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NATIONAL COUNCIL OF BHUTAN



NC/SCAC/LPD-012024/ 061

30th July, 2024

The Chairman of the Board
Disabled People's Organization of Bhutan
Thimphu Bhutan

Subject: National Council Report on the State of Persons with Disabilities

Dear Dr. Sangha,

Following the Parliament's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Social and Cultural Affairs Committee (SCAC) undertook a comprehensive review of the State of Persons with Disabilities in the country. The findings were presented and deliberated during the 33rd session of the National Council of Bhutan.

We are grateful for the valuable inputs provided by your organization during the stakeholder meeting and field visit. We are pleased to share the report and recommendations we submitted to the Government on the Review on the State of Persons with Disabilities for your kind reference.

The SCAC will await the responses from the Government and will share them in the winter session.

With warm regards,

(Kesang Chuki Dorjee)
Committee Chairperson

Copy to:

1. Hon'ble Thrizin, National Council for kind information.
2. Secretary General, National Council Secretariat for kind information.



A Review Report on the State of Persons with Disabilities

Prepared by

Social and Cultural Affairs Committee

June 2024

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"A nation's progress can only be measured by the well-being of its weakest members."

His Majesty The King

Acknowledgement

The Social and Cultural Affairs Committee extends its deepest gratitude to the Dzongkhag administrations for their invaluable contributions and support. Special recognition goes to the Dagana, Gasa, Mongar, Paro, Punakha, Thimphu, Trashigang, Trongsa and Wangdue Phodrang, Dzongkhag Administrations. We particularly thank the respective Dzongdags, Dzongrabs, Gups, Mangmis, Tshogpas, and the public for their time, warm hospitality, and support in comprehending the ground realities.

Furthermore, the Committee is deeply grateful to the Civil Society Organizations for their valuable insights. Our heartfelt thanks go to the SELWA, Ability Bhutan Society in Thimphu and Tsirang, Bhutan Stroke Foundation, Disabled People's Organization of Bhutan, Draktsho Vocational Training Centre for Special Children and Youth in Thimphu and Trashigang, and Phensem Parents Support Group.

We also acknowledge the contributions of international agencies Save the Children, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO for their valuable insights during the follow-up meetings.

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Secondary School, Drukgyel Higher Secondary School, Drukgyel Primary School, Gesarling Higher Secondary School, Jigme Sherubling Central School, Khaling Lower Secondary School, Khuruthang Middle Secondary School, Mongar Middle Secondary School, Muenselling Institute, Samtengang Higher Secondary School, Samtengang Primary School, Tshangkha Higher Secondary School, Wangsel Institute for the Deaf and Yangchengatshel Higher Secondary School.

The Committee also thanks Paro College of Education and Sherubtse College for their participation in our consultation meetings and their valuable contributions.

Lastly, the Committee expresses immense gratitude to UNDP and UNICEF for their funding, which facilitated the review of the state of persons with disabilities across 10 Dzongkhags, including Thimphu.

Abbreviations

ABS	Ability Bhutan Society
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
BCDST	Bhutan Child Developmental Screening Tool
BCCI	Bhutan Chamber for Commerce and Industries
BSF	Bhutan Stroke Foundation
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CWD	Children with Disabilities
DLG	Department of Local Government
DPOB	Disabled People’s Organization of Bhutan
ECCD	Early Childhood Care Development
FYP	Five Year Plan
GNHC	Gross National Happiness Commission
GovTech	Government Technology Agency
ICT	Information Communication Technology
JDWNRH	Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospital
LG	Local Government
MOESD	Ministry of Education and Skills Development
MOF	Ministry of Finance
MOH	Ministry of Health
MOICE	Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment
MOIT	Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport
NHDCL	National Housing Development Corporation Limited
NHS	National Health Survey
NLS	National Labor Survey
NPPD	National Policy for Persons with Disabilities
OCASC	Office of Cabinet Affairs and Strategic Coordination
PWD	Persons with Disabilities
PHCB	Population and Housing Census of Bhutan
RCSC	Royal Civil Service Commission

RUB	Royal University of Bhutan
SCAC	Social and Cultural Affairs Committee
SEN	Special Education Needs
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund
WHO	World Health Organization
YELP	Youth Engagement and Livelihood Programme

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Background

The World Health Organization reports that there are 1.3 billion people with disabilities worldwide.

In Bhutan, the most recent data recorded by the Royal Government is the National Health Survey of 2023, which shows there are about 48,000 persons with disabilities. This survey shows a marked increase of self-declared disability of 6.8% from 2.1% (15,567) recorded in the Population and Housing Census of Bhutan (PHCB, 2017). This number represents a significant portion of the population (777,224), particularly concentrated in rural areas, where poverty and disability are often linked.

Following the World Health Organization definition, Bhutan recognizes disability as long term impairments (physical, mental, intellectual or sensory) that when combined with environmental barriers, hinder full and equal participation.

The National Health Survey categorizes disabilities similarly: vision, hearing, mobility, communication, self-care, and cognition. The 2023 survey introduced the addition of cognition disability, encompassing intellectual and learning disabilities (ADHD, Dyslexia, Down Syndrome), mental illnesses, brain injuries, and dementia.

The Constitution of Bhutan defines the roles and responsibilities of the State for the welfare of its citizens.

Section 15, Article 7, Fundamental Rights states that all persons are equal by the law and are entitled to equal and effective protection of the law and shall not be discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, languages, religion, politics or other status.

Section 22, Article 9, Principles of State Policy states that the State shall endeavor to provide security in the event of sickness and disability or lack of adequate means of livelihood for reasons beyond one's control.

Recognizing the growing numbers, the third government adopted the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) in October, 2019. Hailed by the former Prime Minister as the region's most comprehensive policy, the NPPD aims to improve access to education, health, justice and protection services. It also emphasizes empowerment and participation in political and socio-economic development for people with disabilities.

Bhutan, a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) since 21st September, 2010, ratified it in October 2023 becoming the 191st member to formally protect the human rights of people with disabilities. The erstwhile Gross National Happiness Commission ensured that the policy provisions of the NPPD were in keeping with the principles of the UNCRPD. Bhutan will now need to submit a comprehensive report on measures taken to give effect to its obligations under the present Convention (Article 35, UNCRPD) and on the progress made in that regard, within two years after the entry into force.

As a House of Review, the Social and Cultural Affairs Committee (SCAC) proposed to the National Council's 6th plenary the need to review the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities to complement the Government's efforts for the 13th Five Year plan. The House unanimously approved the proposal and works began in mid November 2023.

As Bhutan begins the 13th Five Year "Gross National Happiness focusing on People, Progress and Prosperity" - there are already encouraging reports that increased budgets have been allocated to promote the rights of persons with disabilities to education, health and other sectors. The National Council's review of the NPPD 2019, aims to complement the government's efforts through our research findings and further improve the lives of people with disabilities throughout Bhutan.

Objective and Purpose

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities strives to empower individuals with disabilities and guarantee their full societal participation. This is achieved by promoting equal opportunities, providing comprehensive rehabilitation measures, and fostering an inclusive, barrier-free environment. Recognizing the vital role people with disabilities can play, the policy ensures they

have the necessary support to reach their full potential. A comprehensive review of the policy's progress and implementation was done by the Social and Cultural Affairs Committee. The final recommendations will be presented to the Government, contributing to the ongoing efforts to promote inclusivity, equal opportunities, and a supportive environment for persons with disabilities.

Review Process

The Social and Cultural Affairs Committee (SCAC) employed a multifaceted approach to review the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) 2019.

Policy Analysis:

- **Core Document:** The NPPD served as the primary document to assess government and partner agency actions over the past five years and plans for the 13th Five Year Plan.
- **Focus Areas:** SCAC prioritized reviewing key sections during stakeholder discussions, focusing on data collection, education, healthcare, economic security, caregivers, accessibility in cities and public transportation, and participation in cultural and social activities.

Data Gathering:

- **Rapid Needs Assessment:** As the Population Housing Census of Bhutan (PHCB) was last conducted in 2017, the committee took the initiative to conduct a survey by late November, 2023. District administration offices in all 20 districts were contacted to obtain updated prevalence data on persons with disabilities.
- **Stakeholder Selection:** The SCAC strategically selected stakeholders based on a combination of factors.

- **Prevalence Data:** Districts with higher reported disabilities received a greater representation.
- **Geographic Spread:** Representation ensured inclusion from eastern, western, southern and central regions.

Stakeholder Engagement:

- **Meetings and Discussions:** Over two months, the SCAC conducted 40 cross-country meetings, engaging 59 stakeholders, These included relevant Ministries, Dzongkhag and Local Government officials, educational institutions, hospitals, monastic institutions, international organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs).
- **Inclusive Participation:** Emphasis was placed on including persons with disabilities (PWDs) and their caregivers in meetings wherever possible.

Chapter 1: The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities

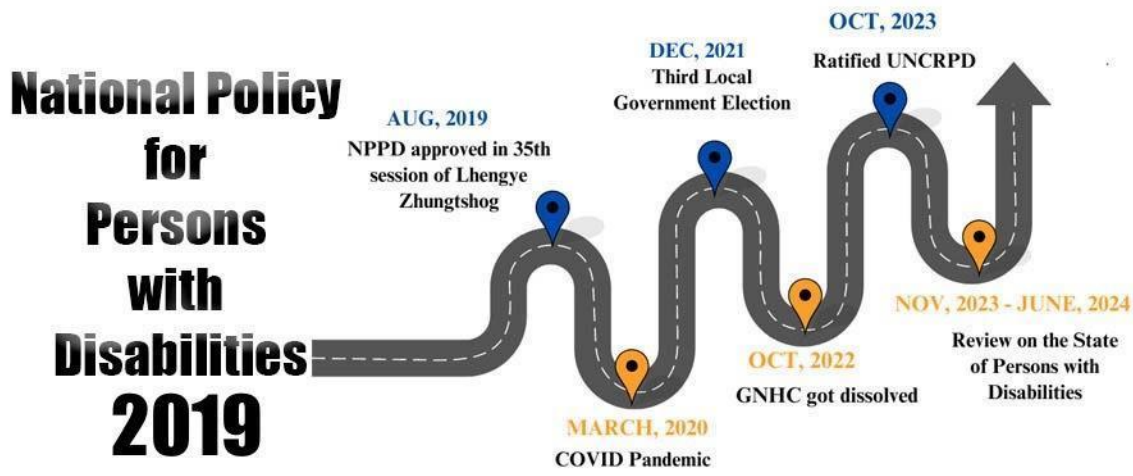


Figure 1.1 Timeline of National policy for Persons with Disabilities

Background:

The Royal Government of Bhutan adopted the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities during the 35th Session of the Lhengye Zhungtshog on August 27, 2019. Aligned with the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), the policy prioritizes people with disabilities, their caregivers and service providers.

Lead Agency:

Initially, the Gross National Happiness Commission Secretariat (GNHCS) was designated as the lead agency for coordinating disability-related policies, plans and programmes (Section 23.2.1) and implementation of the action plan for this policy (Section 23.2.2).

Implementation Challenges:

This review identified several challenges hindering the NPPD's implementation:

- **Limited Awareness:** While most Ministries and CSOs were familiar with the NPPD and UNCRPD, some crucial stakeholders like referral hospitals, Dzongkhag leaders, Local Government leaders and inclusive school faculty lacked awareness.
- **COVID pandemic** struck Bhutan in early 2020 until September 2022 and the agenda and priority of the Royal Government efforts was focused on saving lives.
- **High Local Government Turnover:** According to Department of Local Government, the high turnover rate of Local Government leadership (38% of Gups (77); 20% Mangmis (40) and 37% Tshogpas (386) reelected in 2021) could explain the limited familiarity with the 2019 NPPD.
- **Policy Action Plan Awareness:** Aside from international development partners, the Ministry of Finance and the OCASC, most stakeholders were unaware of the NPPD Action Plan.
- **Post-Dissolution Confusion:** After the GNHCS dissolution, most Bhutanese implementing agencies, except for international development partners and the Ministry of Finance, were unclear about the OCASC's role in coordinating NPPD implementation.

Chapter 2: Data on Persons with Disabilities

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) emphasizes the need for reliable data to inform effective policies and programmes (Section 22)

This chapter explores data availability and challenges.

2.1 National Health Survey (2023)

The National Health Survey (NHS) 2023 offers disaggregated data on persons with disabilities (PWDs). While the full details have not been shared, the Ministry of Health (MOH) shared the following highlights.

Using the Washington Group questionnaire, questions on whether people have difficulty performing universal activities (walking, seeing, hearing, cognition, self-care, and communication) were asked. The survey identified:

- **Total PWDs:** Approximately 48,000 (details not released)

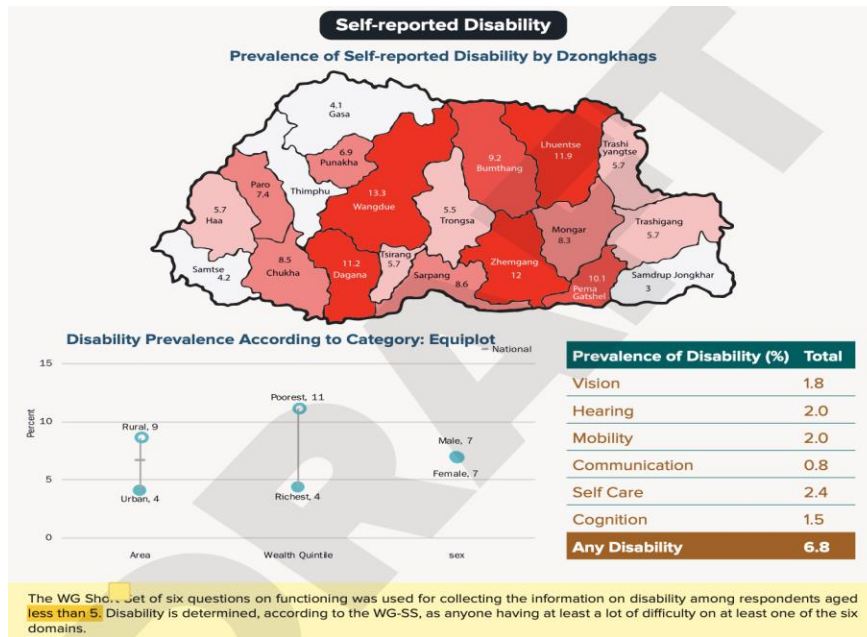


Figure 2.1.1 Disability Prevalence source: NHS 2023

- **Highest Prevalence:** Wangdue Phodrang, followed by Zhemgang, Lhuentse, Dagana and Pemagatshel.
- **Most Common Disability:** Self-care; This means a person with a physical, mental, or emotional condition lasting six months or more, who has difficulty in doing any of the activities such as dressing, bathing, or getting around inside the home would be considered having self-care disability
- **Disability and Age:** Prevalence increases with age, particularly among those 65+

2.2. Population and Housing Census of Bhutan (2017)

In the Population and Housing Census of Bhutan of 2017, the data showed the prevalence of PWDs in rural areas is notably higher compared to urban areas. According to the PHCB 2017, the top five Dzongkhags with the highest number of individuals with disabilities are Zhemgang (591), Trashiyangtse (545), Lhuentse, Trashigang, and Tsirang (451). Of the 15,567 individuals with disabilities, 8,111 are females and 7,456 are males. By area of residence, 3,055 individuals reside

in urban areas, while 12,512 reside in rural areas. The age group with the highest prevalence of disabilities is 85 years and above.

<i>Dzongkhag</i>	Urban				Rural				Both Areas			
	Male	Female	Both	Sex	Male	Female	Both	Sex	Male	Female	Both	Sex
Bumthang	1.2	1.4	1.3	2.1	3.4	2.7	1.8	2.7	2.2			
Chhukha	0.9	1.2	1.0	2.6	2.7	2.7	1.7	1.9	1.8			
Dagana	0.9	1.2	1.1	2.3	2.6	2.5	2.1	2.4	2.2			
Gasa	0.1	0.9	0.4	2.2	3.8	3.0	1.4	2.9	2.1			
Haa	0.8	1.2	1.0	1.6	2.4	2.0	1.4	2.1	1.8			
Lhuentse	1.0	0.8	0.9	2.7	3.8	3.2	2.4	3.4	2.9			
Monggar	0.8	1.1	0.9	3.2	3.6	3.4	2.5	2.9	2.7			
Paro	0.8	1.0	0.9	1.4	1.9	1.7	1.2	1.7	1.5			
Pema Gatshel	1.1	1.1	1.1	3.6	3.7	3.6	2.7	2.9	2.8			
Punakha	1.0	1.3	1.1	2.2	2.9	2.5	1.9	2.5	2.2			
Samdrup Jongkhar	1.2	1.3	1.2	2.3	2.7	2.5	1.9	2.2	2.1			
Samtse	1.0	0.9	1.0	3.0	2.8	2.9	2.7	2.5	2.6			
Sarpang	1.6	1.7	1.6	2.4	2.5	2.4	2.2	2.3	2.2			
Thimphu	1.0	1.2	1.1	1.4	2.0	1.7	1.0	1.3	1.2			
Trashigang	1.4	1.4	1.4	3.3	3.5	3.4	2.8	3.1	2.9			
Trashi Yangtse	1.3	2.3	1.7	3.5	4.5	4.0	3.0	4.1	3.5			
Trongsa	1.5	1.4	1.4	1.7	3.6	2.4	1.7	3.1	2.3			
Tsirang	0.8	1.2	1.0	3.3	3.2	3.3	2.9	2.9	2.9			
Wangdue Phodrang	1.2	1.1	1.2	2.0	3.4	2.6	1.9	2.8	2.3			
Zhemgang	2.1	1.4	1.8	3.8	4.7	4.3	3.5	4.1	3.8			
Bhutan	1.0	1.2	1.1	2.5	3.0	2.8	2.0	2.3	2.1			

Table no: 2.1.1 Disability Prevalence Rate by Dzongkhag, Area, and Sex (PHCB 2017)

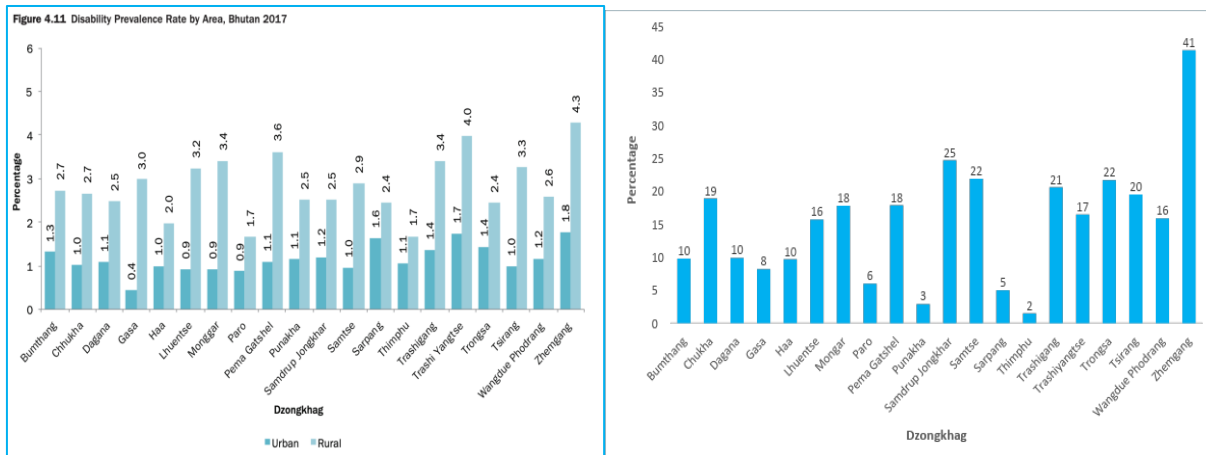


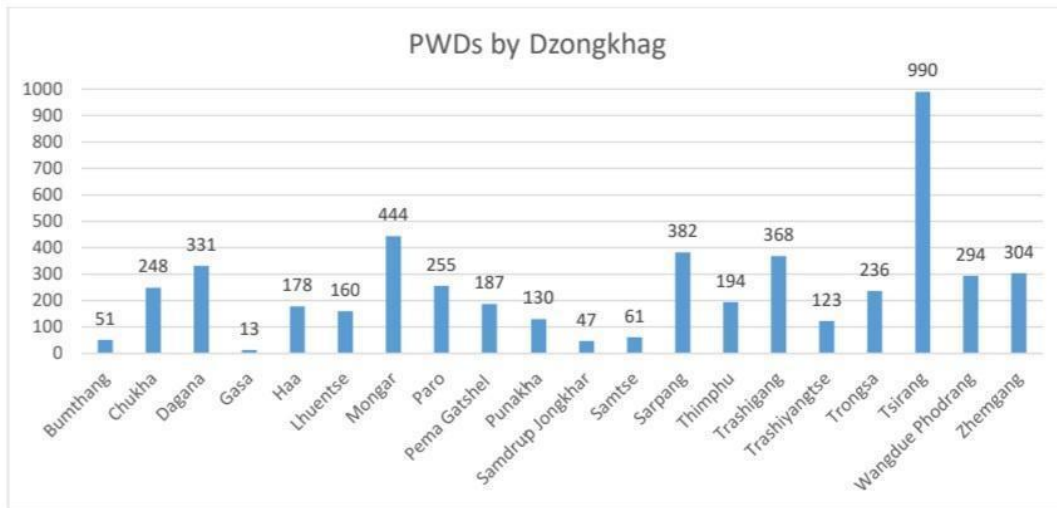
Figure 2.1.2 Relationship between Poverty and Disability, Source PHCB 2017

The PHCB states that multi-domain prevalence rate for 2017 is 0.7%, which corresponds to 5,388 persons, out of which, 4,487 persons are in rural areas and 901 are in urban areas. Of the total, 2,585 persons are males and 2,803 are females.

The disability prevalence rate in Zhemgang Dzongkhag was the highest according to the PHCB 2017. Additionally, the poverty rate among individuals with disabilities was also significantly high in Zhemgang Dzongkhag. This suggests a strong correlation between disability and poverty in the region, indicating that individuals with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty.

The relationship between disability and poverty is complex and mutually reinforcing. Persons with disabilities often face barriers to education, employment, and social participation, which can limit their economic opportunities and increase their likelihood of living in poverty

2.2 Social and Cultural Affairs Committee Survey



Source: Dzongkhag Administration

Figure 2.2.1 SCAC survey 2023

The SCAC initiated a survey (Annexure 3) to ascertain the latest situation and figures of PWDs in the Dzongkhags in late November, 2023 since the only data available was the PHCB 2017. This information was compiled by the District Administrations with the support of the Local Government leaders.

However, some Dzongkhags had incomplete information. The total number recorded from this survey was 4,996 PWDs, much lower than the PHCB 2017 figures, therefore the committee only used this data for discussion purposes during the tours. The Local Government (LG) leaders that SCAC met said that these numbers probably reflected PWDs over the age of 18 since the Election Commission of Bhutan wanted the information to facilitate special early voting service during the Parliamentary elections. Furthermore, the LG leaders said that they were not clear about the definition of disability.

Observations

1. Self-reported disability appears to be increasing.
2. PWDs are concentrated in rural areas.

3. Prevalence variations may be due to changing definitions or data collection methods.
4. A poverty-disability correlation exists.
5. Limited understanding of disability definitions persists among stakeholders.
6. A mechanism for coordinated data collection and dissemination is lacking.

Chapter 3 : Education

This chapter explores the current state of education for children with disabilities (CWDs) in Bhutan, highlighting strengths, challenges and opportunities for improvement in inclusive education.

Policy Framework

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2019) emphasizes the importance of inclusive education (Section 7), Bhutan's draft education policies and strategies, including Vision 2020 and the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024, prioritize inclusive education and the special educational needs of all students.

In 2019, the same year the NPPD, 2019 was adopted, a comprehensive 10 year roadmap for Inclusive and Special Education in Bhutan in collaboration with Save the Children was developed and adopted by the Ministry to expand inclusive education and move towards 100% enrollment in schools.

Government Investment

According to the Ministry of Finance, in the 12th FYP, the Government spent Nu. 87.876 million on education related activities to children with disabilities.

In the 13th FYP, there is an increased budget allocation of Nu. 1,115 million to support inclusive education programmes. (building capacities of teachers, building disabled-friendly infrastructure and training Paralympic athletes)

In order to complement the Government’s efforts in improving the quality of education for children with disabilities, the SCAC shares its observations and findings based on the visits to 17 special and inclusive schools across the country:

3.1 Schools for Children with Disabilities

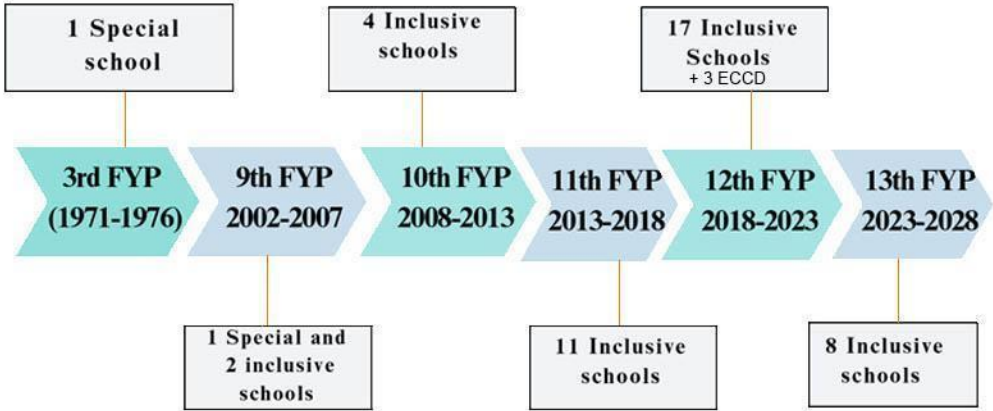


Figure 3.1.1 Timeline of Inclusive Schools for Children with Disabilities

In 1973, the first specialized school for the visually impaired was established in Khaling, Trashigang. Today, it is known as Muenselling Institute and has 23 visually impaired students.

In 2002, Wangsel Institute for the Deaf (118 students), the Inclusive Changangkha Middle Secondary School (143 students), and a school in Zhemgang Dzongkhag were established.

Four more schools were established in Mongar, Trashigang, Samtse and Paro during the 10th Five Year Plan, with the bulk being established in the 11th and 12th Five Year plans.

The three inclusive Early Childhood Care Development (ECCD) centers were also established in the last plan.

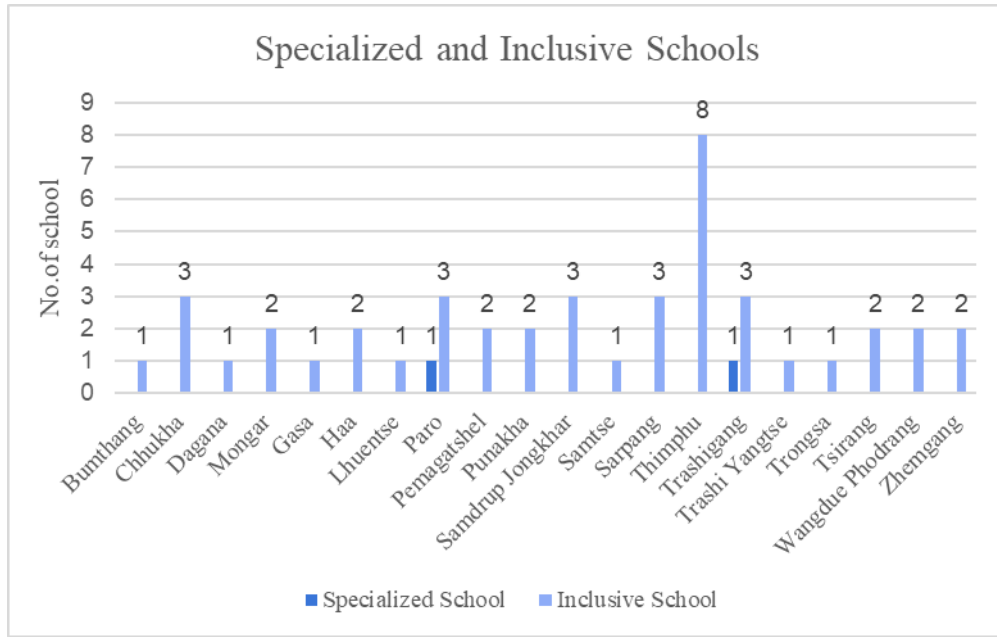


Figure 3.1.2 Specialized and Inclusive Schools; Source: MoESD 2024

According to the Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) and SEN Division of the Department of School Education, there are 1,071 children with disabilities (666 Males, 405 Females) in schools across the country.

The maximum number of children with disabilities in schools are in Thimphu (275), Paro (223), Chukha (85), Samtse (64), Gelephu (53), 14 schools have less than 50 CWDs, with Gasa (2) recording the lowest number of students.

Currently, there are only three inclusive early childhood and care development centers in the country with only 14 students - Changangkha, Thimphu (7), Khaling, Trashigang (1) and Gelephu Thromde (6).

In Thimphu, the Ability Bhutan Society also provides early intervention services such as communication skills, socialization, behavior management, activity of daily living skills, school readiness, and sensory issues to children with disabilities, catering to those aged 0-14. At present, 60 children with disabilities are availing the services.

3.2 Functional or Mainstream Curriculum for Children with Disabilities



The Standards for Inclusive Education was adopted by the Ministry of Education in 2017 and is the guiding document for faculty of schools with children with disabilities.

The children are assessed during admission when they are brought to the school by the SEN school committee, and their disability is categorized either as Mild, Moderate or Severe.

Figure 3.2.1 Inclusive Standards

Then they are placed in either the functional or mainstream curriculum.

The functional curriculum includes Dzongkha, English and Mathematics, some ICT and physical education as well as daily living skills, and a pre-vocational training programme.

Flexibility in the curriculum is permitted, enabling teachers to adapt it based on each child’s capacity. Teachers have frameworks and instructional guidelines to help plan individualized work plans.

From the 17 schools that SCAC visited, out of the 614 students, most of the CWDs are taking the functional curriculum.

Pre-vocational programmes are taught by the respective special education teachers and according to the skill they possess. Art, baking, basket weaving, cooking, laundry, tailoring, wood works are some of the examples of the programmes we witnessed.

Although inclusive schools are supposed to have a separate budget for inclusive education activities, none of the 17 schools have received this. The MoESD reported there are no separate budgets allocated to any of inclusive schools with special education programmes.

As a result, faculty are expected to raise their own funds through various activities from donors and the community, limiting the quality of their pre-vocational activities as well as other special education programmes. The SCAC noted that the older establishments, like Muenselling, Wangsel and Changangkha are much better equipped in infrastructure, and access to equipment.

Additionally in some of the schools, the SCAC noted that students with disabilities had little or no access to ICT and assistive devices like laptops or computers and had to share the ICT lab with the rest of the school.

Notably, Wangsel Institute has trained vocational instructors who are able to award national certification to the students for the various vocational programmes.

For students who are able to pursue the mainstream curriculum, the special education teachers assist them through Push In and Pull Out. For Push In - teachers attend the regular class with the student to provide assistance in the class; for Pull Out the students come for extra coaching in the designated classroom.

3.3 Teaching in Inclusive School

Currently, there are 1,550 teachers for the 44 specialized and inclusive schools.

According to MOESD, 50 teachers have availed the Masters in Inclusive Education from Paro College of Education (2020) and abroad, while 1,500 teachers have only completed the five day professional development on inclusive education training. Except for the faculty of Wangsel and Muenselling and their sister schools, the teachers in inclusive schools do not know Bhutanese sign language or are equipped to help children with visual impairments.

According to the prescribed student to teacher ratio, most schools reported a shortage of special education teachers. In some of the schools, the teachers are also expected to teach general classes.

Category	International Standard	MOESD
Mild	4:1	7:1
Moderate	3:1	5:1
Severe	1:1	2:1

Table 3.3.1 Special Education Needs Student to Teacher Ratio

In many of the day schools, parents of children with disabilities also need to be present at the schools and assist teachers with their children's feeding and bathroom visits.

For inclusive schools, where children are boarding, the staff are expected to care for the children and also the matrons/wardens of hostels have to provide additional support.

A minimum of 2 Teaching Assistants per school are recommended in the Inclusive Standards and the NPPD 2019, however, this has not materialized as of yet.

The Paro College of Education reported that they have already developed a curriculum to train teacher assistants but are yet to receive a directive from the Ministry of Education and Skills Development. They also noted that there are less teachers applying for the Masters in Inclusive Education Programme.

3.4 Certification and Transitioning

In the inclusive schools, most children are enrolled later than their peers and according to their learning ability, will be in school for more than 12 years before they can graduate.

The SCAC learned that while 2 schools had an upper age limit (18 years), most schools did not.

All schools expressed their concern about where the children would go once they completed their schooling.

Wangsel Institute's Class XII certificate is equivalent to Class VI according to the Bhutan Certificate School Examination Assessment.

Students from inclusive schools, including Wangsel, are not eligible for government tertiary educational institutions as they are unable to compete through the general admission exams.

The Royal University of Bhutan also reports they are not equipped to support the needs of students with disabilities in their tertiary educational institutions.

There has been more success for students from Muenselling and their sister schools to get admissions into Sherubtse College. However, with Sherubtse college focusing on degrees with science subjects, students will no longer be able to qualify for any of the courses there as well.

With most schools focusing on pre-vocational skills training, most parents and educators would like to send the children to be upskilled at the Technical and Vocational Education Training institutes. There are currently 17 PWDs in 7 institutes. Out of which 3 have hearing impairment, 5 intellectual disabilities, 4 mobility issues and 5 are unable to communicate.

The MoESD stated that while admissions was open for all, not all their training institutes are structurally inclusive.

The civil society organization, Draktsho Vocational Training Institute in the capital and in Trashigang caters especially to training children and persons with disabilities (171 students) in tailoring, wood carving and carpentry, traditional art and painting, embroidery, weaving and souvenir making. Some have been employed by Draktsho to produce products to sustain their programme. However, they only have limited seats and boarding facilities in Trashigang (61 students).

3.5 Infrastructure and Accessibility



Figure 3.5.1 Toilet in Samtengang Inclusive Higher Secondary School, Wangdue Phodrang



Figure 3.5.2 Stairways in Samtengang and Tshangkha Inclusive Schools in Wangdue Phodrang and Trongsa

The SCAC noted that all inclusive educators and parents expressed concerns on the accessibility of the classrooms, dorms, washroom facilities and school grounds.

As most of the school infrastructure in the country is more than two decades old, the schools are not structurally built for inclusiveness.

Children with disabilities who have mobility issues for example studying in mainstream classes are unable to access classrooms to attend ICT classes, go to the library, science labs easily without depending on the support and goodwill of other students to be carried sometimes two or three flights of stairs.

While schools have been able to mobilize some international donor assistance, Dzongkhag and Local Government support, donations from private citizens or fundraisers to build sensory rooms, additional classrooms for pre-vocational classes, disabled friendly washrooms, and accessible ramps around the campus. The SCAC noted most inclusive schools still require retrofitting.

All the parents during the consultative meetings that the SCAC met shared their concerns of the difficulties of finding affordable housing and high costs such as hiring transportation, walking more than an hour carrying their child or sacrificing family life and income to educate their children in hopes their child may grow up to be independent.

Choki Wangmo from Silambi gewog has two children, one child has learning difficulties and the other was diagnosed with autism. As Mongar only has one inclusive school, she had to move to live closer to the school while her husband stayed back to work in the village to support them. Silambi is 5 hours away from her home.

Some of the parents told SCAC that they moved to Thimphu and Paro Dzongkhags to be closer to inclusive schools and special schools as they thought they would be able to access better education opportunities for their children.

Kinley Wangmo, who has a hearing impairment, and her sister Passang Zangmo Tamang (5 years old) who has learning disability attend Damphu MSS. The grandmother who escorts them to school has to walk three hours daily to and fro from the school. The children's mother works in a hotel and is the sole breadwinner for the family.

In the schools that had boarding facilities, the SCAC observed that only one matron or warden had to look after 200 - 300 children in the dorm, and therefore, posing challenges for them to personally oversee and assist a child with disabilities.

In Gesarling Higher Secondary School, Dagana, the school had kept one room aside in the boy and girls dorm for parents to stay and assist their child with disability.

3.6 Outreach Programme

In Tsirang, special education teachers took turns to visit one of their ex-students, Sujana with cerebral palsy to continue her education at home. Sujana is 15 years old and is bright eyed and very expressive, although she cannot speak. The mother was no longer able to carry her uphill to school, since she was now the same size as her, and she lived more than an hour away from school. While the visits were initially reported to be regular, due to increasing workloads, teachers were not able to visit as frequently.

In Wangduephodrang's Samtengang Higher Secondary School, the outreach programme focused on creating awareness in other schools and communities destigmatize persons with disabilities and importance of inclusive education.

3.7 Monastic Educational Institutions

The Central Monastic Body reported there are 33 persons and children with disabilities from 17 Monastic institutions spread across the country.

The Nyingma Kutshab and Anim Kutshab from the Commission of Religious Organizations reported 10 nuns enrolled, but no study was conducted to see how many are enrolled in the other monastic institutions.

The Monastic body acknowledged that the lack of structurally inclusive infrastructure including ramps and disabled-friendly toilets, caregiver capacity, disability friendly learning environment, adequate funding and under-nutrition as current challenges.

The Central Monastic Body has plans to create a separate structurally inclusive monastic institution for children and persons with disabilities to address these challenges.

Observations

1. From the MoESD data on children with disabilities in inclusive schools, there are more boys than girls enrolled.
2. The number of children with disabilities out of school remains unknown, hindering effective policy planning.
3. The 10 year roadmap for Inclusive and Special Education remains unimplemented by the Ministry of Education and Skills Development.
4. While the number of inclusive schools is increasing, only three inclusive Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centers cater to young children with disabilities.
5. Most CWDs follow a functional curriculum, and untrained teachers and scarce resources often lack the expertise to deliver quality skills training.
6. Only 3% of teachers in the inclusive education programme have a Masters degree. The majority of special education teachers remain mostly untrained and feel ill equipped to properly teach children with disabilities.
7. Bhutanese Sign Language is not widely used outside of Wangsel Institute for the Deaf.
8. There is a need to employ teaching assistants to support special education teachers and relieve parents.
9. Boarding schools lack dedicated caregivers in crowded dormitories.
10. Till what age a student with disability can stay in school depends on individual schools.

11. Lack of accessible tertiary education and vocational training opportunities and no available scholarships or reserved seats, options are limited for CWDs after high school.
12. Most inclusive schools' infrastructure and compounds are not accessible, sometimes being a barrier to admissions for children with disabilities.
13. Parents of CWDs face difficulties due to lack of affordable housing, transportation and financial support.
14. Monastic institutions face challenges in providing accessible infrastructure and trained personnel for CWDs.

Chapter 4 – Health

This chapter examines the accessibility and quality of healthcare services for persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Bhutan. It highlights existing policies, challenges and promising practices.

Policy Framework

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD, 2019) emphasizes accessible healthcare and additional measures for women and children with disabilities. (Sections 8.1.1 & 8.1.3). Provisions include home visits for PWDs living alone (8.1.4) and financial aid for transportation and assistive devices (8.1.5 & 8.1.12) and certification process (19.1.5)

According to the Minister of Health (*NC Question Hour 26/06/24*) there are 554 Outreach clinics, 179 Primary Health Centers and 31 hospitals (10 bedded); 23 hospitals (20 bedded hospitals; and the Mongar, Gelephu and Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospitals.

In the 12th Five Year Plan, the Government spent Nu. 20.073 million on activities and programmes related to persons with disabilities. In the 13th FYP, there is an increased budget allocation of Nu. 720.7 million to support programmes for persons with disabilities (disability friendly infrastructures, health services - preventive and rehabilitative care, capacity development of health professionals and assistive devices).

4.1 Disabilities recorded at the Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospital

From 2021 to 2023 the Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospital (JDWNRH) recorded 126 children with disabilities availing services in the pediatric physiotherapy unit. Children with Cerebral Palsy, Down’s Syndrome, Global Developmental Delay, Muscular Dystrophy and Spina Bifida were identified.

2021-2023 Pediatric Physiotherapy	
Type of Disability	Number
Cerebral Palsy	72
Down’s Syndrome	25
Global Developmental Delay	23
Muscular Dystrophy	4
Spina Bifida	2

Table 4.1.1: Cases of various disabilities recorded at JDWNRH

In 2023, the JDWNRH also recorded 196 cases of strokes, spinal cord injury and traumatic brain injury.

The JDWNRH outpatient physiotherapy unit also saw 31,500 case loads, up by 30% from 2022.

2022-April 2024 Record: Mental Health Occupational Therapy	
Types of Cases	Total number
Neurodevelopmental Disorders (Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Intellectual Disability Disorder, Learning Disability Disorder)	259
Behavioral issues (Conduct Disorders, ODD and other behavioral issues.)	7
Developmental Delays	40
Other Mental Health Conditions (Schizophrenic, Mood disorders, Conversion disorders, Epilepsy etc.)	34

Table 4.1.2 Number of cases recorded at Mental Health Occupational Therapy Department

Hospital authorities, health officials also reported that most of the health care centers' structures were old and therefore, not structurally built for inclusiveness.

During meetings, CSOs and persons with disabilities stated that most health services require many months of rehabilitation and follow up checkups in the hospital, and many of their patients and their families are unable to complete treatment due to the lack of affordable housing, and support system.

Few Local Government leaders from Tsirang, Dagana and WangduePhodrang stated that they also assisted persons with disabilities to travel using their office vehicle from their Gewogs to the hospital whenever possible.

Currently, assistive devices issued by the hospitals include wheelchairs, axillary crutches, lumbar belts, cochlear implants, vision aides, orthosis and prosthetic devices to persons with disabilities.

4.2 Health Professionals

Local Government leaders, CSOs and inclusive schools and families reported that one of the biggest challenges was access to timely health services for persons with disabilities.

Attrition rates in the past few years have been increasing. In the MoH presentation, the SCAC noted there were 8 Audiology and Speech Language Pathologists, with one each in Gelephu and Mongar Referral hospitals.

Under the Department of Ophthalmology there are 6 Super Eye specialists, 6 Ophthalmologists, and 64 technicians. Annually, a team of specialists visit the Muenselling Institute in Khaling to assess the condition and treat the students there.

There are 10 Ear, Nose and Throat Surgeons in the country, with 1 each in Mongar, Gelephu and Phuentsholing, and also 33 ENT technicians spread in 16 Dzongkhags.

Additionally, there are 33 Physiotherapists and 83 Physio Technicians distributed across the country, the 4 Occupational Therapists (Thimphu, Mongar and Gelephu) and 1 Prosthetist and 2 technicians in the Gidakom.

4.3 Early Screening and Referral Services

The Bhutan Child Development Screening Tool (BCDST) effectively identifies potential disabilities in children and can be done by all health workers. However, health workers lack information on resources for further intervention and support for PWDs.

Wangsel Institute for the Deaf said that most of the children who were referred to them mostly came between 10-12 years of age, thereby missing a critical language learning age (0-5 years of age) and delaying further development of their language skills.

4.4 Inclusive schools with SEN programmes

From the 17 inclusive schools and Draktsho East, the schools reported that except for the annual health check up conducted by technicians for eyes, ENT and dental concerns, there are no follow up visits for the children with disabilities.

According to special education teachers, most children with disabilities especially require regular physiotherapy sessions, speech therapy, and follow up check ups.

Awareness of sexual and reproductive health issues among PWDs is low.

Health officials stated that due to lack of funds, they could not send their professionals to make visits to the schools.

4.5 Outreach Programmes

- a. “Service with Care and Compassion” was a pilot project initiated in 2019 in Tsirang, Wangduephodrang, Punakha and Zhemgang and was recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in 2022, as a great initiative by the MoH to take medical services to the people living with Non-Communicable Diseases.

Due to budget limitations, this programme was temporarily put on hold. The Dzongkhag Health officials and Local Government leaders supported the re-introduction of this programme to help not only persons with disabilities but other vulnerable sections of the communities get timely medical care and attention.

The Central Monastic Body said that the children and persons with disabilities in monastic institutions also miss out on timely health check ups.

- b. The ongoing “Hear, Listen and Speak” programme launched in 2021 has successfully screened 78,000 school going children in 9 districts by school health coordinators. From this initiative, 9,200 children were referred for timely treatment.
- c. CSOs also complimented Government efforts in reaching out to persons with disabilities in rural areas to get medical attention and information.

Currently, Ability Bhutan Society with their programmes in Samtse, Tsirang, and Zhemgang build capacity for health workers, organize medical assessment camps for early identification, distribute assistive devices, help with home based interventions to CWDs and caregivers as well as assist with referrals to regional and national hospitals.

Bhutan Stroke Foundation, also complement the efforts of the Government in reaching out to communities and creating awareness in many of the Dzongkhags and helping families since 2020.

In several Dzongkhags, Local Government leaders reported that persons with disabilities have trouble accessing their toilets, so they work with individual households to help make their toilets accessible by using their budget or by raising funds to procure bedside toilet options.

4.6 Certification

Easing access to healthcare, education, and other essential services is one of the major concerns shared by CSOs and persons with disabilities and caregivers.

As intellectual and hearing disabilities are not visible, caregivers often face a lot of challenges in accessing health services, unlike those who are visually impaired or those who have mobility issues.

Till date, the MoH has not developed any guidelines in this regard. The referral hospitals have also not issued any certificates to persons with disabilities.

The MoH confirmed that the Referral Hospital's Medical Board of Doctors would be the appropriate authority to diagnose and certify.

Observations

1. A central database for hospital data on PWDs is lacking, hindering effective planning.
2. Attrition in the health sector leads to fewer medical professionals per capita, impacting service quality.
3. As first responders, health professionals can greatly guide and advise parents and families of persons with disabilities to seek further intervention and support, but do not have access to information on CSO programmes, education options, etc
4. According to the MoH, most of their health facilities are not structurally inclusive.
5. Persons with disabilities in rural areas, children with disabilities in inclusive schools and monastic institutions, do not have access to regular medical check up and therapy sessions.
6. Sexual reproductive health awareness is still low amongst persons with disabilities.
7. Certification of disabilities is essential for availing essential services.
8. Outreach programmes like Service with Care and Compassion have been put on hold due to lack of funding resources.
9. Some Local Government leaders improve accessibility by retrofitting toilets and arranging transportation.

Chapter 5: Economic Security and ICT

This chapter explores the challenges and opportunities for persons with disabilities (PWDs) in achieving economic security and accessing information technology in Bhutan.

Policy Framework

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD,2019) aims to increase employment and business ownership among PWDs (Sections 9, 19.1.1, 19,1,4, 19.1.6). Provisions include skills

training, disability allowances, and incentives for businesses employing PWDs. The policy also stresses that knowledge and information should be accessible for persons with disabilities; with the help of assistive communication devices which can be software or aids (Section 15).

5.1 Employment

According to the Disabled People's Organization of Bhutan, they have conducted critical skills training to 250 persons with disabilities, most of whom are employed as music instructors, massage therapists and some own their businesses including tailoring units and bakeries.

The Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment stated that they do not have separate data on persons with disabilities in the national labor force survey report.

However, they have supported 16 persons with disabled in Youth Engagement and Livelihood Programme (YELP) between 2021-2022, and digital marketing training to 15 persons with disabilities; and the support of 58 students with disabilities at Draktsho East with UNDP assistance.

The Employment Service Centers in Phuentsholing, Gelephu, Samdrup Jongkhar and Mongar and Thimphu assist PWDs in job placement.

The Ministry of Finance said the Government had not discussed the possibility of concessional loans or incentives for all business entities employing persons with disabilities, nor incentives for businesses owned by and run by persons with disabilities as of now.

The Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) said anyone can join the RCSC by participating in competitive examinations as the system is based on meritocracy.

The RCSC further stated they do not have the number of persons with disabilities currently working in the civil service. According to the Civil Service Statistics 2023, there are 28,406 civil servants. Henceforth, the RCSC plans to collect the information from the Zhiyog Electronic System.

According to the Bhutan Civil Service Regulations, if a person becomes disabled on the job, that person is entitled to 36 months of medical leave. During this time, employees have the opportunity to work from home and continue to receive their salary. After completing this provision, if they are willing, they will be deployed to a more convenient working space of their choice.

Furthermore, the three year minimum service requirement for new positions are waived off for civil servants with CWDs to be transferred.

The Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry stated that the private sector currently does not receive any incentives for employing persons with disabilities. Creating a conducive work environment, hiring interpreters are all additional costs to the business establishment.

According to the Hotel and Restaurant Association of Bhutan, there are persons with disabilities employed in the hospitality industry, but exact figures are not known.

Graduates of Wangsel Institute reported they face hiring bias and lower wages despite their national certification and skills in traditional painting, carving, etc.

All the special education teachers shared their concern that despite all their hard work to work with children with disabilities, there is no clear pathway once they complete their schooling.

Employment Quota - In seeking to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities, the committee also examined policies implemented in other countries.

India: The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 mandates a minimum reservation of 4% of vacancies in government establishments for PWDs with benchmark disabilities (generally considered 40% or more impairment). There's currently no legal obligation for private companies to reserve jobs for PWDs. However, the government offers incentives to private employers who ensure at least 5% of their workforce comprises PWDs with 40% or more disability.

Italy: Italy boasts the highest quota in this group at 7%. This means companies with a certain number of employees (usually over 50) must ensure at least 7% of their workforce comprises individuals with disabilities.

France: France follows closely with a 6% quota for companies exceeding a specific employee threshold.

South Korea: Similar to France, South Korea enforces a 6% quota for companies exceeding a certain size.

Germany: Germany implements a 5% quota for companies with more than 25 employees.

5.2 Disability Allowance

During the SCAC home visits in Punakha, an elderly couple was looking after three adult men with multiple disabilities including seizures, cerebral palsy, speech and communication. The parents both farmers, look after all of their basic needs from washing, feeding, changing and going to the bathroom. Since the father injured his back in a car accident, it has become increasingly difficult to work in the fields and support the family.

Families caring for severely disabled members often face financial hardship. Persons with disabilities with severe conditions who are unable to work or contribute often become a burden to the family and vulnerable to abuse and neglect.

All stakeholders agreed that a disability allowance from the State will greatly help families to ease the financial burdens of raising a child with disability or looking after a person with disability who is unable to take care of themselves.

International Examples of Disability Allowances - Maldives and India

Maldives- The Disability Allowance covers all registered persons with disabilities in Maldives who are Maldivian citizens. Once beneficiaries are registered for the Allowance, they receive approximately MVR 2,000 (USD 130) into a nominated bank account on a monthly basis.

Delhi, India - Delhi Social Welfare Department is implementing disability pension which is fusion of State as well Central Government contribution. The scheme is known as Subsistence Allowance/Financial Allowance to a person with special needs. The grant is Rs. 2500/- per month.

5.3 Digitalization and Access to Information

In the pursuit of improving public services delivery, the Government has emphasized on online service deliveries. While this has benefitted many, persons with disabilities, especially those who are visually impaired report that the sites are not accessible.

Furthermore, for those who do not know English, visually impaired persons rely on others to read aloud Dzongkha texts as there is no Dzongkha text to speech software. This applies to accessing information online about educational opportunities to employment and even news.

Govtech reported that digital literacy programmes tailored for inclusivity will be promoted to ensure that all segments of the population can effectively engage with digital technologies. The plan involves expanding internet access to remote areas and transitioning 37 online public service deliveries to offline platforms.

Observations

1. There is currently no data on the numbers of persons with disabilities employed in both the public and private sectors.
2. The civil service offers job security and flexible work arrangements for PWDs with disabilities acquired on the job.

3. There are currently no fiscal incentives or access to finance to encourage persons with disabilities to get employed or start businesses; nor are there incentives to the private sector to hire persons with disabilities.
4. Internationally, some countries have implemented the use of employment quotas in both the Government and private sector.
5. The need for a Disability Allowance for persons with disabilities and their families was strongly highlighted. There are examples where other countries like Maldives and India where an allowance /pension is distributed to PWDs.
6. Limited skilling training and employment opportunities for PWDs in the Government and private sector.
7. Public service websites lack accessibility features, and Dzongkha text to speech software is unavailable.

Chapter 6: Caregivers, Families and Communities

This chapter examines the social environment surrounding persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Bhutan, focusing on caregivers, families and communities.

Policy Framework

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) acknowledges that families who care for persons with disabilities need additional support, and the opportunity to participate in decision making, protection and access to justice. (Sections 10, 11, 15.1.2)

6.1 Stigmatization and Discrimination

Negative attitudes and beliefs about disabilities lead to social exclusion and hinder access to opportunities.

During the review, all stakeholders acknowledged there is a prevailing stigmatization and discrimination against both children and persons with disabilities and their families in the country due to poor awareness and understanding.

Beliefs that disability is caused by past life karma, often results in parents and families hiding the disability, which delays interventions in health and education.

The Ability Bhutan Society (ABS) shared a story about a woman in Trashiyangtse who has epilepsy. The local leaders and community did not allow her to participate in the public meeting as they feared the condition was contagious. However, after ABS' intervention and awareness campaign, the woman was allowed to join the meetings.

Students who went from Wangsel Institute for the Deaf on an internship to the Zorig Chusum institute in Thimphu shared that people were deliberately avoiding them. Later they found that people were saying that if they interacted with them, they would have children who were hearing impaired.

Special education teachers observed that parents from rural communities sometimes acknowledged their child's disability earlier than parents with more education. This could potentially lead to a delay in accessing support and impact learning development.

6.2 Access to Justice, Rights and Protection

A Legal Aid centre was established upon Royal Command for indigent persons at the Supreme Court in 2022. Those who cannot afford to hire lawyers or legal advisors can avail of legal aid services both in civil and criminal cases with funding support from the state.

Till date, the Legal Aid centre has supported 5 cases of persons with disabilities (4 civil and 1 criminal case). The types of services provided by Legal Aid Centre are legal representation, legal assistance and legal advice.

This year, a workshop on Accessible, Inclusive, Gender-Responsive, and Citizen-Centric Justice Services - was conducted by UNDP in consultation with CSOs and the Justice sector, highlighting that legal information is not readily available in accessible formats (Braille, audio recordings, and sign language).

While the SCAC did not take part in the discussions, the committee observed that PWDs and their families are often unaware of their legal rights and available support systems.

In one instance where a video on Tik Tok went viral, a teacher was rudely instructing and threatening to hit a student with Down's Syndrome. The teacher identified to be working at Draktsho East was subsequently terminated.

The National Commission for Women and Children shared that any concerns of portrayal of persons with disabilities can be reported to the NCWC hotline 1098.

6.3 Housing

The National Housing Development Corporation Limited shared that they look after 2,623 housing units spread across 15 Dzongkhags.

Currently, 7 tenants - 6 persons with disabilities and one dependent with a disability are renting their housing units.

All civil servants who are interested in renting have to apply through an online application system on a first come first basis. Upcoming projects will also include structurally inclusive and affordable housing units for the disabled.

Many stakeholders highlighted that there is a lack of priority housing allocation or accessible housing units for PWDs. In Trongsa, the Local Government leaders also questioned whether it was not time for the State to also consider the construction of a special home for persons with disabilities for those who do not have any caregivers to look after them.

6.4 Caregiver System

CSOs like Phensem Parents Support Group, Ability Bhutan Society and the Disabled People's Organization raised the issue of the need to hire foreign caregivers to help out at home. However, they reported that under the current system handled by the Department of Labour, only caregivers

for children are approved. The families with children or persons with disabilities were not able to get the approval to hire foreign caregivers.

The form application clearly states that the particular household work including caregiving for elderly, sick and differently-abled household members will be permitted under the Regulation on Foreign Workers Management 2022.

Observations

1. There is a high prevalence of stigmatization and discrimination of persons with disabilities.
2. Low awareness on the rights of persons with disabilities and no access to disabled-friendly formats of the laws.
3. No priority housing allocated to persons with disabilities or families with dependents with disabilities.
4. No alternative support options for PWDs lacking family caregivers.
5. No priority allocation given to hire foreign caregivers.

Chapter 7: Built Environment and Transportation

This chapter explores the accessibility of Bhutan's built environment and transportation systems for persons with disabilities (PWDs).

Policy Framework

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) emphasizes the importance of universal designs in infrastructure development (Section 13) The Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport (MoIT) established the "Guideline for Differently Abled Construction" (2014) to guide construction professionals.

7.1 Thimphu

The capital, Thimphu, should be an example to the rest of the country in terms of accessibility and inclusivity for persons with disabilities. However, the Thimphu Thromde reports that only about 3% of Thimphu is accessible - this includes some recreational parks, a few inclusive schools, footpaths, and designated parking spaces in Changlimithang.

In the 13th Five Year plan, they plan to promote wellbeing and accessibility for persons with disabilities; although the allocated budget is not yet known.

The public transportation fleet of 27 City Buses have now become more accessible for persons with disabilities with the inclusion of some wheelchair ramps, priority seating, bus stop announcements and 50% discounted fares for PWDs.

Bhutan's rich cultural heritage, focus on Gross National Happiness, and stunning natural beauty have made it a sought-after travel destination. Tourism is a key revenue source for the country.

A recent BBC feature story (January 2024) highlighted the potential of the untapped market of disabled travelers, representing billions in revenue globally. By making Thimphu and other major towns more accessible, Bhutan can not only improve the lives of its citizens but also become a more inclusive and attractive destination for a wider range of tourists, boosting its economic prospects.

7.2 Good Examples from other Dzongkhags

In Damphu, Tsirang, the SCAC noted the accessibility and ease of moving around the town with well designed footpaths and a recreational park, with disabled friendly public toilets. The Dzong also had a ramp entrance for wheelchair users to enter the Dzong.

Some of the Local Government leaders of Dagana shared that they had shifted their offices from the top floor to the ground floor to allow both persons with disabilities and the elderly to visit them.

Observations

1. There's a lack of comprehensive data on the accessibility of public buildings and towns throughout Bhutan.
2. Many stakeholders, including are unfamiliar with the existing Guidelines for Differently Abled Construction (2014).
3. Most Dzongkhags outside Thimphu lack affordable public transportation options.
4. Accessibility initiatives are sporadic and rely on individual leadership, lacking a central plan and budget allocation.

Chapter 8: Participation in Culture and Sports

This chapter examines the opportunities for persons with disabilities (PWDs) to participate in cultural and sporting activities in Bhutan.

Policy Framework

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) recognizes the importance of cultural and sporting activities for inclusion (Section 16).

8.1 Cultural and Spiritual Participation

Bhutan's National Policy for Persons with Disabilities recognizes the importance of facilitating participation in spiritual and religious activities. These activities provide strength, hope, and a sense of community for people with disabilities.

While some older monasteries may not be structurally accessible, efforts are underway to promote inclusion. Local governments in Dagana, Gasa, Thimphu, and Tsirang, for example, organize

religious festivals on public grounds, ensuring accessibility for all. This initiative serves as a model for fostering a more inclusive spiritual experience for people with disabilities across Bhutan.

8.2 Paralympics and Special Olympics

Established in 2017 under the Bhutan Olympic Committee, the Bhutan Paralympic Committee (BPC) works to promote sports participation for children and individuals with disabilities.

The Paralympic movement, with a rich history dating back to after World War II, provides a platform for athletes with various impairments to compete in 28 different sports. Bhutan currently has four active Paralympic athletes, two of whom have achieved remarkable success: Chimi, a silver medalist in shot put at the Youth Para Games, and Sapuna, a bronze medalist also in shot put. Both athletes have short stature.

The BPC actively registers athletes with various disabilities, including those resulting from accidents or congenital conditions. They organize an annual Paralympic festival, rotating the venue each year among inclusive schools, further solidifying their commitment to accessibility and inclusion.

8.3 Draktsho and the Special Olympics

Bhutan's athletes with intellectual disabilities are represented by Draktsho, which has been affiliated with the Special Olympics since 2015. Draktsho athletes have consistently impressed, bringing home several medals since 2011.

Observations

1. Many traditional monasteries lack structural accessibility, limiting participation for PWDs.
2. Bhutanese athletes have achieved success in Paralympic competitions as well as the Special Olympics.

Chapter 9: Civil Society Organizations

This chapter explores the crucial role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in promoting the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Bhutan.

Policy Framework

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) recognizes the expertise and value of CSOs in disability inclusion (Section 21). It promotes partnerships between the government and CSOs (Sections 21.1.3 & 21.1.4)

The SELWA organization under the office of Her Majesty The Gyaltshen works closely with the various organizations and agencies in Bhutan towards enhancing the wellbeing of persons with disabilities and creating a more inclusive society.

According to the Ministry of Finance, in the 12th Five Year plan, 6.229 million was spent on financial assistance to strengthen CSOs to support disability inclusion.

9.1 The Landscape of CSOs

CSOs play a vital role in reaching PWDs in rural areas. They provide training, support and advocacy for PWDs. CSOs also cater to diverse needs, including early intervention, vocational training and family support.

- The Disabled People’s Organization of Bhutan (DPOB) (2010) Offers training, advocacy and capacity building for PWDs.
- Draktsho Vocational Training Center (2010) Provides vocational training opportunities for PWDs in Thimphu and Trashigang for children as young as 8 years old.
- Ability Bhutan Society (ABS) (2012) Delivers early intervention services for children with disabilities aged 0-14
- Phensem Parents Support Group (2020) Advocates for CWDs and empowers families

- Bhutan Stroke Foundation (2020) Raises awareness about stroke prevention, rehabilitation, and access to health care for stroke patients.

Observations

1. Most CSOs rely on external donors, limiting programme sustainability.
2. Many CSOs facilities lack accessibility features, hindering service delivery.
3. Inadequate information sharing between the government and CSOs hinders coordinated efforts.
4. Concerns exist about enrolling children in vocational programmes before completing formal schooling.

Conclusion

The National Council of Bhutan acknowledges the steps taken to support people with disabilities (PWDs) but identifies remaining challenges. The report recommends improvements in education, healthcare, economic security, social inclusion, accessibility, cultural activities and collaboration with civil society organizations to create a more inclusive Bhutan.

Annexure 1 References

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Annexure 2 Stakeholders from Consultation Meeting

Stakeholders from Inclusive Schools and Institutes	
Changangkha Middle Secondary School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals • Vice Principals • Special Education Teachers • Parent's Representatives • Students with disabilities • Instructor • Vocational Instructors
Damphu Middle Secondary School	
Yangchengatshel Higher Secondary School	
Drukgyel Higher Secondary School, Drukgyel Primary School	
Khaling LSS, Jigme Sherubling CS, Muenselling Institute	
Mongar Middle Secondary School	
Khuruthang Middle Secondary School	
Tshangkha Higher Secondary School	
Wangsel Institute for the Deaf	
Mongar Middle Secondary School	
Samtengang Higher Secondary School, Samtengang Primary School	
Gesarling Higher Secondary School	
Bjishong Higher Secondary School	

Stakeholders from Dzongkhag Administration	
Trashigang Dzongkhag	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dzongdag • Dzongrab • DT Thrizin • Gup • Mangmi • Tshogpa • Thromde Thuemi • Gewog Administrative Officers • Dzongkhag Health Officers • Dzongkhag Education Officers
Mongar Dzongkhag	
Trongsa Dzongkhag	
Punakha Dzongkhag	
Wangduephodrang Dzongkhag	
Tsirang Dzongkhag	
Dagana Dongkhag	
Gasa Dzongkhag	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistant Planning Officers • Dzongkhag Cultural Office • Public Health Officers • General Medical Doctors • Community Representatives
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Stakeholders from Ministries, Association and Relevant Agencies	
Ministry of Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RCSC Commissioners • Secretary • Executive Director • Thrompon • Offtg. Vice chancellor • Chief Architects • Chief Engineers • Education Officers • Programmes officers • Ani Kutshab • Nyingma Kutshab • Chief ICT officer • ICT officer • Chief Environment Officer • Communication Officer • Chief Program Officers • Chief Planning Officers • Asst. Planning officers • Chief Research Officer
Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Employment	
Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport	
Ministry of Finance	
Ministry of Education and Skill Development	
Association	
Hotel and Restaurant Association	
Bhutan Chamber for Commerce and Industries	
Relevant Agencies	
Royal Civil Service Commission	
Royal University of Bhutan	
Thimphu Thromde	
Dratshang Lhentshog	
Chhoeday Lhentshog	
National Housing and Development Corporation Limited	
Government Technology Agency	
Cabinet Secretariat	

Stakeholders from JDWNRH and MRRH	
1. JDWNRH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medical Super Intendent • ENT surgeon • Ophthalmologist • Gynecologist • Ortho surgeon • Oral surgeon • Physiotherapist • Occupational therapist • Health Assistants
2. MRRH	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audiologist • Project Manager • Prosthetist and Orthotist

Stakeholders from Civil Society Organizations	
1. Phensem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive Directors • Caregivers • Board Members • Program officers
2. Ability Bhutan Society	
3. Disabled People’s Organization of Bhutan	
4. Bhutan Stroke Foundation	
5. Ability Bhutan Society, Tsirang	
6. Draktsho	
7. Draktsho East	
8. SELWA	

Stakeholders from International Agencies	
United Nations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resident Representatives • Programme Officers • Child Protection Specialists • Education Officer
UNICEF	
WHO	
Save the Children	
UNDP	
UNFPA	

Stakeholders from Colleges

Paro College of Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• College President• Dean of Academic Affairs• Students• Lecturers
Sherubtse College	

Annexure 3 Questionnaire to Dzongkhags for Data Collection of PWDs

Social and Cultural Affairs Committee, National Council of Bhutan

Dzongkhag Questionnaire on the State of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)

Definition of United Nations Convention of Rights Persons with Disabilities

‘Persons with Disabilities’ includes those who have long- term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments; which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society.

Definition by the World Health Organization

Disabilities broadly covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual’s involvement in life situations.

Questionnaire

1. How many Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) are currently residing in the Dzongkhag?
2. In which Gewog/Chiwog do you find the highest concentration of PwDs?

Dzongkhag	Gewog	Chiwog	Physical Disability (Nos.)	Visual impairment (Nos.)	Hearing Impairment (Nos.)	Intellectual Disability (Nos.)	Mental Disability (Nos.)

3. What factors contribute to the higher prevalence of PWDs in that particular Gewog/Chiwog? (Consider environmental, social, or economic factors)
4. How many PWDs in your district are currently attending school?
5. How many PWDs do not have an available education?
6. How many PWDs in your district fall under the category of severe disabilities?
7. Of those with severe disabilities, how many are currently staying at home?
8. How are severe PWDs being supported by their families and the community?

9. How is the family, community and Dzongkhag providing support to these (severe) individuals?
10. How many PWDs in your district are living in villages with no support from family or the community?
11. Are you aware of any stories of PWDs who are currently employed, self-employed in your Dzongkhag? If yes, please share details.

National Council's Resolution on the Review Report on the State of Persons with Disabilities

In line with Section 10 of the National Council Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan and as per the directives of the House, the Social and Cultural Affairs Committee has reviewed the State of Persons with Disabilities and presented the final report in the 33rd Session.

The National Council,

Acknowledging Bhutan's commitment to upholding the rights of persons with disabilities (PWDs), as reflected in the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2019) and the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; as well as the ongoing initiatives and activities by the government, international agencies, and civil society organizations;

Evident from the recent National Health Survey (2023), there is a significant increase in the number of self-declared persons with disabilities in Bhutan, with approximately 48,000, representing 6.8% of the population;

Concerning that children and persons with disabilities and their caregivers in the country face stigmatization and discrimination that limits their opportunities and participation in society;

Noting that children and persons with disabilities currently face challenges in accessing educational and economic opportunities, timely healthcare, accessibility to public spaces, and cultural and sporting activities;

The National Council hereby urges the government on the need for a comprehensive, collaborative, and consolidated approach to maximize the impact of limited resources to eliminate duplication of efforts and strengthen coordination to effectively address the needs of persons with disabilities.

Hereby, calls attention to the Government on the following recommendations:

1. Strengthening UNCRPD and Policy Implementation

- a) Enhanced Coordination: The Office of the Cabinet Affairs for Strategic Cooperation (OCASC), as the leading agency, should convene all relevant stakeholders to update the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (NPPD) Action Plan. This process should establish clear timelines and resource allocation for each activity.
- b) Centralized Data Collection: The OCASC must coordinate the collection of disaggregated data on PWDs. This data, compiled from education, health, MoICE, and other sources, should be housed in a central database.
- c) Stakeholder Awareness and Engagement: Extensive awareness campaigns should be conducted to educate all partner stakeholders on their roles and responsibilities related to the NPPD. Persons with disabilities (PWDs) and their families must be actively consulted and informed about plans and programs within the 13th Five-Year Plan.
- d) Local Government Funding: Local governments should have dedicated budget lines to support programs for PWDs across the country.
- e) Inclusive Decision-Making: PWDs, their families, and relevant CSOs (Civil Society Organizations) must be actively engaged and consulted in planning and decision-making processes at both national and local levels.
- f) Online Disability Resource Center: Create a web-based Disability Resource Center under the OCASC. This platform will ensure easy access to information, programs, and initiatives for both partner agencies and PWDs with their families.

2. Recommendations for Education

- a) Inclusive Education Assessment: Conduct a comprehensive assessment of Inclusive and Special Education institutions to ensure all schools are structurally accessible and provide equal access to facilities, resources, outreach programs, and opportunities.
- b) Out-of-School Children: Analyze the number of children with disabilities who are not enrolled in school and identify the underlying reasons. Develop targeted strategies to address this issue and ensure their right to education.
- c) Teacher Training: Prioritize investments in building the capacity of Special Educational Needs (SEN) teachers. Additionally, incorporate inclusive education principles and Bhutanese Sign Language into all Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) programs.

- d) **Inclusive School Support:** Introduce teaching assistants in inclusive schools to provide additional support. Explore options for subsidized and affordable housing, accessible transportation, and access to health and emotional support counseling for caregivers of children in inclusive day schools.
- e) **Boarding School Caregivers:** Ensure separate caregivers are available in boarding facilities to provide specialized attention to children with disabilities.
- f) **TVET and Tertiary Education:** Establish quotas and scholarships for children with disabilities (PWDs) to access Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs and tertiary educational institutions.
- g) **Review the policy framework** to address concerns about early enrollment in vocational training.

3. Recommendations for Health

- a) **Outreach and Early Intervention:** Prioritize and adequately fund essential outreach programs like "Service with Care and Compassion." This initiative should ensure timely medical attention and access to assistive devices for PWDs in rural communities, educational institutions, and monasteries.
- b) **Allocate a minimum of one occupational therapist, physiotherapist and speech therapist in every Dzongkhag.**
- c) **Train Health Workers** to guide PWDs and families towards relevant support systems.
- d) **Medical Referrals:** Streamline referral processes for children and PWDs requiring specialized medical attention within or outside the country.
- e) **Disability Causation and Prevention:** Conduct research to understand the causes of disability in Bhutan and develop strategies to prevent them.
- f) **Accessibility Improvements:** Retrofit all medical centers and hospitals to make them structurally inclusive and accessible.
- g) **Disability Certificates:** Establish clear guidelines and a system for issuing Disability Certificates

4. Recommendations for Economic Security and ICT

- a) Government Employment: Reserve a designated quota of government positions for PWDs.
- b) Private Sector Incentives: Provide fiscal incentives for the private sector to invest in workplace accessibility and create employment opportunities for PWD.
- c) Make concessional loans and other support services available for Persons with Disabilities.
- d) Housing Support: Prioritize subsidized housing allotment for PWDs and families with dependents with disabilities.
- e) Disability Allowance: Establish a system to provide a Disability Allowance for children and PWDs who are unable to support themselves financially.
- f) Caregiver Access: Train Bhutanese youth as caregivers for persons with disabilities, as well as prioritize the allocation of foreign caregivers to assist PWDs who require additional support.
- g) ICT Accessibility: Develop a Dzongkha text-to-speech reader and ensure all public service delivery websites are accessible for PWDs.

5. Raising Public Awareness

- a) Destigmatization Campaigns: Launch nationwide awareness campaigns to challenge negative attitudes towards PWDs and educate the public about their rights. These campaigns should also inform the public about reporting mechanisms for cases of concern regarding the care or situation of children and PWDs.

6. Recommendations for an Accessible Bhutan

- a) Accessibility Assessment: Conduct a comprehensive study on the accessibility of towns, cities, and public infrastructure across Bhutan. Develop strategies to make all urban and rural areas structurally inclusive.
- b) Review and revise the existing accessibility guidelines and create awareness amongst relevant stakeholders.
- c) Recognize and promote local leadership initiatives in accessibility.
- d) Develop a central plan and budget allocation for retrofitting public infrastructure to ensure accessibility.

- e) Public Transportation: Explore options for expanding affordable public transportation options beyond Thimphu.

7. Recommendations for Culture and Sports

- a) Prioritize accessibility improvements in culturally significant monasteries.
- b) Expand outreach programs to encourage and support PWD participation in cultural and sporting activities by PWDs across the country.
- c) Celebrate the achievements of Bhutanese athletes with disabilities to inspire future generations.

8. Recommendations for CSOs as Partners in Inclusion

- a) Establish sustainable funding mechanisms to support CSOs vital work.
- b) Enhance collaboration between the government and CSOs.