one-third of the existing schemes are in urgent need of repair. Although the Government provides technical support and some construction materials, maintenance is the responsibility of users through Village Maintenance Committees, who should appoint someone to look after the water supply. While in places this is effective, in others the systems are not well maintained, often because the person originally trained has left the village or simply because users do not feel a strong sense of ownership. The lack of effective local management of services also has an impact on water quality. While the original water sources are clean and normally chemically safe, the water becomes bacterially contaminated

Our children are not dying any more

‘Buli has a lot of marshy areas. Even our drinking water used to be taken from the marsh, but now we have a proper water supply. In those days, children used to die from diarrhoeal diseases from time to time. If one child died, then we used to have a dying spree – a lot of children would die in the epidemic. That doesn’t happen any more. We have health facilities, the school, and the water supply is nearby. We have counseling from the health staff, and then if there is an emergency, now we have the road.’

Community leaders in Buli village, Zhemgang district

as it gets closer to users, often around the tap stands or in containers at home.

Sanitation

Nowadays, many more households have safe sanitation facilities. Much of the impetus followed a royal decree in 1992 that every household should have a safe means of human waste disposal. In the rural areas the proportion of households with toilets increased significantly

between 1990 and 2000, from 50% to 87%. Rural sanitation takes the form of dry pit latrines or pour-flush toilets with pits or septic tanks. In the years after 1992, people could take advantage of subsidies for toilet construction but the rate of construction was sustained even after subsidies were withdrawn. In the urban areas coverage started higher, at 80% in 1990, but by 2000 had fallen to 77%, probably as a result of rapid in-migration. A few larger urban centres such as Thimphu and Phuentsholing have some mains sewerage systems though many urban and sub-urban households use systems similar to those in the rural areas.

Although many homes do now have sanitation facilities, not all take advantage of them. The National Health Survey suggested that 2% of households that had toilets were not using them, though the proportion could be much higher.

Water and sanitation in schools

Clean water and sanitation facilities are vital not only for households but also for schools where they can not only help protect children from infectious disease, but also instill in them the virtues of safe sanitation and personal hygiene that they can then transmit back to their homes.

A UNICEF-sponsored survey, visited 383 schools, covering 112,461 pupils. Most of the surveyed schools, 88%, did have water supplies; the others, mostly community schools, either had no scheme at all, or one that was defunct. However, even though the infrastructure was in place it was not always adequate: more than half the schools did not have sufficient tap points to meet the minimum standard of one per 50 pupils. Nor was the tap always working: two-third of schools suffered disruptions in water supplies; in the summer months this was usually the result of flooding and landslides, while during the winter months it was usually the result of water sources drying up.

While some schools have independent water supplies, around 80% share their supplies with other users, so they have to work closely with the community. This should involve not just controlling the quantity of water but also

the quality. In this case the children themselves should be able to monitor the supplies as part of their studies, using simple testing kits.

Most of the surveyed schools also had toilets: 31% were pit toilets, 21% aqua privies, 18% were ventilated improved pits and the rest were pour-flush; only 5% of these schools, mostly community ones, had no sanitation facilities at all. But just as there are too few tap stands, there are also too few toilets. Each school should have at least four toilets for the first 100 children and another four for the next 200; on this basis around half the schools were under-supplied. Many toilets are also below standard: 32% were found in poor condition, not properly covered, and with excreta visible on the floor, and 42% had inadequate walls, doors and screens, offering the pupils little privacy. In most cases, the toilet blocks were cleaned by the pupils themselves.

Hygiene

When households do have access to water supplies, it is also important they practice good hygiene, making every effort to break the standard 'faecal-oral' transmission of disease agents – via dirty hands, feet and vessels – and preparing food hygienically. People need to avoid contaminating water sources and taps and to handle water carefully within the home. Most households store water, and can easily contaminate it if they do not cover the jar or if they frequently touch the water.

In the past, because people had to walk long distances to fetch water and thus needed to use it sparingly, and had no access to soap, their personal hygiene was very poor; and they bathed and did their laundry infrequently. However, hygiene has now improved somewhat: a survey in 1993 found that before meals half the sample washed their hands with water alone, 31% with water and soap, though the rest did not wash their hands at all.

The availability of water has also increased the frequency of bathing: a 1992 survey found that in villages with piped water 55% of adults bathed once a week while in villages without water systems only 11% did so. But even today, given the often cold climate and the lack

Washing hands, but not very effectively

‘Sanitation has brought down the disease rate, but the change is not great. The practices in the way people prepare food are not very hygienic. The way they wash their hands is to rub some rice between their hands. There are cases of diarrhoeal disease but not many deaths.’

District Medical Officer, Bumthang

of domestic heating people probably do not bathe sufficiently – which among other things contributes to the high prevalence of skin diseases. Poor hygiene would also account for high levels of other infections and worm infestations. Health personnel in a number of sites in the country have, however, noticed that messages about hygiene and sanitation are getting through, and in recent years the rate of diarrhoeal infections has declined.

A multi-tiered health system

Bhutan has built up an impressive multi-tiered health infrastructure. At its peak is the JDWNRH national referral hospital in Thimphu, along with two other referral hospitals – at Yebilabsta in the centre of the country and Mongar in the east. Then there are 26 other hospitals, most of them in the district headquarters. Linked to these hospitals are 158 basic health units (BHUs) from which health staff run 439 outreach clinics. Of the BHUs, 148 are grade II, each of which should have three health assistants, while 10 others are classified as grade I and also have a doctor and other nursing staff.

Villages that are more than two hours walk from the nearest health centre have a volunteer village health worker. There are around 1,300 of these, providing basic medical help and advice. At the other end of the spectrum, for more technically sophisticated treatment, for cancer care, for example, Bhutan’s health system will send people to facilities in India and elsewhere; in 2003, it referred 590 patients outside .

Everyone is known to us, no-one is a stranger

‘In our opinion, the present system of health outreach is outstanding, we are not lacking in anything – medicines, equipment, staffing, all is going well and we have no shortages except occasionally in staff. Our health workers are hard-working, and in every remote place there is an outreach clinic and free medicines. We can go into a village, give talks and build health awareness, stitch any cuts or wounds, give immunizations and attend deliveries. We have an important job and people appreciate us – that gives us motivation. We feel that every person, old or young, is part of our service, part of our family. And we know everybody; no-one is a stranger. Once you develop friendly relations with someone you want to do the very best you can for them.’

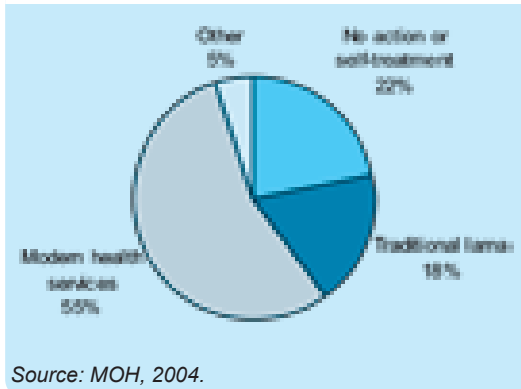
Health staff, Zhemgang BHU

Between them these health facilities and their staff are thought to reach most of the population, at least with an out-reach clinic. In 2000, it was estimated that 78% of villages had a health centre or clinic within two hours’ walking distance; 89% had one within three hours; only 4% were beyond six hours. Given the difficult terrain in most parts of the country, this is a striking achievement. Just as impressive, all the basic health services have so far largely been free – Bhutan is one of the few developing countries to maintain such an extensive free service. Essential drugs are also well distributed and most basic health units maintain a good stock.

In parallel with the modern system, Bhutan also promotes traditional remedies, using So-Wa-Rigpa, an indigenous system that uses several species of Himalayan flora. Many people, particularly in the rural areas, will turn first to a traditional healer, or lama. In 2000, for example, according to the National Health Survey around one-fifth of people sought advice first from a traditional lama, if only for rituals to be

performed, though two-thirds of these subsequently consulted modern health services. Traditional medicine is also available at some district hospitals as well at a hospital in Thimphu that specializes in traditional remedies.

Figure 2.2 Action taken in response to illness



Health service priorities

As in any health system, there are severe budget constraints, and these can only intensify as people live longer and come to expect more sophisticated treatment. Health at present takes up around 12% of the national budget and the country's total health expenditure, 90% of which is public, corresponds to around 4% of GDP. The health service already makes some charges for elective treatments, and it seems likely that eventually it will also start charging for more routine requirements. At the same time a system of private medicine will probably develop for those who can afford it.

For the present, however, the challenge is to ensure that existing facilities and their staff deliver the highest possible standards of care. One priority is to recruit more doctors. Around one-third of district hospitals have only one doctor. Moreover, because many of the doctors have only been trained quite recently, many of those in senior positions, such as district medical officers, can be doctors with relatively little experience. Bhutan has no medical school of its own and so it sends 15 students each year for training in India or elsewhere. Between 1998 and 2003, it managed to increase the number of doctors, national and non-national, from 98 to 140. But this is still not enough, since at any

one time 20 or more may be out of the country for specialist training.

Bhutan also needs more staff in the basic health units. In the past each BHU was to have a trained health assistant, an auxiliary nurse midwife and a basic health worker. Now each is to have three health assistants, each of whom should be able to cover the same activities, though many BHUs lack their full complement.

In addition there are some concerns about the quality and motivation of health staff. School graduates when seeking employment in government service, generally apply for the best-paid job they are qualified for, rather than following a specific vocation. This is not necessarily a problem and most of those who have entered the health service on this basis become more enthusiastic and dedicated after training and when they have started work. But overall standards of care could be increased if the schools gave more career counselling, and if the health system recruited more actively, stressing the qualities needed in health workers.

Another priority is to increase the numbers of female health workers. Currently around 50% are women, but the proportion will need to be higher still, particularly for improving standards of maternal health. One way of boosting the number of female nurses would be to make it easier for them to return to work after having raised a family; at present it is not possible to return to public service once you have resigned.

Health assistants could also take better advantage of their relationship with communities. They visit all the households in their catchment area once a year to carry out a basic health survey, but do not necessarily use the information themselves to follow up particular cases – or to encourage people to come to the clinics. They also keep quite comprehensive records in the BHU, where annual summaries are prominently displayed on the walls although these are not always kept up to date on a regular basis. Health staff are often the only government officials that rural communities see regularly, and are the main channels for educating families on health and hygiene as well as on new issues such as HIV/AIDS. At present, however, the contacts with patients are fairly limited: in line with the general deference to authority, treatment

tends to be a one-way process, with patients accepting what they are given and asking very few questions. Given the evident commitment of many of the health workers, they should also be able to encourage a more equal relationship. It will also be important to maintain the enthusiasm of village health workers, who should benefit from regular training courses to upgrade their skills and so sustain their morale and develop their skills.

Although the health infrastructure, in terms of buildings at least, is very extensive, it too could be improved so as to be more user friendly. Basic health units are generally quite spartan and cold, which tends to discourage attendance. Maintenance can also be poor at some of the larger hospitals.

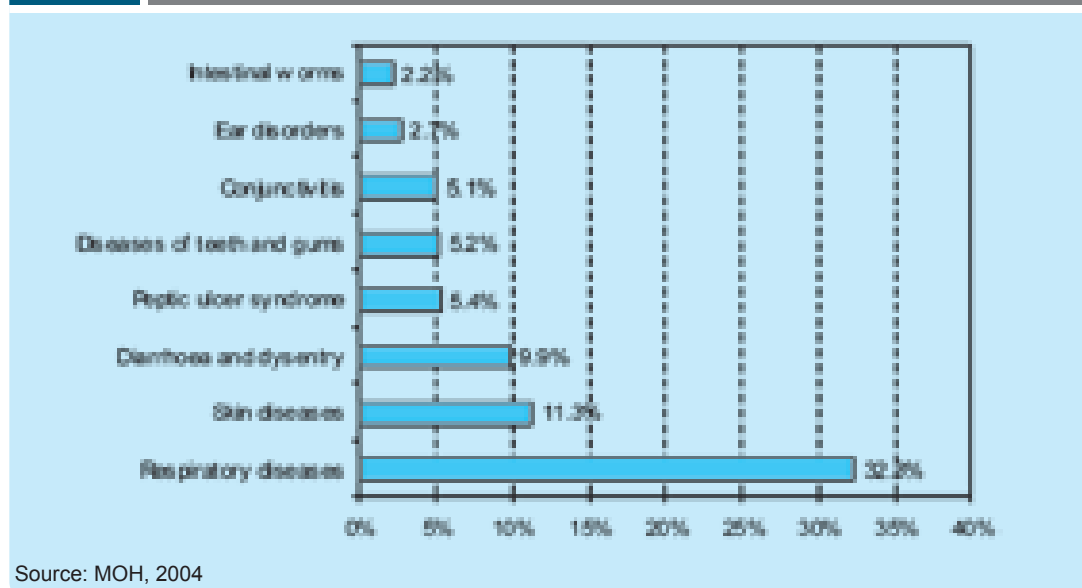
Major childhood health concerns

It is fairly straightforward to assess the major causes of sickness. Figure 2.3, based on reports from basic health units in 2003, lists Bhutan's most prevalent diseases. The main problems are respiratory infections, followed by skin diseases and diarrhoea. The relatively high prevalence of peptic ulcer syndrome is connected to a diet that includes a lot of chillies.

However, it is more difficult to get a true picture of what people are dying from. Bhutan lacks a comprehensive system of vital registration, has only recently introduced a system for certifying deaths, and carries out few post-mortems. The National Health Survey of 2000 did, however, build up a picture by reviewing the circumstances surrounding a sample number of deaths and on this basis was able to ascribe a cause of death in 80% of cases. The most common causes of death were lung diseases, including pneumonia (13.5%), followed by accidents and poisoning (8.7%), cardiovascular and blood disorders (8.5%) and 'old age' (7.9%). It is noticeable that fewer Bhutanese are now dying from infections and more from what might be called 'lifestyle' diseases.

It can be even more difficult to ascribe the cause of death for children who die before reaching their fifth birthday. But the Health Survey indicates that while pneumonia is still the major killer, thousands are still dying unnecessarily from diarrhoea (Figure 2.4). This survey does not indicate how old the children were when they died, but it seems clear that as the child mortality rate comes down, so more of the remaining deaths are those of infants, with a high proportion of these deaths taking place within the first weeks of life. International estimates of infant deaths indicate about half of deaths are during the first 28 days; of these 75

Figure 2.3 Illnesses reported to basic health units, 2003



% are in the first week and of these 40% are in the first 24 hours after birth .

Acute respiratory infections – Acute respiratory infections, including pneumonia, the top killer of children, are most evident during the winter. They can be related to the harsh climate, crowded rooms and smoke pollution from burning of wood fuel for cooking and space heating – as well as to poor hygiene which helps spread viruses. Many of these infections are easily treatable with affordable antibiotics, especially amoxycillin, if health workers recognize the symptoms (a cough, followed by short, rapid breathing) and bring sick children to the health centres.

Diarrhoea – Although much reduced, the incidence of diarrhoea still remains at quite a high

Fighting respiratory infections

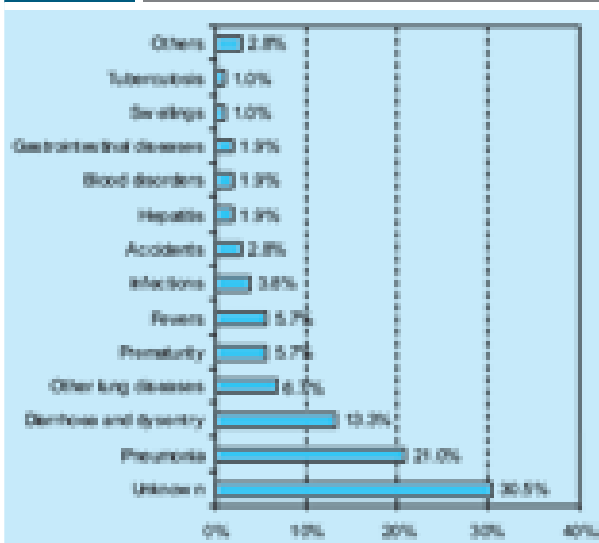
‘In the first year of the ARI programme two or three children still died because of the carelessness of the mother. But mothers now know what to do if the child gets a cough or cold. They have really taken this in, and they bring the child before the cough or cold is severe. In 2004, we had no child deaths.’

Health Assistant, Rangjung BHU, Eastern Bhutan

level, particularly during the summer months, largely due to poor standards of hygiene. But fewer children are dying nowadays, thanks to the wide availability of oral rehydration therapy in the BHUs, if not in people’s homes. Even so, children’s health and nutrition are being seriously undermined by repeated infections.

Immunizable childhood diseases – Bhutan has been very successful in immunizing its children. The health service started the expanded programme on immunization (EPI) in 1979, and by 1991 was able to declare universal childhood immunization. In 1994 tetanus toxoid for pregnant women was introduced, and in 1996 vaccination against hepatitis B. Since then EPI coverage has been sustained at above 85%: in 2003, BCG (tuberculosis) coverage was 93%;

Figure 2.4 Causes of death in children under five years



Source: DOHS, 2000.

DPT3 (diphtheria, pertussis, typhoid) coverage was 95%, oral polio vaccine coverage 96% and measles coverage 88% . Other vaccines have also been considered, such as those against bacterial meningitis, but have been considered too expensive. Bhutan has had no cases of polio since 1986, though there is always a danger that the disease could re-enter from neighbouring countries. Nor have there been any measles deaths since the mid-1990s despite an outbreak in Trongsa in 2003. Parents from remote communities bring their children to clinics and BHUs to be vaccinated – although they are not necessarily aware of the appropriate ages to do so. The Government now has a multi-year plan of action for EPI which includes improving vaccine quality and the health workers’ capacity – though it does not have sufficient resources.

Malnutrition

Bhutan still has disturbingly high levels of protein-energy malnutrition – a high proportion of children are stunted and/or underweight. However, the available data on malnutrition do not give a consistent picture and it is not clear whether there has been any progress. The data are summarized in Table 2.1. The data for 1989 came from a national nutrition survey. The data in 1999, which came from a national study of

3,000 under-five children in 30 randomly selected geogs seemed to register a substantial improvement.

However, a 2002 survey of children aged 6 to 60 months, carried out as part of a nation-

The most insecure districts tend to be in the east, where landholdings are small, and in the south where the climate makes it more difficult to store grains and cereals.

Children can start to become malnourished

Table 2.1 Malnutrition Rates Among Under-fives, 1998-2002

	1988	1999	2002 ¹
Weight for age (under weight) %	38	17	34
Height for age (Stunted) %	56	40	54
Weight for height (wasted) %	4.1	2.6	7.8

Source: 1988 and 1998, RGOB 2003; 2002, NAS 2003.

1. The sample for NAS 2003, was for the most part children 6 to 36 months

Table 2.2 Malnutrition Rates Among Children 6 to 36 Months by Region, 2002.

	Stunting	Underweight	Wasting
South	57	45	12.8
West	50	29	7.4
East	66	33	6.7
Central	54	27	6.1

Note: Stunting refers to low height-for-age; underweight to low weight-for-age; and wasting to low weight-for-height

Source: NAS, 2003.

al anaemia study, and published in 2003, cast doubt on that improvement, indicating relatively little change in the rates of underweight and stunting and a deterioration in the case of wasting. It also showed that the rates were significantly higher in the eastern and southern regions, where there are more likely to be food shortages, than in the centre or the west (Table 2.2). This study also concluded that malnutrition increased sharply between the first and second year of a child's life: in the case of stunting from 21% to 56% and for underweight from 12% to 32%.

Malnutrition, especially for adults, can be linked partly to food insecurity. Although there is no evidence of chronic hunger or food shortages in Bhutan, many parts of the country do suffer from food insecurity, mainly during the May to July period before the harvest. More than one-quarter of geogs and towns surveyed in 2000 reported some level of food insecurity.

even in the womb. In 1998 an estimated 24% of children, born in hospitals and BHUs had a low birthweight (less than 2.5 kilograms) though the proportion appears subsequently to have fallen to 14%. Mothers tend to have low birthweight babies if they are very young, anaemic, undernourished, have a series of closely spaced births and if they continue with hard physical work throughout pregnancy.

Even children of normal birth weight however, may become malnourished during the first or second year of life. This is sometimes because mothers do not start out feeding them exclusively with breastmilk – as they should for six months. Around 20% of the mothers feed children with other foods even in the first month. As a religious ritual they often feed a little butter soon after birth but also commonly start out feeding them with rice flour cooked with butter and little water, and later with soft rice porridge

Causes of malnutrition

'Third degree protein-energy malnutrition is not common. There is some first degree and a few in second degree. Usually it is because of ARI, not to do with poverty. Everyone has a house and some land for growing food. It may be to do with the mother, when she weans the child or whether she goes away, for example. The cases vary from child to child. Some people don't grow a lot of vegetables, or are not very knowledgeable about food values.'

Health assistant, Zhemgang BHU

or rice from the family pot mixed with a little butter and salt. Others may feed their infants cerelac, 'suji', or roasted wheat and barley flour. Very few mothers give their children protein from sources such as eggs or meat and may be reluctant to offer them fruit or vegetables fearing that the child will choke.

Part of the problem is that many mothers, rural and urban, cannot be with their infants the whole time. Some mothers take their babies on their backs to the fields, but most tend to leave them with the grandmother or an older sibling who may not feed the child frequently enough.

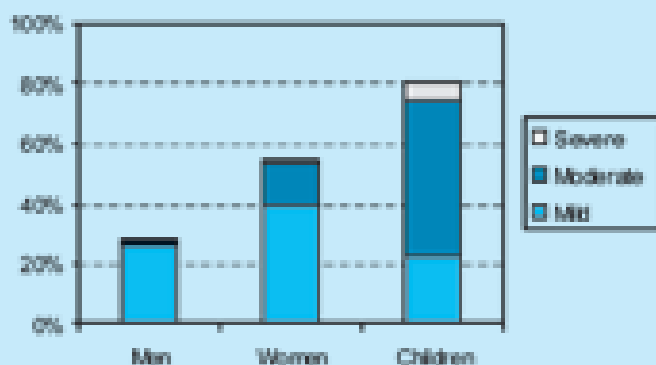
Micronutrient deficiencies

As a result in part of the poor quality of food, children can also go short of important micronutrients, particularly iron, Vitamin A and iodine.

Iron deficiency – The people of Bhutan suffer from high levels of iron-deficiency anaemia. A 2003 study found the proportions anaemic to be 28% for men, 55% for women and 81% for children. Children were also more likely to suffer from moderate or severe anaemia (Figure 2.5) and the rates were highest in the first year, almost 90%, with little distinction between boys and girls. The rates were lower in the south where just over half of children were anaemic, compared with other zones where the rate was more than 82% – presumably because children in the south have access to a wider variety of foods.

Anaemia can be tackled in a variety of ways. The best long-term solution is to diversify the diet to include even small quantities of red meat. The more immediate option is to provide iron supplement tablets, though this can be difficult for the smaller children who are most at risk. The most practical and sustainable option is to fortify rice or salt with iron. Since 2004 the Government has provided all primary school children and all girls in higher education with weekly iron folate tablets.

Figure 2.5 Severity of anaemia in men, women and children, 2002



Source: NAS, 2003

Iodine deficiency – For iodine, on the other hand, Bhutan has had a major success. In 1983 the prevalence of goitre, the principle symptom of iodine deficiency, was over 63%, but by 1992 it had more than halved and by 2003 Bhutan had eliminated iodine deficiency disorder – the first country in the region and the second developing country in the world to do so. This was achieved by ensuring that all salt was iodized and by carrying out community education. Bhutan has been able to capitalize on the fact that there is only one salt producer, which iodizes salt imported from India, but needs to be careful to block imports of cheaper, non-iodized salt.

Vitamin A – Bhutan does not have good data on Vitamin A deficiency. The most recent survey was in 1999 which found that 2.6% of under-five children had a clinical deficiency, though the prevalence may have been higher among some high-risk groups. The survey did not report on sub-clinical deficiencies. A low prevalence at that point could have been the result of Vitamin A distribution during the national immunizations days – which have since been discontinued. Children under one-year-old continue to benefit from the distribution of capsules as part of the EPI programme. But children between one and five, who should receive capsules as part of the growth monitoring and promotion programme, are missing out because that programme has a very low coverage. In addition, however, the Government distributes high-dose tablets to all primary school children – a policy that is not only expensive and has not been demonstrated to work, but also poses certain risks. A high dose of vitamin A given to a pregnant woman can cause birth defects. In rural Bhutan, enrolment in primary school is sometimes very late, and there are occasional cases of teenage pregnancy among school-girls, for whom such a dosage would be dangerous.

Maternal health

The health of Bhutan's children depends critically on the health of their mothers. Women's health is not just of value in itself. Healthy and well nourished women are also more likely to give birth to strong and healthy children and will be better able to provide for them.

In principle there is no reason why women's health should be any worse than men's. Bhutanese women have equal status in many respects and tend to have the strongest voice within the home. But they can also be more vulnerable there. They may, for example, be cooking on open fires in rooms with poor ventilation – and thus exposed to chronic lung disease. They will also be under strain if they have to walk long distances to fetch water from streams and springs, or to take children to the clinic. Women also tend to work longer hours than men and carry out a wider variety of tasks, including agricultural activities.

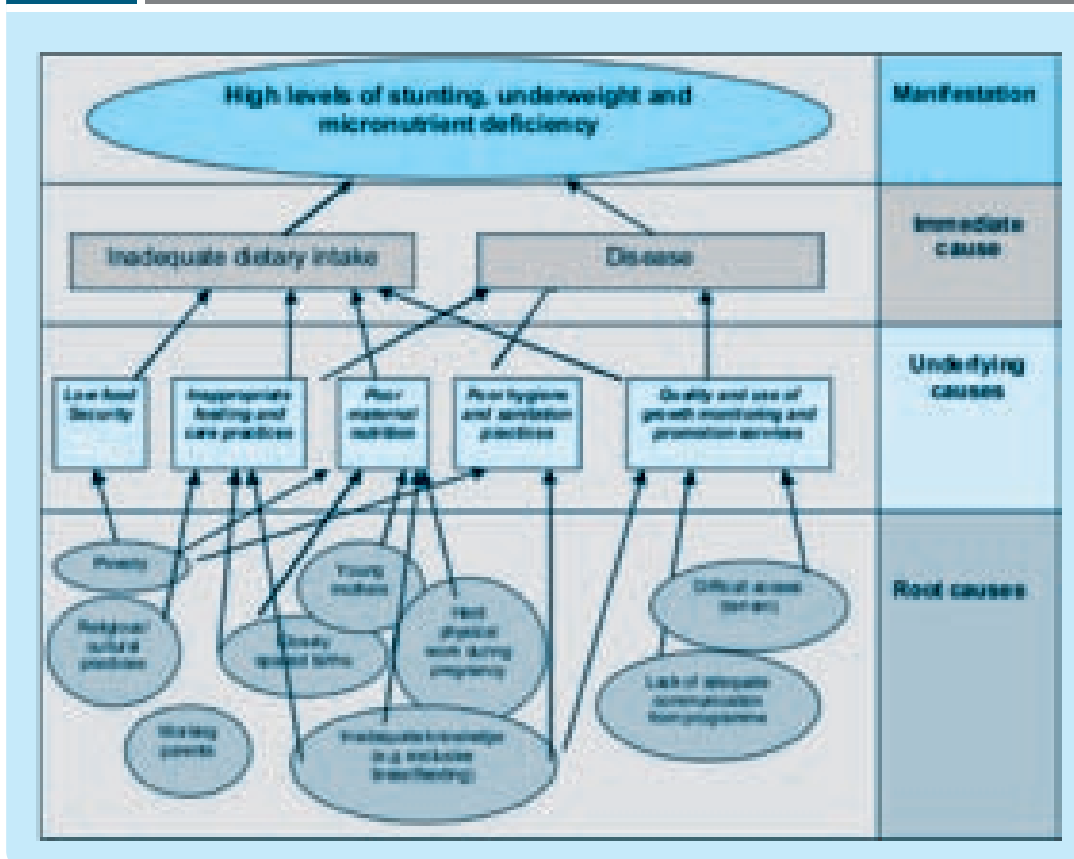
The specific health risks women face relates, as everywhere, to pregnancy and childbirth. Since 1971 when family planning was first introduced into the national health system, the Government of Bhutan has had a strong commitment to reproductive health – reinforced by the high-profile advocacy of Her Majesty Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck in her role as the Goodwill Ambassador of the United Nations Population Fund. This has helped to create a very positive environment for the promotion of family planning – enabling many more women to decide freely on the number and spacing of their children.

Contraception and child spacing

As a result there has been a steady increase in the proportion of couples using contraception – from 19% in 1994 to 31% in 2000. The methods used are indicated in Figure 2.7. Meanwhile, over the same period the total fertility rate came down from 5.6 children per woman of childbearing age to 4.7.

Nevertheless, by international standards few couples are using contraceptives, and a strikingly small proportion of them are using condoms. This is not because they are ignorant of contraception: of those who participated in the national literacy survey, for example, 73% mentioned condoms as one of the modern contraceptive methods, followed by pills (66%), and vasectomy (63%). Condoms, all of which are supplied by UNFPA, are distributed only in health facilities – at least in the rural areas – so this could partly account for their low usage.

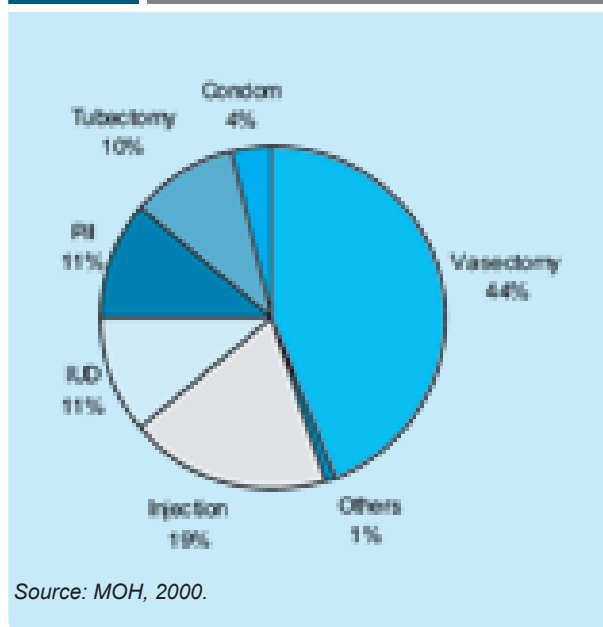
Figure 2.6 Causal analysis for malnutrition



Nevertheless, the main reason why people are not using contraception appears to be that they do not want to; 75% of non-users in the 2003 Living Standards Survey said they did not use them because they were ‘not concerned’; less than 1% said it was because contraceptives were unavailable. Rural communities may not feel under much pressure to have smaller families since many people are leaving for the cities; however the costs of raising children – in terms of schooling and livelihood pressures – are rising for everyone. In the east, where family size is typically high, people cite religious reasons for not adopting family planning. But since more husbands are disappearing to seek work in the western part of the country this may serve to reduce family size, especially when the husband abandons the wife permanently.

Normally urban dwellers and the wealthier have smaller families, though the 2003 household survey showed very little difference in contraceptive use between rural and urban

Figure 2.7 Methods of contraception in use



dwellers or between the poor and non-poor. However, this survey did register a noticeably higher contraceptive prevalence than the Health Survey in 2000: 43% for both rural and urban couples.

Early marriage and childbirth

Even if mothers are indeed having the number of children they want, many are starting too young – having children before they are sufficiently mature physically or emotionally. Teenage marriage is still common, although education is having the effect of raising age at marriage. According to the National Literacy Survey, among those 15 to 19, around 5% of boys and 14% of girls were married – even though the 1980 Marriage Act establishes the minimum age of marriage as 18. However, ‘marriage’ may not amount to a formal contract, so it is difficult to distinguish between what in some societies would be considered as ‘going together’ or ‘having a partner’, and formal married union. Some early partnerships, especially in urban areas, are likely to be less enduring than in the past.

Few marriages are registered, even today. Traditionally, when a couple became established, usually as a result of consensual sex with the approval of the girl’s parents, they were regarded as married. Thus teenage sex and pregnancy were the settled prelude to permanent male-female union. A common system of courtship was ‘night-hunting’ in which the man entered the home of the woman to engage in sexual relations, with or without parental consent, but usually – given that everyone knew everyone’s business locally – with mutual understanding and acceptance. This did not necessarily have the marauding or predatory character the expression implies, though it can also serve, especially in today’s socially mobile environment, as a cover for exploitation and abuse.

Today, too, girls in their teens living at home may become pregnant: where this happens it is mostly while at home on vacation, though a few girls have been known to do so while living in school hostels. They may then marry the father or enter into a permanent union, though this outcome is no longer so certain. The previously close connection between the onset of

sexual relations and permanent union is not as fixed – which has implications both for the young mothers and their children. Pregnancy outside marriage is also less easy to accommodate in a modern society, especially in the towns. Even so, extra-marital sex, unmarried mothers and children born out of wedlock do not carry the stigma they would in some other parts of South Asia.

As girls stay on in school, they expect to marry later and therefore may postpone sexual activity. On the other hand, secondary school staff believe that one reason why more girls than boys do not continue their education past class X is that they or their parents expect that girls in their late teens will soon marry.

Although Bhutan is sexually a fairly liberal society, there is as yet little preparation for

Young ‘marriage’ and school girl pregnancies

‘Girls may marry here at 15, 16, or 17. We discouragethemandexplainabout complications in pregnancy. When girls get pregnant at the school – there were two cases last year – there is a question of confidentiality. We insist that, as health workers and advisors, we should maintain the confidentiality of the students, buttheschoolauthoritiesinsisttheyneed to be prepared. Informationspreadsfrom friend to friend and when we hear about it we encourage them to come to the BHU for a urine test and then for ultrasound; then we inform the parents. Some girls are distressed. They go home and then they stay. We suggested that the girls be issued with a transfer certificate so they can go to another school. But whether they do that, I don’t know’.

Health assistant, Zhemgang BHU

sexual maturity, nor much effort to impart ‘life skills’ to enable young men and women to handle their sexuality. Parents and children rarely discuss the subject. Teachers too are reluctant:

they will give the biological facts and help girl boarders with issues arising out of menstruation, but generally they are uncomfortable about discussing sex openly with adolescents and children. Health staff, however, nowadays go to schools on a more regular basis and give talks about sex, reproductive health, HIV, drug and substance abuse. However, teachers report that it is not common for a dialogue to develop or girls to ask questions.

Teenagers who do wish to protect themselves also have limited access to contracep-

Views on night hunting

'Night-hunting will only stop if the women refuse to participate. This is a tradition and in the villages courtship is still like that. The cases of teenage pregnancy we see are usually because of that custom. Today, more cases of night-hunting are related to casual sex, and fewer are for marriage. In the case of students, it is very few. It does not happen at school, it happens in the village.'

Health assistant, Zhemgang BHU

'All our marriages were based on night-hunting, so how can we disapprove of it? It has its good side. It is all right when the boy comes with a commitment. My husband came several times, and eventually I grabbed him and said yes, it will be fine, as long as you build me a house. I knew him quite well – he was my first cousin. After the road was opened, we got a lot of husbands – drivers and bus service workers. They got to know the girls. When a man comes night-hunting, it has to be someone you know; otherwise he will not be let in. If it is someone she doesn't want, then you close the door and don't let him in.'

Yeshey, 59, Buli village, Zhemgang

tives. While girls in urban areas can buy them from medical stores, those in the rural areas have fewer options. Unmarried adolescent girls can get contraceptives from the BHUs but few would be sufficiently bold enough to ask for them, or to risk being seen taking them anonymously from BHU dispensers.

Health advice for school children

'We liaise with the schools, and we have a school health person in place. We sometimes visit the schools ourselves for talks. And there are Days – World AIDS Day, Women's Day, Children's Day. Each school has a topic to discuss, and one of our staff may go and address the school Assembly.'

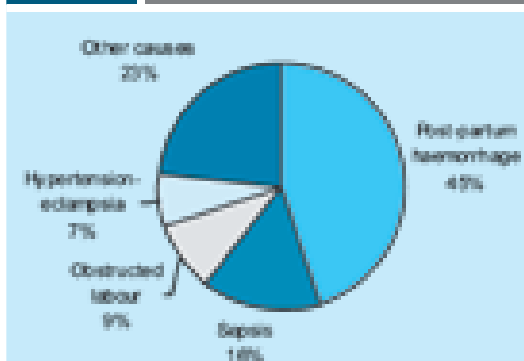
District medical officer, Yebilatsa Hospital

Maternal mortality

Too many mothers in Bhutan, whether teenagers or older, are still dying as a result of pregnancy. The maternal mortality ratio per 100,000 live births does appear to have come down: from 773 in 1984 to 380 in 1994 to 255 in 2000 but is still unacceptably high. Nationally, assuming 15,000 births per year and a maternal mortality ratio of 255 this would imply around 40 maternal deaths. But these figures should be treated with caution. Estimating the maternal mortality ratio is always difficult since the number of deaths is relatively small per head of population and accurate figures require larger sample sizes than are typical in most household surveys. Mothers all over the world, regardless of nationality, social class or state of health can develop childbirth complications – which globally are estimated to occur in 15% of all pregnancies. These typically include haemorrhage, eclampsia, obstructed labour, and the consequences of unsafe abortion. The causes of maternal death in Bhutan, based on an analysis of 56 cases over the period 2001-03, are indicated in Figure 2.8, showing the major cause of death

to be post-partum haemorrhage. Two-thirds of these deaths took place at home, mostly in the absence of trained birth attendants.

Figure 2.8 Causes of maternal death, 2001-03



Source: MOH, 2004.

All these conditions are treatable if mothers have access to adequate emergency obstetric care. Ultimately, for obstructed labour this could require a caesarean section which in Bhutan can only be carried out in a district hospital – even assuming a qualified surgeon and an anaesthetist are available.

The aim should be to prevent as many problems as possible, detect potential complications early and ensure that women needing attention can be transferred in time to the appropriate level of care. A report of the Emergency Obstetric Care Facilities Utilization Study in 2003 estimated that the time between the onset of the complications to receiving care averaged six hours – a fatal delay in the case of haemorrhaging which can lead to death in a couple of hours.

The main problem in Bhutan is that around 80% of deliveries happen at home with or without a trained birth attendant – in most cases many hours away from emergency obstetric intervention, and often beyond the reach of a vehicle along steep mountain paths. In these difficult circumstances the safest option is to try to ensure that all births take place in BHUs or in district hospitals. As well as ensuring better access to emergency facilities this will also permit 'active management of the third stage of labour' which can reduce the likelihood of complications by, for example, giving a drug,

Preparing for safe pregnancy

'Last year after the floods, we had to carry a woman to Trashigang because the road was washed away (17 kms). This was a case of severe pre-eclampsia. We carried her to the junction, and then an ambulance came from Trashigang. Another woman up at Merak suffered from prolonged labour and lost the child.

'We are getting ready now, in case we have problems in the forthcoming rainy season. We know all the women who are due to deliver. At the outreach clinic, we explain to them and tell the stories of the women we have saved. Since last year, we started the 'safe pregnancy' programme, and now even women in the more remote places are in touch with the health services. Each outreach community has two 'safemotherhood' volunteers, who report to us any case of pregnancy.'

Phuba, a Health Assistant at Rangjung BHU

oxytocin, which causes the uterus to contract and reduces the likelihood of haemorrhage. For this reason, having all births in BHUs would on its own probably cut the number of maternal deaths in half – even without emergency obstetric care. It would also boost child survival by reducing peri-natal deaths.

In 2005 the Minister of Health, in a major policy advance, subsequently endorsed by the National Health Conference, announced that henceforth Bhutan would aim for 100% 'institutional delivery'. Births should take place either in BHUs or district hospitals all of which would be linked to a network of emergency obstetric care facilities. The current target is to establish a two-tier system across the country with 15 facilities offering basic emergency obstetric care and 14 others offering comprehensive emergency obstetric care. Basic care would include the administration of antibiotics, oxytocin, or anti-convulsants as well as assisted delivery with forceps. Comprehensive care would in ad-

Three women's views about their place of delivery

'I delivered all six of my children without anyone's help, except that my husband brought some water. Once I was in the car going to Mongar. I asked the driver to stop and walked a few steps off the road. Then I borrowed his shirt to wrap the baby. Another time I was herding. First the cow delivered a calf, and then I delivered twins. I was quite by myself. I never used to go to the hospital. They used to send someone to check up on me, but I turned my back, I refused to show my stomach. They did get frustrated.'

'My youngest was delivered in the hospital. The three eldest were all delivered at home. When I was due with the fourth, I was forced by the health workers – I was dragged to the hospital against my will. I felt very shy there. I didn't like the procedures. Until the baby is coming out the nurses do nothing. Your legs are in the air and it is quite embarrassing.'

'We all deliver at home – we much prefer it. We can always ask someone to come up from the BHU to help, but I didn't do that because my pains were not severe. My husband helped me – he is a good midwife. He thinks that if I go for check-ups and have no problems during pregnancy, home delivery is ok.'

Urban and rural mothers, Trashiyangste

dition offer caesarean sections and safe blood transfusions.

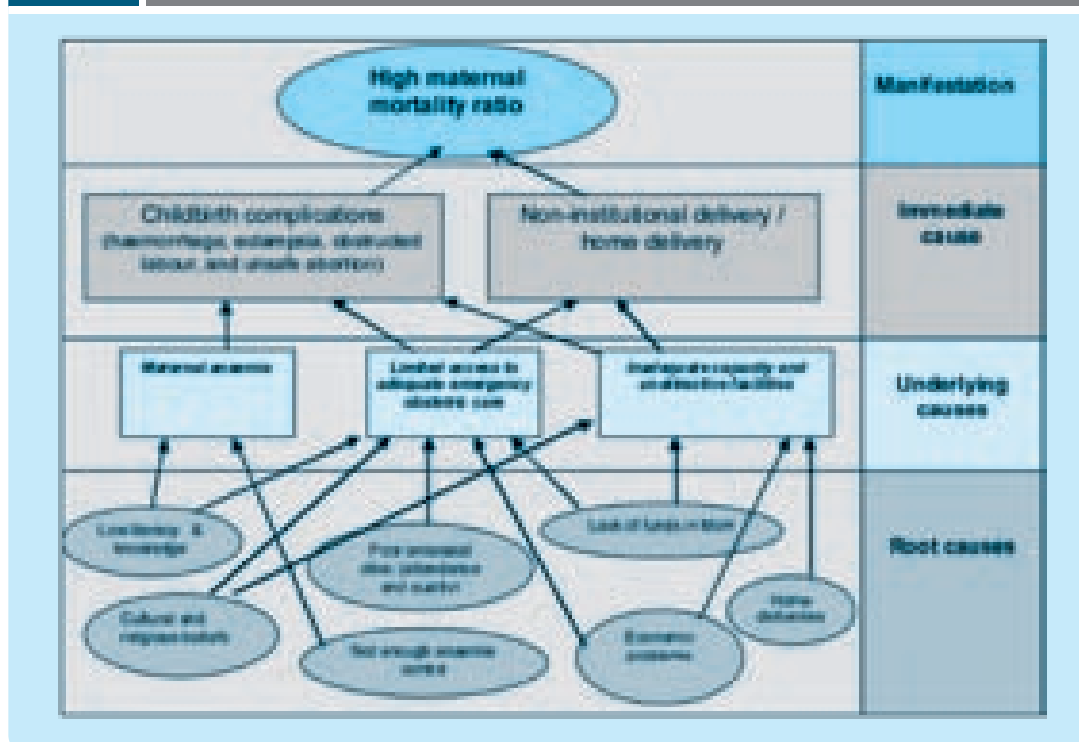
Achieving 100% institutional delivery will be a challenge. The most immediate task is to convince mothers-to-be and their families. The traditional place to give birth has been at home, surrounded by families, with the minimum of fuss; to have managed almost alone is a point

of pride with many older women. They are pleased that, today, risks are reduced and their daughters are within reach of emergency care; but institutional delivery remains unappealing. Mothers express reluctance at the prospect of spending hours or days from home in the cold and generally bleak environment in the BHU, and about giving birth in an open ward in the presence of male medical staff with very little privacy. Families may also balk at the expense of members spending significant time away from home, not just the mother, but also the people who will feed and generally support her in the BHU or the hospital.

Encouraging mothers to give birth in institutions will thus require a major education campaign. This should spell out to women – and their husbands – the risks associated with childbirth, explain the medical interventions that can save them, encourage them to deliver in institutions and to come to the facility early, before the onset of labour. At the same time, the government will also need to ensure that the BHUs and hospitals are indeed fully prepared to receive them – and can offer a safe, warm and comfortable environment. It is worth noting that one-third of maternal deaths occur at hospitals or health centres – though this is often because mothers in distress arrive too late.

These efforts should be complemented by improved ante-natal care. At present, around three-quarters of women attend an antenatal clinic only once, while the rest only attend two or three times. Ideally, they should attend four times. The main value of ante-natal care is to improve the health of the mother and the unborn child, by treatment of anaemia, for example, or giving a tetanus injection. But contact with a health worker should also draw the mother more into the health system and help her and her family plan for the delivery period – including arranging transport in the case of an emergency. Developing a relationship with the health assistant can then encourage her to give birth at the BHU or a hospital. This can then be followed up with post-natal care ensuring that both attend mother and child health clinics, where they can take advantage of immunization, growth monitoring and other services.

Figure 2.9 Maternal mortality, causal analysis



HIV/AIDS

Bhutan still has the opportunity to avert a full-scale HIV/AIDS epidemic. The number of confirmed infections is still modest: the first cases were reported in 1993 and by September 2006 there were still only 101 confirmed cases. Even assuming that only 10% to 20% of cases have actually been detected, this would mean that HIV prevalence is probably below 0.1%.

The main mode of transmission appears to be heterosexual sex. Unlike many other countries, Bhutan does not have an established commercial sex industry; indeed sex work is illegal. There is, however, extensive non-commercial casual sex among the population as a whole – which, when it involves such mobile groups as long-distance drivers and traders, migrant workers and the armed forces, will help to accelerate the spread of the virus. A study of some of these groups in 2003 found that migrant workers had had up to 12 sexual partners, soldiers up to 20, and truck drivers up to 280. The average age of infection among cases reported between 1993 and 2002 was 23 years for women and 32 years for men.

Though the prevalence is still quite low, there are a number of other risk factors, in addition to the extent of casual sex, that suggest it could soon rise steeply. One is that neighbouring countries have a much higher prevalence and since Bhutan's borders are fairly porous, people living with HIV/AIDS can enter and leave quite freely. In addition, many more people nowadays are travelling outside the country, for business or for education. A second risk factor is the rising level of substance abuse; although injecting drug use has not been a major source of transmission in the past, it could be in the future. A third risk factor is that commercial sex too seems to be becoming more common; previously mostly confined to the border towns, such as Phuentsholing, it is now surfacing in other areas – responding to the extending road network and the development of major construction sites around new hydropower plants. But the fourth and most persistent factor is the low level of condom use which increases the likelihood of transmission of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

Bhutan faces all these risk factors in a very young population – more than half the popu-

Learning lessons from maternal deaths in Mongar

In March 2005, a 19-year-old woman from a village in Lhuentse district was admitted to Mongar Hospital suffering acute abdominal pains. The doctors operated and found she was suffering from septicaemia. She had delivered her second child 21 days earlier, at home, with only village elders in attendance. Afterwards, she had recovered enough to return to field work 10 days after the birth. But then came the pains, steadily worsening and help sought far too late. She died from multiple organ failure. The doctors' conclusion: infection was probably contracted during the delivery due to unsanitary conditions.

The tragedy of a young mother dying unnecessarily and leaving two small children behind brings home the perilous nature of childbirth in a country where most families live several days away from hospitals with modern obstetric facilities. Many villages are perched up on mountains along winding trails that make it extremely difficult to carry emergency cases to the road-head. Expectant mothers in rural areas usually receive ante-natal check-ups when the outreach team from the local Basic Health Unit (BHU) visits once a month. If there is any likelihood of complication, they are told to set off well in advance to the district hospital for the birth. Where there is no indication of risk, mothers are encouraged to deliver at the local BHU.

But in Bhutan, the tradition is to deliver at home. Women would rather summon an attendant from the BHU, and stay put. In this case there was no attendant. Doctors at Mongar say that, despite the increase in health service spread, some people still lack awareness or fail to access care in good time, especially in eastern districts. Dr. Mimi, a paediatrician, feels that the inquiry into the case – mandatory in the case of any maternal death – will provide lessons to be learned. 'We need to know why too many mothers do not seek assistance from a trained person. We assume it is mostly a problem of distances and hills. But maybe there is more to it than that.'

Another case of maternal death in a nearby village seems to bear out Dr. Mimi's supposition. A 28-year-old mother of three had been strongly advised by the local health worker that she might suffer complications during birth, and should attend the district hospital for her fourth delivery. But she refused. According to her father, she had a premonition of death and preferred to stay at home, fearful that her body would not be allowed back for the necessary prayers and oblations. She delivered with only her husband present, and died some hours later of haemorrhage. Neighbours – not the husband or father – belatedly called an ambulance, but it arrived too late.

Mothers such as these, for whom longstanding tradition and belief still favour home delivery, will take much persuasion to go to hospital instead. Neither of these women was outside the reach of obstetric advice nor even emergency medical attention. But both types of service were ignored, with fatal consequences.

lation are under 20 – and prone to casual sex and experimentation. A 2005 report on out-of-school youth, found, for example, that more than half had sexual experience, and that the boys on average had had around 10 partners .

Aware of these dangers, the Royal Government has taken the threat of HIV/AIDS very seriously. As far back as 1988 a donor-funded National STD/AIDS control programme was started within the Ministry of Health; this included a limited surveillance system and the distribution of information materials. Then in 2002 multi-sectoral task forces were established within each dzongkhag, bringing together local government officials, the private sector and civil society. His Majesty the King has also issued a decree on HIV/AIDS, exhorting his subjects to take preventive measures and to show compassion and understanding to those who are infected.

This has certainly helped diffuse information. HIV/AIDS is discussed very openly and almost everyone is now aware of the risks. The out-of-school youth report found, for example, that 89% of the youth were aware of HIV/AIDS . People may not, however, be too sure of the details. The National Literacy Survey, for example, found that only 72% knew that the virus could be transmitted through unprotected sex, while half knew of the potential risk from blood transfusions, 37% knew about mother-to-child transmission, and 41% knew of the danger of shared needles. But there were also serious misconceptions: around one-fifth thought it could be transmitted through mosquito bites or through kissing, hugging or sharing cloths. More alarmingly, around half did not realize that a healthy-looking person could have HIV/AIDS .

Even when people are aware of the dangers, they do not necessarily take appropriate action. The risk assessment study in 2003 found, for example, that only 22% of people were consistently using condoms, while the rest did so irregularly or never. One reason that they gave for

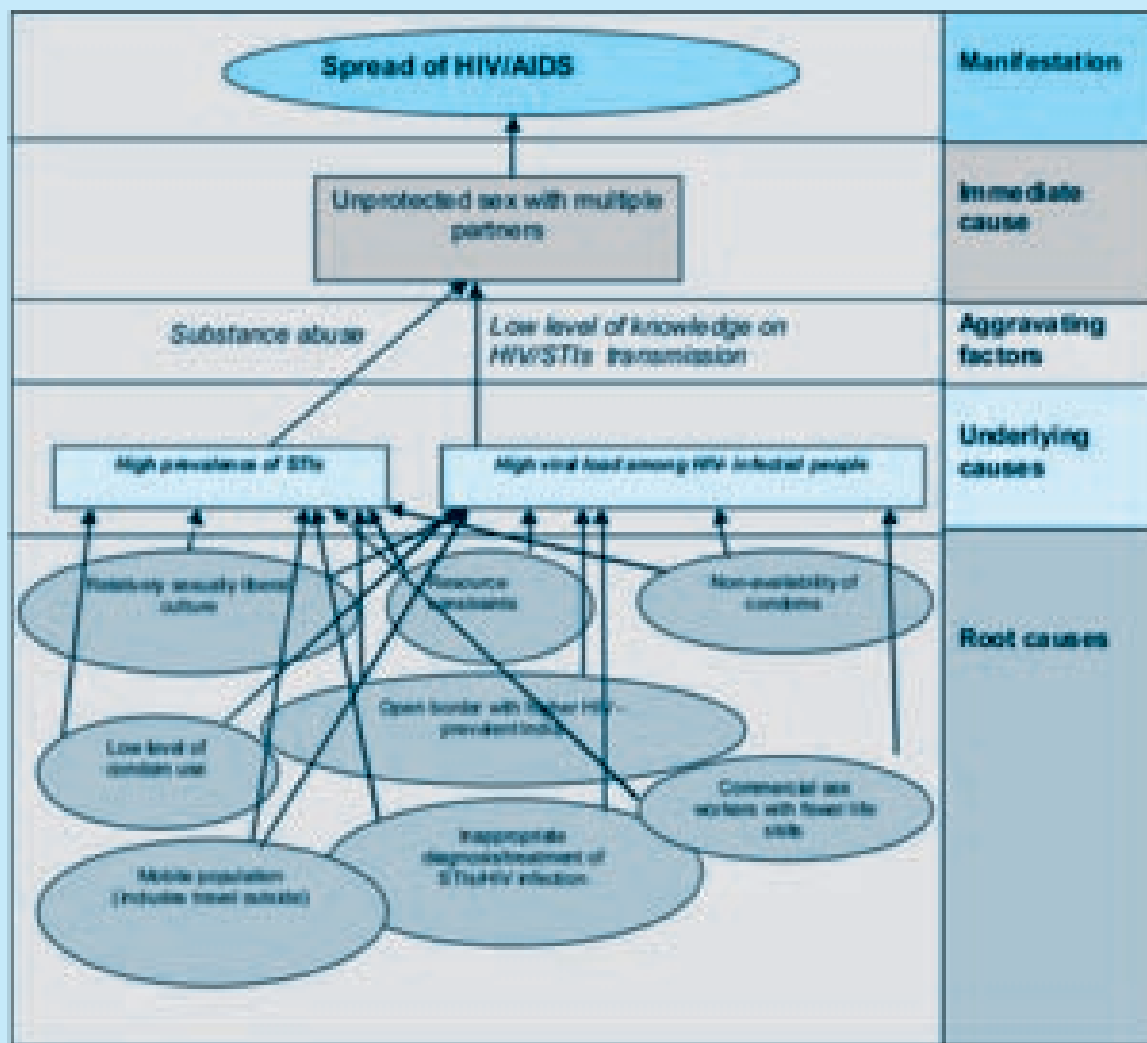
not using condoms was that there were none in their village or that they were shy of going to health facilities to collect them.

There was also a study in 2003 of people living with HIV/AIDS . This study found that they were very fearful of the stigma since there was evidence of discrimination in employment. There were also concerns about the lack of counselling and of confidentiality in testing.

Though the Government is very aware of the dangers, programmes thus far have been fairly limited, hampered by a lack of knowledge about how the epidemic is spreading in Bhutan and the limited resources and staff available to the Ministry of Health. However, that should change as a result of a \$5.6 million World Bank grant for a five-year HIV/AIDS and STI prevention and control programme – 2004/05 to 2008/09 . This will work through a National HIV/AIDS Commission chaired by the Ministry of Finance. The project has four main components: prevention; institutional strengthening and capacity building; care, support and treatment; and surveillance and information gathering. This should ensure, for example, that everyone who is diagnosed as HIV-positive will have access to anti-retroviral treatment, especially pregnant mothers in order to prevent mother-to-child transmission.

A major issue for this programme and others in Bhutan will be targeting. Given that the main transmission route is simply heterosexual sex, this suggests that virtually the whole sexually active population is at risk. But while the aim should be to have testing and counselling services available throughout the country, the immediate priority should be to establish a strong presence in places with high rates of casual sex such as at truck stops, vegetable markets, labour camps, bars, restaurants and also during festivals.

Figure 2.10 HIV/AIDS, causal analysis





At present, more than half the population cannot read and write.

CHAPTER 3 An educated generation

Over four decades, and in a flexible and innovative fashion, Bhutan has been extending its system of basic schooling. But the benefits of education have often been distributed unevenly, and especially towards boys, many of whom aim primarily for careers in government service. Extending the right to education to all children, boys and girls, raises many questions about the type and quality of education needed to cope with an increasingly complex world.

Bhutan has taken enormous strides in education. Both the Government and local communities have worked hard to create schools in the most remote areas. There is, however, still a long way to go before every Bhutanese child receives a high quality education. Around one-third of children receive no schooling at all, and those who do attend school may start late and have to repeat classes. At present, more than

half the population cannot read and write.

From the age of six, every Bhutanese child has a right to eleven years of free 'basic education'. This consists of one year of pre-primary school, six years of primary school, and four years of secondary school, which will take the child up to class X. It had been difficult to assess exactly what proportion of children are taking

Table 3.1 Primary Level Enrolment Statistics

	1998 ¹	2002 ²	2003 ³	2004 ⁴
Primary Net Enrolment Ratio				
National	52.9	50.84	70.22	69
Female	47.2	48.14	67.10	-
Male	58.4	53.6	73.45	-
Urban			88.93	-
Urban-female	-	-	87.78	-
Urban-male	-	-	90.16	-
Rural			65.28	-
Rural-female	-	-	61.55	-
Rural-male	-	-	69.11	-
Primary Gross Enrolment Ratio				
National	71.9	81	92.65	84.2
Female	61.5	74	85.86	-
Male	82.1	88	99.66	-
Urban	-	-	109.01	-
Urban-female	-	-	105.65	-
Urban-male	-	-	112.57	-
Rural	-	-	88.32	-
Rural-female	-	-	80.55	-
Rural-male	-	-	96.30	-

1. Education for All Assessment, An Assessment of the Progress, Education Division, Ministry of Health and Education, RGoB, 1999 (November)
2. Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education
3. Bhutan Living Standard Survey, 2004
4. MDG Report 2005, Planning Department, RGoB

Table 3.2

Proportion of pupils starting Class PP who reach Class VI ¹

	1996	1998	2000	2001	2002
National	60.5	64.5	75.8	72.6	78.8
Female	64.2	66.9	80.5	77.3	85.5
Male	57.5	62	72	68.6	73.2

1. General Statistics, Ministry of Education, Policy and Planning Division, for years of 1996, 1998, 2000, 2001 and 2002.

advantage of this – because of a lack of census data. However, with the release the report on the National Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2005, the Government has been able to present gross and net primary school enrolment rates for 2006. The Gross Primary school enrolment is 102.1% and the net primary school enrolment is 79.4%, (boys - 80% and 79% - girls). There have also been improvements in examination performance: between 2001 and 2003 the proportion of pupils passing the Class VI examinations rose from 84% to 87% .

The Government anticipates further improvements, and in the current Five-Year Plan (2002-07) has set its sights on achieving universal primary education, defining this as gross enrolment of 100%. In Bhutan, however, the fact that schools have only recently been constructed, and the pace of that construction, has meant that schooling only became a possibility after many children had passed the usual age of entry. Accordingly, many children are in school at ages well above the normal age for a class. As more schools have been built, this problem is reducing. But it is still

the case that children start school late; and in addition, their lack of familiarity with learning and uneducated family background means that they often repeat classes. As a result, primary schools generally have significant numbers of children outside the primary-school age range. Thus 100% enrolment is a more arbitrary target than it appears, as the country's gross primary school enrolment has already crossed 100%, like many other countries. A more accurate picture of progress towards universal primary education would be offered by net enrolment – the proportion of children enrolled who are of primary school age.

The National Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2005 has been an immense help in generating much needed data to calculate basic indicators for all sectors, including education. In addition to enrolment rates, it reports an adult literacy rate (age 15 and above) of 52.8% with 65% for males and 39% for females.

Their children have been more fortunate. During the subsequent decades, and especially during the 1980s, the Government increased the number of schools offering primary education; by 2006 there were 349 . It also did so in an innovative and flexible fashion – so as to arrive at the most appropriate solution for reaching very scattered communities. Of these schools 104 are government primary schools – built, maintained and staffed by the government – offering the full range of classes. The rest are 'community schools': in places with insufficient children to justify a full primary school, communities themselves have responded by building schools of their own – for which the Government would then supply teachers, books and stationary. Typically they start with one or two teachers, perhaps covering up to grade III and then expanding according to need – or oc-

Enrolling at the proper age

'There have been many improvements in recent years. Roads, communications, and the increase in girls' enrolment. Also children are entering school in the proper classes, at a more appropriate age. Before they might continue in school until the age of 25.'

Staff member, Zhemgang High School

asionally closing when the number of pupils dwindle. By 2006 there were 245 community primary schools though many do not offer all the primary classes. Since then many of these schools have been renovated: UNICEF has supplied corrugated iron roofing sheets and other materials as well as helping with furniture and separate toilet facilities for boys and girls

To accommodate children who live too far from the school to return home every night, around half of primary schools also have boarding facilities supervised by the teachers. In many cases both day and boarding pupils also benefit from free school meals provided by the World Food Programme. A few community schools have similar facilities: parents build huts around the school and designate someone from the community to care for the children. In the past boarding facilities have been essential for primary schools, to help fulfil children's right to education. However, boarding also detracts from children's rights to be with their families and there can also be problems with the isolation or lack of protection potentially involved in living away from home.

The benefits for the younger generation are evident in the achievements in literacy. Although the overall literacy rate (age 6 years and above) as per the National Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2005 is only 59.5%

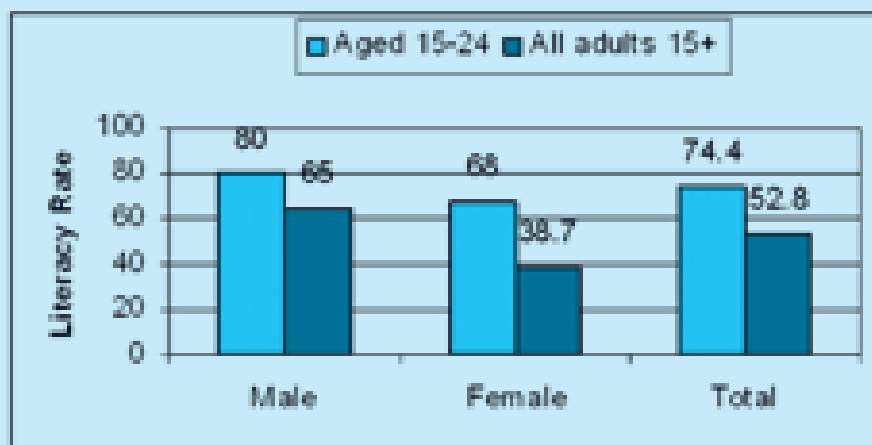
for those aged 15 to 24 the rate is 74.4% (Figure 3.1).

Despite this success, one-quarter of children aged 6 to 14 are not going to school: some 45,000 children are being denied their right to education and the Government has been unable to make primary schooling compulsory. There are many reasons for this shortfall. Some children are inhibited by lack of availability and inaccessibility of schools, others by family circumstances and preferences.

As far as availability is concerned, it might be thought that areas with more scattered population would be less well served. This will be true for individual communities, but viewed at the district level it is notable that some districts with scattered rural population appear to have been quite successful. This is evident from Table 3.1 which shows that the proportion of children aged 6 to 14 attending any kind of school is actually highest in Gasa, Bumthang and Ha.

Dispersal of the population is only part of the picture. Another important factor is geographical location. This is evident from Figure 3.2 which shows that the most serious enrolment problems are in the south, where a number of schools were closed following security problems in 1989-90. A few are still closed, although most have gradually re-opened. Dur-

Figure 3.1 Literacy rate by Age and Sex, 2006



Source: National Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2005

Marrying for security

'I recently dropped out of school in Paro district. My family suffered many tragedies in the past six months. First my older sister killed herself. Then my mother died, and soon after, my father. Another older sister is married and lives with her husband on the farm in Paro, but she cannot offer me a home or support me in school. 'My dead sister's husband came from Tingtibi to attend my father's funeral. I no longer had anyone to live with, so my relatives insisted that I marry him. He accepted the idea. He had lost his wife, and he agreed. So I came back here with him to Tingtibi as his wife. He has agreed to support me if I can go back to school, but I am not sure the school will let me attend. So far, I have not tried to ask.'

Pema, 16, Tingtibi, Zhemgang district

Not sure what to do ...

'I left school at 15 in class IV. My mother died when I was seven, and my father, a farmer, could no longer afford my studies. I used to be interested in studying, but not anymore – I lost the urge. I met someone in Trashigang who offered me a job in Thimphu. I went there and did TV cabling, worked in a shopping complex, and as a cook. Then my father became infirm. One of my sisters has run away and not been seen for 16 years. The other is with her husband in another village. So I returned to the village to help my father and started carrying stones for road construction. I earn very little. I could get a job as a cook, but I think people here would look down on me.'

Kunzang, 18, Ranjung, Trashigang

ing the long period of closure a generation of young people in the south lost out on education. Moreover, because of some continuing fears of insecurity, teachers are reluctant to be posted to these areas.

A further serious problem for children from the south whose family had been involved in activities that endangered the state have to obtain 'Security Clearance' to be eligible for government professional scholarships after their higher secondary education. And there are reports of children as young as six having been turned away from primary schools because they lack identity cards. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child makes it clear that every child has a right to education. Obstructing children's access to school is thus a breach of the Convention.

To meet the overall shortage of schools, during the period of the Ninth Plan the Government planned for the construction of 134 new community schools, aiming to provide most children with schools within three kilometres, or one hour's walking distance, a target it may well achieve by the end of 5 year plan. This should also enable many children who are currently boarding to live at home.

Despite a better distribution of schools, a number of children will still not be covered, particularly those in nomadic and migrant population. For these it may be more appropriate to establish mobile schools, while for others in the most remote villages it should be possible to introduce systems of distance learning.

Starting late and repeating

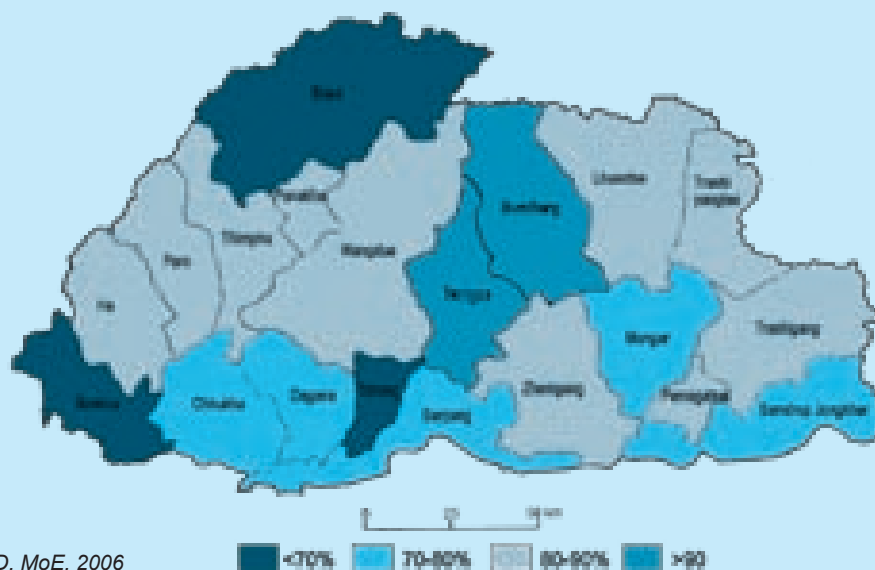
Even when children enroll in school, many still start at over six years old or have to repeat classes. Quite a few children repeat grade I because teachers want to make sure that pupils acquire the basic skills. Others may have to repeat class IV if they have been transferred from community schools where they had not reached the necessary standard. However, fewer children now seem to be repeating: between 1990 and 2002, the proportion fell from 28% to 15%, with similar figures for boys and girls. The effect of late enrolment and repetition is illustrated in Figure 3.3. This shows that most grades have

Table 3.3 Enrolment by district, 2006

	Gross enrolment ratio	Net enrolment ratio
Bumthang	113%	94%
Chukha	93%	71%
Dagana	104%	75%
Gasa	87%	68%
Ha	107%	84%
Lhuentse	103%	81%
Mongar	100%	78%
Paro	106%	86%
Pemagatshel	113%	89%
Punakha	108%	88%
Samdrup Jongkhar	107%	78%
Samtse	87%	65%
Sarpang	94%	72%
Thimphu	104%	87%
Trashigang	105%	82%
Trashiyangtse	112%	87%
Trongsa	117%	92%
Tsirang	99%	68%
Wangdue	104%	83%
Zhemgang	119%	89%
Bhutan	102%	79%

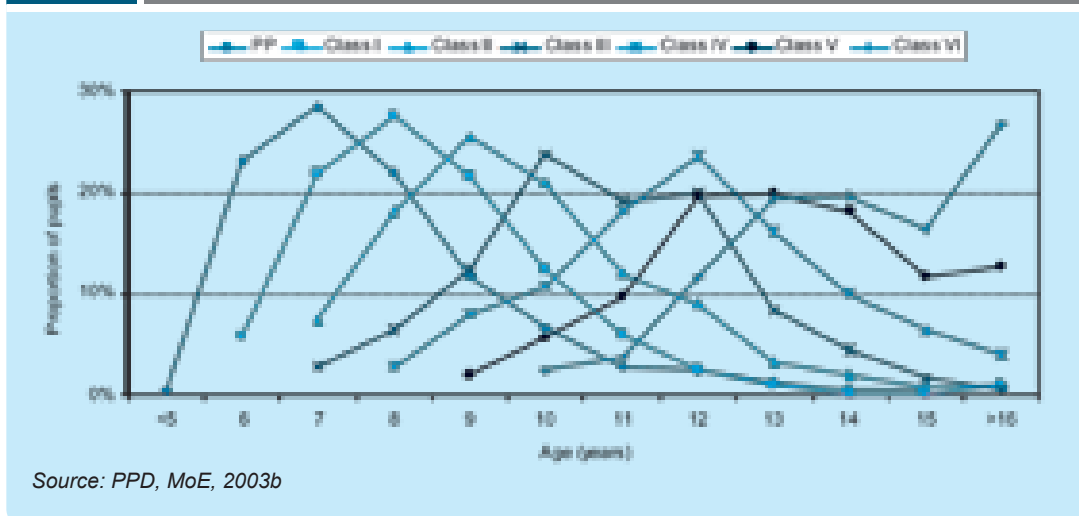
Source: PPD, MoE, 2006

Figure 3.2 Net enrolment ratio by district, 2006



Data Source: PPD, MoE, 2006

Figure 3.3 Age range in primary classes



age ranges of around five or six years. In class IV children could be anything from 8 to 16 years. In class VI more than one-quarter of children are 16 or older .

At the same time many of those who enroll in primary school are failing to complete. As a result of drop-out, which is around 4% annually, and failing to enrol for the next grade, only 78% of those entering primary school reach class VI, 64% reach class VIII and only 57% complete basic education by reaching class X .

Why children are not going to school

Children can only go to schools that are within reach. But nowadays accessibility is not the only factor, and not even the most significant one. This is evident from a number of surveys that have explored the reasons for low school attendance. The Bhutan Living Standard Survey, for example, asked parents why their children were not going to school. Although some families did cite the distance, the most significant cause is poverty: more than one-quarter said they could not afford to send their children school, and a further one-fifth give the related reason that they had to work (Table 3.2).

A similar result emerged from a survey by the Centre for Bhutan Studies but this time of children rather than parents. The children too said

that the main problem was the cost of schooling and the need to work (Figure 3.4). However, around one-fifth of these children said that their parents doubted the value of education – not necessarily because they failed to appreciate the value of learning but perhaps because they feared that educated children would end up unemployed and dissatisfied with rural life .

In principle, education is free. But in fact it does cost money. First there are nominal fees: a child enrolling in pre-primary school pays Nu. 5 and parents must contribute Nu. 30 per year

Troubled children from broken homes

‘Then children in the school are not well-off, the majority are from low-income groups, many living in rural areas adjoining the city. Most of their parents are illiterate. One quarter are from broken homes. There are disciplinary problems with some of these troubled children. The community needs to address this, it cannot only be the school that bears the brunt. Traditional codes of behaviour have broken down.’

Headmaster of a lower secondary school, Thimphu

Table 3.4 Reasons for not attending school

Age	Boys		Girls	
	6 to 12	13-17	6 to 12	13-17
Not interested	10%	15%	6%	7%
Cannot afford	27%	25%	30%	28%
Needs to work	8%	18%	15%	24%
Did not qualify	9%	5%	8%	3%
School is too far	9%	7%	8%	5%
Illness	3%	2%	4%	2%
Too young/old	10%	5%	6%	1%
Problems in home	4%	12%	8%	14%
Other	22%	12%	15%	16%

Source: NSB, 2004b

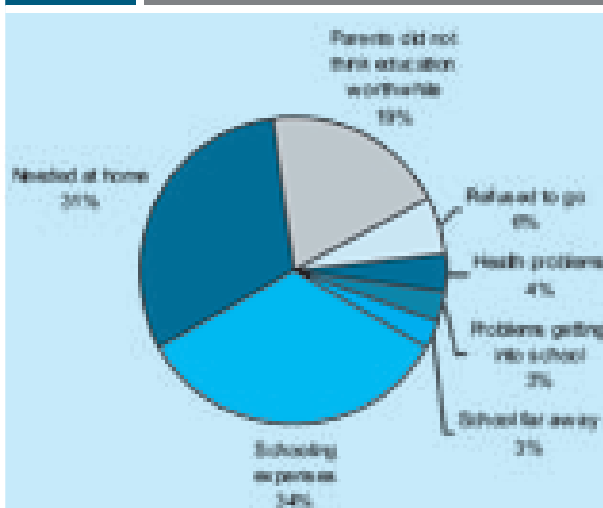
to the school development fund at primary level, and Nu. 100 at secondary level. Even when there are school feeding programmes subsidized by WFP parents usually still have to make a contribution. One UNICEF survey concluded that over a six-month period parents were paying an average of Nu. 1,729 per pupil – for uniforms, school feeding, fees and other contributions – and this among a sample where 40% of households had a cash income of only Nu. 5,000 per year and had an average of 3.4 children. Not surprisingly, enrolment ratios tend to vary with income: for children in the top 20% of incomes the enrolment ratio is 78%, while for those in the poorest 20%, it is only 59% (Figure 3.5).

Another UNICEF-backed study confirmed that children were failing to enroll primarily because their parents were poor and needed their labour at home. Parents were also concerned about the distance that children would have to travel to school and the dangers they might face – and the lack of boarding facilities. Some also doubted the value of education.

The consultation exercises undertaken for this situation analysis also asked parents whether they valued education. In this case, however, parents constantly reiterated that they did value education for their children, boys and girls, and saw it as the passport to a better life. Nevertheless, they were not always able to act on this conviction. This could be because of family circumstances – divorce, for example, or the death of a husband – or because the mother was shouldering economic responsibilities, in

the fields or by casual waged work, leaving the family little alternative to keeping a daughter back to mind the home and look after small siblings.

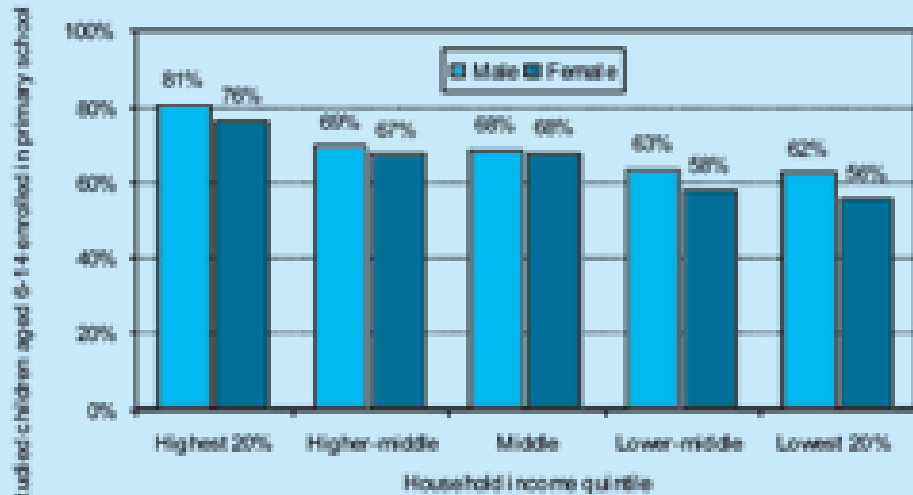
Figure 3.4 Reasons for not attending school



Source: Dorji, 2005a

The UNICEF survey also looked more closely at the reason why children have to repeat classes or drop out. The most significant of these were linked with the home and the community: parents were not able to give sufficient encouragement or guidance or create a positive learning environment. But there were also concerns related to the school, about the lack of reading materials and teaching aids – and in some cases

Figure 3.5 Proportion of children enrolled in Primary school by income group



Source: MoE, 2003b

children suffered because overburdened teachers were rushing through the curriculum without having time to respond to pupils' needs.

Of course not all children have problems; the majority are content with their education and stay in school. The Household Survey, for example, found that most children were happy with their teachers and with the school materials and thought that what they were being taught was relevant to their needs. Even so, around 40% thought there were not enough teachers. Also, 18% said that teachers were often absent, though this may refer not just to absenteeism but to a shortage of teachers who may have to divide their time between different classes.

Bhutan has thus far not made primary education compulsory on the grounds that some children may not have schools within easy reach. But as more schools have now been built, the Government should now make education compulsory for children who have a school within a reasonable distance, which could be a walk of one and a half hours.

As children move further up the educational system, their chance of education will also depend on the availability of places at secondary level. Only around 30% of those graduating

from class X can continue to class XI, the places being rationed through the examination pass mark.

We want our children to get educated

'Of my four children, three went to school, including one of my two daughters. But then I had financial problems, so she got married at 16. We want our young people to get educated. Education is good. We are satisfied when they can serve the country and earn their bread. If they go away, even if they are no good at farming, they will still help us with money. We are still doing farming works at present. What happens to the farm in the future, no-one knows. After we die, who can say? Our greatest fear is that our children will not get good jobs. That they will get into trouble and not do well. If they don't qualify for college, they will have a problem.'

Chumi, 49, Buli village, Zhemgang district

This leaves many children in limbo. Having been to junior secondary school they may not be content to do manual jobs, and hope that their parents will be able to pay for them to continue their studies at a private school, in Bhutan or in India. Thus while a younger son who drops out early may become a family breadwinner, an elder brother who studied till class X may just mope about: feeling too good for one kind of life, but unqualified for another.

Educating girls

Bhutan is close to achieving the MDG objective of eliminating gender disparities in education. The primary net enrolment ratio is 80% for boys and 79% for girls. Indeed in some districts, including Thimphu and Punakha, more girls than boys are enrolling. Girls are also staying longer than boys: 85% stay till class VI and 73% till class VIII, compared with 73% and 62% respectively for boys. When it comes to secondary school, however, girls fall behind: 43% enroll compared with 51% for boys in junior secondary school, and 18% compared with 28% in higher secondary school. It is also clear from

Secondary school students at Damphu High School, Tsirang discuss happy and unhappy families

Around 35 Class IX students, aged between 14 and 18 equally divided between boys and girls, took part in a morning-long participatory exercise to explore the qualities that make for 'happy families' and 'unhappy families'. Divided into groups, the children wrote the qualities on cards according to four categories: economic/livelihoods; health; social/care; and education. These were then pinned up and discussed in plenary. The whole group then ranked the qualities in each category. The exercise was conducted twice, once at some length for 'happy families' and once more briefly for 'unhappy families'. This was a new experience for the students since Bhutanese schools rarely use interactive methods or seek student views on such issues.

Under 'livelihoods', the participants identified the following 'happy family' ingredients in order of priority: good food, jobs, good housing, money, land, stylish clothing, roads and power supply, shops and markets, strong animals, and personal possessions. Under 'health': good health, family planning services, good health facilities, a good environment, and having a small number of children. Under 'social/care', the students placed the highest priority on 'good family relationships' followed by respect for elders and community members, love and care, mutual cooperation, helping others, and friendship. Under 'education' they gave the highest score to 'parents' level of education and access to NFE, followed by good schools and small schools, working hard in school, ambition and confidence, reaching knowledge and attaining success.

Some students may have been trying to provide 'right' answers in what, for them, was an unusual question-and-answer situation. But there are some striking features about their views, notably their emphasis on non-material aspects. Their most important overall category was 'education' – more important even than livelihoods – and within 'education' they were most concerned about their parents' lack of schooling. This appeared to reflect the difficulties that arise in a family when the values, interests and priorities of children and parents start to diverge; their parents' ignorance and uneducated outlook was a major burden.

When considering what makes families unhappy the children identified divorce, followed by death in the family, drunkenness and gambling, quarrels, lack of love or favouritism, and finally crime and insecurity. Children here and in other schools repeatedly emphasized the misery and hardship resulting from family breakdown. Parents and teachers also cited such breakdown, or family death, as an important reason why families fall on hard times and withdraw children from school. From open discussion of the findings, it seemed that many students believe that lack of education is associated with quarrels, drunkenness and bad relations within the family.

Figure 3.1 that girls' literacy rates are still lagging behind boys.

Girls are not enrolling in secondary education for many of the same reasons that they are not appearing for primary education: in particular that their parents want them to help at home. However, as girls grow older their parents have other concerns. The secondary school will usually be further from home than the primary school so girls will either have to walk long distances, or have to board there – which means that they are not under their parents' control and may be insufficiently protected from 'bad influences' during the vulnerable period of puberty and adolescence. Schools are in towns, and the urban environment offers distractions unknown in rural home areas. Moreover, while parents are now more convinced of the value of education, and regret that they themselves did not go to school, many still believe that boys should get preference since they will have greater earning capacity, and in any case girls will be ultimately looked after by their husbands.

Girls themselves may also retain traditional attitudes, somehow feeling inferior to boys and not believing in themselves enough to study hard. Moreover, adolescent girls, whose bodies are developing faster than those of boys of the same age, may be embarrassed if they fail examinations – and be less prepared to stay behind and repeat classes with younger children. Even if they agree that education would be good for them they may still think that boys should get the priority.

As more girls are enrolled in secondary school they need greater encouragement and support from both parents and teachers. At school there have been some improvements. The Government is giving teachers and others more training in counselling so that matrons of hostels, for example, are starting to abandon their traditionally punitive regimes. Instead they are trying to empathize with the students and their problems as well as serving as their guardians from a protection point of view. However, many parents still expect schools and hostels to enforce harsh discipline – anxious that their children may otherwise become unruly and ill-behaved.

It would help if girl students had more locally based female workers such as teachers, health workers and government staff who could serve as role models. Girls would also be attracted by better boarding and school feeding facilities and if schools could provide libraries and free books.

Quality of education

Girls and boys are more likely to stay in school if the education system engages their interest and enthusiasm with a stimulating learning environment. Since 1986 Bhutan has been trying to shift away from rote learning and adopt the 'New Approach to Primary Education' – which is based on children's activity and en-

Girls who lack ambition

'Girls don't seem to have any sense of ambition. It is rare for them to want to be a nurse or a teacher. There is a sudden drop in the number of girls in classes IX and X. The main reason is their background, the social conditioning. If they come from broken families, that makes a difference. The reason may also be economic: if the parents can only afford to keep one child in school, it will be the son.'

Teacher, Rangjung Higher Secondary School, Trashigang

quiry. But change seems to be taking place very slowly: under curriculum pressure many teachers rapidly revert to systems of rote learning. As a result, education in Bhutan still tends to be a one-way process; teachers expect to transmit information to their pupils and do not invite children to challenge them. Although they do use dances, songs and sometimes drama, and supervise extensive extra-curricular activities for boarders, many teachers do not encourage children to take an active part in classroom activities, to be creative or to develop problem-solving skills.

Performance at Bumthang Secondary School: Father reigns supreme

During a participatory exercise in Bumthang, a group of seven students aged from 13-18 developed a drama on 'An ordinary day at home', powerfully depicting the father's household position. Cast: Mother, Grandmother, Daughter-in-law, Grandfather, Son, Daughter and Father.

At the outset, all the family are sleeping. The mother wakes first, and in turn wakes the grandmother and asks her to wake the children. The mother then makes breakfast, while grandfather chants his prayers. The son fetches firewood, while the daughter collects water.

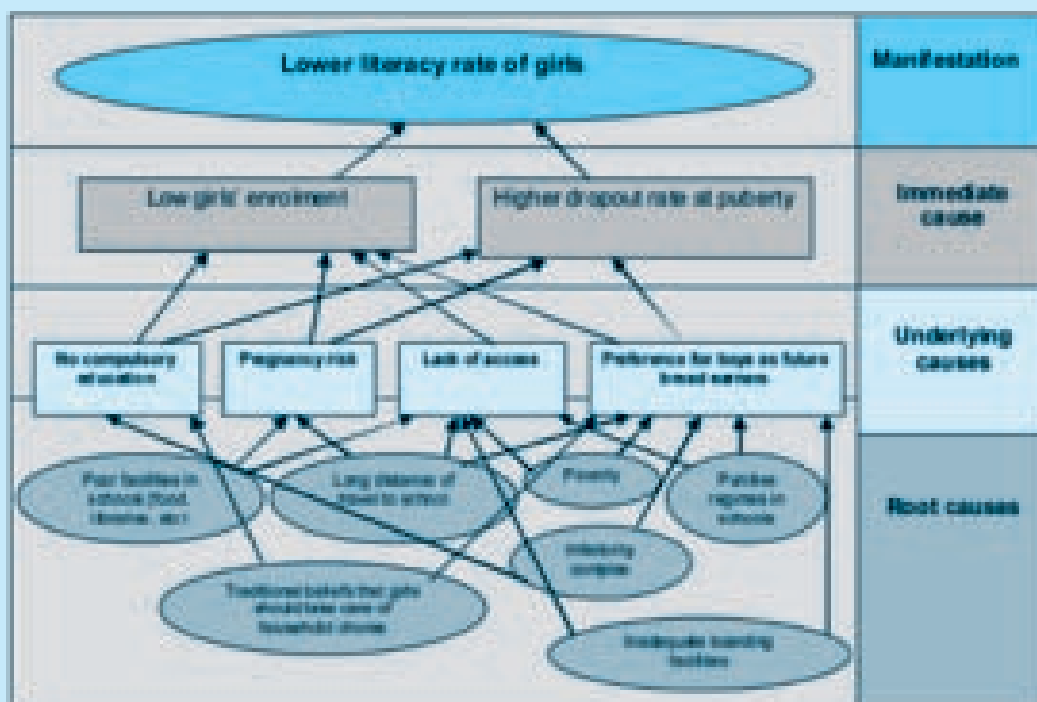
Father wakes up last, but he has to go to the toilet before anyone else. He demands that the mother fetch his toothbrush, and then a towel.

They all sit down to breakfast, the mother serving food and the daughter-in-law pouring tea, always serving the father first and at his instant command. He leaps from the table to leave for the office, but cannot tie the belt to his gho without his wife's assistance. Meanwhile, the son and daughter go to herd cows, while the daughter-in-law cleans and does the washing.

In the evening, father returns and sits in a comfortable chair complaining about his heavy day at the office. He watches TV, as gradually others return from their activities. The daughter has to serve her father with his food, and everyone waits on the master of the house. He asks after his cows. The elders sit in the background, while the younger generation report on their activities. Finally, the father declares that the day is now over. Off they go to bed.

In the follow-up discussion, the father's status and the degree to which he was waited on were universally regarded as normal. 'He is the most important person in the family, he is the one who is working. So of course he will be treated in that way.'

Figure 3.6 Girls' lower literacy rates, a causal analysis



Source: MoE, 2003b

Some teachers are, however, now experimenting with the child-friendly school approach to encourage a more inclusive and lively learning environment. If they are to do this successfully, they will need the appropriate training and materials: at present there is a shortage of learning materials, particularly in Dzongkha. They will also need space: as enrolment has increased, so classes have expanded and in some classrooms children are packed in so tightly that there is scarcely room to move. The situation is now improving somewhat, as more schools are built and more teachers are emerging from the training schools. Between 2000 and 2006, the pupil-teacher ratio in community primary schools came down from 47 to 36 and in primary schools from 44 to 35.

A continuing problem, however, is that only around one-third of teachers are women. The proportion of female teachers is even smaller in the more remote community primary schools.

Teachers start to transform their methods

‘One day I realized that the way I was teaching was artificial. And I totally changed my teaching style to make it more participatory. In the beginning, I used to come and write upon the board, get students to stand up and read what I had written. I felt really frustrated and rejected my own method. This was a transforming experience.’

Head teacher, community school, Zhemgang district

‘I tell my staff: teaching and learning is a two-way process – you should listen to the students, you may learn something from them! But it is difficult to persuade them – many are used to the old authoritarian ways.’

Head teacher, secondary school, Trashigang district

These are considered hardship posts and it is difficult for women to establish themselves in such places without the support of their families. One way to boost the numbers is to encourage more girls to stay in secondary school and then qualify to teach in their home areas. Secondary schools in particular still depend on foreign teachers: 17% are expatriates, mostly from India.

Even with smaller classes, teachers will still have to cope not just with a wide range of ages within grades, but also with teaching multiple grades in the same room. Indeed, the demand for multi-grade teaching is likely to increase as more community schools are built, reaching further into communities and drawing in a wider range of abilities and grades. Multi-grade teaching is very demanding and requires special skills. A few teachers have benefited from specialized training in Australia, but multi-grade training now needs to be significantly expanded within Bhutan both in the College of education and as part of regular in-service training.

Monastic education institutions and schools

From the eighth century to mid-way through the twentieth century, almost all formal learning in Bhutan took place in monasteries; traditionally each family would send one son into the monastery from the age of six. Fewer do so nowadays, and entry at so young an age is now discouraged (10 or 11 is more common). But monasteries still provide residential instruction and religious education for a minority of children – around 5,000 in formal monasteries that are supported by the Government and 10,000 as private students in village monasteries and gomdeys – schools for lay monks. This is around 15% of total school enrolment.

Although these children learn to read and write religious texts, they do not receive what might be considered a rounded education. Apart from rote learning of prayers and scriptures, in which they are tested daily, their only other subjects are the arts and crafts associated

Overcrowding reduces the quality of schooling

'Overcrowding is a big problem in all schools in Thimphu. Instead of 25 students in one class – as the policy says – we are taking up to 50. Every year, parents go from school to school, looking for vacancies, trying to find a school with a place for their child. Children don't stay in one school, sometime they change every year. So they don't know the teachers or other students – they are not familiar with the school environment. It is also hard for the teacher to get to know every child in the class, and the space is very cramped. You can't even move within the classroom. It is not possible to provide quality education in such circumstances.'

Headmaster of a lower secondary school, Thimphu

Contemplating child-friendly schools in Zhemgang

A participatory exercise with 20 community school head teachers (all male) from Zhemgang district on the theme of 'the child-friendly school' revealed that very few were familiar with the concept. Most initially understood it only as meaning an end to corporal punishment. During the exercise, the teachers identified what they thought were the key qualities of 'The Child-friendly School' under four headings: infrastructural facilities, students, teachers and the community.

The following were their findings:

Infrastructure: The teachers' top priority was safe and strong buildings, followed by water and sanitation, spacious well-furnished classrooms, good food, good teaching aids, and games facilities.

Students: First, 'healthy and happy'; second, 'child participation'; third, 'well-behaved', and fourth, 'hard-working'.

Teaching: Teachers should be well-motivated, caring and act as role-models. They should use a child-centred curriculum; and there should be enough teachers. Although teachers shortage is a major problem, questions of quality took precedence.

Community: The community should understand the value of education, actively participate in the school and be cooperative; and finally, be good parents.

During the discussion of their findings, the teachers made it clear that it is not their lack of motivation that hampers child-friendly approaches but rather poor infrastructure and teaching conditions. They also thought that they needed training, practice and the right educational aids to drop old-style methods emphasizing rote learning and keeping order, especially if corporal punishment is to be eliminated entirely.

Many of these teachers work in remote areas, and face extra problems as a result. When summoned for meetings at the dzongkhags (district headquarters), for example, many have to set aside several days for the journey on foot, and if they are a one-man-band they have to shut the school. Teaching in isolated communities is hard, and many find that when their tour ought to end, no replacement appears: those posted manage somehow to get out of their new assignment leaving the old guard to soldier on.

with the performance of Buddhist rituals and celebrations.

Some children enter the monastery because they have a vocation for the monastic life or have been encouraged by their parents to do so; indeed they may be transferred there from the normal school system. Others, especially from poorer families, may prefer a monastery to a government school because they know they can rely on free food, accommodation and instruction in a godly and respectable way of life: a monk is a person with status in the community, and when he visits his home, he will be accorded special treatment and be spiritually valued.

The monasteries also act effectively as orphanages for children who have lost their parents, whose families are landless or in some condition of crisis usually including extreme want. A disabled child too may be sent to a monastery.

Facilities in the monasteries are typically very basic. Although there have been some improvements as a result of the UNICEF-assisted religion and health project, toilets and washing facilities are still frequently inadequate and living conditions are generally poor. The daily monastic regime is spartan in respect of eating, warmth, washing, sleeping conditions, play, leisure, and caring human contact. The way of life into which young monks are inculcated is deliberately intended to subjugate the will and enable the initiate to learn obedience, humility in mind and person, and to submit to holy order as necessary for treading the path to enlightenment. Thus, modern ideas about high quality nutrition for young people, cognitive and intellectual growth, and support for psycho-social and emotional well-being – all of which feature in the child rights perspective – do not easily mesh with the monastic code of instruction and the attainment of spiritual beneficence.

Since the young monks in many monastic institutions do not wash or bathe regularly, they commonly suffer from skin infections. They are also subject to respiratory infections, parasitical infestations, and minor dental problems, as well as anaemia and under-nutrition. However, rates of ill-health are not easily known since there is little systematic liaison between monastic insti-

Escaping alcoholic parents

‘My parents live in Punakha. They have no land and survive by working on the land of other people. They are alcoholics, and life with them is very bad – I and my three brothers have all left home because of this. One of my brothers is in Paro. He is 15, and has a job there at a petrol station. He sends money to my parents sometimes. And he has put my youngest brother in a monastery in Paro: he could not manage to look after him and now he is doing well.’

Tsering, a 12-year-old boy

tutions and the health services. A team from the BHU may visit once or twice a year to give out de-worming pills; but they do not offer regular check-ups and will only usually be summoned in the case of serious illness.

Play, recreation and ‘familial’ care are areas relatively new to the monastic perception. The young monk’s day typically begins at 5 a.m. and lasts until 9 p.m, with one-and-a-half hours of free time in the middle of the day, and one-and-a-half hours in the evening before bed. They spend the rest of the day praying, studying and being tested. They have few facilities for sport or leisure, although monasteries are soon to introduce television and some recreational equipment for educational purposes.

Discipline is strict and some young monks have great difficulty in learning to obey the monastic code in all particulars. If they infringe repeatedly, they will be beaten (see also chapter 4). In these circumstances some young monks run away or abscond to their homes. Previously the monasteries used to insist that they return and be subject to physical chastisement until they succumbed to the code, but nowadays the monasteries are more likely to reach an agreement with the family that the boy should leave.

The teachers or lopens regard the regime as more child-friendly than in the past. However, in terms of psycho-social care the mentoring

and role-model function they assume is by no means that of a substitute parent. When young monks are unhappy or disturbed, the lopens regard this as a spiritual matter to be resolved by prayer and obedience to the code. If it cannot be so resolved, the monk will ultimately leave.

Early childhood development

If children are to grow up with an appetite for learning they need to be stimulated from an early age. This does not just mean attending pre-school classes. Early childhood care and development (ECD) goes far beyond schooling – encompassing all aspects of a child’s life, including nutrition, health, psychosocial development and the multiple interactions that young children have with the wider community. Parents also need to pay attention to this very early: 80% of a child’s brain will have developed before the age of three.

Parents and other caregivers in Bhutan instinctively do a great deal to stimulate the physical, intellectual and emotional growth of babies and very young children. They talk and sing to them and encourage them to play with simple toys. After a child reaches the age of four, however, parents generally make fewer efforts to simulate the child and tend to show their affection in less physical ways. This is partly because they have very little time, particularly if they are working outside the home and have to leave young children with siblings or grandparents. In urban areas, parents without the support of an extended family will frequently employ what are called babysitters, but who are, in effect, full-time domestic helpers or nannies. Some are the daughters of relatives, but the employment of young domestics unrelated to the family is becoming more common (see Chapter 4).

Since parents are already doing some of what is required ECD programmes should aim to reinforce these positive practices – encouraging parents to feed children more appropriately, for example, to listen to their children, to set aside time to play with them and generally help them develop their cognitive, language, social, emotional and motor skills.

Young monks enjoy a participatory exercise – and sunshine

Twenty-six young monks in Jakar Dzong took part in a participatory exercise in the presence of a number of lopens, including the kudung, the monk responsible for them and in charge of their discipline. The monks were aged between 12 and 19 and had been in the monastery from 1-7 years. Of the group, 17 reported that they had entered the monastery of their own choice, and nine that their parents had sent them.

The young monks were divided into groups, and asked to make drawings on subjects such as ‘a regular day’ and ‘a special day’. The drawings were pinned up and their contents discussed. Before and during the exercise, several games were played to engage them and reduce their shyness. They entered into this unusual experience with great zest and enjoyment, although they expressed very little verbally.

Their drawings featured several subjects prominently: Sunshine, television, animals such as pigs, cows and horses, and flowers. The topic ‘a regular day’ produced drawings of monks praying in the Buddha position, offerings, and being tested at their learning. Pictures of ‘happy days’ were all days at home, often lying in the sun.

When asked to identify their preferred activities by a show of hands, praying and offerings jointly came first; then watching television; then study; then going home; then play; then enjoying the sunshine. Hygiene was also added at the end, and given high marks. These rankings might, however, have been different in the absence of the lopens.

Much of this will need to rely on public information campaigns for parents, and training in ECD for health workers and teachers. But it should also be possible to supplement this by creating nurseries and pre-primary schools. This is more straightforward in urban areas, where there are already some private nurseries – five day-care centres in Thimphu and one in Paro. And some primary schools already have nursery classes.

In the rural areas, however, the situation is more difficult since households are often very scattered; in the past, day-care centres have been tried and failed. This means it will be necessary to create not just the supply of places, but also the demand for them – by showing parents the advantages that such centres could offer both to them and their children. At present, there is latent demand but it is not recognized as such.

Parents in rural, semi-rural and small town settings frequently take pre-teen girls out of school to look after small siblings. If parents had access to day-care for infants and young children there would probably be much less drop-out.

Catching up through non-formal education

Those who miss primary education or who drop out early can attend non-formal classes. If local administrators can demonstrate a need with 20 or so potential learners, then the Government will provide a teacher and books. Thus far the books have been provided almost entirely by UNICEF, though in future this might also be an area for involvement by NGOs.

By the end of 2005, there were 646 non-formal education (NFE) centres, all managed by local committees, with 669 instructors, and 18,550 learners. Around two-thirds of the learners are female; indeed many classes consist entirely of women. The classes generally take place in the evenings in the formal schools with which they are linked, or in other community buildings: health outreach clinics, for example, or temples; some take place in private houses. Most of the teachers are part-time. Many teach dur-

ing the day in the formal schools; the rest may have other jobs, or work only as NFE teachers. In some cases the NFE teacher moves around – living in one place until he or she completes the course and then moving to the next village that has requested an NFE programme.

NFE is designed for people of 15 years and older, but it has also attracted children from seven years and upwards. This may be because parents see this as an interim measure, or because they need a child to work at home and see NFE as a part-time educational alternative. They may also think that their children only need to learn to read and write and that NFE should suffice, especially for girls. NFE also takes place at a more convenient time, for just two hours in the early morning, or in the evening when all the day's chores have been completed. This depends, however on electricity supply which UNICEF has supported by supplying solar panels in many centres.

The Ministry has now said that younger children should not be admitted to NFE classes. However these children also need to be provided with alternatives. Those who have missed out on the early years of primary education will need to be offered catch-up classes to enable them to join the formal system – potentially an area for involvement by NGOs. When younger children attend, teachers try to encourage them to go to primary school, and sometimes manage to intervene successfully with the parents on their behalf.

The NFE system works at three levels. First, there is a one-year basic literacy and numeracy course. This is followed by a post-literacy programme which lasts from six to twelve months and enables learners to enhance their skills and gain access to information on health, farming, and other useful topics. Finally, there are opportunities for self-learning, through spaces set aside in schools or in around 25 community learning centres.

However, teaching methods in NFE classes leave a lot to be desired. They seem to be even less interactive than those in the formal schools and the quality is very uneven. Many of the non-professional teachers are class X graduates who are given just one month's training. They may be stranded in distant places where they find it very difficult to supplement their meagre earn-

Shy NFE students and a delight in learning

Participatory exercises with NFE students in villages in Trashigang and Bumthang districts found women trying hard to express their views, despite their inexperience. In Kadam village in Trashigang the classroom, in a private house, was very basic and without furniture; 20 women and girls aged between 15 and 35 attended along with two boys and two older men. In Bumthang, facilities were better and the 16 women and one man were mostly older. At both classes almost all participants were extremely shy. Most women are unused to talking in a meeting or even one by one in class. They were either nearly silent, whispering behind their hands, or they all talked at once.

In Kadam, the teenage girls were invited to explain why they had not gone to school. They said that their brothers and sisters did go, but that they had been kept back to help their parents and work in the fields with maize and paddy, and to look after the animals. Some, however, did not go because they did not want to. They did not feel the need to offer an explanation for non-school-going, nor express a desire for education.

By contrast, some of the older women, especially in Bumthang, took a delight in studying. One 38-year-old, Tshering said: 'Even though I am getting old, this studying is still the most enjoyable thing I do. Before I had little knowledge. Now I know about forest fire prevention, and about good livestock rearing practices and many things. But I also enjoy doing my farm work since it is essential for life.'

In Bumthang, participants drew daily time-lines, from which a list was made of their farming and household activities. They then assessed the amount of effort undertaken by the members of the household for each activity. Women systematically belittled their working contribution and thought that what they did 'did not matter'. 'All the important work is done by men,' was how they put it, even though the exercise illustrated that women did more than men, and that girls did more than boys.

These women had rarely ever written anything independently on a piece of paper – an act requiring much help and effort, and were unused to being asked for their views. NFE provides a setting in which women can explore their aspirations and boost their confidence. But these possibilities are at present a long way from being realized.

ings – Nu. 3,000 a month – and since they have no career structure it can be difficult to maintain their motivation.

Some women graduates of NFE classes have now become chimis and sit in the National Assembly. However, most NFE learners have limited ambitions: they only want to be able to read the signboards, for example, or the packaging in shops, or their bus ticket number so as to defend their appointed seat. There appears to be no evidence at present that NFE is having a wid-

er impact – by boosting women's involvement in income generation or their participation in decision making.

However it should be possible to make non-formal education more productive by expanding its scope and developing it as a framework that complements the formal system. NFE would certainly have greater appeal and impact if it were better linked with formal education, through a system of equivalence in examinations, so that NFE learners could transfer more

easily to primary schools. But NFE can also make its own distinctive contribution: learners could for example use it to acquire vocational skills in NFE classes as part of apprenticeship schemes. They could also use NFE as a springboard from which to start credit or savings groups and generally enhance women's role in community affairs.

Education for employment

Many more Bhutanese children are benefiting from education that should qualify them for much better employment than their parents were able to find. Around 9,000 students are joining the labour market each year, two-thirds of them class X school leavers, and most of the rest from class XII. Many of these are not finding work – a problem that is likely to get worse as the number of school leavers is set to increase steadily. Bhutan's official overall level of unemployment in 2004 was 3%, but for people aged 15-19 it was 7% ; the problem is particularly severe among young men and in the urban areas (Figure 3.7).

This is partly because of the absolute shortage of jobs, but also because of the expectations of school leavers some of whom prefer to remain unemployed rather than to take the unsatisfactory work on offer. Many of today's school leavers are no longer content to do the same kind of farming or manual work as their parents. Most would ideally prefer to work as civil servants, or failing that for government corporations, or as a last resort for businesses in the private sector. But government jobs are becoming much scarcer nowadays, and even where the small private sector needs labour it usually requires people with specific skills – and often prefers to take them ready-made from the quota of workers allowed to enter from India. So while some fields are going untended because of a shortage of labour, young people, particularly in the towns, are out of work.

The Government has been addressing this issue by increasing to six the number of vocational training centres that can supply the plumbers, carpenters or electricians that are needed. But it will also be important to try to encourage the kind of investment that might be able to employ more workers both white

collar (or sleeve) and blue collar. Bhutan does have a comparative advantage in that many of its school leavers speak good English, suggesting that there might be opportunities for the kind of call-centre work that has been attracted to India. At the same time it will also be important to maximize employment in the rural areas by offering the type of training that will allow young entrepreneurs to set up profitable businesses in crop processing and other forms of off-farm activity.

Disabled children

It is difficult to say what proportion of the population is disabled since there has been no national survey. The Ninth Five-Year Plan estimated the figure at 3.5%. The National Population and Housing census of Bhutan 2005 recorded 3351 persons aged between 0-19 suffering from some form of disability.

Most of these children are unlikely at present to benefit from any special services. Children who are physically disabled will spend most of their time at home. Here they will certainly receive close attention from their family but are unlikely to make much contact with the rest of the community. Given the difficulties of moving around the mountainous landscape they would be unlikely to reach school, or even if they did so would struggle to gain access to classrooms. Parents may also be reluctant to send children if they think they would be vulnerable to teasing or prone to accidents.

Within the community, disabled children can be taunted, teased and called names such as Tsagay (stupid), Zhao (blind), Zhou (Lame). Some parents will also give them the monotonous and menial domestic chores such as cattle herding, and fetching water or firewood .

Those who are visually impaired can go to what is now the Royal National Institute for the Disabled in Khaling which has around 30 children as well as some young adults, or to a school in Paro for the hearing or speaking impaired. But facilities for other children are very limited. Government policy is for all disabled children to enter normal schools. This is more an aspiration than actual practice, though there is one junior high school in Thimphu that has

10 to 13 disabled children with teachers trained in special education that sets aside a special classroom for the disabled. These children may, however, often be spectators rather than active participants in school activities. This lack of provision is partly because of problems of access, compounded by the lack of teachers who have had the necessary specialist training.

Older children in Thimphu can also benefit from the centre run by the NGO, Drak-Tsho where they can acquire vocational skills, such as sewing or weaving. However, the school has no boarding facilities so cannot help children from the rural areas.

You are blind so I suppose you can sing

'I became blind at the age of three through vitamin A deficiency. My mother was terribly distressed and died soon afterwards. I was one of the first three students at the institute after it opened in 1973. In 1980, we were integrated into class VI of normal school.

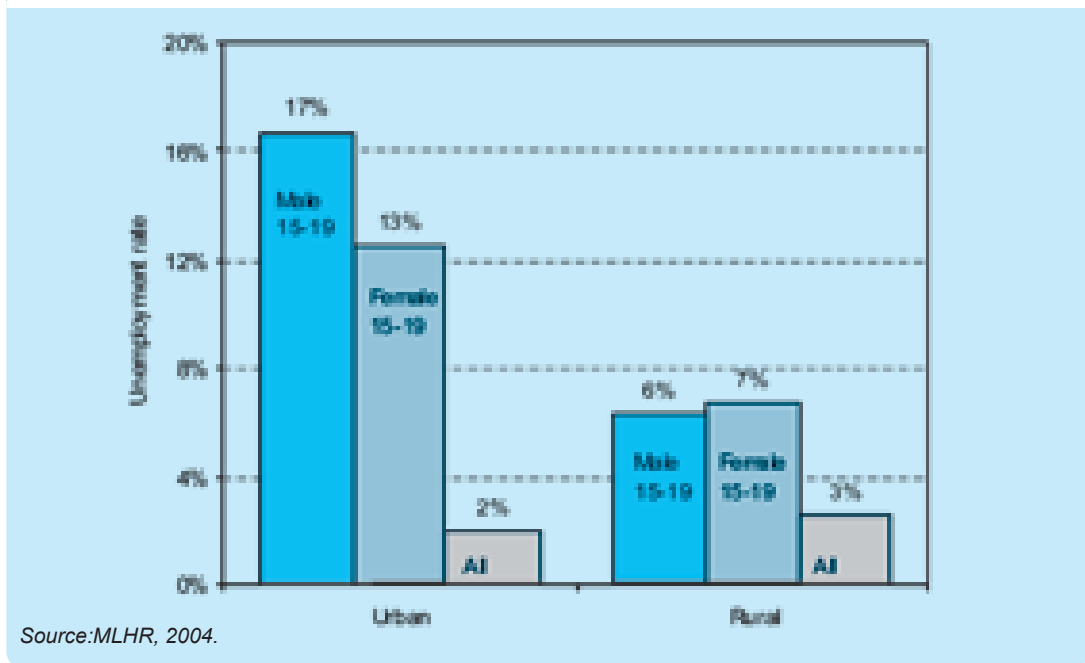
'Unless a blind child does well academically, he or she has no future. We need more vocational alternatives to avoid being dependent on our families. Sighted graduates from class VIII can enter the army, police, or become drivers. Disabled people can only become teachers or telephone operators. And it is far from easy. When I went to the National Institute of Education, I had to struggle to get information and find people to help me.

'We have no voice in our own affairs; things are all decided for us. We need a special association for the disabled or a special branch of other associations so that we can make ourselves heard. We do not face discrimination, but we don't have opportunities either. For example, how can we be good telephone operators unless the directory is in Braille?

'Another problem is our lack of exposure on the media. There is a tendency for people to say: 'You are blind so I suppose you can sing' – they think this is all we can do. People are very ignorant about us.'

Kuenga, a teacher at the NID, Khaling, Eastern Bhutan

Figure 3.7 Youth unemployment, 2004



Education for opportunities

Bhutan has clearly made impressive advances – making education available so widely. But it still has some way to go to ensure that it fulfils the education rights of all children, and that when they go to school they can acquire the information and the skills that will equip them for life in the 21st century.

Education is of course of value in itself – opening a child’s mind to new vistas for the

life ahead. But for the country as a whole it also provides the next generation of workers. Bhutan still needs young adults who will work as productive farmers and others who will do administrative or clerical jobs. But it also need people with enquiring minds and the skills that will enable them not just to occupy jobs but also create them. At present there is a danger that today’s school leavers will remain dissatisfied and resentful. But an educated English-speaking and youthful population can hardly be considered a burden; this is not a problem but an opportunity.



Bhutan has tried to ensure that modernization does not simply displace traditional values and structures but as far as possible complements them.

Bhutanese children have traditionally been able to rely on the protection of their parents and their extended families. But modernization has brought new responsibilities and risks. Bhutan is now party to major international conventions and has to report on many contentious subjects, such as child labour or child abuse, on which it has previously gathered relatively little information. At the same time, modernization, urbanization and greater contact with other countries have exposed women and children to new hazards – against which Bhutan will need to build effective systems of protection.

During the process of growing up, children are inevitably exposed to many dangers as they gradually come to terms with an adult world that can be exciting but also risky. During this period they should be able to rely on a ‘protective environment’ – shielded by a series of layers, starting with the family, extending to the school and community, then to the society and finally to an outer layer of protection provided by the state. A ‘protective environment’ is one in which all these people and institutions work together, ensuring that children grow up safely.

Bhutan is in a strong position to offer this kind of protection. Families tend to be large and their ties are close. Parents cherish their children and try to protect them from the hazards of daily life. And through religious bodies and practices they instil in children the moral values that shape their relationships with the rest of the world. The principles of Buddhism emphasize respect for others: that one person’s life is closely bound up with the lives of many others.

Most parents and children preserve intimate ties and try to support each other, both emotionally and financially. The children can also rely on support from the extended family: if the parent’s home is too far from school, for example, then where possible children will move in with relatives who have better access. And if parents fall sick or die, relatives will rally round. Even outside the family, other community members have traditional ways of offering

support and a form of social safety net. People often use the term ‘brother’ or ‘aunt’ for those who are not blood relatives, and many adults would consider it their responsibility also to instruct or reprimand the children of other families.

Concerns about children away from home

‘We all worry about our children leaving home. Sometimes parents go to the teachers and say that their children are making mistakes. Or a mother may worry about her child getting sick in the hostel with no-one to look after her. Then she doesn’t want her family to get a bad name, she is fearful of losing face because of the girl’s behaviour.’

**Aum, mother and grandmother,
Trashiyangtse**

The state too takes a responsibility for protection. This starts with the King, to whom all citizens, including children, can appeal when they feel they have suffered an injustice. Few monarchs anywhere in the world take such a close and active interest in the lives of their people; the Queens also frequently travel around the country, often promoting the interests of children.

This concern for protection has also been reflected in Bhutan's international commitments. In 1990 Bhutan was one of the first governments to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) without reservations and submitted its initial report to the CRC Committee in April 1999. In 1981 Bhutan also became one of the few governments to have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women without attaching any reservations. Bhutan in 2003 also ratified the SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution.

Bhutan's concern for children has also been reflected in its establishment of the National Commission for Women and Children that will serve as a focal point and a springboard for future activities. The Commission will need to address significant gaps in child protection. Some of these have begun to open up as the country's rapid modernization and urbanization processes erode traditional rural and family-based systems of protection. Others are becoming more evident as traditional attitudes and practices are re-evaluated in the light of 21st century perceptions and of the international norms to which Bhutan has committed itself.

Parents, teachers, and leading figures in society have identified the importance of having effective systems of protection and guidance for children but have also emphasized the need for dialogue with young people on the issues affecting them. Family fragmentation and the increase in education, knowledge, information and consumer drives are changing the relationships between parents and children – making them less controlled and disciplinarian. As a result children need new opportunities for social participation – such as youth associations, clubs, and community-based organizations that can channel energies and build a spirit of social responsibility. In this sense, child protection and child participation are two sides of one coin.

The changing family

Bhutan has tried to ensure that modernization does not simply displace traditional values and structures but as far as possible complements them. Inevitably, however, modernization

causes some disruption. Even improvements in standards of health and education have social side-effects, by shifting children's values and perceptions. The system of education in Bhutan has emphasized academic subjects and qualifications for employment. Not surprisingly, rural children who have reached a certain educational standard are likely to reject the tough farming life in isolated villages and aspire to salaried employment and a higher standard of living. This can mean entering an environmental occupation such as forest ranger or teaching in a village off the beaten track, but most often it means moving to the towns or cities. In either case, it invariably involves a life spent away from the natal home – which, because of its better pay and status, is a strategy that their parents may well endorse.

In some cases girls might stay behind. A mother might, for example, hold back one daughter so that she is not bereft of company and domestic support. There is also the factor that according to Bhutanese tradition, girls rather than boys inherit the land.

In general, however, grown sons and daughters who leave are likely to loosen their ties with their parents, even if they help by sending them remittances, or visit at key moments of the farming calendar to help with planting or harvesting. Thus, although the extended family remains the basis of Bhutanese society, it is becoming more extended spatially: families are fragmenting with parents and sibling living in many different locations.

In addition some women are being abandoned by husbands who set off to find work elsewhere, and never re-appear. Outside the close-knit rural community the sanctions that used to prevent the desertion of a wife, or failure to support the family, no longer operate. In urban areas families are starting to become more nuclear in character.

This change in family structure can erode some of children's traditional layers of protection. This may simply be the result of separation from parents, as more board at school or to work away from home. Or it can be the result of separation from grandparents or from uncles and aunts to whom previously they might have turned if they faced problems with their parents.

Families can also be broken up by the stresses of daily life. Divorce, initiated by either partner, has always been widely accepted. Evidence about trends, either in marriage or divorce rates, is not available; most marriages have always been unregistered. Today, there may be more incentive to regularize unions from a legal point of view in order to be able to establish divorce and custody settlements.

Divorces scatter children

'When I was in class VIII, I dropped out of school. My parents divorced and my father re-married and said he could no longer afford to educate me or my older brother. Since I needed somewhere to live, I went to stay with another brother in Thimphu and spent three years there being his housewife. The members of my family are now spread in many different places. I returned here to visit my relatives, and I am helping out in their shop while looking for a job. I don't want to get married. Many of my friends in Thimphu have had bad experiences with men who have married them and then left them with children to raise on their own. Divorces are very common, marriage brings many problems.'

Tsering, 24, a shop worker in Rangjung, Trashigang district

According to the National Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2005, only 1.4% of couples are officially divorced or separated, but this proportion seems unfeasibly low. Most people seem to think that marriage breakdown and separation or divorce are becoming more common. Whether or not the marriage bond is formally disbanded, its casual treatment and the implications for women and their children are constantly referred to as a social problem.

Divorce inevitably creates difficulties for children. According to the Marriage Act of 1989, following a divorce, children under nine should live with their mother, though older children can choose which parent to live with. Even so, both the circumstances leading to family break-

up and the divorce itself will be an emotional shock for the children. When asked to identify the worst thing that can happen in their lives, it is common for children to cite divorce between their parents. Moreover there is no guarantee that step-parents will take full responsibility for their new charges: children whose parents are divorced are, for example, more likely to drop out of school.

The children most likely to be marginalized and at risk are also those from the poorest families. In the rural areas these would include landless households, as well as those working on the roads, either for contractors or as part of the 3,000-strong National Work Force.

If parents end up in court ...

'I want to be a judge. This is because it can happen that sometimes a father and mother get divorced without any reason and the judge could have stopped it. The father is drinking and says bad things and the mother gets hurt. Then they report to the court their misunderstandings. The judge should then ask questions: "Why are you quarrelling?" If it is serious, I will give compensation. If not, then they should settle their dispute.'

Kinley, a 14-year-old student in Bumthang

Working children

One of the most significant concerns in the child protection context is child work. From the age of about six or seven, most Bhutanese children will be expected to help at home – doing household chores, or carrying out light tasks in the fields. And as they grow up most rural children work as unpaid family helpers during holidays and sometimes in paid casual work, carrying or breaking stones on local construction sites, for example. This need not be harmful; indeed it usually makes a positive contribution to their development, as they pick up essential skills and learn to work and cooperate with others. But parents need to know the limits to what

Performance at Baylling Higher Secondary School, Trashiyangtse: A day of sadness

Secondary school students in Trashiyangtse, 27 girls and nine boys aged between 13 and 18, spent a morning in a role-play exercise and follow-up discussion. One of the four groups prepared a drama on the theme 'A Day of Sadness', as follows.

A boy whose mother dies tries to persuade his father not to remarry. The father asks a woman to marry him, but lies to her about the son's existence. When the boy and step-mother are brought together, she is furious with her new husband for misleading her and is unkind to the boy. She refuses to spend any money on him, and as a result his shoes fall apart. At school, when asked to sing a song, he sings about how terribly children suffer if their parents divorce. Eventually, things become so bad for him that he drops out of school and kills himself by eating poison. When he does not return home, the father becomes worried, but the step-mother doesn't care. The boy's friends find the body, and run to tell the father. The father, desperately distressed, puts the blame on the step-mother, which she refuses to accept.

During the subsequent discussion, questions were put to the whole group about the story. They agreed that it is difficult for a man to remain without a wife, but the man should find out carefully about the woman first and choose someone who will be a good mother to his existing children. Stepmothers typically do not want to look after another woman's children, so the father's lie was normal. The students could see no easy solution to the problem. Some said the boy should have run away, or gone to the women's association for help. Most students thought that the boy's death was the father's fault, not the stepmother's.

The drama illustrated how devastating children find the loss of a parent and accommodation to a step-parent. In the discussion, it was obvious that divorce rather than parental death was in many children's minds. Other subjects to emerge included children's dislike of favouritism within the family, drunkenness of fathers, and the swift resort to cuffing and slapping at the onset of disagreement.

children should be expected to do – that children should not have to do so much work that they cannot attend school or that they come under severe stress or are exposed to physical or moral danger. At that point, child work becomes 'child labour'.

Child work is significant in Bhutan but it is difficult to say just how many children are working and to what extent – and even more difficult to assess the extent to which they are subjected to child labour. One approach is to start from school attendance – assuming that a high proportion of children above the age of 10 who are not attending school are working.

The 2003 Bhutan Living Standard Survey

concluded that a significant proportion of children were neither working nor at school (Figure 4.1). Surprisingly, this survey also found that a negligible proportion of children, fewer than 0.5%, were combining work and school. In the urban areas, this could be because relatively few children work, and for those who do it is likely to be a full-time job such as domestic help. In the rural areas the long walks to school may take up so much of children's time that they cannot help at home. However, this may not be the complete picture: many children do work during school breaks – and often in order to earn sufficient money to go to school.

Another statistical indication of child work comes from the 2004 National Labour Force

Survey . This does not give information on children in the 10-14 age group, but for those children aged 15-19 it suggests that 24% are economically active. In the urban areas the proportions are around 8% for both boys and girls; in the rural areas they are 27% for boys and 32% for girls. These data may need to be reassessed however since they are significantly lower than for the previous year and they probably do not include domestic servants.

The results of these different surveys may be inconsistent, but they permit some general conclusions: that at least one-quarter of children aged 10-14 are working, that most of these children are in the rural areas and that the proportion is higher for girls than boys. Among the main categories of child workers are:

Agricultural workers – In the rural areas the predominant form of employment for children is likely to be agricultural, working in the fields or, for girls in particular, looking after younger children or performing domestic chores.

Road workers – In addition, some children are employed as road workers, often breaking stones, particularly during the school breaks. In 2003, for example, Kuensel reported on children as young as nine breaking stones for a local contractor, earning around Nu. 60 per day. All were doing so to earn enough to be able to pay for stationery, uniforms and food .

Child domestic workers – In the urban areas, most child workers are probably employed as domestic workers, often referred to as 'baby-sitters'. This seems to be a growing phenomenon, as more mothers in middle-class families in the towns are working outside the home, or have enough income to be able to afford domestic help. A survey of babysitters in 2004, for example, found that most were girls aged between 11 and 20, that they tended to come from poor rural families and had little or no education . Notably, 43% came from broken homes: either the parents had divorced, or one had died. Some has also come from the rural areas to live with relatives in the cities, with an implied agreement that the children will be looked after in exchange for work around the home.

While many of these children will be well treated as part of the family, having children

working in private homes is always an area for concern. If their work precludes their going to school it constitutes child labour. Moreover, children in these circumstances are inevitably vulnerable, being required to work long hours. The Child Protection Study commissioned by the then CRC Unit under the Ministry of Health (which since 2004 has become an autonomous organization called the National Commission for Women and Children), for example, talked to 29 children and found that they worked on average 12 hours a day, for Nu. 30. Four of the girls said they had been subjected to sexual abuse; one had become pregnant and had to have an abortion .

Abuse of child domestic workers has also emerged as an issue in the readers' forum on Kuenselonline where one message concerning a neighbour who was beating a child domestic worker generated a series of similar reports . This is clearly an area that needs much closer investigation – and supervision. As in many other countries, it may require considerable advocacy to persuade householders relying on 'baby-sitters' that this is a form of employment rather

Scaring boars in Buli

'Parents keep their children back sometimes to help on the farm, for example during ploughing. If they have no other helpers they need them in the fields. When the crop is growing, they also send their children at night to act as scarers of wild boars – they can consume 50% of the harvest. So at that season people are shouting all night and chasing them away, or they use horns and barking. They make so much noise that we don't get any sleep. The next day in school, children are often tired and sleepy. We try to persuade the children not to go, but this is against their parents' wishes. The parents do encourage their children to study; they don't keep them back more than they have to.'

Teacher, community primary school, Zhemgang district

than an alternative system of upbringing; and that all children in a household have the same rights.

Children working in small businesses –

Children in the urban areas are also to be found working in a whole range of private enterprises, including shops, restaurants, hotels and in weaving operations or various kinds of workshops. They can also be seen working as bus conductors or as assistants to truck drivers. Here too children are often employed in very difficult conditions, working long hours for low pay, and subject to various kinds of punishment. Girls who work in establishments that deal with the public can also be subjected to sexual advances from customers.

Street vendors – Usually, these children are sent by their parents to work on the streets, selling snacks of various kinds and also *doma*. Street vending is illegal so the children will try to keep out of the way of the police. Here too they can be subject to violence from customers and others as well as to sexual molestation.

Legislation on child labour

Bhutan is not a member of the ILO and thus not party to any of the conventions on working children. But it has passed a number of Acts to regulate the work of children, the most comprehensive of which will be the Labour and Employment Act which will specify the kind of work that is permissible for children at different ages. This should also make clear that having a work done by a child under 18 who is not

Two days' journey to market

'In the holidays, I carry oranges and sell them in the market. Also cardamom, chillies, ginger, vegetables, and bananas. It may take two days to reach the market. Settling the price is done by the buyer: they have a fixed price and they will not give more.'

A girl student, Zhemgang High School

a member of the immediate family constitutes employment, whether the child is paid or not, and that such children should be registered as employees.

Following up on such legislation, will require an effective system of labour inspection – which Bhutan is only now starting to develop. Inspectors are however unlikely to gain access to child domestic workers; here the best starting point would be to stimulate a more open public debate – leading to a code of practice for the treatment of child workers.

A further official impetus for reducing child labour will be the introduction and enforcement of compulsory primary education.

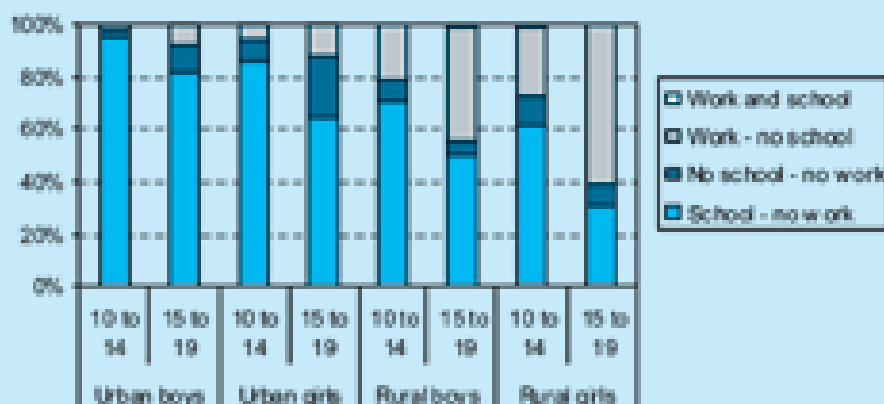
Corporal punishment

Parents in Bhutan have traditionally chastised their children by slapping, cuffing or beating them. Even if such punishment is not so severe as to constitute serious physical abuse this is nowadays considered to be a violation of the rights of the child. Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child says that "States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence".

In response, Bhutan has banned corporal punishment in schools. This has certainly reduced the incidence of such punishment but not yet eliminated it. A consultation with children from several schools in Thimphu in May 2005, for example, discovered that every child present had received corporal punishment in school.

Corporal punishment continues partly because older teachers find it difficult to change their ways, and unlike younger colleagues have not had training in other ways of disciplining children. They fear losing control of their classes – which usually contain between 35 and 50 students – if they have no recourse to physical abuse. Parents tend to be in favour of corporal punishment and request that teachers beat their children. They worry less that their children will be hurt than that they will grow up to be unruly, badly behaved and disrespectful

Figure 4.1 Children at work and school – Living standards survey



Source: NSB, 2004b

A day in the life of a 15-year-old road builder

Karma, aged 15, dropped out of class V in 2004 to go and work on the roads. His father is old and can barely work any more in his orchard. 'I want to help my family – they need me to work. My mother works too, but she can't earn enough. School would be best, but that is not open to me the way things are in my family.'

Every day Karma gets up at 4 am and helps his mother to cook food. At 8 am, he leaves for the road works, joining the truck that takes the workers from Tingtibi to the current site. Since Bhutan's roads suffer so much from landslides and need so much improvement, road works on one stretch or another tend to continue indefinitely. 'The road we are building at present goes to a distant village, and will also need retaining walls, so work will continue for at least a year.'

At present, the work site is one hour away. From 9 am to 12 noon he carries stones and sometimes helps cut down wood and forest. Then for an hour, he eats his packed lunch and takes a rest. Between 2 pm and 4 pm, the work continues, and then there is an hour's drive back to Tingtibi in the truck. At 6 pm he helps his mother prepare food for the evening meal. At 7 pm he teaches his sister and brother to read and write. Between 8 pm and 9 pm he gets ready for the next day, and at 10 pm he goes to sleep.

On special days when he doesn't have to work, he puts on his best clothes and meets up with friends. They play football and sometimes they watch movies or practice dancing for the festivals. Karma earns Nu. 3,000 a month, the standard road-worker's wage; but he cannot be permanently employed because he is under 18.

– and bring dishonour on them. Even children themselves, when asked, tend to say that discipline should be strict and accept that those behaving badly should be beaten.

As parents start to take their lead from schools, it seems likely that corporal punishment will diminish. But eliminating it completely will require consistent advocacy to convince

both parents and educators that there are better alternatives. In the next generation, when more parents will themselves have received an education less coloured by physical punishment, the pattern of upbringing and the ways of instilling right behaviour are likely to have changed. In the meantime, however, the Government will need to make greater efforts to ensure that the ban is enforced.

Children in monasteries are also subject to corporal punishment which is considered integral to the overall discipline of monastic life. However, the ultimate sanction of beating the child is governed by a very strict code and cannot be carried out in anger. Monastic life is governed by rules about all aspects of life: speaking to elders, eating, praying, studying, referring to parts of the body, sleeping in the correct Buddha position. Learning to do everything correctly is the path to enlightenment. When a monk infringes some rule, he is given a warning. After two or three infractions, he is beaten. Three items must be present at a beating: a staff, which represents the deity of integrity; the 'rosary' of large white beads which represents the deity of compassion, and the whip, representing the deity of knowledge. The whip has a plaited handle, inside which prayers are rolled, and four flat leather thongs; younger monks are hit with the thongs, and older monks with the handle. According to the monastic law, different kinds of infringements receive different numbers of strokes.

When administered, the beating is seen as a blessing, a source of learning. In the evening of a beating, the Kudung, who administers all beatings, must prostrate to the entire monk body. In a typical dzong there might be one beating a week, or perhaps none. In the recent past, according to the teachers or lopens, the severity of the code has softened and beatings are administered less forcefully and frequently. This punishment system does not accord with principles and practice of human rights, but the codes operating in the monasteries are governed by the Bhutanese spiritual authorities whose leaders belong to a continuous line of Buddhist belief and religious practice. The place in the monastic code of corporal punishment is, however, likely to decline further, as has happened in other religious traditions, as the monasteries and monk bodies gain wider exposure to the modern world. All efforts to expand that exposure, via health, educational, and recreational support services, can contribute to the necessary change in outlook, including a different approach to psycho-social and emotional care for young monks.

From baby sitter, to mother, to day-care worker

Tshering, who is around 17 years old, and her six-month-old baby, are living with her parents in a National Work Force (NWF) road camp, just below the 3,750 m. Thrumsingla Pass on the road that traverses Bhutan west to east. Tshering started primary school in Sengor, 20 km. lower down. But her parents took her out after class I because she had no-one in Sengor to stay with: their natal home is far away in Trashigang. So she went as a nanny to the family of a government official in Thimphu, for a salary of Nu. 500 (US\$12) a month.

There she 'got married' to the brother of her employer, who lived in the same house, meaning that she got pregnant. Her young husband is now studying in class XII in a school in the next district to the west (Bumthang). Tshering's pregnancy and marriage meant that she left her job. She says her employer was happy about her marriage, but her mother collected her from Thimphu and brought her here. Since then neither the husband nor the in-laws have sent her any money. The father has seldom seen his little boy.

Although her past has given her many hardships and limited her career and family life choices, Tshering is trying to make her future brighter. The NWF contractor has hired Tshering to run a day-care centre for the six small children in the camp, and pays her Nu. 3,000 per month – the same wage as the road-workers. However, her 'marriage' does not look permanent or promising from the point of view of economic or social support, thereby also affecting her young child.

Domestic violence

Tensions within families, frequently fuelled by alcohol, can lead to domestic violence. In the past, such events have remained largely hidden or are tolerated as part of normal life. Although in principle the police can intervene, in practice there is little they can do unless the abused partner, typically the woman, is prepared to make a complaint. But a woman is unlikely to report

Selling peanuts in Thimphu

Tsering, aged around 12, sells packets of peanuts on the streets of Thimphu. His parents, poor landless labourers, have sent him to live with an aunt and uncle for the past year. Tsering has never been to school. When he was seven years old, he was sent to look after cows for a farmer in Paro district, but he was often beaten when the cows strayed into the neighbours' pastures. So he prefers this way of life. The uncle sends Tsering's parents Nu. 300 a month for his work.

The uncle obtains the peanuts from the vegetable market in sacks. His wife cleans them and packages them in small plastic bags. Every morning at 7 am, after Tsering has done his household duties, he puts on layers of warm clothing and sets off on the street. He doesn't go home for lunch if he hasn't sold enough peanuts because he will be scolded by his aunt. Instead, he recoups money to buy something to eat. In a day he sells enough to bring in Nu. 400-500, and he hands all this over to his uncle.

Although he is scared of her tongue, Tsering is fond of his aunt. 'She is nice to me and treats me like a son of the house.' Every now and then she threatens him if he spends too much time playing with his friends, but she has never actually beaten him despite all her tantrums. Her two children and his friends from the neighbourhood all go to school. He sees them reading and writing, but he thinks he doesn't have the brains to do this now, even if he had the chance.

His uncle dabbles in different kinds of business. He has a taxi, and he has told Tsering that when he is older, he can learn how to drive it. He is also a moderator, good at settling disputes. People come and employ him as their spokesman in a quarrel. Although they don't go out together as a family, Tsering is given pocket money like the rest. Some friends have told him he could get much better pay at a hotel – Nu. 1,000 a month. But he would prefer to stay where he is. 'I don't know whether such people are good or bad. Maybe if I go and work for them, they will beat me. I like living with my uncle and aunt.'

such violence outside the family since there are no shelters to go to and few places she can turn to for practical support. Only around 10% of the police force are women, who would be in a better position to help victims than policemen. A new programme, run by the NGO, RENEW, aims to empower vulnerable women, and one of the issues that it addresses is domestic violence; however, care is being taken to address this difficult subject with sensitivity.

Sexual violence

Young women and children may also be subject to sexual abuse within the home. Some of this can take place under the guise of the traditional form of courtship known as 'night hunting' which involves a young man secretly enter-

ing the home of a young woman to have sex. In the past this has typically been by prior arrangement and consensual; a girl would not admit a man she did not know and whom she and her parents did not accept as a potential partner – though in some cases men would simply impose themselves on women and girls. Now that couples have other ways of communicating, and other places to meet, particularly in the urban centres and among educated young people, night hunting appears to be on the decline. But some predatory urban men seem to have been exploiting this tradition to harass, and occasionally rape, women and girls.

In the case of children, the Bhutan penal code classifies as rape any sexual intercourse with a child under 18. Relatively few cases of child sex abuse have been reported, and it may be less common in Bhutan than elsewhere; but

Contrasting opinions on corporal punishment from parents of Damphu High School students, Tsirang

Khamtu, shopowner: Teachers have the right to impose strict discipline on children, they should control them. I also discipline them at home, so that they don't create problems in school. It is my responsibility to make sure that my children are well-behaved. Children who are well-guided by their parents tend to study hard whereas children who lack parental guidance don't do well.'

Nidup, a former teacher: 'I was also a teacher and I know how our teachers behave, especially those in boarding schools, and I think they are too strict. One day my son came to me and said he could not stay in the boarding school. He had overslept and failed to go for prayers, and was beaten black and blue. Since I was a teacher myself, I did not feel I was the right person to go and speak to the person responsible, so I told my son to bear it. If I complain, the boy may be further victimized.'

there is no clear evidence either way. The Protection Study found that more cases appear to be coming to light, and are being reported in Kuensel. Normally this is abuse of girls, but the Kuensel-online reader's forum (www.kuenselonline.com) has also raised the issue of sexual harassment of boys in schools. It seems likely that much abuse goes unreported.

Opening up debate on such subjects as sexual harassment and domestic violence will help to clarify lines that are currently blurred between accepted traditional practices and forms of mild or serious abuse. NGOs and popular communications channels, such as radio and TV dramas, can help society reflect on behavioural norms in a positive manner, and help create a supportive environment for the protection of women's and children's rights.

Substance abuse

Parents have become increasingly concerned about substance abuse by their children. Primarily this concerns drinking alcohol, sniffing dendrite (glue) or correction fluid, smoking marijuana, which grows wild, along with some abuse of prescription drugs and injection of heroin. The actual level of drug abuse is not known, though it seems likely that although lower than in neighbouring countries, consumption is rising.

Most drug abuse goes undetected; the police generally become involved only when peo-

ple are consuming in public or substance abuse is linked with other crimes. But the pattern of drug arrests does give some indication of the picture. At a workshop in Thimphu in 2004,

Beaten for allowing a cow to be mauled by a leopard

'We were cutting trees for house construction and suddenly one cow got caught; a leopard came and attacked her – it was very frightening. I went home and told my father, and he was very angry and beat me. I had to continue taking out the cows in spite of my fear. My mother was very unhappy, and my grandfather had to come and talk to my father and explain that I was terrified. After he understood, my father excused me from taking out the cows.'

A girl student, Zhemgang High School

for example, the police reported on 356 drug arrests in the city over the period 1998-2004. These were almost entirely male, and 61% were under 20 years old. Around one third of young offenders came from broken families. However, substance abuse is certainly not confined to poor families.

The Government has made determined efforts to combat substance abuse. There are

controls over the use of pharmaceuticals and narcotic or psychotropic substances, and also on the sale of alcohol and tobacco. Schools also take drug abuse very seriously and frequently warn children of the dangers through posters as well as in the classrooms or in general assemblies.

Children in conflict with the law

Although children transgressing the law is not a new phenomenon, there are concerns about a rise in youth crime, particularly in the cities. This appears to be supported by police data which show a significant rise in convictions for young people – from negligible rates in the early 1990s to around 60 per year by 2003 (Figure 4.2). However, the sudden jump between the 1980s and 1990s suggests that in addition to a rise in crime there may also have been a change in the method or consistency of reporting. Although this refers to youth aged up to 25, the pattern for juvenile crime (aged 7 to 18) seems to be similar: the rate of offending increases sharply between around 12 and 17, then stays at a similar level until 23, after which it declines.

Although there is certainly crime in the rural areas, including assault and petty theft, the highest crime rates appear to be in the urban areas where there is greater social dislocation and the temptations are greater. An indication of the nature of juvenile crime is available from an analysis of the 514 arrests in Thimphu between 1998 and 2003: 43% were for theft, 19% for assault and 17% for drug abuse. As to why they committed crimes, poverty would seem to be an obvious cause, and one-third of those arrested said that they were jobless, while around one-third have low-quality jobs such as labourers or waiters. But crime is by no means confined to the poor; many of those arrested are also from richer families, suggesting that theft is merely for the purpose of acquiring more expensive consumer goods. Around 10% of those arrested were students, though primarily for assault, rather than theft.

For the first few offences at least, the police will probably discuss the situation with the parents and warn the children. More persistent offenders will be arrested and should then be

returned to their parents before the trial. There are also provisions for the treatment of children who are taken into custody. The Police Act, 1980 and Prison Act, 1982 say that handcuffs may not be used on children under 13; the Prison Act also states that minors must be kept separately from other prisoners and may not be given prison work 'beyond their capabilities'.

Even then the result is more likely to be a warning than any form of detention. If children under 18 are given a custodial sentence, however, they will be sent to the Youth Development and Rehabilitation Centre at Tsimakha in Chukha district. So far these have been relatively few. Between 1999 and mid-2005, 84 children, all of them boys, were sent there of whom 65 had been released, leaving just 16 in residence. The majority had been sentenced for theft or burglary, and more than half had come from Thimphu, though most of these had migrated there from other parts of the country.

The centre has 18 staff, 14 men and 4 women, all of whom are serving police officers who have not had any specific training for dealing with young offenders. The children are closely supervised: in early 2005 there were more staff than children. Some go to nearby schools, where they seem to be well accepted (one is the games captain at the junior high school). Only one has ever tried to escape and he was soon recaptured. The others attend basic education and vocational classes at the centre, where there is typically one teacher for every three or four pupils. There are also group counselling sessions.

The setting is somewhat bleak but according to the staff most of the children are happy enough at the centre, where they may well be better treated than they were at home. The parents seem to visit only rarely, probably because of the distance from home, and in some cases there are problems on release when the parents do not want to take the child back. In these circumstances the centre will try to find work locally for them.

A priority for protection

Bhutanese families have in the past taken the primary responsibility for child protection. But modernization and urbanization are eroding

Performance in Zhemgang: celebrations with a bang

A group of class IX students in Zhemgang High School were asked to develop a drama around 'A Special Day at Home' and chose to set it on Losar (New Year's Day). First they acted out the preparation of Losar breakfast which must be served correctly. The women served the men and the guests, and the father and son then went off to play archery, returning at lunch-time late and drunk. Then came scrapping and argument about the Losar lunch. The son was very rude to his mother and refused to eat. In turn, the father started hitting his wife because she had not served the drinks in the correct way, and had to be restrained by the son.

Whenever the topic of Losar was selected for a drama in a participatory exercise, family celebrations were invariably depicted as descending close to the level of a brawl. Obviously, students enjoyed acting these parts and too much should not be inferred. But children clearly think that fathers and sons often drink too much – sometimes mothers too – and that this routinely leads to fisticuffs or mild domestic violence. In follow-up discussions, children who are upset by these kinds of fights speak of their attempts to mediate between parents.

some of these protective layers – creating a greater demand for formal systems of protection by the state. In the years ahead, Bhutan will need therefore to encourage the health and education systems to broaden the scope of their care for children, while also creating new social services, either through the state or NGOs, to which women and children can turn at times of distress.

Teachers' views of night hunting in Trashiyangtse

'As the country is getting developed nobody walks around looking for wives' according to a female teacher in a lower secondary school. Instead, they send love letters. They fix a time for a date and off they go. In this region night-hunting is not done any more.' But a male colleague disagrees. 'Night-hunting is a tradition of the youth in the past. In the villages it prevails. In the winter, women students go home during the long vacation, and they are still hunted. The victims of night-hunting are usually from poor families. In the villages it is old-fashioned courtship. In the schools and colleges it is non-existent.'

People will also need a better understanding of what constitutes 'abuse', 'domestic violence', 'sexual exploitation', and all the terms

Teachers determined to combat drug abuse

'Marijuana grows wild, and alcohol and cigarettes are available in the town. The school introduced a drugs policy in 2004, banning the use of these drugs. All the students were informed and our policy booklet was also given to the District Education Officer and other local headmasters. We discussed it with the town authorities and said that some shopkeepers were transgressing and selling items to our students. The police have been involved. If there is any repeat, we will take the issue to the Ministry of Trade. When we went into the users' backgrounds, we found that broken homes was a factor. Not the economic background – the richer ones are the ones with the money to pay for drugs.'

Teacher in Rangjung High School, Trashigang

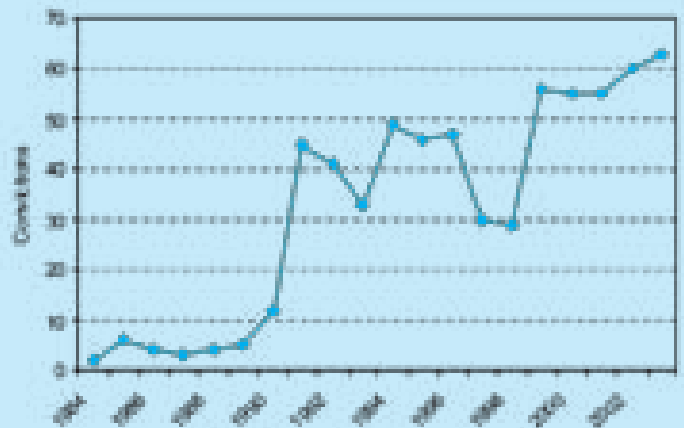
commonly deployed in developing protection policy and practice. This will require a process of sensitization and education involving educators and the media – and women and youth themselves.

This will also mean making a distinction between practices that belong to the old world and need to be discarded; and new protection problems that result from modernization. Certain traditional practices such as strict codes of discipline were originally designed as a form of protection. In the light of modern child rights principles, however, many such practices are now seen as outmoded. Moreover some older practices have now been corrupted by modern outside influences: under the pretext of ‘night-hunting’, for example, some men are committing what elsewhere might be known as ‘date rape’ or forcing themselves on unwilling women and girls. The tradition of child work around the home can also be exploited, pushing children into child labour in domestic service or into working in bars, restaurants and hotels.

It is important to distinguish between these different categories of protection needs. Otherwise cultural practices that some people value may be outlawed in an ineffective and socially alienating way. Practices that are regarded as traditional and acceptable to established norms need to be tackled with sensitivity, by advocacy and similar methods – through an open dialogue that allows people to come to a view of their role in a modern Bhutan, and to adopt appropriate laws and policies.

At the same time, it is also important to tackle new issues arising out of commercialization and consumer life, such as sexual exploitation and modern forms of child labour. In this case there is likely to be less resistance to child and female protection measures from the population at large. The more likely source of resistance here is among those leaders of society who would prefer to believe that Bhutan, uniquely in the world, is able to remain free of the unfortunate side-effects of modernity and the consumer age.

Figure 4.2 Convictions of under-25 year-olds, 1984-2003



Source: Dorji, 2005c

Preventing children from becoming criminals

‘There was a theft. Four outsiders and two students from class VIII, 14- and 15-year-olds, were involved – they were influenced by the outsiders, who were drop-outs and nonschool-goers. At the time of the festival, they went stealing. A case was then brought against them. We informed their parents and the village headmen that they had been taken into custody. I feel that they should be counseled and brought back to school – not taken off to the district jail. We would like the school to be involved in the discussion about what should happen to them – not simply allow them to become criminals. We might be able to stop that process.’

Head Teacher, Ranjung High School, Trashigang



...it is important to ensure that development opportunities embrace all (of them) rather than favouring some and leaving others behind.

Over recent decades the accelerated process of development in Bhutan has opened up wider horizons for its women and children, extending basic services for health, education, and environmental sanitation. At the same time, economic development and expanding opportunities have begun to change the face of traditional life. This has brought many benefits, but also stretched the social fabric – through the dispersal of families, greater social and spatial mobility, and the desire of many more educated young people to enter formal employment – leading to tensions that are most deeply felt by women and children.

Over the past two decades Bhutan has made a concerted attempt to place the well-being of children and women, at the centre of social development policy – putting a strong emphasis on basic maternal and child health care, expanding education, and providing safe water supplies, environmental sanitation and other basic services. As this situation analysis has underlined, Bhutan has a great deal of which to be proud of, even if there is no cause for complacency. The groundwork has been laid and in the next development phase the task in relation to existing social policies will be to improve and fine-tune, rather than embark in any dramatic new direction.

The new task is to widen the scope of development policies and programmes in relation to children, and in particular in relation to older children. Previous programmes have focussed on infants, the under-fives, and children of primary school age. Now it will be important to pay more attention to the predicaments of adolescents between 12 and 18 – recognizing the expectations awakened and energies released in modern Bhutan, and that children's passage through puberty and adolescence in a society promoting a higher age at marriage brings to the fore many significant questions of male-female relations.

This need arises in response to Bhutan's accelerated process of change. The process of transition from an ancient, self-sufficient and settled way of life in a harsh terrain to one that

Expectations and frustrations too

'We were much happier 10 years ago. Society has become much less hospitable, people don't know each other so well or spend time together as they used to. And we did not worry then that our child will be left out, and even after graduating, will end up selling parking tickets. Frustration is building up among parents and elders. They take loans to get their children through college, and still they do not get a job. Is this only happening among a few people who are ambitious for their children, or are there general feelings of frustration? If expectations are rising, how will they be satisfied?'

Senior government officer, Thimphu

embraces modern benefits of improved health and educational standards and professional employment opportunities has up to now been relatively smooth. This can be attributed to the enlightened rule of King Jigme Singye Wangchuck since 1974, and previously that of the 3rd King his father, and the judicious way in which both monarchs have guided the Royal Government, shaping development policies and the institutions that deliver them. But the increased

pace of change, not only within the kingdom but in the outside world, exerts special pressures, as life becomes much more fluid and restless and tends to dissolve traditional certainties and behaviour codes.

For women and children, who are among the more vulnerable members of any society, it is important to ensure that development opportunities embrace all of them rather than favouring some and leaving others behind. It will also be important to ensure that they are protected from modern phenomena that might expose them to new risks. As a signatory to both the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Bhutan is obliged to try, within the limits of available resources, to meet the standards laid down in these human rights instruments.

With regard to children and young people up to the age of 18, the CRC provides the ultimate checklist of internationally sanctioned norms governing the circumstances and attributes of childhood. It provides a lens through which to view contemporary features of the situation of children – so as to determine policy principles and programme directions.

New policy considerations

For basic health, education, early childhood development, water supply and environmental sanitation, fulfilling these rights will mean extending services and eventually covering all Bhutanese children and families. It also requires continuing attention to the improvement of service quality. Bhutan is already committed to these goals, but some populations have so far been relatively neglected – such as young monks, disabled children, those living away from home, and those in ethnic minorities, whose inclusion and coverage requires special initiatives.

Children and adolescents in occupations such as domestic service or babysitting, or who are employed in shops, restaurants and hotels, in construction or selling goods on the street, should have the same access to education, nutrition, health care, and recreation as their

peers. Special effort may be needed to ensure disadvantaged children do not slip the service net.

Bhutan also needs to respond to new sources of childhood vulnerability – including rural-urban migration, social and economic mobility, the dispersal and fragmentation of families, the pressure of qualified young people on scarce jobs, and the growth of consumer tastes and desires. Many Bhutanese families now understand that without education the doorway to a better life will not open. As a result, children come under great pressure to succeed academically and raise not only themselves, but their families, onto the threshold of urbanized life. This, in turn, has an impact on livelihoods, occupations, inter-family relations, the age at marriage and the durability of unions, the age at first delivery, family size, and on young people's ambitions and demands.

The more complex, even if potentially more promising, situation in which many women and children find themselves today thus demands a widening of perspectives to meet their needs and fulfil their rights. This will mean, for example, considering how to reduce the danger of economic or sexual exploitation; how to alert parents effectively to the risks of family dispersal; how to reinforce existing campaigns to reduce alcohol and substance abuse and discourage the use of physical punishment. Policy-makers and service professionals will also need to consider how to promote later marriages, while enabling young people to manage their maturing sexuality by means of 'life skills' training. In addition they will have to find ways of dealing with the abuse, neglect and abandonment suffered by women and children – and doing so not only in law but in practice. Opening up discussion of the best ways forward in such sensitive areas requires leadership of a high order.

Protection measures need to be underpinned by law, but laws and regulations on their own will rarely suffice. They will not bring about the behavioural and attitudinal change needed to end such practices as the employment of under-age children or undue physical or sexual coercion. What is required also is a sensitization of opinion – which will be needed even to open a debate on such subjects as 'domestic violence'. Certain forms of aggressive behaviour

A road worker's hopes for her children

Two years ago, Dipa's husband was killed at the Zhemgang tsechu (festival), in a road accident caused by a drunken driver. Since then she has never been given the compensation the court awarded her. Dipa has since been providing for the family by working on the roads.

One of her sons reached class X before failing to go further, and two young daughters are in school. Her second son dropped out of class VIII to help his mother: 'We had a dispute about it because I felt so bad, but he insisted on leaving anyway.' The 18-year-old and his mother now work on the roads together, each earning Nu. 3,000 a month. The oldest son is unemployed: only if his mother is unwell does he sometimes replace her. He wants to go to Thimphu to get work with an uncle and do something better with his life. Dipa's hope is that her daughters will become teachers. 'My boy has stood down from school to educate the girls, and help with their studies. But financial constraints are my biggest worry. If they don't pass their exams, I cannot afford private education. If they miss out, they will have the same life as I did.'

Dipa, 42, Tingtibi, Zhemgang district

between adults, or by adults towards children, that are accepted under established behavioural and moral codes, may need to be debated before people become aware of their potential for harm. The situation is similar for alcohol and substance abuse, widely agreed to fuel violent behaviour, but regarded by many as an integral part of hospitality for relatives and friends. Sexual and marriage practices also need careful discussion for young people to become less inhibited about sharing their problems, and develop the confidence and skills needed to protect themselves from harassment.

Forums for participation and debate

At present, Bhutan has few forums for building such awareness – though the media do their best to meet some of this need. But formal communications campaigns can achieve only so much. Bhutanese women and children are naturally shy and reticent, and are far from outspoken concerning their needs and desires. They tend to listen to the voice of authority, and not question what they are told.

In schools, some enlightened head teachers are keen to encourage a more interactive learn-

ing process and promote forms of responsible self-expression and self-organization by youth. But these approaches have yet to emerge in NFE classes. The majority of women at NFE courses have not gained sufficient self-confidence to express themselves easily or voice opinions in front of others. Although the media help raise topics and put across new ideas, Bhutan offers fewer opportunities for opening up debate than do other societies that have well-established and organized community associations and networks of NGOs.

With the publication of the draft Constitution, Bhutan has an opportunity to further advance democratization and decentralization. In keeping with this trend, it would be useful to promote networks for youth and for women. Such networks would help meet a number of needs. They would provide a forum in which to discuss sensitive issues and from which protection systems could emerge. They could also provide material support and assistance to women and child victims of exploitation or abuse. In addition they would enable youth to develop capacities for civic responsibility and leadership and take on a social development role – rather than being frustrated by lack of opportunity and suffering the disappointment of glimpsing a new, modern and monetized world and not being able to reach it.

In this context the key aspect of the rights perspective is that of participation. Opening up hearts and minds by means of participatory activity could be an impetus for working towards the next phase of the 'developed' society. Women and children need to learn how to develop and express their views as social actors. They cannot advance without being willing to take initiatives in their lives – whether this is a question of a mother choosing to give birth in a health institution or practice family planning; or of young men and women making informed choices of spouse, having realistic job expectations, recognizing ARI or STI symptoms, or using condoms for safe sex. The supply of amenities can only achieve so much. Beyond that point, there has also to be a demand – an active and discerning consumer response to services and opportunities. There is no reason why latent demand for enhanced social improvements cannot be activated through positive and well-directed community organization.

Bhutan already has umbrella organizations and networks for greater participation by women and youth. These could be a gateway to addressing many problems by adding such elements such as credit, income-generation, legal counselling and marriage dispute negotiation. Among adolescents, the phased establishment of 'youth centres' in urban areas with chapters in secondary schools and other institutions, would provide a setting for the promotion of 'life skills', as well as services such as career counselling, sports and recreation, and preparation for successful adult life.

Seen in this light, the rights framework for policy and programme development has an important role to play in developing citizenship, and social and democratic responsibility. All such initiatives take time to reach fruition, but with the Bhutanese National Commission for Women and Children becoming operational, these are important and timely directions to consider.

National Women's Association, Trashiyangtse branch

An active branch of the NWA in Trashiyangtse has 27 members, led by the wife of the district Dzongda, and including women from all walks of life: teaching, shop-keeping and running the home. Many have received their own education from NFE: as children they had not been able to attend school.

Their main activity is to raise money by catering, and to sponsor destitute or needy students in local schools. Since 1999 they have raised Nu. 73,000 and sponsored 17 students altogether, 11 boys and 6 girls. Cases were recommended by local school teachers, Gups or the District Education Officers.

The problems typically encountered are: single parent family, death of a parent, orphan hood, extreme poverty. Most of the parents are illiterate; alcohol has often played a part in disputes and family break-ups. In many cases, the father has gone off to other districts to seek work. The mother is left behind to shoulder all the economic burden of the family.

The children who are sponsored help with the catering enterprise, serving clients and washing-up. But funds are not easy to come by, and clients need a more permanent route out of poverty. The NWA-TY wants to engage in income-generation activities for disadvantaged women, but technical assistance is needed.

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