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## Policy pointers

**Centring national development** on environmental sustainability can help governments fully integrate environmental conservation into domestic and foreign policy.

**Fulfilling international commitments** and achieving carbon neutrality increases political capital on the international stage, bolsters national credibility and strengthens negotiators' moral authority to lobby for greater ambition from others.

**Small states should work** to preserve and fully participate in a rules-based multilateral system that allows them to negotiate complex matters on an equal footing, regardless of size, population, strength or economic capacity.

**Effective coordination** among national agencies will ensure they bring their best talent to the negotiating table.

## Engaging effectively in climate diplomacy: policy pointers from Bhutan

Driven by its development philosophy, Gross National Happiness, Bhutan has achieved carbon neutrality. Internationally recognised as a model for climate action, this small Least Developed Country is able to approach climate diplomacy from a position of moral authority. This briefing explores the main factors that have shaped Bhutan's climate diplomacy, including how the country has leveraged its comparative strengths across multiple sectors to approach diplomatic engagement in its variety of forms and ensured coordination between its national and sectoral bodies. As the world takes forward various landmark international frameworks agreed in 2015, Bhutan's effective climate diplomacy will place it in the best possible position to influence their implementation. It can also provide a guide for other countries — particularly small states — that seek to further the reach of their climate diplomacy.

In 2015, the international community adopted the Paris Agreement and other landmark international frameworks, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. A plethora of diplomatic activity around these formal negotiations drew together environmental concerns — such as the overarching threat of climate change — with national interests to reach agreement.

Environmental sustainability is one of Bhutan's principle national interests, and a defining element of its domestic and foreign policy. The nation actively engages in climate diplomacy, managing interstate relations on cooperation and collaboration to address issues related to climate change and its impacts. This briefing

considers why and how it has done this, examining the four main factors that have shaped its climate diplomacy.

### Environmental sustainability as a pillar of development

Environmental conservation is one of the Bhutanese government's primary mandates. Promoting and protecting the environment is integrated across the country's development strategies and domestic legislation.

In the 1970s, long before sustainable development became the mantra of governments and development practitioners, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck pronounced that "Gross national happiness [GNH] is more important than gross national product."<sup>1</sup>

## *In doing more than its fair share, Bhutan has sought to spur action by others*

GNH is the basis for Bhutan's development philosophy, providing the guiding vision for all its development efforts. This holistic approach to development seeks to balance economic growth with social development, environmental sustainability and cultural preservation. GNH's four pillars are: good governance, sustainable and equitable

socioeconomic development, preservation and promotion of culture, and promotion and protection of the environment.<sup>2</sup>

The environment pillar ensures that the country pursues socioeconomic development that is environmentally sustainable without compromising its natural environment and biodiversity. GNH informs the formulation of all national policies, naturally integrating the principle of environmental sustainability, which is inherent to climate action.

Contributing to the protection of the natural environment and conservation of biodiversity is a fundamental duty in Bhutan, enshrined in its constitution. Article 5 makes it every citizen's responsibility to serve as "a trustee of the Kingdom's natural resources and environment for the benefit of present and future generations."<sup>3</sup>

Building on the vision of GNH and the constitution, Bhutan's 2010 economic development policy provides strategic direction for the country's economic development up to 2020. Driven by the vision of promoting "a green and self-reliant economy",<sup>4</sup> the clearly articulated strategies include diversifying the economic base

with minimal ecological footprint, harnessing natural resources in a sustainable manner and reducing dependence on fossil fuels.

Self-reliance and inclusive green socioeconomic development are the overarching objectives of Bhutan's 11th five-year plan (2013–2018). The government mainstreams green or carbon-neutral and climate-resilient development into all its development activities, and assesses the outcomes and outputs of its development planning framework against 16 key result areas, which fall under the four pillars of GNH.<sup>5</sup>

A framework of legislation (see Box 1) and strategic programmes such as the 2012 National Strategy and Action Plan for Low Carbon Development support these national policies. For example, although the constitution states that Bhutan must maintain a minimum of 60 per cent of its land area under forest cover, legislation provides the basis of policies that have enabled it to maintain forest cover at 80.89 per cent, far exceeding the constitutional mandate of 60 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

This foundation of environmentally sound policies has allowed Bhutan to achieve carbon neutrality, and keep environmental and climate concerns at the forefront of its foreign policy.

### **Carbon neutrality and moral authority**

To show its willingness to respond to climate change as a responsible member of the international community, the government issued a carbon-neutral declaration in December 2010.<sup>7</sup> This unprecedented move committed Bhutan to keeping its emission levels below its forests' sequestration capacity, a bold pledge the country reaffirmed when it submitted its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) in September 2015, ahead of COP21 in Paris.

The INDC is in keeping with efforts to achieve a global temperature increase at no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius, a guardrail of critical importance to the survival of those states that are most vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change. Elaborating on Bhutan's 2010 pledge to remain carbon neutral and adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change, its INDC covers nine strategic areas for mitigation across a range of sectors and calls on the international community to provide the support it needs to meet these targets.<sup>8</sup>

Such commitments have earned Bhutan recognition from independent scientific research organisations as a model for climate action.<sup>9</sup> The 2010 declaration committed Bhutan to maintaining its status as a net sink for greenhouse gases. Its forests have an estimated

#### **Box 1. Legislating forest cover**

Legislation provides the foundation for the policies that have enabled Bhutan to maintain more than 80 per cent of its land area under forest cover. Forests comprise 70.46 per cent and shrubs 10.43 per cent, far exceeding the constitutional mandate of 60 per cent. Also, more than half of the country's land lies within protected forest parks and corridors.

The legislative framework includes:

- Forest and Nature Conservation Act 1995
- Mines and Minerals Management Act 1995
- Environment Impact Assessment Act 2000
- Regulations for the Environment Clearance of Projects 2002
- Mines and Minerals Management Regulation 2002
- Biodiversity Act 2003
- Forest and Nature Conservation Rules 2006
- National Environment Protection Act 2007
- Constitution of Bhutan 2008
- Waste Prevention and Management Act 2009
- Water Act of Bhutan 2011
- Waste Prevention and Management Regulations 2012
- Water Regulations of Bhutan 2014.

sequestration capacity of 6.3 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, while its emissions were only 1.6 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent in 2000, and 2.2 million in 2013. The country attributes this to the expanse of its forest cover, low levels of industrial activity and near total electricity generation through hydropower.<sup>8</sup>

Underlying the international community's recognition for Bhutan's bold environmental policies and commitment, there is a sense of disconcertion. Bhutan bears no historical responsibility for the causes of climate change and its emissions at a global scale are negligible. So why has this small Least Developed Country (LDC) taken such resolute and brazen measures against climate change?

It is largely down to enlightened self-interest: Bhutan is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. When reaffirming its commitment to remain carbon neutral, the country underscored its conviction that "there is no need greater, or more important, than keeping the planet safe for life to continue."<sup>9</sup> In the spirit of global solidarity and despite its limited means and resources, it is in Bhutan's interests to do what it can to contribute to collective global efforts to prevent greenhouse gases reaching dangerous levels. In doing more than its fair share, Bhutan has sought to spur action by others, seizing the opportunity to increase global cooperation and solidarity by addressing climate change through diplomacy.

Climate diplomacy has also served as an effective platform for Bhutan to safeguard and promote its vital national interests. Engaging with international partners at various forums fosters better understanding and appreciation of national progress, challenges, concerns and needs. Effective diplomatic engagement allows Bhutan to influence the global agenda and the outcomes of intergovernmental decisions that could have direct national repercussions. It also allows Bhutan to bridge critical gaps in finance, technology and capacity, enabling it to take climate action.

### Multilateralism

Bhutan has always maintained that all states — regardless of size, population, relative power and level of development — should have the opportunity to contribute to the work of the United Nations (UN), particularly on the issues that affect them most. Although the sovereign equality of all states is enshrined in the UN Charter and a norm of international relations, it cannot be taken for granted. Small developing states, constrained by both resources and capacity, constantly struggle to find and create space for themselves in the international system.

Climate change gives Bhutan that space. Its environmental stewardship is a legacy of the leadership and guidance its kings have shown in the country's development. Bhutan is globally recognised for its bold and progressive measures in response to climate change at both domestic and international levels, through bilateral engagements, regional forums and multilateral conferences. Its views on sustainable development and environmental issues are seen as authentic and credible. For a small LDC, being recognised as a leader in sustainable development and environmental stewardship is significant.

But the government's interests within the framework of intergovernmental processes and global treaty bodies are more effectively served through a multisectoral approach that recognises the equal, if not overriding, importance of diplomatic imperatives and political considerations within a multilateral context.

A rules-based multilateral system provides states with the space and context to address complex matters by creating a more level playing field for countries of different size, population, strength and economy. Multilateralism is of particular value to small states and Bhutan has consistently supported strengthening this approach. For example, the UN Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) is the main forum for intergovernmental negotiations on climate change. Bhutan has always supported a robust UNFCCC and its associated mechanisms, buttressed by a strong legal architecture that is ambitious, equitable and fair. This is in keeping with UNFCCC principles and objectives, and helps hold states accountable for their commitments and obligations to the international community.

The international articulation of Bhutan's climate change policies through diplomacy showcases the country's commitment to fulfilling its obligations as a responsible member of the international community. Bhutan welcomed the adoption of the legally binding Paris Agreement during COP21 in December 2015 and was among the record 175 members to sign the instrument at the UN's high-level signing ceremony in April 2016. Once all the required national procedures are complete, ratification should follow in the near future.

### Coordinating diplomatic engagement

The international community attaches great political importance to environmental issues, which has heightened the politicisation of intergovernmental environment negotiations, particularly within the UNFCCC. Climate diplomacy is an important source of Bhutan's international political capital. The country is a

member of 90 international organisations, party to 127 intergovernmental instruments — including multilateral environmental agreements — and has signed, ratified or acceded to 23 international environmental treaties and conventions and two regional instruments. Such commitments demand constant engagement to protect Bhutan's sovereign rights, promote its national interests, and respect international law and order.

As the formal channel of communication between the government and foreign governments, international, regional and other organisations and entities, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has the mandate to promote and protect Bhutan's interests at the international level. But depending on the framework and subject matter, Bhutan's sectoral agencies often assume the role of national focal points. As well as ensuring the country complies with an instrument's objectives and legal obligations, these focal points are responsible for coordinating Bhutan's engagements with international bodies and national-level reporting.

The National Environment Commission (NEC) is Bhutan's UNFCCC national focal point. Chaired by the prime minister, it is the highest decision-making and coordinating body on all matters relating to the protection, conservation and improvement of the natural environment and the focal agency for climate change activities.<sup>10</sup> The NEC secretariat has traditionally led the country's engagement in the UNFCCC.

Recognising that climate change and its impacts require the active engagement of a broad array of political actors and specialised agencies, Bhutan's delegations to the main meetings of environmental bodies have become more inclusive and representative over the years. And while they often include personnel from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sectoral representatives — with their particular competence and technical expertise — make up Bhutan's national delegations at international sessions and meetings.

To maximise the benefits of intergovernmental environment negotiations and related international processes, the government

coordinates the appropriate involvement of all relevant stakeholders at various stages of national preparations. There is a clear system to ensure sectoral and national bodies work together for effective diplomacy, with reporting, briefing and debriefing protocols to strengthen policy coordination and coherence when sectoral agencies undertake international engagements on behalf of the government.<sup>11</sup>

When issues arise that exceed the technical mandate of sectoral agencies, they coordinate national positions with the relevant government agencies and ministries — for example, referring matters that have a bearing on foreign policy or legal implications for the government back to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Such close collaboration between the ministry and lead sectors, especially on more focused and technical engagements, helps strengthen the government's diplomatic action on multiple and interlinked fronts.

## Conclusions

Bhutan is recognised as a model for climate action, having achieved carbon neutrality through sustainable domestic policies. Given its LDC status, this allows Bhutan to approach climate diplomacy from a unique moral high ground. The nation strives to use its talents across many sectors to get the best out of diplomatic engagement in all its forms, including multilateral negotiations. Bhutan's experience shows that working multilaterally can be of particular value to small states, who benefit from the nationally representative forum of the UNFCCC. Ensuring coordination between its sectoral and national bodies also leads to more effective action. As the world takes forward the landmark international frameworks agreed in 2015, Bhutan's effective use of climate diplomacy will place it in the best possible position to influence their implementation. We believe that other countries can learn from this.

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## Knowledge Products

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Royal Government of Bhutan (2012) Bhutan: in pursuit of sustainable development. National report for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development 2012. / <sup>2</sup> To hear how Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay is transforming his nation while maintaining its GNH, see: Tobgay, T (February 2016) This country isn't just carbon neutral – it's carbon negative. Ted Talks: TED2016. <http://tinyurl.com/z9o5h9r> / <sup>3</sup> Royal Government of Bhutan (2008) Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan. / <sup>4</sup> Royal Government of Bhutan (2010) Economic development policy of the Kingdom of Bhutan. / <sup>5</sup> Royal Government of Bhutan (2013) 11th five-year plan. Volume 1, 2013–18. Gross National Happiness Commission. / <sup>6</sup> Royal Government of Bhutan (2016). Bhutan state of the environment report 2016. National Environment Commission; Royal Government of Bhutan (2011) Kingdom of Bhutan: second national communication to the UNFCCC. National Environment Commission. / <sup>7</sup> Royal Government of Bhutan (2010) Declaration of the Kingdom of Bhutan — the land of gross national happiness to save our planet. / <sup>8</sup> Royal Government of Bhutan (2015) Kingdom of Bhutan: Intended Nationally Determined Contribution communicated to the UNFCCC Secretariat. 30 September 2015. / <sup>9</sup> Climate Action Tracker. <http://climateactiontracker.org/countries/bhutan>; Arthur Nelsen (3 December 2015) Bhutan has 'most ambitious pledge' at the Paris climate summit. The Guardian. [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com) / <sup>10</sup> Royal Government of Bhutan, National Environment Commission website. [www.nec.gov.bt](http://www.nec.gov.bt) / <sup>11</sup> Royal Government of Bhutan (2013) Executive order issued by the Prime Minister on policy coordination concerning foreign relations. [www.cabinet.gov.bt/executiveOrder/pccfr.pdf](http://www.cabinet.gov.bt/executiveOrder/pccfr.pdf)