

POLICY BRIEF

INTEGRATING CLIMATE-RESILIENT SANITATION INTO BHUTAN'S CLIMATE POLICIES

Policy Entry Points for Integrating Sanitation into National Climate Strategies

KEY MESSAGE

Bhutan has achieved Open Defecation Free status and built a strong climate policy architecture. However, sanitation remains insufficiently recognised as a climate adaptation priority. The NAP 2023, NDC 3.0, and NWMS 2019 address sanitation only implicitly — without dedicated targets, costed actions, or inclusive indicators. This brief presents evidence and recommendations to bridge that gap.

Prepared for: Bhutan Toilet Organisation

Based on Assessment Report by Ter Consulting Firm | January 2026



Context & The Challenge

Bhutan's Post-ODF Transition

Bhutan declared Open Defecation Free (ODF) status in 2022 — a landmark achievement. Yet the country now faces a more complex phase: ensuring safely managed, climate-resilient, inclusive, and sustainable sanitation services. Rising incidences of extreme rainfall, flash floods, landslides, and water stress are placing growing pressure on sanitation and wastewater systems that were designed for smaller populations and milder climate conditions. While household access to sanitation has improved significantly, new challenges are emerging related to:

- Wastewater and fecal sludge management
- Long-term functionality and maintenance of sanitation systems
- Urban sanitation infrastructure capacity
- Equity and accessibility for vulnerable populations

77%

of Thimphu's wastewater is safely managed

23% still untreated

5.7%

annual urban population growth rate (2000–2010)

Among fastest in S. Asia

85.1%

rural households with basic sanitation

vs 81.6% in urban areas

The Policy Gap

This brief is based on a comprehensive assessment of three core climate policy instruments: the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) 2023, the Third Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC 3.0 — Provisional), and the National Waste Management Strategy (NWMS) 2019. The assessment used a six-criteria framework adapted from WaterAid International and the Global Water Partnership, supplemented by stakeholder consultations and national audit evidence.

CENTRAL FINDING

Sanitation and wastewater systems remain insufficiently recognised and operationalised as core climate adaptation priorities. Across all three reviewed policies, sanitation is addressed implicitly — without clear adaptation targets, indicators, costed actions, or defined institutional responsibilities.

Why Sanitation is Climate-Sensitive

- ▶ **Flooding** — damages toilets, septic systems, and contaminates water sources
- ▶ **Water scarcity** — undermines hygiene practices and toilet usability
- ▶ **Cold temperatures** — freeze pipes and sanitation infrastructure in highland areas
- ▶ **Cascading impacts** — sanitation failures disrupt health, education, and disaster response

Key Findings

Assessment across six criteria for climate-resilient sanitation integration

1 Consultative & Inclusive Processes

+ STRENGTH Strong commitment to inclusive, participatory policy development across all three instruments.	- GAP Limited translation of consultation into sanitation-specific adaptation priorities. Rights holders remain under-represented.
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“CSOs do participate in climate-related workshops, but WASH is rarely discussed.” — CSO representative

2 Integration of WASH Across Sectors

+ STRENGTH Policies recognise cross-sectoral climate risks and systems-based adaptation approaches.	- GAP Sanitation not operationalised as a cross-cutting intervention within health, education, DRM, or urban strategies.
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“During the flood in Phuentsholing, sanitation systems were damaged and people struggled.” — Community participant

3 Gender-Responsive & Inclusive Indicators

+ STRENGTH Strong policy commitment to gender equality and social inclusion across climate frameworks.	- GAP No sanitation-specific gender or disability indicators, targets, or institutional responsibilities in any climate policy.
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“When there is water shortage, it becomes very difficult for girls to maintain hygiene, especially during menstruation.” — Female student

AUDIT EVIDENCE

The Royal Audit Authority’s Performance Audit on WASH in Thimphu schools found: many schools lacked adequate female toilets and menstrual hygiene facilities; 16 schools had no adequate WASH maintenance budgets; and the revised allocation (Nu. 1.29M) was far below the proposed requirement (Nu. 5.74M).

Key Findings (cont.)

Costing, national alignment, and global frameworks

4 Fully Costed WASH Interventions

+ STRENGTH Climate finance frameworks exist — GCF, GEF, LDCF, Adaptation Fund, and proposed Bhutan Climate Fund are all identified.	- GAP Sanitation actions not itemised, costed, or linked to O&M financing — reducing climate finance readiness.
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5 Alignment with 13th Five-Year Plan

+ STRENGTH All policies align with the 13th FYP and national development objectives including urban resilience.	- GAP Sanitation not linked to NKRA, budgetary processes, or flagship programmes — weak operational alignment.
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6 Alignment with Global Goal on Adaptation

+ STRENGTH Strong engagement with global climate processes, Global Stocktake, and UNFCCC adaptation guidance.	- GAP Sanitation not mapped to GGA thematic target on climate-resilient water & sanitation — limits finance access.
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Key Policy Gaps

Policy Area	Gap Identified
Climate policy integration	Sanitation not clearly recognised as a climate adaptation priority
Institutional coordination	Fragmented responsibilities across sectors
Planning and monitoring	Absence of sanitation resilience indicators
Equity and accessibility	Limited attention to gender-responsive and disability-inclusive sanitation
Climate finance	Sanitation rarely included in adaptation financing frameworks

Recommendations

Four levels of action to strengthen climate-resilient sanitation

POLICY LEVEL

- ▶ Explicitly recognise sanitation as a core climate adaptation priority within the NAP and future NDC updates.
- ▶ Introduce sanitation-specific adaptation targets and measurable indicators (e.g., climate-resilient public sanitation coverage, wastewater treatment functionality during climate events).
- ▶ Align sanitation adaptation actions with the GGA thematic target on climate-resilient water and sanitation.
- ▶ Embed sanitation-specific gender and disability indicators including menstrual hygiene, safety, privacy, and universal accessibility.

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

- ▶ Establish inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms between climate authorities, sector ministries, and local governments.
- ▶ Clarify institutional mandates for sanitation adaptation planning, implementation, and monitoring.
- ▶ Integrate sanitation into national climate finance pipelines and adaptation funding windows.

PROGRAMMATIC LEVEL

- ▶ Develop dedicated sanitation adaptation programmes under the NAP — urban wastewater, flood-resilient toilets, fecal sludge management, climate-appropriate technologies.
- ▶ Include explicit long-term O&M financing provisions to prevent infrastructure deterioration.
- ▶ Adopt and enforce inclusive design standards for public and institutional facilities.
- ▶ Implement targeted capacity-building for climate-resilient sanitation planning.

ADVOCACY LEVEL

- ▶ Strengthen B-WASH cluster for meaningful, continuous CSO and youth participation in climate-sanitation policy.
- ▶ Leverage parliamentary audit findings and community evidence to advocate for integration.
- ▶ Convene national dialogue platforms to reframe sanitation as a resilience and human rights issue.
- ▶ Engage in regional and global platforms for knowledge exchange on climate-resilient sanitation.

Conclusion & Call to Action

Bhutan's climate response must leave no one behind.

Bhutan has established a strong foundation for inclusive and climate-responsive policymaking, with clear alignment to national development priorities and global climate commitments. The country's achievement of ODF status and its carbon-negative stance reflect genuine environmental leadership.

However, this assessment demonstrates that sanitation and wastewater systems remain insufficiently recognised as core climate adaptation priorities. Across the NAP 2023, NDC 3.0, and NWMS 2019, sanitation is addressed implicitly — without dedicated targets, costed investments, inclusive indicators, or clear institutional mandates.

The evidence is clear: sanitation failures during climate events generate cascading impacts across health, education, disaster response, and urban systems. Women, girls, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups bear disproportionate burdens. Without deliberate integration, these inequities will intensify under future climate stress.

The strategic window is now open. The operationalisation of NAP 2023, the revision of NDC 3.0, and global frameworks that explicitly prioritise climate-resilient sanitation provide clear entry points for action.

THE WAY FORWARD

By explicitly recognising sanitation as a climate adaptation service — and embedding it within policy frameworks, institutional mandates, programmatic planning, and advocacy processes — Bhutan can advance climate-resilient sanitation systems that protect public health during climate shocks, uphold human dignity for all, strengthen cross-sector resilience and policy coherence, and unlock climate finance for sanitation adaptation investments.

Strengthening climate-resilient sanitation is both a strategic necessity and an achievable goal.

Source

Assessment Report: "Integrating Climate-Resilient Sanitation into Bhutan's Climate Policies — From Policy Commitments to Climate-Resilient Sanitation Action". Prepared by Ter Consulting Firm for Bhutan Toilet Organisation, January 2026.

Key Policy Documents Reviewed

National Adaptation Plan (NAP) 2023 | NDC 3.0 (Provisional) | National Waste Management Strategy 2019

Prepared for

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