



UN Statement on Youth 11th Round Table Meeting, Thimphu, September 02, 2011

To be read by Mr. Daniel Toole, UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia

The Royal Government of Bhutan has shown strong leadership in recognizing the importance of issues affecting young people for equitable development in a Gross National Happiness (GNH) society. This is critical to ensuring an enabling environment for young people, particularly as 56% of Bhutan's population is under 25 years of age. The new National Youth Policy frames a comprehensive approach to issues affecting young people, including their meaningful participation. The Government will develop an operational plan for the policy in 2011 with UN support.

Studies on the health and wellbeing of in-school and out-of-school young people, including child workers, have strengthened the policy and programming evidence base. These studies highlight the importance of supporting young people to continue their education whilst enhancing post-education employment opportunities. Youth unemployment is 9%, with significant mismatch between the expectations and aspirations of young people and the current labour market. Unemployment and underemployment will require a coordinated effort from the Government, NGOs and development partners.

The interaction of multiple risk behaviours including alcohol and drug use, risky sexual practices and petty criminal behavior are increasingly well evidenced. While HIV prevalence is reportedly low, the trend is going up and risks and vulnerabilities are evident. STI rates, a proxy indicator for high-risk practices, are high. Comprehensive HIV knowledge remains limited among young people at 21%, particularly among those out of school.

Youth centres and drug and alcohol drop-in centres are beginning to reach vulnerable young people, aided by an increasingly effective partnership by Government with civil society to support implementation. Life-skills education has enhanced the capacity of many young people to make informed and empowered decisions about their lives. A range of skills development and career counseling programmes targeting out-of-school young people, including female early school leavers, have been introduced in the past three years.

One-stop-shop models will be helpful in strengthening integrated service delivery to ensure access to youth-friendly health, education, employment, protection and justice services. These services must encompass prevention, early intervention and response/rehabilitation service delivery. Life-skills education, which requires further institutionalization into education curriculums, will need to ensure consistent, accurate and relevant information on: HIV and AIDS; sexual and reproductive health rights; gender; violence, abuse and exploitation; decision-making; and critical thinking. A sharper focus on vulnerable and at-risk young people is required to ensure that services are accessible to them as a priority.

GNH is important for positive development as it guides young people to cultivate human values. Recognizing its importance, the government successfully initiated Educating for GNH in all schools. This

will prepare young people to become productive and responsible citizens. However, such initiatives should also reach young people who are out of school.

Implementation of the National Youth Policy must be evidence-informed, participatory and equitable. The promising partnership between Government, NGOs and development partners will be enhanced by engaging young people as partners, recognizing them not as a 'problem' but as the 'solution'. Young people have already made valuable contributions to Bhutan's development, such as through recommendations made during National Youth Festivals. Their participation and leadership is essential to the country's continued success.