

## “Strategies for strengthening social protection in Asia and the Pacific”

### **Bhutan's experience on developing inclusive social protection particularly through achievements in universal health coverage**

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to share some snapshots of Bhutan’s story on developing inclusive social protection through a predominantly public health system; driven by the primary health care approach and Universal Health Coverage.

Bhutan, under the wise leadership of our successive Monarchs, and the values which continues in the post-democracy era by the elected governments, has prioritized public policy with people at the core of development.

Fundamental to this approach is the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH). All public policies in Bhutan are screened using GNH screening tool which seek to address a more meaningful purpose of development that goes beyond the fulfillment of material satisfaction. Holistic, people-centered, participatory and balanced development (including a balance between material and spiritual development) forms the core essence of this paradigm.

The framework of health system in Bhutan is embedded in this overarching development paradigm. As a constitutional obligation, the Royal Government is mandated to “provide free access to basic public health services in both modern and traditional medicines”.

The health system in Bhutan was founded on the context of a government assuming responsibility for the development and health care needs of the population. It evolved as a welfare driven system, universal in its design with public financing and delivered free of charge at the point of use. The health system is predominantly public, out of pocket expenditure for health (at 12%) remains low by regional and global comparison, and role of private sector in health is limited, insignificant and is a fairly new phenomenon. Such

overwhelming presence of the government in healthcare, then and now, represents the fundamental strength of the Bhutanese health system.

It is important to highlight the role of Primary Health Care (PHC) approach which Bhutan pursued consciously. The PHC approach provided constant reminder to invest in prevention and multisectoral mechanisms and, thereby, promoted resource prudence. This proved critical amidst the backdrop of human resource constraints and medical supplies dependency that continues to be the primary health system vulnerabilities in Bhutan.

With Primary Health Care approach as the crucial bedrock of the national health system, Bhutan has made dramatic progress in improving the health status of its population. Significant achievements in population health outcomes have been recorded. We have already mainstreamed the SDGs into our programmes and plans including the 12th Five Year Plan (2018-2023) which was recently drafted.

The Bhutan Health Trust Fund represents an important initiative to sustain Primary Health Care in Bhutan and make it self-reliant by continued and uninterrupted financing of essential drugs and vaccines.

**Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,**

Considerable challenges, however, remain. Communicable diseases continue to prevail while non-communicable diseases have already made inroads. Spiking national health care cost, globalization and climate change are other issues of significant concern. On UHC front, while we have universal population enrolment and relatively well established financial protection mechanisms, the effective coverage of quality services are largely work-in-progress. We need to standardize our benefit package, put in place quality improvement measures, broaden the role of non-state actors and rethink our health financing framework to make it more sustainable.

As we advance Universal Health Coverage, we are confident that our pathways are firmly established. However, we are acutely aware of our limitations. In line with our national goals and the principles of GNH, Bhutan remains committed to accelerate progress towards UHC to ensure that all people, regardless of socio-economics, gender, ethnicity or age can access quality health care and financial protection. **I thank you all for your attention. Tashi Delek!**

