



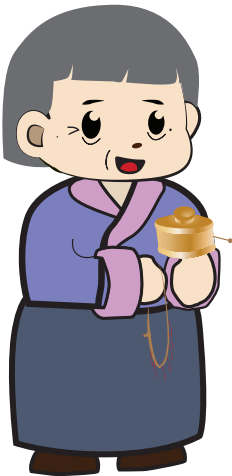
NATIONAL POLICY FOR THE SENIOR CITIZENS OF BHUTAN 2023



Royal Government of Bhutan



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1. BACKGROUND

Bhutan's visionary monarchs have consistently emphasized the vital role of senior citizens in the nation, exemplified by the establishment of the Royal Society for Senior Citizens in 2011. Driven by the principles of Gross National Happiness, this initiative reflects the Royal Vision to building an inclusive and harmonious society. Our benevolent monarch has taken important steps to address well-being of senior citizens through Royal Kidu.

Senior citizens, with their wealth of knowledge, skills, experience, wisdom, and cultural role models, contribute significantly to society. Notably, they serve as primary caregivers for young children, representing a critical investment in the future generation. Despite their invaluable contributions, the current generation of senior citizens, predominantly residing in rural areas, faces myriad challenges. These challenges encompass poor health, homelessness, inadequate shelter, food insecurity, financial problems, and neglect or abuse by younger generations. In 2017, the old-age poverty rate stood at 10% for those aged 65 and above, highlighting a disparity compared to the 2% poverty rate for those below 25 years. Structural poverty, characterized by inadequate economic development, the absence of a comprehensive social security system, and limited public service infrastructure, exacerbates these challenges.

The demographic transition, marked by modernization, urbanization, and migration, has strained traditional social support structures for senior citizens within households. The shift in social structures towards urbanization and neo-locality of families, coupled with a lack of policy attention and access to essential public services, has led to a decline in the quality of life for senior citizens. In response to these challenges, the National Policy for Senior Citizens 2023 is formulated, aligning with the Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA 2002).




The objective of the policy is to ensure that senior citizens have access and opportunities to contribute to the country's development, aligning with Bhutan's constitution, which emphasizes promoting circumstances for citizens to secure an adequate livelihood and providing security in the face of sickness, disability, or lack of livelihood means. The Royal Government acknowledges the valuable contributions of senior citizens and is dedicated to enhancing their potential through a comprehensive policy framework.

The National Policy for Senior Citizens 2023 is rooted in Bhutan's development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and the MIPAA. It takes a universal approach, addressing multifaceted and interconnected issues critical to senior citizens' well-being. The policy is a testament to the Royal Government's highest priority given to the welfare of senior citizens, reflecting a commitment to fostering a society where they can lead fulfilling lives in their later years.

The National Policy for Senior Citizens 2023 serves as a strategic response to the challenges faced by this demographic group, ensuring their well-being and enabling them to contribute meaningfully to Bhutan's development. With a foundation in GNH principles and international frameworks, the policy reflects a holistic and inclusive approach to address the diverse needs of senior citizens.

2. RATIONALE

The ageing population in Bhutan is undergoing unprecedented growth, driven by declining fertility rates and increased life expectancy. In 2022, the population aged 60 and above accounted for 9.5%, expected to rise to 19.7% by 2047. Similarly, those 65 and above constituted 6.6% in 2022, projected to increase to 13.4% by 2047. The ageing index is set to soar from 28 persons aged 65 and above for every 100 children under 15 in 2022 to 78.5 by 2047. This demographic shift has profound implications




for various sectors, including health, housing, employment, and social protection.

As Bhutan undergoes rapid socio-economic development, traditional family structures are eroding, reflected in a declining average household size. This diminishes the capacity of extended families to serve as social safety nets, raising concerns about the elderly's financial support. The Focus Group Discussion conducted by the Task Force for developing this policy revealed fears among senior citizens of abandonment, neglect, poor health, and inadequate housing, particularly for those without children or with children living away. Women, often assuming care responsibilities, face additional challenges, given the prevalence of skipped generation households and a high number of widows or single individuals.

Financial challenges compound the issues, as a significant portion of senior citizens lacks savings, with only 21.7% of those aged 66 and above owning savings accounts in 2019 (RMA, 2019). Farming, remittance, and pensions constitute the main sources of livelihood, but farming and remittance are deemed unreliable. Social protection mechanisms, such as pensions and provident fund schemes, are insufficient, leaving many vulnerable to poverty. Policy intervention is necessary to establish a social protection floor, preventing seniors from falling into poverty and ensuring adequate incomes.

Violence against senior citizens, especially older women, is a global concern, with reports of hidden cases in Bhutan. Addressing gender-based violence and understanding the unique sexual and reproductive health needs of seniors are imperative. Studies show that women in developing countries face gynecological problems throughout their reproductive years and beyond, necessitating tailored health services.

The policy must adopt a comprehensive approach, considering the diverse situations and needs of senior citizens. It should eliminate



age discrimination, promote positive ageing, and secure their right to high-quality services. Additionally, the policy should recognize the contributions of senior citizens to society, leveraging their accumulated resources and knowledge for a “second demographic bonus.” Engaging them productively and providing means for sustaining livelihoods aligns with the changing demographic landscape.

Given the interrelated nature of senior citizens' concerns, a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach is essential. The Royal Government acknowledges the necessity of a dedicated policy to address the multifaceted challenges posed by the ageing population. This policy is necessary not only to fulfill international and national development goals but also to empower senior citizens to lead healthy, active, and productive lives in their advanced years. The demographic shift requires a comprehensive response that considers the broader societal context and preserves traditional support systems alongside modern interventions.

3. DEFINITION


This Policy defines senior citizens as those aged 60 years and above. This is also the age adopted in Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) 2002. However, a different age may be considered for the provision of certain services. For instance, the Ministry of Health provides priority services for senior citizens aged 65 years and above.

4. VISION

An inclusive society where senior citizens live meaningful, productive, healthy and dignified lives with equal rights and opportunities.

5. OBJECTIVE

The overall objective of this policy is to provide a framework to guide and coordinate the formulation of policies, plans, programs, and legislation for senior citizens, including mainstreaming needs and concerns of senior



citizens in all other relevant policies, plans, and programs. The specific objectives include the following:

5.1 Empower senior citizens by ensuring provision of equal rights and opportunities.

5.2 Improve the wellbeing of senior citizens through enhanced economic and social security and services.

5.3 Create conditions that ensure senior citizens live meaningful, productive and healthy lives.

5.4 Adopt a life cycle approach in addressing the issues related to ageing.

6. THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Rights Based: The policy proposes rights based approaches and promotes the rights of the senior citizens.

Non-Discrimination: The policy emphasizes the elimination of stigmatization and discrimination faced by the senior citizens.

Diversity and Inclusion: The policy recognizes and emphasizes the diverse needs of senior citizens of all genders and its integration/mainstreaming into all relevant policies, plans, and programmes.

Participation: This policy is anchored in participation/involvement of senior citizens, their caregivers or their representatives in the formulation and implementation of all relevant policies, plans, and programmes. It promotes appreciation for the contribution of senior citizens as productive members of the society.

Life Cycle Approach: This policy recognizes the different stages in life and the needs, impacts, and roles of all ages on a productive and quality of individual life. As such the policy aims to address from the multidisciplinary perspective.

Tha-Dam-Tshig Lay-Jumdrey: This policy is founded on “*Tha Dam Tsig*¹” and “*Ley Judrey*²”, which are central to the Bhutanese values that govern the social fabric of our society. They serve as a moral compass for individuals to act morally and inculcate values such as compassion, empathy, loyalty, honesty, fidelity, integrity, rectitude, reciprocal affection, gratitude, and filial piety.

Independence: The policy recognizes the need to develop enabling conditions so that senior citizens have access to basic needs, opportunity to participate, authority to decide and lead a dignified life.

7. POLICY INTERVENTIONS

7.1. Family and Social Support

- 7.1.1. The RGoB shall preserve and promote traditional forms of old age care based on filial or family care/support. Appropriate incentives should be developed and provided to encourage and enable children and other family members to be primary caregivers for senior citizens. These could include flexible working arrangements, tax deductions for costs associated with providing care.
- 7.1.2. The RGoB shall also develop and support institutional based care to cater to the needs of senior citizens devoid of family/filial care or support. Institutional support to the extent possible should be provided as close to/within the communities and involve the community.

¹ Loyalty, promise, and vow

² Cause and effect

7.2. Multigenerational Bonding

- 7.2.1. The RGoB shall promote the values of tha-dam-tshig and lay judrey to strengthen traditional familial forms support and cultural values.
- 7.2.2. The RGoB shall recognize senior citizens as resources and holders of knowledge, experience, values, cultural heritage and traditions, and develop mechanisms and strategies in transferring these to the younger generations.
- 7.2.3. The RGoB shall develop appropriate strategies and programs to minimize digital divide between the generations.

7.3. Safety and Security

- 7.3.1. The RGoB shall ensure the rights of the senior citizens are protected, promoted, and fulfilled.
- 7.3.2. The RGoB shall put in place appropriate laws, regulations or other measures to protect senior citizens against discrimination, neglect, abuse and violence, including restitution of property (ies) in the event of neglect and abandonment. Due consideration will be given to the specific circumstances and needs of senior women and those with disabilities.
- 7.3.3. The RGoB shall mainstream the needs of the senior citizens into all relevant policies, plans, and programs with due consideration for senior women and those with disabilities.
- 7.3.4. The RGoB shall mainstream the needs of the senior citizens including those with disabilities into all



disaster preparedness, management, and response plans and programs.

- 7.3.5. The RGoB should ensure senior citizens friendly provision and administration of justice including by making process and procedures easy and convenient wherever possible. This could include making reasonable accommodations in the time, place, and process of conducting hearing and others.

7.4. Health and Well-Being

- 7.4.1. The RGoB shall accord high priority to the provision of the Health Services including mental health to senior citizens including those in prisons and detention centers.
- 7.4.2. The RGoB shall create senior citizen friendly health facilities, services, and personnel to encourage them to avail health services.
- 7.4.3. The RGoB shall strengthen the system/mechanism for periodic medical examination and screening of senior citizens including improving follow up to the examination and provision of appropriate interventions.
- 7.4.4. The RGoB shall provide accessible comprehensive healthcare services including prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and home/community based long term care.
- 7.4.5. The RGoB shall establish geriatric services at all levels including the establishment of a dedicated geriatric care program at the national level.

- 7.4.6. The RGoB shall enhance and strengthen services for sexual and reproductive health needs for senior citizens, including sexually transmitted diseases (HIV/AIDS) and non-communicable diseases.
- 7.4.7. The RGoB shall recognize the mental well-being of senior citizens and provide most appropriate and effective mental health support and services to attain healthy psychological well-being and lead a quality life.
- 7.4.8. The RGoB shall develop comprehensive mental health care services for senior citizens through a multisectoral approach such as spirituality, peer to peer support network, volunteerism, and transgenerational interaction
- 7.4.9. The RGoB shall develop human resource capacity on essential and geriatric care services including those related to mental health care.
- 7.4.10. The RGoB shall support training of caregivers and volunteers providing care and services to senior citizens at home, community or in institutes.
- 7.4.11. The RGoB shall develop mechanisms to ensure quality and standard of care and services provided for senior citizens through certification of trained caregivers.

7.5. Economic Security

- 7.5.1. The RGoB shall create an enabling environment that provides senior citizens, including women, with equal opportunities to participate and contribute in the



development process recognizing them as productive citizens.

- 7.5.2. The RGoB shall support livelihood opportunities for senior citizens by providing focused entrepreneurship and self-employment opportunities, and skill-based training including reskilling.
- 7.5.3. 7.4.2 The RGoB shall implement measures to improve access for senior citizens to finance, infrastructure, market, and other need-based interventions to engage in economic activities.
- 7.5.4. 7.4.4 The RGoB shall explore the introduction of old age allowances and expand pension coverage to all the senior citizens through introduction of various pension products and schemes including contributory and non-contributory schemes.
- 7.5.5. 7.5.6 The RGoB shall review policies and laws to promote productive and healthy ageing, including reviewing the age and conditions of retirement for certain professions.
- 7.5.6. The RGoB shall provide tax concessions on import of assistive devices and technologies required by senior citizens to live independent, healthy and quality lives. Similar concessions may be also explored on personal income.

7.6. Productivity and Engagement

- 7.6.1. The RGoB shall promote a life course approach to healthy ageing by providing age-appropriate education to people of all ages on physical and mental

health, healthy lifestyles, finance and others.

- 7.6.2. The RGoB shall encourage the use of wisdom and productivity of senior citizens in development of policies, plans and programs at all levels
- 7.6.3. The RGoB shall create a conducive environment including provision of appropriate space and services for social interaction, peer counseling, recreation and leisure purposes.

7.7. Access to Infrastructure and Old Age-Public Services

- 7.7.1. The RGoB shall promote universal design for infrastructures, facilities and housing to ensure accessibility and livability for senior citizens.
- 7.7.2. The RGoB shall encourage the private sector to adopt universal design in private buildings and facilities through provision of appropriate incentives.
- 7.7.3. The RGoB shall facilitate access to affordable home loans to maintain and construct houses and apartments for senior citizens.
- 7.7.4. The RGoB shall support the establishment of old-age homes/shelters/centers for those senior citizens without family support or those subject to abuse, violence, neglect, and abandonment. Wherever feasible the shelters/homes shall be built within/near communities, and the communities should be encouraged to take responsibility for providing care and support to the senior citizens living in the homes/shelter.

- 7.7.5. The RGoB shall promote public private partnership to establish a community-based long term care systems for senior citizens.
- 7.7.6. RGoB shall ensure easy access and comfortable spaces for the senior citizens during festivals and public gatherings
- 7.7.7. The RGoB shall ensure all public transport including airlines, infrastructure and equipment are made accessible and affordable to senior citizens through provision of subsidized fares and designated seats.

7.8. Media and Information Accessibility

- 7.8.1. The RGoB shall promote and facilitate digital literacy, skills, training and advocacy to senior citizens.
- 7.8.2. The RGoB shall ensure media and information are made available and accessible to senior citizens
- 7.8.3. The RGOB shall ensure that the senior citizens are portrayed in a dignified and respectful manner in all forms of public media without violating their rights.

7.9. Research and Development

- 7.9.1. The RGoB shall ensure an inclusive and meaningful engagement and participation of senior citizens in research and development, while also respecting their autonomy and rights.
- 7.9.2. The RGoB shall promote research activities, networking, data collection and analysis on ageing and geriatric services for policy planning, monitoring

and evaluation specific to senior citizens.

- 7.9.3. The RGoB shall provide adequate resources to carry out research and development for senior citizens.

8. LEGAL COMPLIANCE

Bhutan is party to the United Nations Principles for Older Persons adopted by the UN General Assembly resolution 46/91 of 16 December 1991. Further, Bhutan adopted an International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002 to respond to the opportunities and challenges of population ageing in the twenty-first century and to promote the development of a society for all ages. It also seeks countries to work towards an inclusive, barrier-free, and age-friendly society based on the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and Barrier-Free Framework.

The Clauses 1, 3, 11, and 19 of the Article 9 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan ensures that the state create those conditions to ensure a good quality of life, free of oppression, discrimination and violence, based on the rule of law, protection of human rights and dignity, and to ensure the fundamental rights and freedoms of the people, adequate livelihood, and create those conditions that are conducive to co-operation in community life and the integrity of the extended family structure.

9. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The OCASC shall in collaboration with implementing partners and other relevant stakeholders review this policy once in three years or as and when necessary to ensure the effectiveness and adequacy of this policy in addressing the concerns and opportunities for the senior citizen. The policy will also recommend national legal instruments if such needs arise in the future.

10. INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENT

The policy shall adopt a cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary approach to the concerns of senior citizens' development and the mainstreaming of senior citizens' concerns into the development policy. The implementation of this Policy shall be defined in the Accountability Framework.

Office of Cabinet Affairs and Strategic Coordination

The Office of Cabinet Affairs and Strategic Coordination (OCASC) shall be empowered to provide all policy guidelines and coordinate the implementation of the provisions of the policy across the government agencies and stakeholders. It shall also be responsible for commissioning evaluations to assess the outcome of the policy and provide mid-course corrections.

Royal Society for Senior Citizens

The Royal Society for Senior Citizens (RSSC) shall, in collaboration with the OCASC, implement the policy and its programme and services. The RSSC as the nodal point for the senior citizens will liaise with other NGOs in the implementation of the policy where necessary.

Ministry of Home Affairs

The Ministry of Home Affairs shall develop an enabling condition to strengthen traditions, culture, and family values and preserve and promote intergenerational bonding.

Ministry of Education and Skill Development

The Ministry of Education and Skill Development shall create a platform for intergenerational bonding in educational institutes and also provide literacy and livelihood skills to senior citizens through non-formal education programmes.

Ministry of Health

The Ministry of Health shall provide comprehensive health services and facilities for the senior citizens on a priority approach such as establishing a one-stop centre to facilitate inclusive health services.

Ministry of Information and Transport

The Ministry of Information and Transport shall in collaboration with relevant housing agencies establish systems and mechanisms to provide adequate senior citizen-friendly homes and ensure senior citizens' friendly built-environment.

GovTech

GovTech shall liaise with the media to take care of the sensitivity of the senior citizens in the news report and to ensure that online mediums are accessible by senior-citizens. Further, digital, and media and Information literacy shall be provided to the Senior citizens.

Ministry of Finance

The Ministry of Finance shall explore and provide adequate financial resources for the implementation of the policy, programs, and services. The nodal agency for the fiscal policy shall provide advocacy related to taxation where applicable and other fiscal measures that have bearing on a senior citizen.

Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies

The Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Studies in collaboration with the National Statistical Bureau shall conduct research and collect reliable data related to senior citizens.

Studies shall be carried out on wide-ranging issues facing senior citizens. This is critical to formulating evidence-based immediate policies, programmes, and interventions for senior citizens. In addition, they will support the Government in conducting evaluations where necessary for



the review of effectiveness of the policy and relevant programmes.

National Statistical Bureau

The National Statistical Bureau, as a central agency for statistics in the country, shall collect and maintain disaggregated data on senior citizens and provide necessary support to the Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies and to other research institutions in the country and support Government in developing plans and programs targeted for the senior citizens.

Academia and Research Institutions

The Universities, colleges and other research institutions in the country shall initiate and carry out research and studies targeted to senior citizens in order to support the Government for evidence-based decision making. Organizations for Persons with Disabilities and other CSOs

As part of Corporate Governance and Corporate Social Responsibility Code of Bhutan 2022, the organization for persons with disabilities and other CSOs shall facilitate and support the RGoB in implementing this policy.

Royal Bhutan Police

The RBP shall provide support to protect senior citizens against abuse and violence through timely response and proper investigation of all matters concerning crime against senior citizens reported to the Police.

Religious organizations and Institutions

The religious organizations and institutes are mainly responsible for the promotion and preservation of religious and spiritual values in the country. It will play a crucial role in rendering support in mental and psychological well-being of senior citizens and imbibing spiritual values and practices.

Local Government

The Dzongkhag/Thromde/Gewog shall supplement the policy effort by appointing a nodal officer to serve as focal point for policy implementation. The nodal officer shall incorporate provisions of the policy in the LG key result areas and strengthen community-based programs and activities for the senior citizens, including maintaining a database for the senior citizens.

Private Sector

The private sectors shall be encouraged to develop innovative and creative solutions to support senior citizens and their wellbeing, including senior citizen-friendly business opportunities in the digital space. As a part of Corporate Social Responsibility, they will collaborate with the Government to develop age care homes and other services.

