



Fund for Innovation
and Transformation

Fonds pour l'innovation
et la transformation



THE BHUTAN CANADA FOUNDATION

Democracy Beyond Elections: Participatory Policy

Context

Known for the Gross National Happiness (GNH) index that recognizes the limitations of GDP, Bhutan emphasizes the balance of non-quantifiable and quantifiable conditions of development as central to its citizens' wellbeing and its economic progress. The development outcomes have often been impressive. Bhutan reduced extreme poverty from 17.6% in 2003 to just 1.4% in 2017.

At the same time, Bhutan ranks only 130 out of 156 countries in the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report. The issue of policies and programs not responding to the specific needs of women is paralleled by the same challenge with other groups. Vulnerable groups do not have a meaningful voice in the policy process, resulting in insufficient social protection policies directed to their specific needs.

The Innovative Solution

Supported by FIT, The Bhutan Canada Foundation with local partner Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, tested a Design Thinking methodology to engage and encourage collaboration among groups of marginalized women, vulnerable youth, people with disabilities, and policymakers to identify social protection issues and resultantly develop practical policy solutions to positively impact the Bhutanese people. The innovative approach included women and other marginalized groups to promote a cross-sectoral collaboration allowing for an effective and inclusive impact on the policy process. This infused the voices of vulnerable demographics directly into the policy process in a manner that has not occurred before.

Advancing Gender Equality

The Gender Equality Strategy (GES) involved both the nature of the innovation itself as well as the nature of the testing and evaluation activities. Key to the innovation was putting women's and other genders' voices at the centre of the policy deliberation process. A local Gender Advisor was hired to play a key role in maintaining a gender lens in both the innovation itself and its testing. As part of the monitoring and evaluation process, all quantitative data was disaggregated by gender. In addition, innovation participants, and women in particular, played a central role in providing qualitative feedback to deepen and contextualize the understanding of the quantitative data.



COUNTRY

Bhutan

AMOUNT

\$147,004

TESTING PERIOD

12 months

Ended April 2023



GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE (GE3)

THEME: GOVERNANCE

Testing Framework

The qualitative methods used in monitoring the innovation centred on partner personnel, such as observation, but most data emerged directly from the beneficiaries through their direct engagement. In addition to quantitative surveys, the MEL methodology incorporated focus groups, dyad interviews and individual interviews with beneficiaries as key methods in incorporating their views and experiences. This included focus groups with women only, and facilitated by women, in order to explicitly explore gender issues in a comfortable and safe environment.

Results and Impact

- Overall, the initiative was effective in enabling all participants to build skills in participatory policy deliberation and increase their confidence in engaging in such deliberation.
- Some 84% of participants from vulnerable groups reported that they plan to continue to actively engage, and influence policy decisions compared to 61% at baseline, surpassing the 80% target.
- Among women in the vulnerable groups, 96% plan to continue to advocate actively on gender related issues compared to 61% at the baseline and a target of 80%.
- A full 100% of these officials reported at the end of the initiative that they plan to adopt a participatory and inclusive policy process. This compares to the baseline figure of 89% and a target of 90%.
- Participants' stories have been shared through local radio interviews, television, and social media. The innovation has also led to a documentary film on the experience of an autistic child and their caregiver (mother), inclusion of children with disabilities in scouting programs, and the development of a Bhutanese sign language module.
- Vulnerable women and women with disabilities were engaged throughout the testing process via the co-learning, co-creating and policy advocacy process. The participants were introduced to policies on disabilities, labor, education, gender, and youth.

Key Lessons

1. Government officials at the highest level of government (Ministers, Secretaries and Directors General) need to be involved in the design thinking process so those with ultimate decision making power can shepherd policy recommendations through implementation.
2. Front line service providers should also be brought into the design thinking process. It is at this level that vulnerable people are most likely to experience discrimination in the implementation process, so it is necessary that service providers are a part of the process.
3. Other lessons learned illustrated that empathy is a powerful driver of policy deliberation, the multiple design thinking stages of the model are effective in promoting participatory policy dialogue and follow-up, diversity is required in participating government officials, and the expectations of vulnerable participants need to be managed.

Wangmo who has an autistic son spoke about the challenges faced in accessing education for children with disabilities during a workshop. Wangmo and other participants proposed policy recommendations for improving the education system, including more resources for special needs education, and flexible policies that would allow students with disabilities to complete their education at their own pace. For the first time, Wangmo had the opportunity to connect with other parents and government officials who were in a position to make a difference.

PARTNER ORGANIZATION

Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy

TARGET PARTICIPANTS

101 participants, 45 women and 56 men

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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ABOUT FIT

The Fund for Innovation and Transformation supports Canadian small and medium-sized organizations (SMOs) testing innovative solutions that advance gender equality in the Global South.



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