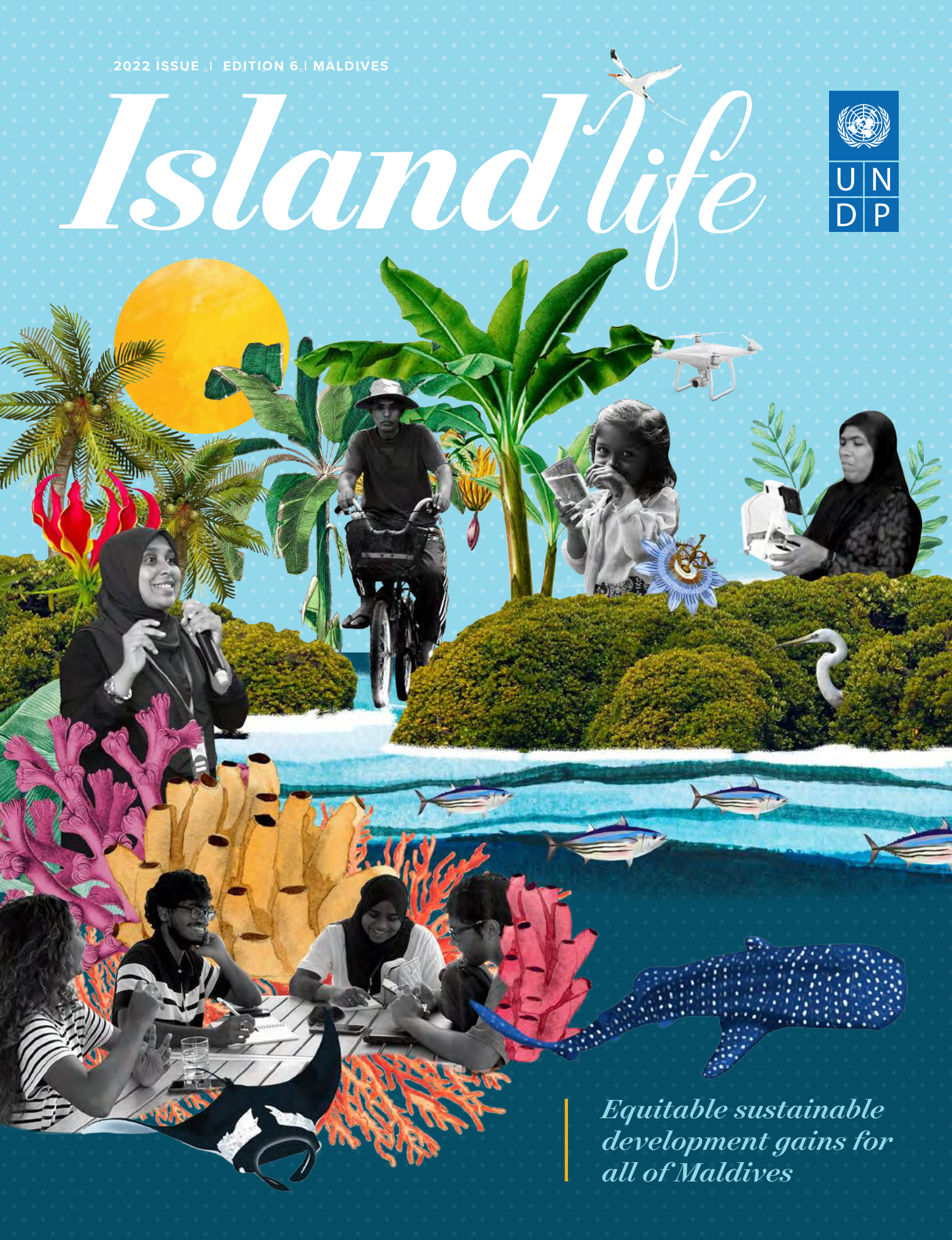


2022 ISSUE | EDITION 6 | MALDIVES

Island life



*Equitable sustainable
development gains for
all of Maldives*

ABOUT UNDP

As the United Nations lead agency on international development, UNDP works in 170 countries and territories to eradicate poverty and reduce inequality. We help countries to develop policies, leadership skills, partnering abilities, institutional capabilities, and to build resilience to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

UNDP has been in the Maldives for close to 45 years. Over the decades, we have worked on sustainable development, democratic governance and peace building, and climate and disaster resilience. In all our work, we make concerted efforts to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged, marginalized and vulnerable groups, particularly women and youth. We remain committed to continue our work in the Maldives, with people and nature in balance.

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568,362

POPULATION PROJECTED BY END OF 2021
(INCLUDING FOREIGN RESIDENT POPULATION)

1.3 million

TOURISTS IN 2021. 138% HIGHER COMPARED TO 2020
WHEN TOURIST ARRIVALS DECLINED DURING GLOBAL
COVID-19 OUTBREAK

\$ 8,787.3

NOMINAL GDP PER CAPITA AT MARKET PRICES (2021)

0.74

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX, POSITIONED 95 OUT
OF 189 COUNTRIES

1.97 metric tonne

CARBON EMISSION PER CAPITA IN MALDIVES

14.5 tonnes

MATERIAL FOOTPRINT PER PERSON. MALDIVES HAS
THE HIGHEST MATERIAL FOOTPRINT PER PERSON IN
THE SOUTH ASIA REGION, WHICH AT 14.5 TONNES
EVEN SURPASSES THE WORLD AVERAGE OF 12.3
TONNES PER PERSON

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OUR IMPACT 2021

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT



150+ youth from **6 atolls** engaged; creating safe spaces, providing skills, knowledge, tools, and networks for young people to become changemakers in their society.



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

6 civil society organisations awarded grants to conduct awareness and information sessions, vocational training camps, and programmes to enhance women's social, political, and economic empowerment across **12 atolls**.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND SOCIAL PROTECTION



28,325 online court hearings conducted, and an estimated **25,000** women directly benefitted from digitalization support provided to tackle service disruptions that arose due to COVID-19.



GENDER EQUALITY IN POLITICS

48 women leaders from **5 atolls** trained in key democratic and parliamentary procedures in the Practice Parliament for Women, building their skills and knowledge to contest for elected positions.



GENDER-INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

199 councils trained on gender-based local planning, with the launch of the Development Planning Handbook for Community Development.

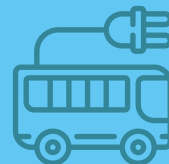
436 women (total **834** participants) built skills and knowledge via virtual '*Kiyeveni*' training portal launched to increase female participation in politics, institutions, and business.

IMPROVING WATER SECURITY



Additional **150 tonnes** of water storage provided for **8 islands** through Rainwater Harvesting (RWH) systems, under the Green Climate Fund (GCF) project. With the addition of complementary Reverse Osmosis (RO) systems, these will be upgraded to Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) systems; which will reduce the overall cost of water production in these islands.

2698 island residents (including **1206** women) will get running water in their homes from Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) systems handed over and operationalised in 2 islands.



AFFORDABLE & CLEAN ENERGY

A **14-seater** electronic mini-bus introduced in Raa Vaadhoo island thanks to the Global Environment Facility - Small Grants Programme (GEF-SGP) - used as transport for school students and island residents. Solar charging system installed on the island, providing free charging for battery-powered vehicles of residents.



REIMAGINING TOURISM

11 islands in Laamu atoll resource mapped to increase the engagement of local councils and communities in sustainable tourism.

More than 30 islands featured on the islands.mv website, providing information on accommodation, transport, and local experiences for each island.

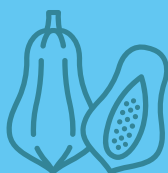


RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

An Overarching Chemicals Management (OCM) bill is being drafted with relevant Government stakeholders to streamline guidelines on how to better manage chemicals throughout the life cycle and on ways to safely deal with chemical waste.

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) project supported the formulation of regulations on sustainable groundwater management and protection in the Maldives, which mandates the use of **100% renewable energy in water production** in Maldives.

THRIVING LIVELIHOODS & FOOD SECURITY



256 farmers (110 women) supported in contract farming and **48 agri-entrepreneurs (27 women)** in urban farming, creating a new generation of productive agri-businesses and promoting national food security. urban farming plots include **6 plots for women, 8 plots for youth, 7 for persons with disabilities (PWDs), and 5 general category plots.**



DEVELOPMENT FINANCING

Through the **Climate Finance Network (CFN)**, UNDP is providing support to the Government of Maldives to enhance direct access to climate financing opportunities and **achieve the 2030 sustainable development agenda.**

Tax Inspectors Without Borders (TIWB) initiative launched to strengthen Maldives Inland Revenue Authority's capacity to develop transparent and equitable tax frameworks.



EMPOWERING MSMEs

Over 60 local businesses featured on the 'Authentic Maldives' website, promoting local artistry and craftsmanship, enhancing small businesses and providing greater access to local products.

597 small-business entrepreneurs and teams using the 'SEED by BCC' co-working space, fitted with a wide range of amenities and support services for their business purposes.



ACCELERATING LOCAL SOLUTIONS

Over 15 local innovators yielded local solutions through **2 solutions-mapping exercises** led by the UNDP Maldives Accelerator Lab -- tackling problems related to artificial intelligence, financial literacy, language preservation, inclusivity, youth empowerment, sustainable tourism, and waste management.

FOREWORD

Enrico Gaveglia
Head of UNDP in the Maldives



Walking along the coastline, with clear waters lapping onto the white, sandy beach, I can see why people call the Maldives a tropical paradise.

Yet, enchanting as it was, behind me lay an anomaly.

Through the thin façade of tropical foliage there is concrete, lots of it, and beyond people's homes dotted precariously close to the shoreline, I can visualize the ocean straight across on the other end of the island. This is the flattest country in the world.

Such is the topography almost everywhere here. Eighty percent of the islands that make up the Maldives lie barely a meter above sea level, and 90% ninety percent of them report some degree of flooding every year. Before arriving here, I heard more stories about the 'sunny side of life' but less about a highly vulnerable country fearing the worst from the sky, land, and sea.

A warming planet is causing a runaway loss of species and ecosystems and killing off magnificent reefs that are a much-undervalued natural asset to the Maldives. Dead reefs are eroding beaches, wiping out homes and schools and contaminating freshwater sources. The country has increased investments in adapting to climate change, including vast sums to desalinate water.

I get a text - one of the many since I landed. It is from a friend asking for a recommendation for a resort in the Maldives, and I do not answer. Instead, a voice in my head asks: "If you had magic, what would you do?"

Maldives is by all accounts widely recognized as a development success. From one of the world's 20



poorest countries in the 1980s, it has graduated today to an Upper-Middle Income economy and has managed to reduce poverty mainly through the successful development of high-end tourism. Yet, this heavy reliance on tourism has been a source of concern to policymakers, both inside and outside the country.

COVID-19 has left a deep, widespread, and cross-cutting impact on the country's tourism sector – it's bread and butter – alongside construction and fishery. The closure of the industry hit hard at employment and livelihoods, the knock-on effects rippling across families and communities.

The economy is estimated to have contracted by 33.5 percent in 2020, as tourism slumped, and the poverty rate rose to 7.2 percent. Despite the contraction, Maldives got itself back on track, reporting a 31.6 percent growth rate for 2021. According to the IMF, it is anticipated to be among those economies that will maintain this positive trend for 2022, despite the global crisis now hitting economies, as the pandemic seems to be nearing its end.

Ninety-nine percent water, one percent land. The voice comes up a bit stronger this time: "If you had magic, what would you do?"

With over 200 islands alive with hopes and expectations, decentralization really matters here: That is to say, a form of meaningful, structured, and functional governance that is able to empower even those on the farthest fringes of the archipelago; – where women are at the center of such governance that is inclusive.

There is a need for a robust civil society that is confident at delivering solutions amidst the challenges of a nascent democracy, ; and also able to provide an inclusive, open, safe, and resilient civic space.

There is a need for stronger institutions, for pathways to end multi-dimensional inequalities, and for stronger justice that can be accessed in all corners of the nation.

"If you had magic, what would you do?"

Before I could formulate an answer for the voice in my head, I am interrupted by a robust "Hello?"

I am met with a bright beaming smile from a man



carrying a freshly caught octopus. Dinner is sorted for his family. He is naturally curious about my visit and as I chat with him, I secretly plan to rescue the octopus and throw it back into the sea. But I am conquered by the kindness of this man, and I am reminded of my purpose here.

A part of a greater interconnected cause, to assist the nation and its people to achieve their aspirations, to live in an inclusive, resilient, and caring, tolerant, society; where everyone can contribute to, and benefit equitably from sustainable development.

Here we go again: "If you had magic, what would you do?"

As the man and his octopus leave, I look to the horizon.

Tonight, there is a waxing moon; a time that is said to be ideal to take ambitious action. If I had magic, I would turn back the tide of time, so the ocean would maintain its original form, that we would develop in harmony with nature, that the light in the night sky would lead the way, showing us the path.

But we still have time, and 'the magic' it lies within all of us. As I look out on this impossibly turquoise ocean, I am reminded of a saying in the Maldives: "*Dhaiy huri dhuvahu kaashi kaasheve*". It means: Seize the moment, as the opportunity won't be there forever. For now, we still have the opportunity - if all of us avail of it and do our part, the Maldives will be ours forever.

UNDP MALDIVES COUNTRY PROGRAMME 2022-2026

The United Nations Development Programme's new offer of support to the Maldives for the next five years is presented in the UNDP Maldives Country Programme 2022-2026, with three priorities that will turn commitments to concrete change:

1

INCLUSIVE, SUSTAINABLE AND THRIVING LIVELIHOODS



2

SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE



3

PARTICIPATORY AND ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNANCE FOR AND BY THE PEOPLE



It is the result of a painful exposure to the challenges of the pandemic, with people of Maldives, those living here, as well as the Government and partners bruised by the sudden shock of a brutal economic contraction and despair, amidst the lack of viable and readily available options for survival. UNDP tailored its Country Programme with emphasis on alignment and seeking coalitions across partners and by betting all it has and can leverage, influence, and generate so to assist Maldives' journey towards achievement of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals.

This issue of UNDP Maldives' Island Life magazine is focused on our new Country Programme.

REMARKS

By His Excellency Ahmed Khaleel,
Minister of State for Foreign Affairs

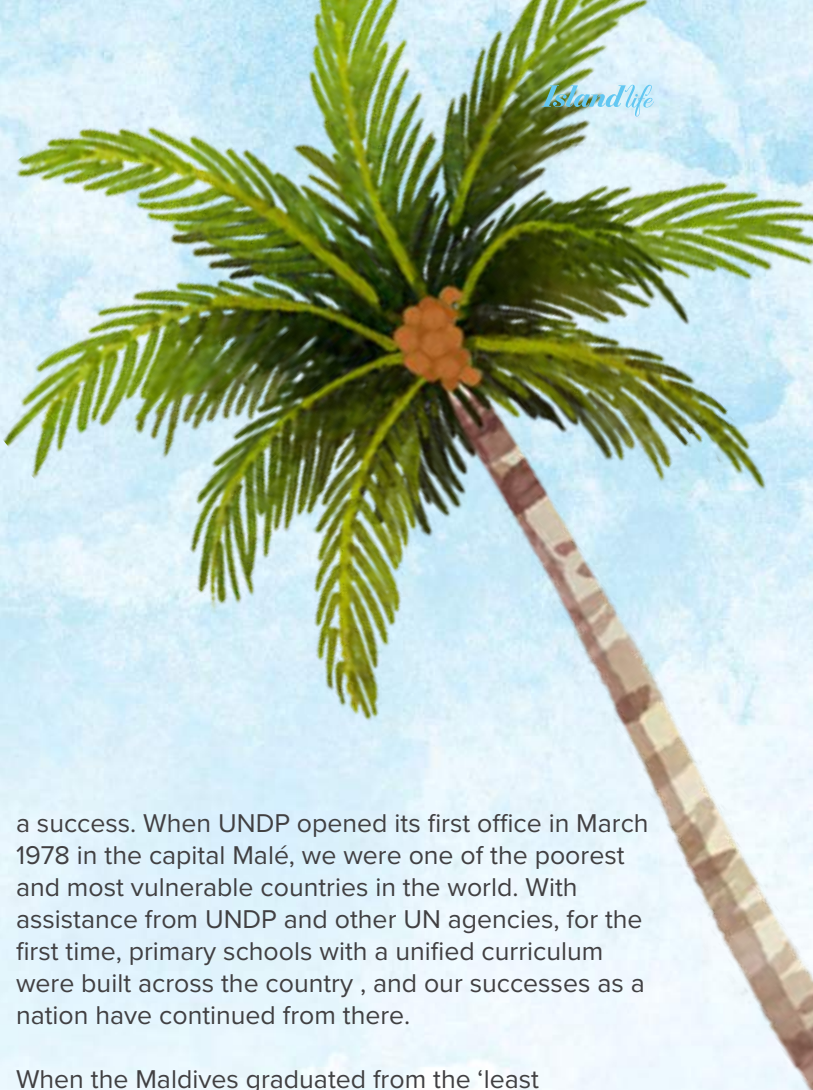


The Maldives is a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), spread over thousands of kilometers across the Indian Ocean. Similar to other SIDS, we face numerous challenges due to the size of our population and the country's narrow economic base. Being geographically small, and low-lying, our islands are exposed to extreme vulnerabilities of climate change.

Many would remember the 1987 tidal surges that damaged thousands of houses and flooded the capital city Malé with seawater. Another recent event that left the country heavily shaken was the 2004 Asian Tsunami. While seven percent of the national population were displaced then, economic losses were felt across all sectors including our vibrant tourism industry. Although compared to other countries our human toll was low, it was a disaster of national proportion. Our leading sectors -- tourism and fisheries -- sustained the largest losses, with total damages estimated at USD 470 million.

This everyday reality of possible loss of life, loss of heritage, loss of economy and loss of land, makes us Maldivians extremely aware of the climate emergency. This is the reason why we, as a government have made several commitments in combating the profound environmental challenges, climate change and ocean degradation. We have made ambitious and bold commitments under the Paris Agreement and the SAMOA Pathway¹, which are well documented².

In our footrace to secure the country's future, our collaboration with UN agencies, as well as with international and bilateral partners, have proved to be



a success. When UNDP opened its first office in March 1978 in the capital Malé, we were one of the poorest and most vulnerable countries in the world. With assistance from UNDP and other UN agencies, for the first time, primary schools with a unified curriculum were built across the country, and our successes as a nation have continued from there.

When the Maldives graduated from the 'least developed countries' (LDC) category in 2011, the UNDP and other multilateral agencies provided technical assistance to ensure a smooth transition. Forty-three years straight on, UNDP has been particularly effective in its support for Maldives sustainable development. Today, our national priority is for resilience and recovery, as we face up to the challenges posed by COVID-19 pandemic.

When the Government formulated its Strategic Action Plan, which would guide the overall development of the country for 2019-2023, UNDP supported its formulation. The Government values UNDP with its long-standing presence, responsiveness, adaptation, and flexibility for the country's needs.

The current UNDP Country Programme 2022-2026 of the Maldives is formulated in view of the added dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on thriving livelihoods, climate resilience, and accountable governance. The country hopes to see thriving individuals, who while understanding the climate impact, will make environmentally sustainable contributions.

¹ See: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/samoapathway.html>

² See: <https://www.ipsnews.net/2021/06/maldives-general-assembly-presidency-renews-hope-small-island-developing-states/>

“It is only through collective effort that we could achieve the Sustainable Development Goals”

It is only through collective effort that we could achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. We therefore, hope that in the next five years the Country Programme will result in well-informed communities across the country.

Looking ahead, we would like to see our children, women, and youth enjoy a healthy lifestyle a dignified life that ensures them basic human rights they deserve. We would like to hear the sound of laughter of our children reverberating across the country with so much innocence in it; it emanates a sense of security, conveying the assurance that as a country we will continue to thrive and be successful.



INTERVIEW

Appointed under the Climate Emergency Act, **H.E Sabra Ibrahim Noordeen** is the first Special Envoy for Climate Change in the Maldives. Ms. Noordeen graduated from the University of London, United Kingdom, with a Master of Science in State, Society, and Development. She previously served as the Secretary, Foreign Relations at the President's Office.

ADVOCACY FOR 1.5C

Maldives at COP-26, and the General Assembly (UNGA), has reaffirmed its stance and determination as a leader in climate action. COP-27 is not too far ahead. How can Maldives impact global conversations so that deeper commitments are followed through?

The Maldives has always been on the frontline of climate change. As a small island state, our vulnerability has long been established, and we have been active, vocal advocates for greater global action against the impacts of the climate crisis. Although we contribute less than 1% to global emissions, our contribution to the international community in trying to build momentum and solutions for ambitious, progressive action has been far greater. The impact of the Maldives on global conversations lies in our beautiful, but fragile natural surroundings and our determination to keep our heads above water.

Domestically, we have pledged to achieve Net-Zero emissions by 2030, but acknowledge that we will need a significant level of financial and technical support from our international partners. We are also in the process of increasing the number of protected areas in the country, working on a marine-spatial plan to better manage our ocean-based activities in a sustainable way, and have begun the implementation of a single-use plastic ban.

Through our traditional pole and line fishing practices, we have one of the most sustainable tuna fisheries in the world, and play a leading role in regional bodies governing the management of these important fish

stocks. We hope to use the strength of our domestic policies in our international advocacy to demonstrate how fiercely we believe in the need for commitments to be followed through.

Successive IPCC reports have outlined how urgent the situation is, how our 'windows of opportunity' are narrowing, and how every 'increment of warming' is a challenge to successful adaptation and climate resilience. Small island states and vulnerable countries are the first to feel the impacts, we are the first to sound the alarm, but it is clear that the repercussions are now being felt across the globe. We need an urgent reduction of global emissions to limit global temperature rise to 1.5C, and an immediate upscaling of resources to address adaptation, and loss and damage.

GLOBAL APPEAL FROM MALDIVES

For Small Island Developing States (SIDS) such as the Maldives resolving the climate crisis is not a matter of choice but is intrinsically linked to your very survival. What can the global community, and development agencies such as UNDP do to better support you and other SIDS advance this agenda?

Absolutely for the Maldives and other SIDS, the climate crisis is an existential issue, but I would argue that the scientific evidence clearly states that finding a resolution is intrinsically linked to the survival of all. It is no longer a matter of choice for any country. As a result, climate change impacts *all* aspects of our lives and livelihoods, and this should be reflected in *everything* we do.

The global community and development agencies can support these efforts by amplifying the voices of the most vulnerable, ensuring inclusivity in negotiation rooms and in the formulation of global development policy, and increasing efforts in education and awareness, to make climate discourse accessible. We need development agencies to recognize and assist us in reforming how communities can access adaptation assistance, to achieve basic essential services and development needs while also ensuring climate resilience.

FINANCING, ECONOMIC STABILITY AND FISCAL SITUATION

You've spoken over the past year on various platforms about the challenges faced by developing countries in accessing climate financing, particularly for adaptation. In your opinion, what is the challenge and what can we do to overcome it together?

The biggest challenge we face right now is accessing climate financing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we found ourselves having to reallocate limited funds to address multiple crises at the same time. The Maldives already spends a significant amount of our own budget on adaptation measures and that is to address immediate adaptation measures such as providing freshwater services and coastal protection.

Unfortunately, the urgency of having to address these immediate concerns means we lack the fiscal space to invest in longer term adaptation measures that are desperately needed to minimize the impact of the climate crisis. There are also limits to adaptation, limits to how high we can build our islands and how often we can replenish sandbags on the shore, and these limits become more entrenched the longer we put off concrete action on global emissions reduction.

The reality is that it is currently easier to draw financing towards mitigation *measures*, than adaptation. It is seen as more profitable. This doesn't ring true when you take into account the disruption and loss and damage as a result of the extreme climate events we now more frequently face. We have called for climate financing systems to be reformed so that access is easier and quicker. While due diligence must be upheld, the speed at which resources are made available to vulnerable communities must be in line with the ground realities.

We need to ensure that at least 50% of the total share of climate finance is used to adapt to the impacts of the climate crisis.

VISIONING, PLANNING, CAPACITY BUILDING

Given that Maldives faces a climate crisis at its shore, and the pandemic has not made it any better with a much-reduced fiscal space, how do you see your role as Special Envoy for Climate Change working to align national policy and planning?

While most of my engagements are international, I work closely with the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change and Technology and other Government stakeholders, on the need to mainstream climate resilience across all national policies. I firmly believe we need more engagement, education and awareness domestically on the impacts of the climate crisis in the Maldives, and we need to have more discussions within our community on how we should adapt. Implementing national policies that are sustainable and incorporating climate resilience into our planning can only be successful when people accept that their development needs can be met in a way that is also climate resilient. With increased decentralisation, the role of local councils, media, civil society, and ensuring the inclusion of more women and young people are especially important in these discussions.

INNOVATION

Whether it is waste, nature-based solutions, coastal protection or renewable energy production, technology transfer and innovative practices can often help fast-track these processes. In which areas do you foresee Maldives benefitting the most from such exchanges?

Technology transfer and innovation would benefit all of these areas, but I do think it could especially help fast track our work in nature-based solutions and coastal protection. Access to technology that would allow us to gather real time data and conduct analysis on our vast maritime zone, resulting in the identification of vulnerable areas, tailored interventions – preferably nature based - and strengthening of management of our protected areas.

In terms of waste management, we have seen the implementation of circular waste management practices in resorts and select local islands through the use of the technology, and community-based innovation, and all at relatively moderate costs.

With the Maldives, the success of sustainable practices, is always confronted by the geographic dispersal of our islands and the small scale of our communities. I believe the technology available now can help up overcome these challenges, and use these unique characteristics to our advantage.

LIFE UNDERWATER FOR LIFE ABOVE

Photography by
MOHAMED NIYASH NIZAR

Maldives has the 7th largest reef ecosystem in the world, home to an incredible variety of marine life, including some 200 species of coral and over 1000 species of fish.





Coral reefs are a vital resource for the Maldives. Coral reefs form a barrier around our low-lying islands. They absorb wave energy and reduce coastal erosion, protecting ecosystems between the reefs and coasts. Without the protective role of coral reefs, we are more prone to the adverse effects of climate change. The Maldivian marine environment, and its associated biodiversity is also critical to our ecosystem and human health, our natural and cultural heritage, and to productive livelihoods and income among others.

However, up to half of the world's coral reefs have been lost, and if global temperatures rise by 1.5°C, an estimated 90% could disappear. As climate change causes extensive coral degradation, Small Island Developing States like the Maldives become more vulnerable without coral reefs protecting our low-lying islands and coastlines from high tides. We need #ClimateActionNow to enhance the resilience of coral reef ecosystems and communities that depend on them.

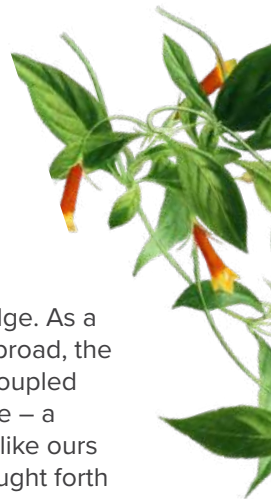
With support from **Global Fund for Coral Reefs**, we are working on developing plans for reef-positive solutions for the Maldives, inclusive of strategies for sustainable blue economy and marine ecosystem protection to prevent the extinction of our precious reef ecosystems that support us and all around us.

If managed and used sustainably, coral reefs and its biodiversity will continue to generate economic benefits and protect our environment for Maldivians and visitors to enjoy for generations.

SOWING THE GOOD SEEDS



“Farming and farmers are our lifeblood, as much is fishing. Don’t you agree? I want my children to realize this. We sow these seeds to earn, and to feed ourselves the goodness that come from our good earth,” says Zameer.



The atmosphere is quiet, save for the gentle swaying of banana leaves in the wide, verdant plot. The field seemed to stretch out for miles, with occasional black netting separating different types of plants. Dull purple specks are visible in between a canopy of low-lying plants as aubergines grow from them – perfect to mature in the hot and warm climes of Laamu Atoll in Southern Maldives.

Amidst the greenery and sweltering heat, stands Abdulla Zameer, gently watering his plants. Working on his plot of farmland has become a daily rite of passage for Zameer, a 31-year-old chef and contract farmer from Laamu Fonadhoo island.

For as long as he can remember, farming has made Zameer happy inside; his interest having been sparked at a tender age by his father who was a farmer himself. It began when he used to accompany his father to the family farm and continued into his adulthood, eventually resulting in Zameer taking care of the farm as his father fell ill. Zameer hopes this trend will continue, and this love of farming is something which he eventually hopes to pass onto his young children as well.

COVID-19 left the Maldives at a precarious edge. As a country which imports 90% of its food from abroad, the reality of food scarcity hit the country hard. Coupled with the ever-present threat of climate change – a constant for low-lying, archipelagic countries like ours – and the escalating economic problems brought forth by the pandemic, building community and climate resilience became a key tenet of the Government. This is something in which UNDP, as a development partner, readily assisted in.

The contract and community urban farming component under the SEEDS (Sustainable Empowerment for Development of SMEs) project – funded by the Government of Japan – is one such endeavour. The SEEDS project promotes sustainable agriculture that increases productivity and production, food security, and maintains ecosystems, while helping farmers learn new ways to manage the risks that they face due to climate change.

As part of the process of learning how to manage these risks, small-scale farmers – in particular women, youth, and people with disabilities – are supported through secure and equal access to productive resources, knowledge, markets, and opportunities

for value addition. Supported by UNDP Maldives, the contract and community urban farming of the SEEDS project are implemented with Agro National Corporation (AgroNat) and Housing Development Corporation (HDC) respectively.

“For me, contract farming is more effective than regular farming. You can get access to local markets more easily; and also, receive assistance at the beginning which can be very helpful,” explains Zameer. “It benefits both farmers and communities. Farmers can have a guaranteed income while locals can buy fresh produce at reasonable rates.”

Contract farming is also a means to empower different groups in the society and give them the opportunity make their mark in meaningful ways, specifically in the economic sphere. This is especially important in the Maldivian agricultural industry, where women and youth are significantly underrepresented.



Photography by
AISHATH AZHEENA / UNDP MALDIVES

Standing in the community urban farming garden in Hulhumalé City, Zulfa Ali and her husband describe their farming plans. Their plot – which is already teeming with different varieties of flora, both in pots and in the ground – was awarded to their disabled son under the urban farming component of the SEEDS project. It is one of 11 plots (out of 16) given to persons with disabilities, women, and youth.

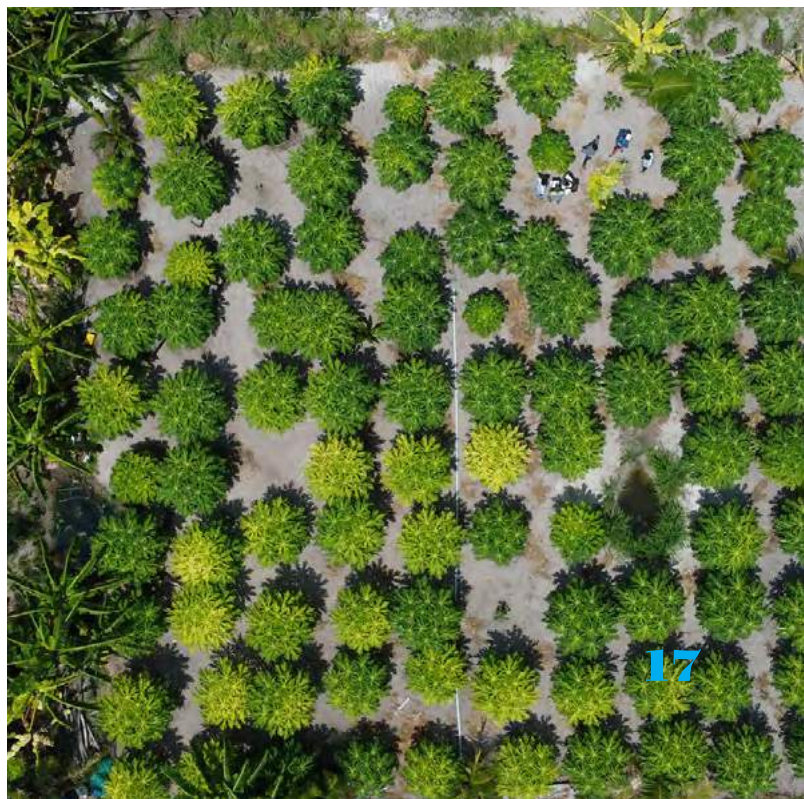
A *Dhivehi beysveriya* (traditional medicine practitioner) with her own clinic, Zulfa is well-versed in the different medicinal uses of plants, sometimes using remedies made from her own home-grown garden. Although growing more medicinal herbs is something Zulfa is interested in, her main goal from community urban

farming is to cultivate organic produce to promote healthy eating.

“I don’t think any food is more beneficial than fruits and vegetables grown by ourselves, from our own hands,” says Zulfa. “From this urban garden, I want to grow more nutritious produce. I think there is a really good chance to get a sustainable source of income from it, while also providing wholesome food for my family,” she adds.

Zameer and Zulfa are proof of a new sprouting of farmers in the country.

“I can see changes. I can have a good business. I am thinking about all sorts of ideas. I know I can grow food and earn money and get things my child needs. And I think about production. It’s a different mindset,” says Zulfa.



A SAFE HAVEN IN THE TIME OF CRISIS

Trigger Warning: Mentions of violence and abuse

"I was 19 years old when I married my boyfriend. I did so against my parent's wishes. Within a year, we had a child. For six years, I suffered through emotional and physical abuse before seeking a divorce. In hindsight, the warning signs are clear.

When we were dating, he would threaten to harm himself over minor disputes. At the time, I thought it was because he loved me. One day, soon after we got married, I was at my parent's house and was watching TV when he came to pick me up. I took some time wrapping my headscarf, and he told me "You will no longer watch TV." When I protested, he put his mouth near my ear and kept screaming, a tactic he would repeat for years, even when I became pregnant.

Sometimes when we fought, he would not let me sleep. He would make me sit up when I started to nod off and would take me to the bathroom and splash water on my face to keep me awake.

He isolated me from my friends, telling me seeing them was a waste of time. When I would go out with my mother, he would call me and keep me on the phone the whole time.

Things started to escalate in the last few years of our marriage. Once, he held me and lifted me by the neck, leaving me choking for breath. I moved out of our bedroom and moved into the maid's room. Our maid had left because she could not tolerate the abuse she was witnessing. He confiscated the keys and raped me every night, saying it was his right as a husband.

For years I considered divorce but stayed for fear of stigma and for our child. Eventually, I filled out a form for divorce. But it was only after I consulted with a lawyer at the Family Legal Clinic that I mustered up the courage to file for divorce. I was lost and I had no idea of my legal rights or that what was happening to me was illegal.

During the consultation, the lawyer explained to me my rights under the Domestic Violence and Family Acts and detailed the procedures for filing for divorce. She told me my case was clear-cut and that all the emotional, sexual and physical abuse I was suffering through was unlawful. It gave me the strength I needed.

Since our divorce I am a happier woman. I am working now, and I live alone with my son. We are now in the midst of a custody battle that has been harrowing."

*– Client Statement Courtesy: UNFPA Maldives.
Featured in: <https://bit.ly/3xiluzA>*

There was a pandemic-sized elephant in the access-to-justice room. As COVID-19 escalated, it seemed as if our chances of meaningfully closing the access to justice gap.

The pandemic left our world reeling; the circumstances being especially hard on women. Forced to bear the multiple burdens of household duties, care work, and career commitments, women have been overwhelmingly affected by the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As well as the increased challenges that many women have been facing during the pandemic, instances of domestic violence, and sexual and gender-based violence cases against women have also been on the rise over this time¹. With many women (and some men) have reported having suffered physical abuse at the hands of their families². Over 550 cases of sexual and gender-based violence were reported to the relevant national authorities during the first six months of the pandemic alone³.

For these women, and others across our geographically scattered islands, effective and easy access to justice and legal aid is a necessity. Unfortunately, it is not the reality.

Although the Maldivian constitution requires legal aid to be given to perpetrators of serious crimes, this focus on crime significantly limits women's access to legal advice, as they are more likely to be the victims. In addition to that, legal services in the Maldives are expensive and difficult to acquire. Pro bono legal aid and services do exist but are even harder to come by.

When Shafeea Riza co-founded the Family Legal Clinic (FLC) in 2014 – along with two other women – her hope was to play a part in remedying this.

FLC is a pro bono legal service clinic, the first one in the Maldives to provide free-of-charge legal consultations in family law, prevention of domestic violence law and sexual harassment cases. On top of this, FLC also conducts awareness programmes targeted for survivors of domestic and gender-based violence.



“The Maldivian population is geographically dispersed across 188 islands, which makes legal representation inaccessible to many. Financial barriers and limited access to lawyers also play a huge part in this,” says Shafeea. “FLC’s mission is to bridge this gap and make these services available for people across the country who can’t afford or access them.”

¹ Human Rights Report 2021, Human Rights Commission of the Maldives

² The Rights Side of Life Survey 2020, UNDP Maldives

³ Gender-Based Violence During COVID-19 Pandemic in the Maldives: An Analysis of Reported Cases, 2021

To support the influx of cases from the COVID-19 crisis and lockdowns, FLC – supported by UNDP Maldives – worked together to increase the number of free legal consultations, organise social media awareness campaigns and run support group programmes for survivors of domestic violence and sexual harassment as well as those financially affected by the pandemic.

Through these initiatives, the goal was not only to provide additional legal aid to clients, but also to offer support and educate the public.

Women’s access to justice is a layered issue, one which is not simply confined to providing affordable legal services and aid. In fact, it runs hand-in-hand with the broader issues of gender equality, power, and equity with barriers to accessing justice rooted in the harmful beliefs and social norms in society.

Increasing the number of women working in the legal field, empowering women to report if they’re

experiencing violence, and providing access for them to seek help through psycho-social and legal counselling are all necessary when considering the best ways to strengthen women’s access to justice, ; alongside encouraging their financial independence, and economic resilience, and creating safe spaces for recovery and reintegration.

Strengthening the Maldivian judicial and legal sector is a core component of strengthening access to justice ; a key pillar of UNDP Maldives’ work on enabling better, more transparent and gender-sensitive governance systems within the country.

Shafeea and her team at the Family Legal Clinic are committed to giving hope and support to women and other vulnerable groups and providing them a helping hand to live a life of respect and dignity that is free from violence and abuse.

For more information about the Family Legal Clinic, visit www.familylegalclinic.org.mv or contact them at +960 3331779 and info@familylegalclinic.org.mv





THE FUTURE IS NOW

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE ACROSS THE ISLANDS ARE PUTTING THEIR CREATIVITY TO THE SERVICE OF THEIR COMMUNITIES

The energy in the air is palpable. Even through the artificial light of the laptop screens, it is clear that this group of young people are excited and ready to take on the world. Perhaps it was the seemingly never-ending wave of lockdowns, or maybe it was the prospect of being together with a like-minded group of peers that energised these youth; most likely a mix of both.

This was Youth Vision – Art Workshop: *Ekani Ekuga*, a virtual art workshop for youth where societal issues and personal identities were discussed and explored through different art mediums. A fitting term, *Ekani Ekuga*, which in *Dhivehi*, the Maldivian language, translates to ‘alone together’, symbolises the digital era that the COVID-19 pandemic brought in; a state of being physically alone, but virtually together simultaneously.

Many young people feel the same way, even now. Feelings of being alone, cynical, and unsure about the trajectory of the world around them is common amongst the youth who feel that they deserve better from their communities. Indeed, better opportunities, better resources, and better guidance are rights which ought to be afforded and awarded to our youth, if we are to hope for a better tomorrow.

The role of youth in any country is without a doubt a significant one. They are the morrow and the driving force of development and prosperity. The changemakers who will navigate our communities

to a brighter path. As such, their involvement in the decision-making process is crucial. They are not only the future, but the *right now* as well. The investment in young people should start today.

The youth population in the Maldives is large and increasing; 43 percent of the country’s population comprises of young people¹. And yet, their meaningful representation in the country is minimal. Their presence in the civic space is insufficient, and this absence is deafening.

Empowering youth to engage more in society means providing them with essential opportunities to exercise their voices and placing the power in their hands. It requires equipping them with the fundamental and necessary skills and information to navigate the world. It means giving them a chance to explore different avenues and fostering an environment where they feel safe and comfortable enough to take these lessons and translate it to the wider community. Boosting creativity, critical thinking and leadership skills are key.

Through the art workshop, participants were able to take part in relevant dialogues about pressing issues such as job security and livelihoods, environment, leadership, violence and abuse, social cohesion, and peace. The goal was to create a safe, respectful harbour for them to express their opinions, without the fear of it being washed away in a tide of noise.



“I work at the Maldives Bureau of Statistics, which has given me the opportunity to travel to different islands, to meet different people. I’ve truly learnt that the social problems that people face at the household level is so multi-faceted and affects each person individually. So, when things like that were brought to life during the sessions, I think it really broadened everyone’s horizons and perspectives; that many issues in society can stem from one problem, and not just the main stereotypical one we usually hear about,” says Imsa, a Youth Vision participant.

By exploring art as a medium, Youth Vision participants were able to convey their thoughts and stories and relate it to the broader context of societal issues, while also developing their leadership and critical thinking skills.

“I think this workshop provided all the participants with the very essential basics; the research, the process and the brainstorming that needed to be done was explained in a systematic way. This made something that a lot of people would find overwhelming a lot more calming and enjoyable,” says Imsa. “I believe everyone, no matter their skill level, was able to learn some key points that may help them in any project that they may come across in the future.”

This is a similar running theme in all youth-focused programmes by UNDP Maldives. Miyaheli Social Innovation Camp focuses on youth-led innovations to tackle society’s most pressing problems, and at the recent Practice Parliament for Youth programme, youth were given training on parliamentary and democratic procedures.



In all these initiatives - including Youth Vision, the youth participants were guided on building their skillsets, then given the opportunity to apply what they learnt in a more practical sense; something that would certainly embed more confidence and knowledge in them.

Our vision is to build a generation of young people who are informed and empowered; to create a lasting ripple effect where they are strong and fearless enough to work towards making a positive change on their communities, in turn inspiring others to do the same and carry it forward. After all, this is the only way to ensure that our society moves forward.

The Maldivian youth are driven, creative and passionate about bringing about change. They are excited and ready to take on the world; all they need are the right opportunities to do so.

OPPORTUNITIES TO THRIVE



By **Mohamed Shahud**,
Economist, UNDP Maldives

One striking feature of the COVID-19 pandemic when it hit was how sharply inequalities grew almost overnight.

The ensuing economic downturn was unprecedented at many levels, with repercussions felt across sectors from tourism to trade. Maldives' economy is estimated to have contracted by 29 percent, and the poverty rate had increased 7.2 percent in 2020 as tourism, our largest economic industry, slumped.

The impact of the pandemic on Small Island Developing States, like the Maldives, is more severe because of the country's high dependence on tourism and the import of oil and food, exacerbating economic and social impacts.

The Rapid Livelihoods Assessment, supported by UNDP, showed that nearly 44% of people experienced either complete loss of income or redundancies at the height of the pandemic in 2020. Vulnerable workers (e.g., young people, employees on probation, and

third-party contractors at resort establishments, casual migrant workers, the self-employed, freelancers, community vendors, and Micro- Small and Medium Enterprises) were worst hit.

Women were disproportionately affected, with redundancy and complete loss of income being higher for women than men. A very probable reality is that increasing unemployment pressures may push these young women out of the labour force permanently, or may prevent young women from entering the labour force altogether.

Those at the bottom were being truly left behind contrary to what was promised by the "Leave No One Behind" pledge of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development¹.

For the Maldives, the reversal of development gains has been a stark reminder of its overdependency on one economic sector. Nevertheless, tourism has been a double-headed eagle for the Maldives.

¹ See: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>



The country has been largely a development success story, having successfully graduated itself from one of the world's poorest countries in the early 1980s to an Upper Middle-Income Country by the 2000s. We had made remarkable progress in areas such as health and education, with a life expectancy of 78.9 and an adult literacy rate of 97.7%, according to UNDP's Human Development Report 2020².

This progress was made possible by the rapid growth of tourism in the country, which resulted in the Maldives achieving an economic growth of 7% in the last three decades.

Although this growth has been remarkable, it has created an over-reliance on the tourism industry, which is extremely susceptible to global disruptions. The COVID-19 crisis is, yet again, another reminder of the need to diversify the country's economic base, as we observed how the pandemic led to the worst economic recession in recorded history, with an unprecedented loss of livelihood opportunities.

COVID-19 forces us to revisit unsustainable development pathways. We have an opportunity to make different choices now, including lowering dependency on fossil fuels and taking a bold leap

forward to invest in peoples' lives and livelihoods as co-joined drivers of progress.



²<https://hdr.undp.org/en/2020-report>



UNDP has been a trusted development partner of the Maldives for close to 45 years, helping to achieve the eradication of poverty, and the reduction of inequalities and exclusion. In our newest offer of support to the country, charting the course of sustainable development over the next five years, UNDP is looking at both inequalities and poverty in our pledge to *leave no one behind*. The main focus is centred on the dynamics of exiting poverty, and not falling back.

We are making it a priority to address the deep-rooted socioeconomic, structural, and systemic vulnerabilities that have undermined the inclusiveness, sustainability, and resilience of development gains. We aim to support the Government and the people of Maldives to convert existing economic vulnerabilities into opportunities for the future.

UNDP will support the Government to develop policies for economic diversification, promote inclusivity, and to increase private sector engagement and investment for fostering inclusive and sustainable economic growth in the country. Focus will be provided to women, young people, and people with disabilities to be brought towards the centre, and to acquire technologies and digital services that meaningfully contribute to blue, green, and digital value chains.

In doing so, UNDP will support the government in diversifying the economy, in which the Maldives has a comparative advantage. The aim will be to up-skill and re-skill the workforce in new and emerging sectors, thus providing improved access to livelihoods, decent work, and expanded opportunities.

We will do this by using deep local knowledge and networks that brings together all development partners and stakeholders, so as to ensure development planning is inclusive. We will use our global expertise and knowledge as a thought leader and innovator to reduce divisions and income disparities between the capital and outer regions of Maldives, so as to ensure development benefits everyone equally.

UNDP stands with the Maldives to tackle inequality of opportunities, by investing in the enhanced capabilities people need to move above the poverty line and to keep moving forward.



A CLIMATE OF CHANGE



By **Ahmed Shifaz**,
Head of the Resilience and Climate Change
Programme, UNDP Maldives

Have you seen the movie 'Don't Look Up'?



This movie - an allegory of the climate crisis - provides the perfect analogy for the times we live in. It is a metaphor for the tepid human response to an imminent extinction-level threat.

Outside of celluloid, it is this denial in the face of irrefutable science that frustrates those who are dedicating their lives to study this and raise the alarm. Scientists have checked and rechecked their numbers. And the mountain of evidence hurtling towards us show that the earth is warming, polar ice caps are melting and sea levels are rising. Unlike the movie, this disaster is entirely caused by humans, and we have the power to change it. Only that time is running out...

The climate crisis is the defining challenge of our generation. Under current estimates from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the global mean sea levels are projected to rise by 1 to 3 feet by 2100 if greenhouse gas emissions remain at high rates. Sitting barely 1 meter above sea level, small islands states such as the Maldives, who contribute least to climate change, face a future that is uncertain.

Maldives has taken ambitious steps to respond to the climate crisis and has been playing an active role championing for the rights of climate vulnerable countries on the world stage for over more than a decade. It is the first developing country to phase out hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) that destroy the ozone layer, 10 years ahead of the target. It has committed to doing a lot more, including achieving net-zero emissions by 2030.

However, none of the actions we take in the Maldives will be enough. Like all global issues – from the pandemic to the climate crisis – our collective success is dependent on collective action and robust partnerships.



Through its decades of experience, UNDP has brought together its extensive infrastructure, networks and breadth of substantive offers to support countries like Maldives to increase resilience to climate impacts and support sustainable development priorities.

UNDP has remained a source of support to the country in accessing climate financing from bilateral donors and international instruments such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and Green Climate Fund (GCF).

Putting climate resilience at the heart of every development decision from the grassroots up, UNDP supported the development of a planning toolkit for local government to ensure local development planning is evidence-based, gender-responsive, low emission climate and disaster resilient.



We are supporting the Government to establish water security in 29 islands of the north of the Maldives and create water reserves to last a 90-day dry period, in turn improving national practices for water management across the country.

We have provided modern facilities and equipment to several islands to manage waste at the community level and are supporting the government to tackle sub streams including managing hazardous chemical waste such as persistent organic pollutants.

We have been investing in climate resilient food systems as a source for food security and economic empowerment, through the introduction of contract farming in the Maldives and setting up urban micro farms which reduces the carbon footprint of produce. Harvests are maximized through country wide network of cold storage facilities powered through renewable energy.



While acknowledging the pivotal economic role of the tourism sector to the Maldives, we must also acknowledge that at present, the tourism sector contributes the largest stake in the country's greenhouse gas emissions and waste generation. UNDP and the Government have been working closely to 'reimagine' what sustainable tourism should look like in the Maldives, by diversifying tourism through leveraging natural ecosystems, history, and cultural heritage, facilitating a bigger role for local councils in tourism planning and development and through linking of cross-sector value chains of the tourism sector with women entrepreneurs and informal livelihoods. A renewable energy feasibility study for the sector is also being development which would provide a roadmap to reduce the carbon footprint.

UNDP is now scaling up its support through its newest offer to the Maldives.

Building on experiences, UNDP will continue its long-standing partnership in the Maldives and explore new and innovative ways of doing things. We will provide comprehensive support to complement the countries' development choices through informed development planning and strengthen infrastructure, capacities, and institutions to prevent, mitigate and respond to crisis, natural disasters, and climate shocks. To return to sustainable development, we will put nature and the environment at the heart of national planning and economy, bringing in sustainable financing and other resources to help the Maldives protect, manage, and value natural assets such as water. We will focus on increasing energy access for those furthest behind and accelerate the transition to renewable energy.

UNDP will center its support around multi-sector engagement to reduce carbon footprint, and in transitioning key economic sectors including tourism, transport, fisheries, and agriculture towards market-oriented environmentally sustainable practices. We will work with the Maldives to find solutions through circular economy principles for integrated solid waste management programmes, and sound management and disposal of chemicals, persistent organic pollutants, and waste. We will strengthen capacities

for evidence-informed and gender-responsive, inclusive, participatory development planning methods including land-use planning that integrate disaster risk management, climate adaptation and mitigation as core principles. UNDP will invest in MSMEs and greener business models and accelerate innovative local solutions for sustainable and climate resilient communities by working closely with community-based organizations across the country.

As UNDP poised to provide a new offer of support to help Maldives, the future may seem uncertain and largely out of our hands. However, there are things that are within our control and things that we can do today that will help us plan for and adapt to the predicted impacts. Some of it may require us to change the way we approach the problem. Some of it may require us to think beyond the symptom and systematically diagnose underlying factors that hold up the current status quo. All of it will require action from individuals and institutions alike. It will require partnerships and alliances. We will surely need to rethink our development practices of the past and visualize one that is more in line with what our future generations expect us to do.

We must move forward towards a new climate of change.



‘FUTURE-PROOFING’ GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS



By **Yasmeen Rasheed**,
Head of the Governance Programme,
UNDP Maldives

Photography by
AMINATH SANU IBRAHIM / UNDP MALDIVES

Paradise isn't without problems. A little more than a decade ago, Maldivians braved democracy amidst heavy political turbulence and uncertainty. Three presidential elections later, and with another looming closer, it is safe to claim that we are more confidently navigating this boat. Democracy isn't 'uncharted waters' anymore. Despite the choppy journey, few states can boast the kind of legislature and institutions in place, which would easily check many boxes on 'how to democracy'.

There have been deliberate and conscious commitments towards decentralisation and devolution of powers, efforts to build accountable institutions; expansion of human rights mechanisms; and assurances towards ending gender-based discrimination – all noteworthy and significant. Despite progress made, not all of these have translated nearly as smoothly from legislature into real life, nor was transferred equally to people it meant to serve. Men still outnumber women where decisions are made, young people struggle with identity and income, persons with disabilities haven't enjoyed dignified empowerment in the true sense. Underlying these inequalities are a host of factors, all of which ultimately boils down to deficiencies in access.



UNDP's support has focused on bridging these gaps in access: bringing justice closer to people by supporting legal and judicial reform; creating alliances with civil society and media to allow information exchange to and from the people; formative and sustained support to decentralisation and local governance; and not just encouraging but advocating and insisting on inclusion. In 2019, with UNDP support, the Decentralisation Act was amended to include a mandatory 33% quota for women in local councils. Today, we have 36% women in local councils, exceeding the quota allocation.

UNDP also facilitated the responsible and efficient use of modern digital technologies in court rooms – something which would have hardly scraped the surface as an idea, let alone an aspiration, as recent as four to five years ago. The digital transformation of the judiciary wasn't just a COVID-19 by-product to ensure business continuity of essential justice services during crisis-time. It was a conscious and strategic support offer by UNDP as a result of a progressive, trusted partnership with the judiciary towards making justice more accessible to all.

Engaging young people and communities to create their own opportunities, and inform our work is another key principle of our work. Every year, through various engagements, we work directly with hundreds of young men and women and help bring their voices and ideas to the foreground. Sometimes it takes the form of social innovation camps, sometimes leadership trainings, or behavioural insight experiments such as STEM introductory sessions for young girls. We also create safe spaces where diversity is celebrated and respected, artistic expression is encouraged, and community-led interventions are supported. In all shapes and forms, these continue to make our communities more open and cohesive, and resilient to external shocks – be it in a pandemic or a conflict.

It is only natural that UNDP continue to deliver on what it does best, offering integrated development solutions driven by country priorities. In UNDP's newest offer of support, we place strategic importance on addressing emerging complexities in the Maldives by "future-proofing" governance systems through anticipatory and accountable approaches: a governance for and by people.



The bottom line is to create an enabling environment for people engagement in a decentralised manner, by bringing to focus those most at risk of being left behind: women, youth, migrant workers and persons with disabilities. In doing so, we enhance independence, transparency, and accountability of the governance and justice system, leading to meaningful human development.

It ensures a re-sharpened focus on empowering local councils and promoting meaningful decentralisation and decentralised delivery of public services and instill a culture of transparent and participatory governance.

To maximise development impact, we will leverage digital technologies for effective delivery of services across the geographic divide, and build an inclusive, ethical and sustainable digital society.



We will also continue to provide support towards establishing an independent and impartial justice sector that protects human rights. We will build on the first ever 33% reserved seats for women in local councils and will continue to accelerate women's political participation. At its core, in the next five years, UNDP seeks to enhance entire institutions, and increase voice and participation for strengthened governance which advances the future of development for the people of Maldives, while leaving no one behind.

MEET THE TEAM

“Enabling a society equal in its fundamentals around gender is key to an inclusive peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world that has the care of human rights at its core. Gender equality and women’s empowerment is therefore central to UNDP’s interventions to accelerate the 2030 Agenda, and remains the main cornerstones of our work here in our support to Maldives. We are taking this in a depth transformation of the office as well, fully embracing the UNDP Gender Equality Seal (a corporate certification process that aims to ensure gender equality is mainstreamed as a whole-of-office approach from programmes to operations which ultimately will deliver transformational gender results beyond our business unit). Each of us at UNDP Maldives is focused to standing together and working on the leavers that if solicited with commitment will support the achievement of gender equality in the Maldives! Meet our team during the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence to #OrangeTheWorld ”

-Enrico Gaveglia, Resident Representative of UNDP Maldives







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