



Co-developing Climate Hero leadership personas for local government in Bhutan

Local government leaders play a critical role in delivering climate-resilient and inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services to communities. Through this research, we applied innovative methodologies with local government in Bhutan to develop contextually relevant aspirational personas. Grounded in data and co-developed in partnership, the personas

– ‘Climate Heroes’ – are designed to empower local government leaders to tackle WASH challenges. In this brief, we share lessons from the process and emerging outcomes. The research showed the transformative potential of research processes and the importance of producing locally relevant outputs to empower leaders to advance equitable WASH services for vulnerable populations.

Key recommendations

Promote proactive local leadership:

Foster leadership that champions climate-resilient and inclusive WASH solutions by using tools like the Climate Heroes.

Enhance capacity building: Strengthen local government leaders' skills and knowledge to identify and address barriers to inclusive WASH services, particularly for vulnerable populations.

Localise leadership tools: Work closely with local government to ensure tools like the Climate Heroes personas are grounded in local contexts and reflect the specific challenges and attributes of transformative leadership in the relevant settings.

Encourage participatory methodologies: Adopt collaborative and innovative research processes that actively involve local officials, ensuring tools and strategies are both practical and applicable.

What are ‘Climate Heroes’?

‘Climate Heroes’ are aspirational personas we have developed to support local government leaders working on delivering climate resilient and inclusive WASH services. These personas represent transformative leaders in local government and are grounded in extensive collaborative research by SNV and the University of Technology Sydney – Institute for Sustainable Futures (UTS-ISF).

Personas are fictional, composite characters created to represent the key traits, behaviours, and motivations of specific groups of people. Though not real individuals, these personas are grounded in data from actual participants, ensuring that they are both relevant and realistic.



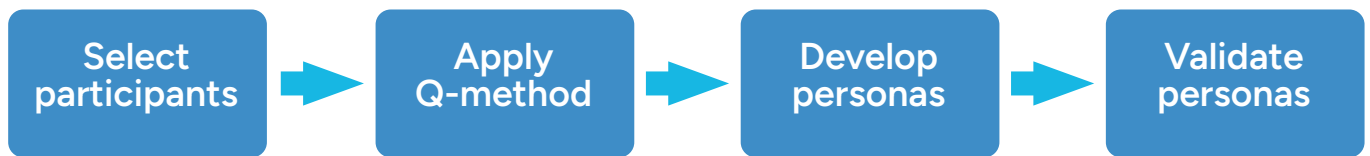


Figure 1. Steps to developing Climate Heroes

Why do we need Climate Heroes?

Local government leaders play a critical role in addressing the impacts of climate change on inclusive WASH services in their communities. Fostering leadership at the local government level is vital, as these leaders are uniquely positioned to understand and respond to their communities' specific WASH, climate resilience, and inclusion needs. However, many local governments staff may not fully realise the extent of their responsibilities as duty-bearers in tackling these issues or may not know where to begin.

To empower local government staff in leading inclusive, climate-resilient WASH initiatives, it is essential to first understand their beliefs, motivations, and barriers, and then identify the way forward. The Climate Hero personas serve as leadership role models, inspiring staff to adopt new mindsets, embrace their responsibilities, and take actionable steps. Designed to build on existing strengths, the Climate Hero personas and approach for using them as tools, aim to ensure local government staff feel supported and capable, fostering engagement and confidence.

About the Climate Heroes research

Our research aimed to:

- Understand the diverse viewpoints, opinions and beliefs of Bhutan's local government leaders regarding climate change, WASH and inclusion.
- Identify the needs of local government partners to better support them in their roles.
- Develop aspirational Climate Hero personas that empower local government staff by building on their existing strengths and enhancing their capacity to deliver climate-resilient inclusive WASH services.

This study builds on earlier research using [Q-methodology](#) in Lao PDR and Nepal and on research investigating the transformative leadership in WASH. It was conducted concurrently with research advancing the Climate Hero approach in Lao PDR and Nepal, and therefore, we have aligned this study as a natural next step in advancing local government leadership development in the region.

This study forms part of SNV's [Towards Inclusive Climate Resilient WASH Services in rural Bhutan project](#) implemented in collaboration with partners between 2023 and 2024 in Chukha, Dagana, Zhemgang, and Trashigang districts. It was supported by the Australian Government's Water for Women Fund.

Gup	A gup is the elected head of a local administrative unit called a gewog. Gewogs are clusters of villages and serve as the basic level of government. A gup is responsible for governance, development, and community welfare at the grassroots level.
Mangmi	A mangmi is the elected deputy leader of a gewog, who serves as the assistant to the gup and represents the community in decision-making and governance matters.
Tshogpa	A tshogpa is an elected representative of a village or cluster within a gewog, responsible for liaising between the community and local government and assisting in the implementation of development activities.

Figure 2. The three levels of local government

Steps to developing 'Climate Heroes' personas

There are four main steps for developing the Climate Heroes (Figure 1).

1. Selecting research participants

28 elected local government leaders from four districts participated in this study. The SNV team selected them from a group of local government staff already involved in the ongoing SNV project.

The team sought to include three types of elected local government positions to ensure a wide range of roles, responsibilities, and views were considered. They were the roles of gup, mangmi, and tshogpa (Figure 2).

Most participants (93%, or 26 of 28) identified as male, with ages ranging from 27 to 58 (mean age: 41 years). The majority held the position of tshogpa (61%, or 17 participants), with the remainder split between the roles of gup (6) and mangmi (5). Efforts to include diverse genders, age groups, and people with disabilities were limited by the need to select elected government officials, reflecting the existing demographic composition of Bhutan's local government at the time of data collection.

2. Implementing the Q-methodology approach

Through the participatory Q-methodology approach, we explored the different viewpoints, opinions and beliefs of local government leaders related to climate change, WASH and inclusion to identify the drivers and obstacles faced by local governments in delivering WASH services.

Data collection

Between February and March 2024, the SNV team conducted private, individual interviews with participants in their districts. All data collection activities were conducted in the local language, Dzongkha.

Participants were asked to rank 34 statements (UTS-ISF and SNV, 2022) related to five main themes: (1) perceptions and opinions about climate change, (2) the efficacy of climate change responses in relation to WASH, (3) workplace dynamics and responsibilities, (4) perceived responsibility and action, and (5) attitudes towards gender equality, disability and social inclusion. The statements were arranged on a pyramid-shaped grid by level of agreement, and qualitative data was gathered during and after the exercise to capture participants' thought processes and reflections.

Photo: Local government leader sorting statements on to the Q-board.
Photo credit: SNV/Jigme Choden.

Analysis and results

We analysed the Q-sort data using the [Q Method Software](#), employing correlation tests, principal component analysis, and varimax factor rotation to identify shared opinion patterns. This process grouped participants with similar views and determined their likely ranking of statements.

The analysis produced eight groups, from which we retained two for further examination and Climate Hero persona development, aligning with [prior research in Lao PDR and Nepal](#). Group 1, representing 17 of the 28 participants, became the basis for Climate Hero 1. This group included members from all four districts and three local government roles: 3 gup, 5 mangmi, and 9 tshogpa. Table 1 summarises Climate Hero 1's key statement rankings.

Group 2 included six participants, exclusively tshogpa, from three of the four districts, forming the basis for Climate Hero 2. Table 2 summarises Climate Hero 2's top and bottom statement rankings. The remaining five participants did not align with either group.



Table 1. Top and bottom five statements for Climate Hero 1

Top 5 statements (most likely to agree)	Bottom 5 statements (least likely to agree)
1. Local government should take more action to address climate change impacts on WASH	30. My department will only address climate change impacts on WASH if higher levels of government or donors encourage us to
2. Climate change will have a large impact on the people in my community	31. My department knows how to design WASH infrastructure that is resilient to climate change
3. In order to reach everybody, local government needs to focus first on those who are poor and marginalised	32. I will encourage others to address climate change impacts on WASH only if my line authority tells me to
4. It is important to have women contribute to decision-making when it comes to WASH	33. My department knows how to plan for WASH systems that are resilient to climate change
5. Community cooperation can make a big difference in addressing climate change impacts on WASH	34. There is sufficient funding available for us to start working on climate change adaptation for WASH

Table 2. Top and bottom five statements for Climate Hero 2

Top 5 statements (most likely to agree)	Bottom 5 statements (least likely to agree)
1. My individual actions can make a big difference in addressing climate change impacts on WASH	30. The seriousness of climate change is exaggerated
2. My department will only address climate change impacts on WASH if higher levels of government or donors encourage us to	31. I'm not sure where to begin to address climate change impacts on WASH
3. I discuss the consequences of climate change with my colleagues	32. My department knows how to design WASH infrastructure that is resilient to climate change
4. In order to reach everybody, local government needs to focus first on those who are poor and marginalised	33. I always pay attention to marginalised groups in coming up with solutions
5. It is important for me to learn new skills at my job	34. Climate change creates uncertainty for existing WASH services

3. Developing Climate Hero personas

The Climate Hero persona development process comprised a collaborative in-person workshop involving SNV and UTS-ISF researchers. During the workshop, we analysed the composite Q-sort rankings for each group alongside the qualitative data collected during the sorting process.

To further refine the Climate Heroes, we applied insights from the study on the qualities of gender-transformative leadership in WASH. This provided a framework to shape the personas' leadership attributes and characteristics, transforming them into aspirational role models for delivering climate-resilient, inclusive WASH services.

For each Climate Hero persona, we defined a set of key values, leadership styles, relevant actions, associated outcomes, motivations and enablers, as well as barriers they face and overcome.

Who are the Climate Heroes in Bhutan's Local Government?

To bring the Climate Heroes to life, we assigned each one a name, gender, position within local government, and an exemplary quote that captured who they are as a leader.

We also created images using artificial intelligence (AI; see on next page).

These AI-generated images reflect the local context, including clothing and settings aligned with their government roles and local context.



"My community trusted me to lead, so it is my duty to take action. I ensure full participation, especially from women and marginalised groups.

Addressing climate change and WASH requires collective effort and utilising available resources for inclusive solutions."

Dorji | The Proactive Gup | Climate Hero 1
[AI photo generated by Canva]

Dorji is a visionary gup with a strong sense of responsibility and dedication to the well-being of his community. Known for his sound judgement and extensive knowledge, he is always in action – planning and delivering community development projects that benefit everyone. Dorji's altruistic approach ensures that no one is left behind, as he actively looks out for every member of the community without discrimination.

Dorji is deeply committed to inclusivity. He steps in whenever he notices that gender, disability, or social inclusion are not being adequately addressed, believing that an inclusive society is one where everyone is considered and supported. He values local knowledge and traditions while embracing innovations and ideas that can drive positive change. His decision-making is thoughtful and informed, blending the best of both worlds to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Dorji's leadership style is collaborative and inspiring. He encourages his colleagues and community members to take ownership of their community and make the most of available resources, demonstrating that change begins with proactive action. Through his efforts, he has increased women's participation, improved access to inclusive services, and fostered a shift in mindset toward inclusive design and planning of WASH services and beyond. Dorji leads by example, never waiting for instructions but instead taking the initiative to address the community's needs. His proactive and inclusive approach has made him a trusted and respected leader, driving both social and developmental progress in his community.



"I am ready to carry out any work assigned to me in the interest of the masses. One person's actions can make a difference in addressing climate change impacts on WASH. By acting now, I want to inspire others to participate and ensure everyone is involved in tackling issues."

Wangmo | The Inspiring Tshogpa | Climate Hero 2
[AI photo generated by Canva]

Wangmo is an energetic and proactive tshogpa who serves as a vital link between her community and the local government. She is deeply committed to ensuring effective two-way communication – advocating for community needs to higher-level leaders while sharing valuable information from the government and other stakeholders with her community.

Wangmo is passionate about addressing climate change and WASH issues. She believes in the power of individual action to inspire others and is dedicated to raising awareness about these challenges and potential solutions. Her approach involves directly engaging with villages, sharing knowledge, and leading by example.

Her efforts have not only improved community understanding of climate change impacts and adaptation measures but have also changed perceptions of women in leadership roles. Wangmo's work has boosted her self-confidence and established her as a role model, inspiring others through her dedication and actions.

Despite the challenges she faces, Wangmo remains committed to her role and continually seeks to learn new skills to better support her community. Her sense of duty and readiness to act align with the local government's vision, making her a vital force in building a resilient and informed community.

4. Validating the Climate Hero personas

In a subsequent stakeholder workshop held in Bhutan in August 2024, we presented, discussed, and validated both Climate Heroes with SNV's wider network of local project partners from across the four districts. Workshop attendees included selected study participants, as well as participants in a range of different roles, including health assistants, district engineers, water technicians, community water caretakers, water users, and a representative from the Disabled Peoples Organisation of Bhutan a local organisation for people with disabilities. During the workshop, all participants were also introduced to Q-methodology and engaged in a hands-on Q-sort activity.

What were the emerging outcomes and key lessons?

Participating in the research process provided local government leaders with valuable opportunities for learning and self-reflection. Through engaging with the Q-methodology, participants gained new knowledge, developed fresh perspectives on their roles, and identified pathways to address climate-resilient and inclusive WASH challenges. In this section we describe the key outcomes of the activity, highlighting changes in participants' knowledge and mindset, as well as the broader lessons as identified through team reflections.

Changes in knowledge through participating in the Q-methodology

Understanding the link between climate change and WASH

By engaging with the Q-sort statements, participants reported gaining a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between climate change and WASH services, which many had not previously considered. They reflected on how these systems influence each other and the importance of addressing them jointly. One participant noted: *"This activity is a very insightful one. For example, I never imagined the relationship between climate change and WASH. The statements are very useful for us to initiate a discussion with our community."*

Similarly, another participant said they had not considered the impacts of climate change during toilet construction in communities: *"Although, considering the economic conditions of the people in Zhemgang district, we provided toilet construction materials for free, we never thought of climate change impacting WASH services."*

Another participant shared their realisation about the lack of prior attention to climate impacts on WASH, despite previous training: *"Although I, as a gup, have attended two trainings and orientations on climate change, one by the department of water and another by the forestry department, there was no mention of the ideas that are present in these statements."*

Photo: Workshop participants discussing the two Climate Hero personas during the validation step. Photo credit: UTS-ISF/Diana Gonzalez.



Recognising GEDSI impacts

The Q-sort activity also shed light on how gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI) issues intersect with climate change and WASH. Many participants admitted they had not previously considered how vulnerable groups might be disproportionately affected or excluded from decision-making processes.

This recognition was a key learning outcome: *"As an elected local government member, this activity triggered me to think about some of the issues regarding climate change. For example, I have never thought of listening to people with disabilities to include in the decision-making processes."*

Another participant highlighted the importance of including women's perspectives in planning: *"Women bring in views from the ground that we might have missed in our planning or in our prioritisation."*

Changes in mindset through participating in the Q-methodology

Re-evaluating responsibilities as local leaders

The research activity inspired participants to rethink their roles and responsibilities in addressing climate-resilient WASH. It motivated them to take a more proactive approach, with one participant admitting: *"During the process of carrying out the activity, I felt that I have not done justice as a local leader in addressing climate change and WASH."*

Importantly, another participant realised their role as a duty bearer in providing WASH services in communities: *"Until now, I had thought that addressing WASH issues was done at the individual household level, not the local government level"*

Incorporating climate change into planning and discussions

The Q-sort activity also encouraged participants to prioritise climate change in their planning and discussions. Even younger local leaders felt empowered to take the lead: *"Although I am the youngest in the local government, this activity gave me insights to propose the climate change agenda in our meetings."*

Lessons about the transformative potential of research

The examples highlight the transformative potential of research as an intervention. Participating in interactive and reflective processes like Q-methodology empowered individuals with new insights, tools, and ideas. By engaging with thought-provoking statements, participants critically reflected on their roles and responsibilities, inspiring changes in mindset and behaviour beyond the research setting.

Workshop participants valued the Q-methodology as a practical tool for daily work, which could support local governments in prioritising investments, planning strategically, making informed decisions, and conducting meaningful community consultations. Research and workshop participants showed eagerness to integrate the learnings into professional practices.

Participatory research processes like this one do more than gather data – they foster growth and capacity building among participants. By creating opportunities for self-reflection, dialogue, and learning, these activities equip local leaders with the confidence and strategies needed to tackle complex challenges such as climate-resilient and inclusive WASH services. In doing so, research becomes a catalyst for change, transforming not only systems but also the individuals who shape them.

What is the way forward?

Considering barriers to local government action

Understanding the challenges faced by local government staff is crucial for effective future programming. Interviews revealed significant obstacles in achieving climate-resilient inclusive WASH, mainly due to budget constraints and lack of technical expertise. While basic WASH infrastructure is funded, there is insufficient financial support for climate change adaptation, limiting access to advanced technologies and dedicated investments. Consequently, climate adaptation discussions are rare, and disaster budgets lack specific allocations for WASH. Additionally, staff often lack the technical knowledge to design climate-resilient inclusive WASH services, and immediate community needs often overshadow long-term resilience planning.

Using the Bhutan Climate Heroes as tools to strengthen leadership

The [Climate Hero Toolkit](#), tailored to the Bhutan context, could support local government leaders in embracing their responsibilities as duty-bearers and fostering a sense of agency. The toolkit could help leaders identify practical actions, model transformative leadership, and drive meaningful change. Workshop participants confirmed that the Climate Hero personas resonated with them and effectively represented leadership qualities they aspired to embody.

Climate Hero 1: Dorji, the Proactive Gup

Most participants selected Dorji as their preferred Climate Hero. Gups related to his proactive nature and saw him as a reflection of their own roles, with additional aspirational traits they aimed to develop. Others appreciated Dorji's ability to inspire and bring out the best in his team, seeing him as a strong role model for collaboration and leadership.

Climate Hero 2: Wangmo, the Inspiring Tshogpa

Participants who selected Wangmo connected with her eagerness to learn and her commitment to driving GEDSI-related change in communities. Her persona highlighted the significant influence local leaders can have. Wangmo's persona served as a reminder of the importance of continuous learning and motivated participants to seek opportunities to upskill themselves.

These Climate Heroes provided relatable and motivational role models, inspiring leaders at all levels to take ownership of their roles and act as drivers of inclusive, climate-resilient WASH services. Moving forward, integrating these tools into programming could help address gaps in leadership development and empower local governments to overcome the challenges they face.

Conclusions

This study demonstrated that Q-methodology is an effective approach to understanding the attitudes and beliefs of individuals within a group. It provided a foundation for developing leadership personas that inspire action among local government leaders. By using this participatory and evidence-based method, we ensured that the personas were both relatable and inspiring for local government officials. Importantly, the

joint persona development process allowed us to have the research locally-led, ensuring the personas accurately reflected the context and realities of Bhutan while maintaining research rigour.

Participants in the study experienced several benefits. They gained new knowledge about the interconnectedness of climate change, WASH, and GEDSI, and many realised they play a larger role in fostering climate-resilient and inclusive WASH systems than they had previously understood. As described by participants, the study also provided them with a practical new tool (Q-sort) that supports reflection and decision-making – one they want to apply in their daily work and use to prioritise investments, engage stakeholders, and plan for inclusive development.

Looking ahead, future programming should focus on addressing the barriers that hinder local government leaders from advocating, planning, and delivering climate-resilient, inclusive WASH services. Using the Climate Hero Toolkit is a recommended next step. This toolkit has the potential to enhance leaders' sense of agency and responsibility, empowering them to drive wider meaningful and sustainable change in their communities.

About SNV: SNV is a global development partner, rooted in the African and Asian countries where we operate. With 60 years of experience and a team of approximately 1,600 people, it is our mission to strengthen capacities and catalyse partnerships that transform the agri-food, energy, and water systems to enable sustainable and more equitable lives for all. Visit snv.org.

About UTS-ISF: The University of Technology Sydney - Institute for Sustainable Futures (UTS-ISF) conducts applied research to support water and sanitation policy and practice in Asia and the Pacific. UTS-ISF provides partners with technical expertise including climate change; planning, governance and decision-making; gender equality and inclusion; public health and water resources management; monitoring; and policy and practice advice. Visit uts.edu.au/isf.

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Cover photo: Researchers guiding workshop participants during the Q-sort activity. Photo credit: SNV/Ugyen Wangchuk.

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