

## PAC flags nationwide gaps in school WASH facilities

...audit reveals poor maintenance weak standards and limited coordination in schools and rural communities

By Kinzang Uhamo  
Thimphu

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) has flagged widespread shortcomings in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities and services, citing weak standards, poor maintenance and limited coordination as key concerns.

Presenting the Committee's Review Report in the National Assembly on the Performance Audit of WASH Facilities and Services to the Joint Sitting of Parliament, PAC Chairperson Sonam Tashi, National Assembly Member from Lamgong-Wangchang constituency, said the findings from government schools under Thimphu Thromde reflect broader national challenges affecting schools nationwide.

The performance audit, conducted by the Royal Audit Authority (RAA), examined the adequacy, functionality, accessibility and management of WASH facilities in government schools under Thimphu Thromde. Recognising the importance of WASH in ensuring a healthy and conducive learning environment, the PAC expanded its review to assess the overall status of WASH facilities and services across all government schools in the country.

The Committee observed that the deficiencies identified in Thimphu Thromde are indicative of nationwide issues. These include inadequate and unreliable water supply, poorly maintained and non-functional sanitation and handwashing facilities, lack of hygiene supplies, outdated and non-inclusive infrastructure, and weak operation and maintenance practices. Systemic issues such as insufficient budget allocation, limited technical capacity, inadequate monitoring and weak coordination with local governments were also noted.

Based on the audit findings, the House adopted all ten recommendations of the Royal Audit Authority. These include strengthening planning and budgetary provisions, upgrading facilities to meet national standards and inclusiveness, improving water supply and quality, enhancing operation and maintenance practices, expanding WASH awareness programmes and establishing a robust monitoring and evaluation framework.

In addition, the Committee made two further recommendations, followed by directives from the House to ensure effective implementation. The Ministry of Education and Skills Development was instructed to consult the Royal Civil Service Commission on the requirement of cleaners based on student population and submit a review report during the Winter Session. On budgetary provisions for WASH facilities, the Ministry, in consultation with the Ministry of Finance, was directed to explore appropriate measures, including outsourcing, and report to the House during the Winter Session.

The Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport was tasked to lead a review of water quality testing and remediation works carried out by Thimphu Thromde and present its findings during the Winter Session. The Ministry of Education and Skills Development was also directed to lead and coordinate WASH training and awareness programmes for local governments, thromdes, dzongkhags and gewogs, and submit a review report during the Winter Session. The House further emphasised the need for a robust evaluation mechanism and instructed the Government to report back during the Winter Session.

Beyond schools, the PAC's broader review found uneven functionality



and service quality of WASH facilities in health centres and communities, particularly in rural and remote areas. While access to WASH infrastructure has expanded over the years, many facilities were found to be partially functional, poorly maintained or vulnerable to breakdown due to weak technical support and inadequate follow-up after construction.

Water supply systems in several areas were reported to suffer from unreliable sources, leakage and inadequate storage, resulting in frequent shortages. In some locations, water quality monitoring was irregular or absent, raising concerns over safety and public health risks. Sanitation facilities were also flagged for poor design and maintenance, with toilets in schools and public places failing to meet basic standards for hygiene, privacy and durability.

Hygiene infrastructure, including handwashing stations, was found to be inconsistent across institutions. Some facilities lacked soap and water, while others had installations that were no longer functional, weakening hygiene practices and increasing the risk of disease transmission.

A major concern highlighted in the review was the absence of uniform national standards for WASH facilities. Different agencies and local governments were found to be applying varying design specifications and service benchmarks, resulting in inconsistencies in quality and coverage

across districts. Fragmented institutional responsibilities further complicated WASH delivery, with unclear accountability for long-term operation and maintenance.

Maintenance was identified as a critical weakness, as recurrent budgets for repairs, monitoring and system upgrades are frequently overlooked once construction is completed. Local governments were also found to face capacity constraints, with limited technical expertise and manpower hindering regular inspection, water quality testing and timely repairs.

During the deliberations, Members of Parliament raised concerns over funding sustainability. Tshewang Rinzin, MP from South Thimphu constituency, said, "Clean water and sanitation projects often run for one or two years, but without budget for continuity they become useless if school authorities cannot maintain them."

He added, "Earlier block grants allowed dzongkhags to plan and disburse budgets for schools, whereas current arrangements now place pressure on gewog budgets, which are insufficient to support multiple schools."

Concerns were also raised over staffing shortages. The Member of Parliament for Khamdang Ramjar constituency said, "The WASH Standard Policy 2020 is well framed on paper, but on the ground, schools still face shortages of water, toilets and cleaners," adding that many schools operate

with only one cleaner despite growing student populations.

Responding to the concerns, Finance Minister Lyonpo Lekey Dorji said, "Sanitation facilities are a basic necessity, and the Government acknowledges these concerns," noting that addressing WASH gaps requires cross-sectoral collaboration and cannot be resolved within a short timeframe due to the large number of schools under thromdes.

Education Minister Lyonpo Yeezang D. Thapa said, "Many schools in Thimphu were built decades ago, long before the National WASH Standards 2024," explaining that older infrastructure has contributed to the gaps identified in the performance audit. She said a nationwide assessment covering 510 schools, 10 technical training institutes, 216 monastic institutions and 32 nunneries found significant shortcomings in toilet functionality, accessibility, safety and inclusivity.

She added, "Under the 13th Five Year Plan, Nu 300 million has been allocated specifically for WASH facilities," with new toilet units, water supply improvements and hygiene infrastructure already being implemented across schools.

Public concerns also emerged following the parliamentary discussion. A resident from Samtse said, "The study focuses mainly on urban schools, while children in rural areas continue to face water shortages and lack of toilets."

Another resident from Punakha echoed similar concerns, saying rural schools with limited infrastructure should also be prioritized in national assessments.

A parent, Dorji Phuntsho said, "We often take public facilities for granted because education is free, but children must be taught that maintaining school property is a shared responsibility."