

PROGRAMME PROPOSAL FOR GPE: SYSTEM CAPACITY GRANT

TRANSFORMING EARLY LEARNING IN BHUTAN

January 2024-December 2026

UNICEF BHUTAN IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND
SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND THE LOCAL EDUCATION GROUP



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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
BCSEA	Bhutan Council for School Examination and Assessment
CDEOs	Chief District Education Officers
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
CWDs	Children with Disabilities
ECCD	Early Childhood Care and Development
EMD	Education Monitoring Division
EM&E	Education Monitoring and Evaluation
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ESPIG	Education Sector Programme Implementation Grant
FYP	Five Year Plan
HACT	Harmonized Approach to Cash Transfers
GER	Gross Enrolment Rate
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
LEG	Local Education Group
NCWC	National Commission for Women and Children
NEA	National Education Assessment
NEAF	National Education Assessment Framework
NER	Net Enrolment Rate
NFE	Non-Formal Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
MED	Monitoring and Evaluation Division
MoESD	Ministry of Education and Skills Development
PGDE	Post Graduate Diploma in ECCD
PP	Pre-Primary
PSEA	Protection of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
QMTEC	Quality Monitoring Tool for ECCD Centres
RGoB	Royal Government of Bhutan
SCG	System Capacity Grant
SPMS	School-based Performance Management System
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
STG	System Transformation Grant
ToR	Terms of Reference
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene

I. INTRODUCTION

The present concept note outlines the activities and interventions proposed to be supported in Bhutan through the System Capacity Grant (SCG) under the GPE.

The activities are aligned with the Partnership Compact, which was developed by the members of the Local Education Group (LEG) of Bhutan, under the leadership of the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD), Royal Government of Bhutan. The Partnership Compact was approved by the GPE on 17 July 2023. The Partnership Compact preparation entailed several consultations among the education community. It was endorsed by the members of the Local Education Group, including teachers and ECCD facilitators, before its final submission to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE).

Partners of the Local Education Group have agreed that Early Learning is the priority reform area that will lead to the transformation of the education system and achievement of better outcomes for children in Bhutan. The Partnership Compact comprises different actions being implemented by education partners in Bhutan to support progress in the agreed Early Learning policy priority. The Partnership Compact also lists the main activities that the country intends to finance with resources that the Global Partnership for Education has made available for Bhutan.

Moreover, following the GPE guidelines the LEG has also identified different conditions that will affect the achievement of the priority. Through an Enabling Factor Analysis, the LEG has identified areas of intervention needed to improve the likelihood of success on the achievement of improvements in the priority area.

The Partnership Compact includes description and justification of the Early Learning as the selected priority; the main gaps identified through the Enabling Factors Analysis and potential areas of intervention; ongoing actions by partners on Early Learning, and the activities that will be financed with GPE resources; the activities to be implemented to monitor compact implementation; the Statement of Commitment of the Local Education Group members to support the implementation of this Partnership Compact.

This note sets out the purpose, scope, and processes for the SCG application. The note was prepared by UNICEF as the Grant Agent for the GPE SCG in Bhutan, based on the Partnership Compact and in consultation with the Ministry of Education and Skills Development, the Local Education Group, and the Grant Agents for the GPE System Transformation Grant and Multiplier Grant.

II. BACKGROUND

Country Context

Bhutan is a small and landlocked country, situated between China (Tibet) and India. It has an area of 38,394 square kilometers.¹ Bhutan is a democratic constitutional monarchy since 2008, with the King as the head of the State. The head of the government is the Prime Minister elected from the ruling political party. The government is elected for a period of five years. The governance system in the country consists of a Central Government and Local Governments. The Central Government comprises nine Ministries and executive powers rest with the *Lhengye Zhungtshog* or Cabinet of Ministers. Policy and any intervention decisions are made by the Cabinet and ultimately by Parliament. The Local Government comprises 20 *Dzongkhags* (districts), 205 *Gewogs* (block administrations) and 4 *Thromdes* (municipal administrations).

Bhutan has a population of 727,145, growing at the rate of 1.3 per cent per annum,² with more than 26 per cent between 0 to 14 years and 19.8 per cent between 15 to 24 years. The nation's second Population and Housing Census (PHC) in 2017 indicated a rapid demographic transition, setting the context to reap the demographic dividend.

Bhutan has a GDP per capita of US\$ 3266.4 (2021).³ Although Bhutan's GDP growth rate has slowly been increasing in recent years, in 2020 it fell to a record low of -10 per cent, a likely consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴

School Education System

The education system in Bhutan has three main forms: general education, monastic education, and non-formal education (NFE).⁵ The general education system is by far the biggest and is now commonly seen as the formal educational structure.

The Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD) is responsible for policy formulation, planning and administration of school education (Pre-Primary-class XII) as well as non-formal and continuing education. The Ministry also implements ex-country undergraduate scholarships, and the design and implementation of higher education policies. The School Curriculum Division (SCD) under the Department of School Education (DSE) is responsible for curriculum development and review while Bhutan Council for School Examination and Assessment (BCSEA) carries out the national assessments, including the high-stake examinations at levels, VI, VIII, X and XII.

In the recent restructuring and transformation of the Government, Technical and Vocational Education and Training, which was earlier under the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources, was transferred to the Ministry of Education and Skills Development.

The school-based education structure in Bhutan comprises 11 years of free basic education from classes Pre-Primary (PP) to class X. From 2019, with the initiative of the government, all class X passed students are provided scholarships to pursue their education in class XI in government and private schools. Thus, the

¹ Statistical Yearbook of Bhutan 2022. Available at: <https://www.nsb.gov.bt/publications/statistical-yearbook/>

² Population and Housing Census of Bhutan, 2017

³ The World Bank Data. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=BT>

⁴ Asian Development Bank. Available at: <https://www.adb.org/countries/bhutan/economy>

⁵ Annual Education Statistics, 2022. Available at: <http://www.education.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/AES-2022-revised-1.pdf>

general education structure comprises seven years of primary education (PP-VI), and six years of secondary education (VII-XII). After the completion of class XII students have the option to pursue Technical Vocational Education and Training in various technical training institutes or universities. In 2020, due to policy shifts, the official school-going-age for enrolment in the first year of primary education was reduced from 6 years to 5 years old, although this is not strictly enforced.

The educational plans and priorities are outlined in the 12th Five-Year-Plan (FYP) 2018-2023.⁶ Early Learning and Learning are the priority reform areas for the 13th Five Year Plan (2024-2029) of the Royal Government of Bhutan.

III. GPE IN BHUTAN

GPE Grants in Bhutan

Bhutan is one of the countries eligible for the GPE funding and has benefitted from the GPE Education Sector Programme Implementation Grant (ESPIG), which was used to increase access to early learning opportunities, strengthen BCSEA's capacity to undertake periodic National Education Assessments by developing a National Education Assessment Framework (NEAF) and the COVID-19 Accelerated Funding, which was used to strengthen Education in Emergencies and Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) during the pandemic.

The current GPE grant windows for Bhutan are from GPE 2023-25 Programme where Bhutan is eligible for the System Transformation Grant (STG) of USD 5 Million, the System Capacity Grant (SCG) of USD 1 Million and the Multiplier Grant of USD 5 Million. While Save the Children Bhutan is the Grant Agent for STG, UNICEF Bhutan is the Grant Agent for SCG. World Bank is managing the Multiplier Grant of USD 3.3 Million. Another USD 1.7 Million of the multiplier grant is yet to be unlocked. UNICEF Bhutan is the Coordinating Agency for all the grants.

Grant Agent Selection

The grant agent selection for the System Capacity Grant was done through a competitive process. The call for expression of interest to become grant agent of the System Capacity Grant was issued on April 24, 2023. The Local Education Group decided to search for a sole grant agent for the different activities listed in the partnership compact to be financed by the System Capacity Grant to reduce transaction costs.

UNICEF was selected as the Grant Agent for the System Capacity Grant based on the proposal. UNICEF has ample experience in implementing activities relevant for the Early Learning – the Policy Priority selected under the Partnership Compact in Bhutan.

Objective of the grant

The main objective of the System Capacity Grant is to build national capabilities to develop, implement and monitor education sector plans and policies and support the system transformation process of the education sector in Bhutan as described in the Partnership Compact. More specifically, the grant will support with improvements on the four enabling factors to ensure achievement of the compact priority – Early Learning.

⁶ 12th Five Year Plan. Available at: [12 Five Year Plan 2018-2023 \(1\).pdf](#)

IV. SYSTEM CAPACITY GRANT ACTIONS

This application is aligned to the Partnership Compact: Transforming Early Learning Education in Bhutan (2023/24-2026/27) developed by the Ministry of Education and Skills Development with the Local Education Group in 2023. Therefore, the application for the SCG proposes five broad components, one for each enabling factor, and an additional one to capture other actions needed to support system transformation.

The grant provides funding for a broad range of eligible activities under three financing windows (FW): (1) gender-responsive planning, (2) coordinated action and financing, and (3) strengthening capacity for adapting and learning, hence the actions are coded respectively, for easy reference.

1. Improving Data and Evidence generation for evidence-based policy development and education sector planning

Action 1.1. (FW 3, Activity Group I): Upgradation of the Education Management Information System (EMIS)

Issue

Bhutan has an Education Management Information System (EMIS) that is used to produce the Annual Education Statistics, which informs plans and priorities in the country. However, the EMIS still lacks data segregated by key demographic variables such as disability, age, socio-economic status, etc. Similarly, data on disability in EMIS is not disaggregated by gender, type, or severity of disability nor by grades and level of education. The same is valid for ECCD. The EMIS does not record information on enrolment by age or type of centre/intervention. For example, the ECCD data does not specify the number of children who are engaged through the mobile facilitator programme or through the home-based interventions. The existing Quality Monitoring Tool for ECCD Centres (QMTEC) that has been developed into a web-based tool will need relevant components to be integrated within the EMIS to ensure synchronization of data.

While EMIS has evolved from a simple Excel-based manual version to 3.0 internet-based version, there are issues related to timely data analysis, publication and dissemination for evidence-based planning, programming, and decision-making.

UNICEF has partnered with the MoESD to build capacity on administrative data collection, analysis, publication, and dissemination but more needs to be done to build the capacity of the ECCD focal persons as well as train other focal persons on the new modules focusing on the integration of the ECCD QMTEC within the EMIS platform. Additionally, there is a need for stabilizing EMIS version 3.0, simultaneously leveraging the digital technology to create user-friendly dashboard and analytics for all stakeholders to use education management data for evidence-based planning, programming, and decision-making.

Outcome

Enhancement of the Education Management Information System (EMIS) into a robust integrated data system that includes key demographic variables such as disability (with type and severity), gender, age, grade/level of education, socio-economic status, etc., including for early learning by type of centre and interventions to support informed decision-making, tailored interventions for improvement of quality, equity, gender inclusiveness, and efficient use of the limited resources. Simultaneously, the capacities of key focal points

across all levels will be developed to ensure effective use of the EMIS platform from data collection to data analysis for informed planning and implementation.

Activity 1.2 (FW 3, Activity Group K): Develop a comprehensive Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Platform for the MoESD

Issue

As part of the education reform and restructuring undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD), the former Education Monitoring Division (EMD) has been upgraded to Monitoring and Evaluation Division (MED), under the MoESD Secretariat with the Division Chief reporting to the Education Secretary. Evaluation of programmes and projects is an additional role for this Division. While the School-based Performance Management System (SPMS) of the EMD is already integrated into the EMIS, there is a need to look at the central-level monitoring.

Currently many Divisions operate in silos in the absence of a unified, single source of monitoring and evaluation platform, thereby perpetuating inefficiencies and duplications. Similarly, the different departments under MoESD, including the newly merged Department of Workforce Planning and Skills Development do not have an integrated monitoring platform, resulting in uncoordinated approaches to programmes and projects. Frequency of monitoring using agreed-upon indicators is another challenge. The Monitoring and Evaluation Division, also serving as the Secretariat to the Ministry, will work closely with Policy and Planning Division (PPD) to optimize resources and avoid wasteful expenditure. Evaluation function, which is the additional mandate of the division is new. There is no in-house capacity to undertake programme evaluations and the capacity gap needs to be filled. Knowledge creation is limited so far.

The mandates for the MoESD have expanded to monitor policies and programmes of various divisions, Dzongkhag/Thromde Education sectors, and institutes (Schools, Technical Institutes, including the Early Childhood Care and Development centers, and Non-Formal Education (NFE) centers, under the MoESD. One of the responsibilities of the division under the new mandate is to improve collaboration and coordination among the divisions, *Dzongkhag/Thromdes* and schools to reduce duplication of programmes and enhance efficiency in the Ministry. In this regard, EMD is in the process of developing a comprehensive online planning and monitoring platform for divisions at the Ministry and *Dzongkhag/Thromde* Education offices. The divisions and *Dzongkhag/Thromde* offices will use the platform to plan their annual programmes and activities which can be viewed by the other divisions and agencies. The platform will also be used by the Divisions and Dzongkhag/Thromdes to share their self-monitoring reports. EMD will use the platform to communicate their monitoring reports based on the field visits. This process is expected to guide Divisions and *Dzongkhag/Thromde* Education offices to make effective decisions and implement appropriate interventions. More specifically for ECCD, since the development of the Quality Monitoring Tool (QMTEC) in 2014, only one national quality monitoring report was published on ECCD. Review from the MoESD suggested that data was not consistent across the dzongkhags, indicating a gap in either the tool itself or the implementation of the tool. Therefore, the revision of the General Guidelines for School Management, which will be done outside of the SCG by the MoESD-EMD, will also include components on ECCD in addition to inclusion of the NFE and inclusive education components.

Outcome

Development of a comprehensive online planning and monitoring platform for divisions, Dzongkhags/Thromdes, and school principals to plan and monitor all programmes, including ECCD and Non-Formal Education, in alignment with the overall goals of the MoESD. The online platform will be incorporated in the EMIS under the Education Monitoring and Evaluation (EM&E) module to ensure synchronization of data platforms within the MoESD. In the long run, EMD expects a well synchronized planning, monitoring and evaluation system within the MoESD to ensure evidence-based planning, programming and decision making for optimized resource allocation and improved education quality, equity, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Activity 1.3 (FW 3, Activity Group K): Assessment of the National Education at Grade III and VI in the Core Areas of Learning

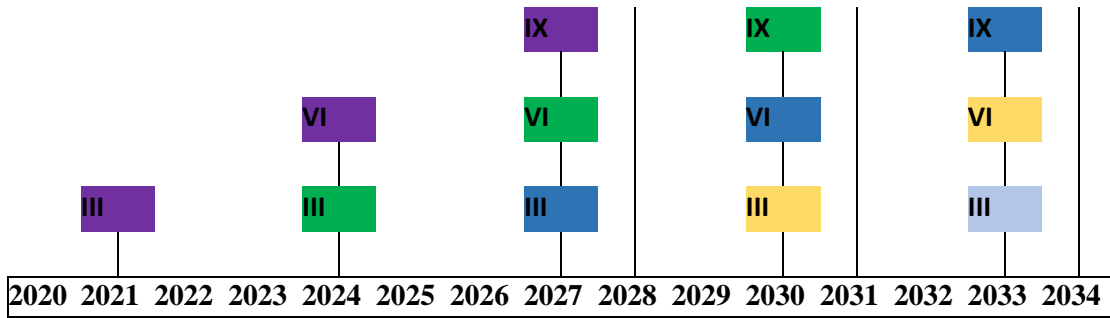
Issue

The National Education Assessment (NEA) is a large-scale assessment programme conducted by Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment (BCSEA) at various key stages of student learning – grades III, VI and IX. NEA assesses the ability of students, disaggregated by gender and other critical variables, in using knowledge, skills, values and attitudes related to core school subjects (Dzongkha Reading and Writing Literacy, English Reading and Writing Literacy, Mathematical Literacy and Scientific Literacy). The assessment is intended to improve overall student learning achievement and enhancing the education system based on the evidence of what our students know and what they can do with that knowledge.

Apart from the recent NEA conducted in 2021, few rounds of NEA have been conducted earlier in various subjects at different grade levels, but there has been a limited usage of their findings in policy development due to various reasons. However, the NEA, 2021 was the first of its kind conducted by BCSEA using National Education Assessment Framework (NEAF) and technical support from Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), India under the Education Sector Programme Implementation Grant funded by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). The NEA exercise was a culmination of extensive collaboration and consultation among different stakeholders (GPE, SCI, UNICEF ACER, India, MoE, REC, RUB, JSW Law School and BCSEA) and paved way for a systematic conduct of National Education Assessments periodically, so that the findings are comparable over time, across districts and subsequently with other countries within and outside the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation in the long run. One of the objectives of the development of the National Education Assessment Framework was to allocate budgets for regular NEAs, which was not the case earlier.

The NEA is conducted in a three-year cycle approach (as shown in the diagram 1). This triennial model approach serves two purposes simultaneously – on one hand, the same cohort of students can be tracked from grade III through grade IX and on the other, systemic interventions can be implemented and tracked through the years for evaluation purpose.

Diagram 1: Three-year cycle of the National Education Assessment



	Cohort 1
	Cohort 2
	Cohort 3
	Cohort 4
	Cohort 5

The next round of NEA as per the assessment cycle given in the National Education Assessment Framework (NEAF) is scheduled for 2024 and it will assess the students of grades III and VI on the following cognitive domains:

Grade III:

- Dzongkha Reading Literacy
- English Reading Literacy
- Mathematical Literacy

Grade VI

- Dzongkha Reading Literacy
- Dzongkha Writing Literacy
- English Reading Literacy
- English Writing Literacy
- Mathematical Literacy
- Scientific Literacy

In addition, students will be assessed on the values and attitudes, and 21st Century Competencies, which are aligned with the Nine Student attributes identified by the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024. The NEA also targets to address equity through the inclusion of Children with Disabilities (CWDs).

For better understanding of the factors affecting the student learning outcomes, including from children’s access to early learning (ECCD) programmes, the contextual questionnaires will be administered on students, teachers, principals, Chief Dzongkhag Education Officers (CDEOs) and Chief Thromde Education Officers.

NEA is a sample-based assessment in which a representative sample size is drawn and accordingly reported on the subgroups of interest. Each student will be required to complete only one booklet in each domain.

Outcome

The National Education Assessment grade III and grade VI reports will inform policymaking, curriculum refinement, and teacher development, resulting in improved learning quality. It can also enhance transparency, accountability, and data-driven decision-making, fostering a culture of continuous improvement. NEA's benchmarking and progress tracking can offer insights into educational effectiveness, while strengthening parental engagement, gender equity and quality assurance.

Administering the NEA at grade III and VI in core learning areas has far-reaching positive implications to evaluate the education system and monitor the quality of learning outcome at the primary education.

2. Strengthening capacity for Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Sector Planning, Policy, and Monitoring

Action A2.1 (FW 1, Activity Group B): Advocacy on gender and capacity building of gender focal persons and relevant stakeholders at the central and district level on gender mainstreaming

Issue

According to the Annual Education Statistics, there are no strong gender differences in school or ECCD (ECCD NER: F=37.95; M=37.38)⁷ enrolment, however, gender norms and stereotypes are still a concern. Traditional societal expectations and the influence of gender roles on parental involvement further contribute to gender-related issues in ECCD. The lack of capacity for gender mainstreaming, including for gender responsive planning, also hinders targeted interventions at the policy level. Overcoming these challenges requires a holistic approach, involving advocacy at various levels, targeted training, community engagement, and effective policy implementation to create a more inclusive and equitable early childhood education environment in Bhutan. At the primary and secondary levels gender parity has improved over the years and there is no marked difference. However, gender parity may not always lead to gender equality in terms of outcomes. More efforts are required to identify barriers that put boys and girls at a disadvantage in terms of curriculum content, pedagogical practices, participation in STEM subjects and TVET. Transition of girls to higher education, including in professional courses, needs to be addressed. There is no data on out of school children disaggregated by sex and this needs to be addressed too.

Outcome

Gender will be mainstreamed into strategic level analysis, planning and monitoring through advocacy and capacity building of key stakeholders. Strengthening gender mainstreaming can promote gender equality through balanced enrollment, improved retention, and completion rates for all students. By fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment, children can develop holistically without being constrained by traditional gender roles. This will result in enhanced educational outcomes, improved social and emotional

⁷ Annual Education Statistics, 2023. Ministry of Education and Skills Development

well-being, and increased self-confidence for both boys and girls. Over time, breaking down gender stereotypes in ECCD can contribute to a more gender-equal society by nurturing individuals who are open-minded, gender sensitive, respectful of diversity, and empowered to pursue their interests and goals without constraints based on gender.

Action A2.2 (FW 3, Activity Group J): Training of ECCD facilitators on Life Skills Education and Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Issue

According to the World Health Organization/South and East Asia Regional Office Regional Framework, Life Skills are a group of psychological competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner. Life Skills can be categorized into three broad areas. (1) Social Skills: Establishing relationships, communicate effectively, (2) Thinking: Self Awareness, Social Awareness, Goal setting and planning, problem solving and decision making, (3) Emotional Skills: Coping with and understanding emotions and stress.

Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) is an integral part of education and represents the first essential step in achieving the goals of basic education and any efforts towards enhancing the quality of education in general. It is in this critical period that children should be provided stimulation and experience that would contribute to their holistic development. Learning to understand oneself and the world around constitute an important aspect of learning at this stage. The early years serve as a critical window of intervention since it is also during this period that children learn about gender norms through their experiences with family and their ECCD facilitators. Considering this critical window of opportunity, the SCG will support the development of the capacities of ECCD facilitators to deliver Life Skills and Comprehensive Sexuality Education through the ECCD programme and the Parenting Education programme. This will help ensure that ECCD facilitators become gender sensitive in their interactions with children and their caregivers and help address some of the persistent gender norms that impact children's perception, attitudes, and behaviours.

Outcome

ECCD facilitators trained in Life Skills and Comprehensive Sexuality Education support the holistic development of children to promote a more gender sensitive, resilient, and competent society.

Action A2.3 (FW 3, Activity Group K): Capacities of Local Government Leaders (Dzongkhag and Gewog Stakeholders) enhanced to advocate for and ensure increased investment in ECCD

Issue

While the government has identified ECCD as a priority area, there is limited and insufficient investment in ECCD, especially at the local government level. Significant support for ECCD initiatives is attested in cases where local government officials understand ECCD and its benefits. Such understanding can lead to proactive measures, including resource allocation, policy advocacy, and collaboration with relevant stakeholders. Building on this awareness, which focuses on multi-sectoral ECCD approach, including parenting education and gender sensitivity, among local government officials creates a foundation for effective strategies that prioritize the well-being and holistic development of young children in the community. Moreover, this action

will help ensure support for Action2.1 and Action2.2 with a focus on holistic development of all children and gender transformative approach at the community level.

Outcome

The capacity of the local governments on the benefits of investing in ECCD, mobilization of resources, increasing demand for quality ECCD, is enhanced leading to increased investment in ECCD for improved quality and equitable early learning.

3. Strengthening Education Sector Coordination

Action A3.1 (FW 2, Activity Group E): Self Evaluation/Analysis of the ESCM (LEG) to help strategize for further strengthening of the function of the Education Sector Coordination Meeting (ESCM)

Issue

Bhutan is relatively small and population with limited presence of developmental partners. Despite this, agencies work in silos, while information sharing is still a challenge. This leads to conflicting policies, duplication of efforts and resources which hinder the effective delivery of educational programmes and services. Enhanced efficiency of the education policy implementation, coordination, consolidation, and collaboration among various stakeholders are the fundamental principles to achieve all the goals, strategies and programme of the current 12th FYP and new 13th FYP.

To address these issues, the Education Sector Coordination Meeting (ESCM) was instituted in early 2018. The ESCM has clear terms of reference and is co-chaired by the MoESD Secretary and UNICEF Representative. It acts as the Local Education Group. The ESCM supports the realisation of common goals and aspirations by strengthening coordination, collaboration, and partnership among the MoESD, relevant government agencies, development partners, NGOs, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), and representatives of parents' organisations. However, meetings are not always regular and CSO's participation is limited. ESCM has not conducted a self-evaluation since its foundation and while there are no major issues now, the challenges in sector coordination may affect the achievement of education and early learning aspirations. There is a need to revitalize the ESCM and gear towards Joint Sector Reviews for the long-term sustainability of commitments from development partners and for better harmonization and coherence of interventions.

Outcome

Conducting a self-evaluation and strategic planning process within ESCM can lead to positive outcomes such as enhanced effectiveness, optimized coordination, inclusive participation, and improved accountability through the development of mechanisms for joint reviews of education performance and project implementation plans. A revitalized ESCM with regular meetings and revised ToR contributes collectively to a more efficient and impactful education coordination, benefiting the overall educational landscape.

4. Review Volume, Equity, and Efficiency of Domestic Public Expenditure on Education, including Early Learning

Action A4.1 (FW 1, Activity Group B): Review the overall education sector expenditure and financing, including formula for budget allocations to help improve equity and efficiency of budget allocations

Issue

Adequate and steady long-term investments in education are vital for reaping both immediate and sustainable benefits. This commitment ensures equitable access, high quality, and parity for all children, leading to positive outcomes on individual and communal scales. The significance of such investments lies in their capacity to facilitate personal development, bolster a country's human resource potential, and elevate global competitiveness.

The Ministry of Education and Skills Development's assessment in 2021 indicates that the expenditure for the education sector, including early learning, as a share of total expenditure (excluding debt servicing) in financial year 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 exceeded 20% of total public expenditure. However, the budget for the education sector fell below 20% in the financial year 2020-2021 which may be due to the pandemic and subsequent closure of schools in 2020. Nevertheless, the MoESD is confident that Bhutan will be able to achieve the 20% share of public expenditure towards education for the next three years until FY 2024-2025.

Nonetheless, the current budget share to subsectors at decentralized levels appears excessively low for primary education. For instance, for the financial year 2019-2020, recurrent budget allocation for primary education was 3 per cent against 97 per cent for secondary. The financing scenario could be similar for ECCD. There needs to be realistic funding and resourcing for ECCD as with primary education. A public expenditure review from early learning up to the higher education could help the sector to identify them. To this end, a nuanced understanding of where and when to allocate resources is vital. By employing effective mechanisms for resource distribution and implementing strategic reforms and interventions, the overall efficacy and efficiency of these investments can be significantly enhanced, yielding substantial and far-reaching returns. The SDG Mid-Term Reporting exercise being undertaken by MoESD will also throw some light on the progress and gaps, that will call for increased investment in the sector.

Outcome

A comprehensive review of the entire education (early learning to higher education) sector's expenditure and financing, including the budget allocation formula, can lead to equitable distribution of resources, ensuring that different regions and schools receive fair funding. Moreover, it enables efficient utilization of resources by identifying areas of improvement and streamlining funding for educational initiatives. The outcome can be more targeted interventions that address specific challenges, ultimately enhancing the quality of education through investments in teacher training, curriculum development, and infrastructure.

Additionally, such a review promotes transparency, accountability, and data-driven decision-making. By analyzing expenditure data, policymakers can make informed choices, prioritize areas that require increased funding, and plan effectively. As a result, educational inequalities can be reduced, stakeholders' perspectives can be integrated, and policies adjusted to align with evolving needs. Ultimately, this holistic review process contributes to a more equitable, efficient, and responsive education system that benefits students and communities alike.

5. Professionalization of ECCD to improve the delivery of quality ECCD services

Action B2.1 (FW 3, Activity Group J): Conduct an Assessment on the Capacity Development Needs of ECCD Facilitators to inform professional development programmes

Issue

ECCD centre programmes are critical in providing the positive experiences that children aged 3-5 need to build a strong foundation for learning and holistic development. In this context, considering that quality of ECCD programmes is pivotal in determining the impact and outcomes for children, the aspiration for high quality programmes underpins all efforts and initiatives in Bhutan. To realize this goal, the growing need for ECCD facilitators or early childhood educators with higher qualifications and specialized professional training needs to be addressed as the skills and knowledge of ECCD practitioners play a vital role in the delivery of quality ECCD programmes. Currently, ECCD facilitators in Bhutan are dedicated individuals, majority of whom are females, with limited formal qualifications in early childhood education. Research indicates that well-trained educators are more effective in promoting children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, which is why investing in higher qualification and training of ECCD facilitators could yield higher quality of ECCD services and improved outcomes for children. Therefore, the focus on the regularization and professionalization of the ECCD workforce is emphasized in the draft Multi-Sectoral ECCD Strategic Action Plan. This is also highlighted as a priority by the Ministry of Education and Skills Development and UNICEF's new Country Development Plan, which is aligned to the Royal Government of Bhutan's priorities. Considering these benefits, proposal for the creation of a higher position level for ECCD professionals called 'ECCD Teachers' is being initiated, along with higher entry qualifications. To this date, an in-depth assessment focusing on the capacity development needs of ECCD facilitators has not been conducted. The MoESD is working towards the recruitment of aspiring individuals with a bachelor's degree to be provided the opportunity to undergo a one year Post Graduate Diploma in ECCD (PGDE) in the Paro College of Education and simultaneously, the ECCD diploma programme will still be offered to individuals with a minimum of grade 12 certificate. These initiatives show that capacity development is critical for quality assurance and for the professional development career path of ECCD facilitators. Therefore, an in-depth assessment focusing on the capacity development needs of ECCD facilitators will inform the ECCD facilitators' professional development programmes. It is proposed that a needs assessment of ECCD facilitators who have graduated from the diploma programme and those who have not enrolled in the diploma programme be conducted to inform the capacity development needs through the GPE System Capacity Grant. This will ensure that the future modules and capacity development trainings are evidence-based to address the needs of the practitioners in the field. The Needs Assessment will also help contribute to the capacity development trainings supported under GPE's System Transformation Grant.

Outcome

The ECCD facilitators' Capacity Development Needs Assessment will inform professional development programmes to ensure that ECCD Professionals have improved capacities and are equipped with a deeper understanding of child development, age-appropriate and child-centered approaches, and strategies to promote active learning and holistic development of young children. Moreover, since majority of the ECCD facilitators are female, the needs assessment will help ensure the professionalization of a strong female workforce in the ECCD sector to promote the best outcomes for all children.

6. Others

Action C6 (FW 3, Activity group J): Develop and model a reading programme in lower primary levels (PP to Grade III)

Issue

Exposure to early reading contributes to children’s foundational learning. There is enough research evidence of the role of reading in enhancing children’s learning outcomes at later stages. In Bhutan limited access to age-appropriate books, a lack of reading culture, and language barriers hinder children's engagement with reading materials. Additionally, factors such as the quality of reading materials, assessment-oriented teaching methods, and limited parental engagement contribute to the issue. These challenges collectively impede the development of strong reading habits and critical thinking skills among children. This GPE capacity grant will address these gaps targeting initially children in from class PP to III.

Addressing these concerns requires a multi-pronged approach, including advocacy and sensitization on the importance of early reading as a foundational literacy skill. The development of a relevant intervention focusing on the needs of young learners is necessary. To address this, a tailor made comprehensive Early Literacy Package should be developed to make reading a fun and enriching experience for all young learners. This will also help ensure that the package becomes a part of the annual school programme.

The proposed reading programme will provide insights and lessons learnt for the improvement of the reading instruction and practices. Implementing strategies to address children's reading challenges in Bhutan can yield a transformative outcome. By promoting a culture of reading, providing accessible and relevant materials, training educators, and involving parents, Bhutan can nurture a generation of enthusiastic readers equipped with improved literacy skills, critical thinking abilities, and a lifelong love for learning. This outcome not only enhances educational achievements but also contributes to the holistic development of children, fostering curiosity, creativity, and a broader understanding of the world around them. Implementing strategies to address children's reading challenges in Bhutan can yield a transformative outcome. By promoting a culture of reading, providing accessible and relevant materials, training educators, and involving parents, Bhutan can nurture a generation of enthusiastic readers equipped with improved literacy skills, critical thinking abilities, and a lifelong love for learning. This outcome not only enhances educational achievements but also contributes to the holistic development of children, fostering curiosity, creativity, and a broader understanding of the world around them.

Outcome

Sensitization on the importance of early reading as a foundational literacy skill through media platforms and development of a tailor made comprehensive Early Literacy Package as part of the annual school programme.

V. BUDGET OUTLINE

ENABLING FACTORS AND ACTIONS	FINANCING (US\$ in MILLION)			TOTAL	GPE financing window
	2024	2025	2026		
A1 – Data and Evidence	0.41	0.182	0.073	0.665	
A1.1: Upgradation of the Education Management Information System (EMIS) into a robust integrated data system including key demographic variables such as disability (with type and severity), gender, age, grade/level of education, socio-economic status, etc., including for early learning by type of centre and interventions.	0.100	0.100	0.050	0.250	3
A1.2: Develop a comprehensive Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Platform for the MoESD	0.050	-	-	0.050	3
A1.3: Assessment of the National Education at grade III and VI in the core areas of learning to evaluate the education system and monitor the quality of learning outcome at the primary education.	0.260	0.082	0.023	0.365	3
A2 – Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Sector Planning, Policy, and Monitoring	0.1085	0.040	-	0.1485	
A2.1: Advocacy on gender and capacity building of gender focal persons and relevant stakeholders at the central and district levels on gender mainstreaming	0.0485	-	-	0.0485	1
A2.2: Training of ECCD facilitators on Life Skills Education and comprehensive sexuality education.	0.040	0.040	-	0.080	3
A2.3: Capacities of local government leaders (Dzongkhag and Gewog stakeholders) enhanced to advocate for and ensure investment in ECCD.	0.020			0.020	3
A3 – Sector Coordination	0.007	0.004	0.004	0.015	
A3.1: ESCM (LEG) self-evaluation/analysis to help strategize for further strengthening of the functioning of the Education Sector Coordination Meeting (ESCM)s	0.007	0.004	0.004	0.015	2
A4 – Volume, Equity, and Efficiency of Domestic Public Expenditure on Education	0.0165	-	-	0.0165	
A4.1: Review the overall education sector expenditure and financing, including formula for budget allocations to help improve equity and efficiency of budget allocations.	0.0165	-	-	0.0165	1
B2 – Professionalization of ECCD	0.030	-	-	0.030	
B2.1: Conduct an Assessment on the Capacity Development Needs of ECCD facilitators to inform professional development programmes	0.030	-	-	0.030	3
C – Others	0.04	0.045	0.040	0.125	
C6: Develop and model a reading programme in lower primary levels (PP to Class 3)	0.015	0.020	0.020	0.055	3
Grant Agent Fees	0.025	0.025	0.020	0.070	3

Cost Distribution

Budget Template: The detailed cost distribution is provided in the GPE Excel Template, which is attached to the application.

VI. IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

The existing Local Education Group will govern the overall System Capacity Grant led by the MoESD. The LEG will ensure alignment with the Partnership Compact and the government's priorities, with a focus on coordination of the System Transformation Grant, System Capacity Grant, and the Multiplier grant.

The actions under the Partnership Compact and the SCG will be implemented as part of the RGoB-UNICEF Country Programme of Cooperation (2024-2028) and are aligned to the government's 13th Five Year Plan.

To implement the actions, a strategic approach that integrates planning, execution, and ongoing evaluation to address the unique educational and technological needs of Bhutan will be adopted. The implementation strategy will also apply a methodical, transparent, and accountable approach with a strong emphasis on results, sustainability, and inclusiveness. The following principles and standards provide an overview of the overall method of implementation:

- **Compliance with Regulations:** The implementation will comply with UNICEF regulations, especially in financial management, procurement, and transparency.
- **Partner Country Ownership:** Bhutanese government and local stakeholders will be actively involved in the implementation process, ensuring that the action aligns with national priorities and context.
- **Inclusiveness and Accessibility:** Work will be done to ensure that the benefits of early learning and education reach all segments of society, particularly marginalized groups.
- **Collaboration and Coordination:** Effective coordination with key stakeholders and GPE grant agents will help avoid duplication of efforts and leverage synergies.
- **Adaptability and Flexibility:** Given the potential new dimensions of the education reform, the implementation strategy will be adaptable to new developments and emerging needs.
- **Gender sensitivity:** Gender responsive planning and implementation will be incorporated throughout the planning and implementation process and emphasized as a major focus area in reporting and evidence generation.

Based on the principles and standards mentioned above, for the implementation of the action, UNICEF will engage with the Royal Government of Bhutan as the Coordinator of the programme. Expert advice will be sought from UNICEF HQ and UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, while maintaining close communication and consultation with GPE.

Partnership will be strengthened with inter-governmental organizations, CSOs, and international development partners, including through the existing coordination mechanisms such as the Education Sector Coordination Meeting acting as Local Education Group.

VII. MONITORING

Monitoring and Evaluation are essential for assessing the progress, effectiveness, and impact of the Partnership Compact in Bhutan.

All programme implementation is monitored by UNICEF, through the following 3 modalities:

1. **Field Monitoring by UNICEF Staff:** UNICEF staff will conduct regular programme monitoring visits to assess the progress of interventions against planned results.
2. **Harmonized Approach to Cash Transfer (HACT):** UNICEF will follow global HACT framework to manage fiduciary and other programme management risks by conducting micro assessments, assessment for Protection of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), spot checks and programmatic visits, for all implementing stakeholders.
3. UNICEF will work with MoESD's Education Monitoring and Evaluation unit to ensure quality control of the project. In addition, UNICEF will apply its own internal monitoring procedures.

UNICEF's Monitoring and Evaluation team headed by the Section Specialist provides office-wide technical support for Planning, monitoring, evaluation, and data collection/analysis.

The monitoring of results for SCG will be embedded in the UNICEF's Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, which forms integral part of the new CPD. Some broad indicators will be framed at the Outcome Level, while direct accountability for UNICEF will be captured as output level indicators.

VIII. RISKS

a. Political Risks

Political Instability: Shifts in political climate could impact project support.

Mitigation: Develop relationships with multiple stakeholders across the political spectrum and create contingency plans for political shifts.

b. Environmental Risks

Climate Change and Natural Disasters: Geo-physically, Bhutan is in the young Himalayan Mountains and considered to be one of most seismically active zones in the world. Bhutan is also increasingly exposed to climate change related impacts such as flash floods, glacial lake outburst floods, and droughts.

Mitigation: UNICEF has a long-standing partnership with the Government on emergency response and remains a key partner in developing shock-responsive strategies and addressing emergencies.

c. Project Implementation Risks

Fund Liquidity: Large volumes of fund release to the implementing partners with limited human resources/capacity for implementation.

Mitigation: All activities related to fund liquidity will be aligned to both the Government and UNICEF's assurance guidelines and supplemented with necessary incorporations based on existing best practices. UNICEF will provide guidance, support and capacity building to implementing partners throughout the project implementation.

Funding Shortfalls: Insufficient funding due to currency fluctuation and inflation during project period and change in financial rules and regulations of the government.

Mitigation: Work with the government to ensure that there is timely communication to the LEG, GPE and relevant partners about any changes in financial fluctuations likely to impact the project implementation with decisions on restorative actions that are taken in a timely manner.

d. Human Resources

High Turnover of Human Resources: High turnover of implementing partners' human resources due to migration, transfers, and resignations could have an impact on project implementation.

Mitigation: Work with the implementing partners on a mitigation plan focusing on mapping of potential human resource transitions to identify replacements ahead of the gap.

e. Cross-Cutting Strategy

A cross-cutting strategy for all these risks involves continuous monitoring and evaluation. Regular assessment of the project's progress against its goals and the external environment will help in timely identification and mitigation of emerging risks.

IX. PREVENTION OF SEXUAL ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION

It is not anticipated that the implementation of the GPE/SCG Programme, which focuses on building national capabilities to develop, implement, and monitor education sector plans and policies and support the system transformation process of the education sector in Bhutan, will involve risks of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (SEAH). Nonetheless, as per GPE's SEAH Policy and requirements of the national laws and regulations, the project will be aligned with the United Nations Policies and procedures for Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. Actions under the SCG will focus on integration of awareness on Sexual Harassment and Abuse based on UN PSEA guidelines. The resources were developed by the Interagency IP Protocol Working Group (IPPWG) and are available to all UN partners who are operationalizing the [UN protocol for preventing sexual exploitation and abuse involving implementing partners](#).

X. TIMELINE

PROG	ACTIVITIES	TIMELINE											
		2024				2025				2026			
		Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
A1 – Data and Evidence	A1.1: Upgradation of Education Management Information System (EMIS) into a robust integrated data system.		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	A1.2: Develop a comprehensive Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) System for MoESD based on the mandates for Education Monitoring Division.		X	X	X								
	A1.3: Assessment of the National Education at grade III and VI in the core areas of learning.			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
A2 – Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Sector Planning, Policy, and Monitoring	A2.1: Advocacy on gender and capacity building of gender focal persons and relevant stakeholders at the central and district levels on gender mainstreaming		X	X	X								
	A2.2: Training of ECCD facilitators on Life Skills Education and comprehensive sexuality education.		X	X	X	X	X	X	X				
	A2.3: Capacities of local government leaders (Dzongkhag and Gewog stakeholders) enhanced to advocate for and ensure increased investment in ECCD.			X	X								
A3 – Sector Coordination	A3.1: Self-evaluation/analysis of the ESCM (LEG) self-assessment/analysis to help strategize for further strengthening of the functioning of the Education Sector Coordination Meetings (ESCMs)		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

A4 – Volume, Equity, and Efficiency of Domestic Public Expenditure on Education	A4.1: Review of the overall education sector expenditure and financing, including formula for budget allocations, to help improve equity and efficiency of budget allocations.		x	x	x									
B2 – Professionalization of ECCD	B2.1: Conduct an Assessment on the Capacity Development Needs of ECCD facilitators to inform professional development programmes		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x				
C – Others	C6: Develop and model a reading programme in lower primary levels (PP to Class 3)		x	x	x	x	x	x	x					